

Thematic review on understanding a child's world:

This thematic review summarises the key findings and strengths from local reviews, and highlights themes in common with national reviews, where understanding of the lived experience of the child was a key factor.

It summarises the key learning points for practitioners, managers and the safeguarding partnership, and provides links to relevant tools and resources to support good practice.

Key findings

Finding one: The child's world was not well understood

- Children's behaviour as a means of communication was not always understood, particularly in infants, teenagers and children with disabilities
- Opportunities to share and analyse information were missed and partnership working was not consistently effective and timely in seeing the whole picture
- Systems for retaining significant family history/information, and current risk were often not accessible to professionals and communication between agencies was not as robust as it should have been
- The role of housing was not well understood. Housing workers potentially had valuable information from home visits but professional concerns about home conditions or involvement with families did not result in decisive action or further discussion with partner agencies. *(To add links to Housing webpage once developed)*

Finding two: Professional curiosity and unease was inconsistent

- Children's distress was attributed to early negative experiences and the possibility of other causes not given sufficient consideration
- In one review, practitioners recorded evidence of neglect, but information was not shared, and no further action taken as parents reported they were addressing concerns, highlighting the importance of looking beyond self-reported information

Finding three: Focus was lost in hearing the young person's voice and their participation was limited in decisions that impacted on their day to day life

- In some reviews negotiating the difficulties of parent or siblings resulted in professionals losing sight of the child's needs. In others the child wasn't given the opportunity to be heard or their feelings and wishes considered

Finding four: Escalation processes not were not followed

- Ineffective communication and/or disagreements between agencies and the impact on decision making is a common theme in local and national case reviews. For example, in one review disagreement between agencies regarding next steps required to safeguard a child at risk lead to inaction and delay in further discussion regarding concerns.

Strengths – What we are doing well in Oxfordshire

- Examples of good direct work showing workers spending time with children and building relationships
- Examples of good practice where the child's views, wishes and feelings were known
- Professionals supported the young person to explore their identity
- Records written to, not about, the child
- Proactively changing the language used with children and young people

Themes in common with National reviews...

- Babies and teenagers featured the most
- Failures to observe & analyse behaviour and interactions, e.g. children's behaviour seen as "misbehaving" or "acting out" rather than communicating all was not well in their world
- Teenagers reported as "hard to reach" or "difficult to engage"
- In some reviews the child was not seen frequently enough and/or not asked their views or feelings
- Agencies did not listen to adults who tried to speak on the child's behalf
- Parental focus, especially when parents had vulnerabilities
- Parents/carers prevented professionals seeing or listening to the child

Learning points for practitioners

Build relationships

- Spend time with children and families and build relationships. Work collaboratively, tell them what you are doing and involve them in decisions that impact on them
- Use available tools with children and families to understand views wishes and feelings *. Ask questions, be curious and practice safe uncertainty
- Understand what life is like for all children in the family, see children alone and give them the opportunity to talk
- Think who else knows/works with this family? Communicate with others, speak to partners and [share information](#)

Professional Curiosity

- **Unpicking behaviour to understand a child's world** - Some young people will never tell a professional their worries and some don't know how to ask for help. Think about what they may be trying to communicate through their behaviour and presentation
- **Develop professional curiosity through [training](#) and supervision** particularly when considering a non-verbal or pre-verbal child. Health and development, appearance, demeanour, behaviour, movement, play and communication with others are all indicators of what life is like for children
- [Multi-Agency Chronologies](#) should be used routinely across all agencies and quality assured through audit. Use [genograms](#) and [chronologies](#). Be aware of where children live, who they spend most of their time with and how these impact on them

Support and challenge

- If you are worried, challenge others even if it's awkward and escalate when required, see [Resolving Multi-agency Professional Disagreements and Escalation Policy](#)
- Check out alternative theories and views

Learning points for managers

Supervision

- Supervision should be reflective and ensure that the practitioner is making decisions based on all available information, and focus is maintained on the child

[OSCB's Safeguarding Conversations Poster](#) can help focus discussion around concerns

- Actions agreed in supervision to address concerns should have a timescale for completion to prevent drift
- Ensure practitioners are using all relevant tools, e.g. childcare and development checklist, genograms, chronologies

- **Escalate**

- If interventions are not effective in reducing risk or concerns, consider escalation to senior managers and directors where appropriate, and make use of professionals only meetings where appropriate and /or complex case panel according to criteria met
- Check if you and your teams know how to escalate concerns

Learning for improved practice

Think Family

Fathers/male carers and wider family members should be included in assessment to ensure strengths and risks are known and understood. See [top tips for working with fathers and male carers](#).

Have the confidence to question and challenge

When professionals don't have a full understanding of each other's roles they may lack confidence to challenge decisions and make assumptions about areas of expertise.

Effective partnership working requires that all practitioners have the confidence to challenge other agencies or professional decisions, if they feel that concerns are not being addressed. Practitioner and managers should follow the process for escalation.

The importance of language used

- Think about what you say and write. The verbal and written language you use has a lasting effect, not only to the way others view young people but also how they view themselves
- Write to children, not about them
- Read [TACT: Language that Cares](#), Changing the way professionals talk about Children in Care

If you do one thing..... Keep your focus on the child/ren

The complexity of a parent's needs can feel overwhelming and require a lot of professional attention. Reviews show that focusing on negotiating the difficulties of the parent often resulted in professionals losing sight of the child's needs. The findings highlight:

- The importance of practitioners talking and listening to children first, before checking out information with parents or carers and of children being seen alone, and their wishes and feelings recorded
- That children's behaviour is a form of communication

The voice of the child should be evident in all statutory assessment and measured alongside other available information.

Did you know?



The following links offer tools and resources for capturing children's views, wishes and feelings:

[OSCB Multi-agency Practitioner's Toolkit](#)

[Oxfordshire County Council Practitioners Toolkit](#)

[Social workers toolbox](#): Free tools and resources for direct work with children and adults

[iCAN Insights from children about abuse and neglect](#): Research, framework and training