

'When are we having candyfloss?'

Report on a project to investigate consultation with very young children in early years services 2002-3

Funding: DfES Sure Start Unit

Ann-Marie McAuliffe
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'When are we having candyfloss?' - An overview of the Early Childhood Unit project on consultation with very young children including a study into the outcomes of consultation with very young children using locally devised materials.

▪ Abstract

Listening to children is an integral part of understanding what they are feeling and what it is they need from an early years experience. Listening can come in many forms. The thematic analysis of four settings shows the important cycle of listening - observing, documenting, reflecting, taking action and feeding back. These factors are key to producing an environment in which children feel confident, safe and powerful. The following report positions listening as a reflective practice where children lead their own learning and are given the opportunities to prove that even at the youngest ages they are very capable of contributing to the way in which early years services are provided for them. The report also details the extensive dissemination work which the Unit has undertaken and the website provision for this research and that of a national group brought together to guide the project.

Key Words - Children, individual, communication, relationships, listening.

The title of the report comes from an anecdote told to us during one of the site visits in the ECU study. When the researcher asked how the staff knew that the children enjoyed their "philosophy" discussions, a member of staff told her about a three year old who had pulled on her hand one day and asked "when are we having candyfloss?" Unable to pronounce philosophy, she had related the word to the nearest concept she could pronounce: candyfloss.

1 Introduction

The following report outlines the work undertaken by the Early Childhood Unit (ECU) of the National Children's Bureau to look at consultation with very young children. The DfES funded the Unit for one year to conduct a study and disseminate the findings.

The Unit decided to divide the work into three elements. A National Group, a research study and dissemination of information. Each part of the overall project is interlinked and culminated in a seminar on the 29th April 2003 to showcase what had been achieved and discuss how to take the findings into the next year's work agenda.

The research findings presented offered an insight into the amount of work being conducted in the field. Initially ECU decided to bring together an advisory group of colleagues carrying out research into this area to discuss a method of working together which would avoid duplication.

The elements of the project then developed as follows.

2 National Group

The Unit brought together a group of researchers/development workers from national projects to share information about their work and to attempt to avoid duplication and to learn from each other. The group was most anxious to set up an on-going electronic communication rather than having too many face-to-face meetings. ECU co-ordinates this type of activity and has developed a set of resources on the subject which the group will update regularly and which will be available on the earlychildhood.org.uk website. The members of the group are

- Kathleen Cronin - Senior Development Officer - Participation - NCB
- Penny Lancaster - Coram Family
- Alison Clark - Thomas Coram Research Unit
- Ginny Morrow - Barnardos and Brunel University
- Nicky Road - Save the Children Fund
- Sue Owen - Director, Early Childhood Unit (ECU) - NCB
- Ann-Marie McAuliffe - Development Officer ECU - NCB

Discussion is also ongoing with Play Train and Joseph Rowntree Foundation both of which are engaged in projects in this area.

The Unit has now extended the consultation National Group to include other contacts in the early years field who have expressed an interest in participatory work with very young children. The group is a mix of voluntary organisations, Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships and practitioners.

The Unit continues to keep the members updated with action in the field and will be using this group as a sounding board for the work ECU hopes to undertake in working with children from birth to three in 2003-4.

3 Information/ Dissemination

Following discussions with the national group it was decided that the NCB could play a key and unique role in the dissemination of information and resources and could become an appropriate home for a central base of resources. It was this group which developed the concept of a 'Rolling Resource'

This component of the project allows the provision of detailed information for anyone interested in consultation with very young children. This has taken the form of a website which houses a number of 'Rolling Resources' so called because they include a number of resource items on a topic and have a facility for users to add their own good practice stories and advice on how they may have used resources listed to improve their practice. The website address is <http://earlychildhood.org.uk>. It is a public site dedicated to providing *Practice and Research*, *Resources* and *Events* on specific topics to the early years sector. It is hoped that the resource data will continue to grow and provide a substantial contribution to the field and be a first reference point for anyone interested in this area of work. (Please see Appendix 2 for further details on www.earlychildhood.org.uk) The majority of the resources detailed on the site and a number of others relating to the wider field of consultation with children are available from NCB's library <http://www.ncb.org.uk/library/index.htm>

The Unit devised a brief for the website and provided the NCB web team with a suggested proposal for the site. There was some period of negotiation and appendix 2 outlines the structure of the site. Once the site had been designed there was a second period of consultation and the following amendments were made:

- The initial topic areas were amended to:
 - Young children with SEN/Disabilities
 - Consultation with very young children
 - Working with children from birth to age three
 - Childminding
 - Recruitment and retention of staff
- A proposed Student Guide indication is postponed until a later development stage
- The site content is to be arranged in three sections:
 - Resources which includes details of recent books, journal articles, training materials, websites, downloadable documents and press cuttings

Practice and research which includes in-house or commissioned reports of current and unpublished research and evaluations of practice

Events which includes details of conferences, seminars and training events

Updating policy - ECU staff will meet at the start of each month to review new material available for the live topic areas. Information which quickly goes out of date such as events and news items will be up-dated more frequently.

EARLY CHILDHOOD



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Welcome

Welcome to earlychildhood.org.uk, a website from the Early Childhood Unit (ECU) at the National Children's Bureau in England. This site contains capsules of information on specific topics within early years care and education. They are being developed from ECU projects and readers will be able to contribute their own suggestions and comments on existing listings.

If this is your first time using the website or you would like more information about what is contained in the website then please visit our [HELP](#) section.

To view a full list of all the topics currently available on Early Childhood visit the [LIST OF TOPICS](#) page.

Latest Topic:

[Consultation with very young children](#)

The Early Childhood Unit (ECU) is undertaking an in-depth study into local methods used to consult with very young children. The aim of the study is to identify themes in practice and find ways to support practitioners to overcome the barriers of participatory work. It is hoped that the work will produce a focus for some national support materials. The Unit has also brought together a national group to ensure that the work on participation is shared. This website resource was the brainchild of that group. We hope that the information provided will give an insight into the services available and research undertaken into this area. The project is funded by the DfES and has three elements: networks, research and information.

or pick a topic from the following list:

CHOOSE A TOPIC



go

When the website went 'live' two topic areas were introduced:
Consultation with very young children and *Young children with SEN/Disabilities*. *Working with children birth to three* is near completion

4 National Conferences and seminars

The first dissemination event for the project was the Nottingham Early Years conference in September 2002. The Unit dedicated one of the three strands from the two-day conference to discussion on the issue of consultation with young children. The final keynote speech of the conference was presented by Mary-Jane Drummond (Cambridge University Faculty of Education). This talk gave the educational context for the project and is a key resource on the 'rolling resource' website for this topic. Three workshops were also conducted on the theme of listening to young children. These were presented by Nicky Road (Save the Children), Penny Lancaster (Coram Family) and Alison Clark (Thomas Coram Research Unit). The details of these presentations have been made available to the public in a conference report which is available on the NCB website. (www.ncb.org.uk). The specific details of the 'listening to children' talks are also linked on to the new 'rolling resource'. (Please see Appendix 1 for details of presentations.)

The conference offered a unique opportunity to showcase the project and a number of settings expressed an interest in being included in the dissemination mailing list and in the study.

Over the year ECU has also presented the work from the Consultation with Very Young Children project to a number of colleagues in the field at local, regional and national events as follows:

- Local Authority Early Years Co-ordinators' Network AGM 30/5/02
- National Childminding Association national conference 19/6/02
- Joint DfES Early Years and Learning and Skills Council seminars June-July 2002
- Children in Scotland Early Years Advisory Group 29/8/02
- UK UNESCO early years conference, Cardiff 14/10/02
- Local Education Authorities Research Group conference, London 15/11/02
- 2 seminars on the Everyday Stories website, London and Birmingham, Nov 2002
- CDC/ECU special needs national conference, London 9/12/02
- Playtrain seminar, Birmingham 17/12/02
- LAEYCN Seminar on Integration, University of East London 15/1/03
- Neighbourhood Nursery Initiatives conference, London 5/3/03
- 3 Seminars on the Disability Discrimination Act March 2003
- Interplay Journal's national conference, Warwick 13/3/03
- LAEYCN Seminar on diversity, University of London 27/3/03
- Day conference for Shropshire EYDCP 28/3/03

- Day conference for Hampshire Families Forum 28/3/03
- Medway Childminding Association AGM 5/4/03

It was agreed that the national group would provide an invited seminar to be held at the end of the project and hosted by the Early Childhood Unit. The purpose of the seminar was to showcase the study of local materials, discuss current national initiatives that have recently been developed and consider ways forward for this area of work in the coming year and beyond.

The Unit hopes to take forward the work on consultation with very young children and integrate it with ECU's new agenda on working with children from birth to three, so information about this strategy was also included within the seminar programme.

Seminar Programme - Date: 29th April 2003
Where next for consultation with very young children?

Aim:

- To provide information about current research
- To discuss what support is needed for practitioners
- To think about moving forward - training etc.
- To showcase Rolling Resource

Suggested points of discussion; Where next? Dissemination paths?, Steer from Government?, Training packages?, Funding?, EYDCP leaflet?

Audience: Practitioners, EYDCP - (Development Officers), National Early Years Organisations

Venue: NCB

11.00	Introduction - Sue Owen
11.10	Alison Clark (TCRU) National Overview
11.40	Penny Lancaster (Coram Family) Listening to young children resource - a participatory approach
12.10	Ann-Marie McAuliffe (ECU) local studies and the Rolling Resource
12.40	Questions and Answers
Lunch	
13.30	Workgroups to discuss issues
14.30	Feedback from groups
15.00	Lesley Staggs and Sharon Smith (Sure Start Unit) The way forward
15.30	Close

*Please see Discussion for the outcome of the seminar

5 ECU study

It was felt that whilst there is a lot of work in the field, most of it has been focused around methods of involving children, so it was identified that it would be useful to look at the effect that consultation has on the communication and relationships within early years settings. The aim of the project was to look in depth at a small number of local initiatives on children's participation in service development and delivery within a range of settings. There is a particular emphasis on lessons learned about the effect on adults (staff, managers, planners and parents/carers) of engaging with children in this way including implications for training, qualifications and continuing professional development.

5a Methodology

The study used a qualitative method. Thematic analysis was used to convey the core features of consultation with very young children and to determine how children's participation in service development and delivery within a range of settings can be achieved. A particular emphasis was put on lessons learned about the effect on adults involved in the setting.

Respondents were found using the networking capability of the two national networks serviced by the ECU: the Early Childhood Forum (ECF) and the Local Authority Early Years Co-ordinators' Network (LAEYCN). ECF is a coalition of interest groups, professional associations and voluntary organisations, united in their concern to develop the care and education of young children from birth; LAEYCN is a network of the 150 lead officers of EYDCPs who meet to provide an information and practice sharing forum for local authority early years specialists.

These two Networks were canvassed for information about settings with creative ways of listening to very young children and we actively tried to link with settings representing a range of current initiatives including Early Excellence Centres, Neighbourhood Nurseries and Sure Start local programmes. A short list of ten settings was interviewed by telephone and then four local settings were selected for on-site interviews and observations. A semi-structured interview schedule was developed and undertaken with key personnel in each of the settings using questions derived from a consultation with the national group and from the background study (see above). The guiding questions are listed below:

▪ A description of the project
▪ Why do they do it?
▪ How does it differ in different age groups of children?
▪ How do they involve parents?
▪ How do they involve other groups?
▪ How has it changed the way in which staff work, both attitudes to work and the day - to - day activities?
▪ How has it altered the way in which the setting runs?
▪ Has it changed relationships with parents?
▪ How has it changed relationships between children and parents?
▪ Has it changed relationships between children and children?
▪ Has it changed relationships in the staff team?
▪ What do they plan to do next with this?
▪ Are there any areas of difference e.g. does it need to operate differently for children from minority communities and children with SEN/disabilities?
▪ What would have made it easier at the start?
▪ What support could you use now?

A member of the Unit went to each setting and interviewed the manager of the setting. The results were transcribed and evaluated using thematic analysis.

5b Results

Case Study One

Setting: Private Day Nursery

Venue: The Children's House, Station Road, Stallingborough, Grimsby, North East Lincolnshire, DN41 8AJ

Contact Details: enquires@childrenshouse.co.uk, 01472 86000 - Sylvia Archer/ Theresa Ellerby

A description of the project

The setting uses a Montessori Education approach and has done since the Nursery was opened in 2000. This approach has listening to children, developing mutual respect, valuing children's opinions and a child centred approach at the heart of its philosophy.

The term 'Listening' embraces the skills of observation, listening and responding appropriately to the child. The Children's House runs a keyworker system whereby the child experiences a relationship with the same adult throughout their 'sensitive periods'. Sensitive periods are transient stages in the child's early life when he or she is "tuned in" to certain aspects of the environment. (Montessori International magazine, 2003) The keyworker uses 'listening' techniques in order to establish if the

child needs a certain range of experiences that coincide with that particular sensitive period. These listening techniques include observation, reflection and assessment of the child's needs.

The culture of the setting is important and the children are taught about kindness to others and respect. This culture enables the 'listening' to appear effortless. The Children are encouraged to talk about their feelings and make choices. One method the nursery uses for the three to five year olds is to offer the children a toy catalogue from which they could choose the toys they felt would be fun to have in the nursery. Another way the staff access views is by working on specific projects which involve artwork or walks, discussion of one of these projects for instance focused on 'who helps us'. The children actively discuss these subjects in the setting.

The nursery uses tools such as Treasure Baskets to help children develop, for instance this would be used during a sensitive period to small objects. The wicker basket is filled with objects that have distinctive textures. The experience of feeling silk purses, starfish, shells, crinkly paper and the like allows the child to build their sense of touch. The treasure basket is available to all children as and when they feel like playing with it.

The Nursery has received funding from the Neighbourhood Nursery Initiative to create a new building which has allowed the Nursery to move and use its existing building in order to extend its services to the primary age range. The children and parents and local community were consulted about what they wanted from the new nursery in a variety of ways. Each part of the new build has a purpose and is derived from feedback from the consultation period. A larger consultation project was developed when the nursery received funding from Neighbourhood Nursery Initiative. The staff asked children what they wanted from a new building and allowed the children to respond in a number of ways. Some used disposable cameras to capture what they liked about their nursery. Some children painted pictures of what they envisaged and staff would talk to the children and ask questions and document what the children had said while painting. Others responded verbally about what they wanted. Much information was gained through staff observations of what distracted children (e.g. being mixed in with toddlers) while other observations concluded that the children liked to be able to see their brothers and sisters.

The architects tried to accommodate all the views from parents, staff and children. The children were involved in each step of the process and their views have been acted upon and this is demonstrated to them in the design of the new building. For instance, the children expressed their love of the outdoor play area and gardens and a desire to spend more time outside. Given the weather in Grimsby this would not always be possible, so the design incorporate large areas of glass wall and partitions so that the outside can be brought inside as much as possible.

Why do they do it?

The nursery began with a Montessori Education ideology and continues to hold true to the principles of this approach. The children are happy and are learning life skills such as respect for others, and the staff are happy as they are receiving quality training and being appreciated for their work by managers, parents and children. Parents are happy as they have a good knowledge of what the child does during the day, their views are respected by the nursery and the staff are approachable.

How does it differ in different age groups of children?

The birth to twos have a daily diary which keyworkers update and parents take home each evening. The diary documents what activities the child has done that day and what they have enjoyed particularly; the time the infant has slept and what they have eaten and at what time. Parents are very keen on this method of communication as there is a two way flow of information about the child's health and well being.

How do they involve parents?

The parents receive a quarterly newsletter from the nursery which is available in paper copy or electronically- this is particularly useful for those parents who do not live with their child but like to keep up to date with their child's care and education.

The managers of the setting prepare a questionnaire entitled 'How are we doing?' twice a year and work to respond positively to parents' comments.

How do they involve other groups?

Other members of the community are welcomed to the nursery. In the new building there will be an internet café to enable parents to access information and to have a space to communicate with other parents. This area will also benefit the local community, as the nursery will provide internet access to the village. The retired members of the community frequently drop in to bring materials for the children's play.

The setting is positioned alongside a working farm. The children get regular visits and with support from the farmer experience a number of farm related experiences.

How has it changed the way in which staff work, both attitudes to work and the day - to - day activities?

The staff have a greater working knowledge about listening to young children and demonstrate confidence in doing so. The children react better to confident adults and the staff benefit from a feeling of being valued and invested in and this feeling is mirrored in the children, making a happier environment for all.

How has it altered the way in which the setting runs?

The setting has always been run this way but regular consultation with parents and other groups means that the setting is adaptable and flexible to community needs.

Has it changed relationships with parents?

The parents are open to discussion about the setting and the way in which the staff work with the children. It has been noticed that the adults involved with the setting are able to recognise the importance of observation and listening skills when working with very young children.

How has it changed relationships between children and parents?

The nursery holds parents evenings and has an open door policy to discuss issues with parents. There is a noticeable respect between parents and children, this has been observed by staff in the setting. The staff have been able to provide routes to help parents with children who display behaviour problems. A recommended resource is 'We can work it out' produced by Save the Children.

Has it changed relationships between children and children?

Mutual respect for each other is evident. This allows for the children to take some time to absorb the norms of the setting and realise that it is a learning curve. The environment of the setting supports this learning and they feel they are developing a community of respect in which difficult behaviour is less likely to occur and can be dealt with more effectively, within the ethos of the setting, when it does.

Has it changed relationships in the staff team?

The team dynamic is very supportive of each other and the staff undertaking the Montessori Education Diploma have increased confidence in their work methods. Personal development reviews are regularly undertaken and staff are given feedback about future development of their role. Qualifications are given a high priority in the agenda for staff development.

What do they plan to do next with this?

Continuation of treating children as individuals, talking and listening to the children and valuing their opinions.

Are there any areas of difference e.g. does it need to operate differently for children from minority communities and children with SEN/disabilities?

The nursery is open to all children. There are no barriers for children attending pre-five. However those children with complex needs wanting to attend (post five years old) are only funded by the local authority during term time, as the setting requires an additional carer to provide one to one support. Many parents of children with complex needs are unable to afford for one to one carers during holiday times. This is an ongoing issue with the local authority as to how it allocates its spend for these children.

The nursery has two children with disabilities. The children are treated equally. The nursery has invested in imaginative toys including dolls in wheelchairs and with aids. They have also introduced a topic of learning about guide dogs. The other children seem not to differentiate between those that have a disability and those that do not.

The nursery has various topics they discuss. A module that has been incorporated into this is multiculturalism. This allows the staff to discuss the ways in which cultures differ. The Children's House has 2% of children from minority ethnic groups. The children are accommodated with a different diet and projects are arranged to discuss different cultures.

What would have made it easier at the start?

The nursery was in an advantageous position as it started with the philosophy of listening to children and then had time to develop strategies to make the philosophy real. It was much easier to start with a blank sheet and create the culture rather than having to work with a culture already set in stone and trying to change it.

What support could you use now?

It would be useful to have the funding to appoint a researcher to look at the effect that consultation has on the setting and how to take that forward in different ways.

Would you find the rolling resource of use to you, your staff and parents?

Yes the new nursery will have an internet café and will be available to parents and members of the community. The site would be useful both to parents to gain a deeper understanding of issues in early childhood and to staff in finding out information for their development as practitioners.

Case Study Two

Setting: Early Excellence Centre

Venue: Southall Early Excellence Centre

Contact Details: whelan_kate@yahoo.co.uk, Kate Whelan

A description of the project

The Southall Early Excellence centre uses a unique method of listening to children talking. While the three sites do not have any babies attending the provision they do all engage in a philosophy group for their three to five year olds. The staff encourage the children's ability to think critically and have profound thoughts. The philosophy session provides the children with an open forum to think and talk about anything.

A member of staff starts the discussion while another documents the children's reactions. Once the children are used to the activity they become more confident and elaborate in their thinking, with minimal input from the adults in the room. The discussions held are open ended and the children are often encouraged to talk by using objects or books to trigger their imagination.

The staff noted that working without an agenda was difficult to begin with, but the skill of child-led discussion could be acquired in time.

An example:

A staff member begins the session with a story of a boy on the beach. The children take over and ask questions of each other and make statements to

add to the debate - such as 'Where does sand come from?', 'Jesus is up in the sky', 'What are clouds made of?' 'Rain is made in the clouds'

Staff also use these sessions to develop new projects aimed at answering some of the questions and issues that arise from such discussions. A skeleton was used to begin a session and the staff followed up the views raised in that session with a project on the body. Again the children proved their ability to have differing and sophisticated views on the body and organs including a lengthy discussion about the heart. This discussion had some children describing the heart as a place where love comes from, whilst others opted for the more medical description of the organ.

The setting has also experimented with other methods of consultation based around the principles of the Effective Early Learning Programme (EEL) to which observation is key. They have asked the children about their environment and why they like coming to nursery. The staff have helped the children express themselves with art.

The staff have a 'things that children say' - to encourage both the adults and children to take note of what discussions the children are having. This again is a source to tap into the type of project topics the children might enjoy.

Why do they do it?

The staff feel that observation is a key part of early years practice and have been supported by the EEL programme. The staff are also keen to keep up with the children's needs and understand what children want from their service. The staff feel that it is important when working with children, to allow them to learn through play, and it encourages the children if their ideas are used to design the theme of projects.

There is also a strong influence from the Reggio Emilia approach to work with young children and their families. The staff see the children as capable of profound thoughts and allow them to speak freely about the thoughts they have.

How does it differ in different age groups of children?

The setting caters for three to five year olds. The same techniques are used for all ages but the children who have attended the setting longer are more confident with their views.

How do they involve parents?

The setting provides curriculum evenings and spends a lot of time discussing issues with parents. There is a big effort to translate the discussions for parents as there are 29 different languages used in the Southall EEC community. Staff are keen to consult with the parents and have received positive feedback regarding the Newsletter.

How do they involve other groups?

There is limited scope for involving the wider community. Although if more resources were available the setting could share their practice more widely.

How has it changed the way in which staff work, both attitudes to work and the day - to - day activities?

The staff work together where possible to ensure that the children's comments are recorded. The staff are encouraged by the children's positive responses but find that the work can be difficult if only one member of staff is available to run the sessions. There is a determination to continue the themes the children raise through their talk into the project work they do. This shows the children that they are being listened to. For instance, the children discussed a spider that lived outside by the door. The staff then developed a project on spiders for the children.

How has it altered the way in which the setting runs?

The setting has tried to use the resources it has. Working on the activities to encourage children to talk and listen to each other has become more prominent on the agenda for development of the setting as its success has been noted by staff.

Has it changed relationships with parents?

More communication with parents has been noticed but it is difficult to access parents' opinions due to language barriers and time restriction on behalf of both parents and staff. Curriculum evenings have proven successful but ideally the setting would like to develop this area more if resources became available.

Has it changed relationships between children and children?

The children are all keen to have their comments noted and support each other in the philosophy group. The children have grown in confidence. A practitioner recorded a philosophy session where she wore a black hat with a rainbow trim and did not say a word to the children. The children happily took over the session and had a wonderful free flowing discussion for 30 minutes elicited by the hat. The children were very comfortable to speak to each other. The staff noted that at the beginning of the year children are more wary and unfamiliar with the style of the sessions but by the beginning of the second term they are very happy to talk freely, display high-level thinking and let the adults take a back seat.

Has it changed relationships in the staff team?

The staff from the three settings are able to discuss the children's development and share expertise and skills in participatory work. They feel they would benefit from further training. There is a real sense that all the staff members are on board with the concept of listening to children.

What do they plan to do next with this?

Will continue current work and will try to build on what they have achieved. It is felt that the staff need more points of reference and resources to embed participation into everyday practice.

Are there any areas of difference e.g. does it need to operate differently for children from minority communities and children with SEN/Disabilities?

Parents attend to tell stories in the Mother tongue of the children for which English is not their first language. There are 29 different languages in the settings. These stories are usually culture-based stories and do not have the same style as the philosophy group. The Settings require more funding to train staff or obtain staff with the skills to conduct philosophy groups in various languages of the children in the provision. There are some children with speech and language difficulties. The children are helped to express themselves in other ways but the resources are limited and more information on being creative with resources to help children express themselves would be welcomed.

What would have made it easier at the start?

More staff to concentrate on ways in which consultation could be embedded into the culture of the setting. The provision would have and still would benefit from training on how to 'listen' to young children. Examples on how other practitioners creatively use resources would be advantageous. As the setting has a large number of children with different languages it would be desirable to have more staff and resources to access their views. There is a need for funding for the further development of staff.

Would you find the rolling resource of use to you, your staff and parents?

The staff would certainly benefit from access to research and more importantly case studies of how other practitioners are enabling listening to be part everyday life in the setting.

Case Study Three

Setting: Sure Start

Venue: Rosehill and Littlemore estates, Oxford

Contact Details: tan.lea@sure-start.org.uk, Tan Lea

A description of the project

The Rosehill and Littlemore Sure Start has a committed agenda for children's choices. The staff, parents and children are regularly involved in discussion regarding the service. The ethos of work is based on the premise of respecting children as individuals and allowing them the space and time to verbalise their views. The staff do not hand power over to the children. They provide boundaries and within these boundaries choices can be made by the children giving them the opportunity to feel empowered yet safe.

An example the staff use to give this message to parents:

Let your child choose their own clothes but set a boundary of choices: Rather than giving them the option of their entire wardrobe you can give

them a choice between two jumpers. This way the child is dressed appropriately for the weather but has chosen what to wear.

The staff are very open to children's needs and this is reflected in play. The children have an open area with a range of activities which they can use as and when they choose. The staff also encourage children to choose a meal from the Cafe menu every Wednesday.

An essential tool for listening to children is observation. The staff regularly observe the children's likes and dislikes. They document the children's activities in books and photos to which the children have access.

The Sure Start setting also works at a countywide level feeding into the consultation group for Oxfordshire, meeting termly. Rosehill and Littlemore are also involved in Children's Focus Groups; the local structures of regular multi-disciplinary meetings to take forward the work. The group has agreed that job descriptions should acknowledge the children's rights commitment built into countywide policy.

Staff engage in other activities that provide methods of listening and accommodating children's needs. The children have been involved in making model gardens for the new garden that will be built. The children drew designs of what they liked outside and all comments on what the outdoor space should have were recorded by the staff. The children are also encouraged to choose new toys from catalogues to add to the current pool. The setting also has toy library catalogues with pictures of all toys available so that children can choose what they want to borrow if they cannot attend the session.

The staff help children make faces to access views and to help them understand feelings. This activity also gives the children confidence in knowing that it is fine to express feelings even if they are scared or sad.

The Cafe is a child friendly area with a variety of high and low chairs and tables where children and parents can talk with others. Play activities are compatible with cafe area and child friendly food is available. The Children also have the opportunity to choose the meals every Wednesday.

Why do they do it?

The staff found that listening to children is the most fun area of their work. Whilst it can be hard to find new and creative ideas it is always very rewarding when the methods work and the children are responsive and happy. The setting developed structures for listening in order to, develop energy for consultation with children and parents. The staff also see that listening is an integral part of early identification and support for children with SEN and disabilities. This principle is also true for early identification leading to improving behaviour.

How does it differ in different age groups of children?

With very young children the staff use observation and interpretation techniques. With toddlers there are also elements of observation but they children are encouraged to voice their opinions via visual mediums such as painting and pictures. The older range of children are more articulate so verbal communication is noted and observations and visual representation are still used.

How do they involve parents?

Each Friday the setting focuses on choices and has a session all morning about choices. This helps the parents understand that children do not have a free reign but have a number of choices set out by the adults. Rosehill and Littlemore also have a Parent Participation Worker who has a remit to get parents views to inform planning around projects.

The setting also uses other resources to help parents including 'Its not just me then' a video and has a Check it out group for parents only. Planning meetings for major changes such as NNI new build are open to public. The setting also operate a suggestion box and makes requests for thoughts on specific projects such as the NNI new build i.e. toys, playroom and café as well as general comments on the service.

How do they involve other groups?

The setting works with different providers in the area and is currently producing a guide to practicing methods of consultation with very young children. The setting has a tradition of work on children's choices and has worked with the countywide group to help to develop a children's rights checklist. The countywide coordination Oxford community project pulls together the views of young people. This group provides a mechanism to feedback on consultation. The setting also works with people who aren't funded by Sure Start. It supports settings such as playgroups, schools, and childminders and has an open door policy with resources and expertise on hand. The Sure Start staff feel that listening is a part of quality practice.

How has it changed the way in which staff work, both attitudes to work and the day - to - day activities?

The staff are all well-informed and committed to listening to children. Staff are happy and encouraged by the responses of children and parents to the choices agenda.

How has it altered the way in which the setting runs?

The Sure Start operates a drop in session where parents must stay with their child and the staff facilitate in the different areas. Play work goes across all areas of work, as does the promotion of children's choices. The entire physical layout of the setting provides the opportunity for children to engage in all activities at any given time. Large, open access to all units - promoting access to everything

Has it changed relationships with parents?

The staff openly talk about the children's choices in everyday life which is not about giving power but giving boundaries in which choices can be made.

The parents are open to such discussion when children's choices are presented in a non-threatening way.

How has it changed relationships between children and parents?

The staff recounted an experience with one particular parent who initially struggled to listen to their child, 6 months ago one particular mother would not take her child home when the child asked to leave, as she preferred to stay talk with friends. However recently the staff have noticed a difference and the mother is far more receptive to her child's requests even at the expense of her time with her friends.

Has it changed relationships between children and children?

The children have more access and ability to participate and therefore are communicating better with each other.

Has it changed relationships in the staff team?

The staff are very clear about respecting children as individual people and use observation with babies and verbalising choices for children. The setting has an agreed statement and there is a continued focus around training for staff. The staff encourage each other.

What do they plan to do next with this?

Rosehill and Littlemore have written a book called 'can do ' - examples of activities to encourage making choices. This is currently with the publishers of Can Do series. The book is aimed at early years practitioners and parents. It details practical things to do with very young children - versatile activities across different disciplines.

Are there any areas of difference e.g. does it need to operate differently for children from minority communities and children with SEN/disabilities?

The setting hosts a sensory room for all children but is particularly good for children with SEN and disabilities. The setting accommodates children with SEN and disabilities in terms of providing ways in which they can communicate their needs.

The setting has an Asian support team and all practice and thinking incorporates culture. Asian support workers help to support the families where the importance of play is not recognised and conversely advise on elements of Asian culture such as baby massage. Same message is given throughout that the individual specific needs of parents and children are respected and catered for.

What would have made it easier at the start?

Some support information about what others do - like the Rolling resource or can do book. It is difficult with very young children and hard to shift the thinking of all the stakeholders at first.

What support could you use now?

More time to plan and focus on consultation. It would be useful to have regular meetings to steer the work. There is internet access in the computer training room so a web resource would be useful.

Case Study Four

Setting: Sure Start

Venue: Westy - Warrington

Contact Details: tholding@warrington.gov.uk - Angela Taylor, 01925 630618

A description of the project

The Westy Sure Start, Warrington, began a consultation project with the [National Youth Advocacy Service](#) (NYAS) to obtain the views of very young children on a specific issue: what children want from their early years setting. The consultation project is ongoing until July 2004. The team have been using a variety of methods to gain the views of young children. The process has undergone much trial and error but the team have worked through a number of methods to suit different children.

Children in nursery classes of two local schools were visited by the members of the consultation team before any activities were carried out. This was to allow the children time to get to know and trust the new adults. The consultation was purposely fitted around the normal routine of the children's day and the team got involved with the daily activities to remove the stranger issue. It was noted that when the team was recognised the children were more responsive. The team also ensured that the nursery teachers approved the programme before and tried to involve current projects such as the theme on colours. Relationship building exercises were carried out which included songs and playground games.

The consultation team then worked with the staff in the setting to provide the children with a number of activities, which allowed them to express themselves. It was noted that there was a significant number of children with speech and language difficulties, and these were accommodated by different consultation techniques. These children were given picture-based activities and used photography to express themselves. Other children were more vocal and engaged in circle time discussion around what they liked and disliked in their setting. A teddy bear was used in a similar method to a persona doll to encourage discussion. The project has been introduced to discover a number of issues around what children do and don't want from their nursery including; what types of play, physical environment, equipment preferred inside - outside, how to make children welcome, food and what they want from staff members. Oral feedback was given two months after initial consultation, plans are in place to feedback every two to three months.

The team realised that the consultation approach differed for each child depending on time spent in the setting, confidence, attention span etc. It became very apparent that each child needed to be consulted differently to suit their needs

Why do they do it?

Initially the project was begun to fulfil the Sure Start remit to involve the local community and the ethos of participatory work with young children. The project was designed to access the views of young children for the building of a new NNI. They are encouraged by the specific targets committed to consultation and supporting practitioners in changing the way people work.

How does it differ from different age groups of children?

The Sure Start has arranged trips for families with children aged 4yr -10 yr olds and used the trips as a link to seeking views. Parents are given snappy short questionnaires, which are mainly closed questions.

With very young three year olds and very old three year olds the team noticed that the younger ones tend to follow the lead of the older ones. Both settings already use circle time so children were very comfortable and used to it however the team decided to use separate groups to obtain views to eliminate the trend of the younger children following the views of the older children.

How do they involve parents?

Letters and briefings sent to parents and a parents questionnaire was enclosed to find out what issues are concerning them. An audit of parents issues showed some anxiety that NNI would take away existing provision such as childminders particularly for children after school. Liasing with the school and parents to give them some control The Sure Start is hoping to start a parent education programme shortly.

How do they involve other groups?

The EYDCP is heavily involved in NNI and are advised of the work being conducted. Nursery teachers and heads are very happy to be involved in planning and report this to Governors. The team tap into other communication chains in the community via newsletters etc.

How has it changed the way in which staff work, both attitudes to work and the day - to - day activities?

Class A nursery teacher reported that the children had enjoyed the activities and had conducted a couple herself in small groups on different topics. Class B continued with circle time and keen to start other activities with 2 nursery sessions.

How has it altered the way in which the setting runs?

Some of the teachers have used the techniques in their daily practice as the children have enjoyed the time spent with the Sure Start team.

Has it changed relationships with parents?

Not really had enough opportunity to provide evidence for this although the team are working on accessing parent's views.

How has it changed relationships between children and parents?

Not really had the opportunity to access evidence for comment on this.

Has it changed relationships between children and children?

The feedback sessions have shown that the children are reactive and more confident with each other but that could be due to the length of time they have had in the nursery. The longer they have been there the more confident they become. Some teachers commented that the children became better at working in groups.

Has it changed relationships in the staff team?

The project is still ongoing so this part of the research has not yet been addressed. The new nursery staff will be committed to a culture of listening.

What do they plan to do next with this?

This project is still in a trial and error stage however they are learning a lot and would like to ensure that the methods that have been successful are shared with colleagues in the field and are embedded in the culture of the new nursery.

Are there any areas of difference e.g. does it need to operate differently for children from minority communities and children with SEN/disabilities?

The children communicate in different ways - non-verbal, observation pictures and use smaller words. Several activities including MAKATON signing are conducted with those children with speech and language difficulties. Not many children with SEN/D but all children are involved. There are no children from black or ethnic minority backgrounds, but there are facilities for translation in the LA.

What would have made it easier at the start?

Some guidance material on how effective consultation is carried out. Case studies of how other people have worked would have been very useful. Working with children of this age is challenging and more information about methodology would be useful. The team have tried a number of ways of engaging parents such as setting up meetings just after they have dropped the children to nursery. Some support material such as engaging with parents and socially excluded children and parents would have been useful.

What support could you use now?

Staff are committed but unsure how to disseminate information. There is internet access on the bus so the rolling resource would be of use for that. A training course with practical examples of how it can be done and a list of resources - consultation activities would be supportive.

5c Analysis

Whilst each of the case studies has shown a different approach to consultation they all show uniform features of listening. The following themes have been detected.

- Knowing the Children - consultation is not as effective with strangers
- Respect - Is key to all relationships. This needs to be a fundamental part of listening. The children will learn from An early age the life skill that is respect for others.
- Capable Children - This is again a part of respect. Children need to be seen as capable in order for the practitioners to treat them as capable.
- Cycle of consultation - Consultation does not have to be an additional feature of working with very young children. It is a part of ongoing daily practice and practitioners need support to identify opportunities.
- Treating all children as individuals - Each child is different and has different needs. It is important that these are identified when listening to children so that the child can be interpreted properly and can be given the opportunity to use different means of communication.
- Consultation with all stakeholders in the setting - The parents/guardians of the children also need to be involved in the consultation process. The child's family and culture is a part of their identity and will affect the way they respond to adults. The setting also has to be aware of parents/guardians needs and inform them about the principles of listening.
- The staff need to be invested in and listened to as well as the children - The staff are the gatekeepers of the children's views. If they are not given the skills to identify children's views then the children's experience will suffer. Furthermore the staff need time to reflect and discuss practice with each other and get advice from the more experienced members. Listening to the staff is a part of creating a listening culture in the setting.

The staff in the settings felt that improvements to their current methods would be significantly made if there was available support for

- Engaging with parents - need more support
 - How to make 'listening' a daily practice
 - Examples of creative practice to enable them to begin to think and apply such practice to their setting - How to do it!
-

5d Discussion

The study indicated some clear ingredients for good practice when consulting with very young children. Although each case study is at a different developmental stage of their projects they all aspire to make listening a way of life in their setting.

The following cycle was common to the approaches adopted:

Listen → **Document** → **Reflect** → **Take Action** → **Feedback**

Listen: Listening is more than the dictionary definition of 1- to concentrate on hearing something, 2 to take heed or pay attention.

Listening to very young children is a skill which combines;

- Observing the child on its own
- Listening to children talk to each other
- Observing their behaviour with each other
- Talking to the child and waiting for a response
- Responding to that child's verbal or non-verbal response
- Helping the child find ways of communication that suits their needs

Document: The careful documenting of children's views has a number of advantages. The practitioners are able to remember what an individual child likes or dislikes and if the keyworker for a certain child is unable to attend the session then the child can be cared for by another member of staff without losing the continuity of understanding with that child.

Rosehill and Littlemore staff document the children's activities in books and photos to which the children have access.

Reflect: This is an important feature in the cycle. Staff must reflect on what has been observed in order to uncover what perhaps may not be obvious at a first glance. An example of such reflection can be seen in the instance of Southall Early Excellence Centre.

The children freely express their enjoyment of the time they have to talk and listen and express themselves in their philosophy time. A child was noted to have said 'When are we having candyfloss?' For some this would be nonsense or simply meaning food. However for the practitioners of the Southall Early Excellence Centre this is understood as the child meant it. Unable to say philosophy at the tender age of three the child uses her existing vocabulary to find a word that fits the same sound. The practitioners listen to the child, reflect on what is said and are able to understand that the child is expressing "when are we having philosophy" rather than pink sweet food stuff!

Take Action: This is key to gaining trust. The children need to see evidence that their views have been listened to and thought about by the adults. This

will provide children with the desire to continue to voice their views and feel confident in themselves that their ideas are good ones.

In each of the case studies the settings have actively responded to the needs of the children and advised them of this in formal and informal ways. The Westy Sure Start team have made special efforts to return to the children and advise them of the action they have taken on their behalf. While the Southall EEC responds with project topics that the children have commented on in group discussions.

Feedback: This element of listening is the difference between children being listened to and children **feeling** they are being listening to. The principle is the same for adults. If you are asked for your opinion and nothing is done with it then you will be less likely to want to offer your opinion again or you may feel frustrated that nothing is being done even though you have expressed your feelings.

Children need to be reassured that their opinion is valid and even if the outcome cannot be achieved they need to be shown why and how their voice contributed.

- Participation in service development and delivery within a range of settings.

It is clear from the case studies that children's views form a valuable input into the environment and learning topics that they are involved in. The children are more responsive and happier in an environment which has been adapted to suit their needs. This is also true when topics for projects are based on something they have expressed an interest in.

- effect on adults (staff, managers, planners and parents/carers) of engaging with children

The case studies provide a base for debate on the improvement of relationships within and around the setting when staff actively listen to children. It is difficult to quantify the change as none of the case studies had actively sought to document this change in attitudes between adults and adults; adults and children and children and children. It is clear that respect is key to relationships and as respect is a principle of listening then it is assumed that the relationships benefit from listening.

- Implications for training, qualifications and continuing professional development

Listening to children is not an additional task for practitioners. It can be, and is for many, a part of everyday good practice. However there is a need to revisit training schemes and qualifications to evaluate how they can emphasise the importance of observing and responding to children in the cycle described above. Practitioners need support to be able to identify what they are already doing and expand on that element of practice.

Issues arising from the thematic analysis included the themes below

- **The staff need to be invested in and listened to as well as the children.** Staff require support and time to reflect on their practice and the techniques to identify listening and implement listening to very young children.
 - **Respect, Treating children as individuals, Capable Children** all these issues blend together. Children need to be respected as capable individuals who are able to make choices about their own lives.
 - **Cycle on consultation - ongoing in daily practice** The cycle of listening is not an additional activity for practitioners to undertake during the day. Effective listening principles are the same ones at the heart of early years good practice. Staff need support to focus on this.
-

6 Seminar Conclusions and recommendations

ECU invited thirty colleagues from the early years field to discuss 'Where next for consultation with very young children?'

After presentations from Penny Lancaster, Ann-Marie McAuliffe and Alison Clark the seminar delegates split into two discussion groups. Alison provided three questions from her presentation that were discussed;

- What training is necessary and for whom in relation to listening to young children?
- What principles are important for listening to young children?
- What methods are appropriate for disseminating the views of young children?

Group A discussed training

Group B discussed the principles of listening and the way children's views should be disseminated.

- **Respect** is key to all relationships. Children are **individuals** too and should be treated as such. The **Culture of Childhood** should not be forgotten, children should be provided with an environment that respects their needs as children, one which allows them to communicate with each other. Listening to children talking to each other is a valuable way of accessing their views. It is important to have a **positive response** to children who provide their thoughts. This helps to build their confidence in conveying their views. **Knowing the children** is central, children react better to people they know. Consultation exercises could be conducted by a nursery on behalf of another organisation i.e.

Local Authority. One off consultations can be damaging for young children as there is no feedback mechanism and is usually a stranger asking questions! **Preparing adults with methods of listening-** Advising parents and practitioners of the fundamental principles of listening will enable them to design creative and individual ways of listening to children and each other. **Choices -** Giving children choices within a boundary of options provides independence yet the carer remains in control of what choices are available

Dissemination of children's views

- It was agreed that making children more visible was important and continuing to access their views on service development and delivery was a good way to keep this agenda moving forward. However the group discussed concerns about children being used at conferences. It is a daunting experience for some and can be an unrepresentative sample if the same children are used for every piece of work.
- The group felt that there are many forms of technology that can convey children's views to a wide audience without them being present.
- Listening to children does not need to be an 'add on' to practitioners daily work but more of an integral part of their good practice. The listening philosophy is grounded in the features of current good practice and practitioners need to be helped to signify the participation work they are already engaging in. The group felt that more emphasis should be put on the key skills of listening (observing, standing back and letting children discover in their own way, providing children with a range of tools to communicate with) in training and qualifications. They agreed that the website detailing good practice case studies is a good way to provide creative methods of listening to young children.
- The group felt that if not managed properly the listening agenda would be misinterpreted as 'one hour a week of listening on a Wednesday' which is wholly away from the principles of a participatory approach with very young children.

Group B

- The 'reflective practitioner' approach should be more widely adopted because listening to children is a crucial element in it. The 'reflective practitioner' approach is sadly lacking from most training, and is only addressed at level 4 of NVQs. It should permeate training at all levels, including the orientation course. National Occupational Standards are being reviewed - could reflective practice be emphasised more? Perhaps in a values statement? Values and practice should be developed together. Janet Moyles' 2002 DFES study "Pedagogical effectiveness in early learning" was recommended - it discusses reflective practice.

- What basic training is available that would encourage the idea of listening to children? Some current and planned training was described. Some quality assessment schemes may include reflective practice.
- The idea of 'listening to others' is important through society as a whole. If parents recognise the value of a listening culture in an early years setting they may continue it at home. Work directly with parents in their own home is also important. A "17th card" has been produced for Birth to Three Matters which deals with working with parents. It will be included in the forthcoming publication from the project. Internet and Email should also be considered when thinking about contacting parents.
- National Literacy Trust has started a Talk to Your Baby campaign, accessible through their website (www.literacytrust.org.uk)
- Too often the idea of 'listening to children' is only spurred by an impending Ofsted inspection, but Ofsted inspectors have asked for training in this area! It should also be part of the Foundation Stage inspections. Specialists such as Ofsted inspectors, mentors, trainers, NVQ assessors are not concerned enough with developing the workforce in concepts such as reflective practice and listening to children. They should also be embedded into teacher training at all levels.
- How can the ideas from 'listening to children' projects be disseminated in terms of training? There could be some formal qualification or accreditation to show that staff have had some training in this area? Is this an appropriate time to resurrect the 'climbing frame' model of progression, as the national training framework is under scrutiny? We need horizontal as well as vertical relationships in a training hierarchy, and links to non-qualification, local or ad-hoc training courses. Perhaps the APEL (accreditation of prior experience and learning) system needs to be resurrected, with evidence of continuing professional development in some form that would be acceptable to Ofsted.

The group decided that they would like to be a 'virtual network' so that the work could move forward and be kept on the early years and childcare agenda. ECU will host this network and use the expertise to inform the other ECU Networks and the new ECU project on working with children birth to three.

7 Conclusion

How is effective consultation with very young children achieved? The formula for this has a number of components.

- Ideally the setting requires an embedded culture of listening in many forms; observation, reflection, active listening to children talking to

each other and adults, encouraging time and space for children to express themselves in whatever form suits them.

- It is also essential to treat each child as an individual. They may appear a homogenous group but in reality each child has a unique and valuable interpretation of the world. It is about children leading their own learning and making choices within a boundary of options.
- Respect is a clear theme and if children are shown respect by adults and encouraged to be respectful of others and themselves it will follow that the children learn from an early age that showing consideration for others is a life skill that will impact positively on later behaviour.
- Practitioners need support to change practice where such a culture does not presently exist. It is hoped that the early childhood website will enable practitioners to find out how consultation improves the early experience of young children and, when conducted well, provides them with essential life skills.
- The case studies provide a good source of evidence to suggest that a national prescriptive method is not the solution, but time for practitioners to be creative with the resources available and with the individual children in the setting in mind, is the best approach.
- The settings also need to provide valuable information for parents so that children receive a consistent message from their home environment as well as their day care and early education. This can be augmented by information on the Rolling Resource
- Staff investment is also key and ECU work in 2003-4 will provide support for practitioners to reflect on how working with children from birth to three also means **listening** to children from birth to three.