

Working with adults, children and young people with additional needs: An introduction to complex or life limiting physical disabilities

We hope that you will find this 'introduction' leaflet helpful. It is not intended to replace conversations that you will need to have with children, young people, their families, and the professionals who know them. Those conversations are essential to understand the uniqueness of each family member you work with to ensure that you can engage with them in the most meaningful and supportive way. Links to relevant charities, information services and research are embedded at the end of this leaflet.

Children, young people and adults with life limiting or complex physical disabilities may be known to health and social care services from birth. A child, young person or adult living with a physical disability may experience difficulties with mobility, manual dexterity, communication, physical co-ordination, memory or concentration, and/or continence. The most common causes of physical disabilities include cerebral palsy, muscular dystrophy and acquired injuries. Children, young people and adults with a physical disability may also sometimes be diagnosed with a learning disability or sensory impairment.



Planning for meetings, interviews and direct work

A child, young person or adult with life limiting or complex physical disabilities may need you to adjust how you would usually undertake direct work, interviews or observations of time spent with their family. It is important that you establish what they need from you to make this an effective piece of work. Speaking with the child, young person or adult and their family members and the professionals who know them will guide your planning.

There can often be a distinction between receptive communication (what a person understands) and expressive communication (what a person can express or communicate to others). You may struggle to understand someone whose physical disability impacts their expressive speech, but this should not be used as an indicator of their level of receptive speech. Unless you have been specifically advised that a child, young person or adult has a learning disability, you should communicate with them in the respectful, age-appropriate way you would with any of their peers.

These are some general tips to think about:

- ✓ When deciding whether in person or remote working is more appropriate you need to be sure whichever you choose will allow you the opportunity to understand their needs and enable them to engage meaningfully. It is important to ask if they have a preference.
- ✓ Make sure you understand the child, young person or adult's individual needs. They may use assistive technology or augmented/alternative communication, for example a wheelchair or electronic communication board. If you are inviting a child, young person or adult to your office space you may need to make adjustments to the physical environment you are meeting with them in to ensure that they can fully engage in the interview.
- ✓ Whether meeting in person or remotely, you will need to think about the timing of your meeting to ensure that personal care needs, for example PEG feeds or medication, are not interrupted.
- ✓ Let them take the lead to set the pace- listen.
- ✓ Give enough time for the direct work, interview or observation of contact
- ✓ Don't be afraid to be creative.

Introducing Yourself to Children & Families

The templates for the introductory letters are editable. These letters can be sent to a child to introduce yourself and share details about the purpose of your interview/visit. Use of pictures and images is appropriate in these letters, particularly when working with very young children. All information should be provided in accessible formats.

If a letter is not appropriate, think about how you can introduce yourself in advance of the interview. Would a call or video call be useful?

After the direct work/interview has finished it is important to know how your recommendations to the court and the outcome of any hearing will be shared with the child. Would they like you to write to them again or use other ways of communicating? Is this best communicated via solicitors, family members or professionals, and if so, why? 'Easy read' letters and judgements are becoming more widespread within the family court and you can advocate for these from the judges and magistrates. These outcome letters can form a valuable part of a child's life story work. Even if the child cannot understand the letter at their current age or developmental stage it is something they may be able to understand as they get older.

Safeguarding:

Children, young people and adults with additional needs are at greater risk of abuse due to communication barriers, the signs of abuse being misunderstood or minimised, increased isolation and greater dependence on others for their care, a lack of education to help them to stay safe, and inadequate support. It is important to work proactively to protect vulnerable children and adults, be professionally curious and respectfully challenge others if we have concerns.

How can you be sure you're making the right adjustments?

The short answer is you can't. However, if you're flexible and willing to try different approaches, you're far more likely to succeed.

Using Cafcass Direct Work Practice Aides



Cafcass direct work practice aides are designed to be used with all children, young people and adults.

Here are some tips and ideas to help you use them:

- Limit the number of 'pages' or screens you are using from the practice aides. This allows for clear questioning with visual support. Don't try to complete the entire practice aide unless this is something the child or young person wants to do and can manage.
- Share the sections of the practice aide you intend to use in advance of the session. This could include sharing them with educators or support staff. They may be able to offer guidance to you about how best to engage with the child, young person, or adult.
- Include pictures or images in letters to the judge. These may convey the message the child or young person wants to communicate effectively and will allow the court to hear their voice.

- The 'Dictate' software can be used to allow the child to interact directly and see their own words on the page.
- Don't feel you need to do all the direct work yourself. Adults that the child or young person are familiar with may be key to helping you understand how best to communicate.
- Working alongside educators, carers and support staff may provide opportunities to amplify a child's voice in a way that you could not do alone.
- [Cafcass resources for professionals](#)

Remember, connection before content.

The importance of planning and relationship building cannot be underestimated.

Links

Scope- [Home](#) | [Disability charity Scope UK](#)

A-Z of medical conditions- [Conditions Archive](#) | [Contact](#)

CP Teens UK, a website for children and young people with cerebral palsy- [CP Teens UK](#)

Signalong- [Signalong - The Communication Charity](#)

Makaton- [Home \(makaton.org\)](#)

Widget- [Widget Software](#) | [Widget Symbols Help Communication](#) and [Widget SymbolWorld: Categories : index](#)

PECS- [My PECS - Free PECS Cards and Images](#)