

SSCP Practitioner Guidance

Preparing for a visit when working with children and families with additional / complex needs.

*'Disabled children are at greatest risk of abuse in addition to those with behaviour/conduct disorders. Other high-risk groups include children with learning difficulties/disabilities, children with speech and language difficulties, children with health-related conditions and deaf children.'*¹

*Significant barriers continue to exist in child protection processes for disabled children. Recurring themes include failure to recognise abuse or apply appropriate thresholds; lack of communication with the child and maintaining a focus on their needs.*²

This practitioner guidance will help you to plan a visit where you want to gain the voice of a child with additional needs. It will guide you to consider how to prepare in advance to ensure that family engagement can be maximised, and the voice of the child can be heard.

When working with families who have children with additional/complex needs it is important to have a good understanding of what those needs are to enable you to prepare and respond appropriately.

When planning for a meeting, consider the following:

- Speak to parents and carers first to establish their needs and to find out their interests
- What is the disability, special need or impairment that affects this child? Ask for a description of that need: for example, 'learning disability' could mean many things and does not tell you much about the child or their needs.
- What is your understanding of that need, and do you need to carry out some further research to improve your understanding?
- Consider the child's communication needs, how do they communicate and what mechanisms can you utilise to support positive interaction?
- It may be helpful to discuss in advance with professionals who have a detailed knowledge of the child and/or expertise in the need concerned and forms of communication, such as teachers or care staff.
- Will the child respond better if they know you are coming to speak with them in advance? (Only where appropriate)
- Would a social story help them to understand what you do and why you are there?
- Where will you meet the child? Is this a place where they feel safe and comfortable?
- Would a shared activity promote better communication to avoid direct eye contact and direct questions?
- Could the use of puppets and games help facilitate the discussion?

¹ Excerpts from the NSPCC report "We have the right to be safe - protecting disabled children from abuse" by David Miller and Jon Brown (October 2014)

² (Ofsted 2009, 2012; Brandon et al. 2012; Taylor et al. 2014).

- Consider if the date and time of the meeting is conducive to positive interactions e.g not taking a child away from a preferred activity.
- Opportunity to observe the child in their own environment

It is important not to underestimate the child's ability to communicate or make assumptions that they will be unable to do so.

What to expect when working with children with additional/complex needs.

- Expect the unexpected!
- Non-verbal children may not react to questions (Verbal communication is the things we say. Non-verbal communication is the things we don't say, but what we communicate through our body language.
- Some children may not understand social boundaries and may interact with you physically, be aware of how you interact physically with children.
- You may be met with silence, find ways to engage with the child such as their favourite games, toys etc
- Allow enough time for the session. You may not gather all the information you require in one session. Be prepared to have further sessions if needed.
- Allow for processing time this may be longer than you think, and you may need to rephrase the question.
- Allow the child opportunity to communicate with you in a way that they feel comfortable, drawing, through play with images etc.
- Communication may not be in the way that you expect for example: use of body language, eye contact, physical change such as a change in temperature.
- Bring activities based on child's preferences/ picture prompts to support positive engagement
- Celebrate small wins – different forms of communication
- Recognise that behaviour is communication – what is their behaviour telling you?

Identifying neglect in children with additional needs can be very complex, it is important that small details (nagging doubts) are recorded when there are concerns regarding children with complex needs to build a picture. As practitioners, we need to be mindful that we don't focus on the SEND need as a reason/excuse for any signs of neglectful behaviour.

Please see the SSCP website to access the [Neglect Toolkit](#) for useful resources that may support you when planning a visit.

