



## Why and how we listen to young children

Alison Clark

### Why do we listen to young children?

We listen to young children because:

- it acknowledges their right to be listened to and for their views and experiences to be taken seriously
- of the difference listening can make to our understanding of children's priorities, interests and concerns
- of the difference it can make to our understanding of how children feel about themselves
- listening is a vital part of establishing respectful relationships with the children we work with and is central to the learning process.

### Who benefits from listening?

Listening is important for the children who are being listened to, but also for the adults who are listening, whether at home or outside the home, in an early years setting, a school, at local authority level or in national government.

#### *Benefits to young children*

##### Everyday experiences can change

If young children's views and experiences are taken seriously, then adults may decide to make changes to children's daily routines. This may include, for example,

#### YOUNG CHILDREN'S VOICES NETWORK (YCVN)

Young Children's Voices Network is a national project promoting listening within the early years. The network supports local authorities in developing good practice in listening to young children, so that young children's views may inform policy and improve early childhood services. Local authorities across the country have established local networks that focus on developing a listening culture. These networks support practitioners by offering opportunities to share effective practice, providing training and undertaking projects.

#### LISTENING

In this leaflet, listening is defined as:

- an active process of receiving (hearing and observing), interpreting and responding to communication. It includes all the senses and emotions and is not limited to the spoken word
- a necessary stage in ensuring the participation of all young children, as well as parents and staff, in matters that affect them
- an ongoing part of tuning in to all young children as individuals in their everyday lives
- sometimes part of a specific consultation about a particular entitlement, choice, event or opportunity.

Understanding listening in this way is key to providing an environment in which all young children feel confident, safe and powerful, ensuring they have the time and space to express themselves in whatever form suits them.

enabling children to help themselves to water throughout the day, or may result in changes to other routines, such as children gaining open access to the outdoors.

### Raising self-esteem

If young children feel their views are respected and valued by adults then this can have a positive effect on their self confidence. This can be of particular benefit to those children who find it hardest to communicate their perspectives or who have had limited experience of adults who listen to them.

### Developing skills and understandings

Young children may also gain new skills as their confidence builds. These can include social skills, such as being able to talk to children they have only just met, and to adults. Listening activities may offer children the opportunity to gain additional practical skills, for example, how to operate a camera. Listening to young children can create the time and space in which they can reflect on their early years experience and, in doing so, help them to process and understand what is happening. 'It's not so much a matter of eliciting children's preformed ideas and opinions, it's much more a question of enabling them to explore the ways in which they perceive the world and communicate their ideas in a way that is meaningful to them' (Tolfree and Woodhead 1999, p.2).

### *Benefits to practitioners and parents*

#### Challenges assumptions

Listening to young children can challenge assumptions and raise expectations. Seeing and hearing children express their interests and priorities can provide unexpected insights into their capabilities. Practitioners and parents may see children in a new light.

The impact of listening has been recorded by practitioners who were involved in the Effective Early Learning (EEL) programme: 'One of the most rewarding aspects of our involvement with the EEL project has been the children's responses to the interview schedules. Their views on the way the school is run, the teachers' jobs and the parents' involvement have been expressed very naturally and with great insight. They also come up with some surprises and made us think' (School Enquiry and Research Newsletter (2000) quoted in Dupree, Bertram and Pascal 2001, p.19).

## Case study: Benefits of listening to young children

Cathy was a shy child who had taken a long time to settle in the nursery. Her keyworker commented on how Cathy's confidence had grown during the period she was involved in the listening project. She had taken great pleasure in taking her own photographs and making her maps. She was happy to show these to her parents and keyworker with great pride.

(Case study from Clark and Moss 2001)

#### Reciprocal process

Working in a more democratic way with young children can relieve practitioners and parents from the burden of needing to know all the answers. Listening to young

## Case study: Children's day

Wistanstow Under Fives meets in a village hall with mock Tudor beams. This is a shared community space, used by a variety of groups during the week. Despite the restrictions of the space, the emphasis is on listening to, and acting upon, the children's wishes, opinions and interests. One example arose over a child's enquiry about Children's Day. The play leader had been talking about Mother's Day with a group of children when one child remarked: 'We have Mother's Day and Father's Day so why don't we have Children's Day?'

The play leader explained she didn't know why we don't in this country so she asked the children if they would like to have a Children's Day and if so what they would like to do? They were keen to have such a day and came up with the idea of painting the hall pink!

Initially this might have seemed like an impossible suggestion for this shared space. But the playgroup took the children's idea seriously, worked with it and came up with an imaginative solution. On Children's Day there was a party where the children could make special glasses and choose the colour of the lenses, so they could make the hall pink ... or whatever colour they liked.

This case study illustrates an early years setting where listening to and involving young children is embedded in practice (see Miller 1997). The practitioners found creative ways to place young children and their ideas 'centre stage' – despite the restrictions of the premises.

(Case study from Clark, McQuail and Moss 2003)

children may reveal different possibilities for engaging children and exploring new interests together.

### Child protection

There is the possibility that listening to young children may lead to some children sharing serious concerns. This is more likely to be the case if listening is embedded in everyday practice and if listening to children is not limited to adult-led agendas. Such circumstances may be rare, but reflect the responsibilities that come from taking children seriously.

### *Benefits to early years provision*

#### Opportunity to reflect on practice

The sharing of children's perspectives can provide the chance for early years practitioners to reconsider the relationships they have established with young children as well as to rethink routines and activities. This process of reflection can be 'contagious' in a multi-agency environment, with changes to one service's practice leading to changes in neighbouring services.

#### Opportunity to reflect on the environment

Young children can make insightful comments about their indoor and outdoor spaces. This information can be used to inform changes to existing provision or to contribute to new designs and buildings.

## How can we listen?

How we listen to young children will depend on why we are listening. We may be wanting to:

- tune in to children as part of their everyday lives
- listen as part of a specific consultation about a particular entitlement, choice, event or opportunity
- find out about their thoughts and feelings.

### *Foundations for listening*

Whatever methods we use to help us to listen, there are certain principles which provide the foundations for listening. Being a skilful listener is not easy. It requires practitioners to show respect, honesty and patience, be sensitive to timing, be imaginative and work collaboratively.

#### Respect

Effective listening requires respect for whoever we are listening to. We need to believe that children of all ages, backgrounds and abilities are important and unique and

are worth listening to. This is connected to our view of children: do we see the child we are working with as a strong child, a skilful communicator, a competent learner and a healthy child? This includes babies and children who may be seen as having communication or other difficulties.

#### Openness and collaboration

Listening requires us to be sensitive to the variety of ways in which children express their feelings. Children are individuals, with different cultural and ethnic backgrounds, and they may use a variety of ways to communicate their perspectives, which require us to be open, receptive and willing to learn. Similarly, we need to respond to the preferred ways that children choose to communicate their views and experiences. This is particularly important with disabled children.

One way to achieve this may be to work closely with parents or other adults who know the children well. Listening can be a collaborative activity.

#### Honesty

Honesty is required to make listening effective. We need to be clear about why we are listening. If we are listening to children's views and experiences about a particular issue, we need to explain this carefully to children in ways appropriate to their levels of understanding.

We need to be honest about how far we may be able to act upon children's views and to explain how other people's views may need to be taken into account. We need to be honest in feeding back the outcome of a consultation so children can see how their views have been taken seriously, and where and why it hasn't been possible to act on their suggestions.

#### Patience and timing

Effective listening takes time. Patience is essential when working with very young children, especially if they have communication difficulties.

Listening requires us to be sensitive to timing. The best times for listening will vary according to individual children's emotions, feelings and routines. How we ourselves are feeling will also affect how well we are able to listen. Children's timing may be different from our own. Children may choose to express their feelings and wishes at the very moment we are least prepared.

#### Imagination

We must use all our senses, not just our hearing. This includes using our eyes, sense of touch, and smell, in order to listen to how children are communicating with us. We need imagination in order to design ways of listening which are enjoyable and varied and which take into account children's different strengths and abilities. Imagination may often be required in order to act upon young children's ideas and expressed interests.

## Ways of listening

We can use a range of ways of listening to young children, a selection of which are listed below. Different tools have strengths and limitations. More than one approach can be used at the same time. Choosing which to use will depend on our skills, those of the children we work with and their ages, and the time, space and resources available. Several tools use the arts, whether visual arts or performing arts, as a means of listening.

**Observation** is an important starting point for listening to young children. This builds on a strong tradition within early years practice of using observation as a tool for understanding young children's abilities, needs and interests (see, for example, Paley 1981 and 1997).

**Interviews** are among the most popular method for gathering the views of older children and adults. This formal talking needs to be adapted to become appropriate for young children. Group interviews can be used, following a similar approach to 'circle time' (Miller 1997). Interviews can be conducted 'on the move' (see, for example, Clark and Moss 2005). Child-to-child interviews offer a different approach where older children can act as consultants to younger children (see, for example, Johnson and others 1998). Children can respond to formal and informal opportunities for talking (Cousins 1999).

**Still and moving film** can open up new ways of young children communicating their perspectives. Projects have used single use cameras, 'polaroids', digital still cameras and video cameras with children aged three and above (Clark and Moss 2001; Lancaster and Broadbent 2003). This builds on innovative work with older children, where photography has proved to be a valuable medium for children to communicate their perspectives about their schools and neighbourhoods (see, for example, Smith and Barker 1999; Morrow 2001). Walker (1993) has described this as the 'silent voice of the camera'. Listening to children takes place through the process of the children choosing and taking the images, as well as discussing the final product.

**Performing arts and play** can provide a natural way for young children to communicate with adults. Role-play activities can include the use of toys and puppets as 'intermediaries' in consultations. The Daycare Trust (1998), for example, used a teddy bear as a starting point for young children to talk about their nurseries.

**Visual arts** provide a variety of different 'languages' for young children to communicate their perspectives. This links to Malaguzzi's idea of the 'hundred languages of children' (Edwards, Gandini and Foreman 1998). Visual tools for listening can include painting and drawing (Lancaster and Broadbent 2003; Coates 2003), and model

## Case study: Listening to young children and parents

Sure Start Blakenall in Walsall, working with the Walsall Community Arts team, commissioned an artist from Bostin Arts to listen to the views and experiences of young children, parents and older members of the community and to use these ideas as a basis for planned artworks within the proposed new Sure Start building.

### Phase one: Talking and making

The artist ran arts activities in different locations across the area. The aim was to find out from local residents of all ages what it was like to grow up in this part of Walsall. This work included visits to centres with preschool groups and also interviewing adults and young children in the street. Arts activities included making a height chart with children from a local playgroup, including pictures of things they liked to do. Other sessions involved taking photographs of the children and making mobiles of their favourite things. (Note: It is always important to seek the permission of the child's parent/carer as some families may not want their children to be photographed.) These arts activities formed the basis for talking and listening. The young children's and adults' views and experiences were collected in scrapbooks.

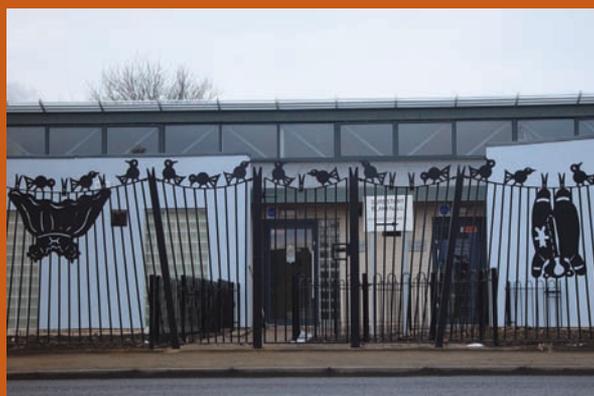
### Phase two: Listening turned into design

The artist used the comments and ideas from the scrapbooks to identify key themes. These formed the

basis for discussion with the architect and the building steering group. Examples of design features incorporated into the final building include a glass wall containing hand- and footprints of babies, older children and adults, and fencing made into a washing line design incorporating cutouts of memorable clothes.

This Sure Start programme had demonstrated an imaginative approach to listening to and involving young children. The organisation has taken seriously the need to consult young children and has chosen to use the expertise of a community arts team to help it to do so.

(Case study from Clark, McQuail and Moss 2003)



and map making (Hart 1997; Clark and Moss 2001). Listening to children while they are in the process of creating is often as important as talking about the final product (Coates 2003). Children can demonstrate their interests and priorities through the visual arts. This may include children with linguistic communication difficulties or other disabilities, who might find a formal interview difficult. Artists and community arts teams may be a useful resource for practitioners to call on for consultations, in addition to practitioners' everyday work on listening.

## Possibilities and challenges

What possibilities are there for listening to young children and what are the challenges?

### Possibilities

There are many possibilities for including young children's views and experiences. Here are some suggestions – but there will be others according to the context in which you are working.

- Times of transition – Listening in imaginative ways can support children as they adjust to change. This might be a whole class event such as starting in a new

class or moving classrooms or, on a personal level, helping children talk about a new sibling.

- Assessment – Children can play an active role in recording their progress and identifying what they have enjoyed or found difficult. Involving children in this way can also open up further channels of communication with parents.
- Internal audits – Listening to young children could add to annual reviews and help to identify activities, places and people of importance from the children's perspective.
- Parent's centre – Listening to young children can be the focus of work with parents/family members/carers and their children, looking at the different ways in which children, from birth, listen and communicate.
- Outdoor environment – Listening to how young children use existing outdoor provision can be an important starting point for planning change.
- 'New build' or changes to settings – young children's perspectives on their existing environments can provide a useful contribution to discussions about future spaces.

## Case study: The tree of feelings

To explore the role emotion plays in painting or artmaking, we painted a 'tree of feelings', a branch potted in sand and water. A tree of feelings represents a bounded space that allows children to keep on adding or taking away photos, drawings, pictures and messages about how they are currently feeling.

We talked about colour with the children: 'What colours do you like or dislike? What is your favourite colour? Why do you like or dislike these colours?' Jack said his favourite colours were: 'Gold and black because I like Sonic and Brother Shadow ... He turns bad ... Black and red ... bad. Gold because I love money.'

Jacob said: 'Gold because it shines. Red for Liverpool football.'

Rachel said: 'Pink because I have a pink dress ... Barbie wears pink.'

Johnny said: 'Silver because it shines.'

Helen said: 'Pink, it's in my bedroom in my new house ... I love my house.'

They then chose the colours they liked or disliked, that made them happy or sad and began painting the tree with these. Spontaneously some children began choosing colours that reflected their interpretations of how they felt about parts of the tree. For instance, some children

coloured what they saw as peaceful branches with a particular colour, whilst scary parts were painted with another colour. The collaboration reflected the different interpretations of the children.

After this we asked children to think about the kinds of feelings they experience. Those who wanted to shared some of their emotional experiences with the group. They then drew their own pictures to represent some of the feelings they had discussed, which were hung on the tree of feelings. We talked to the children about their pictures to find out why they felt a particular way. Sad faces were about: 'Someone hitting you', 'Shoving ... pushing', 'When my mum is cross I cry', 'When I leave Gramps'. Happy faces were about: 'Snowflakes falling on my happy head', 'I like growing beans', 'Walking in an airport', and 'Cuddling'. The children also drew faces that showed they were feeling hungry, cross and sick. Children have spontaneously continued to use the tree to register their feelings.

(Case study from 'Exploring feelings' in Lancaster and Broadbent (2003) *Listening to Young Children*. Reproduced with the kind permission of Open University Press.)

## Challenges

Listening to young children places a great responsibility on each of the adults involved and requires skill, understanding, time and space.

- Taking children seriously – Children need to know that their views and experiences are valued and not ridiculed or ignored. This involves demonstrating that we take them seriously. When it is not possible to act upon their ideas, then we need to explain this to children.
- Responding to what children say – Listening to young children's views and not responding could have a negative impact: 'Asking children what they think, but taking it no further will send a message that there is little real interest in their views' (Mooney and Blackburn 2002).
- Time to listen – Listening to young children cannot be a rushed activity. The younger the child, the less possible and desirable it is to rely on direct questions. Time to listen shouldn't be seen as another bolt-on activity but as an integral part of every day.
- Respecting privacy – Adults cannot demand or require that children provide them with an opportunity to listen to them. Adults should respect children's privacy and silence as well as their expressed opinions. There is the risk that the drive to listen to and consult children becomes another invasion of their time, thoughts and spaces, rather than an empowering process. There will always be the need for discussion and negotiation with children about what material is private knowledge and what can be shared and with whom.

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**Listening as a way of life leaflets** – See page 8 for details.

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[www.crae.org.uk](http://www.crae.org.uk)

Children's Rights Alliance for England (CRAE) protects the human rights of children by lobbying and raising awareness. CRAE also publishes an annual review of the state of children's rights in England.

[www.coram.org.uk](http://www.coram.org.uk)

Coram Family is a children's charity that aims to develop and promote best practice in the care of vulnerable children and their families.

## Useful websites

[www.ncb.org.uk/ycvn](http://www.ncb.org.uk/ycvn)

Young Children's Voices Network (YCVN) is a national project promoting listening within the early years. The network supports local authorities in developing good practice in listening to young children, so that young children's views may inform policy and improve early childhood services. Practice development, consultancy, networking opportunities and resources are available.

[www.ncb.org.uk/ecu](http://www.ncb.org.uk/ecu)

The Early Childhood Unit (ECU) is based at NCB and provides information on specific topics within early years care and education. It also includes networks and projects which aim to improve early years services and support workforce development.

[www.ncb.org.uk](http://www.ncb.org.uk)

NCB promotes the interests and well-being of all children and young people across every aspect of their lives. NCB advocates the participation of children and young people in all matters affecting them and challenges disadvantage in childhood.

[www.participationworks.org.uk](http://www.participationworks.org.uk)

Participation Works is a partnership of six national children's and young people's agencies. It enables organisations to effectively involve children and young people in the development, delivery and evaluation of services that affect their lives. The site contains an early years topic with specific information on listening to young children, developed by the Early Childhood Unit at NCB.

### Listening as a way of life

This leaflet is one of six leaflets from the government funded project 'Listening as a way of life'. The series provides guidance to practitioners in designing creative and individual ways of listening to children and to each other.

Others in the series include:

Listening to babies

Supporting parents and carers to listen: A guide for practitioners

Are equalities an issue? Finding out what young children think

Listening to young disabled children

Listening to young children's views on food

There is a second series of leaflets also available:

Developing a listening culture

Leadership for listening

For copies contact the Early Childhood Unit by email on [ecu@ncb.org.uk](mailto:ecu@ncb.org.uk), or call the switchboard on 020 7843 6000 and ask for the Early Childhood Unit.

### STATUTORY GUIDANCE

The requirement under section 3 of the Childcare Act 2006 states that LAs must have regard to any information about the views of young children which is available and relevant to those duties. For services to be successful the voices of young children need to be listened to and actively taken into account. Children need to be recognised as 'partners' in the planning and commissioning of services. By regularly listening to young children, local partnerships can respond to children's needs, identify barriers to learning and development, and ultimately work towards improving services for children and supporting children to achieve their potential.

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