



GUIDANCE NOTES NO:

5.11

LISTENING TO CHILDREN

FOR ALL

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LISTENING TO CHILDREN: FOR GRASSROOTS FOOTBALL

Opportunities to listen to children occur all the time in football – at times you may not even realise. For example, you may already talk with children about the training activities they'd like, or maybe you involve them in half-time team tactics? In addition, your club's committee may actively input from young players, or maybe your Welfare Officer's always on hand to support them when they need it.

Putting children at the heart of the things you do ensures a more positive, child-centred culture and helps create thriving community clubs.

KEY PRINCIPLES AND GETTING STARTED

If you are already listening and encouraging children to share their opinions, you know this makes for a happier and safer environment. Valuing children's views, experiences and using these to inform club actions helps create a child-centred culture where children will be more effectively engaged and motivated. Your club has a huge influence on the children within it, however, only children can tell us about their lives – their likes/dislikes, their hopes, dreams or worries, whether they feel safe and who or what might help them if they don't. On this basis, if anything at your club impacts a child – ideally you should have conversation with them about it – and here's why:

CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

All children and young people have human rights as set out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The convention is a list of rights that all children and young people have, wherever they live in the world.

Many schools work within this framework, so it is quite likely that children in your club will be familiar with this.

One of the rights in the UNCRC is all about listening to children – it says they have a right

to have a say on issues that affect them, and for their opinions to be given due weight when a decision is made. Involving children doesn't only make for better decisions – it's also their right.

The UNCRC also recognises the important role adults have to support children's best interests and as a football volunteer there will always be opportunities where you need to put children first – whether on the sidelines, during training, establishing behaviour expectations, selecting team captains or using social media.

THE ROLE OF AN ADULT

As adults we need to make sure that the views of young people are central to our decision making. The way children play is very different to our childhoods. Second guessing what they think and believe won't work. Creating an environment where views are regularly and actively sought – and children feel safe and empowered to give them – will help create a child-centred culture within a club. This is how you bring children's rights to life.

WHO COULD LEAD THIS WITHIN OUR CLUB?

Opportunities for children to share their views should ideally be embedded across everything that involves them. But start where you feel most comfortable or where the opportunity

presents itself. Clubs are structured in different ways, so there is no specific person responsible, although Coaches and Welfare Officers are likely to play a key role.

During training, coaches can ask children simple questions to understand better the things they enjoyed or help identify areas they feel they need to work on and how they as a coach can support this. This simple approach ensures young people are actively involved in decision making.

The Welfare Officer might survey the children to seek feedback about the club or a specific activity, such as the end-of-season awards event. Again, this simple approach allows children to feed into decision making about matters that impact them.

Those leading activities should always look to gain feedback from the young people to whom they are delivering.

Once you feel comfortable in seeking feedback on regular activities, you can build towards something bigger – like co-creating training sessions with children – or even have them provide input on longer-term plans for your club. As a rule of thumb ask yourself – does this decision or action have an impact for children? If the answer is yes, you should give them an opportunity to shape what you do.

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Remember: children do not have to give their views and opinions. Your role is to develop a culture where they are encouraged and feel comfortable to do so if they wish. You can do this by being an active audience – listen carefully to what they have to say, clarify if you need to, and always welcome their input.

WHAT IF CHILDREN ASK FOR THINGS WE CAN'T DELIVER?

It is important that where a child asks for something you cannot provide or have no jurisdiction over, you take time to explain this to those involved. Talking to children about their request and why it might not be feasible can help build trust and transparency. It can also help children understand the processes by which decisions are made. This may provide opportunities to engage children in finding solutions (e.g. if a group asks for new kit for which there's no budget, you could explain the costs involved and the implications of this. The children may want to be involved in fundraising for this.)

As you work with children to understand and value the influence they can have, requests will be more aligned to factors within your control.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

There are many ways that listening to children can be built into the way your club works.

This will get easier as you become more experienced and confident. It is important to make sure that all children have the same opportunity and you consider a range of ways in which children can be engaged and their voices heard. You may need to adapt your approaches to be inclusive of everyone.

The approaches listed here are just a starting point – you can also ask the children themselves about how they would like to give feedback and have their voice heard. These approaches require different levels of adult involvement, some led by adults and others involving adults and children working together. As your club develops this culture you will find you naturally move towards more child-led approaches.

Remember that childhood lasts up until an 18th birthday and children of different ages will require different approaches. If you are involved in open-age football and have a player in your team who is under 18, you will need to think carefully about how you engage their views and opinions. This could include taking time to create specific opportunities to check in or hear feedback.

There is something for everyone – can you recognise your own practice in the table on the following page?

“ The coaches played me in a different position when I asked. ”



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	COACHES	WELFARE OFFICERS	COMMITTEE MEMBERS
Adult-led (Adults initiated – recognising the added value of child input)	<p>Ask players simple open-ended questions and act on responses. e.g. How was that session for you? What did you enjoy? What could we do differently? What do you think we need to work on? How can we all help each other improve?</p> <p>Provide opportunities for children to provide written feedback e.g., on Post-it notes. What are we doing well? How can we improve as a team? How can I as the coach help you improve? This can work really well for children who may feel shy about speaking up in a group.</p>	<p>Provide questionnaires in which children can give feedback on their general experiences or specific activities. Within this, be sure to provide open-ended questions such as: Is there anything else you would like to tell me? Such questions allow children to tell you things you may not have considered or specifically asked about.</p>	<p>Create an anonymous suggestion box which is accessible to all.</p> <p>Undertake an end-of-season review with player feedback.</p>
Co-created (Started by the Adults, influenced by children)	<p>Work with children to identify where in a session or match they would like to have a say and empower them to do it.</p> <p>This might involve giving them a simple structure, so they are comfortable taking on this role. e.g., identifying three positives and one thing to work on.</p> <p>Work together to create a training session which reflects any identified needs.</p>	<p>Redevelop the club code of conduct with your young players and design a behaviour agreement together. How do the young people think they and the adults need to behave? What do they need from each other to support this? How would they like this information to be shared with the adults in the club?</p>	<p>Work with children to explore and plan activities such as player awards, the development of facilities or purchase of new kit for the coming season.</p>
Child-led (Adults as facilitators – children as leaders)	<p>Create space for children to think about and identify the skills they feel they need to develop. Trust children to lead parts of a training activities, where they identify something, they enjoy or feel they need to work on.</p> <p>Commit time for children to lead team talks. You will be amazed how much you can learn about your players by observing their interactions.</p>	<p>Create opportunities for children to tell you how you can help them. This could involve an action such as supporting them to produce child-created versions of safeguarding posters or policies, in which they can use their own language to explain what this means to them and where and how children can get help if they need it.</p>	<p>Open club management structures to child representation.</p> <p>Empower a youth council where young people from teams across the club can come together to share ideas and make suggestions.</p>

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Remember – hearing from children is the first step. You then need to make sure their opinions are given due weight – and most importantly – feedback to the children about what changed as a result of their input. That way children will start to value their own voice and let you know even more about what they think and feel about your sessions and your club. That can only help things get even better.

WHERE CAN I FIND MORE INFORMATION?

The FA is currently working with clubs across the country and the University of Chichester to create a number of good-practice case studies. These will be available on The FA website once complete.

You can also speak with staff at your local County FA Designated Safeguarding Officer who will have experience of this work across clubs in your county.

FA Information⁶ around engaging your young people and youth leadership can be found [here](#).

A number of County FAs have also produced resources to support clubs. For example, North Riding FA have produced a toolkit², which includes a number of resources, top tips and case studies from clubs. This is available for free on their [website](#).

Additional resources related to Inclusion and Disability Football, including listening and learning, can be found [here](#)³.

You can find out more about the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) [here](#).

Further information and about enabling meaningful child participation and the Lundy (2014)⁴ model can be found [here](#).

LINK TO SAFEGUARDING

Clubs with open and child-centred cultures create ever-safer environments, where children feel safe to raise concerns. When all children are actively listened to, they are empowered to talk about things that matter to them. Survivors of abuse refer to club cultures where young people were not encouraged to share their views and opinions with those in charge.⁵

Ask yourself: when did you last review your club ethos and philosophy? Does it reflect a listening culture?

“ I can tell my coach if I have any problems and I feel like they will resolve them. ”



“ My coaches are good listeners because they always listen to my ideas. ”



REFERENCES

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- 2 <https://www.northridingfa.com/inclusion/youth-voice>
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- 5 <https://www.thefa.com/-/media/thefacom-new/files/about-the-fa/sheldon-report/independent-review-into-child-sexual-abuse-in-football-1970-2005.ashx>
- 6 <https://www.thefa.com/get-involved/player/youth/youth-leadership-and-volunteering>





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