

# Standard 7: Communicating the ‘keep children safe’ message

## METHODS OF COMMUNICATION

### ***Communicating with children***

Organisations create a safer and more respectful environment for children when they consult and talk to them, and create time and opportunities to listen to them.

By allowing children and young people to have a say in the decisions that affect them, taking their ideas seriously and respecting and valuing their views, an organisation is contributing to building a child or young person’s self-esteem and confidence. It also strengthens their relationship with your organisation.

Child-focused communication systems create a safer environment as children become more empowered to speak up about what makes them feel safer, and when they are concerned for their safety and wellbeing.

### ***Supporting children’s rights***

In support of these concepts, Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) states that the “*child has a right to express an opinion and to have that opinion taken into account in any matter or procedure that affects the child*”.

Article 13 of the CRC states the child’s right to “*obtain and make known information and to express his or her views, unless this would violate the rights of others*”.

### ***Practical tools and strategies for consulting with, and talking to children***

If you want to keep children safe, it is important to make sure the lines of communication are open, that children know their rights, and know how to speak out for what they need and want. The following seven tools should help you to make children safer.

1. Listening
2. Finding out what makes children feel safe
3. Creating safe areas
4. Identifying safe behaviour
5. Empowering children and young people
6. Encouraging children to speak out and make complaints
7. Recognising they are sometimes vulnerable, making sure children recognise that they may be targeted by abusers and helping them to protect themselves

Now let's look at each of these suggestions in more detail.

### 1. *Listening*

Discuss with and train staff and volunteers about communicating with children. The following lists some of the best ways you can make sure you are listening to children and young people.

- Allow time for children to talk.
- Give children an opportunity to talk in private but make sure the space is safe and not intimidating to them.
- Ensure the physical environment is welcoming to children and young people – ask the children and young people themselves what would make the physical environment more inviting to them.
- Listen carefully to what children and young people are saying.
- If a child or young person discloses abuse, take them seriously, do not be judgemental and explain carefully what will happen next. Do not make promises you cannot keep.
- Use language that is appropriate to the age of the child or young person.
- Discuss ways to effectively communicate with and listen to children with disabilities.

### 2. *Feeling safe*

Look at ways to allow children and young people to discuss what makes them feel safe, and use this information to direct your activities and programmes. For example:

- For young children: ask them to draw pictures, write stories or act out what makes them feel safe. You could do this in a group. Use their drawings as posters in the organisation – this will make them see that they are contributing to the organisation, even the building that it is in, and should make it feel like a child's place, not just a place for adults.
- For older children: hold workshops and ask them to describe what makes them feel safe. This could be done in many ways including art, role plays, music or dance.
- Gender differences: provide opportunities to talk separately to girls and boys on their particular concerns regarding feeling safe.
- Peer abuse and bullying: provide safe places for children to talk with an adult about the difficulties they face when they are being bullied or abused by other young people.

### 3. *Safe areas*

Ask children and young people what they feel are safe and friendly areas. Have them design a safe area. Include ideas on:

- how chairs and desks are positioned
- private yet still observable spaces
- open doors
- decorating the walls with child-friendly posters, toys, furniture etc
- where the space is located, such as being in a safe and accessible part of town
- familiar people on reception or the kind of people they feel comfortable with
- young people as peer workers present and available.

### 4. *Safe behaviour*

There are lots of ways to involve children and young people in creating their own safe environment. One good way is to involve older children and young people in drafting a Code of Conduct for children.

A Code of Conduct/Behaviour for children helps to explain their rights and responsibilities when taking part in your organisation's activities or programmes. It can be written in simple

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language, should be widely advertised and should address issues that are important to children and young people in your organisation such as:

- how bullying behaviour will be dealt with
- what the policy is on the use of drugs and alcohol
- how dangerous or abusive behaviour will be managed.

## *5. Empowering children and young people*

Hold workshops on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Educate children and young people on the Convention, ask them what it means to them and how it can apply in their lives.

- Train young people in the Convention so they can become peer advocates and educators.
- Involve children and young people in developing policies and procedures for your organisation. Ask them for their feedback.
- Include young people on interview and selection panels for staff and volunteers. Support them through this process and include their opinions and feedback in selection.
- Involve children and young people in the planning of activities and programmes.
- If appropriate in your organisation, educate young people on sexual development, forming consensual and equal sexual relationships and being empowered to determine their own sexual experiences.
- Provide awareness of the different types of abuse, abusers and risks.
- Have young people represented on your Board or Committee for your organisation.

## *6. Speaking out: making complaints*

Your organisation should discuss ways to let children know that they can complain if they are not happy, and encourage and support children and young people who wish to make complaints.

In any organisation, large or small, it is important to have a clear complaints or reporting procedure where disclosures, concerns, suspicions or allegations of child abuse can be raised. A complaints procedure can be developed with the participation of staff, volunteers, young people and families. A clear complaints system makes sure that everyone, including children and young people know where and who they can go to for help in your organisation. A complaints procedure should include the following:

- what to report
- when to report
- who to report to
- how to report
- follow up.

You can appoint one or two people in your organisation who are designated child protection/safety officers – all concerns, complaints or incidents of harm or abuse can be reported to them. **Standards 1 and 2** have more details on the role of the designated or named person for child protection.

The complaints system should be widely promoted and explained and you should give a copy of it to everyone involved with the organisation. A child-friendly version could be developed to give to children and young people.

When children report any harm or abuse it is essential that they are supported through

the process and are kept informed of what will happen. They should be referred to local counselling, welfare or health services that may assist and support them.

You can also think about other strategies – a few are suggested below.

- Have a copy of your code of conduct and complaints procedure on display in the organisation and as brochures available to all staff, volunteers, children and young people, families, visitors and partners.
- Have a suggestion box. This provides a confidential or less intimidating way for children and young people to make suggestions or complaints about your organisation and the activities or programs they participate in.
- Consider how disabled children can communicate their complaints especially if they have verbal communication difficulties. Remember how vulnerable disabled children are to abuse. It is especially important that their communication needs are not forgotten.

### *7. Recognising they are sometimes vulnerable*

So that they can protect themselves, children need to recognise that they may be targeted by abusers.

- Talk to children about what makes them feel safe and unsafe and that they should always talk to someone if they feel unsafe or have been harmed.
- In times of crisis, natural disaster or an emergency, make sure children know where safe areas or child-friendly spaces have been set up, so they are with someone they can trust if they are displaced from parents or family, and know who to contact if they want to report a concern.
- The development of local child protection action plans and reporting systems for an emergency situation helps to keep children safe in times when they are more vulnerable and to ensure they are not targeted by abusers.
- Your organisation could provide education or information sessions for young people, families, and members of the community on children's rights, child abuse and empowering children and young people to speak out.