Making interaction meaningful: How to communicate effectively in children's social services

Organisation(s):	Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA) and Child and Family Agency (Tusla)
Country:	Ireland
Contact:	policy@esn-eu.org

Theme: *Choose at least one option*	☐ Ageing & Care ☐ Asylum & Migration ☐ Young People ☒ Support for Children & Families ☐ Community Care ☒ Integrated Care & Support ☒ Co-Production ☐ Disability ☐ Housing & Homelessness ☐ Artificial Intelligence ☐ Digitalisation ☐ Quality Care	☐ Labour Market Inclusion ☐ Social Inclusion ☐ Technology ☒ Workforce and Leadership ☐ Social Benefits ☐ EU Funding ☐ Social Service's Resilience ☐ Mental Health ☐ Person-Centred Care ☐ Research & Use of Evidence ☐ Management & Planning ☐ Other, please specify:
Principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights: *Check the 20 principles here.*	☒ 1. Education, training, life-long learning ☐ 2. Gender equality ☐ 3. Equal opportunities ☐ 4. Active support to employment ☐ 5. Secure and adaptable employment ☐ 6. Fair Wages ☐ 7. Transparent employment conditions ☐ 8. Social dialogue ☐ 9. Work-life balance ☐ 10. Healthy, safe work environment	☒ 11. Childcare and child support ☐ 12. Social protection ☐ 13. Unemployment benefits ☐ 14. Minimum income ☐ 15. Old age income and pensions ☐ 16. Health care ☐ 17. Inclusion of people with disabilities ☐ 18. Long-term care ☐ 19. Housing and assistance to homeless ☐ 20. Access to essential services
Current status of the practice:	☐ Concept and Design Phase ☐ Testing or pilot phase ☐ Temporary practice that has terminated ☐ Temporary practice that is ongoing and has a termination date ☒ Established and ongoing practice ☐ Scaling Up and Transformation Phase ☐ Other (please specify)	
Summary: *Please summarise the practice in maximum 3 sentences. This*	The Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA) and Child and Family Agency (Tusla) developed the 'Fundamentals of Good Communication: How to Have Effective Everyday Conversations' toolkit to address children's social services challenges. It helps staff focus on meaningful communication with children, families, foster carers, and colleagues, ensuring they feel involved and in control of decisions.	

will be the disclaimer of your project on our website.	
Context/ Social issues addressed *Please explain the problem you attempt to solve with your practice.*	Good communication is important in effectively delivering health and social care services. HIQA addresses this by developing National Standards for Health and Social Care Services that focus on good communication and effective information sharing. Hiqa recently developed National Standards focused on the care and support of children. As part of this process, there was an extensive engagement with children, young people, families, foster carers, advocates, staff and policy-makers to identify and understand the barriers and facilitators to implementing the standards into practice. This engagement found that children, young people, families, and foster carers felt supported and heard when communication between them and staff in children's social services went well. However, it was also found that, at times, a lack of effective communication often led to confusion for children, families and foster carers, delays in accessing care and support, and a lack of trusting relationships. HIQA invited Tusla the Child and Family Agency to collaborate and co-produce the tools to support and enhance communication.
Objectives: *Please provide **a maximum of three** objectives in bullet points.*	1. The toolkit has been developed to support staff in communicating effectively with children, families, foster carers, internal colleagues, and external agency professionals about the care and support of children and families where children's social services are involved. 2. It will guide reflective thinking for the worker who initiates and leads the communication. 3. It will provide a blueprint to support each stage of the communication exchange and strengthen the worker's active listening during both planned and urgent communication.
Activities: *Please describe the activities put in place to achieve the objectives (maximum 300 words).*	A collaborative multi-agency approach was adopted to develop the communication toolkit. This approach aimed to develop a toolkit that would be relevant, useful, and assistive and meet the needs of both services and staff. Taking a collaborative approach in developing the toolkit also helped to ensure that the toolkit would be owned by staff and become embedded into practice in the long term. The cross-sectoral Working Group included representatives from HIQA, Tusla, non-statutory service providers, advocacy bodies and foster carers. There was also engagement with young people and families who have experience using children's social services through focus groups to hear their views on areas the toolkit should address and to provide feedback on draft versions of the toolkit. This feedback, along with evidence of best practice, was used by the cross-sectoral Working Group to inform the toolkit's development. We also worked collaboratively with our cross-sectoral Working Group to develop a framework that sets out key learning from each stage of the collaborative process that informed the development of the communication toolkit. Based on this learning, the framework sets out some important factors that can help support the successful implementation and scale-up of the toolkit in practice. These factors include developing an action plan, examining contextual factors, effective communication pathways, ongoing monitoring, and long-term evaluation. Considering these factors can help support the successful implementation of the toolkit and motivate its sustainment and embedding into practice. The toolkit sets out questions to prompt staff to stop and think before, during and after communicating with children, young people, families and foster carers. We have designed the toolkit so that staff can use it in everyday practice, including in preparation for meetings, as a guide during meetings and as a prompt to seek feedback. This tool provides workers with a process to "stop and think" about how they can communicate to people to support and empower them in everyday conversations. Facilitating people to have a voice can strengthen their confidence in communicating their position and empower them as agents of positive change in their own lives. Encouraging people to use services to use their voice and experience it in a respectful and supportive way will encourage them to use their voice in other forums and help them engage in community life with more confidence and

	optimism. Staff working in social care settings have an important role in supporting people in becoming involved in decisions that affect their lives, their families' lives, and their wider communities. Helping staff to build trust with children and families can support staff to fulfil this important role. Good communication can help people using services feel supported and heard in their care journey and promote meaningful interaction with services. This toolkit will support staff by reinforcing the fundamentals of good communication. This will help to build trust between children, families, foster carers, and staff, which will, in turn, support these groups in having positive experiences on their care journeys and becoming involved in meaningful decisions that affect their lives.
Outcomes: *Please explain what the results were/are so far and how you evaluated this.*	The toolkit underwent a phase of pre-implementation testing to assess its usability, acceptability and adoption by staff in practice. A total of 25 participants from six children in care teams from different children's social service areas across Ireland participated in an eight-week testing phase. These participants included social workers, social care workers, team leaders and principal social workers. We used both quantitative and qualitative methods to gather feedback from participants. Participants completed a short online questionnaire at the end point of testing, and we also collected feedback from participants at regular intervals throughout the test period via semi-structured phone calls. We found that seeking regular feedback from staff throughout the testing period and actively responding to this feedback helped maintain momentum for using the toolkit among participants. Collecting regular feedback also allowed us to identify any contextual factors impacting the toolkit's implementation and address these when appropriate. Overall, there was good acceptance of the toolkit among participants, with feedback indicating that the toolkit serves as a helpful reminder to staff on the fundamentals of good communication. Feedback indicated that the toolkit is particularly useful in helping staff prepare for difficult meetings with children, young people, families and foster carers. Participants also indicated that the toolkit is a useful tool to help ensure there is clarity regarding the purpose of the interaction, checking to ensure the information has been received as intended and summarising points at the end of meetings. Some examples of feedback that we received from participants are outlined below: - "It reminds us to consider how the information is being received and to check in with families to ensure there is clarity, especially in times of high stress" - "It has helped my team to stop and think before they make a call and to think about the purpose of any visits they make" - "It is great to have this as a prompt for a communication re-set and to remember the basics of communication" - "The tool helps to support the structure of phone calls and has helped me to find my style as a new social worker" We used this feedback to revise the toolkit where necessary. We have also collaborated with the Child and Family Agency (Tusla) to reflect on our learning from this project and to use this learning to support the implementation and scale-up of the toolkit in practice. While the pre-implementation testing phase has provided valuable insight into the toolkit's usability, acceptability and adoption among staff, we will collaborate with the Child and Family Agency (Tusla) to conduct a longer-term evaluation to measure the toolkit's impact. This longer-term evaluation will measure the tool's impact concerning improving communication between staff and children, young people, families and foster carers. It will assess if there has been any change to their experiences and outcomes.

Links to supporting documents: *e.g. website or report of the practice*	https://www.tusla.ie/fogc/ https://www.hiqa.ie/reports-and-publications/guide/fundamentals-good-communication-how-have-effective-everyday
Comments and tips *i.e. for people willing to use your Practice*	Promote this as an everyday tool have it on peoples desks, ask managers to use it in reflective and immediate communication planning contexts