



### 3. Responses to child exploitation and extra-familial harm must... **respect the voice, experiences and expertise of children and young people**

#### Summary

All children and young people have the right to have a say about matters that affect them and be heard in decisions made about them. Listening to, hearing and responding to what children and young people are communicating (remembering that communication does not have to be verbal) helps to build trusting relationships and helps professionals to better engage children and young people. This in turn can increase their safety; participation is a core part of protection.

Respecting the voice, experience and expertise of children and young people means ‘working with them’ rather than ‘doing to them’; involving them in decision-making wherever possible and, where decisions cannot align with their wishes (for safety reasons, for example), having honest conversations around this. These behaviours form the basis of meaningful participatory practices. A child-centred approach to participation provides opportunities for children and young people to exercise control and choice. This is a powerful and practical way of inverting the coercion and manipulation associated with child exploitation and some forms of extra-familial harm.

Children and young people’s voices should be heard at all levels of safeguarding systems to influence decision-making about their own support, as well as at strategic level.

Particular attention must be paid to children and young people whose voices are sometimes under-represented or overlooked. These might include - but are not limited to - disabled children and young people, unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people, those placed far from home, those with complex mental health needs, those with no recourse to public funds and children and young people from ethnic minority groups.

#### What does respecting the voice, experiences and expertise of children and young people mean?

This Practice Principle is about recognising children and young people’s right to have a say about matters that affect them, as reflected in conventions, legislation and guidance, both internationally and nationally (UNCRC, Children’s Act, 1989 and Equality Act, 2010). As Working Together outlines, ‘anyone working with children should see and speak to the child: listen to what they say; take their views seriously; and work with them and their families collaboratively when deciding how to support their needs’ (Department for Education, 2018, p. 10).

## Why is respecting the voice, experiences and expertise of children and young people a Practice Principle?

There is wide recognition and acceptance by professionals that ‘child or youth voice’ is important within services that work with children and young people, an example being the development of Children in Care Councils in response to the White Paper ‘Care Matters’. However, research indicates that the involvement of children in decision-making about issues that affect their own lives can be limited within the field of safeguarding and that feeling heard is often not the reality experienced by young people who are accessing related services (Cossar et al., 2016; Dixon & Baker, 2016; Warrington, 2016; Diaz et al., 2019; Dillon, 2019; Brodie, 2022). As Hill and Warrington (2022, p. 180) observe, ‘this is particularly true within the field of child safeguarding where protection and participation rights have long been noted as uneasy bedfellows.’

Research identifies a number of different factors that can act as barriers to children and young people being able to share their views and experiences. This includes children and young people feeling judged and blamed for the abuse they have experienced, not feeling listened to, understood, or afforded sufficient time to build the trusting relationships with professionals that might enable them to express their views (Cossar et al., 2016; Hallett, 2016; Warrington, 2016; Beckett et al., 2017; Allnock, 2018). Children and young people may also have concerns about professionals’ ability to keep them safe, fears that research has shown can be well founded in cases of child exploitation and extra-familial harm (Beckett et al., 2013; Beckett & Lloyd, 2022). They may also hold anxieties about whether professionals will safely and sensitively manage their information and any negative implications of a failure to do so (Warrington, 2013; Wroe & Lloyd, 2020). Research also shows that engaging with services can erode their sense of agency and control (Warrington, 2013; 2016) and, in doing so, replicate the harmful power dynamics of abuse, an observation that has been particularly highlighted in relation to engagement in criminal justice processes (Beckett & Warrington, 2015).

Research also documents a number of issues that can act as barriers to professionals embedding the voice of the child or young person, in both individual practice and strategic responses. Developing meaningful participation processes in services and systems requires giving over control and power. This can feel risky, both for individual professionals and the agencies within which they are working (Williams, 2021; Hill & Warrington, 2022). The views of children and young people may not align with those of the professionals working with them. This can be particularly pertinent where children and young people do not see themselves as experiencing harm, or disagree with proposed responses being put forward by professionals. Research demonstrates the need for sensitivity in such situations, balancing the need for protection alongside the need to avoid invalidating a child or young person’s views and understandings of, and sense of control over, their own life (Warrington, 2016; Lefevre et al., 2017). This can be a particularly difficult tension for professionals to hold, and one that requires supportive supervision and management structures (Beckett et al., 2017). Research shows that children and young people are not unaware of statutory safeguarding obligations and do understand that decisions may need to be made that do not align with their wishes

or preferences. It shows that the implementation of such decisions does not necessarily undermine their willingness to engage with professionals, so long as such decisions are clearly communicated and explained (Warrington, 2013).

Additionally, professionals have duties and processes, such as assessments and timeframes to fulfil, that can mitigate against their ability to create the conditions that support the promotion of the voice of the child or young person, meaning that, ‘children feel (often with good cause) that professionals struggle to balance their need for protection and guidance with their right to a voice and to make agentic choices about their own lives’ (Lefevre et al., 2017 p. 2458).

The serious nature of child protection issues, like exploitation and extra-familial harm, can be felt to limit or exclude the possibility of enabling children and young people’s rights in decision-making, because the urgency of putting protective measures in place takes over as the paramount driver (Tisdall, 2017; Warrington & Larkins, 2019, Whittington, 2019).

Whilst not denying the tensions that can exist in concurrently attending to issues of participation and protection, there is increasing recognition of the need to move beyond an ‘either / or’ approach, to recognise the ways in which participation can in and of itself be protective (Lansdown, 2012; Lefevre et al., 2017; Warrington & Larkins, 2019; YRAP, 2021). As Warrington and Larkins (2019, pp. 134-136) summarise, ‘protection must not be considered distinct from participation: recognising the latter (information, expression and influence) as a necessary component of protection... Children’s protection from abuse is dependent on cultures (organisational, community or state based) which respect and amplify children’s “voices” thus challenging cultures of silence and impunity in which abuse flourishes.’

Although recognising the need for better participatory practices generally in relation to child exploitation and extra-familial harm, research also illustrates how particular groups of children and young people can be particularly disadvantaged in this regard. This includes children and young people with disabilities, whose ability to share their views and experiences is often under-estimated or denied (Franklin & Smeaton, 2018). Research has also highlighted the need for workers to feel comfortable to talk with young people and name issues of race and racism, so that it can inform more effective interventions (Wainwright & Larkins, 2019). In light of the documented additional barriers to participation for these, and other groups, it is particularly important that questions about ‘who is participating’ are embedded into participatory efforts, to ensure that such efforts do not inadvertently replicate existing exclusionary practices (Morrow, 2001; Hinton, 2008; Hart, 2009).

### **What difference could respecting the voice, experiences and expertise of children and young people make to responses to child exploitation and extra-familial harm?**

Beyond realising their right to have a say about matters that affect them, recognising power dynamics and reconsidering traditional hierarchical structures enables children and young people’s voices, experiences and expertise to inform efforts to safeguard them from harm

(Winter et al., 2017; Featherstone et al., 2018). This is important at all levels of agencies and partnerships (Godar, 2015; Thomas, 2015), to ensure that both individual and collective responses are rooted in the lived realities of children and young people's lives.

In promoting the idea of working with children and young people as partners in their own care, participative approaches create openings to enhance their safety and wellbeing, and ensure services are fit for purpose (Beckett & Warrington, 2015; Williams, 2021). Learning from children and young people helps build an understanding of what might most helpfully attend to any risks, harms and needs, but also what strengths and resources can be drawn upon in doing so.

Creating room for children and young people's voices is also critical in challenging the stigma and silencing of abuse (Pearce, 2018). Respecting the voice, experiences and expertise of children and young people lets them know their experiences and needs matter and, in doing so, counters the abusive power dynamics which subjugate their choice, control and voice. It also creates a foundation for establishing meaningful relationships and developing trust, the importance of which is outlined in Practice Principle 4.



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