

Practice Guidance

Children's Participation in Child Protection Conferences/Core Groups

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Children of sufficient age and understanding will normally be invited to attend child protection conferences with their parents or other members of their family who the child feels are particularly significant. It is important to recognise and understand the value and benefit of involving children as well as parents/carers in the child protection conference in terms of the success both of the immediate concerns for the child/ren, and for longer term planning. Families are more likely to appreciate the outcomes if they are enabled to understand the reasons for any decisions and recommendations made through the conference process.
- 1.2 Children aged twelve years and upwards would normally be deemed of a 'sufficient age and understanding' to attend, but this is guidance only. Exceptionally, some younger children may be deemed to be competent to attend. Given this, the numbers of children deemed eligible to attend conference will be relatively small.
- 1.3 This guidance relates not only to attendance at conferences/core groups, but also recognises that even if children do not attend, they need to be informed and helped to give their views, and participate in a range of ways to influence decisions, e.g. writing, drawing, modelling, etc.
- 1.4 **Principles Regarding the Involvement of the Child and Family Members in the Child Protection Conference:**
 - in most circumstances the safeguarding of the child and promotion of his or her welfare is achieved through developing a partnership with parents/carers and involved family members. This does not mean always agreeing with parents or other adult family members, but does mean striving for common agreement
 - children and young people of sufficient age and understanding should be involved in decisions about their future in a way which respects their views, wishes and feelings but does not appear to leave the responsibility for decisions with the child
 - all agencies share the responsibility for following practices which promote these principles
 - the involvement of family members requires careful preparation and planning. The social worker has the prime responsibility for ensuring that this is managed in a way that best promotes partnership, without compromising the overarching principle that the best interests of the child are paramount

- 1.5 Agencies and professionals should be honest and explicit with children and families about professional roles and responsibilities, powers and expectations and about what is and what is not negotiable.
- 1.6 If there is a criminal investigation, the social worker **must** consult with the police about the child being invited to the conference.
- 1.7 In addition to those adults who have daily care of the child, estranged parents (e.g. birth fathers) grandparents, or other family members may play a significant part in the child's life, and some may have parental responsibility even if they are not involved in day to day care. It is important to include significant family members, particularly if an advocate for the child. However, conference size needs to be manageable and be able to be conducted in a manner that will be constructive.
- 1.8 For each child subject to the conference, the social worker must consider whether it is appropriate for the child to attend, based on a careful assessment of the child's best interests. The following questions are key to forming a judgement:
 - is the child of sufficient age and understanding to make an informed decision about whether he/she wishes to attend?
 - will the child's presence inhibit the appropriate sharing of information?
 - what is the level of the child's vulnerability and how can this be handled?
 - is the conference likely to be too distressing or disturbing for the child?
 - is the presence of the child likely to undermine a criminal prosecution?
- 1.9 If the child of sufficient age and understanding chooses not to attend conference, then s/he should be given the opportunity of alternative methods of participation, e.g. a written statement to the chairperson, or the child's wishes and feelings about outcome being included under a separate heading in the report of the social worker.
- 1.10 If a child and/or family does not attend conference, the reasons should be clearly understood and recorded on the child's case file, and also on the record made of the conference.
- 1.11 If the presence of siblings is considered to be detrimental to the individual child who has been abused, the social worker must ensure that the siblings' wishes and feelings are separately obtained and recorded in the report of the social worker, or, exceptionally, in a separate report for a 'confidential slot' in conference. (**See also 3.2**)
- 1.12 Exceptionally, the child and family may need to be excluded for a 'confidential slot' (**See also 3.2**) during conference, for example:
 - when the conference needs to seek legal advice

- when information regarding prosecution is being given by the police
- when personal health information about particular family members is given (unless consent has been given)
- FII/ medical info etc.

1.13 When a person attends part of the conference, he/she must only receive the record of that part of the conference attended. If he/she does not attend, he/she will only receive the record pertaining to that part of the conference he/she would have attended.

The child and family need to be informed of the reason for any exclusion.

2. Pre-Conference

2.1 Prior to the conference, whether or not the child attends, the social worker should talk to the child about the purpose and process of the conference, and explain who will attend. When appropriate, the social worker should also inform about the court process.

The following issues also need to be taken into account:

- whether the child has any particular anxieties about the conference process
- encouraging the involvement of a supporter/advocate for the child to support the child and to ensure the child's views are heard and taken into account
- sharing relevant parts of the social work report to the conference and clarifying any points the child disagrees with or is unhappy about
- consider allowing the child a 'confidential slot' and agreeing this with the chairperson (**see 3.2**)
- providing information regarding their right to complain if he/she is unhappy with the decision of conference.
- checking whether there are any communication issues e.g. signing or Interpreters
- checking whether there are any difficulties with physical access, written text, communication, or lack of suitable equipment and support which may inhibit the full participation of a disabled child
- checking whether there are any cultural issues that need to be considered
- checking whether the venue is appropriate
- consider the 'timing' of the conference to take account, as far as is reasonably possible, of the child and family's needs
- checking whether there is a need to involve any specialist workers e.g. any physical or learning disability that may affect the child's ability to understand the conference process; or someone with expertise in a particular field e.g. children involved in prostitution
- whether separate social workers are required for the child and rest of family

- 2.2 Where a 'supporter' or 'advocate' is being considered, the wishes and feelings of the child should be taken into account. It is important to discuss the issue of supporter or advocate for the child in advance of the conference. The child may suggest their own appropriate adult as an advocate. A decision needs to be made as to whether this support should be available pre-conference, during conference and after conference. Issues such as confidentiality need to be considered fully when this decision is made.
- 2.3 Prior to the conference, the social worker must ensure that the police have all names and d.o.b's of any additional family members who will be attending conference, including all family members involved, or likely to be involved, with the child, e.g. birth fathers, in order to check prior to the conference taking place.
- 2.4 It is also important for the social worker to consider, in advance of the conference, practical matters such as accessibility of toilets; soft drinks for the child; someone available to sit with child/children if they get bored or disruptive and wish to come out of conference.

3. Conference Process

- 3.1 During the conference, it is important that due consideration is given by all agencies to the presence of the child/ren and how what is said may affect them. Also consideration needs to be given to issues of safety and confidentiality of information.
- The Challenge of Partnership in Child Protection: Practice Guide (Dept of Health, London: HMSO 1995) outlines 15 basic principles for working in partnership, as follows:
- treat all family members as you would wish to be treated, with dignity and respect
 - ensure that family members know that the child's safety and welfare must be given first priority, but that each of them has a right to a courteous, caring and professionally competent service
 - take care not to infringe privacy any more than is necessary to safeguard the welfare of the child
 - be clear with yourself and with family members about your power to intervene, and the purpose of your professional involvement at each stage of the process
 - be aware of the effects on family members of the power you have as a professional, and the impact of what you say and do
 - respect the confidentiality of family members and your observations about them, unless they give permission for information to be passed on to others or it is essential to do so to protect the child
 - listen to the concerns of children and families, and take care to learn about their understanding, fears and wishes before arriving at your own explanations and plans
 - learn about and consider children within their family relationships and communities, including their cultural and religious contexts, and their place within their own families

- consider the strengths and potential of family members, as well as their weaknesses, problems and limitations
- ensure children, families and other carers know their responsibilities and rights, including any right to services, and their right to refuse services, and any consequences of doing so
- use plain, jargon-free language appropriate to the age and culture of each person. Explain unavoidable technical and professional terms
- be open and honest about your concerns and responsibilities, plans and limitations, without being defensive
- allow children and families' time to take in and understand concerns and processes. A balance needs to be found between appropriate speed and the needs of people who may need extra time to communicate
- take care to distinguish between personal feelings, values, prejudices and beliefs, and professional roles and responsibilities, and ensure that you have good supervision to check that you are doing so
- if a mistake or misinterpretation has been made, or you are unable to keep to an agreement, provide an explanation. Always acknowledge any distress experienced by adults and children and do all you can to keep it to a minimum

Confidential Slots

- 3.2 The social worker should tick the boxes on the conference request form and should tick whether it is necessary to have a confidential slot. The Chair will ascertain from the social worker or other professionals prior to the conference, the purpose of the confidential slot, and consider these on a case by case basis.
- 3.3 There is an expectation that families and child/ren remain together throughout the conference including when there is a need for a confidential slot, unless there is a particular need for the child to have a confidential slot (**see 2.1**). The child or parent's view will then be reported to the conference by the social worker. During the conference the Chair will provide a further opportunity for a confidential slot to allow for reporting of any very recent developments, e.g. domestic violence. The social worker will make arrangements for the family while out of the main conference.

4. Post conference issues

- 4.1 The child must be given the outcome of decisions and recommendations of conference on the same day as the conference. This follow up would normally be via the social worker. The child needs to be told what the outcomes are intended to achieve in the short, medium and longer term. Any other children in the household who are affected must also be informed of the conference outcomes on the same day or as soon as possible after conference.

- 4.2 The social worker needs to ensure that the child is aware that he/she can follow the complaints procedure if he/she disagrees with the conference decision. (This is a three-stage process.)
- 4.3 The child should be kept informed about the progress of a complaint or the implementation of a decision.
Please also refer to **Chapter 23: Resolution of Professional Disagreements related to the safety of Children .**

5. Advocacy

- 5.1 Although Leicester City, Leicestershire and Rutland do not currently have formal advocacy services at present, this does not preclude the use of an advocate to support the child.

6. Core Groups

- 6.1 The same principles apply to core groups regarding the involvement of the child and family members as in the Child Protection conference.
- 6.2 Parents and children (where appropriate) should be fully involved in the discussions about the Child Protection Plan.
- 6.3 All meetings of the core group should be recorded and this record will provide a clearly written statement of what has been negotiated between the relevant parties. All core group members including the child should be given a copy of the record of the meeting.