

Introduction

Engaging with children, their families and significant others is essential to the department's mandate for protecting children and ensuring the best interests of children. The *Child Protection Act 1999* states that if a child is able to form and express views about his or her care, these views must be given consideration.

Practice guidelines and procedures relating to the structured decision making tools for child protection intervention decision-making offer practical information about the tasks and decisions a departmental officer must complete when working with a child. However, if children are to be genuinely consulted and actively included in decision-making process, departmental officers must demonstrate an authentic interest in a child's viewpoint, have a thorough understanding of children's development and appreciate what environmental conditions facilitate good communication with children.

In this practice paper, we consider in more depth:

1. why children should be listened to;
2. the specific skills needed to work with children; and
3. explore what things children describe as being important when adults want to communicate with them.

Working with children and young people

Knowing how, and being able to communicate with children is an essential ingredient for working with and on behalf of children. While being able to talk to children can be regarded as a specialised skill, in many ways it is little different from conducting a professional 'helping conversation' with adults. Listening, being authentic and clarifying what is being said are skills that are just as important when it comes to working with children as it is when engaging with adults. However, children's communication skills and styles and how they are positioned in the world does effect the communication process, for example, children are generally less verbal and more demonstrative than adults. Moreover, children are often aware that they are relatively powerless in society and may, as a result, work out unique ways of 'managing' conversations with adults - particularly when it comes to being questioned about emotionally uncomfortable topics (Thomas, 2001).

Since the *Child Protection Act 1999* requires that children be considered and, where appropriate, consulted in all phases of their involvement with the department, having a thorough knowledge of child development is vital. This information will not only provide you as a departmental officer with benchmarks for assessment purposes, it will also inform you about the context and at what level it would be best to engage with a particular child. While having a genuine interest in children and being able to communicate this interest is key to successful communication with a child of any age (Crompton, 1980), a knowledge of the developmental milestones associated with a particular age group will provide additional background information about such things as a child's susceptibility to particular questions, the effect of peer pressure and their understanding of time (Wilson and Powell, 2001),

In general, children's communication is usually indirect and, depending on the child's age, may need to be facilitated with the use of an intermediary device such as drawing or of a toy. Having access to a variety of 'aids' is therefore necessary and may require prior consideration before meeting and talking with a child. From a departmental perspective, while communication with a child may need to be indirect, more often than not, the interaction between a departmental officer and child will also be directive - that is, extremely focused in search of specific outcomes (Colton et al., 2001). While there may be opportunities for the departmental officer to engage in non-directive

work, such as when driving a child between places, usually there will be a clear purpose for contact and a plan and structure for the contact. As such, it is expected that the departmental officer will take a leading role and gently move a child from one issue to another to ensure that their views and needs regarding issues that affect them and their future care are listened to and understood.

Why children should be listened to

As stated above, the *Child Protection Act 1999* has enshrined that children in contact with the department have a legal right to be listened to and that departmental officers need to be cognisant of this. Until the late twentieth century, children's welfare was traditionally vested with the adults who cared for them. The existing legal models of child-adult relationships constructed children as 'passive recipients of adult protection and good will, lacking the competence to exercise responsibility for their own lives (Lansdown, 2001:87).' In fact, it wasn't until revelations in the 1980s and 1990s of abuse occurring in state and church run institutions around the world (and for those of us in Australia, the ill effects of the Stolen Generation), that doubts emerged about adults being able to secure the child's best interests.

As questions arose about the adequacy of existing approaches and the assumptions that they were based on, governments and their associated legal systems began to recognise that children should be the 'subjects of rights'. This culminated in the almost universal acceptance of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1990 and the inclusion of Article 3 (...in all actions concerning children, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration) and Article 12 (... a child has the right to express his/her views freely and have them considered) as guiding principles for administering the *Child Protection Act 1999* in Queensland.

Nevertheless, while departmental officers have a legal obligation to listen to children, evidence also suggests that children, even as young as babies, have a greater sense of well-being if they have an element of control over their lives cited in (Thomas, 2001:105). Therefore, including children's views also makes good professional practice sense. By taking time to explain things in appropriate child friendly language and giving children an opportunity to respond, opportunities are created for children to influence decisions and develop skills that will allow them to move on in other aspects their lives (Thomas, 2001). In fact, the process of giving children respect for their views can itself be a necessary strategy for ensuring their protection. Lansdown (2001:95) claims that children who are competent to make decisions and have had the experience of having their views respected, demonstrate a level of confidence that enables them to challenge any abuse of their rights. Evidence suggests that giving children a voice in decision-making regarding their own welfare is not only likely to produce better decisions, but children themselves are then more inclined to contribute to their success (Cashmore, 2004).

As part of the process of listening to children and their needs, it is important that departmental officers inform children of their right to have a support person of their choosing (including a friend) and that there are processes available to them if they feel that their wishes have not been heard. While organisations such as CREATE (accessed at www.create.com.au), the Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian (accessed at www.childcomm.qld.gov.au) and Boystown (accessed at boystown.com.au) advocate and provide support for all children in care, children with Aboriginal and Torres Strait cultural backgrounds must also be supported by an appropriate agency. It is useful to note that CREATE provides children in out-of-home care with a collective voice that can raise their concerns and make their views known to Government. It provides much needed encouragement and empowerment for those who are largely dis-empowered in our society. In fact, it should be presumed that children in out-of-home care are 'objects of concern', but rather they need to be viewed as being competent and necessary to the process of decision-making. In order to facilitate this process however, departmental officers need to develop particular skills that will encourage children's voices and support their decision-making expertise.

Specific skills needed to work with children

There are many different roles a departmental officer can play when working with children in out-of-home care that require overlapping, although on some occasions, different skills. In the intake and investigation assessment phases of the department's work, little may be known about a particular child before a departmental officer interacts with them. However in all other phases of the department's work, information will be available that will enable the departmental worker to specifically plan and facilitate appropriate resources and supports to encourage a child to express their views. Irrespective of the available facts however, the departmental worker must have the ability to obtain and consider additional information for each phase of the department's work. This work is enhanced if the worker is able to:

- maintain a clarity of focus;
- recall the experience of being a child and relate that to the work at hand;
- encourage children to talk or express themselves;
- feel comfortable in the presence of children and to have them feel comfortable with them;
- facilitate children's play;
- decentre from an adult perspective to engage the child;
- continue working uninterrupted despite the emergence of painful and disturbing material;
- respond to the different vocabulary, idioms, and expressions of children; and
- be the diplomat (Colton et al., 2001:53-65).

Maintaining focus on purpose

The departmental officer needs to be aware of the purpose of contact with the child and keep that in mind at all times. While assessment is an ongoing process during departmental intervention, the departmental officer's primary role and approach to a child will be determined by the particular phase of departmental involvement. Whether contact with a child is for the purpose of obtaining necessary information or acting as an advocate for the child, will largely determine how they will adapt their interaction with a child.

Recall the experience of being a child and relate that to the work at hand

While working with a child who has experienced abuse, the worker may well be confronting ghosts from the past. It is vital that this is understood, so that the worker does not try to resolve [their] own problems through the work undertaken with the child. (Colton et al., 2001:57)

It is important that the departmental officer is aware of their own past experience as a child, both in terms of preventing 'transference' as described in the above quote, as well as recalling how time and concepts can be misunderstood from a child's perspective. An example most readily available to most of us, is recalling how long it seemed for Christmas or a birthday to come around from year to year when we were children. Therefore, remembering how issues and events could be misconstrued is essential when helping a child to understand adult decisions, actions and concepts.

Feeling comfortable in the presence of children and to have them feel comfortable with you encourages children to talk and/or express themselves

Children typically do not have the 'social graces' expected of adults in their communications with each other. Children are quite likely to comment on a person's baldness, are noisy and can and will get bored easily. As such, a departmental worker needs to have a good sense of self and not take any forthright comments made by a child as a personal attack, nor be perturbed if the child wants unceasing attention or is excessively shy and refuses to talk. At the same time however, a worker does need to be aware that sometimes something as simple as a beard or a different skin colour

may interfere enough with the communication process that another worker needs to be assigned to the case. Usually though, if a child feels that the departmental worker is genuinely interested in their story, they are likely to express their views.

Facilitate children's play

Play is an absolute prerequisite for work with young children. If a child cannot play, they cannot be helped, and therefore, the first stage with a child who cannot play is to help them to learn to play. From there the work can begin (Colton et al., 2001:60).

Play is a normal medium of communication for a worker engaging with a child. Feeling comfortable with play often conveys to a child that the worker values what the child does. Not only that, children often use play as a projective tool, so much can be learned about what the child thinks by engaging with their play. However, because play can also be used as a therapeutic tool, it is important that the worker remember their purpose for using play as a conversational aid and refrain from interpreting play in ways that may not meet the needs of the child in the situation at hand.

Decentre from an adult perspective to engage the child

Children are not necessarily familiar with or comfortable with addressing issues at a specific time or particular place. Therefore, workers need to be flexible and appreciative of a child's notion of what is acceptable to say and when to say it. Unfortunately, because of time constraints, departmental workers may turn to other adults to obtain information about a child's wishes so that they can complete necessary documentation. While this may be necessary on some occasions, it is not a practice that ensures the child's voice is heard nor meets the principle of practice as outlined in the *Child Protection Act 1999*. Of course, this may raise issues around confidentiality. As a departmental worker, it is necessary to have explored and considered the consequences of maintaining or compromising a child's confidence and have discussed this with a line manager.

Continue working uninterrupted despite the emergence of painful and disturbing material

Foster carers describe the process... in which the child seems to test you out to see how much you can cope with. If you seem able to cope with what you have been told without being shocked or thrown off course, then later the child may tell you more (Colton et al., 2001:63).

On occasions, the material a child reveals to a worker will be graphic and very painful. As the quote above states, if a child detects that a departmental worker is unable to cope with the information being shared, they are likely to discontinue their story. It is therefore important that departmental workers find a way to maintain their composure. Training has helped workers in the past, but it is a useful practice for any worker to find a means to effectively debrief and identify and address any symptoms of vicarious trauma that may arise. Not recognising their own trauma can have adverse consequences for a worker, both personally and when assessing the safety needs of a child. This was born out in the Victoria Climbié case, a well publicised case of child abuse in London in 2002 (Ferguson, 2004:206-212).

Respond to the different vocabulary, idioms, and expressions of children

It is useful for a worker to be familiar with slang words that may be used by children. However, this does not mean that the worker should use them, as children will feel patronised if an adult 'gets it wrong'. Rather, it is being able to engage with the child's language and to be aware that abused children, particularly sexually abused children, will use words that may shock the worker. As previously stated, it is important that the worker maintain their composure while at the same time exploring the meaning that the words may have for the child.

Be the diplomat

In the area of child protection, there are often occasions when workers are required to convey bad news or answer children's questions that the worker may find very difficult to answer. While workers are advised to be factual and cognisant of not condemning parents in the information they share with children, it is also important not to feed any possible fantasies. This can be a difficult task and requires reflection and tact on the part of the worker.

What children consider important when adults want to communicate with them

Basically the review meeting was about them – It was about what they thought was best for me. I could say what's best for me as well, like you could say what's best for you. I don't need – well, I do sometimes, but most of the time I don't need people to say what is best for me (child's own words, cited in Thomas, 2001:111)

There have been many studies in the education, legal, medical and welfare sector, both in Australia and overseas, that have looked at the skills and qualities that are needed when interacting with children (for example, Wilson and Powell, 2001, Thomas, 2001, Crompton, 1980, Mason and Gibson, 2004). In an English study that specifically explored children's participation in decision making while in local authority care (Thomas and O'Kane, 1998, cited in Thomas, 2001:107-108), 47 children and adults who were looking after them identified the following factors as being necessary for them to contribute:

- time;
- relationship, trust and honesty;
- active listening;
- choice, information and preparation;
- support and encouragement;
- activities;
- the child's agenda;
- serious fun!; and
- risk taking.

Although most of these factors have been covered to some extent in the previous section, revisiting them from the child's perspective provides further insights.

Time

The children interviewed said that it was important that workers were prepared to spend time with them. While appointments are necessary in the worker's world, for the child, being able to stay in control of the pace of the interaction and when and how that interaction occurred allowed them to open up and convey what was important to them.

Relationship, trust and honesty

Children prefer to interact with someone who is friendly, open, accepting and who will be honest with them. The participants in the study noted that they were more likely to communicate with those people that they had a warm and trusting relationship. If the worker is unable to create that relationship with the child, it is worth the effort to identify and include a person who does when important decisions need to be made.

Active listening

Drawing on the skills of 'active listening' associated with counseling is useful when working with children.

This means responding to cues, restating and drawing out the meaning of what the child is saying, combined with the expression of warmth, empathy and acceptance (Thomas, 2001:108).

Choice, information and preparation

Building on the notion of time as outlined above, if a child feels they have a choice in deciding whether they will and/or how they will participate in a decision-making process, they are more likely to do so. This can be aided by preparing the child for the discussion and giving them time to think things through before any meeting.

Support and encouragement

Children do not like being put on the spot and will often need support and encouragement to state their views. This may be particularly so if they feel they will let someone down or may be judged or criticised or if they have something difficult to say. Having someone the child trusts in a meeting can help children in this process.

Activities

The participants in Thomas and O'Kane's (1998) study noted that children don't particularly enjoy just sitting and talking. They found this boring and wanted other activities to keep them engaged. Life story work or the use of strength cards (available from St Lukes, Bendigo) have been found to be particularly useful ways of encouraging children to discuss their circumstances.

The child's agenda

Providing space for children to raise issues of their own is a necessary strategy to include them in decision making. Children note that adult questions can be both intimidating and overwhelming, however, the space created should not leave the child feeling they are being put on the spot.

Serious fun!

Although the issues being discussed in decision-making meetings are serious and can have an impact on a child's future and/or care arrangements, children are more likely to involve themselves if there is a bit of fun and the process is somewhat enjoyable. A sense of humour and prior knowledge of the child can help a worker facilitate this process.

Risk taking

Asking children to be involved in decision-making may mean that they will make a decision that may seem risky to the adults involved. Within reason, children need to have opportunities to learn from their mistakes and to take responsibility for their actions.

If communication is done well, if situations make sense to children and if there is a presumption of competence rather than incompetence, children often turn out to be more capable and sophisticated than they are given credit for. This includes all children, including those with learning disabilities (Thomas, 2001:106).

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