

# Children and Young People at the Centre

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By listening to children and young people with speech, language and communication needs, our professional practice will be enhanced, challenged and will become more targeted to the actual needs and life experiences of the children and young people we are working with. We need to increase the size of our “listening ears”.<sup>1</sup>

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## What does the Code say<sup>2</sup>?

- There is an explicit requirement for children and young people with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) to be at the centre of all decision-making in regards to choice and control over the support they receive. This is the case whether the child or young person has an Education and Health Care (EHC) Plan or not.
- Children and young people should therefore be involved at all stages in the Graduated Approach of Assess, Plan, Do and Review.
- It has become law that local authorities **must** have regard to:
  - The views, wishes and feelings of the child or young person and the child's parents.
  - The importance of the child or young person, and their parents, participating as fully as possible in decisions, and being provided with the information and support necessary to enable participation in these decisions.
- Local authorities must consider how to provide information for children and young people on their rights and entitlements in accessible formats and give sufficient time to prepare for discussions and meetings.
- The child or young person must be closely involved in deciding what support they need and the outcomes or goals they want to achieve.
- Post 16 years, the young person can make their own decisions independent of the family if they so wish.<sup>3</sup>
- Consulting with, and enabling participation of, the child or young person is part of all aspects of the SEND process and as well as informing support for the individual should also influence SEND systems such as the Local Offer and Joint Commissioning.

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### *A little more about...*

This model of engagement put forward in the SEND reforms is sometimes referred to as "person-centred planning" and relies upon effective participation with the individual at the centre. It draws on work from the World Health Organisation which proposes a wider appreciation of outcomes: that we consider a person's level of activity, participation and well-being as well as underlying difficulties.

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### *A little more about...*

"Consulting" should involve listening, but it is listening with a particular purpose, for<sup>4</sup>'ways of seeking the views of children as a guide to action'.

**Participation** takes this involvement a step further: the literal definition of participation is 'taking part'. There are a range of degrees to which children can take part, though it is argued that: "Participation is a process not an event and empowerment is the outcome".<sup>5</sup>

The reforms call for the individual and family to participate, to be at the heart of the decision-making process about choices they can make, and the support they receive.

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## *What are the Key Issues for SLCN?*

For children and young people with SLCN, this renewed focus on communication skills as the foundation for successful outcomes is timely and necessary. However, enabling their participation requires careful planning and skilled practitioners.

- The very nature of their difficulties will make it harder for children and young people with SLCN to participate. This can include understanding as well as expressing their views, so ensuring their views are heard and recognised can be a very complex process. However, capturing views is no longer optional.
- Involving young children can also be challenging and will require innovative ways of working.
- Many older children and young people with SLCN will also have associated difficulties with reading and writing.
- There can be challenges in terms of time, skills and appropriate resources to ensure children and young people are able to participate.
- Preferred outcomes for children with SLCN, their parents<sup>6</sup> and the professionals working with them may vary greatly, and these need to be appropriately recognised and reflected in planning and support. Using parents as a proxy voice is also no longer acceptable. This raises challenges, however, particularly relating to a child's age: while using parents as a proxy voice for children and young people's views may no longer be seen as acceptable, this approach will need to be balanced for parents of very young children.
- There is a need for services to work holistically in capturing a shared vision of what is ultimately important for the child or young person, and to think beyond their own service parameters.

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### *Research snapshot...*

Research undertaken to look at what was important to children and young people with SLCN, found that in general the child or young person did not talk about wanting to make improvements with their communication skills, but rather they wanted changes to be made to their immediate environments. They wanted people "to understand students and what helps", for adults to listen more and not raise their voices; and for peers not to tease.<sup>7</sup>

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### *Research snapshot...*

Themes that have emerged from research are that children and young people with SLCN are particularly vulnerable to difficulties with social acceptance, and also are more likely to have difficulties with emotional well-being. The preferred outcomes for these individuals centred on:

- the inclusiveness of the school environment
  - support around the child's emotional needs
  - addressing attitudes and knowledge of those around the child or young person and their family
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# What are the Key Strategies for SLCN?



Above all, there should be a clear assumption that children and young people with SLCN *can* take part. Alongside adults developing skills and resources to help with this, positive attitudes are crucial.

In order to find out what is important to the child or young person, what is going well and what could be better, the following points will need to be considered:

### Time is needed to

- find or develop appropriate methods and resources to enable participation
- go at the pace of the individual – try not to interrupt or fill silences
- ascertain his/her views accurately – this may well take a period of time
- analyse what has been found out, and convert it into meaningful and motivating outcomes that can be shared with the child or young person as far as possible

**Skills** are required to fully involve children and young people so practitioners may need ongoing training or professional development to effectively enable the child or young person's participation.

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### A little more about...

#### Principles of participation

It is important if we are to involve children and young people to ensure this is done within a framework of good practice. Though the area is still developing, the following criteria have been identified:<sup>8</sup>

- A range of methodologies are used to listen to children's views including visual and non-verbal tools
  - Children's opinions are sought about day to day matters as well as for specific consultations
  - Children receive feedback about any changes to practice which result from their involvement
  - The necessary steps are taken to ensure inclusion of children with special needs
  - A range of settings are included
  - The children and young people involved should be treated with honesty and respect, their views are valued, taken seriously and acted upon
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### An individualised approach

Each child and young person has different strengths and needs, so different strategies are required for effectively involving them. A template approach is therefore not best practice, but some key approaches to include are:

- **Find out as much as you can** about the child or young person's speech, language and communication needs. Observation of the individual and how he/she interacts is an essential part of this process. Use Speech and Language Therapy information if it is available. From this, pitch language at the right level. Keep spoken language simple and clear.
- **Use their strengths** to support the process. Using materials and activities that interest them and choosing a good time of day for them are helpful.
- **Support spoken language** with additional supports where possible (e.g. photos/ pictures/ meaningful objects).
- **Show interest** in everything the child or young person has to say.
- **Acknowledge any feelings being expressed;** ensure they are seen as valid. Resist providing solutions.
- For children and young people without formal communication systems as yet, it is important to **build up a clear idea of what motivates them**, through interaction and also discussion with parents and others who know them. Building on these interests and extending them would be a next step, as would looking at incorporating early choice-making into outcome setting.

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#### *Research snapshot...*

Research shows the progress that can be made when children and young people are actively involved in saying what is important to them. We know that listening to and valuing children's views has implications for their confidence and attitude to learning. This in turn can lead to more effective therapy.<sup>6</sup>

Also, **good participation opportunities** produce more confident and resilient young people and encourage citizenship<sup>7</sup>; participation helps in developing skills useful for debate, communication, negotiation, prioritisation and decision-making.<sup>8</sup> Children can learn how to organise their thinking and language to represent what is happening and describe this to others.

**Effective participation** can provide a sense of self-efficacy and raise self-esteem.<sup>9</sup> Researchers and practitioners have commented on the impact of listening to and involving young children on their confidence and developing self identity. This can be of particular benefit to shy or withdrawn young children.<sup>10</sup> Children themselves comment positively on the experience of being consulted.<sup>11</sup>

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#### An individualised approach (continued)

- **Be clear about what you want to find out.** Talking about the future and aspirations can be difficult for any of us at any point of our lives. The best approach is to talk about the present:
    - What is going well now
    - What could be better now
    - What works best for him/her
  - **Check you have understood correctly.** You can then use this information to support future outcomes and aspirations from this.
  - **Use positive language.** Outcomes need to focus on the positive so questions such as those above are useful to elicit what specific achievements have resulted from an intervention or model of support. It's also harder for many children to understand negatives such as don't, isn't etc.
  - **Ask open questions as much as possible,** for example instead of asking "do you like school?" you could ask "what do you like about school?" Give choices if the child or young person is unsure.
  - **Ask question words which are at the right developmental level** for the individual. "How?" and "why?" questions may not be understood.
  - **Sum up** what you think has been communicated and check with the child or young person at the end of the process.
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### Make listening and consultation part of everyday practice

- **Choice-making should be embedded into daily activities** (e.g. offering different sandwich toppings, drinks, book choices) to increase independence and the ability to make choices.
- **Ensure that any choices you are offering are informed choices** (i.e. the child or young person has experience of it at least once). So, if we are asking whether a child or young person would like to go horse-riding, but he/she has never experienced it, this would not be a fair choice.
- **Use pen pictures/communication passports/one page profiles** as a good place to start in involving children and young people. These should as far as possible be developed with the child or young person using the strategies mentioned previously. If this is not possible, then the people who know the individual best should be involved.
- **Share information** with other staff, as this makes a huge difference. Young people with SLCN and their parents have told us that the people who are best at supporting and enabling their inclusion are those who understand the nature of their difficulties.

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#### *A little more about...*

The pen picture provides a summary of what matters to the child or young person and how to best support them. It is compiled from information from the individual, family and others who know him/her well.

It enables others to be aware of their strengths, interests and specific support that can help them, which can then inform involvement, planning and target setting.

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### Act on what you have found out

- **It is important that children and young people know they have been heard**, even if it is not possible to follow through on all their views. Consider how will you evidence their views so they know you listened and understood. This may be through involving them in outcome setting, making targets accessible to them (maybe in symbol format for example), and in writing pen pictures with them.
- **Ensure that the child or young person sees the impact of their participation:** that through listening to them you have thought about their interests and what is motivating for them. This information has then been translated into individualised targets and outcomes, which you have shared with them. The process is then empowering, and future participation is more likely.

## *What does success look like?*



From the child or young person's perspective:

- People involve me in decisions made about my life as far as possible.
- People know how to communicate with me, and make the adaptations I need to enable me to get my message across.
- I can let people know what is important to me in my life, and how to support me.
- I am involved in my person-centred review, and am supported in thinking about what information I want to share and how to share it.
- I am given information that I can understand about what is possible for my future.
- I am encouraged to make choices throughout my day.
- My views help inform local offers and joint commissioning of services.



## References



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2. This section references the SEND Code of Practice Chapter 1, sections 1.1, 1.3 -1.9
3. SEND Code of practice Section: 8.17
4. Roulstone S & Lindsay G (2012), *The Preferred Outcomes of Children with speech, language and communication needs and their parents*, The Better Communication Research Programme
5. Roulstone S & Lindsay G (2012), *The Perspectives of children and young people who have speech, language and communication needs, and their parents*, The Better Communication Research Programme, p11
6. Owen, Hayett and Roulstone (2004) *Children's views of speech and language therapy in school: consulting with communication difficulties CLTT*
7. <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/listeningtolearn/downloads/LearningtoListen-CorePrinciples.pdf> accessed 23.4.07
8. Tansey, in Treseder P, 1997. *Empowering Children and Young People*. Save the Children Fund
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11. Warwick, I., Blenkinsop, S., Aggleton, P., Eggers, M., Chase, E., Schagen, I., Schagen, S., Zuurmond, M. and Scott, E. (2004). *Evaluation of the Impact of the National Healthy School Standard*. Final Report.



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There is a wide range of other guidance available to help practitioners deliver the Reforms which Communicating the Code seeks to add to rather than duplicate. Follow [this link](#) to find additional resources and support and [this link](#) to see examples of good practice and case studies relating to the Code of Practice.

This document can also be downloaded from our website at [www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk](http://www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk)

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