

# Organisational, Professional, and Interprofessional Communication in the Protection and Promotion of Children's Rights

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## ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the critical role of communication in advancing the rights and well-being of children, particularly within legal, organisational, and interdisciplinary contexts. Clear and purposeful communication provides a basis for effective cooperation among professionals such as social workers, psychologists, educators, medical practitioners, and legal experts, so that their decisions are informed by and responsive to the child's overall needs. The chapter examines the key aspects of communication, including organisational communication within legal institutions, interprofessional collaboration, and child-sensitive practices, while addressing common challenges such as power dynamics, differing terminologies, and lack of standardised protocols. The study also identifies key tools and techniques based on best practices and case studies, such as digital platforms, trauma-informed training, plain language initiatives, and multidisciplinary teams, that enhance the efficiency and responsiveness of child-centred systems.

## KEYWORDS

children's rights, communication in law, interdisciplinary collaboration, child-friendly justice, organisational communication, legal professionals, trauma-informed practices, plain language initiatives, multidisciplinary teams, child-sensitive practices, best interests of the child

## 1. Introduction

Protecting and promoting children's rights is simply not possible without clear communication. In cases involving children, professionals from the fields of law, psychology, social work, education, and healthcare domains need to work together. Despite their different backgrounds, they share a common goal: to protect the best interest of the child. However, bringing their perspectives together is not easy because different

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professions have their own ways of thinking, language, and ethical standards, which can make true collaboration challenging.

Legal professionals play an important role in upholding children's rights – as advocates, decision-makers, and mediators. However, their work is closely related to the inputs of others. A child's well-being often depends on psychological insights, social assessments, and medical information, all of which need to be woven into legal decisions. Therefore, this is not just about understanding what each expert brings – it is about having open, respectful conversations that help everyone work together. When communication breaks down, there can be delays, confusion, and, worst of all, real harm to the children involved.

At an organisational level, the way people communicate sets the tone for policies and routines that shape how professionals work together. In a legal setting, communication determines how cases move forward, how information gets shared, and how decisions come about. When lawyers, judges, and others in the legal field talk openly and clearly, it helps maintain fairness and consistency. Working with professionals from other backgrounds is also crucial for tackling complicated problems as a team. However, if all those involved fail to make a real effort to understand each other and aim for common goals, communication can break down, making it more difficult to achieve what is best for everyone involved.

This chapter explores the critical role of communication in coordinating the efforts between legal professionals and other disciplines to uphold children's rights. To this end, it examines the challenges inherent in organisational, professional, and interprofessional communication; highlights best practices; and offers recommendations. This chapter therefore contributes to the growing body of research on child-friendly justice by offering a comparative, practice-oriented analysis that bridges legal theory, communication studies, and children's rights advocacy. The guiding question of this study is how communication can be structured across professional and institutional boundaries to ensure that the child's best interests are consistently respected and effectively implemented in practice. Methodologically, the chapter combines comparative and analytical approaches, drawing on purposive sampling of jurisdictions that are either norm-setting in child-friendly justice or exemplify distinctive institutional pathways.

While there has been increasing international attention has been paid to child-friendly justice,<sup>1</sup> research and practical solutions in this field are still developing.<sup>2</sup> Effective communication plays a vital role in addressing this gap by helping the collaboration between professionals across disciplines and ensuring children's meaningful participation in legal processes.

The participation of children in legal proceedings (e.g. family law, criminal justice, or child protection) is fundamental for access to justice. For children's participation in legal proceedings to have genuine meaning, it needs to rest on

1 Liefwaard, 2016, pp. 905–927.

2 Parkes, 2013.

communication that is clear, respectful, and inclusive. Judges, lawyers, and child commissioners must therefore cooperate closely with psychologists, social workers, teachers, and other experts to build settings in which children can express themselves freely and feel that their views are genuinely valued. Achieving this kind of cooperation goes beyond having shared objectives; it depends on communication methods that can bridge the different languages, priorities, and working cultures of each profession. When this communication falters or coordination is lacking, the result is often delay, confusion, and decisions that fall short of the child's best interests. As legal processes increasingly intersect with other fields (e.g. as psychology, social work, and education), ensuring clear and consistent communication becomes key for achieving the best outcomes for children.

This chapter employs the purposive sampling of jurisdictions that are either norm-setting in child-friendly justice or illustrate distinct institutional pathways. Their selection was based on four criteria: existence of codified child participation guarantees, specialised procedures or forums, demonstrated practice on trauma-informed interviewing, and accessible regulatory materials in English or official translations. Sweden, Norway, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Canada, Germany, and Florida in the United States were used for analysis because together they reflect both civil- and common-law traditions, administrative and judicial modalities, and national and subnational innovations. The aim of the analysis is analytical illustration rather than exhaustiveness.

## **2. Theoretical Foundations of Communication in Law**

Good communication is not just another tool in a lawyer's toolbox, but something that the ideas of justice and protecting rights are built on. It is also how legal professionals make sense of the law, stand up for their clients, solve disagreements, and make sure things are fair and open to everyone. Regarding children's rights, good communication is even more important. Communication is what lets children be heard, take part in the process, and have their best interests considered when big decisions are made about their lives. Understanding communication in this way also helps build an interdisciplinary methodological framework that can inform both academic inquiry and practical reform of child-focused justice systems.

In law, communication goes way beyond passing information back and forth. Specifically, it is an ongoing process that involves speaking, writing, body language, and even visuals. This is especially true for children, who might find the legal world confusing, intimidating, or even scary because of what they have been through. For them, clear and thoughtful communication is key to making sure their stories are heard and their needs do not get overlooked.<sup>3</sup>

3 Lundy, 2007, pp. 927–942.

The protection of children's rights requires teamwork from a variety of experts – lawyers, psychologists, social workers, teachers, and healthcare providers. Each has their own perspective and skills, and it is communication that brings them all together. Without good communication, there is a risk of things slipping through the cracks: misunderstandings, mixed messages, or scattered efforts that do not truly help the child. In this section, we identify the ideas behind communication in the legal world, especially their importance when it comes to children's rights.

### ***2.1. Characteristics of Communication within Legal Settings***

Communication in legal settings is inherently different from that in most other professional or interpersonal contexts. It is characterised by a unique combination of formality, precision, and confidentiality, which reflects the high stakes, ethical considerations, and societal expectations related to the legal system.<sup>4</sup> These characteristics ensure that legal communication remains professional, credible, and reliable, but also introduce the complexities that legal professionals must navigate, especially in cases involving children. Understanding these traits is essential to appreciating how communication supports the administration of justice and the protection of vulnerable individuals.

*Formality* is an attribute of communication in legal settings that reflects the gravity and authority of the legal system. It functions as a means of preserving professionalism, showing respect for legal institutions, and affirming the legitimacy of judicial processes. In practice, legal communication follows established conventions and long-standing traditions, evident in courtroom exchanges, written submissions, and professional correspondence alike. These formalities (e.g. addressing judges as “Your Honor”, adhering to prescribed formats in legal filings, or observing courtroom decorum) create an environment that reinforces the seriousness of legal proceedings.<sup>5</sup> Formality in law is not limited to outward appearance; it provides a stable structure that allows all participants to operate within a shared and predictable framework.

Yet this same rigidity can create difficulties, particularly when children are involved. The atmosphere of legal proceedings may feel intimidating or distant to a child, making genuine participation harder to achieve. A child asked to testify, for instance, might feel unsettled by the courtroom's tone and setting, which can restrict open communication. While the preservation of formality remains essential to uphold the dignity of the process, legal professionals must also adapt it sensitively to meet the specific needs of children. Strategies such as child-friendly courtrooms, simplified language, and supportive environments can help mitigate the intimidating effects of formality, while preserving the integrity of the legal process.<sup>6</sup>

*Precision* in communication is indispensable in legal contexts, where determining rights, liabilities, and justice is required. Legal language is crafted with attention

4 Glogar, 2023, pp. 45–67.

5 Romig and Burge, 2025.

6 Saywitz, Goodman and Lyon, 2002, pp. 349–377.

to detail, as even minor ambiguities can lead to misinterpretation or unintended consequences.

The importance of precision is most evident in written legal documents, such as contracts, court orders, and statutes.<sup>7</sup> Every word in legal communication is selected with care to guarantee accuracy, internal consistency, and conformity with the law. In a child custody agreement, for example, vague or loosely phrased terms may invite conflicting interpretations and, in turn, jeopardise the child's best interests. Precision in language therefore not only prevents misunderstanding but also protects the integrity of the legal process against manipulation or misuse.

However, the demand for precision can make legal language inaccessible to non-experts, including children and their families. Legal jargon, complex sentence structures, and abstract concepts can alienate those who lack familiarity with the legal system by creating a barrier to understanding and participation. For children, this inaccessibility is particularly concerning, as it directly conflicts with the right to be heard in matters affecting them, as articulated in Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).<sup>8</sup>

To address this challenge, legal professionals have to strike a balance between precision and comprehensibility. Promoting the use of plain language in legal documents and proceedings is essential to ensuring that all parties, especially children, can understand and engage with the legal process without compromising the accuracy of legal communication.

*Confidentiality* is another defining characteristic of legal communication, rooted in the ethical obligations and legal standards that prioritise the protection of sensitive information. The concept of confidentiality is deeply rooted in the idea expressed by Publilius Syrus: '*Fidem qui perdit, nil potest ultra perdere*' (He who has forfeited his good faith has nothing else to lose.)<sup>9</sup> The origins of this tradition can also be linked to biblical texts, particularly the Proverbs attributed to Solomon. Proverb 25:9-10 advises, '*If you take your neighbour to court, do not betray another's confidence, or the one who hears it may shame you, and the charge against you will stand.*'<sup>10</sup> This ancient guidance highlights the moral imperative to maintain trust and confidentiality. The principle of professional privilege predates the legal profession and can be traced to other fields. For instance, in the medical field, the Hippocratic Oath from the 5th century BCE explicitly requires confidentiality. It states,

'and whatsoever I shall see or hear in the course of my profession, as well as outside my profession in my intercourse with men, if it be what should not be published abroad, I will never divulge, holding such things to be holy secrets.'<sup>11</sup>

7 Tuten, 2019.

8 United Nations, 1989.

9 Publilius Syrus (c. 1st century BCE) *Sententiae*: '*Fidem qui perdit, nil potest ultra perdere.*'

10 The Holy Bible, Proverbs 25:9-10 (NIV).

11 Britannica, 2025.

Similarly, the ecclesiastical tradition established the inviolability of confessional privilege as early as the 4th century CE at the Council of Carthage. Moreover, by the 12th century, the Fourth Lateran Council (1215 CE) codified this principle and imposed severe penalties for violating it.<sup>12</sup> The Council of Trent in the 15th century reinforced confessional privilege as an absolute rule, even superseding the authority of the Inquisition. Confidentiality has been deeply rooted in the history of the legal professions since antiquity.<sup>13</sup> In ancient Roman law, legal representatives were bound by maintaining secrecy regarding the information entrusted to them by their clients. During the medieval period, the confidentiality of legal communication was reinforced by the influence of canon law, which emphasised the sanctity of confession and the moral obligation of secrecy. The legal advocates were often clergy, and the duty of confidentiality paralleled the priest-penitent privilege. In English common law, the attorney-client privilege emerged as a formal doctrine during the 16th century, being rooted in the principle that clients should feel free to speak openly and honestly with their legal representatives without fear of disclosure. *Berd v. Lovelace* (1577) is one of the earliest cases establishing attorney-client privilege.<sup>14</sup> The court held that legal counsel should not be compelled to testify about matters disclosed by their clients. In modern times, many jurisdictions have codified the principle of confidentiality in their legal systems and have statutory provisions protecting lawyer-client confidentiality.

Confidentiality becomes especially important in cases involving children, since a single breach can seriously affect their privacy, safety, or well-being. Lawyers and other legal professionals are therefore required to protect client information carefully, whether it concerns personal details, legal strategies, or private conversations. This duty also helps build trust, allowing clients to speak openly about sensitive matters without fear. In the context of children's rights, that trust is essential. Children and their families need to know that what they share will be treated with care, understanding, and respect.

The duty of confidentiality goes beyond the lawyer-client relationship and extends to the entire legal system. When legal professionals communicate with other experts such as psychologists, social workers, or educators, they must respect privacy rules while still sharing the information needed to safeguard the child's best interests. Finding the right balance is often difficult. Too much emphasis on confidentiality can obstruct cooperation between professionals, whereas too little protection may place children at risk.

New technologies have made confidentiality in legal communication more complex. The growing use of digital platforms, cloud storage, and electronic communication brings clear benefits, but it also creates risks that require strong security

12 'A priest who reveals a sin confided to him in confession is to be deposed and relegated to a monastery for the remainder of his life.' (Council of Lateran IV, Canon 21).

13 Hodos, 2018, pp. 34–60.

14 Bondi, 2010, pp. 145–190.

measures to prevent data breaches. Lawyers and other legal professionals must therefore not only follow existing confidentiality rules but also stay alert to new challenges that come with an increasingly digital world.

Formality, precision, and confidentiality shape how communication works in the legal world. They help keep the system professional, accurate, and respectful of privacy. At the same time, these qualities can create real challenges when cases involve children. Legal professionals often have to find a balance - keeping the formality that gives the process its dignity, using clear but simple language, and protecting confidentiality while still working closely with others. Doing this well takes not only legal skill but also empathy and sensitivity.

## **2.2. Key Communication Theories Relevant to Interdisciplinary Collaboration**

Effective interdisciplinary collaboration relies on communication theories that help bridge the gaps between fields, terminologies, and professional priorities. Theoretical frameworks such as systems theory and the transactional model of communication provide insights into how individuals and groups interact, share information, and resolve conflicts in collaborative environments. Applying these theories in practice enhances the effectiveness of interdisciplinary teams, particularly in complex fields such as children's rights, where legal professionals must work closely with psychologists, social workers, and educators.

*Systems theory*, originally developed in biology and subsequently applied to social sciences, views organisations, teams, or groups as interconnected systems.<sup>15</sup> Each part of the system contributes to and is affected by the others, emphasising the importance of collaboration and mutual understanding. In a collaborative setting such as a legal team working with social workers and educators, systems theory highlights the importance of interdependence. The failure or inefficiency of one component (e.g. miscommunication between a lawyer and a psychologist) can negatively affect the entire system. Systems theory thus encourages professionals to recognise their role within the larger context and adapt their communication to support the overall goals, such as safeguarding children's rights. In interdisciplinary meetings, systems theory suggests that effective communication requires clear role definitions, shared objectives, and feedback mechanisms to ensure all parts of the system are aligned. For example, in a case involving child protection, regular check-ins among legal, medical, and educational professionals ensure that decisions are informed by a holistic view of the child's needs.

The *transactional model of communication* emphasises the dynamic and reciprocal nature of communication.<sup>16</sup> Unlike linear models, which view communication as a one-way process, the transactional model considers communication as continuous and interactive, with both parties simultaneously sending and receiving messages. This model recognises that communication is influenced by

<sup>15</sup> Laszlo and Krippner, 1998.

<sup>16</sup> Sameroff, 2009.

context, relationships, and feedback. In interdisciplinary teams, understanding the background, expertise, and expectations of colleagues is essential for effective communication. The model also highlights the importance of active listening, mutual respect, and adaptability when navigating the diverse perspectives of team members from different disciplines. In legal proceedings involving children, the transactional model underlines the importance of dialogue. For instance, during case review, a lawyer might seek clarification from a social worker about the child's home environment when providing legal updates to the team. This two-way exchange ensures that all professionals are aligned and responsive to evolving information.

The applications of systems theory and the transactional model of communication are a practical necessity for effective interdisciplinary collaboration. Viewing teams as interconnected systems reminds us that no single discipline holds all answers; instead, success depends on the seamless integration of each team member's unique perspective and skills. When communication is approached as a dynamic, two-way process, it encourages active listening, mutual respect, and adaptability.

In the context of children's rights, the stakes are high. The lives, safety, and well-being of children depend on the ability of legal professionals, social workers, educators, psychologists, and others to work together with a shared purpose. Systems theory helps these teams see the bigger picture – how each action, decision, or misstep can ripple through the system, affecting the outcomes for the child. Meanwhile, the transactional model ensures that these interactions are not one-sided but collaborative, allowing professionals to respond in real-time to new insights, challenges, and needs.

### **3. Organisational Communication**

Within legal institutions, organisational communication refers to the internal processes through which information is shared, decisions are made, and tasks are coordinated. These processes are critical for ensuring the smooth operation of the courts, law firms, child protection agencies, and other entities involved in legal matters. Regarding children's rights, effective organisational communication is even more vital, as it directly affects the abilities of these institutions to deliver justice and protect children's rights.

In court, organisational communication is necessary to ensure that judicial processes run smoothly and fairly. Judges, clerks, administrative staff, and other personnel work together in a coordinated effort to manage caseloads, schedule hearings, issue rulings, and maintain court records.<sup>17</sup> For instance, clerks must communicate effectively with judges to ensure that the case files are complete and accessible during proceedings. Meanwhile, the administrative staff coordinate with legal

<sup>17</sup> Ng, 2007.



representatives to ensure that hearings are scheduled efficiently, minimising delays that could undermine the timely administration of justice. For children's rights, this communication has an added layer of complexity and importance. For example, courts handling child custody or welfare cases require seamless information flows between the various stakeholders, including social workers and legal guardians. Poor communication can lead to critical oversights, such as missing evidence or misunderstandings regarding the needs of the child, thus potentially jeopardising the case's outcome.

Communication within child protection agencies involves a diverse range of professionals, including social workers, legal representatives, and administrative personnel. These organisations often face high-stakes situations, where effective communication is critical to safeguarding the welfare of vulnerable children. For instance, social workers must share detailed reports about a child's living conditions, psychological state, or educational needs with the legal representatives who rely on this information to advocate for the child's best interests in court.

Breakdowns in communication can have devastating consequences in these cases. Misunderstandings or delays in information sharing might lead to inappropriate placements or insufficient interventions, further endangering the child. Therefore, establishing communication protocols such as standardised reporting templates and regular interdisciplinary meetings is essential to ensure that all professionals involved are working collaboratively toward the same goal.

Effective organisational communication within legal institutions is crucial for upholding children's rights. Several global cases and policies highlight the importance of internal communication systems in protecting children. A study conducted by the Child and Woman Abuse Studies Unit (CWASU) examined how professionals from diverse agencies (e.g. social services, law enforcement, healthcare providers, and educational institutions) communicate in the sensitive context of child protection cases.<sup>18</sup> The results of the study revealed that effective collaboration and clear communication are indispensable for creating and implementing Child Protection Plans. These plans are critical tools used to ensure the safety and well-being of children at risk of harm. The study also highlighted that communication breakdowns between agencies often lead to significant delays in intervention, the mismanagement of critical information, and, in some cases, have dire consequences for the child's welfare. For example, when social workers fail to relay timely updates to law enforcement or when schools are not informed about a child's situation, opportunities for early intervention can be missed. The findings also emphasised that child protection cases are inherently multidisciplinary, requiring seamless information sharing and communication between professionals who may have vastly different areas of expertise and operational protocols. They also pointed to the need for ongoing training in child-sensitive communication practices. Across agencies, professionals must understand how to effectively communicate with children, who may be experiencing trauma or

18 Child and Woman Abuse Studies Unit, 2025.

fear, as well as with each other. Building trust and ensuring clarity in interactions can significantly improve the outcomes for children.

UNICEF and Save the Children collaborated to develop a comprehensive tool for guiding businesses in integrating children's rights into their policies and codes of conduct.<sup>19</sup> Recognising the significant influence that businesses exert on children's lives through their operations, supply chains, and products, this tool offers a framework to help organisations align their practices with international standards on the protection and promotion of children's rights. Specifically, the tool emphasises the role of clear and effective internal communication in creating a culture of accountability and responsibility within businesses. By embedding children's rights into their policies, businesses can ensure that the employees at all levels are aware of their responsibilities toward children and understand how their actions and decisions may affect young lives. For example, clear internal communication protocols can help ensure that policies regarding child labour, ethical advertising, and community engagement are consistently applied across all departments and regions. The guidance also highlights practical steps for businesses, including the creation of dedicated training programs and awareness campaigns. These initiatives are designed to educate employees about the importance of children's rights and to provide them with the knowledge and tools to identify and address potential risks to children. Regular workshops, internal memos, and updates from leadership can reinforce these principles and demonstrate a company's commitment to ethical practices.

Furthermore, the tool advocates for transparent communication within organisations, ensuring that employees feel empowered to raise concerns or report violations of children's rights without fear of retaliation. This open dialogue is essential for fostering a culture of trust and integrity, where employees at all levels can contribute to their organisation's efforts to protect children. In addition to internal communication, the tool also stresses the importance of external reporting and engagement. Businesses are encouraged to communicate their commitments towards children's rights through public policies, sustainability reports, and stakeholder consultations. By doing so, they not only enhance their reputation but also contribute to broader global efforts to safeguard children's well-being. The tool developed by UNICEF and Save the Children thus provides businesses with actionable strategies to embed children's rights into their operations.

#### **4. Professional Communication**

Effective professional communication lies at the heart of legal practice, as it aids collaboration, mutual understanding, and ethical decision-making among legal professionals. It encompasses both intra-professional communication – interactions

19 UNICEF, 2013.

within the legal profession – and specialised approaches required for cases involving children.

*Intra-professional communication* refers to the interactions between judges, lawyers, legal aides, and other legal practitioners. This form of communication is essential for coordinating efforts, maintaining procedural consistency, and delivering coherent legal outcomes. Judges, lawyers, and legal aides must work collaboratively to ensure that cases are managed efficiently and fairly.<sup>20</sup> For example, lawyers need to present their arguments in a clear and logical way so that judges can make well-informed decisions. Legal aides support this process by organising documents, highlighting key points, and helping the proceedings run smoothly. Collaboration becomes even more important in complex cases that involve several legal professionals. In matters that cross jurisdictions, for instance, good communication between legal teams helps ensure that all procedures are followed correctly and that justice is delivered without unnecessary delay.

Cases involving children require a tailored approach to communication, as they often involve unique ethical, developmental, and emotional considerations. Legal professionals must adapt their communication strategies to ensure that the child's voice is heard and their rights are protected. In juvenile justice cases, communication must be child-friendly, considering the cognitive and emotional development of the child. This may involve simplifying legal language, using visual aids, or employing child psychologists to facilitate understanding.

In child welfare cases, professionals have to balance clarity with compassion. Communication needs to be straightforward, yet gentle enough to take into account a child's fears or past trauma. When speaking with a child about their living situation, for instance, social workers and lawyers should ask open-ended questions that invite honest answers rather than leading ones. This approach helps the child feel safe to share their experiences in their own words.

Legal professionals have a duty to stay impartial and to communicate in ways that do not shape or influence a child's words or views. Judges and lawyers should approach every case with an open mind, setting aside assumptions or personal opinions. Ethical communication also means giving children a real voice in the proceedings that affect them. According to Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child,<sup>21</sup> children have the right to express their views in matters that concern them. Legal professionals must create environments where children feel safe and empowered to share their perspectives.

UNICEF has developed comprehensive guidelines that emphasise the critical importance of *child-sensitive communication in legal aid services*.<sup>22</sup> Recognising that children are often among the most vulnerable participants in legal processes, these guidelines ensure that young clients are not only protected but also empowered to

20 Ng, 2007.

21 United Nations, 1989.

22 UNICEF, 2018.

participate meaningfully in decisions affecting their lives. One of the core tenets of these guidelines is the emphasis on building trustful relationships with child clients. Establishing trust is essential, as children may be reluctant to share their experiences due to fear, trauma, or lack of familiarity with the legal system. Legal professionals are encouraged to approach interactions with patience, empathy, and a genuine willingness to listen. By doing so, they can create a foundation of trust that allows the children to open up and express their concerns more freely.

Another key aspect of the guidelines is ensuring that children understand the legal proceedings. Legal jargon and complex procedures can be intimidating and confusing for adults, let alone children. To address this issue, UNICEF advocates for the use of age-appropriate language that simplifies legal concepts without undermining their importance. Legal professionals are also encouraged to explain each step of the process in a way that is relatable and comprehensible, thus enabling children to make informed decisions about their participation.

The guidelines further emphasise the importance of being attentive to non-verbal cues. Children may communicate their feelings, fears, or needs through body language, facial expressions, or tone of voice rather than words. As such, legal professionals must develop the skills to recognise and interpret these subtle cues, as they often provide valuable insights into the child's emotional state and unspoken concerns. Active listening and a keen awareness of non-verbal communication can help professionals address underlying issues that may not be immediately apparent.

Creating a supportive environment during legal consultations is another cornerstone of UNICEF's guidelines. This requires practical measures such as arranging seating to reduce formality, allowing the presence of a trusted adult, and ensuring that the physical space is welcoming and non-intimidating. A supportive environment also includes the professional's demeanour, such as approaching the child with kindness, understanding, and reassurance to alleviate anxiety and build confidence.

Additionally, the guidelines stress the importance of actively involving children in decisions that affect them. This aligns with the principle of child participation outlined in Article 12 of the CRC, which states that children have the right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them. By involving children in discussions and considering their opinions, legal professionals not only uphold this right but also ensure that the developed solutions are tailored to the child's needs and circumstances.

UNICEF has extensively documented examples of *child-friendly complaint mechanisms* designed to empower children by providing them with safe, confidential, and accessible ways to report the violations of their rights.<sup>23</sup> These mechanisms acknowledge the importance of children's agency in matters that directly affect them and aim to uphold their rights as outlined in the CRC, particularly Article 12, which emphasises a child's right to be heard.

23 UNICEF, 2019.

A defining feature of these mechanisms is their accessibility. Acknowledging that children come from very different circumstances and abilities, UNICEF promotes complaint systems that are simple to understand and easy to use, no matter the child's age, literacy level, or background. This includes offering multiple channels for lodging complaints, such as in-person reporting, hotlines, online platforms, or designated complaint boxes in schools or community centres. The materials that explain these options, such as brochures, videos, or posters, are created with child-friendly visuals and plain language so that every child can follow the process with confidence.

Another key element of these mechanisms is confidentiality. Many children hesitate to report violations of their rights because they fear being punished, judged, or not believed. Ensuring confidentiality helps create a safe space where they can speak about their experiences without fear of consequences. This protection is especially important in cases of abuse, neglect, or exploitation, where a child's safety and emotional well-being may already be fragile.

Just as important is the supportive role these mechanisms play. They do more than simply receive complaints, they are designed to guide children through the process and offer assistance at every step. Trained personnel skilled in child-sensitive communication play a crucial role in creating an environment where children feel respected and valued. These professionals help explain the potential outcomes of their complaints, provide emotional support, and ensure that children are not retraumatised during the reporting process.

The *Council of Europe* has developed comprehensive *guidelines* aimed at making justice systems more accessible, inclusive, and responsive to children's unique needs.<sup>24</sup> These guidelines, grounded in the principles of child-friendly justice, recognise that children are not merely passive recipients of protection but active rights-holders who deserve meaningful participation in legal processes.

One important recommendation is to provide specialised training for legal professionals for effective communication with children. Such training focuses on understanding the cognitive, emotional, and developmental stages of childhood and on giving professionals the skills to engage with children in ways that are age-appropriate and non-intimidating. For example, judges and lawyers are encouraged to use a more relaxed tone, avoid complex legal language, and listen actively to what children have to say. Approaches like these help children feel genuinely heard, respected, and valued in proceedings that have a direct impact on their lives.

The guidelines also emphasise the importance of adapting legal proceedings to be more child-friendly. This includes simplifying legal language and procedures so that they are understandable to children of various ages and developmental levels. For instance, instead of complex legal terminology, professionals are advised to use plain, everyday language when explaining legal processes, rights, and obligations. Visual aids, diagrams, and storytelling can also be employed to help children grasp complex concepts and navigate legal proceedings with greater confidence.

24 Council of Europe, 2010.

Additionally, the Council's guidelines advocate for procedural modifications that reduce the intimidating nature of traditional court settings. Examples include creating specialised child-friendly courtrooms with relaxed seating arrangements, allowing children to provide testimony via video to avoid direct confrontation with alleged perpetrators, and ensuring the presence of a trusted adult or support person during proceedings. These measures help minimise the stress and trauma children may experience while participating in the justice system.

Another vital aspect of the Council's guidelines is the focus on providing children with accessible information about their rights and the justice system. The guidelines recommend developing child-friendly materials such as booklets, videos, and online resources that explain legal concepts and procedures in a straightforward and engaging manner. These resources empower children to understand their roles, rights, and options within the justice system, fostering a sense of agency and confidence. The ultimate goal is to transform the justice system into a space where children's voices are not only heard but also acted upon, ensuring outcomes that reflect their best interests and support their development.

The *Child Rights International Network* (CRIN) has highlighted numerous examples from various jurisdictions of how legal processes can be adapted to better meet the needs of children.<sup>25</sup> These practices emphasise the importance of creating environments where children feel safe, respected, and empowered to participate in legal proceedings.

In many jurisdictions, judges who handle cases involving children receive *specialised training* to ensure they understand the unique developmental, psychological, and emotional needs of such young participants. For example, juvenile judges in France are specifically trained to handle cases involving minors. These judges not only focus on adjudication but also try to understand the social and familial context of the child, often by collaborating with social workers and psychologists to make decisions that prioritise the child's welfare.<sup>26</sup> Judges in child protection cases in Norway undergo extensive training in child psychology and trauma-informed practices. This training enables them to ask questions and interact with children in a way that minimises intimidation and builds trust. These efforts ensure that judicial decisions are informed by a comprehensive understanding of a child's circumstances and needs.<sup>27</sup>

In many countries the use of *video testimonies* is a widely adopted practice aimed at reducing the stress children experience when appearing in court, particularly in cases of abuse or violence. In the United Kingdom courts allow children to provide testimony via pre-recorded video or live video links.<sup>28</sup> This practice not only spares children from the potentially traumatic experience of facing perpetrators in court, but also enables them to speak more freely in a less intimidating environment.<sup>29</sup>

25 Child Rights International Network, 2011.

26 Liefgaard, 2016, pp. 905–927.

27 Skivenes and Søvig, 2016.

28 Youth Justice and Criminal Evidence Act 1999 (YJCEA), Arts. 27–28.

29 Plotnikoff and Woolfson, 2009.

The Family Court of Australia uses video technology to take testimonies from children in a separate, child-friendly room.<sup>30</sup> This method has proven effective in gathering accurate accounts while safeguarding the child's emotional well-being.<sup>31</sup> These adaptations demonstrate how technology can be leveraged to protect children from the formal and often intimidating traditional courtroom settings.

Ensuring that children can understand legal processes is another critical component of child-friendly justice. Various legal systems have developed *materials tailored to the needs of children*, including those with disabilities. For instance, the Swedish Ombudsman for Children has produced simple, illustrated guides to legal rights and court procedures for children.<sup>32</sup> These materials explain complex legal concepts in plain language, making them accessible even to younger children. In South Africa, legal aid organisations provide audio recordings and Braille versions of legal documents for children with visual impairments.<sup>33</sup> This inclusivity ensures that children with disabilities can actively participate in legal proceedings and understand their rights. Such measures demonstrate a commitment to making justice systems truly accessible to all children, regardless of their abilities or circumstances.

In addition to implementing specific communication strategies, some jurisdictions have taken significant steps for redesigning *child-friendly courtrooms*, ensuring that the physical environment aligns with the principles of child-friendly justice. Recognising that traditional courtrooms can be intimidating and formal, these adaptations aim to reduce anxiety and create a sense of safety. In Canada, several courts have introduced child-friendly spaces that prioritise the emotional well-being of young participants. These areas are equipped with toys, books, and comfortable seating, providing a relaxed environment for children who may be required to wait before giving testimony or attending hearings.<sup>34</sup> New Zealand has taken on a progressive approach with its specialised youth courts, creating informal layouts that prioritise collaboration and inclusivity. These courts aim to minimise the adversarial nature of traditional proceedings. Children are seated closer to judges and legal professionals, thus breaking down hierarchical barriers and encouraging open dialogue. This arrangement reduces the sense of intimidation that children might feel in a conventional courtroom. The youth courts in New Zealand often feature round tables instead of traditional courtroom layouts, enabling all participants to engage in discussions on equal footing. This setup encourages children to express themselves more freely.<sup>35</sup> Family courts in the UK have introduced similar initiatives, such as allowing children to meet judges in informal settings before proceedings; this is not

30 Family Law Act 1975 (Cth), Arts. 102C -102F.

31 Cashmore and Parkinson, 2007, pp. 43–60.

32 Barnombudsmannen, 2018.

33 'Any relevant court documents must be made available in Braille, large print, electronic and/or in audio format.' Child Witness Institute, 2022.

34 Proactive Information Services, 2015.

35 Lynch, 2008, pp. 215–228.

a systematic practice yet, but there are documented initiatives.<sup>36</sup> This personal connection helps children feel more comfortable and reduces the stress of appearing in court. In some courts, murals and artwork featuring nature or child-friendly themes are used to create a calming atmosphere.<sup>37,38</sup> Additionally, courthouses have incorporated separate entrances and exits for children to avoid confrontations with other parties involved in the case.

These child-friendly initiatives have had measurable positive impacts. Studies from jurisdictions such as the UK and Norway report that children who experience such adapted legal processes feel more empowered and less traumatised by their involvement in the justice system. Feedback from legal professionals indicates that these practices improve the accuracy and reliability of children's testimonies, as children feel more comfortable and confident when sharing their experiences. By appointing specially trained judges, using video testimonies, providing accessible materials, and creating child-friendly environments, these jurisdictions set a standard for how legal systems can better serve children. These examples underline the necessity of embedding child-friendly communication strategies into the very fabric of justice systems worldwide.

## 5. Interprofessional Communication

Interprofessional communication is the cornerstone of effective collaboration in cases involving children's rights. Ensuring the well-being of children often requires the coordinated efforts of professionals from diverse fields, including social workers, psychologists, educators, medical practitioners, and legal professionals. Each brings a unique perspective and expertise to the table, contributing to a holistic understanding of the child's needs. However, the differences in professional terminologies, priorities, and ethical frameworks can create significant communication barriers, making collaboration challenging. Addressing these barriers is thus essential for safeguarding children's rights and ensuring decisions are made in their best interests.

Social workers are often at the forefront of child protection cases, being tasked with assessing family dynamics, evaluating living conditions, and identifying risks to the child's safety. Their ability to navigate sensitive family environments and provide detailed assessments of the child's home life is critical to understanding the child's experiences. Social workers also act as the link between families and other professionals, ensuring that all parties are informed about the child's needs and progress.

Psychologists contribute valuable insights to the emotional and cognitive development of children. Their assessments can uncover underlying mental health

<sup>36</sup> Jones, 2023.

<sup>37</sup> Sheahan, 2021.

<sup>38</sup> North Carolina Judicial Branch, 2023.



needs, emotional distress, or trauma that may not be immediately visible to other professionals. For example, in cases of suspected neglect or abuse, a psychologist's evaluation can reveal the psychological impact on the child and guide interventions aimed at recovery.

Educators also play a crucial role in interprofessional communication, as they have direct, daily interactions with the children. Teachers and school staff often observe behavioural changes, academic challenges, or social difficulties that may indicate underlying issues at home or in the child's personal life. Their input provides a critical perspective on how external factors are affecting the child's development and performance in an educational setting.

Medical practitioners bring yet another essential dimension to the collaborative effort, focusing on the child's physical health and development. Paediatricians and other healthcare professionals can identify signs of neglect, abuse, or malnutrition, and their assessments often form the foundation for immediate protective actions. For example, in a case where a child presents with unexplained injuries or developmental delays, the medical practitioner's observations and recommendations can guide the direction of the broader investigation.

Collaboration among these professionals is critical to forming a comprehensive picture of the child's circumstances. However, the effectiveness of such collaboration depends on overcoming significant challenges. Differences in professional terminologies, priorities, and ethical frameworks can create barriers to effective communication and coordination. For example, while a social worker might prioritise immediate safety, a psychologist may focus on long-term emotional stability, while a medical practitioner may highlight urgent health interventions. Without clear communication and a shared understanding of goals, these different priorities can lead to fragmented efforts and delays in action. In some cases, certain professions may dominate the discussions or decision-making processes due to perceived authority or expertise. For instance, legal professionals might overshadow contributions from educators or social workers, despite the latter's critical insights into the child's day-to-day experiences. These imbalances can lead to the undervaluation of certain perspectives, reducing the quality of the decisions affecting the child.

Child custody disputes present some of the most emotionally charged and complex challenges within family law, often requiring input from multiple professionals to ensure that decisions are made in the best interests of the child. A cross-disciplinary approach leverages the expertise of various specialists such as legal counsel, psychologists, social workers, and educators to provide a comprehensive understanding of the child's circumstances. A concrete example of such collaboration can be seen in the Unified Family Court system in Florida, United States,<sup>39</sup> which integrates legal professionals, child advocates, social workers, and mental health specialists. In cases involving custody disputes, psychologists are often brought in to conduct

39 Florida Courts, n.d.

thorough evaluations of the child's preferences, emotional bonds with each parent, and any underlying psychological needs. These evaluations may include interviews with the child, observational sessions with parents, and standardised assessments to gauge the child's emotional and mental health. Social workers complement this by providing detailed assessments of the living conditions in each parent's home. They evaluate factors such as housing stability, the availability of resources to support the child's needs, and the quality of parenting practices observed during home visits. For example, in a case where one parent may lack sufficient means to provide a safe environment, the social worker's report becomes instrumental in shaping the court's decision. Educators also play a vital role by offering insights into the child's academic performance, social interactions, and behavioural patterns within the school environment. A report from a teacher or school counsellor can highlight how a child's living situation is affecting their education and social development. For instance, if a child shows significant behavioural changes or declining grades during the dispute, this information provides the court with a clear understanding of the impact of instability on the child's well-being.

In New Zealand, the Family Court uses a multidisciplinary approach to resolve custody disputes. Judges frequently engage psychologists, known as "Court-appointed Specialists", who assess children's needs and preferences. The Care of Children Act 2004 mandates children's voices to be heard during custody proceedings, with the psychologist acting as a neutral party to ensure that the child's perspective is fairly represented.<sup>40</sup> Social workers also collaborate with the court to provide reports on home conditions and parenting suitability. While specific case details are confidential, the Family Court's protocols emphasise the importance of such multidisciplinary collaborations. For instance, the *Guideline: Family Court Counsellors*<sup>41</sup> outlines the roles of various professionals, including psychologists and social workers, in providing comprehensive assessments to inform judicial decisions.

The success of these cross-disciplinary efforts hinges on effective communication among professionals. Sharing consistent, accurate, and timely information is essential for understanding the child's needs. For example, psychologists must communicate their findings in a way that is accessible to legal professionals who lack a background in mental health. Similarly, social workers and educators must translate their observations into actionable recommendations that align with the legal framework governing custody disputes. Cross-disciplinary approaches to child custody disputes demonstrate the value of interprofessional collaboration in law. By pooling the expertise of legal, psychological, social, and educational professionals, courts can make decisions that prioritise the child's best interests. Real-world examples, such as those from Florida and New Zealand, illustrate how these practices enhance the fairness and effectiveness of custody proceedings, ensuring that children's voices are heard and their well-being remains at the centre of every decision.

40 Ministry of Justice New Zealand, n.d.

41 New Zealand Disputes Tribunal, 2016.

## 6. Tools and Techniques for Effective Communication

The ability of professionals from different backgrounds to communicate clearly and empathically is at the heart of putting children's rights into practice. This requires using the right tools and techniques to ensure everyone understands each other, can work together smoothly, and, most importantly, children can take part in the process and have their voices heard.

Digital technology has completely changed how professionals handle the cases involving children. Tools such as online platforms for managing cases, shared databases, and secure messaging have become essential in information being shared quickly and accurately. Nowadays, social workers, psychologists, and legal experts can all access and update case details in real time, which helps prevent mistakes and saves time. Secure messaging lets teams discuss sensitive issues privately and make better, faster decisions.

Visual aids and simplified language are also critical tools for helping everyone involved, especially children or those new to legal terms, to really understand what is going on. Flowcharts can break down the steps of a legal process and infographics can turn complex information into something much easier to grasp. When we use such tools, we make sure all voices, especially children's, are included in decisions that matter to them.

Interdisciplinary collaboration is essential for addressing children's rights cases. Regular meetings and case reviews give everyone involved a chance to come together, share what they know, and figure out the best way forward. Picture a group made up of a psychologist, a social worker, a teacher, and a lawyer sitting down to talk about what's best for a child. The psychologist explains how the child is coping emotionally, the social worker brings updates about their home life, and the lawyer makes sure the legal steps are all in order. By pooling their insights, they can make sure nothing gets missed and that every decision puts the child's needs first.

Mediators or communication facilitators are especially helpful when the situation becomes tense, such as the case in tough custody battles. These neutral experts help keep conversations on track, making sure everyone gets to share their perspective and that proceedings remain respectful. Their involvement not only helps calm things down but also creates a space where everyone can work together and put the child's well-being first.

The legal field is also catching on to the power of plain language. Legal documents using complicated words and formal language can make it hard for parents, children, and even other professionals to understand what is really going on. Plain language initiatives are all about writing things simply and clearly so that everyone knows their rights and responsibilities. For example, court orders or custody agreements can be rewritten in everyday language, making sure everyone is in the loop and able to participate. In other words, this ensures that all parties fully understand their rights and obligations.

In cases involving children, it is especially important to create legal documents that the children themselves can actually understand. These documents translate legal concepts into age-appropriate language, often incorporating visuals and examples to help children grasp their meaning. Imagine a court giving a child a diagram that shows where they will live and when they will see each parent; this helps bring the legal process to life in a way that makes sense to them. Explaining things in this way helps children feel included and less anxious, because they know what is happening and what to expect.

To improve communication practices in legal and interdisciplinary contexts, it is important to look at what is working around the world and to involve trained professionals who know how to talk to children in ways that are clear and supportive.

One of the key recommendations we can draw from worldwide best practices is to have trained professionals dealing with children. These include:

1. **Child Advocates and Guardians ad Litem:** These professionals act as independent representatives for children in legal cases, ensuring that their voices are heard and their best interests prioritised. For example, in the United States, court-appointed guardians ad litem are trained in child development and communication,<sup>42</sup> enabling them to provide insights into a child's perspective during custody and welfare proceedings.
2. **Trauma-Informed Specialists:** Professionals trained in trauma-informed care can help identify and address the emotional needs of children who have experienced neglect, abuse, or other adverse conditions. In Canada, Child and Youth Advocacy Centres employ trauma-informed advocates who work alongside legal and social service professionals to create a supportive environment for children.<sup>43</sup>
3. **Child Psychologists and Forensic Interviewers:** In countries such as Norway and New Zealand, psychologists and forensic interviewers receive specialised training to conduct child-sensitive interviews. These professionals use evidence-based techniques, such as the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) protocol, to gather accurate information while minimising distress for the child.<sup>44</sup>
4. **Mediators and Family Dispute Resolution Practitioners:** In Australia, Family Dispute Resolution Practitioners play a key role in facilitating communication between parents in custody disputes. These mediators are trained in conflict resolution and child-focused practices, thus helping families reach agreements that prioritise the child's well-being.<sup>45</sup>

42 American Profession Guide, 2024.

43 Canadian Child Advocacy Centres, 2021.

44 Lamb et al., 2019, pp. 87–112.

45 Attorney-General's Department, n.d.

A big step forward is creating *specialised child-friendly units* within courts and legal organisations. These should be staffed by people trained to talk with children in ways that make them feel safe and understood. For example, the Family Court of Australia provides child-inclusive mediation services, where children can share their feelings in a comfortable setting, helping judges make decisions that really take the child's perspective into account.

Another important change is requiring all professionals who work with children to participate in interprofessional training programs. Governments should require *cross-disciplinary training* to equip professionals with the skills needed to collaborate effectively on child welfare cases. In Sweden, there is a growing push for this kind of cross-professional education, and ongoing training is offered so that everyone can learn more about children's rights and how to communicate with. Studies show that most actors in child protection – including lawyers, social workers, and laypersons – report needing more education in children's rights and how to communicate with children. Sweden's Judicial Training Academy provides continuous training in relevant legal fields (e.g. family and social welfare law).<sup>46</sup>

Creating *child-friendly justice systems* is also vital. Legal environments can be intimidating for children, which can hinder their ability to fully participate. Many jurisdictions have introduced adaptations to address this issue. In Scotland, the Vulnerable Witnesses Act allows children to provide testimonies via video links, thus offering a more comfortable and less formal alternative to appearing in court.<sup>47</sup> In the Netherlands, there are some documented cases of using small consultation rooms or meeting rooms for children in judicial proceedings, including interviews without parents being present. These are intended to reduce the pressure on children and help them express their views more freely.<sup>48</sup>

The development of *standardised communication* protocols is another key recommendation. Consistent methods for sharing information and managing cases can significantly enhance collaboration among professionals. In the United Kingdom, the Integrated Children's Services system employs shared digital case files accessible to all relevant stakeholders. This approach promotes transparency, reduces redundancies, and ensures that all team members are working with the same up-to-date information.

Encouraging *child participation* in decision-making is a cornerstone of child-centred justice. Empowering children to actively contribute to decisions affecting their lives not only upholds their rights but also leads to better outcomes. In Germany, the *Participation in Family Law Proceedings* project allows children to meet judges and share their perspectives in age-appropriate ways.<sup>49</sup> This initiative ensures that chil-

46 See: Swedish Judicial Training Academy [Online]. Available at: <https://portal.ejtn.eu/en/About-us/Members/Sweden/> (Accessed: 12 December 2024).

47 Scottish Government (2019) Vulnerable Witnesses (Criminal Evidence) (Scotland) Act 2019: Implementation plan.

48 Janssen, 2022.

49 Dethloff and Schröder, 2021, pp. 185–204.

dren's voices are heard and valued, reinforcing their sense of agency and trust in the legal system.

To sustain and refine these efforts, governments and academic institutions must *invest in the research* and monitoring of communication practices. Ongoing studies can evaluate the effectiveness of existing systems and identify areas for improvement. European Union's *Child-Friendly Justice* project<sup>50</sup> serves as an exemplary model of conducting comparative research to highlight best practices across member states. These findings provide evidence-based guidance for policymakers and practitioners seeking to improve child-focused justice systems.

Finally, the importance of funding for multidisciplinary teams cannot be overstated. Financial support is essential to maintain the collaborative efforts of professionals from various fields. For example, in New Zealand, the Family Court integrates social workers, psychologists, and legal experts to provide comprehensive assessments of children's needs. This multidisciplinary approach ensures that decisions consider all aspects of a child's well-being, from emotional and psychological factors to physical and social conditions.

Certain techniques, such as plain-language orders, child-friendly explanatory sheets, and multidisciplinary case conferences, are policy-level changes that can be implemented administratively within existing mandates. Other elements, including video-link testimonies or the establishment of child-specific court units, typically require legislative amendment or practice directions. Mapping each technique to its legal basis clarifies the pathways for reform and the responsible actors.

All of these steps can make a real difference in how we communicate, work together, and make decisions when children are involved. Through specialised units, interprofessional training, clear protocols, and research initiatives, legal and social systems can ensure stronger protection of children's rights and genuine inclusion of their voices in decision-making processes.

## 7. Summary

Effective communication keeps children safe and supports their rights, being the bridge that connects different professionals, fields, and systems. In the sensitive world of child welfare and justice, communication is not just a technical skill. Rather, it shapes how children are seen, supported, and given a voice in both legal and social settings. The words used in legal documents and the way a child is spoken to during an interview both matter enormously. As such, how professionals communicate can change not just outcomes, but also how children feel as they move through a complicated system.

This chapter has looked at the challenges and possibilities that come with communication in organisations and across different professions. It shows that lawyers,

50 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2015.

social workers, psychologists, teachers, and doctors need to work side by side - not just to be efficient, but to make sure every decision genuinely puts the child's best interests first. When professionals trust one another, speak clearly, and lead with empathy, they can break down barriers and create systems that truly work for children.

Global initiatives such as child-friendly justice systems, multidisciplinary teams, and tools such as digital platforms and plain language documentation are changing how we view children's rights. These approaches are not just minor procedural improvements, but show a real commitment to making sure children's voices truly matter in the decisions about their lives. For example, child-friendly courtrooms, trauma-informed training, and teams that bring different experts together make the justice system more accessible, inclusive, welcoming and less overwhelming for children.

To improve communication even more in settings focused on children, we need to be intentional at every level – professional, organisational, and policy. Professionals should have access to strong training that helps them connect with children and work well with others. Organisations need to emphasise collaboration and inclusion in their communication protocols. Moreover, policymakers play their part by creating frameworks that make these practices the norm and by supporting long-term funding for multidisciplinary efforts.

Protecting children's rights takes more than just good intentions from professionals. It calls for systems to be built around children. By learning from the best ideas worldwide, we can create structures that genuinely protect every child's dignity and rights. Communication is not just a means to this end; it is the very foundation for building a world where children are truly heard, understood, and supported in all parts of their lives.

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