

Case Study – Participation Officer and Aiming High for Disabled Children



I work in the local office of a national charity as a Young People’s Participation Officer. Our project offers services to disabled children and their families, including advocacy and support in accessing services, help with communication barriers, and youth involvement and participation. We are funded by public donations, commissioned work (eg training) and grant aid under the local Children’s Trust funding for **Aiming High for Disabled Children**.

The Aiming High agenda includes looking at ways to encourage active involvement for disabled children and their families in developing new and improved services across all sectors, including health and social care. The team I work in is small, but with lots of skills and passion for the work. My role is to find ways to enable children and young people to participate in the community and in leisure, to be consulted on the services they need and receive, and to be able to influence the decisions made about them.

For example, last week I helped a young person participate in their own transition review. This is where decisions are made about their next steps in education, training or employment. The young person communicates non-verbally and felt left out of decision making previously, as it had been assumed they had nothing to say. I used the ‘I’ll Go First’ toolkit, which is specially designed for young people with high communication needs. It went well and the young person was able to contribute and make their point. It took some time to complete the review, but professionals need to be aware that inclusion is about working at the pace of the user of the service.

I am particularly interested in helping disabled children to communicate their needs and preferences. All children have rights under the **UN Convention on the Rights of the Child** and our own **Human Rights Act 1998**, but it’s hard to get what you’re entitled to if you can’t get the message through. I’m learning to use Makaton, a communication method which uses combinations of signs, symbols, gestures, speech and pictures to enable each person to communicate in the way which best suits them. I may even look at developing a specialism in it, perhaps to use in legal representation services.