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| Good Practice Bulletin |
| Spotlight on the voice of the child  Office of Professional Practice, Issue 14, October 2018 |

# Chief Practitioner’s welcome

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| Image of Tracy Beaton, the Chief Practitioner  **Tracy Beaton**  This month we consider how we privilege the voice of the child in our practice. Seeking, hearing, recording and carefully considering the views of children is central to child protection decision making. This is not a simple task. The voices of children can be eclipsed by the needs of parents or the opinions of professionals. In the scramble to provide immediate safety we can miss a key element of our practice that is to create the space needed for the voices of children and young people to be embedded in decision making.  Watch this [short video](https://vimeo.com/287572679/fa661d9c2b) <https://vimeo.com/287572679/fa661d9c2b> to see how decision making in this case was influenced by the voice of the child.  The pain of a child’s experience can be hard to hear. We must enquire, listen carefully and think creatively, particularly when children are very young or have communication challenges. When we do this we can make better decisions. |

# Case study

Maddy is fifteen and has been the subject of six reports to child protection since the age of ten. Each time a report has been made a different child protection practitioner has come to Maddy’s house, or sometimes her school, to talk with her. Her parents are separated and she does not wish to live with either of them. Maddy’s mother’s new partner has told her that he does not want her in the house. Maddy’s father has physically assaulted her in the past and has been hospitalised due to drug overdoses twice in the past year.

Maddy has told each practitioner who visits that she does not feel safe with either parent but nothing changes. She has continued to live with whichever parent seems more stable at the time.

What she really wants is to live with her father’s sister. Her Aunt has always been kind to her and has a room for her in her house. Maddy feels that no-one seems to listen to what she wants.

Maddy has recently moved to live with her boyfriend’s mother. She has stopped attending school and was recently admitted to hospital with deep cuts to both her arms.

On the night she was admitted, she sent this message to her Child Protection Practitioner:

*So sorry but I can’t wait forever. Dad is in a bad way tonight, I love him but it’s not safe for me to stay with him and I can’t go back to mum’s after last time. I’m scared and I need you to look after me. Let me just be a kid.*

## Discussion prompts

Has Maddy’s voice been considered in decision making? What are some of the barriers? How could they be overcome?

If you were Maddy’s child protection practitioner what would you do when you received Maddy’s message?

# The voices of newborns and unborns

Mallee District Aboriginal Service has adopted an innovative approach to considering the voice of the unborn child in their *Wondering from the Womb* program, inspired by staff learning about the [Newborn Behavioural Observations (NBO) system](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hPUnq0HB2FY) in 2015 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hPUnq0HB2FY>.

The NBO is a collaborative, baby focussed session between a professional and a family, centred around observing, drawing out and sensitively responding to baby’s behaviours.  The NBO session allows the baby to show their strengths and struggles to their parent, and it supports the parent to notice and reflect on the caregiving and interaction their baby needs and values, and to feel better about themselves as parent. It can be offered alone or as a series of sessions anytime from birth to age three months.

The NBO follows on beautifully from antenatal conversation about what baby might be like, as developed in the *Wondering from the Womb* program (Crouch, K.,2017). MDAS is currently working on enriching the NBO or, Baby’s First Yarn as it has become known. MDAS has commissioned a local artist to create a painting from staff ideas to use as Baby’s First Yarn summary sheet. An example is pictured here.

Image of Baby’s First Yarn.

(Crouch, K. (2017) Wondering From the Womb: Antenatal Yarning In Rural Victoria. Children Australia, 42(2), 75-78. doi:10.1017/cha.2017.15)

# Relevant findings from inquiries

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| Ok, Check, Todo, Agenda, Icon, Symbol, Tick, To Do, Gui | Direct contact with a child and their family greatly enhances the capacity of practitioners to astutely assess risk of cumulative harm posed to a child. |
| Ok, Check, Todo, Agenda, Icon, Symbol, Tick, To Do, Gui | Consistent, relationship-based practice made a notable difference to the quality of case management provided to children reviewed. |
| Ok, Check, Todo, Agenda, Icon, Symbol, Tick, To Do, Gui | Children were infrequently interviewed away from family members and rarely engaged in decision making processes or participated in case planning. |
| Ok, Check, Todo, Agenda, Icon, Symbol, Tick, To Do, Gui | Children who had reached the point of adolescence were rarely assessed or described as ‘vulnerable’. They were frequently characterised as ‘self-protective’. |
| Ok, Check, Todo, Agenda, Icon, Symbol, Tick, To Do, Gui | Requiring children to speak to multiple people within Child Protection and child and family services can lead to children disengaging from the service system completely. |

# The last word

We’ve left the last word to the eight young people in this video [Snap that Stigma](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8WC5GtffOvI#action=share) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8WC5GtffOvI#action=share> by CREATE.

On behalf of the Office of Professional Practice, we hope you have found this issue of the Good Practice Bulletin useful.

If you have any feedback or ideas about what you would find useful to include, please email [Office of the Professional Practice](mailto:officeofprofessionalpractice@dhhs.vic.gov.au) <officeofprofessionalpractice@dhhs.vic.gov.au>.

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