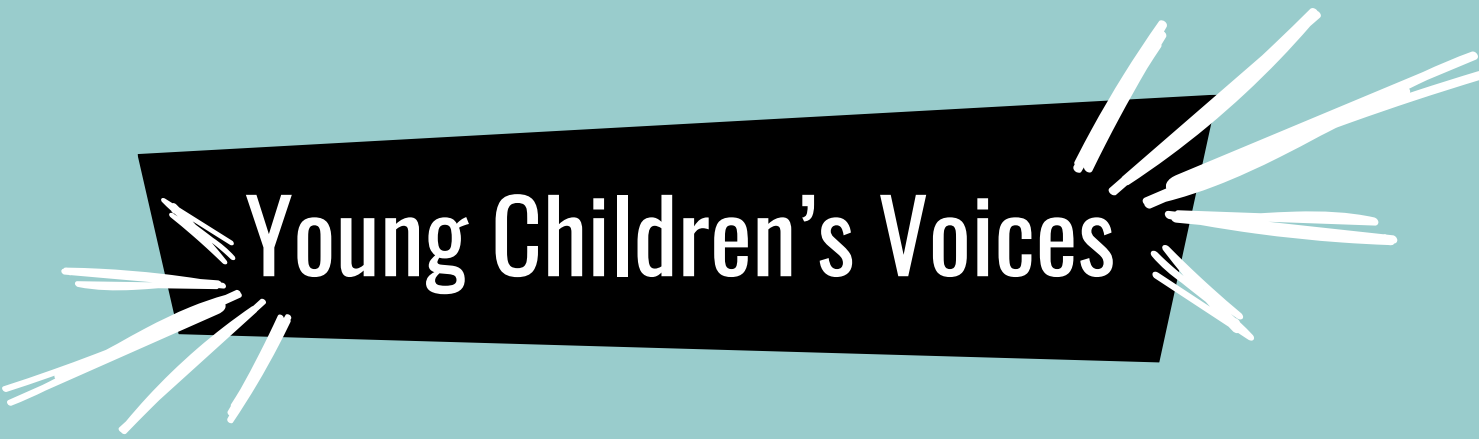


Early Years Knowledge Bank



Young Children's Voices

Full read



Save the Children

Young Children's Voices

Definition

Babies and young children lead rich lives, they are competent beings and experts in their own lives. From birth, they have thoughts, feelings and preferences which they are capable of communicating. That is, they have a voice. The concept of 'voice' for this youngest age group relates to deliberate self-expression, and there are many different ways of expressing voice beyond the articulation of words or sentences (Arnott & Wall, 2022).

Babies, for instance, express themselves in a range of ways such as smiling, crying, cooing, gesturing, eye contact, attention/focus, and moving their faces, limbs and bodies. Toddlers may communicate verbally, but also through creative activities such as drawing and play. Typically, as they get older, young children develop more cognitive skills and a greater capacity for self-awareness. Alongside a growing maturity, they may enjoy expressing themselves in imaginative ways.



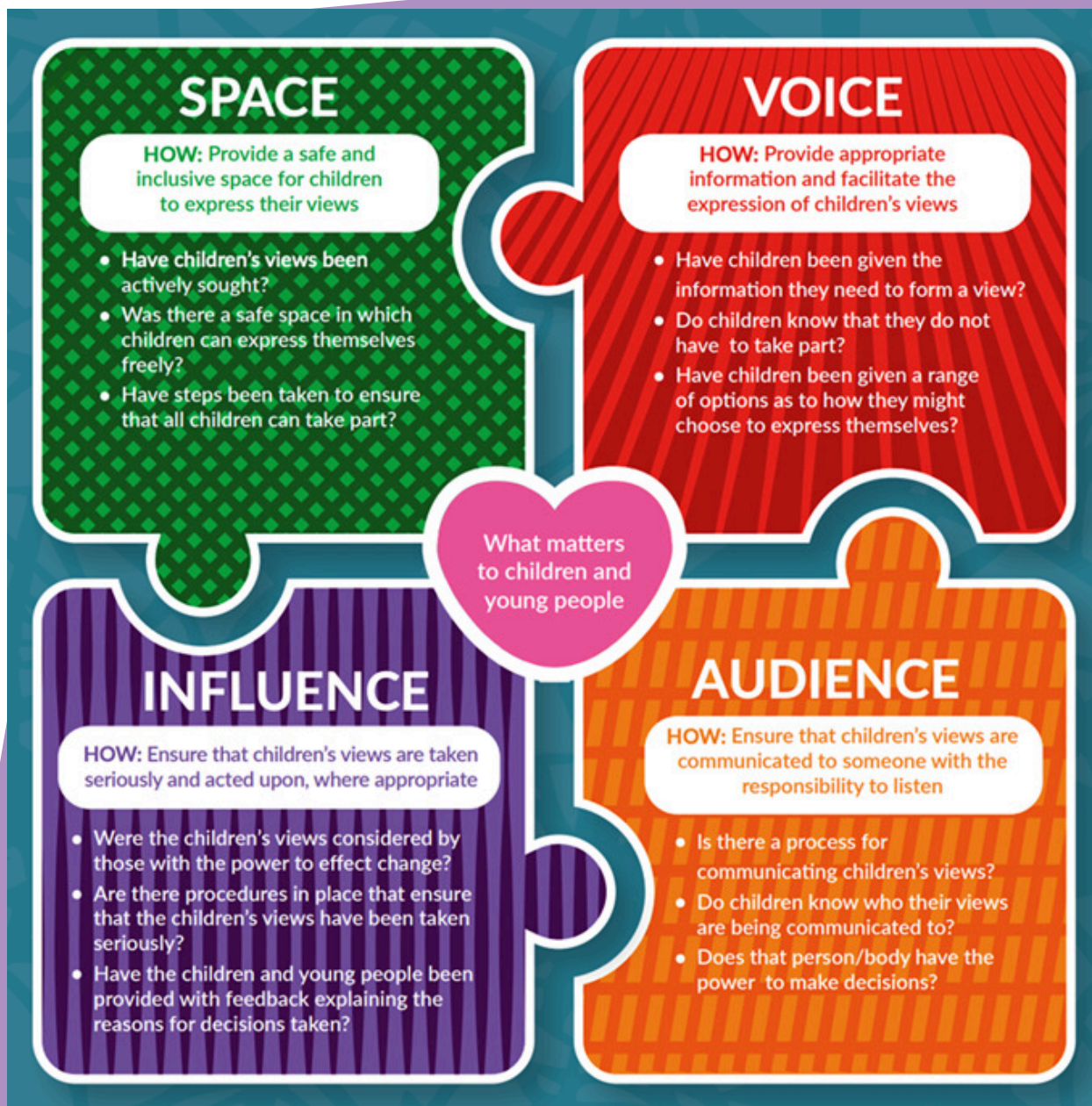
For all young children's voice to be fully realised, however, adults must listen. [Clark, McQuail and Moss \(2003\)](#) define listening as

- An active, dialogical and relationship-based process of communication involving hearing, interpreting and constructing meanings
- Not limited to the spoken word
- A necessary stage in participation in (a) daily routines as well as in (b) wider decision-making processes

There is intrinsic value in listening to babies and young children; they have a right to have their voice heard. Listening is also required to develop and enable babies and young children's participation. [Lundy \(2007\)](#) offers a model that explicitly identifies this connection. She outlines four essential elements of child participation:

- Space: Babies and young children must be given the opportunity to express a view
- Voice: Babies and young children must be facilitated to express their views
- Audience: Babies and young children's voices must be listened to
- Influence: Babies and young children's views must be acted upon, as appropriate

Young Children's Voices



Lundy model of child participation (2014)

Participation occurs when babies and young children are actively involved in a decision-making process and power is shared (Miller 2003). However, participation is not the only valid outcome of listening to babies and young children. A culture of listening – whether in the home, in an early years setting or in society at large – will nurture positive relationships with babies and young children, build their confidence and sense of self-efficacy, and improve their day-to-day experiences and environment ([Williams 2009](#)).

Young Children's Voices

Practice Standards for Participation

Child voice and child participation is central to Save the Children's work. It is essential to a commitment towards locally-led action and [shifting the power](#) to children and communities.

Save the Children defines participation as having the opportunity to express a view, influence decision-making and achieving change. Children's participation is an informed and willing involvement of all children, particularly those who are marginalised whose voices may often not be heard, and those of different ages and abilities, in any matter concerning them either directly or indirectly. In its participation work, Save the Children follows seven [practice standards](#):

1. An ethical approach: transparency, honesty and accountability
2. Children's participation is relevant and voluntary
3. A child-friendly, enabling environment
4. Equality of opportunity
5. Staff are effective and confident
6. Participation promotes the safety and protection of children
7. Ensuring follow-up and evaluation



For further reading on Save the Children's approach to and work on participation refer to our [Shifting the Power Hub: Child Voice, Participation and Accountability](#).

Save the Children also operates an ethical review process for all activities that generate evidence. [Save the Children's Safeguarded, Ethical and Accountable Data \(SEAD\) process](#) ensures highest ethical standards for work directly undertaken or funded by Save the Children that generates evidence from children or parents.

Young Children's Voices

Importance

Summary

Article 12 of the [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child \(UNCRC\)](#) outlines the importance of listening to all children as part of realising children's rights, but all too often, babies and young children's voices are not heard. England and the devolved nations have pathways in place to ensure children's voices are heard. The importance of protecting children's right to be heard has been highlighted very recently across the UK as a result of the pandemic.

The UNCRC was ratified by the UK in 1991 and ensures that children grow up in a spirit of peace, dignity, tolerance, freedom, equality and solidarity. It is only guaranteed that the rights in it will be respected, protected and fulfilled if steps are taken to implement the Convention into domestic law, policy and practice.

Article 12 of the UNCRC asserts that all children have the right to express their views on matters concerning them, and that those views should be taken seriously. Every child has the right to be heard: this includes the youngest children, children experiencing poverty and marginalised children. Every child is also capable of making sense of their relations in an environment and with people. They should be given the opportunity to share their opinions on and to influence the services they receive, the experiences and activities they enjoy, and the relationships they engage in. Through this process, babies and young children develop the sense that they are important, that their voice can make a difference, and that they too are rights bearers.

Babies and young children may express their voice differently to adults and listening to them requires adults to tune into the many, or - according to the [Reggio Emilia Approach](#) - the hundred, 'languages' of children, their ways of thinking, understanding, constructing knowledge, and expressing. It is the responsibility of adults in children's lives to value all of these verbal and non-verbal languages of babies and young children. Often, they are left out of the conversation and opportunities to participate in society. Adults may question their maturity level and capacity to engage, and may filter babies' and young children's views through the lens of 'grown-up' experience and agendas. Similarly, babies and young children experiencing poverty or who are marginalised may not have the same opportunities to be listened to in the first place.



Young Children's Voices

It is particularly important, then, to articulate and promote best practices for listening to babies and young children, and young children experiencing poverty or who are marginalised, so that their right to be heard is fulfilled and changes that impact on their opportunities and outcomes can be identified and promoted.

This is true within a devolved nations context as well as in England. For example, the Scottish Government currently require [Children's Services Plans \(CSPs\)](#) in each area of Scotland as the statutory framework for delivering on the principles of the UNCRC. CSP partners need to give full consideration to the views and needs of all babies, children and families when developing these plans for local services.

Similarly, Wales became the first country in the UK to make the UNCRC part of its domestic law in 2011. Welsh Government have taken a lead in promoting children's rights, basing their approach on UNCRC principles. Children's rights are enshrined in Welsh law under the [Rights of Children and Young Persons \(Wales\) Measure 2011](#), which underlines the commitment in Wales to listening to children.

The Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People has produced a [Statement on Children's Rights in Northern Ireland](#) every two years since 2018, specifically to assess performance against key rights for children and young people. The right to participation, which incorporates Article 12 of the UNCRC, features prominently in these Statements, with ongoing recommendations that particular attention should be paid to involving younger children in matters that concern them.

The importance of protecting children's right to be heard has been highlighted very recently across the UK as a result of the pandemic. Speaking at the [Covid-19 Inquiry](#) on 6 June 2023, Rajiv Menon KC of Garden Court Chambers said 'it appears that little or no progress has been made since you acknowledged the importance of children being heard ...to ensure that the United Kingdom's more than 14 million children will not remain voiceless during the listening exercise. Children's rights organisations are justifiably worried that without swift action by the inquiry to ensure the effective participation of children the window will close and it will be too late. Without capturing the testimony of children's first-hand experiences of lockdown it will be impossible to learn lessons from the decisions made during the pandemic that impacted our youngest so heavily and mitigate some of the negative impact the pandemic inflicted on children.'

<https://crae.org.uk/news/leading-childrens-rights-organisations-warn-covid-19-inquiry-risks-failing-understand>) Considering that there is already ample evidence that the pandemic had an unequal impact on the poorest and youngest children, it is especially critical to include babies and young children experiencing poverty.



Young Children's Voices

Benefits

Summary

Listening to babies and young children benefits both the child and the listening adults. There are direct and indirect benefits that impact on the child, on the parent and the parent-child relationship in the home, on early years settings and other services, as well as on policy and advocacy. This can create a culture of listening to babies and young children throughout the system around the child.

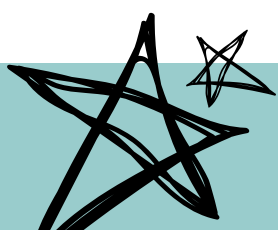
Listening to babies and young children benefits the child as well as the adults who are listening:

Impact on the child:

- Listening to babies' and young children's voice acknowledges and supports the realisation of their right to be listened to and their views to be considered on matters that directly affect them.
- Where babies' and young children's voice is sought and considered, children themselves will gain many essential skills. They will develop confidence in themselves and their capabilities, decision-making and problem-solving skills, while also increasing their own wellbeing and empathy for others.
- Babies and young children who grow up in an environment where they are listened to will be more likely to embark on a pathway to participation that they can continue to engage in throughout their lives.
- Babies and young children who are listened will grow to have a better understanding and awareness of the needs and views of others and are able to reflect on them.
- This in turn can have an indirect positive impact on general outcomes for children.

In the home:

- Listening to babies and young children can help parents/carers understand the children they care for better, help them understand how the baby or child sees and engages with the world around them, and support the development of secure attachment.
- It gives babies and young children more autonomy, voice and choice in their home: a child who has a sense of having choices and being listened to will feel safer, happier and understood.



Young Children's Voices

- It will help the parent/carer to better understand a baby's or child's interests and to better meet children's needs.
- Listening to babies and young children's voice can ultimately improve the relationship between a parent/carer and a child.

In settings:

- Incorporating babies' and children's views on services will ensure that they are more effective and tailored to their needs and interests.
- It can help settings to better support babies and children who experience disadvantage or marginalisation by understanding more about their experiences from their own perspectives.

In policy and advocacy:

- Where babies' and young children's voices are sought, their voices can inform and strengthen policy and advocacy work which influences decisions that impact on a child's life; such as funding decisions, service design and implementation, and local and national policy and government.
- It contributes to developing a culture where it is the norm to consistently consider the views and experiences of babies and young children throughout the system. This makes it more likely that babies and young children are kept in mind when decisions are made.
- This in turn may benefit all babies and young children by creating a mindset where children are considered capable citizens with a valued voice as a matter of course. Such systemic change links to Save the Children's [work with communities across the UK](#).



Young Children's Voices

Challenges

Despite the importance of listening to babies and young children to inform policy and practice, there are a variety of factors that can inhibit this. Some barriers are quite practical:



- The process of listening to babies and young children can be time-consuming and resource intensive. Listening to babies and young children requires deep and trusting relationship with them, which take time to evolve. Eliciting their voice requires dedicating additional time for the process of 'making meaning' of their verbal and non-verbal expressions, both in dialogue with babies and young children and with other important adults in their lives.
- Capturing the voice of pre- and non-verbal children requires greater creativity and effort. It may be necessary to use multiple methods of engagement, such as observation, one-to-one interactions, group conversations, and visual activities or games (e.g. drawing, photography, map-making, filming videos, etc.).

- There is an unavoidable power dynamic between adults/carers and babies and young children, who rely on grown-ups to meet their basic needs. Some practitioners may be reluctant to engage with babies and toddlers because of the heightened concern or need for safeguarding precautions. Researchers may feel less confident involving babies and young children in their studies due to more complicated ethical considerations. Arguably, these challenges reinforce the importance of listening to the youngest children, as they have fewer opportunities and avenues to advocate for themselves particularly if they are at risk.



Young Children's Voices

Other challenges are cultural or systemic, and are embedded in the ways that adults think about and interact with babies and young children:

- Babies' and young children's voice may be perceived as not possible to gain, due to adults assuming that they are too immature and incapable of contributing to the discussions of issues such as poverty, climate change or conflict. It is important to acknowledge the importance of maturity, and that listening to babies and young children at different stages of their development will look different. It is the responsibility of the adult to give due consideration how the voices of babies and young children can be captured.
- Often, the ways in which babies' experiences and views can be explored is underestimated and may not recognise babies and young children's capabilities.
- There is also an inherent challenge in how to ensure that the issue at hand is directly relevant to the child, and if this is not the case, the purpose of participation could be reconsidered to establish if it's the right opportunity for the children involved. Complex issues may be possible to be translated in a way that they relate to the child's direct experience in accessible, age-appropriate ways which enables babies and young children to share insightful views in ways they choose to express them.
- Babies and young children may not be considered to have the knowledge or views to share on specific topics, while adults may be overly confident in their superior knowledge. However, babies and young children are the experts in their own lives. There is a need to balance adults' wisdom and practical knowledge with the realisation that we are far removed from the day-to-day experience of being a child and it is those insights that are hugely valuable and can inform decisions that affect them. Children's views can contribute to the bigger picture, where due weight is given, in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.
- There may be concern that babies and young children should not be exposed to certain risks and responsibilities inherent in participation. Safeguarding and protecting children is paramount and appropriate safeguarding procedures should be followed. However, this should not come at the cost of limiting babies and young children's opportunities for participation such that they are excluded entirely and further marginalised.



Young Children's Voices

Ethical Considerations

Engaging babies and young children in specific participation activities may often mean disrupting their typical routines. While they may gain benefits from these activities, it is worth considering what they might be losing out on in exchange for their participation. Embedding listening within their daily experiences as opposed to approaching it as a separate activity should be considered. Accumulating babies' and young children's voice over time versus during one or two discrete interventions can also be a less disruptive and more genuine and reliable way of listening.

Additionally, babies and young children may be better positioned to engage directly with themes that are directly experienced and relevant to them – such as their immediate learning environments or close personal relationships. Other topics, such as housing or poverty, may necessitate more indirect facilitation of babies and young children's voices. Observations, alongside conversations and observations of interactions with parents and caregivers, are valid methods of highlighting voice, particularly for very young children and sometimes the most effective. It is therefore best to use a range of methods and approaches to meaningfully capture babies' and young children's voices.



It is important to consider the question of who is most appropriate to conduct this work. Adults engaging in babies' and young children's voice work need to be known and trusted by the child and have an established relationship with them. This means that parents and carers of babies and young children who interact with them on a daily basis have a central role to play.

Children's needs need to be put first to ensure an ethical approach to sensitively and effectively listening to babies' and young children's voices. For this reason, prior to engaging in babies' and children's voice work, it is important to ensure an ethical approach including assessing and mitigating against risk. This will strengthen the approach and value of babies' and children's voice work and ensure that children are kept safe.



Young Children's Voices

UK Evidence

Background

The practice of listening to babies and young children has evolved over recent decades in the UK. After the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the prioritisation of babies' and young children's voices has ebbed and flowed depending on sector need and capacity. [The Childcare Act 2006](#), for example, required early years settings to incorporate children's voice into their practice. This sparked the creation of the Young Children's Voices Network, which supported Local Authorities across England to develop entire programmes of activity and resource to facilitate and take into account the voice of the young child.

While there may not be as much statutory incentive to prioritise voice in the early years today, there is a growing acknowledgement in the field that enabling participation for the youngest children is a rights-based issue of critical importance.

To promote this position, a core group of researchers and practitioners across the UK are actively investigating and promoting best practice around listening to babies and young children's voices. [The 'Look Who's Talking' project](#), coordinated by Lorna Arnott and Kate Wall, brought together academics and practitioners in the early years to look at how we can better understand children's perspectives. The *Theory and Practice of Voice in Early Childhood: An International Exploration* (2022) explores the resulting themes of voice, democracy, culture, listen with purpose, space and place, skills and tools, enable, and build capacity. The book also offers innovative and practical examples of these themes in international settings. This resource, among others, outlines and advances the benefits of listening to young children's voices.



Young Children's Voices

Young Children's Voice in Early Years Practice

The foundational approaches and principles of influential thinkers such as Reggio Emilia, Montessori and Froebel have long promoted listening to children and centring them in their own learning, acknowledging that they are active participants in their development. But recent research takes a more rights-based perspective, and reveals how influential young children's voices can be within the context of early years service provision. In *Listening to Young Children: A Guide to Understanding and Using the Mosaic Approach*, Alison Clark outlines a comprehensive and creative approach to involving young children in service design and delivery. Viewing children as 'experts in their own lives', this framework outlines how to listen to young children's perspectives through talking, walking, making and reviewing together. Drawing on the Mosaic approach, the Map-Do-Review method, developed by Sarah Laing, is another form of participatory practice used by early years settings to facilitate children's voice in decision-making.

In this approach, practitioners utilise listening and responsiveness to guide children through a cycle in which they communicate intent for play, engage in play activities and reflect afterward. Map-Do-Review fosters language development, curiosity and creative play among young children while incorporating their voice in early years services.

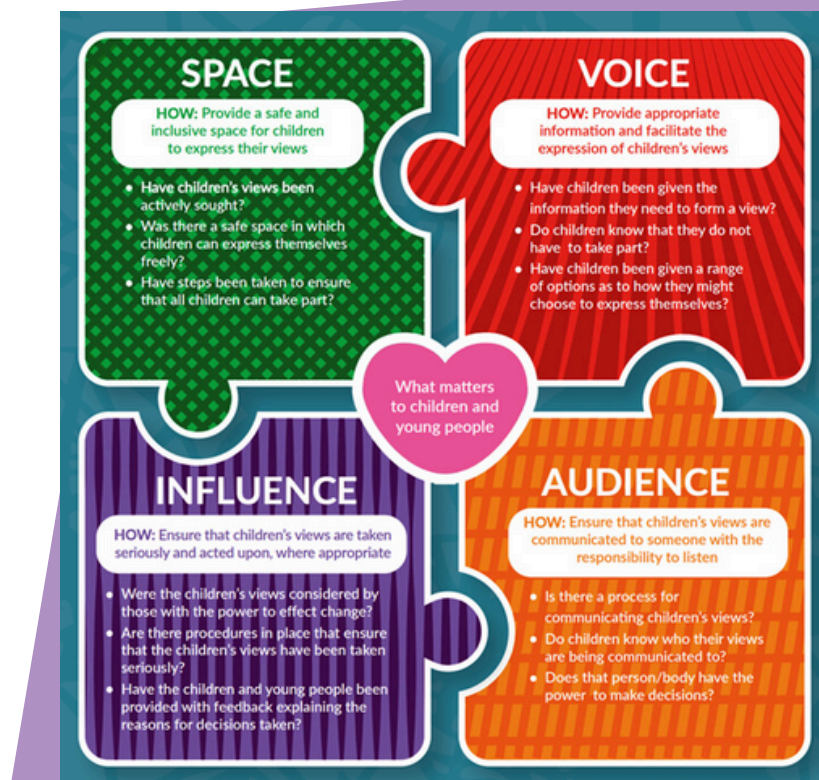
There are also current efforts to highlight the benefits of facilitating infant and toddler 'voice' within early years practice. Although the very youngest children may not have the capacity to express themselves verbally, there are still effective ways to support their right to be heard. For example, the Scottish Government's Perinatal and Infant Mental Health Programme Board recently released [Voice of the Infant: best practice guidelines and infant pledge](#). This publication outlines the Scottish Model of Infant Participation, a framework for facilitating infant voice based on the Lundy model of child participation (Lundy, 2007). It adapts the four key concepts of Space, Voice, Audience and Influence for application with babies and very young children. 'Space' addresses both the physical and emotional conditions that best foster a safe, comfortable and accessible environment for infants. 'Voice' refers to developmentally appropriate methods of supporting infant communication through observation or reciprocal interaction. 'Audience' reflects the notion that adults should clearly acknowledge infant voice, such that babies understand they have been listened to. 'Influence' means that infants' views are acted upon in a tangible and visible way.

Map making with children



Young Children's Voices

To facilitate implementation of these guidelines, Scottish Government includes a '[Good Practice Checklist](#)' that settings can refer to. There are also other practical tools available specifically to support more formal observation of babies and young children with an eye to eliciting their voice. Developed by the Brazelton Centre UK, the Newborn Behavioural Observations (NBO) system is an instrument designed for parents and practitioners to use together, interpreting babies' signs, movements and responses as a form of communication.



The NBO can be used with babies from birth to 3 months old, and requires training to utilise successfully. Other tools are less formal and more accessible, such as the versatile '[Observational tool for infant-caregiver activities and therapeutic interventions](#)' (Armstrong & Ross, 2021). This is a checklist designed to encapsulate infants' (ages 0-3) experiences during focused activities when they are engaging directly with their caregiver. It can be used for one-off sessions or to measure change over time. While this observational tool was originally created for practitioners to use at a creative [arts intervention in Dundee](#), the fact that it involves parents and carers so closely is significant. This piece notably fills a gap in much of the current evidence base, which is detailed further below.

Young Children's Voice in Influencing

Listening to babies and young children can and should also have implications at a national policy level. Enabling their participation for influencing purposes, though, still requires a strong base in practice so as not to be tokenistic. This is especially important for groups such as children living in poverty, who may not have as much opportunity to be listened to when national policy is developed. There is an opportunity to bridge this gap through best practice and proactively promoting the consideration of babies' and young children's voice.

Young Children's Voices

One example when listening to young children in a practice setting contributed to a broader policy change was conducted by the National Children's Bureau (NCB) in 2010. The report, '[Am I staying for lunch today?](#)' sought to capture the experiences of three- and four-year-olds as their nurseries expanded free entitlement hours for families. Findings showed that friendships, practitioners and play were very important to young children, and were often disrupted during daily transitions resulting from the flexibility of individual entitlements. NCB subsequently recommended amending the Code of Practice of the Free Entitlement for 3 and 4 Year Olds, which provides statutory guidance to all English Local Authority nursery providers. The updated version specifically requires consideration of children's sense of continuity and control over their daily lives. Key person, friendship groups and children's interests are now prioritised during implementation of the entitlement (Williams, 2010).

Other relevant examples include young children's experiences of mealtimes at one nursery, serving as a best practice promoted by Education Scotland across the country (Paterson, 2022), and young children's voice contributing to the design and review of their built environment (Clark, 2010).

Crucially, these instances of successful influencing on behalf of young children are all firmly embedded in high-quality early years practice, and did not take place as one-off consultations or interventions. This ensures that young children have safe and meaningful ways to contribute to policy change at a larger scale.



Insights from Save the Children UK

At Save the Children, we take a rights-based approach to working with children and families living in poverty. We have a responsibility to embed their voices in our work and to be led by their experiences and needs. As we have shifted to a more community-centred model of programmatic delivery, we have also heard a desire from our partners to facilitate the inclusion of babies' and young children's voices in their own practice.

While there is increasing momentum within this theme, there are relatively few organisations in the UK specifically supporting systemic change across the sector. Save the Children has a long-standing interest in participation with young children (e.g. Miller, J. Never Too Young: How young children can take responsibility and make decisions 2003 and [How to write a Child-Friendly Document](#)) and is keen to convene, support and facilitate best practice and collaborate on innovative approaches to listening to babies and young children.

Young Children's Voices

Save the Children works in specific communities with and for local organisations and families, and is keen to test and implement strategies to listen to babies and young children. We can work together with experts in the field to influence more widely, incorporating babies' and children's voices into our advocacy work across the UK.

Case Study

One recent example of the potential power of elevating young children's voice comes from Save the Children Cymru. The Starting Strong project (2023) aimed to help young children adapt to the transition to primary school, ensuring that they and their families had the right support around them at this critical point in their lives. We wanted to find out what tools, techniques and approaches could facilitate this process, particularly for children living in areas of high deprivation in Wales. Along with schools and nurseries, Save the Children delivered participatory workshops with young children to understand their hopes, fears and wishes around starting school. The themes that emerged were then used to develop workshops for parents. The results of both of these series of workshops were presented back to schools and nurseries to support innovative planning for their upcoming early years transition activities. In this way, alongside our partners, we were able to facilitate young children's involvement in decision-making in matters that concerned them. More in the reports from the [children's workshops](#), the [parents' workshop](#) and the [main report](#).



Young Children's Voices

Gaps in Evidence

While there are a handful of dedicated practitioners and researchers in the field of early childhood who are exploring and expanding on the theme of babies' and young children's voices, there are still a few critical gaps in the evidence that require further attention.

First, the existing research does not adequately consider the application of this work specifically for babies and young children and families living in poverty. There is general acknowledgement that no 'one size fits all' approach applies when engaging with babies and young children, but it would be valuable to learn if particular methods of listening and participation are more suited to working with children from disadvantaged backgrounds or to investigating especially sensitive topics. Inequality impacts negatively on the ability to have one's voice heard, regardless of age. Enabling participation among the youngest children can prepare them to advocate for themselves as they grow older, and would ideally highlight their experiences in the present to push for social change.



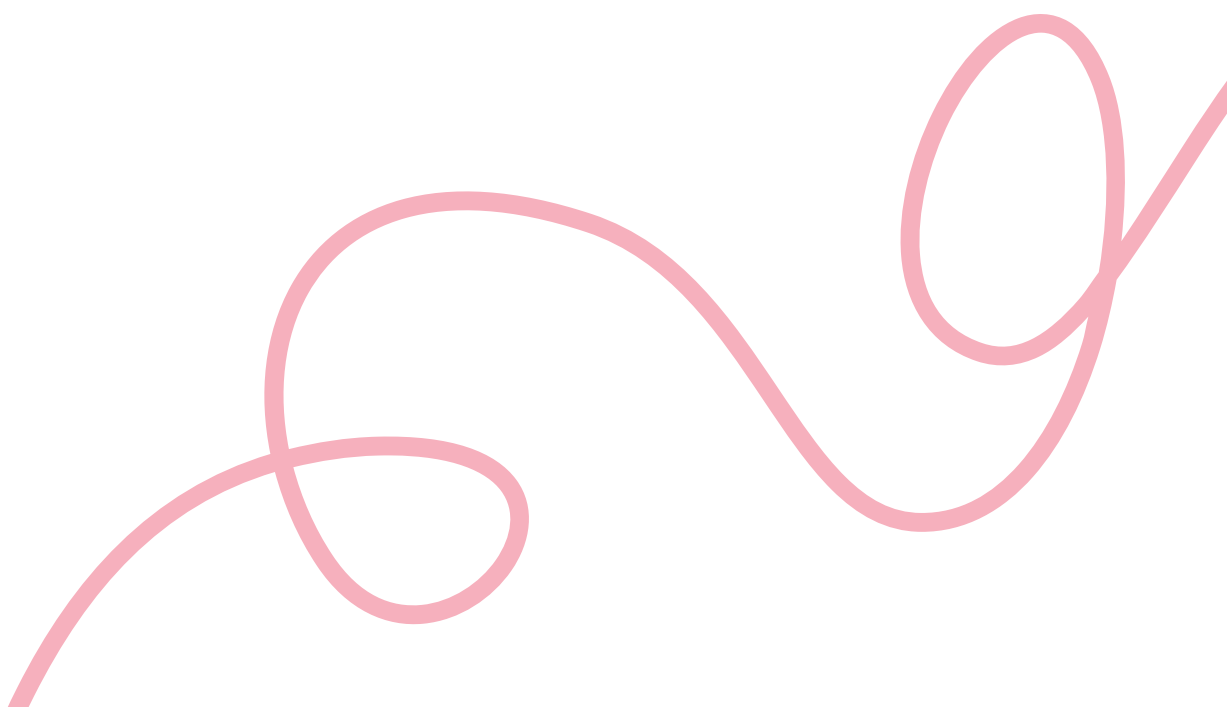
There is also a missed opportunity to examine the role of parents when listening to babies and young children. The current literature is written primarily to support practitioners in settings to implement a more child-centric approach to early learning and care. There is also a focus on how researchers can incorporate babies and young children's voice into their work to make it more participatory and inclusive. These are incredibly valuable aims. However, there has not been a corresponding emphasis on supporting parents to listen to and foster the voice of babies and young children in the home. Given that we know that attuned and responsive parent/carer child interactions in the first 1001 days are the greatest predictor of future attainment and wellbeing for children, this area seems critical for further development. There is an opportunity to support parental skills to incorporate listening to babies and young children habitually. This can enhance the relationship between the parent/carer and the baby and young child, as well as promote interactions that support children's social and emotional, as well as speech, language and communication development. Such every day listening can enable sustained impact for children's wellbeing, confidence, participation and ultimately long-term outcomes. However, it is important that babies' and young children's voices are best understood in multiple contexts and through direct observation.



Young Children's Voices

The role of the parent should not replace the children's voice work of professionals. Instead, a focus on children's voices and perspectives can be made relevant within the home in day-to-day interactions, thus fostering empathetic and attuned parenting approaches. This can be achieved by practitioners building strong partnerships with parents and supporting parents' engagement in their child's early learning and development.

Finally, there is a need to evidence the impact of fostering babies' and young children's voice on their learning and developmental outcomes. Anecdotally and intuitively, creating an environment that values babies' and young children's experiences and contributions would lead to an increased confidence in their own capabilities and capacity to learn. However, these connections have not been directly made by previous research. Firmly establishing this link would provide greater incentive for systemic change within early years practice, and could lead to broader acceptance and implementation of strategies for listening to babies' and young children's voices. This could then be an enabler for a greater focus on and proper recognition of this crucial time in a child's life in both policy and practice.



Young Children's Voices

Principles and Core Elements for Best Practice

Principles

- ***All children have 'voice' and are capable of expressing it, regardless of age and ability.***

All children, including babies and toddlers, have thoughts and views, wants and needs, likes and dislikes, that are valid. They are fully capable of communicating these experiences in age and developmentally appropriate ways. The languages of young children are valued.



- ***Babies and young children have a right to input into and influence their environments and experiences.***

The right to have one's voice heard and taken into account is fundamental in a just society. Babies and young children deserve access to that same right through a process of enabling participation. This sets them on a path to fuller participation as young people and adults, and leads to services and systems that are child-centred.

- ***Participation of babies and young children should be voluntary and relevant to the child.***

While babies and young children have a right to have their voices heard, they also have a right not to participate. Steps should be taken to ensure that babies and young children participate freely and that the context is directly relevant to their experience.

- ***Trusting relationships with parents and carers are central to eliciting babies' and young children's voices.***

Young children, especially when pre- or non-verbal, rely on parents and carers to interpret their daily wants and needs. Adults who are closest to babies and young children are more attuned to their individual modes of communication and expression, and are better positioned to elicit their voice. These relationships are established over time, through repeated warm and caring interactions. They can be key to provide a child-friendly and enabling environment.

Young Children's Voices

- ***Authentic incorporation of babies' and young children's voice has visible impact.***

Listening to babies and young children, while critical, is only the first step. To fully validate their experiences and contributions, adults need to take these into account and make changes where warranted. This action should then be communicated back to children so they can see the impact of their input. This step reinforces to children that their voice is meaningful and taken seriously, and encourages future participation. This ensures transparency and accountability to children.

- ***The voices of babies and young children living in poverty demand particular attention.***

Babies' and young children's voices are often discounted due to their age and perceived inability to contribute; however, babies and young children living in poverty are even further excluded. Their families may experience barriers to accessing spaces of influence and there may be reluctance to engage with them around sensitive topics that are part of their daily lives. These challenges highlight the importance of working even harder to enable and ensure that children living in poverty have the same opportunity to be heard as their peers.



Young Children's Voices

Core Elements

Eliciting babies' and young children's voices is...

- ***Relationship-based.***

Listening to babies and young children occurs within the context of relationships. Adults need to establish an environment of trust and safety to facilitate babies' and young children's voices. Parents and carers who interact with a child frequently over a long period of time will be most successful at encouraging participation.

- ***Multimodal and creative.***

Babies and young children's voices cannot always be captured over the course of one conversation or observation. To construct a holistic picture of their experience sometimes requires combining a variety of approaches and interactions. These may include observations, one-to-one conversations/interviews, small group discussions, as well as more hands-on or playful strategies such as drawing, photography, map-making and filming video. For babies and toddlers, speaking with parents and carers may also help to reinforce themes that emerge through observation.

- ***A reciprocal process of 'meaning-making'.***

Listening to babies and young children is an active, relational and dialogical process. Adults may need to be prepared to engage in a shared dialogue that challenges their assumptions. Children may use different language to describe their experiences, which can require deeper exploration to fully grasp. Their priorities may not be immediately clear from any artwork they may produce. Arriving at a mutual and reliable understanding is the result of back-and-forth questions and reflections, dialogue, affirmation and reaffirmation between children and adults.



Young Children's Voices

- ***Influential in their daily lives.***

Babies' and young children's voices are reinforced through a feedback cycle that demonstrates the impact of their contribution in a way that is relevant to them. McAuliffe (2003) articulates the steps of this Listening Cycle as Listen, Document, Reflect, Take Action and Feedback. For babies, this may be as simple as receiving recognition for any first attempts at mark-making. For young children, this could include adapting the toys and activities offered at nursery or at home in response to their expressed interests. While seemingly small, these steps gradually enable babies and young children to participate in meaningful ways, and strengthen their sense that their input is valued and valuable.

- ***Part of a reflexive, ongoing practice.***

All adults who interact with babies and young children – whether practitioners, researchers, parents, or other key people in the child's life – need to take the time to reflect on how those interactions are going, and to make changes to their approach as needed. Just as it is important to attune to the needs and behaviours of babies and young children in this work, adults need to have self-awareness of their own assumptions, biases, emotions and motivations. These factors all influence how adults relate to babies and young children, and need to be recognised and managed as much as possible. There is an inherent imbalance of power between adults and young children that cannot be eliminated, but through reflexive practice it can be mitigated.

- ***Safe.***

Listening to babies and young children can only be successful in places and spaces where they feel safe and comfortable. This includes the physical environment, which needs to be warm and inviting, with furniture and toys/activities suitable to the child's age or development. Babies and young children are likely to feel psychologically and emotionally safe in the presence of familiar adults. They can be encouraged to opt in or out of an activity at any time, either verbally or through their body language, with their preferences given due respect. Safeguarding policies and procedures need to be followed and risk assessed that is cognisant of the specific needs of babies and young children.



Young Children's Voices

Resources within the UK

[Starcatchers](#) are a Scotland based Arts and Early Years organisation. They work with babies and children from birth to five years old alongside their parents/carers, to provide access to creative opportunities. Through direct work in communities, professional development support and advocacy, they aim to advance children's rights to engage with and participate in arts and cultural experiences from birth.



[PlayBoard NI](#) are the leading charity in Northern Ireland dedicated to the development and promotion of children and young people's play. They are a rights-based organisation formed on the premise that play is fundamental to a healthy and happy childhood. PlayBoard NI are renowned for their participatory work with young children, particularly through the lens of play.

The [National Children's Bureau](#) (NCB) work across England and Northern Ireland to influence policy, improve practice, and involve children and young people with the aim of building a better childhood. They were instrumental in establishing the Young Children's Voices Network (2006-2011) to promote listening within the early years, designing a series of resources to promote best practice in this area. NCB continue to provide training in Listening to Young Children.



[Children in Wales](#) (Plant Yng Nghymru) are the national umbrella body for organisations and individuals who work with children, young people and their families in Wales. They jointly coordinate and facilitate the [Children's Rights in the Early Years \(CREY\) Network](#) with the School of Education at Swansea University. Through this work they have developed practical guidance that supports young children's right to have their voice heard and be listened to.

Resources within the UK

Young Children's Voices

Practical Tools

The following tools and checklists can serve as a jumping-off point for beginning or enhancing your practice around listening to babies' and young children's voice. They are aligned with the Principles and Core Elements laid out above, and are representative of best practice in the field:

- From *The Theory and Practice of Voice in Early Childhood: An International Exploration*, edited by Lorna Arnott and Kate Wall, a collection of talking point posters and reflective and strategic conversation starters. These are meant to support self-reflection or stimulate discussion and action with others, and to assist in setting goals for practice development.
- From the Scottish Government's [Voice of the Infant: Best practice guidelines and infant pledge](#), a Good Practice Checklist. This is a simple assessment to evaluate how successfully a service or programme is facilitating babies' and very young children's participation by eliciting and supporting infant voice.
- From the National Children's Bureau's Young Children's Voices Network, the Listening as a way of life series – a set of leaflets with details of research, practice and methods that work with young children from birth to eight years old: ["Developing a Listening Culture"](#) and ["Listening to Young Disabled Children"](#).



Young Children's Voices

Key Messages

Listening to young children's voice is critical for realising their right to be heard and input into matters affecting them.

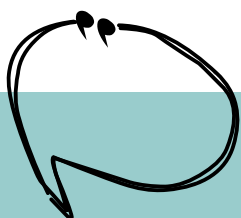
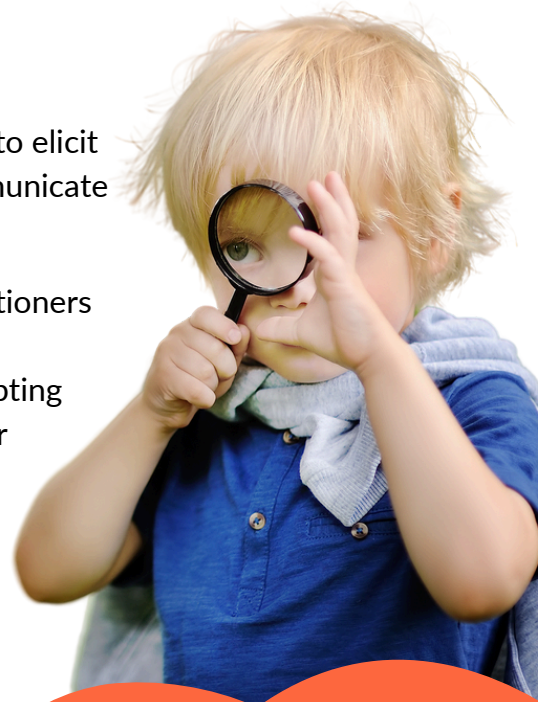
All children, from birth, have experiences and views and are capable of expressing them. Adults need to be intentionally attuned and creative to elicit these experiences from babies and younger children who do not communicate verbally, but that does not mean their views are less valid.

Listening to babies and young children is highly important for all practitioners across a broad range of professions. Crucially, Parents' and carers' relationships with their children can also be strengthened through adapting listening practices in everyday interactions. More support is needed for families to gain knowledge, skills and confidence in listening to and facilitating the voice of their babies and young children.

While babies and young children are often left out of debates that concern them, young children living in poverty, those with additional support needs or from underrepresented backgrounds are even more marginalised. Particular attention needs to be paid to eliciting and duly considering their voices.

Safeguarding, while integral in all forms of participation, is especially crucial when working with babies and young children. The inherent power dynamic with adults can never be completely eliminated, but there are ways to minimise it.

Finally, there needs to be an urgency around listening to babies and young children because there are significant consequences when their voices are not heard. The early years are the most critical time for development, and if babies and young children do not have a voice during this period it can put their health and wellbeing at risk and set them back in realising their full potential for years to come.



Young Children's Voices

Key Questions

It is useful to consider reflective questions before, during and after listening to babies' and young children's voices. Below is a list of such questions that can strengthen ethical consideration, the practice of voice work, and learning from babies' and young children's voice work. They are adapted from *The theory and practice of voice in early childhood: An international exploration* (Arnott & Wall, 2022) and [Voice of the infant: Best practice guidelines and infant pledge](#) (Scottish Government 2023).

Questions to consider relating to the process and method of listening to young children:



Questions to consider in relation to space:



Young Children's Voices

Questions to consider in relation to voice:

Who is asking the questions?

What is the level of skills and understanding of how young children communicate amongst the adults present?

What does voice look like/sound like in our context

How do we tune into different types of voice(s)?

What is the balance between collective and individual voices?

Does everyone have an equal voice? Who is included and whose inclusion may be compromised?

How mindful are adults that a child's view may be different to their caregiver's?

How does voice change over time?

Questions to consider in relation to Influence:

When making decisions about care and intervention, how do all adults involved ensure that the child's view is taken into account?

How do adults ensure that the experience of young children is reflected in service design and delivery?

How are the actions recorded that were taken based on what is learned about the child's views?

How is feedback given to the young child on how their views have been acted on?

Key Questions

Young Children's Voices

Questions to consider in relation to audience:

What efforts are made to capture observations and consider what is being communicated?

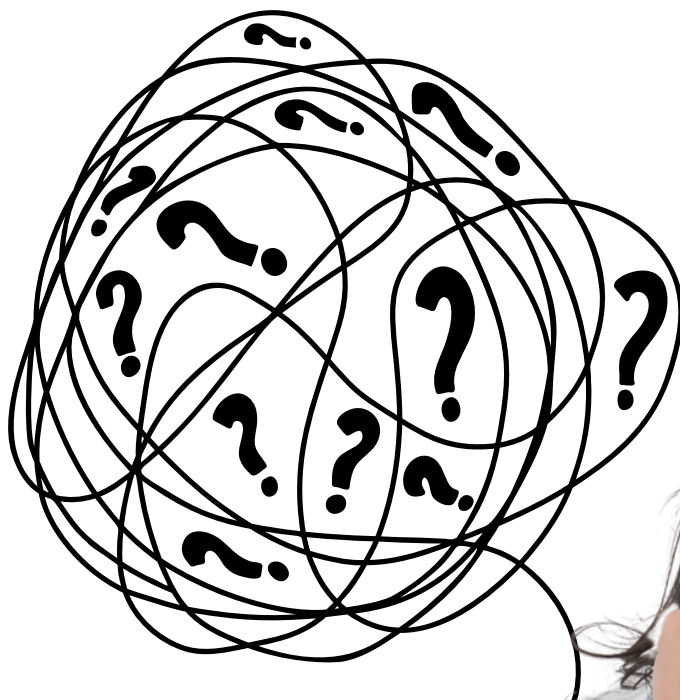
How do adults take note of the child's silence

How do we interpret and translate voice? How do we ensure this is authentic

How do adults acknowledge what they are seeing and hearing to the child and their caregiver

How do we ensure that adults respond directly to the young child?

How are the adults going to act on the child's feedback and views?



Key Questions



Save the Children

Young Children's Voices

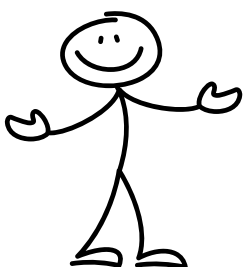
Example of Practice

Child Assent Script

There is no child-friendly version that will be perfect for all children, even those of a similar age and background. Research/ study teams should adapt and tailor the assent script for the particular context, age and ability of child.

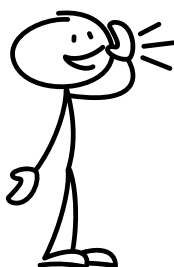
1. INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE

Hello, my name is (NAME)
I have a very interesting job. I
get to work with children like
you and find out how me and
other people I work with can
make sure children can play,
learn, be healthy, and be safe.

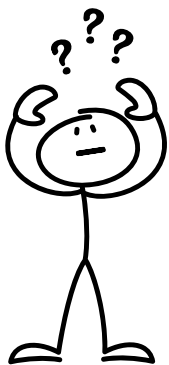


2.

We want to find out what you think
about today and what you have
enjoyed or are looking forward to over
the summer holidays. We would really
like to know what you think. Do you
think you could create a picture, then
tell us about it and let us take a photo
of it? We would like to use your picture
to learn about what children like and
find fun so that we can help more
children do more fun stuff.

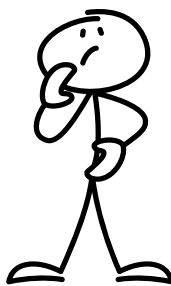


3.
It's up to you if you want to make
a picture or if you do and don't
want to tell us/ let us take a photo
of it. You can say no or you can
say yes - either is ok. nobody will
be upset with you if you don't
want to take part anymore or you
would like to make a picture about
something else.



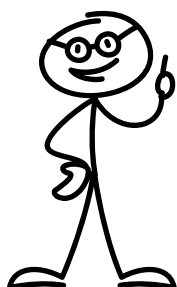
4.

You might feel a bit shy, get a bit
tired or a bit bored, and that's ok.
You can just let me know if you
want to stop and do something else.
If I get worried about something
you say, like you or another child
being hurt or not feeling safe, then I
might have to tell someone else
who can help. Is that ok?



5. QUESTIONS

Does all that make sense? Do you
want to ask me anything? You can
ask me a question any time.



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