



PSDP—Resources and Tools: Hearing the voices of children and families in supervision



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Introduction

Although there is a statutory requirement to work in partnership with parents and seek the wishes and feelings of children, families often report feeling that their voices and views are not heard when they have a social worker. There are many reasons for this, such as social workers simply not demonstrating that they are listening, professionals holding a different view from the family, which leads to their voice being marginalised, or perhaps it is simply very difficult to hear unbearable stories and this can become an unconscious barrier.

Ferguson (2018) came up with the idea of ‘the invisible child’. He found that, in most of the practice he observed, children were seen and related to but, in a small number of home visits, social workers were not child-focused and children were not ‘held in mind’. There is also research evidence that the lived experience of children from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds, is invisible within child protection case recording, which is a further unexplored factor of Serious Case Reviews (Bernard and Harris, 2018). Parents also express frustration with having to resort to using complaints processes, in order to share their experiences of services (Family Rights Group, 2014).

If supervision focuses on compliance with process, rather than exploring how practitioners are working with families on the issues they are facing, the problem of invisible and voiceless families can become exacerbated. It is, therefore, vital that workers’ emotional and visceral experiences are understood for the crucial part they play in why they may, at times, not relate effectively to children and parents (Ferguson, 2018), and that supervision is a vehicle through which to explore this.

This reflective audit tool focuses on how you can use reflective discussion to explore the lived experiences of children and families in supervision. It is made up of three sections, which have been developed to promote curiosity and imagination in practice:

- > reflective audit questions for supervision practice
- > using your whole self to ‘listen’ - employing your senses
- > using the Johari window to consider the invisible and the unvoiced positions of children and families.

Reflective audit questions for supervision practice

Below are a number of questions for you to consider, which you can mull over and work through on your own, in supervision with individual social workers, or in a group supervision setting with your team. Start by focusing on one or two:

What might prevent you from asking about the views of children and their families?	How might you challenge workers that don't seem focused on the views of children and families?	How might issues of difference, diversity and culture impact on hearing the voices of children and families?	What do you need to consider about your own curiosity (or barriers to asking) about the views of families?
Do you have standard supervision questions about the views of children and families? What are the strengths and limitations of these questions? Can you think of any different questions you might ask?	Does focusing on the experiences of families bring up emotions that make our job harder? How do we know when this is happening? What do we need to do to avoid this?	How might you record voices and views in your supervision notes or children's file? Would these records make sense to the family if they read them? How do you account for multiple stories?	How do you review any actions agreed as a result of children or families expressing wishes about their plan or outcomes? Do your supervisees go back and talk to families about these things?

Using your whole self to ‘listen’ - employing your senses

This section invites you to think about how to reach beyond listening with your ears and using all of your senses in observing and listening to children and families with your whole body. This includes drawing on the use of your emotions, which Cook (2019) argues, are both a potential resource and a risk for social workers’ professional judgement and practice.

The poem below is written by a young person who has a learning disability (source unknown):

In Jenny Molloy’s heart-wrenching, bold and insightful book ‘Hackney Child’ (Daniels, 2014), she recollects feeling shame for smelling of urine as a result of sleeping in a wet bed and wearing unwashed clothes. A story that, as a child, was perhaps too embarrassing to express in words to a social worker, but one that was undeniably told to the other human senses, through sight and smell.

If you are going to work with me,
You have to listen to me.
And you can’t just listen with
your ears,
Because it will go into your head
too fast.
You have to listen with your
whole body.
If you listen slowly, with your
whole self,
Some of what I say will enter
your heart...

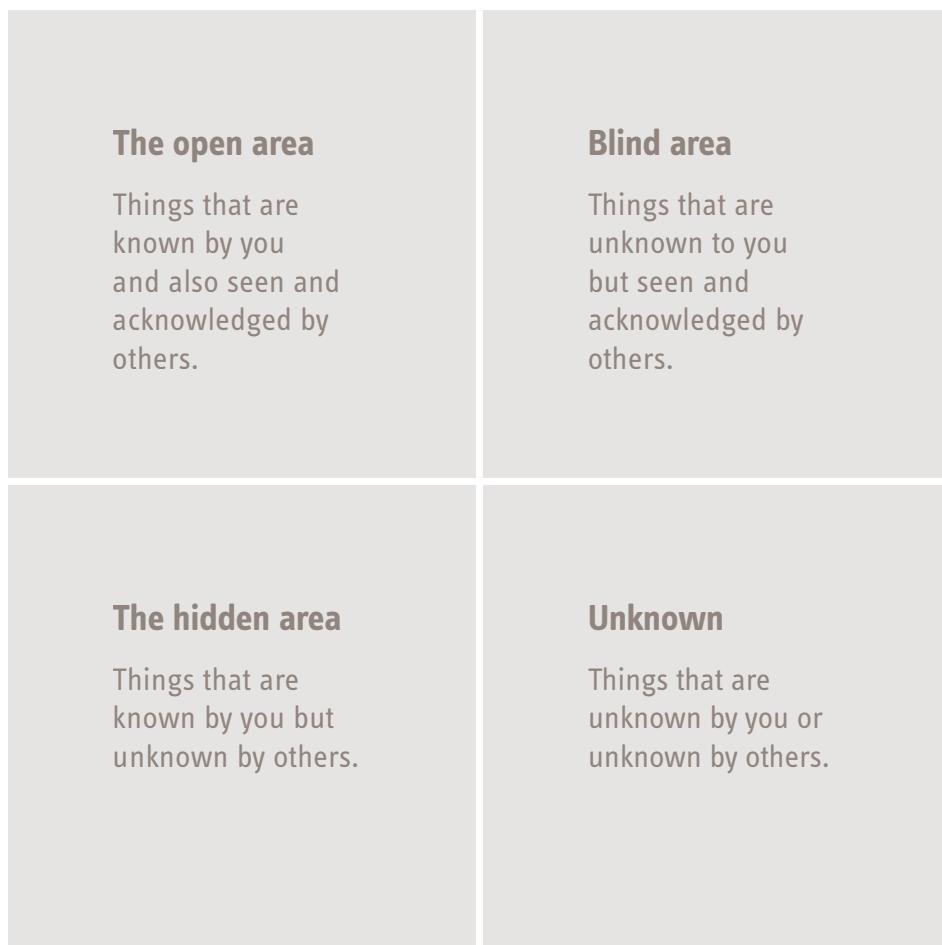
Winter's research (2010) tells us that in court reports, child permanence reports, and child protection case conference reports, social workers often say that the child was 'too young' to seek their wishes and views. This is also often the case for children who have a disability, where they may be considered 'non-verbal', or for anxious or traumatised parents who are simply unable to express themselves in words. This is why it is important for social workers to use *all* of their senses when establishing what children and families are 'telling' them. In supervision, it may be helpful to consider the following questions to help social workers consider the voices of families:

What are children and their families not telling you, and what leads you to wonder this?	What are they not telling you, but might be telling someone else?	What does their behaviour towards you and towards each other tell you?	What can you see, smell, hear and feel when you are with them? What are all these senses telling you?
How will they know that you are ready to hear them? What do you need to do in order to hear them?	What can you write down in their file, to describe their lived experience of the family? If they could talk, what might they tell you?	If they could communicate their views in a different way, what might this look like?	How do you know what they are feeling? What do their face and body tell you?

Using the Johari window to consider the invisible and the unvoiced

Luft and Ingham (1961) developed the Johari window as a tool to help us explore our awareness in interpersonal relationships. The window is divided into quadrants and covers the four areas below:

This model can be usefully adapted and used to explore the voices of children and their families, and also what is unvoiced and perhaps invisible. In this case the ‘others’ may be the social worker (or other professionals) and the ‘self’ may be the child or parent.



This model is something you can use to reflect on in general and to think about how it might guide you to explore children and families voices in supervision. Or you might bring the model into supervision to explore a particular child or family in conversation with your social worker. The use of this model can spark curiosity in conversations about a family, as illustrated below.

	Known to child and family	Unknown to child and family
Known to SW	The open area Things that are known by the child/parent and also seen and acknowledged by the social worker/other professionals.	Blind area Things that are unknown to the child/parent but seen and acknowledged by the social worker.
Unknown to SW	The hidden area Things that are known by the child/parent but unknown by the social worker.	Unknown Things that are unknown by the child/parent or unknown by the social worker.

Other ways you can use this tool

Bring the questions included in this tool to a team meeting and invite the team to consider one of the above sections each week.

Ask your social workers what stops them from being able to listen to children and families. Is this different when working across a ‘racial’, linguistic, cultural or religious divide? How can they communicate to families that they’re listening?

Discuss the Johari window in supervision, or with a child or family.

Discuss the Johari window in group supervision about a family, and invite the group to consider each person within the family to stimulate curiosity and encourage different perspectives.



We want to hear more about your experiences of using PSDP resources and tools. Connect via Twitter using #PSDP to share your ideas and hear how other practice supervisors use the resources.

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