

# Guidance for Schools on the Flexible Tools

## Introduction

The purpose of this guidance and the associated flexible tools are to help schools meet their Disability Equality duty to promote disability equality and eliminate discrimination. They are intended to help schools find out from the children themselves how they experience school life and so strengthen their understanding of how their buildings, routines and practices impact on everyone.

The Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) reminds us that disability is not simply about the presence of impairment. Disability is also about how that impairment impacts on daily activities, together with other factors which may prevent disabled people from participating and making choices. Schools are expected to identify any barriers that inhibit disabled children from participating fully, and to canvass children's views on the kinds of support that make it easier to take part in the full range of activities available in school.

Disability is a sensitive and complex area. Children may be more comfortable talking about difficulties rather than impairments or disability, and will be more confident to do so in an ethos that accepts that everyone experiences difficulties of some kind. This guidance offers advice on a range of approaches that schools can use depending upon their particular context, and considers the following key questions:

- From whom should information about disability be collected?
- How should the information be collected?
- How should the information be used?

### ***From whom should information about disability be collected?***

It is unlikely that schools will be aware of all their disabled children. This may be because the effects of conditions are only experienced at certain times or that medication or other support mitigates the impact. Schools may wish to collect the views of *all* pupils and to follow up information from those with particular difficulties (depending on schools' decisions about maintaining children's anonymity – see *How will the information be recorded and acted on?*)

### ***How should the information be collected?***

Experience suggests that schools can elicit particularly considered responses by embedding the activity within the curriculum. Schools have used a number of different approaches, for example, adapting activities to fit within programmes for Citizenship, PSHE, maths and data handling. Other schools have carried out activities as part of circle time or tutor group time. However, when making such choices, schools need to ensure that a full range of children have the opportunity to participate (e.g. in some schools, children with certain impairments may receive specialised support/intervention rather than attend a timetabled PSHE session).

Choosing the most appropriate methods will depend on the age of the child, their preferred communication style and their level of understanding. Disabled children have a wide range of communication needs, and what is effective for some children may not be suitable for others. For example, pictures may be helpful for some children, but less so for others. It will therefore be important to consider the communication needs of children and use the most appropriate method to enable and encourage responses.

## Interviews

Talking with children provides an opportunity to clarify issues that are raised (e.g. in questionnaire responses) and to take time to delve a bit deeper and obtain a better understanding. Interviewing children requires considerable skill, especially where the child lacks confidence about speaking and there are difficult or challenging aspects to discuss.

Research has indicated the importance of asking open questions e.g. What was that like? Can you tell me a bit more? Nevertheless, it should also be borne in mind that some children may find it difficult to respond to questions that are more open-ended, and a more directive style may be necessary, e.g. offering children options/choices to respond to.

It is important that children know that we value honest responses and that we are not making judgements about them. Place and context provide important cues that this activity is not a "lesson", while materials such as photographs or pictures can be useful memory aids.

The final section of this guidance offers advice on a number of special types of interview:

- Symbol-Based Approaches: for children with limited verbal communication.
- Point to Point: focusing attention on thinking about the barriers and supports in place during a particular event of the child's choosing.
- Focus Groups: for exploring both individual and group views of difficulties in learning.

### **Questionnaires**

Questionnaires offer children anonymity to write what they want to and can encourage greater honesty. Another advantage is that questionnaires can be given to whole classes or year groups at the same time. Children can be asked to agree or disagree with statements or to rate them. Open questions can be used selectively to find out more. Children will vary in how much they write in response to open questions; and a potential disadvantage is that the full meaning of single words or phrases may not always be clear to the reader.

Research suggests that children write more if questionnaires are presented online. Online questionnaires also make the data easier to handle.

### **Supporting methods**

Visual methods such as cameras and the creation of collages or posters can be used to help children capture positive and negative images of school life or re-construct an event. However images don't always speak for themselves and consequently time may be needed for a follow up conversation.

Stories or letters provide a safer and less personal context to start to consider some of the more emotive challenges within school. Role play and drama can be used to explore feelings and emotions.

### **Individual or group approaches**

An individual discussion can provide opportunities to talk about more private or potentially embarrassing issues in greater depth, with less possibility of being interrupted. Staff need to be skilled in helping a child to communicate about sensitive and difficult aspects of life.

A group setting gives pupils confidence and the support from friends. Group members can prompt one another's memory and the event can be more fun. Children may prefer group settings, especially when talking about general problems rather than their own specific difficulties. However, the group format can be challenging for children who find it difficult to take turns or who can get angry or impatient with their peers and for those who need a more individual approach to communication.

### **Who will introduce the activity?**

Experience that suggests that children may be more concerned to provide their class teacher with what they perceive to be the "right answer" than to offer their own views. However, it is important that the person involved is familiar to the children so that they feel relaxed and confident with them.

An adult who knows the child well may be able to offer gentle reminders of events or situations in which the child was involved, while at the same time taking care not to influence children's responses. For example, an interviewer might say "Do you remember going to the zoo on the coach?" but should avoid saying "You didn't like those steep steps on that coach to the zoo, did you?"

### ***How will the activity be introduced?***

Great care is needed to set the right tone for the activity. Children need to know that their views are valued and that they will be listened to. They need to understand why they are being asked these questions, how the information will be used and who will have access to it. Most important of all, the adult leading the activity should emphasise that there are no right or wrong answers.

In group activities, establishing ground rules can help to encourage respect for other people's opinions and a promise to listen. In group discussions in mainstream schools where there may be only one disabled child participating, great care is needed to ensure that this child knows about the group composition beforehand, agrees to participate, and does not feel socially isolated. In such a group situation, it may be difficult for this child to give candid responses, and some children may be quieter/less responsive than others. The facilitator may need to structure the discussion at times so that each child is given an opportunity to contribute in turn. Or responses from quieter children may be overtly invited, e.g. "I haven't heard from everyone – please could I have a comment from someone who hasn't spoken about this topic yet."

### ***How will the information be used?***

Parents and children will need to be informed of how information will be used. Information that is collected can contribute to a co-ordinated whole school and individual response, and can contribute to Individual Education (or Behaviour) Plans or to Communication Passports as well as help schools to make reasonable adjustments for individuals (depending on schools' decisions about maintaining children's anonymity see *How will the information be recorded and acted on?*).

When pupils' responses are considered at a group level, they can be used to inform school planning and can contribute to the school's Self Evaluation Plan.

The following extract is from 'Implementing the Disability Discrimination Act in schools and early years settings' ([www.teachernet.gov.uk](http://www.teachernet.gov.uk)):

*Actively identifying barriers as early as possible and exploring the solutions using a practical, problem-solving approach has led schools to identify more effective reasonable adjustments. To make reasonable adjustments schools will need to:*

- *Plan ahead*
- *Identify potential barriers*
- *Work collaboratively with disabled pupils, their parents and others*
- *Identify practical solutions through a problem solving approach*
- *Ensure that staff have the necessary skills*
- *Monitor the effects of adjustments on a pupil's progress*

### ***How will the information be recorded and acted on?***

In deciding how best to record children's responses, schools will need to balance the need for confidentiality with that of responding to any concerns that are identified, e.g. whether names or codes are used on recording sheets.

Schools will also recognise the need for sensitivity when considering any barriers to participation that emerge. One example might be a disabled child who, having expressed his or her feelings about being called names by other pupils, may prefer a more general approach that encourages consideration for other people's feelings, rather than an approach that attracts individual attention.

## EXAMPLES

Five flexible tools have been developed that schools can use to help them collect information on children's views about the barriers and supports to participation in school activities. They have been designed with a range of communication needs and ages in mind and include activities that could take place in a group, in pairs or individually. They are outlined here but more detailed guidance can be found in the accompanying booklet.

**Good and Bad Things about School:** This is based on the approach adopted by Talking Mats (Cameron & Murphy 2002). A simple symbol array is used to enable young people to record the barriers/things that make school difficult and the things that help them in school. All aspects of the symbols can be personalised and where appropriate replaced by objects of reference.

Good and Bad things about school: summary	
Method	Talking Mats with symbols or objects.
Grouping	Individual, or pairs.
Time	May need extensive preparation to collect symbols and pictures; activity length depends on pupil's concentration span.
Strengths	Works well with children with communication difficulties.
Notes	May be more appropriate to carry out as a sequence of activities, embedded into personalised learning programme.

**Seeking Pupils' Views:** This is an interview schedule designed to be undertaken either individually or in a small group and explores children's favourite things about school as well as those aspects they don't like doing and what would make these activities easier.

Seeking Pupils' Views: summary	
Method	Interview.
Grouping	Individual, or small groups, or circle time.
Time	15-20 minutes to carry out interview, preceded by short time to collect photographs, if used with younger/less communicative pupils.
Strengths	Works well with younger children. Easy to prepare. Could be amalgamated with IEP reviews.
Notes	Some preceding work on likes and dislikes might be needed, and it can be difficult to find photographs of places/things pupils don't like.

**Point to Point:** This tool is based on counselling techniques. It provides a concrete approach focusing on specific events in the child's life that are viewed as good or bad. With the help of a facilitator children rate these events and position themselves on a continuum, between the best and worst, indicating where they are today. This activity provides a vehicle for exploring the barriers that contributed to the worst event (as perceived by the child) and the positive supports that have enabled the child to move forward.

Point to Point: summary	
Method	Discussion following drawing activity.
Grouping	Individual, or small group.
Time	20-30 minutes for individual or pair work.
Strengths	Provides a concrete task to focus discussions. Works well with pupils described as having emotional and/or behavioural difficulties.
Notes	Pupils need to be able to understand the visual representation of positioning themselves with respect to past and previous events. Rather than drawing a line and a cross it could be used with an interactive whiteboard or magnetic board.

**What Works for You:** This is a questionnaire designed for pupils in secondary schools. Pupils are invited to rate their experiences in school, both in the classroom in different types of lesson and around the school. It asks pupils what helps in those activities and what factors make them more difficult. It also asks pupils if they have any impairment or difficulty.

What Works for You: summary	
Method	Online (or paper) questionnaire.
Grouping	Pupils work individually. This works well as a whole class activity (if enough computers).
Time	5-15 minutes (depending on number of written comments by pupils).
Strengths	High level of confidentiality. Suitable for whole class so disabled pupils not made to feel different. Provides opportunity for all pupils to express their views on a range of school issues.
Notes	Pupils need to be able to read the questions, but can respond by selecting symbols.

**Structured Focus Group:** This uses a “Nominal Group Technique” to encourage contributions from all group members. Through discussion contributions are narrowed down prior to each member of the group ranking these through a voting system. Suggested questions for issues to consider are: What makes school difficult? What support would help to get around these barriers?

Structured Focus Group: summary	
Method	Nominal Group Technique.
Grouping	Small groups – no more than 10 pupils.
Time	20-30 minutes.
Strengths	Provides the opportunity to collect both individual and group views. Voting provides added interest.
Notes	The composition of the group needs careful consideration. Girls may be less likely to contribute in mixed sex groups.