

## Successful features of partnership/engaging with a child

Children when asked what they consider to be good practice, valued professionals who:

- **listen** carefully and without trivialising or being dismissive of the issues raised
- are **available** and **accessible** with regular and predictable contact;
- are **non-judgemental** and **non-directive** -accepting, explaining, and suggesting options and choices;
- have a sense of **humour**- it helps to build a rapport;
- are **straight talking** - with realism and reliability - no false promises;
- can be trusted, maintain **confidentiality** and consult with children before taking matters forward.

## Language, can you explain yourself and what you need to or know?

One of the most important things, as far as a child is concerned, is that what you are intending to do with them can be explained to their satisfaction and that the adults in their life are in agreement with work that is to be undertaken. You need to be able to explain yourself, your role and the work's purpose in a language appropriate to the child's age and understanding.

You will need to have settled where, when and for how long you are going to see the child and some of the areas of their world that you need to secure more information about. The explanations will vary from child to child, depending on the child's maturity, the work areas and tools you may be choosing to use.

If you are unsure how your explanation sounds then try it on a colleague, ask them to imagine being the child and ask them how clarity could be improved, do the same for them when they are encountering a child they too feel a little uncertain about.

## Where? Facilities matter...

You will have contemplated in your planning where you are to see the child. Plainly it should be somewhere quiet and where the child feels safe, where you are not going to be interrupted and where the child knows how to get to the lavatory. Children engaged in potentially stressful situations often need to go to the lavatory at regular intervals, as a way of regulating emotions as well as the physical desire to have a wee.

It is always worth asking before the works starts whether a child needs a toilet trip (use their word for it) and if you find during a session, particularly with younger children, that their concentration has gone, or that they are wriggling in their seat, then a loo prompt can be helpful. You may feel irritated as it may come at a point where you feel the child is about to say something significant,

you will need to swallow your irritation and accept that the child is managing the session for themselves.

What they need from you is acceptance and a willingness, as Sophie aged six told me, “to *“listen with your eyes as well as you ears”*”.

In complex family situations practitioners may want to see and meet the child in a neutral space and some workers make arrangements with parents or carers to see the child at their school. Whilst this has the advantage of being an environment free of family or parental influence, it brings the home situation into the school for the child which may be distressing for them.

Also they may well need your help to find a form of words to explain to friends who you are and what you are doing, in a way that does not breach boundaries they have created.

Some practitioners are confident that they can engage the child using only the simplest of materials; perhaps paper and pens alone, and that they can use themselves and their experience to draw out from children and young people the information that they need. This may be true but most children will engage more readily if provided with an activity as an introduction to the work and, for some, it is important that you do the task too.

Art work, photocopied “prompt” sheets such as those from the [Anti-Colouring Book](#) (Susan Striker and Edward Kimmel 2007) work well for many children particularly those under 11, take spare copies in case a child becomes anxious that they have made a mistake or wants to add more ideas than the sheet format allows.

### **For how long? And the time it takes, phasing work**

Practitioners know that the younger the child the shorter their capacity to engage with a new adult and carry on a conversation that is important to them. Children under eight may find more than 30 minutes very tiring, boring or distressing and this is very true of all children with any form of ADHD. This group of children are a challenge to all practitioners and are the children for whom a supply of different activities, drawing, kinetic movement, playing with useful toys, bits of string and using mirrors, well sequenced, are the key to a longer engagement in work with you.

Children and young people find it helpful and comforting to know how long they are going to spend with you. Even if they cannot tell the time, it is sensible to let them know how many minutes the session will last. If there is not a clock in the room you might show them your watch and tell them a couple of times how much time is left. It is always important to let a child know that there is 10 minutes or five minutes left as it allows them to decide on the important things that they may say to you before you go.

## **Preparation, for the worker and the child**

More important than any toys or tools is the time you spend on preparing yourself. Busy experienced practitioners have become used to moving rapidly from one child's life to another's without giving themselves time to gather their thoughts and concentrate on the child "in hand".

Just a couple of minutes reflection before meeting a child thinking about what you know of them, what the gaps are, the puzzle the child presents to you, any hypotheses you might test, where you left off last time you met the child and particular "image" the child conjures in you can all help centre your focus.

## **Children who are different from you; in terms of language, gender, race, faith, physical or other disability**

One of the challenges for every practitioner is gaining information from children whose life experiences are very different from our own. There is no shame in this, but merely indicates that more preparation will be required.

Colleagues are a good resource as they may have worked with children in similar circumstances or who have the same cultural or faith identity as the child you are to meet. Ask them for a consultation and set ground rules that permit you to ask foolish questions.

Working with children whose physical and/or mental health often presents practitioners with difficulties in relation to gaining information about the child or young person. In these cases workers can, and indeed should, enlist the help of someone who has the child's trust

In some cases this person can act as an interpreter/translator for you. Choosing the person needs care, of course, as a family member presents obvious difficulties in many circumstances, but many practitioners have reported successfully collaborative work with teaching assistants and other care and support workers. Again you must invest time in them as to what your role requires of you and hence them, and be ready to be guided by them as to when the child is too bored or tired to carry on.

## **Tools and techniques, what to take with you.**

Most practitioners will take pens and paper with them to meet a child as a basic minimum; others bring large bags, filled with puppets, buttons, play people in family groups, farm animals, musical instruments and play dough. Whilst there is a "right" way to engage children, active listening being the most important attribute, there is no "right" amount of toys or games to have on hand, practitioners make choices as to what they offer and how they offer it.

Some children do work with you best if provided with an activity, and may work even better if you are engaged in a similar fashion too. Sitting beside, rather than face to face, with a child allows a dialogue to develop and a sense of sharing, rather than requiring you to adopt a grand inquisitor stance. Just as children often open up during a car journey, helped by the safe confined space and a sense of being nowhere, neither here nor there, some aspects of that safety can and should be recreated in the space you create around yourself and the child.

On a very practical note when you take pens and paper make sure the paper is clean and not scrap. Many children turn scrap paper over to read fierce office memos on the back and are diverted from the conversation you would like them to have with you. Pens should all be working and have tops that match their colours; puzzles must have all their pieces, if not, throw them away. Children can feel very distressed and cheated when they realise that a piece of puzzle or a game is missing and, of course, feel that they are not valued enough to be brought intact pleasures, often an awful reflection of the lives they are living.

Many practitioners have books that they use for children in particular circumstances. Teams should be encouraged to share what they use and how they do so, perhaps building up a team resource bank.

For some children the work you do in understanding them helps them to understand themselves better, this is particularly true when practitioners use tools such as ecomaps and genograms/family trees.

A genogram is a good way to commence work with a child/young person once you have explained who you are and why you are spending time with them. You can encourage the child/young person to draw one, themselves, or you could give them a variety of different play people to choose from to represent family members. Alternatively you could have a 'button box' which contains a variety of different shapes, sizes, colours, textures etc. and ask the child/young person to choose ones which represent family members. You can then follow this up by saying something like, 'that's an interesting button you've chosen for your mum (dad, brother etc.), tell me what made you choose that one?'

**Suggested questions to engage a Child in sharing information about their world (this is not exhaustive):**

**Where there are concerns around neglect or you want to understand the child's routines etc:**

- Tell me what a normal school day is like for you, from when you first get up on a morning, to when you go back to bed at night? You can extend the child's narrative by asking 'tell me more about (insert what the child has told you already). Some suggested further prompt questions are:

- How do you know when it is time to get up on a morning? (this will establish whether they have an alarm clock or someone calls them up, or they are left to their own devices)
- Who is in the house with you, when you get up on a morning?
- Where are they? (this will hopefully establish whether or not responsible/supervising adults are up out of bed to help the child get ready).
- What is the very first thing you do when you get out of bed? Then what do you do? And then? Etc. etc.
- Do you have any breakfast before you go to school? What do you have? Who makes this?
- How do you get to school? Does anyone go with you? Do you have to take anyone else in your family to school (i.e. younger siblings)
- What happens at home time? Who is in the house when you get home from school? What are they normally doing?
- What happens at tea-time? Where do you eat? What do you eat? What is your favourite tea-time meal?
- Tell me what you do from tea-time to bed time?
- How do you know when it is time to go to bed?
- Tell me what happens at bed time?
- So when it's not a school day, tell me what happens then from you getting up on a morning, to going to bed at night?

Younger children can be asked to make drawings of some of the above (e.g. draw their favourite meal) or use play people to demonstrate where people are and who does what.

### **Suggested questions about school:**

- What do you think about your school? Have your feelings about school changed?
- What do you enjoy doing at school?
- What do you think you are good at? What do you find hard to do?
- Do you get enough help in class, playtime, at home?
- What would make school better for you?
- What do your mum/dad think about school? What do they think you are good at?
- Where do you do your homework? Do you have enough time to complete it?
- With younger children: Does anyone read to you at home? Does anyone listen while you read?

### **Suggested questions about health/emotional well-being:**

- Do you normally feel physically well? If the child has known health issues, ask what their understanding is of these.
- Do you normally eat well, and sleep well? If not, ask what they think the reason is for this.

- Do you have any health problems such as feeling sick, tired, or have headaches? If yes, ask what they think causes this?
- What happens when you are poorly? When was the last time you were off school because of being unwell? Have you ever been to see a doctor when you are poorly?
- What happens when you are sad or upset?
- How often do you play or exercise? If they do not, ask what the reasons are for this. Great care and judgement should be taken here with a child/young person who has obvious weight issues and it may be more appropriate to talk to parents about this.

### **Suggested questions about friendships:**

- Tell me about any friends that you have? How old are they? When do you see them? What do you do together? Where do you go? What happens if you don't agree with your friends? An ecomap could be used here to establish who the important people are in the child/young person's life.

**Suggested questions about relationships/family life?** For younger children use pens/paper/ecomaps/play people/anti-colouring book/feelings faces etc. or other photocopy material

- Describe your mum/dad/brother/sister etc.
- If you could only use 3 words to describe your mum/dad/brother/sister etc. what would they be. Then follow up by asking 'what made you choose those words for your mum/dad/brother/sister etc.?'
- What kinds of things make your mum/dad/brother/sister happy?
- What kinds of things make your mum/dad/brother/sister sad?
- If you could change one thing about your mum/dad/brother/sister, what would it be? Tell me more about that?
- What happens in your family when it is someone's birthday?
- What happens in your family at Christmas?
- All families have disagreements about things at times. What happens in your family when mum and dad don't agree? What happens when you and your mum/dad don't agree? What happens when you and your brother/sister don't agree?
- Who decides when it is time for you to go to bed?
- Who decides whether you are allowed to go out to play?
- What happens when you are hurt or upset?
- Who makes the meals in your house?
- Who tidies up in your house?
- What things do you have to do in the house?
- What things do your brother/sister have to do in the house?
- Who decides how money is spent in your house?
- Do you have any money of your own to spend?
- What happens when mum or dad are unhappy about something you have done?

- Tell me about the last time they were unhappy with you. What happened?
- Tell me about the last time they were unhappy with your brother/sister. What happened?
- Who else is in your family, e.g. aunts/uncles/grandparents etc.
- How often do you see them? Do they come to your house, or do you go to theirs? What 3 words would you use to describe your aunt/uncle/grandparents? Would you like to see any of them more often? Would you like to see any of them less often?
- If you could change one thing about your aunt/uncle/grandparents, what would it be?

**Points for practitioners to consider following contact with children/young people:**

- What was the mood of the child, did they laugh and smile with you, with others?
- Did they look at the floor, or make eye contact?
- Is there a change in their demeanour when on their own, or with other household members?
- Are they too loud or too quiet?
- Are they calm or aggressive?
- Can they concentrate for very long?
- Do they repeat a version of events “parrot fashion”, or do they contradict themselves?
- How do they react to what is said to them, does their body language match what they are saying?
- Can they show emotions appropriate to the situation, are they aggressive, defensive, aggrieved?
- Do you get the sense that they feel loved and special?
- How do they describe their identity?
- Do they have an appropriate understanding of their family culture, religion and ethnic heritage?
- Do they have a sense of belonging to or fitting in with their family?
- How do they describe their immediate family and household members?
- How do they say they get on with parents and siblings?
- How do they say they get on with wider family; cousins aunts uncles, grand parent, current family situation, and their circumstances?
- Do they talk confidently or reluctantly?
- What words do they use, are they age appropriate?
- Does the child pointedly change the subject of conversation?
- Have there been any recent sad or happy events e.g. last birthday celebration, family holiday?
- Do they usually play with friends, siblings, on their own?
- Are their friends the same age, older, younger?
- Can they keep friends?
- What don't they like in their life?
- What are they looking forward to?
- Does anything scare them?
- What is their favourite activity, hobby, day out, evening in?

- How is the child dressed, appropriately for their age, the weather?
- Are the clothes clean, do they fit?
- Do they do chores and “help out” at home?
- Do they have a job e.g. paper round?
- Can they care for younger siblings?
- Can they describe things they are good at or enjoy?
- How do they get on with their pets?

### **Age and Understanding**

- How well developed is the child’s ability to make judgements and decisions for themselves? (Fraser competence)

#### **A child may be judged to have sufficient understanding if they can:**

- Have a reasonable understanding of the issues involved
- Understand questions being asked of them about the issue and their response to it
- Appreciate and consider alternative courses of action
- Weigh up one aspect of the situation against another
- Express a clear personal view on the matter
- Keep a reasonable consistency in their views
- Understand the implications of not involving others in the decision-making process e.g. parent/carer
- Understand the implications of sharing/not sharing information about the issue with others concerned e.g. parent/carer