



# Capturing children's voices to inform practice

## Why is this important?

Statutory guidance emphasises that safeguarding should be child-centred, meaning that children's wishes and feelings should inform decisions that affect them. Yet research consistently shows that children face significant barriers to speaking up about abuse, and that their attempts to communicate are often missed or misunderstood.

Capturing children's voice is about creating a culture where children know their views matter, where they have multiple ways to communicate, and where adults are skilled at listening – even when a child cannot find the words to say what is happening directly.

By doing this well, you will be better placed to notice concerns early, to understand what issues are affecting your children, and to respond in ways that they experience as helpful.

## 1. Seek pupils' views on PSHE/RSE delivery

Effective Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education (PSHE)/Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) should reflect the lived experiences of children and address the issues that matter most to them. Children are well placed to tell you whether content is relevant, whether delivery feels safe, and whether they are learning what they need to know.

**Early years:** Observe how children respond to activities about bodies, boundaries and feelings. Notice which topics prompt questions, curiosity or discomfort. Use simple picture-based feedback to help children show how they felt about an activity. Parents can provide insight into what children say at home.

**Primary:** Use age-appropriate feedback methods such as traffic light cards, emoji responses, or "what I wish we had talked about" boxes. Ask children what questions they still have after a lesson. Hold small group discussions where children can share what topics feel most important to them.

**Secondary:** Use anonymous surveys to ask students about curriculum content, delivery and relevance. Establish student panels or focus groups to review and shape PSHE/RSE content. Ask students whether lessons reflect what is happening in their lives, including online. Invite feedback on whether delivery feels safe and inclusive.

**Post-16:** Consult students on the topics they want covered and the formats that work best. Use anonymous digital tools to gather honest feedback. Involve student representatives in curriculum planning and review. Recognise that students may have direct experience of issues being taught, and create space to discuss this.

It's important to be sure you are **reaching less-heard voices**. Standard feedback mechanisms often capture the views of confident, well-represented children. To hear from those whose voices are less often heard:

- Offer alternative ways to contribute, including one-to-one conversations, visual methods, or responses in first languages.
- Actively seek views from children with special educational needs or disabilities; looked-after children; young people who are lesbian, gay or bisexual; those who are questioning their gender identity; and children from minority ethnic communities.
- Work with staff who have trusted relationships with particular groups of children.
- Consider whether group settings feel safe for all children, or whether some need private opportunities to share.
- Ask whether your curriculum content reflects diverse identities and experiences.

## 2. Create opportunities for children to share concerns

Children need multiple, accessible ways to tell someone when something is wrong. Relying on a single mechanism will exclude those who find that mechanism difficult to use.

**Early years:** Build "telling" into daily routines. Use worry monsters, feeling charts, or a designated soft toy which children can take to an adult when they need to talk. Teach children simple scripts: "I need to tell you something." Ensure all adults know how to respond when a child signals distress.

**Primary:** Offer a range of options – worry boxes, trusted adult cards, quiet corners for conversations, and regular check-ins. Teach children explicitly who they can talk to and how. Display information about trusted adults prominently. Consider anonymous note systems for children who find speaking difficult.

**Secondary:** Provide anonymous reporting tools alongside face-to-face options. Make clear how concerns can be raised and who will see them. Train peer mentors to recognise when a friend may need adult help. Ensure pastoral staff are visible and accessible. Use tutor time or PSHE to remind students regularly how to raise concerns.

**Post-16:** Maintain confidential reporting routes and ensure students understand the limits of confidentiality. Offer online and in-person options. Make clear that support is available regardless of age. Ensure that students on placements or off-site provision know how to raise concerns.

**Listening beyond words is essential.** Children may not always tell you directly that they are being sexually abused. They may communicate through changes in behaviour, questions in lessons, artwork, or comments made in passing. Staff should be supported to notice these signals and respond with curiosity rather than waiting for a direct disclosure.

### 3. Let children know they have been heard

Children quickly learn whether adults genuinely listen or simply go through the motions. If a child shares their views and nothing changes, they stop sharing. If they raise a concern and hear nothing back, they may feel dismissed or disbelieved.

#### **When feeding back on curriculum views:**

- Tell children what you learned from their feedback and what you will do differently.
- Explain when you cannot change something, and why.
- Revisit topics which children asked to explore further.
- Show children that their views have shaped what happens next.

#### **When responding after a child tells you about something they've experienced or are experiencing, or something that may be going on for another child:**

- Acknowledge what the child has told you and thank them for sharing.
- Explain clearly what will happen next, in language they can understand.
- Keep the child informed at each stage, as far as is safe and appropriate.
- Check back with the child later to ask how they are feeling and whether the response helped.
- If you cannot take the action a child has hoped for, explain why and what you can do instead.

#### **To build a culture of being heard:**

- Celebrate examples where children's views have led to change.
- Use assemblies, displays or newsletters to show children that their voice matters.
- Train all staff to 'close the loop' when children share views or concerns.
- Monitor whether children believe they are listened to, through regular surveys and/or conversations.
- When changes to practice have been made following feedback from children; seek those children's views to ensure that this has been done in the way they wanted it to, or in the best way possible.

### Avoid making assumptions

- **Don't** assume that children who do not speak up have nothing to say.
- **Don't** assume that formal mechanisms like school councils capture the views of all children, particularly the most vulnerable children.
- **Don't** assume that children will tell you if something is wrong, without adults creating the conditions for this.
- **Don't** assume that one survey or consultation is sufficient to understand children's experiences.
- **Don't** assume that feeding back to children once means that they know their voice matters – the message needs to be reinforced frequently.
- **Don't** assume that all children feel equally safe using the same reporting mechanisms.
- **Don't** assume that curriculum content is relevant without asking the children it is designed for.