



Supporting parents and carers to listen: A guide for practitioners

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Why we encourage parents to listen to very young children

As adults, if we feel that we have been listened to and what we have expressed has been acknowledged, we are more likely to feel valued and loved. It is the same for young children.

The benefits of being listened to as a child are well documented. What children learn about themselves from the adults closest to them depends on the quality of their experience with us and this in turn affects how their self-esteem and sense of identity develops (Leach 1994). **Through being listened to children:**

- learn many essential skills such as listening, debating, negotiating and compromise
- reflect (on what they have heard or observed), taking account of a variety of points of view and considering them objectively
- develop a deeper sense of the needs of others; an increased sense of ownership and responsibility for where they live, play and learn (Miller 1997)
- but most importantly: they learn whether or not they have a voice that other people think is worth listening to.

The voices of our parents and close family members are usually the first we hear. They are the first people we learn things from and, as such, they have a powerful effect on our attitude to life and later achievements (Bastiani and White 2003). For

children 'to do well' – emotionally, educationally, mentally or physically – it is important for parents to listen to their children and take note of what they say. Practitioners within the very broad field of children's services, which spans education, health and

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.

social care, are uniquely placed to support parents and carers to enhance the way they listen to their children, and to champion the voice of the child so that it is heard both at home and in services outside of the home.

By listening to children we as adults benefit as people, and as parents we learn things about our children from information that only they can give to us. This in turn helps us to become more sensitive to their needs and to understand what they are really telling us. We may be born with the ability to communicate (Kitzner 1986) but what happens along the path to parenthood can either enhance or diminish that ability. If parents themselves were not listened to as children, they may need support to listen effectively to their own children.

How to support parents

Setting a good example

Before practitioners can begin to support parents to listen more effectively, they need to create a culture of listening within the setting in which they work. This includes listening to the voices of other staff, parents and children. Once parents and children experience being listened to, it is easier to encourage parents to make space for their children to be heard and to think about how to make sense of what their children are telling them.

Listening, though valuable in itself, can be a means to an end. Through being listened to, children are more likely to be able to express their views on matters that concern them and participate in decisions that affect them, which in turn gives practitioners the information to take action on their behalf.

Practitioners are already supported by Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Children Act 1989 and the 'making a positive contribution' goal contained within *Every Child Matters* (DfES 2003), which supports the principle that every child has the right to participate in decisions that affect them. Central government has also been placing greater emphasis across a range of services within the health, care and education fields to work in partnership with parents (Evans 2001).

Early Years Foundation Stage

The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), which came into effect in September 2008, is a comprehensive framework that sets the standards for learning, development and care of children from birth to five. It is based around four **Themes**, each of which is linked to an important **Principle**, which in turn is supported by four **Commitments** that describe how the principles can be put into practice.

This framework can be used as an invaluable tool in supporting parents to listen to their children, as there are very clear messages about how both parents and children must contribute to the planning and delivery of effective early years practice. For example, throughout the framework emphasis is placed on understanding the

individuality of each child. The 'A Unique Child' theme contains the principle of 'Inclusive Practice' and under children's entitlements states that 'All children have an equal right to be listened to and valued in the setting.' Taking into account the need to work in partnership with parents, this can be used to highlight the need for the child to be heard in the home. Partnership working with parents is seen as vital in identifying individual children's learning and development needs. The framework states that practitioners must support this important relationship by sharing information and offering to support learning in the home, something that can be done only by effectively hearing what a child is telling us through play.

Key Elements of Effective Practice (KEEP) highlights the need to demonstrate how settings have developed and improved their relationships with children and their parents. Effective partnership working also informs the development of full and holistic assessments being made of individual children, as both what the parent has heard and the child has said can be included.

The theme 'Enabling Environments' under principle 3.1 'Observing, Assessing and Planning' says that good practice ensures that parents have regular opportunities to add to records, which in the case of the Stop, Look and Listen Project (see Case study below) is exactly what happens.

The 'Positive Relationships' theme in 2.3 'Supported Learning' states the need for observation and the ability to *tune into* rather than *talk at* children, taking the lead and direction from what children say or do.

Case study: Stop, look and listen: sharing observations with parents

The London Borough of Camden is helping parents to recognise the importance of listening to their children through the Stop, Look and Listen project. This innovative approach encourages parents to observe their children at play. They are urged to stop everything, look at their child as they play and listen to what they have to say. Observations are recorded through using a variety of methods such as cameras, tape recorders or by writing things down (the *hows*, *whens* and *whys* having been carefully explained beforehand). What has been recorded is then discussed and interpreted with the support of practitioners. As a result of adopting the Stop, Look and Listen method parents learn new things about their children, their interests and why they behave the way they do, and together with practitioners, go on to plan the next steps for their children's learning and development.

You can read more about the project at www.peal.org.uk

Legislation and guidance is one thing; making 'being heard' a reality for young children is another. Whether we work in a care and education setting, a GP's practice or hold a mobile clinic, it should be obvious to the children, parents and professionals who use the services that the work being

done is child centred. For this to take place, staff commitment to working towards a broader culture of listening is important. A practitioner actively listening to other adults and children gives parents the opportunity to ask questions and discuss their experiences.

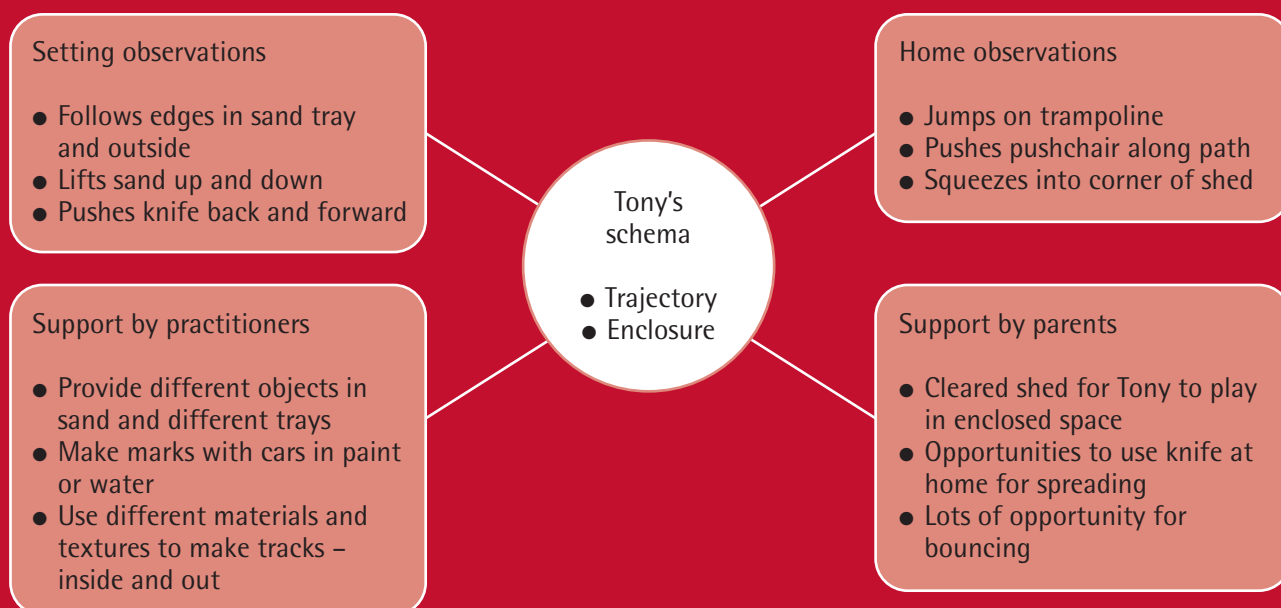
Case study: Tony's story

When Tony started preschool he showed interest in a range of toys and activities. He played in the sand tray and with the cars. Outside he pushed a pushchair around the playground and pushed himself with his feet on the trikes. He especially enjoyed anything to do with trains, including books, pictures, puzzles as well as the train set itself. Some aspects of preschool, however, were very difficult for Tony. He found it hard to understand why his favourite toys were sometimes packed away or why he had to come inside. He could also see things he wanted, but did not know how to ask for them. Sometimes when he was distressed Tony would run and press himself into a corner. Not long before starting preschool Tony had been diagnosed with autism, a condition that seriously impairs an individual's understanding of social situations and ability to communicate with others. This did not mean that Tony did not have opinions, but we needed to find a way of listening to what he was trying to tell us.

Following a course by Professor Tina Bruce on schemas, we decided to observe Tony to see if identifying his schemas would help us to understand his needs more fully and so plan the activities that would both interest him and develop his learning. Schemas are observable patterns of behaviour that children use in different situations to fit their ideas together. For example, children with a dominant enveloping schema may enjoy

wrapping things up, dressing up, making dens, tents, covering paper with paint and hiding objects.

Tony was observed at preschool and at home and we identified patterns in his play. He was observed going round the edge of the playground with both a bike and a pushchair before going to the activities in the middle. This pattern was repeated in the sand tray when he pushed vehicles around the edge of the tray. He appeared to be enclosing the area in which he was playing. When distressed, Tony squashed into small spaces and enclosed himself. Tony also consistently showed an interest in lines, both horizontal – following paths, making tracks, cutting – and vertical – bouncing, going up and down the slide, watching sand fall through his fingers. This is called a trajectory schema. Using this information, we were able to plan activities to extend Tony's play and develop his learning. All the way through the project, Tony's parents worked very closely with us and did their own observations. At the end of the project they reported that he was using verbal communication more readily. Mum had cleared out the shed and put his trains in there as she now knew he liked the enclosed space. He was enjoying cuddles and had started coming to her for help. Close observation and identifying schemas was one way for us to listen to what Tony needed and allowed us to support his needs together.



One method of making such a broader culture of 'listening' a reality is to develop a basic set of principles and guidance to which everyone is encouraged to adhere. For example:

- all children aged from birth to eight years of age are important and unique individuals
- they are not too young to show us what is important to them
- listen to what they are telling us through a range of methods
- reflect on what the children have said and take action where possible
- feed back to the children what we have done
- if you can't take action or give time you need to explain why
- what they tell us and how they feel is valuable to the adults around them

- we, as adults, can facilitate change by involving children in the way in which we plan environments and activities.

The development of such underpinning statements supports practitioners to create an environment that actively encourages and makes space for the voices of young children to be heard. Not only do these statements act as a reminder, they open up opportunities to challenge incidents where children are not being listened to and promote conversation around the subject.

Encouraging parents

Practitioners could also develop some simple guidelines for the parents and families with whom they work in partnership. Whilst these guidelines must be sensitive to a child's culture and take into account the impact of the local community and the environment in which they live, the message is the same – no matter how young they are, children can and do make positive contributions to family life and it is important that parents tune in effectively by being:

Case study: Reece's story

Reece has been attending playgroup since he was two and-a-half-years-old. He is a quiet child who does not talk much (but is not speech delayed), likes to focus on detail and does not like to get messy. Lately Reece has been behaving differently. He stands very still, holds his body rigid, clenches his fists and wets himself; he only does this at home and not at playgroup. Jade, his mother, is really worried about this – she thinks it is because he is jealous of his baby sister Monica and is seeking attention. Staff at the playgroup advise Jade to just watch him and to write down when and where it happens, and the circumstances leading up to and after the event. Jade fails to do this because she is discouraged by her mum who says Jade is being too soft with him.

The problem is not getting better and further prompting by staff reveals that it only happens at Jade's parents' home. A member of staff offers to pop round to chat with both her and her mum. Jade agrees. The worker drops by and hands over an observation sheet and explains how it should be completed. The worker observes that the house is spotless – there are many toys but they are arranged neatly in rows. Jade writes down what she observes (her mother dismisses the exercise as daft – according to her, Reece just needs a good smack) and over the next few weeks she notices a pattern emerging. The incidents all begin with Jade's mother getting annoyed with the mess Reece is making while playing. Reece seems to be not jealous of his sister but angry with his granny. He couldn't stop her spoiling his games or continually telling him off, but he could do what upsets her most – he could wet his pants and make a mess.

By observing her son, Jade heard what he was expressing – he was not being naughty and to discipline him would only have added to the unhappiness of his situation. Jade started to make comparisons with the way she rebelled against her very controlling, house-proud mother. She did not want her children to feel as she had done as a child – that appearances were more important to her mother than she was. While the playgroup could not be expected to help resolve all the emerging issues, they could support her to give Reece the freedom to play and explore. The first step was to support Jade to learn how to play with Reece and Monica and concentrate less on the routines of feeding, dressing and sleeping. She attended a course of parent and child play sessions where play homework was given. As this homework could not be done at her mum's, Jade started to spend more time at her flat where it was alright for Reece to make a bit of a mess. Jade learned the importance of play as a way of communicating with her children. It was a revelation to Jade that Monica could adapt the way she behaved so that Jade would attend to her needs and that she could mimic her expressions or that peek-a-boo and tickles were a baby's equivalent of having a good old chat.

Jade learnt that communication is not reliant just on what her children tell her through speech, but also on what they tell her through their actions. Jade started to relax and feel more confident as a mother and her priority was no longer how things *look* but how they *feel* – something she learned from her children.

- patient – try not to rush them
- interested – or at least trying to look interested
- available – do you really need to do what you are doing?
- realistic – your baby can tell you more than you think, but your two year-old will not have the language to discuss the complexity of his or her emotions
- observant – listen with your eyes
- honest – if you don't know, you don't know and may have to say so.

It is also important to:

- focus on what your child can do, knows and is learning and not on what your child cannot do, does not know and has not learnt
- not dismiss a child's emotions as silly or unnecessary
- be positive – tell your child that he or she can do something and this is how
- not shout
- reflect back what you understand your child to have said
- give it a try.

Practitioners can also encourage parents by helping them to think around why a child makes the choices that they do. Caroline, age two years and four months, insists on choosing what to wear and puts on unusual combinations of clothes – trousers under dresses and Wellington boots whatever the weather. Why? Because she does not want to show her pants when playing on the climbing frame and Wellingtons are easier to take off and put on than shoes!

Possibilities and challenges

Possibilities

We see in Reece's story that listening to a child can improve the way he or she behaves from an adult point of view. However, not all listening needs to begin with a problem, nor should effective listening techniques be promoted as a method of improving the way a child behaves – a confident, listened-to child can be very assertive indeed!

It could be argued that it is easier for practitioners who work in a nursery or playgroup to champion the idea that being heard should be the everyday experience of all children, no matter how young. Practitioners in this situation have regular and long-term access to both parents and children and have a physical space in which to establish and enforce principles and ground rules, run

workshops and demonstrate good practice. However, for those, such as health workers, who work from clinics and do home visiting, it may be more challenging as they are coming into the home where parents set the ground rules.

To suggest changes to this environment may be interpreted as interference and not be well received. On the other hand, being in someone else's home means it is still possible to demonstrate good practice and can give more opportunities for spontaneous conversation regarding effective listening techniques in a private and safe environment.

When supporting parents to tune in to what their children are saying, it is important to help them to think about whether or not their home environment encourages talking and listening. Practitioners can share their imaginative methods in supporting parents to help them identify where, in their often busy and pressured lives, room can be made to have a conversation with their children in all its many forms, be it verbal or non-verbal.

One method of encouraging children to be listened to in the home is to promote the importance of children's chatter as a means to understanding what they think and feel. Young children often talk through their problem-solving activities. Their talk helps them to move from the here and now to the past, present, future or alternative worlds. It is how they make sense of what is going on (Duffy 1998). Parents could also be encouraged to see if their home environment supports talking and listening. For instance, are there times when the television is turned off or the radio turned down?

Some parents may pass off what their young children say as nonsense, but listening to them does not necessarily mean taking everything they say at face value. What it does mean is looking out for the fine distinctions between their feelings, such as curiosity, anxiety, pleasure or stress, and putting them into perspective while considering their age and ability (Pugh and Selleck 1996). So when Abbey, aged three-and-a-half, said that her family gets their 'Milk from the cow on the floor outside. It's post milk not paper milk and I don't like the bang of paper milk', she was explaining that her milk is delivered and left on her doorstep and letters are posted through the letterbox and that the bang of the letterbox startles her – perfect sense if you consider the verbal abilities of a three-and-a-half-year-old.

It is more difficult to encourage effective listening if the parent concerned is wary of what could happen if an established routine is changed or is worried that their child may make the wrong decision if allowed to make choices. One method of addressing this is to talk through what part of the established routine is non-negotiable, where it would be acceptable to tweak and change, and where it does not matter at all. For a working mother, the non-negotiable may be the adult-led morning routine 'up, breakfast and out', but the negotiable may be the bedtime routine where a parent does have some time to be led by their child and give them the time they need after a busy day.

Challenges

Young children can and do make real and valid contributions to the world in which they live. However, we live in a society that does not universally value the voice of children, especially young children. This attitude exists even though research and personal experiences prove that very young children can and do make valid contributions to the world in which they live (Clark and Moss 2001, and Lancaster and Broadbent 2003).

There are some circumstances where adults blame the age of the child, as in the example of the 'terrible twos', without reference to the context, such as the adult's role in the situation (Alderson 2000). It is important that parents and practitioners see children as individuals and react to them in a positive and supportive way.

There are some adults who label children who are assertive as cheeky and scold a child who does something they believe to be outside of their capabilities for taking too many risks. As Lindon comments: 'Children need opportunities to take acceptable risks in an environment that encourages them to push against the boundaries of their current abilities, to stretch their skills and confidence' (Lindon 2003). The notion (often subliminal) that the only way we can protect our children is to control them, can curtail their freedom and limit their experiences.

Some adults see children as extensions of their parents and not individuals and, as such, adults may (to a certain degree) treat them as they wish: it is still acceptable to smack young children – something that parents often vigorously defend as their right (Willow and Hyder 1998).

Perhaps the biggest challenge is making space and time for children to express themselves in whatever form suits them. Central to this is the importance of adults making time, not just for the children, but time to build relationships between parents and other workers within children's services. This will work towards the aim that all children can be at the centre of all the decisions that affect them.

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Useful websites

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.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.literacytrust.org.uk

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

www.crae.org.uk

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

www.coram.org.uk

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

www.peal.org.uk

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

www.peep.org.uk

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

Listening as a way of life

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

Others in the series include:

Why and how we listen to young children

Listening to babies

Are equalities an issue? Finding out what young children think

Listening to young disabled children

Listening to young children's views on food

There is a second series of leaflets also available:

Developing a listening culture

Leadership for listening

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

STATUTORY GUIDANCE

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

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