

Advocacy support for children in child protection conferences

What do we mean by advocacy?

Advocacy is about speaking up for children and young people and ensuring their views and wishes are heard and acted upon by decision makers. The role of advocacy is not only limited to assisting children or young people when they wish to make a complaint. We know that children's interests can be promoted more effectively by having a personal champion in the form of an advocate who can help children and young people ensure their wishes and feelings are heard at all times. Advocacy in its broadest sense is about empowering children and young people to make sure that their rights are respected and that their views and wishes are fully considered and reflected in decision making about their own lives.

Policy context

Article 3 of the UN Convention of Rights of the Child requires best interest of the child be a primary consideration in all actions concerning him / her. Article 12 gives all children the right to freely express their views in all matters affecting them and due weight be given to these views in accordance with the child's age and maturity. Within child protection this is reflected in the Children Act, 1989, which places a duty on local authorities, to ascertain a child's wishes and feelings and to give them due consideration, when making decisions during the child protection process.

What is the purpose of the Advocate?

Child protection conferences are a key part of the child protection process, where various professionals, the child or young person and parents/carers offer their assessment of the situation and where appropriate work together to agree a plan to protect the child. Advocacy within a CP conference, whereby children are supported by skilled independent practitioners to express their views and talk about their experiences, can bring clarity and understanding of the child's perspective. What's more the meaningful engagement of children in the decision making process can lead to improved outcomes ensuring that children are kept safe.

Why have advocacy in a child protection conference?

Evidence from many Serious Case Reviews (and audits) repeatedly show that the child's voice is often not heard and effectively represented in child protection cases. Research and evidence shows that supporting the child to attend their child protection conference or having an advocate attend on their behalf can empower children to express their views. As one child has said *"without the support of an advocacy services during the process "they don't know what I would have said or what I think and they wouldn't have any of my views and they wouldn't really know my decision."*

The 2012, Munro Review of Child Protection states *“children and young people are a key source of information about their lives and the impact any problems are having on them in the specific culture and values of their family. It is therefore puzzling that the evidence shows that children are not being adequately included in child protection work”*.

Providing children with an advocate, does not omit the need for social workers to engage children in discussions, about their thoughts and feelings. However it can provide another vital outlet through which children can be heard and adequately articulate their needs. An advocate can help ensure the child remains the absolute focus within the child protection conference (even if they do not attend).

Why are we doing it?

- to promote, support and increase young people’s right to real and substantive participation in child protection conferences
- research tells us that listening to young people helps to keep them safe and has a positive impact on child protection planning

Young people’s views can be promoted more effectively by having an adult “independent” champion (in the form of an Advocate) who can help them to:

- participate confidently at CP conferences and
- ensure their wishes and views are heard
- research and good practice have demonstrated that by having gained young people’s views, the conference is able to more relevant risk assessments and protection plans

How advocacy improves outcomes

There are a number of benefits to providing an advocacy services to children involved in child protection process. These are outlined in Independent Advocacy in Child Protection. Guidance for Policy Makers Willow, C (2013), NCB and include the following:

- ensuring the child remains everyone’s focus
- enhancing the child’s engagement in the child protection process
- empowering children
- providing children with additional support and protection to ensure a fuller picture emerges if their lives, wishes and concerns
- increasing parents engagement in child protection processes and outcomes

The process:

Independent advocacy must be seen as an integral part of the child protection process. Newcastle operates an ‘opt in’ process for advocacy. This means that there is an expectation that social workers will have discussed advocacy with children and families in advance of the child protection conference or review giving them the choice to ‘opt in’ to the service. Should a child not wish to have an advocate the rationale for this must be given by the social worker in their report to conference.

Providing good information to professionals, children and parents:

Good information about the role of the advocate needs to be provided to professionals, children and parents/carers. This should provide a clear idea of what advocacy looks like; what it can achieve; and the extent of the child's involvement/presence during the child protection conference. Please follow the link to NYAS information which can be used with children and their parents / carers. <https://www.nyas.net/promotional-material>

Local Context

Newcastle has access to independent advocacy for children in need, children subject to protection plans and looked after children, through National Youth Advocacy Service (NYAS). Take up of this resource could be significantly increased and should be considered for the children and young people we work with. We need to proactively promote and offer all children timely access to advocacy.

Referrals to NYAS can be made by calling **0808 808 1001** or by completing the online professional referral form via <https://www.nyas.net/referral> - this is the preferred route for the NYAS Helpline team. If 10 days' notice is not provided NYAS may be unable to provide a suitable advocate.

For more information contact:

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