

Helping your young person to give their views

Top tips from an Independent Supporter

Independent Supporters have been helping families transfer a young person's statement to an Education Health and Care (EHC) plan. They talk to many young people, and their families, about getting their views across. These are an Independent Supporter's top tips for supporting a young person.

When you're helping a young person to give their views it can be really hard to know where to start. The pressure of getting everything down on paper and into a small space on a form can feel overwhelming for a young person and their parent.

There are many different ways to gather views and how you do it will depend on how the young person likes to communicate, how they like to record information and who they feel most comfortable with.

Always remember though – there is no right or wrong way to do this and everything a young person says is relevant.

Who is going to help?

Sometimes parents are the best people to support a young person. But sometimes, as a young person gets older and becomes more independent, it can be helpful for someone else to do it. A trusted adult who's seen as not taking sides may be able to help a young person express ideas or feelings that are different from their parents, teachers or the local authority. You could ask your young person who would be the best person to help them, such as a teaching assistant or teacher, their support worker or a friend.

I say to young people "These are your views, all about you. It's like a blog about who you are. This is like a passport to your future. It's going to tell everyone who comes into contact with you what you want and need to make you happy and healthy."

Whoever gives the support, it's important that they're focused only on the young person's needs and goals. If they can help them to think big, be independent in their views and clear about exactly who they are and what they want, that will help too!

Helping a young person share their feelings and ideas

A young person should feel free to say whatever they like. It is the job of whoever is with them to enable them to think about and decide what really matters. I usually talk about how I'm going to support them to think about their life and the future. I suggest to them that between us we can come up with ideas about what they want to happen in the next year and in the long-term.

The best way to do this is through informal questions. Using a mix of open and closed questions often works well. Open ended questions are those which take more than one word to answer. Closed questions usually give you one word answers. Mixing the two can help to move a conversation on – you can listen to an answer and then ask another question to get a bit deeper into how they're feeling. So, for example

“So Rob, How have you found secondary school?” (Open)

“Have you enjoyed your lessons?” (Closed)

“What are the lessons you have most enjoyed?” (Closed)

“Why do you think you liked those lessons so much?” (Open)

If the young person says something which you feel they could expand on, you can use the technique of repeating it back to them, and acknowledging their feelings at the same time (see the example below).

What are you trying to find out?

I start with a loose plan and some questions, which allows the young person to go off on a tangent. I've found that often when they know it's OK to speak freely, you can find out who they really are. They might say something which seems so basic, but actually tells you a lot about how they are feeling, if you dig a bit deeper. So, for example

“What do you like to do in your spare time? What are you really good at?”

“I just like Minecraft.”

“Oh OK – so what do you really like about Minecraft?”

“I have friends on Minecraft, but I don't have any at college. No one talks to me, but on Minecraft everyone thinks I am really good at the game, so I feel happy. When I am at college people think I am weird because I have a helper with me all the time. I hate it.”

The basic questions I use are:

- What makes you happy?
- What are you great at?
- What worries you or makes you sad?
- What do you find really hard?
- What do you want for your future? (College/job/apprenticeship/volunteering?)
- Who do you like supporting you and why?
- Where do you see yourself when you are an adult?

Here's an example of how a conversation might go

“When do you feel happiest Claire?”

“I think it is in lunchtime at college. I get to be with all my friends and we go to computer club. They're really kind to me.”

“So being around your friends and on the computer make you feel really happy?”

“Yes”

“What happens in the lessons then? Do you have friends in the lessons?”

“Everyone talks lots in the lessons and I can't even see what I am doing in my work, so I don't like making friends in the lesson.”

“So everyone talking lots in lessons means you find it hard to focus? It sounds like you find that frustrating. Shall we put that down as something you found challenging about last year? It's something that you can definitely be supported with a bit more. What would you like to happen to make it a bit easier for you in lessons?”

How do we record what's been said?

There are lots of ways to record a young person's views. Here are a few ideas:

- use a big sheet of paper and jot down lots of ideas and information
- record a video
- draw pictures - use pens, pencils, a computer, paint, cutting and sticking
- do a collage
- the supporter can write out what the young person has said
- you can use observations that come from spending time with the young person
- fill out the 'All about me' or This is Me profile pages - these are on the DIAS website
- use pre-made online personal profile one-pagers (see below)
- the young person can write a letter from themselves to anyone supporting them
- write a song or rap and record it

From the conversation with Claire above, whoever is supporting her could explore a bit more and come up with something like this.

I feel happiest at lunchtimes with my friends. I like computer club because I can focus more at lunchtime on the stuff I really enjoy. I do like having friends and talking to people, but in lesson time I can't focus at all and it makes people think I am shy. It is too noisy and bright. Everyone is shouting out and laughing lots. I am sat at the back and I sit next to a boy who is really loud. My TA Sandra tries to talk to me too and I just feel like crying all the time.

I wish this could be different and that I wouldn't get so upset, because when I am older I would like to work in a computer shop and I need to be able to speak to lots of different people. I also want to live alone, with friends, not with my parents, so I really hope I can learn to be a bit more confident. I want to go to Exeter College and do a course in retail and customer service. Then I would like to get an apprenticeship in a shop. I could tell the customers lots about Minecraft and other games.

I think if I could sit nearer the front, next to some quieter people and also be allowed to go and work in the library more often, I would be able to learn better.

Other helpful resources

Sheffkids (adult area of site)

Lots of different one page profiles to download from Sheffield County Council
w: www.sheffkids.co.uk

Careers South West

Information and advice about post 16 options
cswgroup.co.uk

Thanks go to Jess Cain, Independent Supporter based at Careers South West, for her help with these top tips.

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