

Children's rights to communicate their views and be listened to

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states that all children have a right to participate in decisions that affect their lives – both in their private lives and in the public arena. They have a right to have their say as individuals as well as being part of a group of children. This right forms a basic part of the democratic society in which we live.

In England this right is supported by legislation, policy and guidance. This right applies to all disabled children, regardless of their level of impairment or disability, in the same way as it applies to non-disabled children.

It is the responsibility of services to make sure that all disabled children can take part in decisions or have a say in:

- ◆ what activities they take part in
- ◆ how those activities are carried out
- ◆ the way in which the services or activities are run.

This type of choice and participation is more routinely found in services for non-disabled children and young people – where services frequently get feedback from children and young people who use their services and where they are represented on the groups that manage the service. Participation tends to be less routinely found in services for disabled children or where disabled children are included in mainstream services.

It is often assumed that disabled children cannot give their views or service providers feel it is too difficult to obtain their views. Good service providers will

obtain the views of disabled children in more creative ways that will also include those who communicate non-verbally.

Service providers should not rely solely on obtaining children's views through questionnaires, interviews or focus groups as these methods rely heavily on children being confident and articulate in using written and spoken language. You should expect services to find alternative ways of obtaining disabled children's views – they may use art, play, videos and so on. Where children have difficulty expressing their views directly, services should observe what children like and don't like to do then use these preferences to ensure that children are offered choices and options in any service. These expressed preferences should be used when planning and arranging future activities for children. It is then essential for services to remember to give children feedback on changes that have been initiated on the basis of their views.

On an individual basis, children may need more time to express their preferences. They may need to use alternative methods of communication, such as Makaton or Picture Exchange Communication Systems (PECS), to make their choices. You should expect that children will be given information in order to make informed choices, wherever possible. For some children with more severe cognitive impairments, those choices may need to be made using more concrete methods such as using objects of reference or actually giving the child the opportunity to try out activities in order to decide whether or not they enjoy them. Services need to

ensure that children are using a method of communication familiar to them, so that they are given the maximum opportunity to express their views.

If your child does not use a formal code of communication – one where there is agreed and shared understanding of the meaning of words, signs or symbols – but uses gestures, eye contact, sounds, etc then services need to understand how he or she uses these to express their needs. Communication passports/profiles can be written which explain the child's main communication behaviours – happiness or enjoyment, dislike, hunger or thirst, and so on. This is important so that services offer care in a consistent and appropriate way and make sure your child is enjoying and making the most of their time at an activity. (See the information on *Inclusion of disabled children and young people who communicate differently*.)

This leaflet pack can be obtained by emailing NCB@robertguy.co.uk or telephoning 020 7232 3049.

The leaflets can also be downloaded from

www.councilfordisabledchildren.org.uk/

rightsresponsibility where you will also find

web-based information covering the inclusion of children with specific needs.

