



# 4 Part four: Working creatively with individual children

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Enabling decision-making by children and young people  
with speech, language and communication needs  
– a four part practice guide

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# 4

## About this practice guide

This is the fourth and final part of a four-part practice guide that offers guidance, tips and practice pointers for anyone seeking to actively involve a child or young person with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) in making decisions about their lives.

The four parts are:

- > **Part one: Understanding the experiences of children with speech, language and communication needs**
- > **Part two: Why inclusive communication is everyone's responsibility**
- > **Part three: Strengthening your listening mindset**
- > **Part four: Working creatively with individual children**

The guide's primary focus is on helping practitioners to make sure that the voices of children and young people with SLCN are heard within assessment and review processes. It will therefore be of particular interest to social workers, independent reviewing officers, early help practitioners, SENCOs (special educational needs coordinators), special educational needs (SEN) caseworkers and children's advocates.

Part four focuses on providing guidance and tips for working creatively with individual children to enable their participation. This includes signposts to a wide range of resources and anonymised stories of effective practice in action.

We have deliberately chosen generic examples of creative practice to ensure that the guide is relevant to a wider audience also. Examples are presented alongside a set of core principles (see Part three: *Strengthening your listening mindset*) for undertaking inclusive assessments and reviews with children and young people with SLCN. These principles can be applied by practitioners working in all settings.

## How to use this guide

We strongly recommend that you read all four parts of this practice guide in sequence. This will enable you to reflect on your own views and experiences and to think about the contextual landscape for children with SLCN before moving on to consider the range of ideas and tools for creative communication that are described in Part four. The guide includes reflective questions and exercises throughout.

The guide can support individual continuous professional development (CPD) and structured CPD within teams and organisations – for example, by asking practitioners to read each part and then participate in a reflective discussion session. Social workers can also write up their reflections to help provide evidence for Social Work England's Professional Standard 4: Maintaining My CPD.

### A note on terminology

Throughout the practice guide, we refer sometimes to 'children' and sometimes to 'children and young people'. No distinction is intended. Unless otherwise specified, all references to 'children' with SLCN include children and young people also. To maintain readability and conciseness, we don't use the full phrase 'children and young people' in every instance.

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## Communication aids and communication systems

### Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS)

... is a way for autistic people and people with learning disabilities to communicate without having to rely on speech. As the name suggests, it's a system of cards with a series of pictures, symbols, words or photographs that the child exchanges (with their 'communication partner') to request an item, respond to questions, or express their needs and elicit a response. PECS has been shown to increase social interaction and reduce behaviours that challenge autistic people. While almost anyone can use PECS, it does require training for both the child and their communication partner; so if you're not trained in using PECS, you're likely to need to enlist the support of someone who knows the child well to communicate with them.

**i** More information on PECS can be found at: <https://pecs-unitedkingdom.com/pecs>

### Voice Output Communication Aids (VOCA)

... some children and young people who are unable to produce speech (or have difficulty doing so) use a high-tech form of augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) to produce computer-generated synthesised speech. A range of voice output communication apps are available to use via iPad or Android tablet devices that children and young people can use to produce sounds and words by using eye-gaze or touch technology.

**i** You can find out more about the different types of VOCA on the [Communication Matters website](http://www.communicationmatters.org.uk).

*Examples of different VOCA (Images are with the permission of Communication Matters [www.communicationmatters.org.uk](http://www.communicationmatters.org.uk))*



### Talking Mats

... is a visual communication framework that can support children with communication needs to express their feelings and views. It can be carried out in person using a physical mat and cards, or digitally via a tablet, laptop or computer. The mat comprises three sets of pictures or symbols to show: the subject being explored; the different options available for the child to choose from; and visual scales for the child to show how strongly they feel about each choice. Talking Mats has been used successfully to involve children in their education and care planning.

**i** More information and resources are available at: [www.talkingmats.com](http://www.talkingmats.com)

### Objects of reference

... are physical objects that have a particular meaning for a child or young person. Many children with SLCN develop a way of communicating that is personal to them, and this often involves attaching their own meaning to particular objects – e.g. a special blanket that the child seeks out when tired or upset or a favourite cup that the child fetches to let you know they're thirsty. These are an important way for children with SLCN to express their needs and preferences. For some children, it may be possible to develop a communication tool using photographs of the child's objects of reference.

**i** You can read more about using objects of reference on the [Communication Matters](#) and [Just One Norfolk](#) websites.

### Resources for children with sensory impairments

... some children with SLCN have a sensory impairment that affects their hearing or sight. Some who are profoundly deaf will use [British Sign Language](#) as their first language. Visually impaired children and young people may use braille or speech-to-text and text-to-speech software to access written communication and to aid their learning. Children who are deaf, blind or have profound multiple learning disabilities that include sensory impairments will have specialist communication needs. They may require support from an advocate to help them express their views and participate in decision-making.

For more information on how to work creatively with children with sensory impairments, see:

- > [the National Deaf Children's Society's deaf-friendly communication tips](#)
- > [the Royal National Institute of Blind People's advice on helping children communicate](#)
- > [a blog by Henshaws \(2022\) on how to communicate with a visually impaired child](#)
- > [information and advice from Sense on different ways of communicating.](#)

### Makaton

... is a communication system that uses signs (gestures) and symbols (pictures) with speech to enable people with learning difficulties to communicate. Signs are based on British Sign Language, but Makaton is designed to support hearing children and adults to understand spoken language and express themselves. Signs and symbols are used with speech in spoken word order. Makaton also makes use of facial expression, eye contact and body language to give as much information as possible.

**i** For information and resources visit: [www.makaton.org](http://www.makaton.org)

### Signalong

... is a sign-supported communication system based on British Sign Language but adapted to the needs and abilities of children (and adults) who have difficulty understanding and producing spoken language mainly due to learning disabilities. Users sign while they speak using simplified English, and signs are used in spoken word order to support language. Signalong is a total communication approach that uses body language, facial expression and tone of voice alongside speech to slow down communication and so allow more processing time to maximise understanding. The process of developing vocabulary is led by the child themselves.

**i** More information and resources are available at: [www.signalong.org.uk](http://www.signalong.org.uk)

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## **Farida: Using observation and sensory activities to understand the world of a child with complex disabilities**

Three-year-old Farida has been diagnosed with a life-limiting neurological condition and is unable to communicate verbally with words. Farida can't move her body without assistance and requires 24-hour care and support. She is from a Bangladeshi-British background.

Farida was made subject to a child protection plan due to parental domestic abuse. She now lives in a new home with her father (the non-abusing parent) who has no recourse to public funds. The social worker was asked to visit Farida's home to assess the environment and the care she was receiving.

When the social worker arrived, Farida was being cared for by her community paediatric nurse who had plaited Farida's hair and painted her nails, an activity Farida always seemed to enjoy. Farida's father explained that Farida had experienced a seizure earlier that day, so he had started to play an audio recording of the Quran, which helped her relax.

While holding her hand and making eye contact, the social worker spoke to Farida in a soft and gentle tone about the seizure and the recent changes in her life. Farida turned her gaze towards the social worker's voice. She appeared at ease and content with the care she was receiving. Farida was no longer responding anxiously to noises in the home as she had done in the past. This indicated that Farida likely felt a greater sense of safety and security living with her father in their new home.

Farida remained living with her father, had supervised contact with her mother, and started attending a specialist school. Farida was removed from the child protection plan.

- > Farida's story shows how the social worker was able to draw on a combination of observation and sensory activities to understand the world of a young child with profound physical and communication needs.
- > This observation contributed directly to the ongoing assessment of Farida's needs and the level of care and support her father provided.



### Khalid: Using images to assess capacity to consent to marriage

Khalid, a 16-year-old boy from a Muslim Pakistani-British background, has a diagnosis of autism, a severe learning disability and associated SLCN. Khalid's school reported that his father was planning to take Khalid to Bangladesh to find him a wife who could look after Khalid when his family no longer could. (This was before the legal age of marriage in the UK was raised from 16 to 18 in 2023.) To safeguard Khalid, the social worker needed to assess his capacity to consent to marriage and consider making an application for a forced marriage protection order.

Before meeting Khalid, the social worker met his teacher and enhanced learning assistant to learn about his personality, likes and dislikes, and how he likes to communicate. As Khalid enjoys Bollywood movies, they decided to use images of men, women, husbands, wives and weddings from some of Khalid's favourite films to assess his understanding of what would be expected of him as a husband and his ability to consent to marriage.

They asked Khalid questions about social rules in school and at home in his community. By placing cards onto respective symbols for 'ok' and 'not ok', Khalid communicated that shaking hands, high fives and fist bumps were all ok to do, but grabbing, kicking and pushing people were not ok. When asked if hugging, cuddling and kissing were ok, Khalid communicated that all were ok at home but not ok at school.



Next, Khalid was shown a series of images from Bollywood films. Khalid was unable to correctly identify a man, woman, husband or wife. It was evident that Khalid did not have the mental capacity to understand, retain or weigh up the information needed to make an informed decision and provide his consent to marry in Pakistan.

The local authority was granted a forced marriage protection order and a plan of care and support for Khalid was put in place.

- > Khalid's story shows how important careful planning and preparation are to involving young people with complex communication needs in important decisions about their lives.
- > By working in close liaison with Khalid's teacher and learning assistant, the social worker was able to build a clear picture of Khalid's interests.
- > Together, they were then able to devise a highly personalised way of establishing Khalid's capacity to make decisions about his future and to use this information to help safeguard Khalid from potential harm.

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## AUDIENCE: Involve others, especially advocates, to ensure the child's voice is heard

As we have seen, finding creative ways of involving children with SLCN in decision-making often means enlisting the support of those who know the child well. Sometimes, additional or outside support is required to ensure that children's voices are kept central to assessment and decision-making processes. Independent advocacy represents an important way of ensuring that children with SLCN's views are communicated to those with the power to make decisions.

### Use of independent advocates

Independent advocacy is a way of involving neutral others to help ensure that children's views are heard in assessments and reviews. It is particularly used to uphold a child's right to express their views to decision-makers.

Advocates act on the permission and instructions of children and young people. This may be even if the advocate does not agree with the child or does not think that these views are in the best interests of the child.

Certain groups of children and young people, many of whom are very likely to have SLCN, have a legal right to an independent advocate.<sup>1</sup> This includes any child or young person who:

- > has special educational needs or disabilities
- > is classified as a child in need
- > is a care leaver or a young carer
- > presents as homeless
- > is aged 16-17 and lacks mental capacity
- > is subject to the *Mental Health Act 1983*.

Children and young people with SLCN may particularly benefit from being supported by an independent advocate, given the additional barriers they face contributing to decision-making. Recognised uses and benefits of advocacy include:

### Independent advocacy helps children with SLCN by ...

- > ... improving their understanding and confidence about taking part in decision-making
- > ... developing more open and honest relationships with professionals
- > ... challenging professionals' and parents' negative attitudes and assumptions regarding children's participation
- > ... helping to maintain a focus on children's needs and rights while they're living away from their family at residential schools or in care
- > ... significantly increasing their chances of being offered care when presenting as homeless.

(Children's Commissioner for England, 2023; Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel & Council for Disabled Children, 2023; Franklin & Knight, 2011; Martin & Franklin 2009; VIPER, 2014).

1 At the time of writing, the government is taking forward plans to pro-actively offer advocacy to all children in care unless they 'opt out' (Department for Education, 2023b, p. 96). The government is also updating the National Standards for the Provision of Children's Advocacy Services and the associated statutory guidance (Department for Education, 2023a).

### What children and young people say about advocacy

"I can talk to [my advocate]. He's been there for me and helping me. He is a good listener and works hard."

"[Having an advocate] makes me feel really, really confident and happy. I feel confident talking to [my advocate]."

"Having an advocate is helpful ... she can get my point of view across, [at meetings] like if I am not invited or I am and I don't want to go."

(Franklin & Knight, 2011; Hernon, 2018a, 2018b)

### Non-instructed advocacy

Acting on a child's instructions can pose problems for children with complex communication needs who cannot instruct the advocate directly.

Acting for someone who cannot tell you directly what they think or feel is sometimes called non-instructed advocacy or non-directed advocacy. Typically, this involves observation, questioning and gathering information from those around the child and across multiple settings, clarifying the rights of the child and then presenting this information on the child's behalf (Franklin & Knight, 2011; Greenaway-Clarke, 2020; Knight & Oliver, 2007, 2008; Townsley et al., 2009).

- i** More information on the use of independent advocacy, including non-instructed advocacy with children with SLCN, is available on the [Coram Voice website](#).

### Other ways to ensure a child's voice is heard in assessments and reviews

A key reason why independent advocacy is effective in ensuring that children's views are heard by decision-makers is because the involvement of a neutral adult goes a long way towards addressing the inevitable power imbalance between children and the adults involved.

But whether or not the child has an advocate or chooses to be present at meetings where decisions are being made, some very simple strategies can help keep the child's voice central to the process. For example:

- > Have a photo of the child or a drawing they've completed visible throughout the meeting.
- > Involve the child in setting the agenda, chairing the meeting or asking questions.
- > If the child is present, use a ball or other object that can easily be passed around to create a system where everyone has a chance to share their views.

All these suggestions can be adapted to ensure they're appropriate for the age of the child and the decisions being taken.

- i** FLARE's (2020b) [practice tips](#) for working with children with SLCN online can be adapted for use during any meeting or visit to help redress the power imbalance between children and adults.

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## INFLUENCE: Check that the child's views are valued

One of the most common barriers to upholding children's right to participate in decision-making is that it's all too easy for adults to be outwardly seen as consulting children only then to disregard their views when final decisions are made (Lundy, 2007). So, in this section, we highlight a small number of key resources that you can use to check that children's views are being valued within decision-making.

While the extent of children's influence on decision-making will vary according to the individual child's age and understanding, the value placed on the views of children with SLCN should always be:

- > monitored to guard against tokenistic participation
- > reviewed regularly to take account of children's evolving capabilities
- > reflected on by practitioners in supervision.

### Guarding against tokenistic participation

After being consulted, all children should at the very least receive feedback on:

- > what decisions were made
- > how their views were listened to
- > why certain decisions were made
- > what will happen next.

Good practice when feeding back the outcome of assessments and decision-making to children with SLCN involves:

- > being consistent by using the child's preferred method of communication
- > involving others who know the child well
- > instructing an independent advocate as needed.

**i** **Easy read versions** of plans agreed by decision-makers can help make adult-led decisions more accessible to children with SLCN. See the Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities' advice on preparing easy read materials. You can also find advice on the CHANGE website.

**i** The **Sorting Important To/For tool** is a person-centred thinking tool that can be used to help explain to children with SLCN why certain decisions have been made. It can also be used to check that the issues that are important to the child have been prioritised by decision-makers.

*“Contact with father was No.1 on child’s agenda but further down SW [social work] team agenda. Due to the importance the child placed on this issue it was given greater time and more detailed planning discussed.”*  
(Social worker, study participant – Kennan et al., 2019)

- i** **Getting children’s direct feedback:** The Irish government’s participation framework (Government of Ireland, 2021) has a **range of resources** that practitioners can use directly with children to evaluate the extent of their involvement. These use each of the four domains of Lundy’s model. The resources include a **feedback form** (Government of Ireland, 2021, p. 23) for children to evaluate meetings and other engagements with adult decision-makers.
- i** **Service evaluation checklist:** The resources developed by the Irish government also include an **evaluation checklist** that practitioners and organisations can use to evaluate (internally or externally) how effectively policies, services and day-to-day practice are meeting obligations to involve children in assessments and decision-making.

### **Reflecting in supervision on how children’s views are valued**

Finally, all practitioners have an ongoing responsibility to reflect on the steps they have taken to ensure that the views of children with SLCN have been appropriately valued in assessments and decision-making.

In particular, it’s important to reflect in supervision on what steps are being taken to build the confidence and skills of children with SLCN to participate in decision-making – and that their evolving capabilities to participate are being taken into account in day-to-day practice.

- i** The ‘stop and think’ reflective exercise in Part three (*Strengthening your listening mindset*) of this practice guide can be used as part of practice supervision.

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