

GIVING CHILDREN A VOICE

A Step-by-Step Guide to Promoting
Child-Centred Practice



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GETTING STARTED

CREATING A CULTURE OF ADVOCACY

SECTION OBJECTIVES

For you to be clear on:

- the way in which advocacy is being defined – what is a ‘culture of advocacy’?
- how children are to be positioned in relation to advocacy
- the framework to be used to help you create a culture of advocacy.

The aim of this book is simple. To provide you with a foundation through which you can establish a ‘culture of advocacy’ within your organisation, home or indeed any setting that you share with children.

A culture of advocacy is reflected in a setting in which:

- children’s voices are acknowledged and valued
- opportunities are created to make sure that children’s voices are heard.

Advocacy, in this context, is driven by the value that children’s voices can bring to each and every setting that they experience, whether that is a home or school, a restaurant or courtroom, a playground or shopping mall.

By creating a culture of advocacy you will unlock children's potential to constructively contribute to the spaces that form part of their everyday lives.

A culture of advocacy sees adults and children working together to create shared spaces. It is relevant to adults whether they engage with children directly or indirectly, in formal or informal settings. A culture of advocacy moves beyond a traditional approach that is driven by adults speaking out for and on behalf of the child. Here children's voices are recognised for the contribution that they offer to improving practices and outcomes, as adults and children come together to positively transform key spaces within society, offering the opportunity to change their experiences and our experiences (as adults) too!

INTRODUCING ADVOCACY

Embracing a culture of advocacy can have a transformative impact.

Here are some quotes from children who were part of a pupil parliament in their primary school. They had been asked about the value of their parliament:

'I don't know how to explain it but it's a good opportunity to let me know that I have a voice.'

'You can say what you think and it can be in consideration for changes.'

'It helps everyone know how school is and helps make it more better.'

'It's a good thing because other children get to make ideas instead of the teachers having the ideas.'

'I think it is a good idea because if you're shy you get a turn to actually speak.'

The opportunity to have a voice is valuable. This book will suggest that, through encouraging children's participation and

engagement, a culture of advocacy has positive implications both for the individual and for those many and varied community settings that children and adults share.

This book seeks to offer support to adults who are keen to pursue change through harnessing the potential of children's involvement and contributions. This book is not about demanding that only children have the answers. However, it does suggest that adults, alone, do not. To embrace that benefit and give transformation a real chance we need to create a new culture of advocacy, where opportunities for children to talk and be heard are both real and valued.

A desire to engage with children's voices changes the way in which spaces come to be experienced, wherever they may be. How we as adults come to recognise the possibilities of this, and the potential that it offers society, is an important challenge that we must engage with. For example, if we were better at hearing and acting on children's thoughts and ideas, how would that change the experience of going out for a 'family' meal, or of how children are positioned in formal legal settings, through to their place in schools and at home? A culture of advocacy offers a chance to create a truly shared space that is co-constructed and as a result is one where children experience a sense of purpose and belonging and which offers a basis for effective relationships and personal learning (in its broadest sense).

Each step that follows and the related 'actions' offer a guide to implementing a culture of advocacy. These ideas will allow you to test and evaluate a culture of advocacy in those settings where you engage with children and from this to build and shape a dynamic arena for interaction – full of potential benefits for both adults and children.

APPROACHING ADVOCACY

Are you an advocate for children?

'I am an advocate', wrote prolific English writer Sir John Mortimer (1998, p.59). Creator of the enduring character

Rumpole of the Bailey, Sir John Mortimer had good reason to call himself an advocate. He was a lawyer. Indeed his musings on the role of an advocate reflected the techniques and skills that might be used in the formal setting of a courtroom. At one point in his autobiography he highlights the extent to which the advocate becomes a go-between, an 'interpreter...between judges... and clients...in a reasonably short time I became bilingual and able to speak both "judge" and "client" and I formed a sort of glossary of useful phrases with their translations' (Mortimer 1998, p.111). It reflects a particular approach to advocacy. The advocate, who, through their training, is recognised as being best placed to represent the 'needs' and 'wants' of a particular group, taking their voice and re-configuring this for the ears of a decision-maker in a defined setting.

The example above offers a hierarchical model of advocacy, framed and shaped within the context of social institutions (here the legal system). It reflects a version of advocacy that illustrates the traditional way in which children have been positioned. Children here are the group whose 'needs' and 'wants' require translation and interpretation; their wants, as a result of some 'lack', are presented to the wider world of adults by a 'qualified' advocate. This advocate, thanks to specific training, is assumed to be able to understand the child and therefore offer an accepted version of the child's 'voice'.

However, should advocacy with children be based on little more than adults assuming their ability to effectively impersonate the voice of the child?

The purpose of this book is to question how we see advocacy and its relationship to children. This will mean questioning the role of the adult as advocate on behalf of the child. Indeed, as we explore that role further, it will become clear that adults do have a significant part to play in advocacy with children. This role might involve interpreting and translating, but it is more about creating opportunities, such that children have the confidence to share their voice in the first place, which may then lead to their further participation.

The point here is that adults are important. However, as we seek to engage with a culture of advocacy we need to recognise that it is not good enough to simply assume the voice of the child. In practice the experience and training of the adult needs to be driven more by a desire to unlock children's voices, as the adult as a facilitator creates platforms that allows the child to be heard. This book reflects the need for a true partnership where adults and children are able to combine knowledge, experience, perspectives and ideas in shaping the spaces that they share.

DEFINING ADVOCACY

Advocacy can certainly be put into the category of a 'contested concept' (Robinson 2015). It is one of those words that has a multitude of uses and meanings. It is, therefore, important to define how advocacy is going to be interpreted in this book as a first step in presenting a meaning that can have real application in the context of children's everyday lives.

Advocacy is of course:

- Martin Luther King Jr: 'I have a dream.'
- Nelson Mandela: 'Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.'
- Barack Obama: 'Yes we can.'

But it is also the child who speaks out because they want an education or want others to know about the realities of their everyday life:

Dear friends, on 9 October 2012, the Taliban shot me on the left side of my forehead. They shot my friends, too. They thought that the bullets would silence us, but they failed. And out of that silence came thousands of voices. The terrorists thought they would change my aims and stop my ambitions. But nothing changed in my life except this: weakness, fear

and hopelessness died. Strength, power and courage was born. (Malala Yousefzi, Speech to the UN General Assembly, 12 July, 2013)

I will always speak the truth. No one will shut me up even the whole world. (Bana Alabed, Tweet on 9 February, 2017)

The similarity that binds these examples together is that they represent one authentic voice which is being presented to other people. They reflect a call and offer the chance for others to respond. Each voice is being launched from a platform that allows others to hear it, whether in the courtroom, at a political rally, or through traditional news outlets or social media. So much of how we come to hear that voice is determined by our attitude towards it and the value we attach to it. The authentic nature of that voice is a defining catalyst for change. For ultimately change, whether large or small, starts with a voice.

The word advocacy is derived from the Latin, *advoco*, which means to call, invite, convoke or summon. Reflecting on that dictionary definition the notion of an offer to engage through coming together is particularly powerful. Advocacy, therefore, if we go back to the roots of the word, should not be separated from the idea of an individual or group ‘calling out’, as others are invited to share in matters of personal relevance and through their participation create the possibility of change.

Advocacy thus reflects a *stimulus* – the call – and a *response* – the opportunity to engage and participate.

We should be concerned with both stimulus and response in relation to creating a culture of advocacy with children. *This book seeks to connect advocacy, defined in terms of the passion and relevance of an authentic call, with children.* The *stimulus* is thus to be considered in terms of ‘establishing the voice of the child’, allowing them to find their voice. The *response* is about ‘amplifying the voice of the child’ and through this recognising the need for the creation of opportunities for children (and others) to engage and participate.

A culture of advocacy:

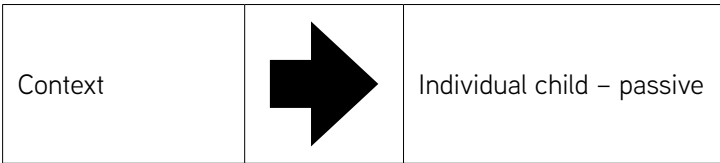
- establishes the child's voice: children's voices are acknowledged and valued
- amplifies the child's voice: opportunities are created that allow children's voices to be heard, giving others the chance to respond or engage.

Creating a culture of advocacy that values the voice of the child and gives children meaningful opportunities to respond as part of their everyday lives changes a pervasive dynamic of social interaction. Rather than children being merely the objects of adult concerns, children become partners, whose voices are not only openly heard and respected in their authentic state (without the need for an adult interpreter or guide), but whose participation is welcomed as a key ingredient for positive change and an embedded sense of shared communities in all the settings in which children live their lives.

DEFINING CHILDREN

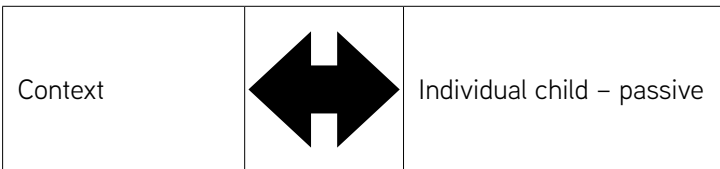
It is important to be clear on the way in which children are viewed in this work. Consistently, children's place in advocacy has been as, at best, an observer. Traditional approaches to advocacy relate to children in terms of their developmental capacity. Here the aim is to move beyond this and to see children not in terms of their passivity but as active meaning makers, processing all that is going on around them (which influences their actions and reactions).

This does not need to get complicated and it will be explored in more detail in later sections, but what is being argued is that a traditional approach to the child looked like the following diagram (this is reflected in early models of the socialisation theory).



Here the child is merely a product of adult society. The contexts that adults provide, such as home and school, are there to mould the child. A ‘normal’ child will, through experiencing these contexts, become a ‘normal adult’. At no point is it recognised that children will be making sense of these experiences themselves. Rather the child is seen as passive, there to be sculpted using the reliable tools of ‘reward’ and ‘punishment’; their voice is of little value.

Arguably, one of the biggest changes in our thinking about the child in recent years has been to see a shift in the nature of that unidirectional arrow.



A bi-directional arrow recognises that children are not simply moulded by external forces; rather, children are processing what is going on around them as they make sense of the world they live in. As such children are creating meanings, meanings which have the power to shape the context itself. As soon as you recognise that there is a process, that children do not passively absorb what is going on around them but rather filter it, interpret it and then use it, then children’s emotions, memories, experiences, sense of identity and, consequently, voice become of absolute relevance (based on ideas in Frankel 2017).

It is the active sense of the child, who is constantly processing what is taking place around them through the uniqueness of all that makes them ‘them’, that is the essence

for how children are to be considered in all that follows. It is a way of thinking about the child that has developed under the banner of Childhood Studies. This is a multi-disciplinary approach that includes research in psychology, education, law, sociology, medicine and so on. It centres around the idea that children are social ‘agents’ – a term that reflects the extent to which they are responding to their social world and drawing off this as they shape meanings that come to inform their actions and reactions as well as their current and future ideas.

DEFINING THIS APPROACH

It is not without due regard to the enormity of the task that this book calls for a change in the way in which we approach advocacy with children. To help, the following chapters will rely on a framework that is currently being developed by EquippingKids and which is having an impact in schools in England (see Frankel and Fowler 2016). As we explore a culture of advocacy we will, therefore, draw on some of the tried and tested themes we are using in schools. Our school-based approach is, unsurprisingly, focused on children as learners. However, our definition of the learner is defined by recognising the social world that children are part of. A learner, therefore, is someone:

- growing in awareness of themselves and others
- developing knowledge and skills to navigate the social world around them
- maximising their potential through making the most of opportunities to participate and engage in the world around them.

The belief that learning is not an activity that should be restricted to the classroom pervades our approach in schools. Rather, it is a focus on those social or personal skills needed to maximise our effectiveness as lifelong learners that drives

our work. However, this learning journey is limited unless it includes the chance for children to participate and engage in the world around them. This book, therefore, is focused on the third bullet point, as it seeks to draw out, through a focus on advocacy, the part that children can play as they develop their ability to get involved in the communities they are part of.

The following pages will, therefore, consider how we can create those opportunities for children to participate and engage. It will follow a model we are using in schools, linked to the wider themes of learning:

- Ethos – establish children as partners
- Community – design a space for the social learner
- Lead – champion a learning process
- Speak – compose a language for social engagement
- Act – initiate opportunities for practice.

As we now turn to building a culture of advocacy these steps have been adapted in order to promote a focus on children's voices and their wider social engagement. The steps are:

	Steps
Part 1: Creating a climate for change	Step 1 – Revitalise your thinking!
	Step 2 – Be spatially aware
Part 2: Turning rhetoric into reality	Step 3 – Speak the right language
	Step 4 – Create opportunities
	Step 5 – Lead the change

Each step is linked to a number of core 'actions' and 'reflections', both of which will help you to not only think about a culture of advocacy but to put it into practice!

Note: Each step will be supported by a number of actions, which will be introduced during these 'chapters'. You will need to interpret the steps and actions in the context of your work with your children. The aim here is not to provide you with all the answers, but rather to create a framework of actions that will put you in a strong position to engage with children to shape your own culture of advocacy.

Reflection

Having read this Introduction, what is it that you would like to achieve from reading the following pages? Where might you be heading on your journey? Why is such a journey necessary?