

WORKING WITH INTERPRETERS AND OTHERS WITH SPECIAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS

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1. INTRODUCTION

All agencies need to ensure they are able to communicate fully with parents and children when they have concerns about child abuse and neglect and ensure that family members and professionals fully understand the exchanges that take place.

Consideration should be given to the use of intermediaries during interviews, assessments and/or advocacy, when appropriate.

2. RECOGNITION OF COMMUNICATION DIFFICULTIES

Contact In taking a referral social workers must establish the communication needs of the child, parents and other significant family members. Relevant specialists may need to be consulted e.g. a language therapist, teacher of hearing impaired children, paediatrician etc.

The use of accredited interpreters, signers or others with special communication skills must be considered whenever undertaking enquiries involving children and/or family:

- For whom English is not the first language (even if reasonably fluent in English, the option of an interpreter must be available when dealing with sensitive issues).
- With a hearing or visual impairment.
- Whose disability impairs speech.
- With learning difficulties.
- With a specific language or communication disorder.
- With severe emotional and behavioural difficulties.
- Whose primary form of communication is not speech.

Family, friends or involved professionals should not be used as interpreters within the interviews although can be used to arrange appointments and establish communication needs. Children should never be used as interpreters.

For children and/or parents requiring interpreters, it is vital to establish their dialect, pertaining to their country of origin, as it might have significant outcomes for the translation. It should also be noted that cultural issues between the interpreter and victim / witness might have a bearing on the translation or disclosure. When planning using an interpreter consideration should always be given to gender and religious and cultural beliefs respected.

3. INTERVIEWING CHILDREN

The particular needs of a child who is thought to have communication difficulties should be considered at an early point in the planning of the enquiry (Strategy Discussion stage).

Professionals should be aware that interviewing is possible when a child communicates by means other than speech and should not assume that an interview is not possible even if it would not meet the legal standards required to be admissible as evidence.

All interviews should be tailored to the individual needs of the child and a written explanation included in the plan about any departure from usual standards.

Every effort should be made to enable such a child to tell her/his story directly to those undertaking enquiries.

Workers interviewing children should be patient; identifying need across a language barrier takes time. However, the time spent up-front will be paid back by good rapport and clear communication that will avoid wasted time and dangerous misunderstandings.

Building trust with a child or young person will also take time in order for them to open up and talk about the issue you want to discuss with them, particularly if they have been told not to talk about those issues.

Workers must remember to speak more slowly when using an interpreter to ensure information is translated correctly and allowing for the child or young person to respond, this will also promote an atmosphere of calmness.

If the child or young person becomes anxious, distressed or overtired, check this out, and if necessary take a break.

It may be necessary to seek further advice from professionals who know the child well or are familiar with the type of impairment s/he has e.g. paediatrician at the child development centre, the child's school and/or the social worker from the disabled children's team.

Interviewers should be aware that some children will be perfectly fluent in English but will use their family language for intimate parts of the body.

When the child is interviewed it may be helpful for an appropriate professional to assist the interviewer and child. Careful planning is required of the role of this adviser and the potential use of specialised communication equipment.

INVESTIGATIVE INTERVIEWS

Achieving Best Evidence in Criminal Proceedings Guidance on interviewing victims and witnesses, and guidance on using special measures (March 2011) provides guidance on interviewing vulnerable witnesses, including learning disabilities and of the use of interpreters and intermediaries.

Interviews with witnesses with special communication needs may require use of an interpreter or intermediary and are generally much slower. The interview may be long and tiring for the witness and might need to be broken into 2 or 3 parts preferably (but not necessarily) held on the same day.

A witness should be interviewed in the language of her/his choice and vulnerable or intimidated witnesses, including children, may have a supporter present when being interviewed.

4. USING INTERPRETERS WITH FAMILY MEMBERS

If the family's first language is not English and even if they appear reasonably fluent, the offer of an interpreter should be made, as it is essential that all issues are understood and fully explained.

Interpreters used for interviewing children should have been subject to references, DBS checks and a written agreement regarding confidentiality. Whenever possible, they should be used to interpret their own first language. In the case of FGM (see Female Genital Mutilation Procedure) the interpreter must not have any connection with the family and their cultural beliefs must be examined.

Social workers need to first meet with the interpreter to explain the nature of the investigation, aims and plan of the interview, and clarify:

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- The interpreter's role in translating direct communications between professionals and family members.
- The need to avoid acting as a representative of the family.
- When the interpreter is required to translate everything that is said and when to summarise.
- That the interpreter is prepared to translate the exact words that are likely to be used - especially critical for Sexual Abuse.
- When the interpreter will explain any cultural issues that might be overlooked (usually at the end, unless any impede the process).
- The interpreter's availability to interpret at other interviews and meetings and provide written translations of reports (taped versions if literacy is an issue).

Family members may choose to bring their own interpreter as a supporter.

Invitations to child protection conferences and reports must be translated into a language / medium that is understood by the family.