

Empowering vulnerable children and their parents using Talking Mats

IRISS (Institute for Research and Innovation in Social Services) works to promote positive outcomes for the people who use Scotland's social services. We do this by enhancing the capacity and capability of the social services workforce to access and make use of knowledge & research for service innovation & improvement.

A range of organisations in Scotland are seeking to improve their use of evidence to inform their practice. Often information about what they have done, how they do it and what they have learnt is not widely available. Part of IRISS's Evidence-informed Practice programme involves producing case studies that highlight the different ways of gathering 'evidence' and how this is being done by practitioners working in social services to change how they deliver services. *Empowering vulnerable children and their parents using Talking Mats* is the first case study in the series. For more information see our website: www.iriss.org.uk or contact ellen.daly@iriss.org.uk

www.iriss.org.uk/resources/empowering-vulnerable-children

Please provide a brief description of what you did in terms of creating, using or sharing evidence to inform or improve your work/organisation.

This case study describes the use of Talking Mats at Stenhouse Child and Family Centre (Edinburgh City Council) with very young, vulnerable children and their parents.

Talking Mats¹ is a low-tech communication tool originally developed by the Alternative and Augmentative Communication Research Unit to support people with communication impairment including those with stroke, learning disability and dementia.

Stenhouse Child and Family Centre often work with very vulnerable children who have experienced significant adversity and trauma in their lives. This often means that children are hyper vigilant and find new people and experiences stressful and at times impossible. Child Protection systems can heighten these children's stress levels and as research into early brain development attests, stress can have a significant impact on children. Though it is often inappropriate for very young children to be part of meetings and Children's Hearings, the Stenhouse team identified a huge gap in empowering and ensuring that these children's views and wishes were represented.

Leeanne Turner, the Depute Manager at the Centre was part of a pilot scheme in her previous post using Talking Mats with children within school review systems. She was so impressed with the impact of using this communication tool that she wanted to see if it could work with under fives, children within child protection and vulnerable adults with learning difficulties.

This case study relates to evidence-informed practice in several ways. First, Talking Mats is an evidence-informed tool in itself. It was developed through extensive research so this case study demonstrates the use of existing evidence. Second, staff at Stenhouse explored the use of Talking

1 www.talkingmats.com

Mats, gathering and documenting its effectiveness thereby creating new evidence. Third, Talking Mats is a tool for gathering evidence of the views, feelings and wishes of children and their parents and sharing it with professionals.

What was the process you went through?

The use of Talking Mats at the Centre was implemented and overseen by the Depute Manager, who had undergone the Talking Mats training.

Talking Mats were used at the Centre in different contexts. It was tried out in different rooms of the nursery to find out which environments put the children at ease. It was used with very young children, with parents with learning difficulties involved in the Children's Hearing system, for family work and for reviews. Evidence about the effectiveness of the tool and experience of children, parents and staff were documented.

What were the barriers or challenges?

There is some preparation time required in order to use Talking Mats. This includes undergoing training to ensure the tool is used properly. Time and consideration also need to be taken to ensure a comfortable and relaxed environment is created in which to work on a Mat with the child.

What supports or resources helped you to succeed/deliver?

Support from the Centre's management to try something new was very helpful as was the Depute Manager's previous experience with Talking Mats. The commitment and willingness of Centre staff to explore a new method of providing a way for vulnerable children and their families to have their views shared and documented was invaluable.

What were the outcomes of your activities? Do you have evidence to support this?

The outcomes of using Talking Mats at the Centre were that children and

parents receiving support felt empowered, listened to and included in processes and decisions. A boy with significant difficulties was helped by a worker using a Talking Mat to express who he would like to live with and to understand about what went on in the meetings he was not permitted to attend. Parents with complex learning disabilities were supported to understand a Children's Hearing and what a supervision order involved. A Talking Mat was used to facilitate a conversation between a three year old boy and his mother who had personality disorder to explain to her how he felt when she shouted at him. Talking Mats have even proved useful with children as young as twenty months.

The staff team at the Centre also felt empowered. They reported feeling that they are now acting more as advocates for the vulnerable children and families that they work with but also felt confident in challenging decisions if they had the evidence through a Talking Mat that the intervention may not be in the child or adult's best interests. They have also challenged other professionals in their thinking and ensured that the voices of vulnerable families they are working with do not get lost in a room full of professionals.

Evidence of these outcomes:

- Talking Mats and Reviews [p.06]
- Talking Mats and the Children's Hearing system [p.07]
- Talking Mats and Very Young Children [p.09]
- Talking Mats and Family Work [p.10]
- Talking Mats: A Practitioner's Perspective [p.11]

What have you learnt?

Talking Mats can help to empower very young, vulnerable children and their parents through decision-making processes within Child Protection processes and the Children's Hearing System. It enhances communication and engagement between children, their parents, staff and other professionals ensuring decisions are evidence-informed.

Any other comments

The Centre was delighted to win Edinburgh City Council's award for creativity and innovation for their use of Talking Mats.

“We are excited about how this may grow and develop in the future and would like more opportunities to share what we have learned. Talking Mats is such a simple tool to use and you don't need lots of expense or time consuming training.” — Manager, Stenhouse Child and Family Centre

Notes

IRISS are working with the Talking Mats Centre to develop a Talking Mats application for iPad. For more information, please contact Paul Hart at **paul.hart@iriss.org.uk**

For more about the case study project please contact Ellen Daly at **ellen.daly@iriss.org.uk**

Suggest a case study online at:

<https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/EIPcasestudy>

Talking Mats and Reviews

An outreach worker at the Centre was working with a young boy who was experiencing significant difficulties at school including aggression and non-compliance. He was being excluded and had also spent considerable periods of time being looked after away from home by other family members. During meetings which the boy was not part of it became clear that his own views and voice was not being heard. With this in mind the outreach worker completed a Talking Mat with him.

The worker then spent time with the boy talking with him about the different aspects of his life and using pictures, asked him to place them on the Mat depending on how he felt about them (a tick for 'like', a question mark for 'not sure' and a cross for 'dislike'). The boy was able to quickly grasp the concept and was able to express a wish to live with his uncle not his mum and that he liked school but hated being shouted at. The worker was then able to ask his permission to take this to the next meeting to ensure that all the important people in his life knew what he was thinking and feeling. Following the next meeting the worker drew a picture to show the boy who was at the meeting and used speech bubbles to give him an idea of what was discussed.

This boy has since blossomed in his confidence and has really started to trust the worker. Feedback from the professionals has been that he appears to find communication easier and although he continues to have significant difficulties they have not been to the same extent. A Hearing recently took place and the child was excused because of the content of some of the discussion. However, again the worker completed a Talking Mat with the boy and this time he chose to use speech bubbles and words instead of pictures. The worker was then able to take this Mat into the Hearing and ensure again that his voice was heard. Panel members fed back that they had not seen such a tool before and found it refreshing to have the child's views included in this way even though he wasn't in attendance.

Talking Mats and the Children's Hearing system

This example involves a child with significant additional support needs and both parents with complex learning difficulties.

There had been ongoing concerns about the parents' ability to meet their child's needs and keep her safe. A Children's Hearing was called and legal grounds for the Hearing were read out to the parents for them to agree or disagree with. Staff were aware that the parents were agreeing to quite complex information and were concerned they may not fully understand it. A decision was made that the grounds would need to go the Sheriff Court. Two staff members who know the family well felt that this was a perfect opportunity to use Talking Mats to support the parents to fully understand the process of the Hearing and the legal grounds. A Mat was worked through with each parent separately so they could indicate which grounds they agreed with, didn't agree with or didn't understand. Each of the grounds were also explained using visual tools. What was clear was that both parents had been very distressed by the process and their learning difficulties had exacerbated this. It came to light they had not understood any of what was asked of them during the Hearing. Using Talking Mats both parents were able to be clear about what they agreed and disagreed with and to explain their feelings. When they were called to the Sheriff Court they were able to use the information gathered through using the Mats to provide feedback.

Talking Mats were also used to explain to the parents about what a supervision order was and what the conditions were. Again, visual tools were used to explain to the family what the consequences would be if they didn't comply with the conditions. The appeal procedure was also explained in detail. The father had arrived at the meeting very tense and explained that he was angry and wanted to see his lawyer. However, once the mat had been completed he appeared much more calm and was able to share with the worker that while he wasn't happy he was not allowed to be on his own with his little girl he understood why and did not want to appeal the decision. Feedback from the family, the social worker and the Children's Hearing Service has been very positive and workers have been

asked to meet with other Reporters from the Hearing System to talk to them more about Talking Mats. The family have said that they have found the mats helpful and that they understand and agree with what has happened to them and their child so far.

Talking Mats and Very Young Children

A Talking Mat was used in a different way with a child of twenty months. The child lives in a chaotic home environment with relationship break-downs and concern around mum's drug use, her mental health and ability to identify, understand and meet his needs. The child would often present as highly anxious but would shut down and disassociate at times of stress. This made assessing and understanding his likes and dislikes very difficult for the staff. It was agreed that through observations and photographs staff would try to plot a mat showing the child's reactions to different activities and events. Along with the photographs the worker wrote statements to give more information about what was happening and the child's reactions.

It was apparent that although his communication was limited there were clearly times where he demonstrated unhappiness or distress. The most significant of this was when mum was late in collecting him from the centre. He would always seek out the same cuddly toy and hold it tight whilst constantly saying 'mummy, daddy'. He would at the same time sometimes have a frown and a worried expression. He found sensory, tactile and messy play difficult and would avoid it or show dislike. Again it was possible to plot this on the mat using the photographs and worker's written statements. The photographs were duplicated and mum was asked to plot these on the mat to see how she recognised her child's likes and dislikes. Mum had started the session angry and defensive but seemed to calm down and focus on her child as she plotted the photographs against his likes and dislikes. At the end of the exercise Mum and the worker had almost identical mats. Staff felt this empowered Mum in feeling that she knew her child well. It was also an example of partnership working as it enabled the worker and mum to work together to think about strategies to alleviate the child's distress. This work is in the early stages but the Centre hope to develop it much more and use it as a tool to work with parents to focus on their child's views, wishes and hopes.

Talking Mats and Family Work

Workers were supporting a three year old boy who's mum was challenging and had personality disorder. The worker had been facilitating some nondirective play work with the child and asked for support in how she could empower him to share some of his feelings about his mum's anger with her. The Centre worked to create an environment for the child in which he felt safe to firstly seek his views about the play work and what he had enjoyed, not enjoyed or was unsure about.

What was interesting was that the child himself brought his mum into the Talking Mat discussion and shared with the worker that his mum's shouting made him very sad. The next step was to try and encourage the child to share his mat with this mum. Again what was interesting was that before the worker could suggest it to the child he had asked if he could show it to his mum. The worker was supported to think about how to keep the child safe within this situation and how best to facilitate the conversation between the child and his mum. Thought was given to the set up of the room and where the worker should position herself. The child was involved in this and he wanted two chairs side by side for him and his mum and for the worker to sit close behind him. The child was then able to talk to his mum about all the things he had been doing with the worker and used the mat to show her what had been difficult for him such as trying to get off and on the big rocking horse.

When it came to the picture of his mum (drawn by the worker) he told Mum that it was a picture of her. He then said in a very quiet voice "when you shout it makes me sad". Mum became negative and defensive: "I only shout when you are naughty". Again the child used his mat and repeated in a much louder voice "no mummy, when you shout it makes me sad". His change of tone seemed to have an impact on his mum and she was able to talk with him about his feelings, really listen to him and show him through touch that she had heard him. It seemed that having the mat in front of him empowered and supported him to talk with his mum about something really scary but important for him.

Talking Mats: a practitioner's perspective

A key part of the role of working with children is gathering their views and feelings. This can be challenging in daily practice, not just from time constraints but being able to clearly evidence you have gathered their views and their understanding of what has been asked of them. Children can find it difficult to talk about very emotional topics, Talking Mats are a fantastic way of helping even very young children have their say in a non-threatening way.

Preparation is crucial, and well worth the time and effort involved. A number of practitioners in the neighbourhood are beginning to use this tool and build up resources of pictures that can be used. Over time this will help cut down on some of the preparation time as these resources can be shared. By ensuring that I had adequately prepared for this activity I was able to feel more confident in using it for the first time.

I used this tool to gather the views of a three year old child, who was showing signs of real distress during contact with her mother who has personality disorder. It was relatively straightforward to put my observations of the child's behaviour in reports to the Children's Hearing and draw conclusions from this, however this was not allowing the child to have their say.

Being able to share a Talking Mat with the parents helped everyone involved gain a clear and understandable insight into this child's views. Using the talking mat as a structure for discussing a very distressing subject with the parents helped make the meeting more productive and manageable. For the first time, the 'transference' of the mother's feelings was also more manageable and contained, and I was not expecting this positive outcome. From the mother's perspective it was very difficult to hear and see what her child was sharing, however for the first time this Mum with personality disorder was able to gain an insight into how her child's feelings and views were different from her own. The Talking Mat will also be shared at the Children's Hearing, to enable the Panel members to hear and see the child's views.

To ensure the child understood what was being asked of them I used a 'food' themed Talking Mat. Information was gathered from the carer to ensure pictures of food the child liked and disliked were included, as this would act as a control to monitor their understanding. The child was also asked to name the emotion 'smileys' so that this reflected her views. This worked really well with the child clearly demonstrating her understanding. The session itself did not take long but was really helpful in beginning one-to-one work with the child in a relaxed way.

The second session was always going to be more challenging as this would focus on contact, both for the child who had a strong negative reaction to contact and for myself using this tool for the first time. A stage by stage picture sequence was shared from being at home with the carer, to being collected, arriving at contact, during contact, journey home, being back with carer and bed time.

As a practitioner I found that my observations of the child's contrasting behaviour in the two tasks heightened my understanding of how much the child was struggling with her emotions when talking about their mother. In the initial session the child was confident, chatty, able to concentrate and fully focused on the task. By marked contrast as soon as the subject of contact was discussed the child's behaviour changed, and they wanted the session ended after 20 minutes. During the sessions I also asked the child's permission to take photographs (having received permission from her carer beforehand). In terms of evidence to present to parents, Children's Hearings etc, this provided a graphic illustration of the contrasting behaviour and presentation of the child during the two sessions, as well as evidence that this is the child's own work.

This direct work and photographs were shared with the Panel members at the Children's Hearing following a discussion of my social work report. Panel members were given an opportunity to examine each piece of work and the corresponding photographs and to ask questions. This provided a very focused opportunity for a full discussion about the child's needs, views and wishes. From feedback from the Panel members it was clear that they appreciated having the opportunity to see and hear about the

child's views, however more importantly it helped them gain a deeper understanding of how the child felt about contact and was a vital part of their decision making process. The Panel Chair in his summoning up commented on the benefits of using the Talking Mat and photographs in helping them make the right, but very difficult decision to end the child's contact with her mother.

Talking Mats will become part of the toolkit I use in working with children and their families on a regular basis, and is well worth the time and effort involved in the preparation stage.