

Child-centred policing principles in practice

8 principles, designed by young people and tested with police.

Citation

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Communication

“Be relatable and respectful without power-tripping; balance authority with humanity to avoid fear.”

Young person

How you speak to children shapes whether they feel safe, understand what’s happening, and can respond. Small changes in tone, pace and clarity make a big difference.

Initial encounter:

Your tone, pace, and words determine whether the child feels safe or silenced, or whether the situation escalates.

- Give a calm greeting, especially in public or unfamiliar spaces,
- Use names where possible, and use ordinary language that reflects a child’s age and needs.

Be aware of how you might come across:

Children may read your tone, body language, positioning, or presence as threatening, even if that is not your intent.

- Take a moment to reflect on how you might be coming across,
- Adjust where possible (speaking position, stance, eye level, pace).

Before you ask questions:

Children listen and answer better when they know why you’re speaking.

- Explain why you are asking questions,
- Focus on what is happening, not what the child is presumed to be responsible for,
- Check they are ready to talk.

When emotions rise:

Strong emotions (distress, anger, fear, shutdown) change how children hear, think and respond.

- Acknowledge the emotions that you see,
- Lower your voice and slow your pace,
- Reduce questions before continuing (more words can overwhelm).

When the child goes quiet or compliant:

Silence or quick agreement could mean overload, not understanding.

- Allow processing time,
- Don’t just repeat your question, check understanding in another way,
- Offer a different way to respond, if needed.

Using authority or formal language

Formal words can sound threatening or confusing to children if not explained.

- Always explain legal terms in simple language,
- Avoid overloading the child with too much at once.
- Avoid adultifying or criminalising labels (e.g. avoid youth, juvenile, ‘involved in’).

When multiple officers are present:

Too many voices or movements can overwhelm children.

- Designate one officer to communicate,
- Avoid talking over each other,
- Keep instructions consistent.



2 Keeping children informed

“Talk children through each step so there are no surprises; ‘explain better’ during stops.”

Young person

How clearly you explain what is happening affects whether children feel safe, confused or anxious. Simple explanations and clear steps help children understand and cope.

Explain what is happening and next steps :

Children cope better when they understand why police are there and what is about to happen.

- State the lawful reason in simple, child-friendly language,
- Explain each step before it happens,
- Clarify what the interaction means for the child (e.g. whether they are suspected of wrongdoing or not).

Give information at a manageable pace:

Too much information at once can overwhelm children, especially when they are distressed.

- Give information in small, steady steps,
- Keep messaging consistent across officers,
- Explain clearly if information changes.

Set immediate expectations:

Children may feel less anxious and more in control when they know what will happen next, how long things will take, and what is expected of them.

- Tell the child what will happen next and in what order,
- Give simple indications of timing (e.g. how long something will take, or how many steps remain),
- Signpost transitions between conversations or activities.

Clarify roles and people:

Uncertainty about who people are and what they do can increase anxiety and make it harder for children to engage.

- Introduce everyone present and explain their role clearly,
- Explain the presence of body worn video and others (e.g. observers) and why they are there,
- Clarify who is responsible for what, so children can understand who they can ask for help or information.

Preparing for and explaining potentially distressing actions:

Unexpected procedures or actions can be unsettling: preparing children beforehand helps them feel more informed and in control.

- Explain clearly and concretely what will happen before any unfamiliar or intrusive process,
- Use simple, sensory language where relevant (e.g. what something might feel like, how long it will take),
- Reassure about safety, privacy, and choice where appropriate.



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Presence

Children are more likely to feel safe and trust police when officers are visible, familiar and involved in everyday interactions, not just during crises or enforcement.

"Where I used to live, there was a patrol car that just patrolled one area. Everybody knew them, and they knew us... We'd tell them about incidents."

Young person

Use everyday, non-enforcement contact to build trust:

Small, informal interactions help children see police as approachable, not just authoritative.

- Use routine patrol time for brief, friendly interactions,
- Where possible, prioritise walking patrols and visible presence,
- Greet children in passing,
- Avoid approaching groups in ways that signal suspicion or enforcement unless necessary.

Build familiarity through continuity:

Children engage more easily when they recognise officers and know who to approach.

- Maintain continuity of officers across settings where possible and introduce new officers clearly,
- Use named points of contact for schools, care settings and youth services.

Make police presence in youth settings relational:

Contact in schools and youth spaces should focus on relationships, not just authority or crisis response.

- Prioritise small-group or informal engagement rather than large assemblies,
- Show availability and approachability during visits,
- Ensure children know how and when they can safely approach or contact police outside emergencies.

Ensure visibility is fair and respectful:

Police presence should build trust, not reinforce suspicion or inequality.

- Reflect on whether similar behaviour by different groups receives different attention
- Treat all children with the same respect and attention.

Keep everyday contact calm and non-intimidating:

How officers approach children shapes whether contact feels safe or threatening.

- Avoid sudden approaches, crowding or escalation during routine contact
- Approach calmly, announce your presence, and keep tone, positioning and movement steady and non-threatening.



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Fair treatment

Children want to be treated as children first and judged on what is happening now, not on assumptions about their appearance, behaviour, background or past experiences. Fair and consistent treatment helps build trust and prevent harm.

“Avoid assuming guilt-based decisions on clothes, area, or past history. For example, all black clothing does not equal ‘knife.’”

Young person

Start from the position that every child is a child:

Children want to be treated as children, not adults or threats, with responses that recognise their age, needs and vulnerabilities.

- Recognise children as children first, avoiding adultification and understanding behaviour in the context of age, development and unmet need.

Base decisions on clear, objective grounds:

Children want police actions explained and to be treated fairly, without assumptions based on their appearance, background or circumstances.

- Treat children fairly by making evidence-based decisions.
- Explain actions and decisions in a way that children can understand.

Recognise and challenge bias in decision-making:

Children said they feel they are often judged differently, and they want officers to recognise this and actively challenge any assumptions.

- Reflect on how bias may influence your perception of a child’s risk, behaviour or credibility.
- Pause and ask yourself: Would I respond in the same way to a different child in the same circumstance?

Use proportionate, child-appropriate responses:

Children said when situations escalate unnecessarily, it feels unfair and unsafe. When officers stay calm and proportionate, it builds trust.

- Use the least intrusive response necessary and only escalate where clearly justified.
- Slow down where possible and consider behaviour in context before deciding how to respond.

Be accountable for fair and consistent treatment:

Children said trust depends on fair, consistent treatment and a willingness to learn from mistakes.

- Use supervision, feedback and review processes to reflect on decision-making and identify areas for improvement.
- Be open to challenge and take action where patterns of unequal treatment are identified.



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Supporting voice and participation

"You know you've been heard when something happens afterwards."

Young Person

Children want to know that what they say matters. When their views are listened to, taken seriously and reflected in decisions, they are more likely to engage and trust the process.

Seek and centre the child's view:

Children are not always asked directly about their views, with adults often speaking on their behalf.

- Create opportunities for children to share their views privately and safely.
- Treat the child as the primary source of their own experience; do not assume adults can speak on behalf of the child.

Use the child's views in decision-making:

Listening is only meaningful if what children say genuinely shapes decisions.

- Record and communicate the child's views accurately,
- Make clear how the child's views have informed planning and decisions,
- Challenge assumptions when the child's account differs from adult interpretations.

Explain decisions and outcomes:

Children can accept decisions more easily when they understand the reasons behind them.

- Give feedback about what happened after the child shared their views,
- Show the link between what the child said and the decisions that followed,
- Revisit decisions with the child if circumstances change.

Be clear when their view cannot determine the outcome:

Children can accept decisions they disagree with more easily when they understand the reasons behind them.

- Distinguish between hearing a child's views and agreeing with them,
- Explain any legal, safeguarding or procedural limits on what can happen,
- Ensure the child understands why a different decision has been made.



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Welfare-first

“If someone is cooperating, avoid unnecessary escalation”.

Young person

Police encounters with children often involve distress, confusion or vulnerability. Children respond best when officers begin with concern for their well-being and safety, rather than moving immediately to enforcement.

Check and prioritise the child’s wellbeing:

Children may be experiencing fear, stress or crisis.

- Check how the child is doing before focusing on the incident,
- Ask simple questions about what has happened and assess need,
- Show concern and understanding rather than judgment.

Slow the situation when possible:

Children’s behaviour can escalate when they feel rushed or threatened.

- Slow the interaction when tension or escalation is emerging,
- Allow the child time to settle before continuing,
- Avoid escalating the situation by making multiple demands or issuing instructions.

Use proportionate responses:

The level of police response should match the situation.

- Recognise when behaviour is linked to distress, vulnerability or unmet needs,
- Use the least intrusive response necessary; look for opportunities to de-escalate,
- Consider whether enforcement is necessary or whether support is more appropriate.

Avoid unnecessary physical contact:

Unexpected or unexplained touch can overwhelm children, especially those who are neurodivergent, causing distress and risking escalation.

- Avoid sudden or unexpected touch where possible,
- If unavoidable, explain and ask before touching,
- Reduce physical intensity where possible.

Avoid unnecessary criminalisation:

Early police contact can have long-lasting effects for children.

- Consider alternatives to formal action where appropriate,
- Work with safeguarding and support services to meet children’s needs,
- Focus on prevention and support, where appropriate, rather than punishment.



Appropriate environments

“Design custody environments for children...more comfortable than adult cells.”

Young person

Children are more likely to feel safe and able to engage when interactions take place in calm, manageable and discreet settings. Particular care is needed in custody, transport and interview environments, where children may feel especially vulnerable and out of control.

Reduce environmental pressure:

Children can feel overwhelmed when there is too much noise, too many people speaking, or too much happening around them.

- Move to a quieter space where possible,
- Reduce the number of people speaking at once (nominate a lead officer).

Avoid unnecessary public exposure:

Children often feel exposed or embarrassed when interactions happen in public or draw attention to them (this can also potentially increase their risk).

- Handle sensitive conversations discreetly,
- Avoid drawing unnecessary attention to the child,
- Recognise the impact of public authority on children.

Avoid overwhelming or intrusive physical presence:

Children can feel threatened or unsafe when officers crowd them, move suddenly, or stand too close.

- Avoid crowding or surrounding the child where possible,
- Approach and reposition slowly and clearly,
- Maintain a non-threatening distance and stance.

Create calm and manageable conditions:

Children find it harder to cope when situations feel chaotic, fast-moving or unpredictable.

- Keep the environment as calm and predictable as possible.
- Reduce unnecessary noise, movement, people and other demands on the child.

Adjust environments for individual needs:

Children may have needs that are not immediately visible (e.g., neurodivergence). Calmer environments will help more children feel able to cope.

- Create sensory-aware environments that are calm, accessible and supportive by default,
- Make reasonable adjustments, including allowing extra time where needed.



Reliability and follow-through

If you say you will do something...do it."

Young person

Children build trust when officers are honest, consistent and follow through on what they say. Keeping children informed and doing what has been promised helps them feel safe, respected and more confident in the process.

Explain and manage expectations:

Children need to know what is happening and what to expect. Clear explanations reduce anxiety and build trust.

- Explain what will happen next, including any uncertainty, delays or possible outcomes,
- Be honest about what you can and cannot do, and help children understand where they are in the process.

Your next steps:

Trust depends on whether you do what you said you would. Broken promises quickly undermine safety and confidence.

- Agree how and when updates will happen,
- Do what you said you would do, or explain clearly if plans change,
- Track commitments and ensure they are followed through.

Keep children informed:

Children feel safer when they are kept up to date. Even small updates show they have not been forgotten.

- Keep children informed through regular updates and clear communication, even when nothing has changed,
- Explain delays, next steps, and points of contact so that they do not feel forgotten or uncertain.

Accountability:

When actions are clear, recorded and explainable, children are more likely to see policing as fair and trustworthy.

- Provide records (e.g. stop-and-search),
- Be transparent about decisions,
- Show how to raise concerns.

Repair when things go wrong:

Acknowledging mistakes and putting things right helps rebuild trust.

- Acknowledge what went wrong, apologise and explain what should have happened,
- Explain what will happen next, including how concerns or complaints can be raised.





YEF's newly published practice guidance for senior police leaders sets out six evidence-based recommendations for policing across England and Wales to help prevent 10-17-year-olds from becoming involved in violence.

Further guidance on keeping children informed, updated, and supported is available in the Code of Practice for Victims of Crime in England and Wales and in the College of Policing guidance on victim and witness engagement.

Parallel guidance for children who harm is less codified in a single statutory code but is articulated through the Youth Justice Board's Child First framework, which emphasises that children in conflict with the law should be treated as children first, supported to participate in processes, and enabled to develop positive, pro-social identities.

Guidance on keeping children informed and able to participate is also reflected in the Youth Justice Charter, which sets out children's rights to understand processes, decisions and outcomes across the youth justice system and is designed as an accessible resource that can be shared directly with children to support their understanding and engagement.