



Accessing children's 'voices' on what matters to them: An overview of the research and recommended practices

Dr Susana Castro-Kemp
Associate Professor in Psychology and Human Development



Scenario

- An 8-year-old boy with a EHCP for a history of anxiety and with a diagnosis of ADHD is requested to attend his first annual review meeting with his caregivers, headteacher, classroom teacher, SENCo and LA representative.
- He attends a mainstream primary school.
- The purpose of this meeting is to have his feedback on the provision offered to him and his views on his needs and abilities, in alignment with policy requirements.

Scenario

Do you agree that this child should be attending this meeting?

What adjustments do you think may be necessary to support his participation, if he attends?

Why should we listen to children's views?

Policy

Human's rights

Effectiveness

Why should we listen to children's views?

Policy:

- Local authorities to give due regard to a child's wishes when determining what services to provide under Section 17 of the Children Act 1989
- Children and Families Act 2014:

*'(...) a local authority in England **must** have regard to the following matters in particular—(a) the views, wishes and feelings of the child and his or her parent, or the young person.'*

Why should we listen to children's views?

Policy:

- New Zealand's Ministry of Social Development:

Involving children in decision-making means they can influence some of the things that affect them and offer a different perspective from adults.

- The Government of South Australia:

Through whatever means children use, it is children's voices that matter when consulting with them about issues affecting them. It is important not to impose our adult frames of reference or put words in children's mouths. Children are insightful human beings.

Why should we listen to children's views?

Human's rights and international policy:

- UNCRC – United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children Art 12:

I have the right to be listen to and taken seriously.

Every child has the right to express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them, and to have their views considered and taken seriously. This right applies at all times, for example during immigration proceedings, housing decisions or the child's day-to-day home life.

Why should we listen to children's views?

Effectiveness:

- Challenges of measuring effects (the design and the authenticity), but...
- E.g. The focused attention of a trusted adult led to disclosing child protection issues and positively affected their educational progress (Smith, 2006) – against a control group.
- Evidence from early childhood intervention: child-centred play and learning (departing from the child's own interests, observing their engagement and reactions) (e.g. Bistagani & Najafi, 2017).

Levels of involvement of children and young people with SEND in planning provision?

In *decision-making* about their provision (annual reviews, EHC plan meetings)?

In everyday practice?

Some evidence from research on Education, Health and Care (EHC) plans

Analysing the depictions of children's voices and the process by which these were gathered in 184 EHC plans of children with SEND attending mainstream and special schools in the Greater London area;



The majority of the plans used the first person to describe the child's perspective (63.6%), but the great majority **do not specify the method of communicating with the child (83.2%)**.

Some evidence from research on Education, Health and Care (EHC) plans

- 91.3% of the plans mention both abilities and difficulties that the children face, but when looking at the actual statements presented in this section (meaning units), **the great majority of those relate to functional problems** – focus on disability, rather than on participation (709 on abilities, 1010 on disabilities and 277 on environmental aspects);
- When they focused on abilities....
- *'I really like engaging in learning'* (3-year-old child, with language difficulties)

Some evidence from research on Education, Health and Care (EHC) plans

- Majority of abilities statements focus on things that children *enjoy* doing or *temperament* traits, rarely on things that children are good at – how is this info gathered from the child? **Are we asking the right questions?**
- There is no standard procedure between local authorities – we found statistically significant differences amongst them in that:
 - ✓ Some use the first person more often than others
 - ✓ Some describe the method for obtaining the child's voice in much more detail than others
 - ✓ Some local authorities seem to be adopting consistently better practices than others

Some evidence from research on Education, Health and Care (EHC) plans

- The voices of children with neurodevelopmental disorders (Down Syndrome and Williams Syndrome) are underrepresented in statutory documents.
- Most statutory documents portrayed parents' rather than children's voices.
- A minority of statutory documents reported the methods used to portray children's voices.

Barriers to eliciting children's views in the EHC planning process

What barriers do you face?

Barriers to eliciting children's views in the EHC planning process

- Lack of access to communication systems – for pupils and staff;
- Levels of self-esteem and anxiety in meetings – is it in the best interest of the child?
- Lack of exposure to prior decision-making situations;
- Lack of time/training/organisational structure;
- Some parents have reservations about their children being approached
- Are the perceived needs of the children reliable?
- Professionals might feel pressured to do this as a 'tick box' exercise, rather than a continuous inclusive practice

A person-centred approach

1. Person is at the centre, consulted throughout, choose who they want to be involved, the setting and the timing;
2. Family members and friends are included;
3. Plan reflects what is important for the CYP, their capabilities, reflecting a shared understanding between CYP and professionals;
4. Plan is on actions about life, not just services, what's possible, not just what's available;
5. Ongoing listening, learning and further actions.

How to improve access to children's views

- Using a person-centred approach;
- Direct methods, prompted methods and mediated methods;
- The power of co-production;

- As everyday practice...

Direct methods

Questionnaires

Conversations

Interviews

Post views in a
box

Diary/log

Prompted methods

Sentence
completion

Video replay of
teaching/learning
situation

Report back
observations of
child interacting

Photos of
different settings

Mediated methods

Drawings
and
paintings

Taking
Photos

Making
videos

Making a
poster

Role-play

Other tools

One-page profiles:

- Particularly useful for setting transition;
- To open-up conversations;
- Critique: superficial list of likes and dislikes; should be used appropriately, as a starting point.

My One Page profile

Your Name Age:
Occupation:

What people appreciate about me

What is important to me

<https://www.bexleyvoice.org.uk/one-page-profiles.html>

Other tools

Planning Alternative Tomorrows with Hope (PATH) maps:

- Graphical model in a solution-focused meeting with two facilitators (one for eliciting and one for graphical recording);
 - Begins in the future with the child's dream;
 - Then think 12 months into the future, on the goals towards that dream;
 - Address how they feel now and the tensions between now and the future;
 - Set interim meetings.
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- Said to increase confidence and motivation.

Other tools

Talking MATS: Communication tool for people with communication difficulties aiming to increase their capacity to think about and communicate effectively about things that matter to them.

Recent scoping review showed effectiveness in augmenting communication (Stans et al., 2019).

Has been used effectively to support during EHC planning meetings (Pearlman & Michaels, 2019).

The graphic organizer is titled "How I'm coping during lockdown" and is designed for children to express their coping strategies. It features three cartoon boy faces at the top, representing different emotional states: a thumbs up (positive), a neutral face, and a thumbs down (negative). Below these faces are various icons representing different coping strategies, organized into three columns. The first column includes social distancing, college work, family at home, pets, hobbies, other family, relaxing, routine, TV, reading, and cooking. The second column includes food, friends, motivation, health, feelings, and mental health. The third column includes physical fitness, sleep, and social media.

Multi-method consultation

- There isn't one method that is fit for all;
- It is necessary to have good understanding of general child development, individual child's functioning and methods of eliciting voice, to be able to choose the best in each case;
- A 'mosaic approach' to gathering views;
- Creativity and flexibility and rapport.

Co-production

- Involving children and young people in the co-creation of services, provision and interventions, as well as research;
- Examples in research are fast growing but there are also examples in service provision: e.g. co-creation of an educational psychology service, based on cycles of action and reflection;
- Some challenges: unclear definition of terms, accessibility and representation (what about complex needs?), building an evidence-base.



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**How do you access
children's views?**



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