



# Helping your child to give their views

Helping your child to express themselves and tell you how they feel about life at school (and life in general) is vitally important to making sure they get support that's going to work for them. There are lots of ways to help your child to talk about what school is like for them and what they would like to achieve and change. This factsheet tells you what you need to find out, how to go about it and how to record and share it.

DIAS is a free, confidential and impartial service providing information and support to parents, carers and young people about special educational needs and disability.

## Why are my child's views important?

Children should be at the heart of any decision made about their education and support. The law about special educational needs and disability is clear that local authorities must consider your child's views, wishes and feelings. The law also stresses how important it is that children take part as fully as possible in the decisions made about them.

A child's views, wishes and goals are the foundations of good planning and support in school. If the needs identified, the targets set or the support given don't help a child to achieve their goals, then they're less likely to work. So, good planning and support starts with understanding what your child is good at, what's hard for them and what their goals and dreams are.

When your child is very young, as their parent or carer you'll know what they need and the kind of help that would best support them. You can be their advocate and speak on their behalf.

As your child gets older and has clear views of their own, it's important to encourage them to be ambitious and support them to share in the decisions made about their support. Sharing their views is a great way to help children learn to speak up for themselves as adults. Children and young people with special educational needs or a disability (SEND) may need more support than others to develop these skills, but their views are just as important.

If your child has an Education Health and Care (EHC) plan or is having an assessment for one, you might hear about something called the 'Golden Thread'. When you're reading your child's EHC plan you should be able to see a clear link between their aspirations (what their goals are), their needs, the support they get and the difference that will make. This is the golden thread and it should apply to any plan your child has, including those that their school writes. The starting point should be your child's goals or aspirations and everything else should follow from that.

## Who will see their views and how will they be used?

There are many times when your child's views should be part of the decisions made about their education and support, such as:

- when their plan at nursery, pre-school or school is being written or updated
- when they're having a specialist assessment, for example an educational psychology assessment or a sensory assessment
- during times of planned changes in school – for example the move (transition) from primary to secondary school
- when they're being given support from new services, such as social and health services
- during the assessment for an Education, Health and Care (EHC) plan
- at an annual review or reassessment of an EHC plan

Your child's views should be listened to alongside your views and those of any professionals. They're equally important, as without them, whatever support the nursery or school puts in place may not work as well as it should. So, for example, if your child tells you they find it hard to be in a busy and noisy environment, but their plan has no support in the lunch hall or during assemblies, then it's unlikely to work.

## How do I get my child's views?

Whatever your child's age or ability, you will need to find a way to help them 'talk' about what they're good at, what they find hard and what their hopes, dreams and goals are. You'll need to work out the best way to do this in a relaxed and playful way, which meets them on their level. Home is often the best place to do this, though anywhere they feel comfortable or safe will work just as well.

Here are some top tips from parents and DIAS volunteers about how to do this:

- Listen out for opportunities that come up when your child starts to talk about nursery or school, and encourage them to explore it more.
- Collect their views over a few days or weeks. Sometimes it helps to keep things short and talk about it a few times.
- Write down what they say or record it in some way before you forget it. Sometimes a direct quote can sum up how they think or feel about an issue very well.
- Sometimes children will tell you what they think you want to hear, or say the first thing that comes to mind, so it's worth having more than one go.
- Try talking to them when you don't have to look at each other – when you're in the car or on a walk together. That can help to keep things light and take the pressure off.
- Use play to help you. You could use puppets, toys, modelling clay or Lego to come up with their own story of what's important and what they want their life to look like.
- If your child is old enough and has the skills, they could write or type something or even record a video message.

If your child has been assessed by an educational psychologist, they may have spent time finding out what your child thinks about school too. You can look at this information as well and ask your child if they want to share it as part of their views.

## What should I be asking them about?

To begin with, think about what the most important things to know are. If your child has problems concentrating or communicating you may need to focus your efforts and look at just a few things. It's worth remembering that there are no right or wrong answers. Make sure they know that too.

Here are some of the things that you might want to ask and find out about (you don't need to do them all):

- What are their hopes and dreams?
- What does a good day look like and what's not a good day?
- What do they enjoy and what motivates them?
- What are they good at and what are they most proud of?
- What are the things they find hard at school, or what would they like to change?
- What do they want to achieve now, and what do they want to do when they grow up?
- How do they feel about any condition they have, such as autism or ADHD?

## How do I record what my child tells me?

There are several ways to record your child's views:

- There are forms such as 'All About Me' and 'This is Me' for your child to fill out themselves or with your help. These ask about great stuff, tough stuff, what they're thinking and feeling, what help they think they need and what their goals are. You can usually print them out or fill out an electronic version.
- You can write down what they say for them and share it as a word document or a photocopied note. It's a good idea to keep a copy to help show whether and how things are changing for your child and if they're getting what they need and want.
- If your child is able to, they can write down their views, record a short film message or draw something.
- Your child's school or nursery may be able to help too. If your child has a trusted adult, such as a teaching assistant (TA), they could talk to them and record their views.

The important thing is to make sure your child's views are shared. You don't have to share them with everyone and if there is someone you or they don't want to see them, make that clear.

Otherwise, send a copy to:

- your child's nursery, pre-school or school
- any relevant professionals or
- the Local Authority 0-25 team staff, if it is for an EHC plan assessment or review.

It's a good idea to get your child's views at least once a year, but you can do it more often if you want. If they're going through a lot of change or finding things especially difficult it's a good idea to find out what they're thinking and feeling.

## How do I make sure it's my child's voice that is heard?

Sharing views and then seeing things happen as a result, is an important thing for a child to learn. It helps them to feel listened to and valued and feel that they have some control over what happens to them.

Sometimes it's easy for a child's views and their voice to get lost in the discussions about school support. If there are lots of professionals involved, if your child has complex needs or if their behaviour is challenging it's all too easy to lose sight of their wants and needs.

Children can sometimes echo the views of their parents or carers too, for all sorts of reasons. So, it's important to make sure that it's your child's voice that everyone is hearing and that it stays at the heart of any discussions. Here are a few tips to help that happen:

- Make sure your child knows that there are no right or wrong answers to the questions, and that they won't get into trouble if they say they don't like something or someone.
- If you think your child will say what you would say, ask someone you and they trust to talk to them, without you in the room. That may help to take the pressure off and free up the conversation.
- Try not to ask leading questions – leave your questions open and give your child plenty of time to respond. Open questions are those that have to be answered with more than just a yes or a no. They often start with a 'wh' – why, what, where etc. Sometimes 'wondering' about something they have said helps too. So, you could say "You seem to really enjoy spending time at after school club, I wonder if that's because..." Getting something wrong on purpose sometimes helps too – so you could say, "I think if you could do only the things you wanted to in school you would do maths everyday", even though you know that maths is something they don't like. They'll soon put you right!

When you're in a school meeting, always ask if you can give your child's views first. Some parents take a photo of their child into meetings and put it out for everyone to see, to remind them that their child is at the heart of the discussions.

Children and young people also have a right to talk to an Information Advice and Support service, such as DIAS for confidential and impartial advice, including help to give their views.

## What if my child can't talk or finds it hard to communicate?

As you know, children don't communicate just by speaking. There is a wide range of tools to help your child share their views, from watching facial expressions and gestures, through to pictures and cards,

### Should my child go to meetings?

Every child is different so you'll need to decide whether your child is likely to want to go to a meeting, and how well they will cope.

Children can and do go to meetings and, as they get older, this is a helpful way of getting them involved in decisions. Some children also like to know what everyone is talking about! However, not every child will want to, or will be able to manage it. Meetings can feel intimidating for children, and they can also find them boring.

If your child wants to be involved, then you could ask them to come to the start of the meeting for a few minutes to talk about what's working at school and the help they need. That way they can take part, see what the meeting is like and have their say with the least amount of stress.

and high-tech devices. You know what works best for your child, so use the communication methods they prefer.

## How will my child get to know what's been decided or changed?

It's important to tell your child what difference sharing their views will make. This helps to give them confidence in their ability to understand and influence what happens around them.

You can explain that their views were discussed and thought about. Then talk about the decisions made. If your child has asked for something that can't be done, then it's important to explain why.

## Other helpful resources

### **SEND Code of Practice – version for parents and carers**

Guidance on the special educational needs and disability (SEND) system for children and young people aged 0 to 25.

[www.gov.uk/government/publications/send-guide-for-parents-and-carers](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/send-guide-for-parents-and-carers)

### **Top tips on getting a child's views**

Practical information from DIAS volunteers about working with your child to get their views.

Available on the DIAS website and by contacting the enquiry line.

[www.devonias.org.uk](http://www.devonias.org.uk)

### **All About Me and This is Me**

Editable forms for parents and children to use to record their views.

Available on the DIAS website and by contacting the enquiry line.

[www.devonias.org.uk](http://www.devonias.org.uk)