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Communication and consultation with children and young people with learning disabilities: Bridges Resource Centre

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Brief description

This example illustrates flexible and effective approaches in relation to communicating and consulting with children and young people with learning disabilities and a complex mixture of communication difficulties.

Overview – the provider’s message

‘We have a commitment to understanding every child’s needs, wishes and feelings and we work hard to ensure that, as far as possible, we know what each child and young person enjoys, likes and dislikes. We want all the children and young people who come to us to have their say and we go the extra mile to make sure that everyone has an opportunity to put across their point of view’.

David Green, Manager



The good practice in detail

Effective consultation in practice

The recent extension of the centre and the development of a soft play cabin in the garden have showcased how well the centre consults with its users to ensure that everyone has a say in future developments. All the equipment in the soft play cabin, for example, was chosen by the children and young people, and a range of methods was used to ensure that everyone had their say. Pictures of soft equipment were displayed on a consultation board at the home and there were various ways for everyone to vote for the pieces they liked the best. Some children wrote their names, others preferred to put stickers next to their favourite pictures and some liked stamping with art paint and shaped stampers. For those children who were unable to use any other methods, a picture of the equipment was shown to them and they were able to express their preferences by pointing their eyes at their favourites, or by using facial expression or body language.



Mel Budge

Mel Budge, the Senior Resource Centre Officer, explains how the children were consulted. 'We did our best to explain, in language and pictures that the children and young people could understand, what they were choosing and with those young people who used eye pointing we changed the pictures around and asked them a few times and at different times to ensure that we were really capturing their wishes, and to rule out any bias for looking in a particular direction. We made sure that they were consistently looking at the same pictures and we judged by their facial expressions and reactions that we had understood them properly'.

Observing facial expressions and body language is key to making sure that the young people are understood and Bridges constantly updates their records and talks to parents and other organisations, to make sure that everyone has an appreciation of what each individual child's expressions are telling them.

David Green explains: 'Understanding why and how young people present in a certain way is really important to enable you to realise what they are trying to tell you. Sometimes our young people can be very challenging in their behaviour, but we train all our staff to understand that behaviour *is* communication. When children and young people are presenting challenging behaviour we see that as communication – they are trying to tell us something. Sanctions are rarely used, as this would be seen as punishing what is essentially communication. We work with the young person, and sometimes other professionals and their parents, to understand what is going on for them, and to teach them more appropriate ways to communicate their feelings.'

Symbols for hurt, abuse, body parts and so on are readily available in a variety of formats so that the children and young people have the ability to communicate if anything upsetting is happening to them. Such incidents are always reported to social care services when appropriate.

Communicating with the children on a day-to-day basis is seen as a vital part of understanding their ever changing wishes and feelings. A variety of methods are used which are consistent with those used in the child's school and home. Staff are familiar with each child's individual method and how each child can make themselves understood. Training is offered frequently to staff to ensure that they understand the different communication methods. Knowing the young people as individuals and understanding how they indicate pleasure or displeasure are vital to being able to meet their needs. It is also important that the young people can input

‘We have a commitment to understanding every child’s needs, wishes and feelings.’

into their own care plans and reviews, and have a chance to say who they enjoy caring for them and what their daily preferences are.

'As preferences change frequently it is important to keep communication and consultation regular to ensure that the young people really benefit from their stays with us' says David. 'It is absolutely vital to keep the care plan updated so that everyone knows how preferences are changing and how they are communicated'.

As well as daily consultation and communication, the children and young people who attend Bridges have been able to influence what happens within their local community. A group of users visited 15 local parks and assessed their accessibility for people with a disability. Their findings were reported to the local council and, as a result, many parks now have more accessible play equipment and the Council has consulted Bridges over recent 'Playbuilders' developments in the area.

‘...we train all our staff to understand that behaviour is communication.’

Young people have also influenced where and how services for them are delivered. Some of the older teenagers wanted to be more independent and so the local youth centre was used to set up a group for these young boys. Using the youth centre's facilities, it allowed the boys to be more independent within a safe environment. These young people were invited to take part in the Duke of Edinburgh Award scheme, and initially two staff from Bridges attended with them. Both of these initiatives are still ongoing, with the youth centre staff developing more services for disabled children having gained knowledge, skills and experience from this project.

The centre staff are currently consulting with the young people about the completed extension and play area and asking which new room they enjoy spending time in the most. Photographs are displayed of the children enjoying their favourite room and from the number of pictures of the soft play cabin, it seems like this is a real hit. The children obviously chose their equipment wisely!

Provider background

Bridges Resource Centre is a respite care facility near Wokingham that caters for children and young people with severe learning difficulties and many also have a physical disability. All the children who attend the centre have some communication difficulties and many are non-verbal.

The centre currently works with more than 30 children and young people who range from eight to 18 years of age. A range of services is offered and a maximum of five young people stay over each night. The centre tries to match the children in terms of ability, age and interest so that there is a mix of children who can get along with each other and with the staff who are on duty.

Are you thinking of putting these ideas into practice; or already doing something similar that could help other providers; or just interested? We'd welcome your views and ideas. Get in touch [here](#).

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