



Are equalities an issue? Finding out what young children think

Nicky Road

Why find out what young children think about equalities issues?

Children learn about differences from an early age. A baby's own individuality and sense of self emerges from the moment of birth. As babies mature, they become increasingly aware of others. They develop skills through observation, imitation and experimentation. They develop emotionally and socially, through the support provided to them by their significant carers. They learn how to respond to new people and events based on the experiences they have had in new and different situations and the messages they have picked up from their key carers.

We now know that through this process of growing and developing even the youngest children start to learn about what is different, as well as what is similar, between people. For example, they see and note, often unconsciously, differences in people's skin colour, hair texture, physical features or size and agility. They begin to form values and responses to these differences by observing other people's behaviour – their actions, reactions, body language and words – as well as through images presented to them. Children therefore learn about the way inequalities are embedded in our society and, as a consequence, this affects their attitudes to those who are different from them from an early age. These differences may be because of their ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, ability/disability, family background or other factors.

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.

Helping young children make sense of differences

Children therefore need to be consciously presented with positive attitudes and messages about differences and the benefits such attitudes bring to all children. Understanding differences extends children's horizons, provides information about the wider world they live in and helps them form views based on a range of experiences. Children also need to be enabled to reflect on their similarities and common humanity. In this way every child will feel equally valued and have a sense of belonging in their early years setting.

There are many ways of enabling children to express their thoughts and feelings. Negative attitudes that may exist, but are not revealed, can be explored with children in a safe and positive environment. Giving children the opportunity to ask questions, express their feelings, empathise with others and make up their own minds about what they feel is fair and just is an important part of listening to children. For some children, particularly disabled children, this may be a new experience for them. Some children may need more time than others to start saying what they think and feel. Their initial silence does not necessarily indicate a lack of views or feelings about something.

Hearing and responding to young children's perspectives

The Preschool Equity and Social Diversity (PESD) project in Australia (MacNaughton 2003) is studying the relationships between pre-school children's understandings of social diversity and equity and their own gender, class and racial identities. They have begun to discover ways of hearing children's perspectives on equality issues.

In another study in Australia, researchers talked to children aged three to eight years, who were using a range of early years services, about what they liked and disliked about them. Most liked playing and making friends, and when asked what they did not like, they spoke about bullying, teasing and being hurt, often by older children (Farrell, Tayler and Tennent 2002).

If we ask these kinds of questions and find ways to enable children to express their views and feelings, we must also be prepared to respond appropriately and sensitively to what they tell us. We need to be confident and clear when children express negative attitudes and behaviours while, at the same time, always ensuring that every child is constantly reassured that they are loved and valued. Children can be silenced by our fears of hearing or dealing with things we do not feel confident in dealing with. By anticipating that this may happen, we can prepare ourselves with possible responses.

If we do not know what children think about equalities, we cannot respond effectively to their thoughts in ways that promote respect and value for all.

How can we listen to young children's views on equalities?

Active listening

Being an active listener makes different demands on those who work with children. *Listening to Young Children* (Lancaster and Broadbent 2003) sets out a three-step spiral framework of preparation, process and reflection (PPR).

This approach, aimed at capturing children's real interests, feelings and concerns, will naturally throw up sensitive and perhaps difficult issues that will need to be explored further. It may include their attitudes and feelings about differences.

Active listening is a skill that has to be learnt. Listening is a two-way process that shifts the emphasis from a one-sided 'lead' to a two-way facilitating role. In shifting the emphasis from controlling to enabling, we have to develop different skills. Children communicate through their body language and facial expressions; their movement and choice of what or whom they go towards or stay away from; and their play, drawings, sounds and words. They also respond in ways they have learnt to be appropriate, such as looking someone in the eye or not, depending on different cultural traditions.

Active listening involves observation – observing children at play and how and whether they are participating. It often helps to record the observation or play through videotaping with the child or children's permission. What we observe at the time can be different from what we notice when we see the same sequence again – for example, children more subtly excluding another child from their play, a child sitting outside the circle of activity or even a child apparently included in play but actually, when closely observed, being taunted.

Storytelling

A way of encouraging children to express their feelings and views is through storytelling. There are a growing number of books that consciously try to reflect the diverse communities in which children grow up. This helps to redress the balance found in many well-known stories with messages that may, for example, foster attitudes of superiority by white children and devalue and reject other lifestyles and languages. Some stories contain messages that may also encourage black children to develop feelings of inferiority, alienation, lack of worth and confidence which interfere with their abilities to learn. This is equally true for disabled children and for gender stereotyping. The principles of these stories may also enable all children to recognise the damage caused by having attitudes based on such notions of superiority or prejudice. Seeking out books that explore these issues and encourage children to talk about them can help young children identify and empathise with characters who have been unfairly treated.

We can try to uncover any stereotypical attitudes and negative beliefs by asking them questions like:

- Would you like to have a friend like... (characters in the story)?
- Do you like/dislike the way the story ends?
- What do you like/dislike about the illustrations?
- Is there someone in your family or do you know anyone like...?

Helping children to create their own stories is another way forward. Asking them open-ended questions enables them to decide who they want to be and what happens to them. They can decide how they want the story to begin, how it develops, how that makes them feel and so on.

Using Persona Dolls is another way of exploring issues of equality and developing concepts of empathy in young children. Louise Derman-Sparks (1992), who developed their use in her work in the US, explains that Persona Dolls become 'people' in the early years setting because they are introduced to the children in the first week of school or nursery and have the same problems settling in as the children. Assuming different personas, the dolls can give children opportunities to see black people, refugees, people with disabilities, Gypsy and Travellers living happy and successful lives. Other stories can describe difficulties the dolls experience that flow from discrimination and prejudices, like teasing and name-calling.

MacNaughton (1999, see Brown 2001) emphasises the importance of using Persona Dolls with skill and sensitivity. Storytelling has to go alongside listening to children in a spirit of commitment to fairness and respect for all those involved.

Discovering young children's concerns

Consulting children on what they think about their settings or the curriculum routinely throws up concerns that they have about what they dislike or what worries them. This is a good way of exploring with them their reasons for such thoughts and what can be done to make things better. Consultations can be through focus groups and circle time. It can also be done by getting children to walk around their indoor and outdoor play area, tape/video recording their likes and dislikes or photographing places and things.

It is important to involve parents and carers so that they know what their children are doing and for what reason. Both children and parents need to give their permission if they are being recorded or photographed and to be clear what they are giving their permission for.

In whatever way children express their feelings and views, the issue of interpretation is critical. Children should be enabled to tell their own story about the picture or the image they have created. The practitioner should write down the children's descriptions of what is happening. When listening to disabled children it is important to understand their preferred method of communication. If

Case study: Using Persona Dolls

In a nursery in London, Christopher shouted at one of the few black children in the group, 'Rashid, go away. You can't play. My gran and me don't like brown people.' After this, two other children, Kylie and Jeff, invited Rashid to join their game. The keyworker first spoke to Rashid and Christopher separately and sensitively to explain that all children were equally precious. She then decided to tell a Persona Doll story based on this incident at circle time. So as not to identify the children or incident she changed the story but used a black doll. While telling the story she observed Christopher and Rashid in case they needed her support. The positive responses made by Kylie and Jeff were also highlighted in her story.

The keyworker refreshed the children's memories of Emily, the doll on her lap, by speaking about the last story she had told them about her. She asked if Emily looked happy today and when the children replied 'no', she said that Emily had asked the keyworker to tell her story, as she was feeling too sad to tell it herself. The story she told was of Emily going to the park with some

friends. She was having a really lovely time until some big children came up and asked Emily's friends if they wanted to join their game. They left Emily out. She wanted to play too but was told that she was too small and small people were stupid so they didn't want her in their game. Off they all ran, leaving Emily alone.

Throughout the telling of this story the keyworker invited the children to join in by sharing what they did in the park. When the story finished, she encouraged the children to do most of the talking by asking questions like 'What do you think Emily was feeling when all the children went off to play?' and 'Do you think small people are stupid?' She encouraged the children to describe and name Emily's feelings and talk about how the story made them feel.

By weaving in the children's contributions, the keyworker drew it together by emphasising the pleasure of inclusion and the pain of exclusion.

(Case study from Brown 2000)

children do not have verbal language or sufficient English, thought needs to be given to how best to interpret what they have represented. This may be through involving the parents, a bilingual speaker, interpreter or someone else who knows the child well.

Possibilities and challenges

In order to meet the diverse needs of each child we have to know as much as possible about them.

Understanding differences and avoiding stereotypes

This means finding out about a child's ethnic, religious and cultural background, languages spoken at home, family background, health and so on. It also means, most importantly, building relationships with parents and the extended family so that we are properly informed about the values, religious practices, outlook and concerns of each family. Failure to do this can lead to stereotyping and assumptions that certain topics, such as sexual orientation, are taboo.

A useful resource, developed from practice in a primary school in London on how best to support refugee children and their families, is *Home from Home* (Salisbury World and Save the Children 2004). It is equally useful for non-refugee children. It provides a range of checklists and advice on admissions, languages spoken and countries of origin, a welcome pack for parents, supporting bilingual children and ways of involving parents.

Requirements of legislation, and policies and procedures

As a result of the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000, schools and other maintained services have specific, statutory duties to promote race equality and good relations between people of different racial groups. They must also ensure that they monitor the impact of their policies on different racial groups of children. It is clearly good practice for all service providers, whether they are in the maintained or non-maintained sector, to act in the same way and collect, analyse and evaluate ethnic data on specific key issues of relevance to their service. Equally, the SEN Code of Practice 2001 also requires the collection, recording and updating of relevant information about individual children with SEN. This is normally part of the SENCO's role. This duty has been strengthened through the Disability Discrimination Act 2005, which places a legal duty on public authorities to actively eliminate barriers to disabled people's full participation in society. Additionally, from April 2007, the Gender Equality Duty now requires public authorities to promote equality between men and women.

Creating a positive environment, which promotes equality and challenges discrimination and prejudice, requires those working with children to work together in order to achieve this. They should plan which policies and procedures need to be put in place and how these will be communicated to the children, parents and the wider community. It includes working with families within a no-blame culture. It involves creating positives through images, activities and the environment and being prepared to tackle negatives, such as hostility from other workers or families, and dealing with misunderstandings.

Case study: Exploring gender and sexuality

At lunch five-year-old Tommy announced that when he grows up he is going to marry his best friend Sam. Ethan asked his teacher whether Tommy and Sam could get married as he was fairly sure that they could not, as only men and women marry each other. The teacher did not know what Tommy and Sam had in mind when they said they planned to get married. Perhaps, as best friends, they thought that getting married was the best way to express their deep friendship. They might grow up to be gay, or one or both might become heterosexual men. Not knowing how their sexual orientations were developing, and wanting to be inclusive of all that children are and will become, she had to respond thoughtfully.

Ignoring the child's question reinforces the sense of taboo on this issue and devalues the children's thinking. Whilst parents should be told about their children's questions and how the teacher handled them, the responsibility for answering the question rests with the teacher.

To gain a better insight into Ethan's thinking, the teacher asked some careful questions like 'What do you think, can two men marry each other?' By gaining a better understanding of Ethan's views the teacher became more certain of his meaning and was able to help Ethan construct his own knowledge on this issue. The teacher elaborated and clarified rather than provided information, which may have been off target.

(Case study from Cahill and Theilheimer 1999)

Children today may have seen or heard about civil partnerships so it is important to keep up-to-date with legislative change and think about how this may impact on young children's awareness and understanding of issues they may face.

Staff development and support

Staff development and teamwork help to decide how to create an open and listening culture, one which enables children to express their views and feelings. We need to anticipate what this may throw up and plan how we will respond both as individuals and as staff teams. This can involve drawing up procedures on how to deal with difficult situations which relate to staff, parents and, possibly, the wider community. Examples may cover situations where children are told by their parents not to play with certain children: 'My mum says I shouldn't play with girls who have scarves over their heads' or parents saying that certain children should not be allowed in the group 'because Gypsies are always stealing things'.

Guiding and assisting children

Children are quick to learn what they can and cannot do or say and with whom. Most people behave differently in different situations, depending on the role they are playing. Early years practitioners sometimes say, for example, that bullying, homophobia or racist taunts are not problems in their setting, class or school. Yet children report that these go on in the play area or on their way to school or their setting. In Britain there are very few areas that could be genuinely described as 'white'. Wherever we live the principles of promoting equality are the same.

Research evidence over the past 50 years shows that three-year-old children notice differences in skin colour and that between the ages of three and five they learn from the world around them that it is 'better' to be white in Britain than black. Recent research by the internet TV station Colourtelly found that African Caribbean children are equating white dolls with 'pretty' or 'good' and black dolls with 'ugly' or 'bad'. Black and white children are damaged by racism, but in different ways. Many young black children suffer abuse and rejection from their white peers, causing them to become angry, frustrated, depressed or withdrawn. Such feelings are compounded if adults fail to react positively. As a consequence of racism, many white children develop feelings of superiority, which may cause them to respond insensitively or uncaringly, limiting their ability to empathise or sustain stable relationships. Some black children too may have learnt negative attitudes about others. Equally, by the age of three boys and girls have developed fixed ideas about roles of men and women. By five many think the female role is the one less valued and valuable and that they can only play certain roles or do certain jobs in life.

We must be prepared to reply to comments and questions – simply and directly. We must listen carefully to what children want to know and what they are feeling. We must teach children to challenge prejudice directly themselves and to give them the skills to do so. Children can express views that are the beginnings of prejudice. We should not ignore these. This is not to underestimate how difficult this can be for practitioners. Fears of saying the wrong thing, not wanting to rock the boat, wanting the setting to be a happy place for children, are all understandable concerns. Worries about the lack of appropriate resources, anxiety

about parental reaction and being seen as having a chip on the shoulder are also deterrents.

Deciding to act is about persuading other staff and family members that attitudes are learnt at this early age. It is about getting help and support from groups and organisations that exist to provide this and it is about using the resources and materials that are available to help plan what needs to happen.

Case study: Exploring what children really think

A teacher in an all white nursery showed a group of pictures of black and white people doing a variety of jobs. The discussion that followed supported the head's view that the children did not discriminate between people on the basis of the colour of their skin. However, some children in another group left to discover the pictures for themselves, without any input from the teacher, made negative and derisory comments about the black people.

(Case study from Jeffcoate 1980)

Case study: Kitchen sink drama

Alice is at her preschool playing at making tea in the home corner. Brenda is doing some ironing. Ben comes in and wants to help serve the tea but both Alice and Brenda shoo him out saying that 'boys aren't allowed' because the mummies are in the kitchen.

Thinking about points for thought and discussion: what might Ben be feeling? What might a worker or another child have said or done to help him feel hurt or rebuffed? If he was not feeling hurt, what else might he be feeling? Might any stereotypes he has of girls be reinforced? How could Alice and Brenda be helped to understand the effect of what they did? What could workers do to ensure that this doesn't happen again and to help the children have a different understanding of roles? What strategy could be developed so that workers, children and their families take responsibility to prevent this sort of incident occurring?

(Case study from Lane 2008)

References

- Brown, B** (2000) 'Someone to talk to', *Nursery World*, 100, 3710, 28.
- Brown, B** (2001) *Combating Discrimination - Persona Dolls in action*. London: Trentham Books. Quotes paper by MacNaughton, G 'Dolls for Equity: Young children learning respect and unlearning unfairness', presented at Persona Doll Conference, London, 1999.
- Cahill, B and Theilheimer, R** (1999) "'Can Tommy and Sam get married?' Questions about gender, sexuality, and young children', *Young Children*, 54, 1, 27-31.
- Farrell, A, Tayler, C and Tennent, L** (2002) 'Early childhood services: What children can tell us?', *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, 27, 3, 13-17.
- Jeffcoate, R** (1980) *Positive Images Towards a Multi-Racial Curriculum*. Writers & Readers Publishing Cooperative.
- Lancaster, Y P and Broadbent** (2003) *Listening to Young Children*. Buckinghamshire: Open University Press.
- Lane, J** (2008) *Young Children and Racial Justice: Taking action for racial equality in the early years - understanding the past, thinking about the present, planning for the future*. London: NCB.
- MacNaughton, G** (2003) 'Eclipsing voice in research with young children', *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, 28, 1, 36-42.
- National Early Years Network and Save the Children** (1995) *Playing Fair: A parents' guide to tackling discrimination*. NEYN/SCF. UK version of original American version by Louise Derman-Sparks (1992)
- Salisbury World and Save the Children** (2004) *Home from Home: A guidance and resource pack for the welcome and inclusion of refugee children and families in school*. London: Save the Children.
- Clark, A and Moss, P** (2005) *Spaces to Play: More listening to young children using the Mosaic Approach*. London: NCB.
- Clark, A** (2010) *Transforming Children's Spaces. Children's and adults' participation in designing learning environments*. London: Routledge.
- Cousins, J** (1999) *Listening to Four Year Olds: How they can help us plan their education and care*. London: National Early Years Network. (Now available from NCB.)
- Derman-Sparks, L** 'Early childhood anti-bias education in the USA', in van Keulen, A (ed) (2004) *Young Children aren't Biased, are they?! : How to handle diversity in early childhood education and school*. Amsterdam: B.V.Uitgeverij SWP.
- Dickins, M, Emerson, S and Gordon-Smith, P** (2004) *Starting with Choice: Inclusive strategies for consulting young children*. London: Save the Children.
- Kirby, P, Lanyon, C, Cronin, K, and Sinclair, R** (2003) *Building a Culture of Participation*, London: NCB.
- Hamer, CW and Williams, L** (2010) *Let's Listen: Young children's voices - Profiling and planning to enable their participation in children's services*. London: NCB.
- Lancaster, Y P and Kirby, P on behalf of Coram** (2010; 2nd edn) *Listening to Young Children*. Buckinghamshire: Open University Press.
- Lancaster, Y P** (2010; 5th edn) 'Listening to young children: Enabling children to be seen and heard', in Pugh, G and Duffy, B (eds) *Contemporary Issues in the Early Years*. London: Sage.
- Lindon, J** (2006) *Equality in Early Childhood: Linking theory and practice*. Hodder & Arnold.
- Listening as a way of life leaflets** - See page 8 for details.
- Marchant, R and Gordon, R** (2001) *Two-Way Street: Communicating with disabled children*. NSPCC.
- Miller, J** (1997) *Never too Young: How young children can take responsibility and make decisions*. London: Save the Children
- Persona Doll Training** (2004) *Celebrating Diversity: Inclusion in practice*. Persona Doll Training.
- Save the Children** (2007) *Working Towards Inclusive Practice Training Toolkit: A resource to support the delivery of training in Gypsy/Roma and Traveller culture*. London: Save the Children.

Further reading

Alderson, P (2008) *Young Children's Rights: Exploring beliefs, principles and practice*. London: Jessica Kingley.

Brown, B (1998) *Unlearning Discrimination in the Early Years*. London: Trentham Books.

Browne, N (2004) *Gender Equity in the Early Years*. Buckinghamshire: Open University Press.

Clark, A and Moss, P (2001) *Listening to Young Children: The Mosaic Approach*. London: National Children's Bureau and Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

Sure Start/ECF/NCB leaflet (2003) *Participation and Belonging in Early Years Settings. Inclusion: Working towards equality*. London: NCB.

Young, J (2009) *How to Build a Culture of Participation*. London: NCB for Participation Works.

Useful websites

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

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

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.coram.org.uk

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

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.earlyyearequality.co.uk

Early Years Equality (EYE) is a charity working to promote race equality in the field of early years provision. It aims to work with intermediaries and policy makers to influence practice at grassroots level.

www.ncb.org.uk/bvn

The National Black Voices Network (NBVN) is an email-based network of around 300 black and white practitioners who work across the children's sector. NBVN offers a collective voice, from black and anti-racist perspectives, to influence policy and practice and to promote an understanding of how racial identity and racism can impact on opportunities and life chances.

www.ncb.org.uk/aba

The Anti-Bullying Alliance (ABA) is a group of over 40 organisations working to progress and promote a society in which children and young people feel safe and protected to develop, grow, learn and play in a secure environment.

www.equalityhumanrights.com

Commission for Equality and Human Rights.

www.savethechildren.org.uk/earlyyears

Save the Children publications include many on children's rights, and their right to be consulted, including specific information for early years practitioners working with Gypsy, Roma and Traveller families.

www.childrenwebmag.com

Contains a racial equality resource list by Jane Lane.

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

Listening to babies

Listening to young disabled children

Supporting parents and carers to listen: A guide for practitioners

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, or call the switchboard on 020 7843 6000 and ask for the Early Childhood Unit.

Statutory guidance

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

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Author: Nicky Road

Critical Reader: Jane Lane

Series Editor: Ann-Marie McAuliffe/Lucy Williams

Cover photo: Provided by Broadwater Farm Children's Centre, Haringey

This is a reprint of a leaflet first published in 2004 and revised in 2008. The content remains the same as in 2008 with updates to Further reading and Useful website sections only.

© NCB 2011



National Children's Bureau
8 Wakley Street
London EC1V 7QE

tel +44 (0)20 7843 6000

fax +44 (0)20 7278 9512

www.ncb.org.uk

Registered Charity Number 258825