



What Works for  
Children's  
Social Care



# SUPPORTING SHARED DECISION-MAKING MEETINGS DELIVERY, IMPLEMENTATION AND EVALUATION

Practice guidance





# What Works for Children's Social Care

## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the young people, local authorities, organisations and individual practitioners that acted as stakeholders and offered feedback throughout the development of this review. We would also like to acknowledge the support of Aimee Cummings and Laura Cook for their administrative support in producing this report, Helen Morgan of the Specialist Unit of Review Evidence (SURE) at Cardiff University for supporting literature searches, Nell Warner and Asmaa El-Banna (Warwick Medical School) for support with initial data analysis.

---

## About What Works for Children's Social Care

What Works for Children's Social Care seeks better outcomes for children, young people and families by bringing the best available evidence to practitioners and other decision makers across the children's social

care sector. We generate, collate and make accessible the best evidence for practitioners, policy makers and practice leaders to improve children's social care and the outcomes it generates for children and families.

## About CASCADE

The Children's Social Care Research and Development Centre (CASCADE) at Cardiff University is concerned with all aspects of community responses to social need in children and

families, including family support services, children in need services, child protection, looked after children and adoption. It is the only centre of its kind in Wales and has strong links with policy and practice.

To find out more visit What Works for Children's Social Care at: [whatworks-csc.org.uk](http://whatworks-csc.org.uk), or CASCADE at: [sites.cardiff.ac.uk/cascade](http://sites.cardiff.ac.uk/cascade)

---

If you'd like this publication in an alternative format such as Braille, large print or audio, please contact us at: [wwccsc@nesta.org.uk](mailto:wwccsc@nesta.org.uk)

# SUPPORTING SHARED DECISION-MAKING MEETINGS DELIVERY, IMPLEMENTATION AND EVALUATION

## Practice guidance

The programme theory presented in the review describes how shared decision-making meetings work, for whom, and under which circumstances. It is intended to support the implementation and delivery of shared decision-making meetings so that they can be delivered in a way most likely to be effective in safely reducing the number of children in care, and in a way that supports future evaluations of shared decision-making meetings. There are of course many other outcomes that may be hoped for from shared decision-making meetings. There are also existing resources to support practitioners in delivering certain types of these meetings well (see for example the Family Rights Group practice guidance and accreditation for how Family Group Conferences should be delivered ([www.frg.org.uk/involving-families/family-group-conferences/fgc-standards-and-accreditation](http://www.frg.org.uk/involving-families/family-group-conferences/fgc-standards-and-accreditation))). We hope this guide complements these existing sources of information.

This guidance has several aims:

1. To support reflective practice: The guide is primarily intended to help social workers, meeting chairs, facilitators and coordinators think about whether what they are doing with a child and family is consistent with what makes shared decision-making meetings work well. It is designed to be used to support reflection on and the development of practice, not as a simplistic checklist.
2. To support practitioners to be purposeful: The guide outlines signs of success in achieving goals to enable progress to be monitored, and how the shared decision-making meeting programme theory suggests challenges should be overcome. Practitioners can use this framework to check they are meeting the key aims of shared decision-making meetings, to understand the key issues to monitor in practice, and as a prompt to reflect upon and overcome potential challenges.
3. To support supervision: This practice guide will hopefully also be of use to supervisors in thinking through work with practitioners and can be a framework for thinking about how to measure how well what is being done is leading to the outcomes you are hoping to achieve with a family.
4. To shape service design and evaluation: The guide can be used as a basis for thinking about quality assurance and the evaluation of a service. It is important for organisations to think about the way that processes and procedures impact on the ability of practitioners to operate in this way.

**Table 1: How to build collaboration and engagement with families (Mechanism 1)**

This is concerned with what social workers and other professionals do to enable true collaboration with families and their network in a meeting; and how this creates family and wider network engagement in the meeting process. This includes working with the

family to identify resources in their wider network and then to invite and facilitate a discussion amongst the wider family and network where they can decide what is needed for the child to be safely at home.

What are you trying to achieve?	Signs of success	Overcoming challenges: What to do if the signs of success are not there
<p>Families know what to expect in the meeting and feel prepared</p> <p>Children and young people feel prepared for the meeting</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Families know the purpose of the meeting.</li> <li>• Families and young people know who will be in attendance, what their roles are and what they will say.</li> <li>• Everyone has the relevant reports in time.</li> </ul>	<p>Make sure that there is enough time to talk over the processes and what will happen on more than one occasion.</p> <p>Think about the language that is used when explaining what will happen and ensure any jargon or legalistic terms are fully explained.</p> <p>Check the family, child and young person's understanding of the information throughout. Think about asking families to reflect the information back, and then use the words that they use in order to explain to other family members.</p> <p>Give families enough time during preparation meetings to take breaks and digest the information. This can mean planning longer meetings with specific breaks scheduled or arranging a number of shorter meetings over a period of days.</p> <p>Give information in different formats depending on the needs of the person. An example would be encouraging someone to record the meeting so that they can listen back to it later, or giving links to websites such as the Family Rights Group where families can access more information about the process.</p> <p>Ensure that reports are given to parents and young people in a timely manner e.g. at least three days before the meeting. If this is impossible, try to at least give a summary of main points ahead of time. Ensure that there is time to go through the reports in detail to explain what everything means.</p> <p>Consider mandatory use of advocacy for young people and parents with mental health issues/ learning difficulties.</p> <p>Consider the definition of advocacy being used. If someone has turned down an advocate, encourage the child/young person or parent to nominate a trusted person in the community to act as an advocate.</p> <p>Ensure that families understand their legal rights and all legal processes relevant to their involvement with children's services.</p>

Table 1: How to build collaboration and engagement with families (Mechanism 1) (continued)

What are you trying to achieve?	Signs of success	Overcoming challenges: What to do if the signs of success are not there
Everyone feels confident that conflict will be managed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Families know what safety procedures are in place to manage conflict.</li> <li>▪ Families feel reassured that safety procedures have been put in place.</li> <li>▪ Children and young people have reduced anxiety about attending the meeting.</li> </ul>	<p>In certain circumstances, such as where domestic violence is a concern, split meetings should be considered, where the mother can attend the first meeting then the meeting is run again with the father. This can be difficult in terms of timing and how busy people are but usually the chair and social worker should meet with the other partner (usually the perpetrator) after the meeting and explain what happened.</p> <p>At the start of the meeting, support the family to draw up ground rules to govern behaviour. Speak with attendees ahead of the meeting about this and potential examples so that they are prepared. Potentially keep this as an open document for new points to be added if anything else arises in the meeting. This can be kept as a document to be used for future meetings/family chats.</p> <p>Ensuring the right people are invited – if families and young people know they are able to bring family/friends to the meeting it can help them feel more comfortable.</p>
Families, children and young people feel supported	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Trusting relationship with consistent professional e.g. the social worker.</li> <li>▪ Wider family invited to the meeting.</li> <li>▪ Families feel that progress is being made and that professionals are working with them to find a solution.</li> </ul>	<p>If there is a professional that the parents/children trust, ensure that they are invited to the meeting, and that the meeting prioritises their availability to attend.</p> <p>Work with the family to map out (perhaps using a genogram) who has an interest in supporting them and keeping the child safe. If they struggle to think of anyone, consider drawing on scenarios where they needed support in the past and who offered it.</p> <p>Reassure families that anyone who is invited to come to the meeting can remain anonymous to social services if they want to. First names can be used, and they are there only as a means of supporting the child – not to be assessed in any way.</p> <p>Ensure that the preparation meetings start with a focus on what is going well so that parents feel that progress is being made.</p>
Families have choice and control over elements of the meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Families make practical decisions around the location and timing of the meeting.</li> <li>▪ Families make decisions around what will be on the agenda of the meeting.</li> <li>▪ Families invite people to the meeting that are important to them and are able to offer them practical and emotional support.</li> </ul>	<p>If families have not been given the opportunity to make any decisions around the meeting, think about making choices available to them that are meaningful for the family. This can be around small things (such as the food available) and larger things (such as who attends). What is meaningful is likely to be different for each person.</p> <p>If families have been given options but have not made any decisions, reflect on how open the decisions were, and if the options were limited but could be more flexible.</p> <p>Check that they have clearly understood the purpose of the meeting by altering the language that has been used and checking understanding throughout.</p> <p>If families have not invited anyone to the meeting, go back and work with the family to map out potential people that could help to support them, taking a wider focus (such as including friends, community members, estranged family).</p>

Table 1: How to build collaboration and engagement with families (Mechanism 1) (continued)

What are you trying to achieve?	Signs of success	Overcoming challenges: What to do if the signs of success are not there
Families feel they will be valued, important and heard in the meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Families feel like they have a part to play in the meeting.</li> <li>▪ Families feel like the outcome has not been pre decided.</li> <li>▪ Families feel like their attendance and involvement is important</li> <li>▪ The meeting feels like a space for open dialogue between professionals and family members</li> </ul>	<p>Ensure that the family has had the chance to set their own agenda for the meeting. Begin the pre meeting with a blank sheet of paper to collaboratively write up the plan, rather than adding a family agenda onto a pre-written agenda.</p> <p>Ensure families have been given options regarding where and when meeting will take place, and who will be invited. This can be limited by community resources (if there is no community space for example) so think broadly about places that could be used as a venue and offer options.</p> <p>'Warm the context' at the beginning of the meeting by discussing openly the dynamics of the meeting (the power differential and what can be done to minimise it) and the meaning of dialogue (that everyone is at the meeting prepared to listen to what everyone has to say, and be influenced by other people's ideas. That people come with their own ideas and preconceptions, but that these are 'held lightly' and can be changed)</p> <p>Ensure the use strengths-based approaches and seek to understand what is going wrong and why rather than blaming parents.</p> <p>Focus on protective factors and building instead of focusing solely on risk indicators. This can involve cocreating an assessment of strengths before the meeting so that the plan can be linked explicitly to this.</p> <p>Meet with families at a time and in a location that is convenient to them and ensures that their network can attend.</p>
Families have ownership of the meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Families feel it is 'their' meeting and that it is about their needs.</li> <li>▪ Families choose to participate in the meeting.</li> <li>▪ Families feel positive about their involvement in the meeting.</li> </ul>	<p>Think about giving families a veto on professionals coming to the meeting. This means that, if there is someone that you think should be there and a member of the family disagrees, explore other ways to include everyone that does not mean people that certain people in the family do not want to attend. This needs to be balanced with the needs of the child so consider doing this with the child and other family members together.</p> <p>Ensure that all options regarding location and timing of the meeting prioritise the family needs, rather than professional.</p> <p>Allow families/ CYPs to send invites for the meeting. This can be a good way of engaging younger children in the planning process for the meeting.</p> <p>Arrange for the family to be the first people in the meeting room so that professionals can then come in and re-introduce themselves to the family and so that the family does not have to enter a room where professionals may already be talking amongst themselves.</p> <p>Ensure that the balance of attendees is weighted towards the family. This can involve simple changes, like ensuring there is only one representative from an organisation (i.e. the school) and that the person is the most relevant (i.e. a teacher that the young person has identified).</p>

**Table 1: How to build collaboration and engagement with families (Mechanism 1) (continued)**

What are you trying to achieve?	Signs of success	Overcoming challenges: What to do if the signs of success are not there
Everyone feels safe to attend the meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The meeting is arranged to be held in a neutral location that everyone feels comfortable with.</li> </ul>	<p>Explore all options to allow everyone to take part and feel safe, such as holding individual meetings if necessary.</p> <p>Where possible, do not rush to have a meeting, and ensure everyone has had a chance to voice their concerns, and have them addressed, ahead of the meeting date.</p> <p>Make sure everyone has agreed to the location of the meeting, rather than it being chosen by one family member or a professional.</p>

## Table 2: How to build trust between families, social workers and agencies and reduce shame and stigma (Mechanism 2)

Building trust between social workers and families can be an important mechanism for parents and the wider family to feel able to participate in a meeting in a way that is open and solution-focused. Feeling shame around involvement with children's services, and the reasons for this involvement can reduce the ability of families to be open with their network, or to invite them to a meeting. If social workers and families can work

together during the preparation stage of the meeting then it can be possible to plan the meeting in a way that reduces stigma. This can make families and young people more open to discussing what is going on with people who could offer support. This in turn can help to extend the network of people around the child who are knowledgeable about the situation and able to form a network around the child.

What are you trying to achieve?	Signs of success	Overcoming challenges: What to do if the signs of success are not there
Shame to be minimised for the family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Everyone who the family feels is important them and the child, who can offer support, is invited to take part in the meeting.</li> <li>• Only people who are necessary to offering the family support are invited to the meeting.</li> <li>• Parents know the details of what will be discussed and shared in the meeting, and private information will only be shared with people who need to hear it (as decided in collaboration).</li> <li>• Professionals only invited to attend the part of the meeting that is relevant to them.</li> <li>• Families can input to the agenda, and the information that is shared after the meeting.</li> </ul>	<p>If families or children and young people are worried about certain people being present/ information being shared, check that only relevant people are invited to the meeting, and that everyone understands why each person is there. Consider providing ahead of time the names and roles (and perhaps pictures and sitting plans) of everyone who will be there who may be less familiar to some members of the family.</p> <p>Ask for people to leave the room at certain points when difficult information will be shared. Agree ahead of time with the family what they are happy to be shared with who. Ensure ahead of the meeting that professionals/wider network members are aware of this.</p> <p>Consider which information is necessary to be shared, and speak with families, children and young people about exactly what will be shared, how it will be shared, and with who, and work together to ensure that this is done in an appropriate and sensitive way.</p> <p>Ensure that families, young people and children are able to give their views on anything that will be shared ahead of the meeting. If there is something that might be shared that they do not agree to, explore ways for this to be discussed in a different forum. Take the family's comfort and confidentiality as a main priority.</p>
Parents/CYP feel confirmation that network cares	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Connections and relationships are restored/reinforced in the meeting.</li> </ul>	<p>Understanding that feelings of distrust, including minimising or even lying about problems, is a normal response to this situation. Ensure that this is articulated to families throughout the process.</p> <p>Demonstrate an understanding of the family members' feelings. This can be done in different ways. In conversation, try using reflections and summaries of what the person has said so that they can hear that you have heard what has been said.</p> <p>Show a commitment to working together and if possible keeping children at home as long as it is safe to do so. Even if this has been said, it is important to say this regularly, and to all of the family, rather than just the parents.</p>



Table 2: How to build trust between families, social workers and agencies and reduce shame and stigma (Mechanism 2) (continued)

What are you trying to achieve?	Signs of success	Overcoming challenges: What to do if the signs of success are not there
Families feel they have people to call on for support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Services are available and able to offer round the clock support.</li> <li>A wider range of stakeholders are available to offer support.</li> </ul>	<p>Prioritise/explore services that are creative and consider different unique ways to support families including individualised contingency planning for families. Start from the basis of what the need is, and then look at what would be appropriate to meet it, rather than working backwards from what is currently available.</p> <p>If people are reluctant to attend a meeting, social workers/coordinators ensure that wider family members/community members know that their details will not be shared or recorded if they attend the meeting, and that they are only there in their capacity to support the family.</p>
SWs feel reassured that parents/ CYP have a support network	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Support network are invited and able to attend- i.e. venue, time flexibility.</li> </ul>	<p>Social workers engage with the wider support network including family, friends, neighbours, community resources etc. to ensure that the timing/location is appropriate and facilitates attendance.</p> <p>Social workers or families ask contacts in the local community about resources/locations available to hold the meeting.</p>
Families feel appreciated and valued	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Families are an active part of the discussion.</li> <li>The meeting is flexible to allow everyone to take part in their own way.</li> </ul>	<p>Think about using the principles of relationship-based practice: positives are acknowledged and issues are raised and challenged in a sincere, direct and honest manner by professionals who take ownership and provide evidence of any concerns in a transparent manner.</p> <p>Ensure that meetings are not 'overscheduled'. Even if professionals are not able to stay for the whole day, consider ensuring that the space that is used is available for the whole day to allow for conversations to not feel rushed.</p>
Everyone has mutual understanding of situation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Everyone feels able to have their say/ speak openly to share information.</li> <li>Everyone has a shared idea of what they are trying to achieve.</li> <li>Issues that have remained hidden due to shame are able to be spoken about openly within the family.</li> </ul>	<p>Put emphasis on the meeting being chaired in an inclusive way. This can involve training chairs to prioritise ensuring that there is time during the meeting when the family are left alone to draft plan.</p> <p>Ensure families are engaged in setting ground rules for the session such as how people signal they want to talk, how to ask for a time out. Potentially trial this in pre meetings with family members so that everyone is used to the ground rules. Make these visible in the meeting.</p> <p>Make sure part of the meeting is dedicated to creating a shared idea of 'outcomes' – not just needs and services, but what would be different in the family's life if these needs were met.</p> <p>Make sure families feel they will not be judged for sharing information through ground rules and preparation work.</p> <p>Ensure work has been completed to minimise the potential stigma associated with the meeting. For example – if the child has asked for a meeting not to be held at school, has this been heard and acted upon?</p>

**Table 3: How to include families and young people in decision-making to develop an effective plan (Mechanism 3)**

One of the main outcomes from shared decision-making family meetings that families can be enabled to be involved in making important decisions about the care and safety

of the child. To do this in a meaningful way, families need to both be informed of what is needed, and also empowered to make decisions.

What are you trying to achieve?	Signs of success	Overcoming challenges: What to do if the signs of success are not there
<p>Families are empowered to take ownership over decisions and plan</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The plan that is developed has key points included that were suggested by family members.</li> </ul>	<p>Ask family members for suggestions around different options drawing specifically on points raised by the family.</p> <p>Think about whether families have had time without professionals involved to produce key points – either before the meeting or during the meeting. If they have not, create a space where the family can speak alone (even if that is during a break).</p> <p>Consider splitting the meeting into two, with the first half focused on sharing information, and the second on creating a plan, with a break in the middle where the information can be absorbed.</p> <p>Make sure that professionals are not explicitly or implicitly positioning themselves as the experts by reiterating the expert status of the family, and not offering solutions to problems (rather draw out solutions through what the family suggests).</p>
<p>A plan is developed that reflects and addresses family's/child's needs</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The plan takes into account the wider circumstances of the family and their needs.</li> <li>It is holistic and rather than just focusing on the risks also outlines the positive/protective factors and seeks to build on them.</li> </ul>	<p>Encourage families to share honestly their experiences and where they need support. This could be through offering them time alone to talk through issues where they do not feel under scrutiny.</p> <p>Make a list of needs/gaps in the family network that could make life easier for the family in preparation meetings. Ensure that everyone knows that asking for support is a main purpose of the meeting (i.e. if someone is potentially going to offer to be a kinship carer, ensure they feel able to ask what financial provision they are entitled to in a way that protects their relationship with the child).</p> <p>If the young person does not want to attend the meeting, ensure their presence is clear with photos, a short video etc.</p> <p>Be prepared to offer practice support where it is identified as a need. Explore tangible ways that day to day life can be easier for the family.</p>

Table 3: How to include families and young people in decision-making to develop an effective plan (Mechanism 3) (continued)

What are you trying to achieve?	Signs of success	Overcoming challenges: What to do if the signs of success are not there
A safe plan is developed by the family and accepted by professionals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Everyone has a shared, hopeful vision of what life would be like for the family and the child if the plan 'worked'</li> <li>▪ Families propose a plan that meets their needs, but also addresses the concerns of professionals.</li> </ul>	<p>Ensure that there is time in the meeting (and before the meeting) to talk about a hopeful idea of what everyone is trying to achieve. This can involve talking over small aspects of family life that might be improved (like the whole family being able to sit down together and have dinner).</p> <p>Ensure that professionals are clear on what they need to see in the plan, and which parts are fully under the control of the family.</p> <p>Consider having a meeting with all professionals to create a shared understanding of concerns and what is beyond a safeguarding issue.</p> <p>Think about the main reasons for involvement – perhaps going back to the original assessment.</p>
Everyone takes shared responsibility for carrying out the plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ No one feels sole responsibility over carrying out the plan.</li> <li>▪ The 'burden' of responsibility is shared across a number of people.</li> <li>▪ The plan can be monitored and adjusted without blame when some areas have not been completed as envisioned.</li> <li>▪ Everyone knows what their tasks and responsibilities are.</li> <li>▪ Someone is allocated the task of monitoring and feeding back on the plan.</li> </ul>	<p>Ensure that a plan has been drawn up that has clear tasks, time frames and responsibilities allocated, and that everyone has a copy, in a form and language that they can understand.</p> <p>Consider if the child/young person can be involved in monitoring the progress of the plan.</p> <p>Ensure the goals on the plan is specific and outcome focused with a clear contingency plan that is individualised if things do not improve. Consider parallel planning so viability assessments of family members.</p>
Families are committed to the plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Families feel that their concerns and needs have been heard through the meeting, and are part of the plan.</li> <li>▪ Families feel that the plan is achievable and that it will work to make the situation better.</li> <li>▪ Families feel that the responsibility for carrying out the plan is not theirs alone.</li> </ul>	<p>The plan needs to have shared responsibilities, and these should be clear in the plan.</p> <p>Ensure that the optimism from the meeting is maintained in future work so that motivation is continued.</p> <p>Arrange follow up meetings, both with or without professionals to ensure ongoing monitoring and support.</p>



What Works for  
**Children's  
Social Care**

[wwccsc@nesta.org.uk](mailto:wwccsc@nesta.org.uk)

 [@whatworksCSC](https://twitter.com/whatworksCSC)

[whatworks-csc.org.uk](http://whatworks-csc.org.uk)

