

Knowledge Bite

Diversity conversations with young people



This Knowledge Bite is specifically about talking to children and young people about their own diversity.

Please see a separate Knowledge Bite: [Diversity Monitoring \(knowledge bite\)](#) for guidance on Diversity Monitoring with Adults.

It's important to give children and young people the opportunity to tell us about their identity themselves.

- Parents may not know, or may choose not to tell us, about aspects of their child/ren's identity.
- We can't make the best recommendations for children and might overlook key strengths and risks if we don't know significant things about them or what they see as important.
- We should be talking about diversity and uniqueness with **every child who is able to engage in direct work with us**, tailoring our approach to the age and understanding of each individual child.
- Ofsted told us in June 2021 that we need to be more consistent in considering the impact of cultural heritage and identity of children from white British backgrounds
- We need to record on the Diversity Monitoring tab on the child's file what the child/young person tells us about their ethnicity, religion, dis/ability and first language (as well as gender identity and sexuality where applicable).

Young people will often ask us why we are asking about their diversity and we need to have a clear understanding of this ourselves, so we can explain this to them.

Young people may also ask us what we are going to do with the information and we need to be ready to explain that we will record it and take into account any factors which have relevance for the recommendations we will be making to court. The organisation will also use anonymised information to help us to have a better understanding of the groups and communities that we work with, so that we can make sure our services meet people's needs.

Why is it important to have conversations with young people about their identity and their diversity?

*"My identity is really important to me, if you don't ask me about it then **how** will you know what makes me unique?" FJYPB member, 2021.*



Understanding the young person's 'Diversity with a capital D' (the 'protected characteristics': categories of discrimination or obvious difference, such as race, sex or disability) is important because we need to understand if the young person and/or their family is experiencing discrimination or disadvantage because of structural inequalities. Their 'diversity with a little d' (diversity/uniqueness in its broadest sense – e.g. appearance, interests, body weight and talents) is also significant. We need to value and understand whichever aspects of their identity are most important to young people.

Ways of approaching diversity conversations



Value: "Wanting to know more about you and what is important in your life"



Consider...

- You need to be clear with young people that they do not have to answer any questions about their diversity if they do not wish to.
- Pronouncing names correctly is really important – just ask a young person if you're not sure. Perhaps consider writing their name down phonetically so you can remember it easily.
- The FJYPB ask that we '*find things in common and share them with the child*'. If a young person is talking about any experience of difference or discrimination, you might want to show empathy by sharing an appropriate and safe (for you) example of when you have felt similarly: '*revealing a little of yourself as a human being is crucial for effective relationship building to occur*' (Finnis, *Restorative Practice*; 2021).

DIVERSITY

There are many ways of incorporating diversity conversations into your work. Here are some suggestions, but you will need to find a way that works for each individual child and young person you meet:

- A good starting point may be to explain to the young person *why* we are asking them about their diversity and identity - see above.
- Asking about diversity can be useful at the 'rapport building' stage of your direct work. You could start by simply asking a young person about the **most important things about them that you need to know to help the courts understand what is important to them**. Some practitioners share the [Diversity Wheel](#) with the child to support and stimulate discussion.
- Don't be too formulaic, the FJYPB have told us that they don't want to feel like you are just 'ticking boxes'. Wherever possible, incorporate diversity discussions into your general 'getting to know you' conversation. You might want to ask some general questions such as 'what three things is it most important for the Judge to know about you as a young person? What makes you different from other young people? What makes you unique?'
- You will need to tailor your approach to the age and ability of the child. It might be appropriate to ask more direct questions to older young people whereas you might ask younger children more general questions.

'Do you consider yourself to have any disability?' or 'Do you think you have any disability?'
(for a 14 year old)

'Is there anything that makes it harder for you do certain things?' (and then give an example if they don't understand/respond, e.g. 'Some children we work with need extra help with reading or writing or need a hearing aid to hear better' (for a six year old)

- If you are working with a child or young person with communication needs, you may need to adjust how you undertake direct work with them. Find out from their parents/carers or school in advance the best way to communicate with them generally, including about their diversity. Consider sending materials out in advance – why not share the 'diversity wheel' with them via carers so they can see what you are going to be talking to them about? Consider using pictures/images to explain topics or questions. Use jargon free language to explain questions and concepts in plain language. Allow adequate time for them to be able to express themselves in the fullest way possible.

- Really listen! Ask open questions and let the young person explain the answer in their own words:



'Do you have a religion or belief?'
'What language or languages do you speak at home?' 'How would you describe your ethnicity?... that means whether you are Black British, British Asian, White British etc'.

- Younger children may or may not be able to say which 'category' they fall into but they may offer you rich information about what they *do* understand about their heritage or skin colour, for example.
- Practitioners should be wary of probing children in any way which could cause the child to feel confused or uncomfortable. You should ask open questions in line with their age and understanding in a way which enables them to talk to you about what they are comfortable with sharing.

'Do you think that has made things harder or easier for you? Does that make things any different for you? Do you need anything different because of that? Do you feel different from or the same as other people you know, or live with and in what ways?'

'Tell me what that means for you and your family?'

- Be 'respectfully curious' – explore sensitively what a young person says about any aspect of their identity and don't be afraid to ask for further details if you are unsure or unfamiliar with what they are saying.
- Don't make assumptions about any aspect of a young person's identity – for example, don't assume they are straight because they mention having a boyfriend/girlfriend of the opposite gender.
- Likewise, be careful not to reinforce stereotypes about any aspect of their identity
- Remember a young person may be wary or fearful about sharing their diversity information based on previous experiences and you may need to reassure them about what you will do with the information they give you.
- Remember: 'it's OK to respectfully ask about someone's life in order to understand them better'.

'Diversity is something that I embrace because my school, social groups and networks are diverse. So I may be very open and welcome the opportunity to talk about my diversity'. FJYPB member, 2021.

Talking to young people about sexuality and gender identity

This Knowledge Bite includes specific guidance about talking to young people about gender identity and sexuality because it is an area in which FCAs have asked for more clarity and guidance.

*'Don't be weird, nervous or apologetic about asking me about my diversity. You may make me feel ashamed about who I am'.
FJYPB member, 2021.*

The welcome letters for parents at WAFH stage are to be updated, to ensure that we are transparent that we will be discussing all aspects of identity and diversity with a young person aged 13+. Parents may ask us about this and will hopefully feel reassured once we have explained our approach. In a small minority of cases, a parent may expressly forbid us to talk to their young person about an aspect of their diversity, in which case a professional judgement would need to be made about whether it would be necessary/proportionate to ask the court to direct that we are able to discuss all issues with the child. In such circumstances, you should seek situational supervision with your SM who may consider seeking advice from Cafcass Legal if needed.



How do we know about a young person's sexuality and/or gender identity if we don't ask them?

- When working with young people aged 13 upwards, practitioners should ask the young person about their sexuality and gender identity or record a defensible decision if they decide **not** to ask a young person over this age about these aspects of their identity. If younger children raise with us the issue of their sexuality or gender identity during general discussions about diversity, then we should explore it in the same way as below.
- Practitioners are often worried about asking young people questions about their sexuality and gender identity, but it is more harmful not to create the opportunity for them to talk to us. Any young person with whom we work could potentially be struggling with their sexuality or gender identity and not feel able to raise it with us – or with any other supportive adult. The impact on a LGBT+ young person of living in a household where they cannot be open about their identity, or where they fear repercussions from parents or carers, for example, cannot be underestimated. Not to ask is to risk missing a significant risk issue and/or a significant opportunity for them to be signposted to support.



Lesbian, gay and bisexual young people under 35 years of age are TWICE as likely as heterosexual young people to experience poor mental health *Sexual orientation and symptoms of common mental disorder or low wellbeing: combined meta-analysis of 12 UK population health surveys* (Semlyen et al, 2016).

Compared to cisgender and heterosexual youth:

- Trans young people are 6x more likely
- Bisexual young people are 5x more likely and
- Lesbian and gay young people are 4x more likely to attempt suicide

Meta-analysis attempted suicide Estimating the Risk of Attempted Suicide Among Sexual Minority Youths (Di Giancomo et al, 2018).

The **very fact of not being able to talk about their sexual or gender identity** is a contributory factor in youth suicide *The social determinants of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth suicidality in England: a mixed methods study* (McDermott et al, 2017).

The impact on many trans young people of the Bell v Tavistock ruling in December 2020 was significant. This judgement resulted in the NHS cancelling all new referrals for puberty blockers and reviewing all current patients who are under the age of 16. This placed these young people and their families into a different and possibly difficult situation.

‘Being a young person who is questioning their gender identity can be a very lonely and confusing place to be. It is no wonder that these young people often experience isolation and poor emotional and mental health’. *Blog by Cafcass Pride Network member, February 2021.*

So how do we start these conversations?



- You might want to consider sharing your pronouns at the start of your direct work session, which is a great way to foster an atmosphere of respect and is also a positive step in visibly demonstrating allyship with LGBT+ young people, e.g. 'Hi, I'm *** and I'm your FCA. I use the pronouns he/him. What name would you like me to call you? Do you like to be called he, she, they, or something else?'
- Overcome any awkwardness in yourself: young people are often a great deal more comfortable with discussing these issues than we are as adults. There should definitely be no sense of apology before asking these questions, otherwise it risks inadvertently giving the message that matters of sexual or gender identity are embarrassing or shameful.
- You should ask questions in a sensitive, open and encouraging way. Consider:

'Can you tell me about your gender identity?'

'Your parents have told me that you are a girl/boy, is that what you think too?'

'Some young people talk to us about where they are at with their sexuality or gender identity when we talk to them. Other young people don't know yet or haven't started to think about it and that's fine too'.

'Can you tell me about your sexuality?'

'Have you had any thoughts yet about your sexual orientation?'

- You need to give young people the opportunity to say they're unsure, questioning, don't know or don't want to say.
- You may need to reassure young people about what we will do with the information they give us. We never disclose their sexuality or gender identity to a parent or other agency without their consent or put pressure on them to 'come out', although we may of course have to pass on information if what they tell us constitutes a safeguarding concern.
- NEVER make assumptions about a young person's sexuality or gender identity from their appearance or interests.
- Explore the (potential) response of the young person's parents/carers/family to their gender identity or sexuality. Think about factors relating to culture and the potential for honour-based abuse. Consider whether you need to seek situational supervision.
- Check whether the young person is in need of support around their sexuality or gender identity – but don't assume they are - and signpost where necessary.

- Remember that many young people do not identify with conventional 'adult' sexual identity labels or may reject labelling altogether. Research confirms that lesbian, gay and bisexual young people use a wide range of sexual identity labels such as 'Questioning', 'Experimental' 'Queer', 'Pansexual', 'Genderqueer', 'Asexual', 'Panromantic' or 'Trisexual'. *Researching and monitoring adolescence and sexual orientation: asking the right questions, at the right time* (McDermott, 2010).

See [Stonewall glossary](#) for an explanation of many of these terms.

- Amendments may need to be made in due course to how we record sexuality and gender identity on the child's record but for now:
 - if the young person identifies as something other than lesbian, gay, bisexual or heterosexual (sexuality)
 - or something other than male, female or trans (gender)

you should place on the child's record the narrative detail of how they describe their identity and tick 'other' under sexuality/gender in the diversity monitoring/person details tab.



Now we have asked the questions... what do we do with the information? How do we analyse it?

We need to consider all the 'Big D' and 'little d' factors and think about how they impact on each individual child. Intersectionality is a framework for considering the complex way in which all aspects of a person's identity interact and intersect to create different layers of advantage and disadvantage. It is important that we do not focus in our work solely on one aspect of a child's identity to the exclusion of other aspects which are important for them. See [What is intersectionality? - YouTube](#)

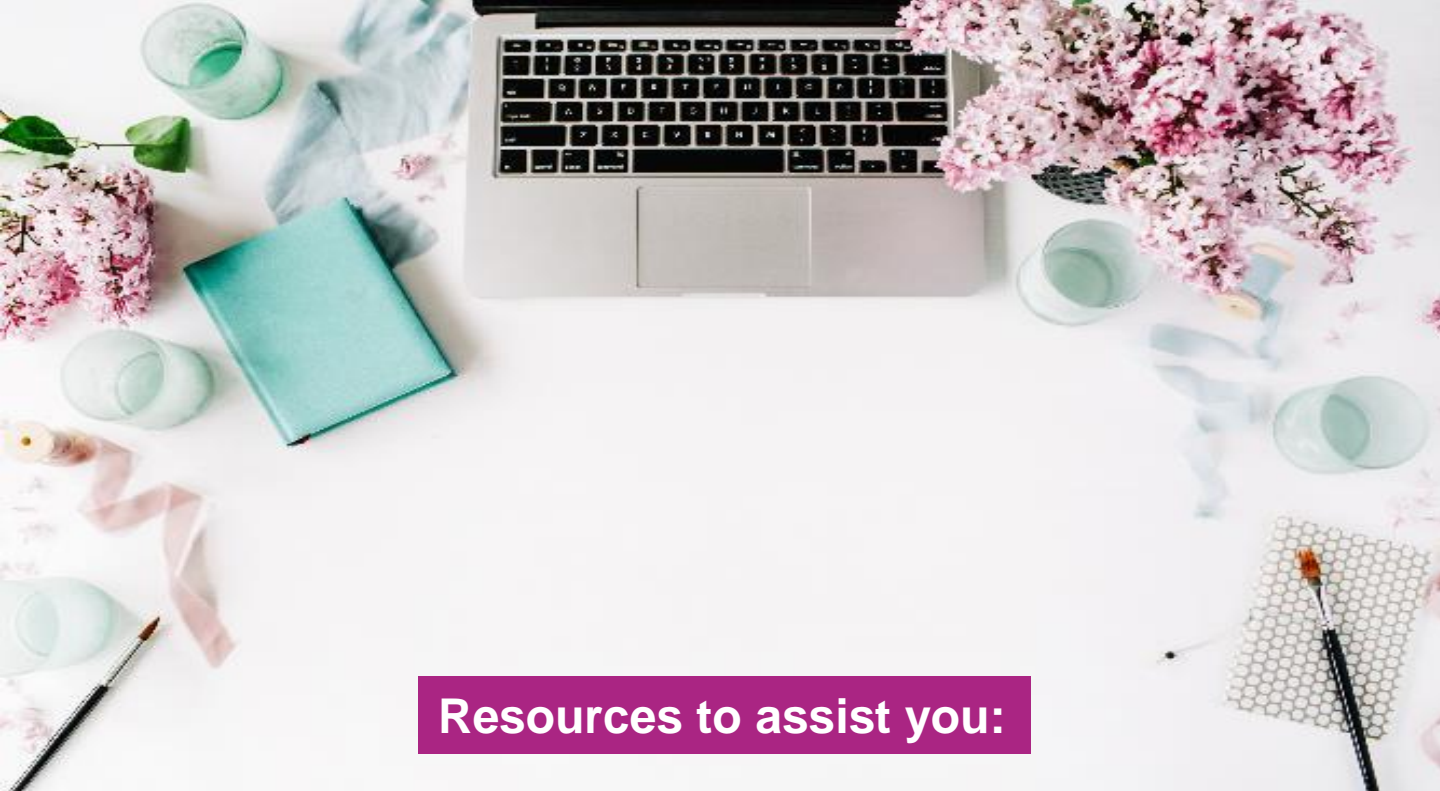


In respect of ALL aspects of a child or young person's identity, these are good questions to ask yourself in your analysis:

- How has this young person's identity influenced their journey and experiences as a unique individual?
- What do different and intersecting aspects of their identity mean for this child?
- What strengths does their diversity bring?
- What barriers/prejudice or negative experiences have they faced? How can I make sure I don't replicate that in my work with them?
- Is the young person being treated fairly and respectfully by our partner agencies? How can I challenge it if not?
- Does the child have positive role models who reflect aspects of their identity? Do they know other people they identify with? If they do not, how can we facilitate this?
- Do they/I perceive myself as *similar to* or *different from* them, and in what ways does this impact on our relationship?
- Am I making any assumptions based on their identity/diversity? Are any unconscious biases at play?
- Does the way I work with them need to change because of their diversity characteristics?
- Do they or their parents need signposting elsewhere for specific support?
- Does their diversity affect my assessment of risk and their current and future safety?
- Does it change my recommendations?

This reflection needs to appear in your case planning and your reporting to court.





Resources to assist you:

Peer Practice Specialists

- Our Peer Practice Specialists are available to provide consultations on diverse areas including working with Roma families, working with trans adults and children, same-sex parents, working with deaf adults and children and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. A full list of areas covered, including topic guides and information about accessing the service, can be found [here](#). They can provide guidance about communicating effectively with young people and signpost to relevant resources or services.

Diversity networks

- There are six virtual staff Diversity networks to represent, support and engage staff who share a similar background, protected characteristic or common cause.

Library

- [The Cafcass library](#) has numerous resources relating to diversity practice.

Diversity Champions

- Each service area has Diversity Champions whose role it is to raise the profile of diversity within our work and to share good practice. [Please click here to access the Connect page.](#)

Other

- FJYPB top tips for respecting children and young people's diversity <https://www.cafcass.gov.uk/download/4464/>
- Knowledge Bite: [Talking with children and young people about racism and Black Lives Matter \(Knowledge Bite\) \(learningnexus.co.uk\)](#)
- FJYPB top tips for working with LGB young people <https://www.cafcass.gov.uk/download/9483/>
- FJYPB top tips for working with trans children and young people <https://www.cafcass.gov.uk/download/9479/>
- [The Genderbread Person | A free online resource for understanding gender identity, gender expression, and anatomical sex.](#)