



Warrington Safeguarding Partnership Guidance: Seeing / Talking to Children Alone



1. Introduction

This document represents some guidelines for front-line staff to consider when seeing / talking to children alone. This was produced as a result of issues raised via the multi-agency case audits where it became apparent that the voice of child was often unheard and that children were often unseen by professionals visiting the home. This was particularly the case in young children but refers to anyone under 18 years old.

2. Parents / Carers

Parents / carers need to be made aware at the outset that it is best practice in Warrington for professionals involved to spend some time speaking to the child alone where this is developmentally appropriate (mainly applicable to children over the age of 4 years). This cannot be enforced however if the parent refuses that should be documented.

3. Confidentiality

You should Inform the carer and child that the meeting is confidential and anything discussed will only be shared with those that have a need to know if there are concerns that emerge for the child's or someone else's safety. If previously unknown information comes to light of a child protection nature as a consequence of seeing and talking to a child / young person alone it will be necessary to follow child protection procedures.

4. Why / When – The Criteria for seeing / talking to the child alone:

Children about whom there are concerns for their welfare and / or that are subject to the following processes:

- EHA/ family support
- Combined Assessment
- Children in Need
- Section 47 Enquiries
- Children and young subject to Child Protection Plans
- Looked After Children
- CSE / Missing from Home / Return Interview

5. What is the purpose of seeing / talking to the child alone?

The purpose of seeing / talking to children / young people alone is to listen to the voice of the child and to ascertain their wishes and feelings in order to understand the child's perspective. It is to explain the reason for professional / agency involvement but also to give them the opportunity to speak freely in a safe environment.

6. Where and who should see / talk to the child?

The best person to see / talk to the child is the professional that has identified the concern or that is working with the child for one of the reasons indicated in the criteria listed above. The venue should be child-friendly and chosen in conjunction with the child / young person and is a safe and appropriate venue for all concerned. Particularly with young people it would be prudent to inform your manager that you have a meeting with a young person and the location.

7. How?

With all age groups

7.1. Some Dos:

Be open and honest

Listen and pay attention to the child / young person

Use appropriate child-friendly resources and materials

Make contemporaneous notes of the dialogue with the child / young person in your records

7.2. Some Don'ts

Talk over the child

Put words in the child's mouth

Make promises to keep things secret

Keep concerns to yourself

8. Developmental issues

8.1. Early Years (Birth through 6 years)

When talking to a very young child alone consider that they are developing language. Young children have difficulty in distinguishing fantasy from reality and difficulty in understanding causality (that one thing/action leads to another). They concentrate on the concrete aspects of reality (what I can see, hear and touch). They have a growing awareness of gender and other "differences". They are developing from total dependency on others to separation and autonomy. They have evolving awareness of their own and others' emotions and are growing in understanding that others think and feel differently. They will be showing signs of empathy, prosocial and helping behaviours.

Implications for Communication

- Use simple language
- Use open ended questions "what makes you happy?" "What makes you sad?" Adapt to the child's growing attention span
- Keep a varied, but not too fast, pace
- Use every day experiences; stories of other children, families, animals and typical daily
- activities and routines
- Use "pretend" and imaginative play

8.2. Middle Years (7 through 10 years)

During middle years, children gradually develop into more independent and separate human beings who are capable of exploring the world around them. They use more sophisticated language; learn a tremendous amount of new information; and acquire a host

of new skills, including literacy and knowledge about the world and people in it. They gradually break free from an egocentric perspective of life where they are placed at its center, and learn to put themselves in the shoes of others. They are curious and develop social skills and friendships, as well as become more prone and receptive to a host of exclusion practices, such as gender and race stereotyping, bullying and victimization. They can take more responsibility for their behaviours, gradually learn to delay gratification, and learn tasks that develop self-confidence and independence.

Implications for Communication

- Use more sophisticated language depending on level of understanding.
- Appreciate child better at distinguishing between fantasy and reality, understanding inner motivation of characters and causality (that “one thing leads to another”).
- It is important for child to have their feelings and worries understood and respected. Use strategies such as visual and auditory humour and cognitive challenges (e.g., brain teasers, riddles, tongue twisters, etc.)

8.3. Early Adolescent Years (11 through 14 years)

This is the period of transition to adulthood, and adolescents may experience frequent mood swings and aggressive or emotional outbursts. They are often torn between rational thought and irrational risk taking, between adult responsibility and childish mischief. Adolescents are capable of adult-like abstract and logical thought. They have emerging concern for, and exploration of, options regarding future plans. Adolescents tend to rely on friends more than family, depending on their culture: This can help define their identity and be expressed in a variety of separation behaviours (unique fashion, taste in music, joining social groups and movements, expanding social networking). Peer pressure plays a central role in decision-making and behavioural patterns, including those which are antisocial, unhealthy and put adolescents at risk (aggression, alcohol and substance abuse, unsafe sex and others). Cultural differences play a very significant role in constructing what it means to be a child and an adolescent at different stages of development, communication may need to be culturally specific.

Implications for Communication

- Do not emulate adolescent speech. Be yourself.
- Explain confidentiality to the young person as this can often be a barrier to communication; For example; *“This conversation is private between you and me. This means I won’t tell your parents what we talk about unless you want me to. However, if you tell me something that worries me, I may need to share that information with other people, such as a health professional or a social worker. I will tell you if I need to do this. The sort of thing I’m talking about is if you tell me that you have been sexually abused, or you are wanting to harm yourself, or something serious like that, but not for other things, like drinking or smoking. Is that OK?”*
- Literacy levels might not be consistent with chronological age – check that the young person understands what you are saying and is not just repeating you.
- Talk respectfully and not didactically. Do not “talk down”.
- Use humour and creativity.

The guidelines above need to be read in conjunction with Warrington / Pan-Cheshire safeguarding procedures and your own agencies safeguarding procedures.

References:

Communicating with children UNICEF Nov 2011

E. Shakespeare

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