

KEEPING CHILDREN IN MIND AND IN VIEW

Practice Guide 5:

Engaging with parents and carers about children and young people

Acknowledgement of Country

The Centre acknowledges the past and present traditional custodians of the land on which we work. We pay respect to Elders past and present. We acknowledge that sovereignty was never ceded and that this was and always will be Aboriginal land.



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Foreword

This guide is one in a series of practice guides written by the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare to enable practitioners to keep children first and foremost in service system responses. Funding for these guides has been provided by Family Safety Victoria.

The aim of the guides is to support key workforces involved in maintaining child safety and wellbeing to:

- use a child rights lens
- identify and prioritise what is in the child's best interests
- work in ways that promote children's participation in the decision making and processes that affect them
- document what happens to children so that they are kept in mind and in view.

The guides are intended to make sure that children and young people are at the centre of our thinking and our practice. They are not intended to replace leader or manager practice guidance or to replace existing agency protocols; rather, they are aimed at providing practical, simple and accessible information that will increase practitioner understanding of how to work with children and young people and enhance confidence in their ability to do so.

In engaging with children, particular attention needs to be paid to the safety and wellbeing of children who are non-verbal or very young, who have developmental challenges, who have a disability, who are from a non-English speaking background, who are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, who have a parent with a disability or mental ill-health, who identify as LGBTIQ+ or who experience (and/or use) violence in the home.

The guides aim to address confidence and knowledge gaps for practitioners across the sector and promote the importance of effective and meaningful observation, communication and empowerment of children and young people. They are intended to be an easy to understand, practical reference tool for new practitioners, or for practitioners who have not had significant experience in working with children or young people.

Why is it important to empower parents?

Earlier practice guides in this series have examined working effectively with children and young people. This guide focuses on the importance of listening to their parents and caregivers.

Listening to parents and caregivers can provide insights into the needs of children and young people as individuals and in the context of their family and community. By engaging with parents and recognising their relationship with their child and their expertise as a parent/caregiver, professionals are more likely to gain their support in assessing risk, in planning for safety and in recognising what supports are needed for the child.

Some of the valuable insights that parents may be able to offer include being able to:

- identify and articulate the individual needs of their child or children
- identify possible triggers or likely causes of trauma or distress for their child
- reflect on areas of strength in their parenting and the impact these have on their child's wellbeing
- identify opportunities for improvements in their parenting in relation to their child's wellbeing and work towards possible solutions to address any limitations
- identify what support they might need to improve their parenting ability
- identify what therapeutic or other forms of support that their child may need.

Simple techniques to show respectful practice

There are some simple, yet effective strategies or techniques that can be used to demonstrate respect for a parent/caregiver and their family, including:

- asking parents/caregivers and children about their preferred pronouns and using these
- using everyday language rather than professional jargon that may intimidate or alienate families
- offering and organising interpreting services if the family is not confident in speaking or understanding English. Making sure that the correct dialect is arranged and that the family is comfortable with the specific interpreter enlisted to provide support
- offering and organising for a professional to sign in the correct dialect where a parent or caregiver is hearing impaired
- adapting the conversation and any written material to a parent/caregiver's level of comprehension or ability to read
- trying to arrange meeting times that suit the family's needs, i.e. fitting in with work schedules, children's routines or caring and medical commitments and appointments
- identifying and discussing positive examples of their child's behaviour
- asking about what works for their child and their family, the likes and dislikes of their child, and what methods or therapeutic interventions may have worked for their child previously
- supporting parents/caregivers to make informed decisions by giving them options and information on the likely outcome of each option.

Raising concerns with parents and carers

It can be challenging to raise concerns about a child's behaviour, wellbeing or development when parents and carers experience any of the following.

- Becoming aggressive or angry, feeling judged, feeling a sense of guilt. Wherever possible, be aware of any history of the parent or caregiver's trauma experience or history of anger or aggression.
- Being affected by alcohol, illicit substances or prescription medication, which might diminish their capacity to engage in a meaningful conversation. Professionals will need to ensure the safety of any children who may be in their care and be aware of responsibilities to report concerns if necessary.
- Having cognitive impairments, intellectual disabilities or acquired brain injuries and requiring a support person or an advocate to engage. Professionals might need to use alternative and creative ways to present information.
- Being vulnerable themselves. Professionals may find it hard to raise difficult or confronting topics which could make the parent or carer feel judged, guilty or inadequate as a parent.

Some practice tips when engaging with parents and carers

While not all disagreements and grievances raised by a parent or caregiver can be resolved amicably, the following strategies have been found to be useful.

- Focusing on the issue that parent/caregiver is raising and remembering the shared goal of supporting the child or young person.
- Allowing the parent/caregiver to speak without interruptions and voice their concerns.
- Listening actively so that parents/caregivers feel that their concerns have been heard.
- Using body language and facial expressions that suggest sympathy with the parent/caregiver's needs and validation of their experiences.
- Seeking advice or support from a colleague when needing to talk about or resolve concerns with parents/caregivers.
- Making sure the parent/caregiver is aware of the organisation's feedback and complaints process.¹

Providing care and support

Engagement with children and young people is likely to involve discussions regarding instances of trauma or trauma-related experiences and the feelings associated with these experiences.

Professionals have responsibilities to provide care and support to children and their families to keep them safe physically and emotionally. Family members may need access to appropriate formal supports.

There may be instances when information will need to be shared with other Information Sharing Entities involved with providing support to the family to ensure the wellbeing and safety needs of the child are maintained. Where there are concerns for the safety and wellbeing of the child or young person, a report to Child Protection may be required.

¹ Raising Children's Network, <https://raisingchildren.net.au/for-professionals/working-with-parents/communicating-with-parents/communication-with-parents>

In summary

There are many variables to consider when working with parents and caregivers.

While the parents and caregivers of children and young people can be responsible for direct harm to children or of failing to protect them from harm, in most cases parents genuinely want to see the best outcomes for their children. Their knowledge of their children's individual needs means they can potentially work with you to support their child.

The parent- or carer-child relationship is likely to outlast any professional relationship. So, there is a need to promote this and educate and empower parents to make informed parenting choices and decisions for their children, as well as assisting them to support their children to make positive decisions for themselves.

Engaging with parents and caregivers is likely to be more successful when practised in a planned and considered, non-judgemental manner, taking into account the needs of the child and young person and those of their parents and caregivers.

