

“Listening and Talking with Children and Young People”

Presentation by Sara Bann and Ed King on behalf of the GCYP Youth Advisors

The Charter of Rights says that children and young people in care have the right to “express their opinion about things that affect them”. They also have the right to “be involved in what is decided about their life and their care”. My name is Sara and this is Ed, and we are here to give you a quick presentation about listening and talking with children and young people. Whilst the Charter has helped and continues to help many young people in care, there is still work to be done. We believe that for this to happen, that young people need to be supported and they also need the opportunity.

Children and young people in care have had, and will continue to have, many different experiences when talking with professionals. Some of what we talk about today are examples of active listening and talking with young people, while others are not so positive. We want to say that it is important not only to listen and talk to children and young people in care, but that it is important to do it well.

We want to tell you about what works well when listening and talking with professionals and we want to share some of the problems that can have a big impact.

So from our experience, what should workers think about when listening and talking with children and young people?

- One of the most important things is having a sense that the worker is someone who is committed to you and that you are seen as a priority and valued as being important. When appointments are frequently cancelled or changed, young people can begin to feel that they are at the end of the line. Many young people in care are often just looking for someone who will show them respect and will take the time to listen.
- Information should be easy to understand and workers should allow enough time so we can explain our views, ask any questions and talk about the issues until we understand them properly. It can be helpful to have important information written down to go back to later.
- You need to plan ahead when deciding when and where to meet with a child or young person. Things to think about are privacy – like who can over-hear your conversation, the need to meet outside of school hours, inviting others to support the young person if needed and how long it will take to get there.
- Staying calm can help show the young person how they too can manage stress, and still you can offer support.
- Expectations of each other really need to be agreed. Such as, it’s really important for the child or young person to know that you will do something that was agreed or that their phone message will be passed on and they’ll get a call back – and when. At times, if you haven’t had the chance to do something that was agreed that’s okay – just give us a call or text and let us know. This means we don’t have the expectation that something will happen and then it not, and being faced with the disappointment or not understanding why. Young people should also be told who else to speak to, if their worker is away.
- Good communication often begins with homework – but not the school variety. Prior to meeting for the first time or when you haven’t seen each other for a while, workers should update what they know about a child or young person. This shows respect and that they have cared enough to find about you.
- Conversations in the car can work well for some young people. It allows privacy and isn’t so threatening as setting up an interview. Talking in the car can be easier as it means we don’t have to show you eye contact and we can look around at other things. Sometimes though this doesn’t work and you should check out whether we want to talk then or not.

Many of you probably know what some of the common problems are. We think they are that:

- Sometimes young people feel that they are not listened to, as all the conversation is directed to the carer. This means talking about me and for me, but not to me.
- If workers are running late, it can be a bad start. It can mean that there is less time to talk, details are rushed through and decisions get made too quickly – or worse still, when you're not there.
- Jargon and acronyms are really difficult. It is often assumed that everyone knows and understands what has been said. In these situations, it is quite likely that a young person will not speak nor ask what it means.
- Personal appearance and presentation is important as it's often about being accepted, not being seen as different and just blending in with the crowd. So don't turn up looking like a slob or trying to be who you're not.
- And finally, regularly 'check in' with young people, listen and confirm what has been said. Barriers of all sorts – cultural, age, background and so on – mean that, you may not have the same understanding.

To come up with today's presentation we had a meeting and some of the other things that we talked about that we would like you to keep in mind are:

- Just because a young person's placement is stable and everything seems to be going well, the child is likely to still want contact with you.
- It is important to look at what is being said, and it is equally important to look at what is not being said. .
- Everyone has a need for personal space and it is important to know when to back off – to have a break, to change direction or to simply refocus.
- When a child or young person makes contact it may be their only way of reaching out, so follow up is really important.
- A trusting relationship with a child or young person is built on regular face to face contact.

And last but not least, one size doesn't fit all. Your approach has to be tested out with every child. In other words, listen and talk with me, then you can talk for me.

Thank you and good luck with the rest of the day.