



## Listening to babies

Diane Rich

By their very nature babies demand constant attention. This starts even before they are born. Mothers develop a bond with their baby over their nine-month period together and this is where communication begins. Medical staff monitor the growth of babies and listen to them in the womb. Babies' actions are felt by their mothers and sometimes can be seen by those around when they stretch, turn or kick. Affectionate comments such as, 'Baby's going to be a footballer!', 'I think baby's dancing in there!' show that their early actions are being observed and thought about. Adults' responses to children vary enormously. Many respond instinctively towards babies, engage in quality interactions with them and have respect for babies, believing that they have a right to be listened to. But others do not.

### The importance of listening to babies

Practitioners' observations of babies' preferences can contribute to improving service delivery – managers can respond, for example, by adapting key workers' rotas and daily routines in response to what is working best for babies in their setting. In turn, service managers can inform and influence local authority decisions on

how services are commissioned and run by identifying and sharing effective practice to inform policies and strategies. Listening to babies is key to delivering high quality childcare and can impact on continual quality improvement of all services for under 5s.

#### *Who counts as a baby?*

Although the principles for listening to babies may be relevant to all adult-child relations, this leaflet

focuses on young babies and babies, namely those from birth to 18 months as defined overleaf:

### 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.

- 'young babies' refers to those from birth to eight months
- 'babies' refers to those from eight to 18 months.

### *What is listening?*

Effective listening to babies entails respect and a belief that they are worth listening to. Listening is a two-way process which is not limited to the spoken word. It involves babies being active through sounds, movements and actions of many different kinds. Adults need to have the skills to interpret these. In daily encounters, they will make decisions informed by their observations and interactions with babies. They will decide, moment-by-moment, how best to provide for the babies they care for, sometimes getting involved, but at other times leaving babies content in their own explorations.

### *Why is it important to listen to babies?*

Listening to babies helps to ensure that:

- they are valued and feel valued
- they are responded to caringly and attentively
- their physical, emotional and cognitive needs are met
- their interests and experiences are developed in appropriate ways.

Listening acknowledges babies' right to be heard from pre-birth and throughout their lives. It builds up positive, enriching relationships between adults and babies (Gillespie Edwards 2002). It helps adults understand a baby's priorities, interests, concerns and rights. Adults are better able to provide for babies when they listen to them. Through listening a deepened understanding of each individual baby is developed.

Babies who are not listened to are likely to grow up with low self-esteem, while those who are listened to have a sense of well-being and are likely to be less anxious. Roberts (2002) reports that babies feel valued when their actions are responded to calmly. She writes:

*'Sharing children's distress with them in a calm way without fuss or panic is one of the most effective things that "important people" can do to help children grow up feeling good about themselves and other people.'*

(Roberts 2002, p.42)

Bruce (2004) refers to the stress that not listening to babies can cause them. As they grow older this can lead to anxiety and aggressive behaviour. Listening to babies is important because it has an impact on self-image and behaviour in later life. Listening is not only restricted to adults: babies and children are listeners too. Babies

interact with others all the time. They can hear before they are born and become familiar with key voices and sounds that will surround them once they have entered the world. Babies naturally prefer the sound of human voices to other sounds and they respond to these familiar voices. Babies are already expert communicators and they learn even more about listening from the listeners who are all around them. They also learn early on that listening is important and is part of the social world.

Being listened to plays a key role in developing as a skilful communicator. Much is written about the importance of early interaction, which includes being listened to, and its impact on developing communication, language and literacy (Rich 2002). Makin and Whitehead (2004) recognise this too and also acknowledge that babies are ready to learn. They say that:

#### *'Babies*

- *understand the people who look after them every day*
- *think about what is going on around them*
- *enjoy new things and new experiences*

*... babies are born already prepared to find other people interesting and worth communicating with from the start.'*  
(Makin and Whitehead 2004, p.16)

The Early Years Foundation Stage states that 'every child is a competent learner from birth who can be resilient, capable, confident and self-assured' (DfES 2007). Babies learn by being listened to because listening adults respond to babies' interests and are then better able to meet their needs.

## How to listen

### *How can listening to babies be achieved?*

Most adults enjoy listening to babies. They love the reactions from babies when they engage with them. A baby's smile gives a great sense of real pleasure to many parents. A gurgle, a laugh, a baby sound, hand wave or a kick might be celebrated. Such actions from babies are communications that demand attention of some sort.

Adults listen to babies all the time, especially when they are cuddling their babies, feeding them, changing their nappies or bathing them (see 'Lara's story' on p. 3). Adults even listen to babies when they are asleep.

There may be complaints from babies when an attentive adult leaves the room, or a cuddle ends. Roberts (2002) states that adults should show sympathetic acceptance of babies' grievances. Calm feedback shows babies that they have been listened to, but at the same time acknowledges that it is not always possible to alter a course of action. For example, Katie's mum calmly acknowledges her daughter's protests, but she does not change what she is doing (see

'Katie's story' on p. 3). Although Katie's mum did not stop dressing Katie, despite her protests, she recognised that Katie does not like the intrusion of being dressed and that her tights are rough. In future she will be able to choose different clothes for Katie. She has listened to her baby. Being listened to is much better than being ignored.

Listening to babies can be achieved when adults think of babies as capable communicators and when they recognise and tune in to the many different ways babies communicate. Generally it is parents who tune in to their babies and consequently listen to them well. If babies spend time with other carers, their parents' knowledge needs to be respected, valued and shared. Listening to babies involves listening to parents too, and finding out from them about daily events in the home worlds of babies, including what they like, dislike, their preferred food and sleep patterns, what they can do and what currently interests them.

Developing relationships with parents is important. Gillespie Edwards (2002) confirms that:

*'There is immense potential in the parent–staff relationship to support the child, by offering opportunities for continuity, complementarity, mutual respect and deepened understanding of the child as an individual, as part of a family with a particular cultural background and as an active learner with strong interests of his own. When such a partnership is achieved it leads to confidence all round: confident staff, confident parents and confident children.'*

(Gillespie Edwards 2002, p.3)

Listening happens best when adults have good relationships with babies and when these adults respect each other's ways and communicate together about the babies they care for.

## Case study: Lara's story

Babies enjoy close attention from adults at nappy changing or other times, as this example shows:

Tina picks up seven-month-old Lara and says, 'Let's check your bottom'. They go together to get a tissue and a nappy and Tina carries Lara on her hip from the mat area into the bathroom area, and then lays her on the mat. Tina undoes Lara's clothes and says, 'That looks a lot better, doesn't it?', and then, 'Hiya, hiya', looking at her face to face. Lara kicks and Tina says, 'Those legs!', as she fixes the nappy. Then she says, 'There we go. Are you pulling my jumper?' Tina smiles closely at her in between fixing the poppers on her babygrow and Lara, seeming to enjoy the attention, pulls at Tina's clothes and kicks her legs.

(Case study taken from Everyday Stories, NCB)

## Case study: Katie's story

Katie's mum calmly acknowledges her daughter's grievances: Katie, three months old, lies on the mat as her mother kneels over her getting her dressed. She talks to Katie in a high, excited voice as she dresses her. 'Who's a clever girl? Who's a clever girl? You are. You're a clever girl, aren't you and I'm taking my clever girl to the shops. I am.' Her mum rubs Katie's tummy and Katie laughs. 'You are a clever girl. Mummy's clever girl, Katie. And we're getting ready, aren't we? Yes we are ... yes we are. Let's put your little toes in here, come on, ready for the shops ... That's a good girl.' (Katie squirms and tries to wriggle free.) 'Oohh, you don't like these tights, do you?' (Katie starts to cry.) 'Oooh, Katie, I know you don't like this, but soon we'll be at the shops. Nasty tights. We'll have to get you some comfy soft ones at the shops, won't we? Come on now ... nearly ready for the shops. The shops ... the shops. We're going to the shops. Yes we are ... '

(Katie and her mum)

### *How do babies communicate their needs?*

Although babies cannot talk, they have no problems communicating and have little difficulty in letting those around them know what they want, how they feel or what interests them, without words. They are very skilled at it. Crying is commonly thought of as one of the key ways babies communicate. They cry for different reasons. Sometimes, as Winnicott (1964) suggests, it is simply to exercise their lungs; at other times it may be to signal hunger, pain or even the memory or fear of pain. Sometimes babies might cry if they are sad. Crying might occur simply because it is enjoyable to make sounds and be in control. Exploring the world and wanting to be in control is natural for babies, especially as they grow older. This can lead to frustrated crying when the physical restrictions of simply being a baby limits what they can do and what they can get hold of, or when things they don't want are in their way. Leach (1997) records that some babies might be overstimulated by too many toys or people around them so they cry to register feelings, such as rage or frustration.

## Case study: Lara and Mary's story

Calmly supporting babies while giving them time and space to express how they feel is important.

Lara, seven months old, topples onto her face with a big bump. Lara then cries very loudly and seems very shocked by her fall onto her face. Mary is very sympathetic and says, 'Oh dear', and says to her, 'It's not that bad, it's not that bad', but then goes on to say, 'It's very sad, isn't it?', as she holds her gently, and then decides to wait while Lara carries on screaming. Mary also remarks, 'It frightened you, didn't it, Lara?' She responds to the insistence and passion of Lara's screams. She rocks her and holds her and comforts her.

(Case study taken from *Everyday Stories*, NCB)

## Case study: Samson's story

Adults try to tune in to what will stimulate, interest and engage babies.

Samson, seven months old, drops a spoon into a tin and listens to the noise that it makes as it drops down. Then Samson picks the spoon up and mouths it again and Sonia sorts through the basket and draws his attention to some of the other items. Samson frowns at the new things he is offered and carries on examining the spoon and tin very carefully. Sonia seems to notice that he has spent quite a long time playing with the tin and spoon and she comes alongside his play by clapping a wooden spatula on the side of the tin in time to the tape and the music that she has put on. Samson listens attentively and then reaches for the wooden spatula. He tries this on the tin.

(Case study taken from *Everyday Stories*, NCB)

Adults who are tuned in to babies can identify their different cries and will respond appropriately. Taking action is not always possible, but responding to babies, trying to understand and paying attention is important. Sometimes, just acknowledging that they feel sad or

frustrated is all that can be done. Responding to babies calmly and acknowledging how they feel is very important if they are to grow up feeling good about themselves. Listening adults will acknowledge babies' feelings, interests and what they are asking for. Listening adults will give babies space and time to express how they feel (see 'Lara and Mary's story').

Babies give messages about how they feel not just through crying, but also through all of the sounds and actions they make. Makin and Whitehead (2004) report that they might wave their arms, or kick or make sounds of pleasure. They squeal, gurgle, sigh, blow bubbles, hiccup, giggle and babble. They move their bodies in different ways too. They kick their legs, wave their arms, stiffen their bodies, arch their backs, stretch and clench their fingers.

Observations of non-verbal language allow adults to see babies communicate through their many actions. Babies learn about more conventional communication through watching. They are great watchers and can watch those near to them and fix eye contact. Through watching they can mimic the speech of those interacting with them by opening their own mouths and by getting excited (Trevarthen 1993). Babies move their gaze away when they are bored. In these many varied ways they communicate and get reactions from listeners. They entice adults into a two-way communication.

### *What adults do when they listen to babies?*

Observation is an important starting point for listening to babies and this can happen all the time, especially during the daily routines such as feeding, nappy changing, bathing and getting ready for sleep times. Babies communicate how they feel, and what they want, to adults who 'tune in' with all their senses. They recognise all of their baby's actions and interpret these in order to respond in the best possible way. Listening adults follow what babies seem to be looking at and talk around this (Bruce 2004). They provide things for babies that are good to feel, to hold and touch, to taste, to look at and listen to. They try to see the world from the baby's perspective and tune in to the things that will stimulate, interest and engage them. Often these can be very simple things, as Sonia, a key worker in a day nursery, shows when she tries to do exactly this for seven-month-old Samson (see 'Samson's story').

Listening adults interpret the sounds and actions of babies. In a daycare setting a practitioner may know that a specific cry or action from one baby is a sign of hunger or tiredness or needing a nappy change, while a similar cry or action from another baby may mean something different. Strangers in a baby's home can be amazed when a parent reacts to a baby's squeal by simply saying, 'He wants to sit up now.' The adults have tuned in to their children and recognise that they are worth listening to and that they have a right to be heard.

## Case study: Verity's story

Being given choices is a significant part of being listened to.

Verity is sucking a plastic toy and as she does so, she moves to the corner of the room where there are large, soft play shapes covered in coloured plastic. Jackie notices and moves to the centre of the room where there is a large, soft cylinder supported on two blocks that the children can ride on. She smacks the sides of the cylinder with her hands and calls to Verity, 'Are you going to play on this? Come on then.' Verity comes across and with some help, climbs up tentatively. She sits straddled on the cylinder but looks slightly ill at ease and Jackie says, 'Don't you like it, Verity?' Verity shakes her head very slightly. She slides off. Verity looks on as the games on the cylinder are repeated with Jake. Then Jackie says, 'Do you want to do it, Verity?', but Verity does not move and Jackie comments, 'She knows what she doesn't want to do, doesn't she!'

(Case study taken from *Everyday Stories*, NCB)

Adults often ask babies what they want and respond to their answers. Fifteen-month-old Verity is able to make decisions about where she goes and what she does within her day nursery. She is supported by staff in a day nursery who tune in to where she wants to be (see 'Verity's story').

Many adults talk to babies as if they understand what they are saying. The earlier episode with Katie and her mum is a good example of this. Adults seem to respond naturally to the fact that babies cannot understand words. It is common to see people who communicate with babies by pulling faces, making exaggerated sounds, repeating words and using a higher-pitched voice than usual. This helps to hold a baby's attention and gets messages across to babies. Listening adults will engage with babies as they:

- direct their talk to them
- give babies choices
- take turns in making sounds and actions with babies
- respond to what babies show interest in
- calmly and caringly acknowledge babies' emotions
- sing a variety of songs to them, ranging from traditional lullabies from many cultures to pop songs from the charts
- tell them stories
- sing nursery rhymes and get babies involved in action songs
- give commentaries on everyday actions
- model how to be a listener and how to be a communicator
- share toys and picture books with them
- laugh with their babies.

## Challenges and possibilities

### Challenges

Being in a busy home environment may mean that babies do not get to be heard by adults and those around them. Listening to babies and doing all of the activities listed in the preceding section requires time, patience and commitment. It means that daily routines cannot be rushed, although of course this is not always possible in day-to-day lives. In homes where there is a lot of background noise from the TV, radio or computer games, babies' sounds and actions are sometimes not acknowledged.

Deaf or blind babies communicate their feelings, interests, likes and dislikes in the same ways as all other babies, using all the senses they have (see 'James' story' on p. 6). They can mimic adults and respond to them. When listening adults tune in to babies with all their senses, they will hear what is being said and respond to their babies in the best way for each unique baby.

Parents of deaf babies often use more direct face-to-face communication with them, with expression as well as touch or gestures. They encourage others to do the same, especially when different adults care for their child.

When different adults care for babies, for example, family members, childminders, nursery staff and parents living in separate homes, there will be challenges in maintaining relationships, which keep every 'listening adult' informed about individual babies.

Regular time spent sharing information about babies is important in helping listeners tune in to them most effectively. Documentation of observations is particularly useful to ensure continuity of care for the baby. Diary sheets and profile books are good examples of how this can be achieved. Having time to focus on babies is a challenge for all busy parents and practitioners, but it is important to provide children with their rights from the earliest age.

## Case study: James' story

Mum stays close to James when she gives him a new soft toy to explore. She reassures him that she is there by staying close and talking to him.

Four-month-old James, blind from birth, holds his mum's hair as she talks with him. 'Ouch, that's my hair, James. That's mummy's hair. It's long hair for James to pull.' She calmly says, 'Gently, James, do be gentle.' He squeals as he pulls her close and puts her hair in his mouth. He kicks his legs fast. Mum's face is very close to his own, and he nuzzles it with his cheeks. He smiles as he touches her face and makes gleeful sounds as he carries on kicking his legs vigorously. 'That's right, It's mummy. It's

mummy come to play with you James.' She keeps her face very close to James as she puts a soft toy gently onto his face and then into his hand. 'Does that feel nice, James? Mummy likes it. Does James like it?' He releases her hair and stops kicking as he lifts the toy to his mouth and nose. He rubs it on his face. He feels it on his cheek and breathes in the smell. He explores it with his fingers. Mum stays very close. 'Mummy thought you'd like that teddy, James.'

(James and his mum)

### Possibilities

When adults respect babies and believe that they are worth listening to, listening becomes possible. Focusing on the needs of the baby is a starting point for building a good relationship. Where this does not exist, support can come from baby massage classes or seeking help and support from other family members or early years workers. Parenting classes are often held at local children's centres and will support parents through listening to others and sharing experiences.

It is not just relationships with babies that are important; good communicative relationships between all those who look after babies have to be maintained and developed so that information can be shared on a daily basis. The more that adults commit to this, the greater the potential will be for all babies to be listened to. Starting at the very earliest years will mean that a generation will grow up with listening as the norm, which will inevitably have a positive impact on society as a whole.

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## 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.everydaystories.org.uk](http://www.everydaystories.org.uk)

Research conducted by the NCB Early Childhood Unit in 1996-97. Detailed observations of 15 different children, in 15 nurseries for a full day, providing support material for those working with under threes in daycare settings. The full observations are available and will be of particular use to lecturers, trainers and students in the early years and childcare field.

### [www.peal.org.uk](http://www.peal.org.uk)

PEAL offers training for practitioners in working in partnership with parents. It aims to build parents' confidence and active involvement in their children's early learning and development.

### [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.

### [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.literacytrust.org.uk](http://www.literacytrust.org.uk)

The Talk to your Baby initiative (part of the National Literacy Trust website) aims to encourage parents and carers to talk more to babies and young children.

### [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.

### [www.peep.org.uk](http://www.peep.org.uk)

PEEP supports parents and carers in their role as children's first and most important educators. PEEP also trains practitioners to deliver PEEP programmes to families, offering ideas and activities to support babies' and children's learning and development in everyday situations.

## 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:

Why and how we listen to young children  
 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 these 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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