



National Children's  
Bureau



# Listening as a way of life

Listening to young disabled children

Mary Dickins and Lucy Williams

## Introduction

This leaflet includes inspiring examples of listening practice and significant updates on policy following the Children and Families Act, 2014. 'Listening to young disabled children' is one in a series of 'Listening as a way of life' leaflets originally published by the National Children's Bureau (NCB) as part of the government-funded projects, 'Listening as a way of life' and the 'Young Children's Voices Network'. The Early Childhood Unit at NCB continues to support local authorities and a range of children's services in developing listening practice so that young children's voices inform policy and improve services.

Listening to young children is essential in enabling their right to express their views on matters that affect them, and to have their views taken into account in a meaningful way. All children have an equal right to be listened to, an entitlement which includes babies and very young children, each with individual needs, capabilities and means of communicating.



### Listening in this leaflet 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 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, including babies, feel confident, safe and powerful, ensuring they have the time and space to express themselves in whatever form suits them.

### Why do we listen to children?

We listen to children because:

- it acknowledges their right to be listened to and for their views and experiences to be taken seriously about matters that affect them
- of the difference listening can make to our understanding of children's priorities, interests and concerns
- of the difference it can make to how children feel about themselves
- listening is a vital part of establishing respectful relationships with children we work with.

Listening is not only important for the children who are being listened to, but also for the adults who are listening, whether at home or in an early years setting, at school, at hospital, at a local authority level or in national government.

### Listening to young disabled children

Disabled children have the same right as all children to express their views and to have these taken into account in decisions that affect them. We may take it for granted that we provide children with choices and opportunities to contribute to decision-making. However, it is important to reflect on the extent of children's influence, and whether all children receive the support they need in order to be able to engage. For young children's experiences to be meaningful and empowering, we need to recognise that strong analytical and facilitation skills are required by practitioners who place an emphasis on listening throughout their daily practice.

There are particular challenges for disabled children that make listening all the more important in terms of addressing inequality and disadvantage.

### Barriers

There are many barriers to the participation of disabled children in decision-making. Disabled children are:

- subject to a much higher degree of adult intervention and their scope for making day-to-day choices and decisions is often severely limited
- likely to have many things done to, and for, them rather than with them
- significantly more vulnerable to abuse than non-disabled children

**“Disabled children have many things done to, and for, them and they are significantly more vulnerable to abuse than non-disabled children.”** (NSPCC 2003)

- more likely to be subject to a number of medical interventions and treatments
- more likely to be subject to various kinds of assessment procedures and less likely to be involved in the process
- more likely to be excluded from consultation processes because these are often based on written and spoken language
- supported by parents and staff who are more likely to see their roles as advocates rather than listeners
- more likely than other children to have contact with multiple carers who lack the skills to understand their communication system.

Many of these factors have limited the opportunities for disabled children to express their preferences and opinions and have them acted upon (Dickins 2014). To some extent these barriers have been exacerbated by attitudes dominated by a medical model of disability which sees the underlying impairments as the problem which has to be fixed. The development of a social model of disability changes this and focuses on the attitudinal and physical barriers that need to be removed to enable disabled people to participate in society. More detail on the medical model and the social model can be found on page 15.

It is important to remember that disabled children from black and minority ethnic groups face additional cultural and linguistic barriers (Chamba and others, 1999), (Lane, 2008). For many young children speech and language are not the best ways of communicating, especially about wishes and feelings. The creation of a culture of listening embedded in an inclusive and enabling environment will ultimately benefit all children (Dickins 2014), (Williams, 2011).

### Effective listening

The Children and Families Act highlights the importance of the views, wishes and feelings of disabled children and of their participating “as fully as possible” in decisions. Seeing the baby or young child as a capable communicator, and as an expert in his or her life has increasingly been recognised as vital in enabling practitioners, together with parents, to listen to and reflect upon children’s perspectives. This is key to informing individual day-to-day interactions as well as service design and review. ‘The Mosaic approach’ (Clark and Moss, 2001) provides theoretical and practical guidance on consulting young children, taking as its premise a focus on children’s lived experiences. This multi-method approach presents a framework which is participatory and adaptable to allow for the many ways in which children may choose to communicate.

Communication difficulties are most often cited as the reason why disabled children, especially younger ones, are not consulted. Adults often fear that they require specific expertise to listen to disabled children. But if we explore this assumption in more detail it becomes obvious that spoken language is only one of a range of methods that we employ in order to communicate our thoughts, feelings, information and ideas. Body language, humming, laughing, kissing, hugging, blinking and crying are just some of the ways in which we naturally express ourselves. Although some new skills may be needed, attitudes and approaches are very important.



Listening to young disabled children effectively, particularly if their needs are complex, may sometimes involve learning new communication techniques, but more often than not is a question of acknowledging and 'fine tuning' the skills that effective practitioners already use every day, including sensitivity, creativity and intuition. (See later section, Ethical issues in consulting young children).

Listening to young disabled children can be thought about in three broad areas of activity:

- **listening to individual children** – using their preferred means of communication, perhaps as part of a specific learning opportunity, consultation or assessment procedure
- **everyday listening and consultation** as a vital element of good early years practice

- **inclusive strategies and developing a listening culture** so that the 'voice' of the disabled child is included as a fully-fledged and participating member of a group.

All three areas of listening activity rely on strong partnerships with parents, which is an essential part of effective early years practice and a key principle of the Early Years Foundation Stage Framework (2014). By supporting parents to listen to their children and engaging them in their children's early learning development, practitioners can build a culture of listening in the setting and in the context of the early home learning environment. All meaningful listening activity is underpinned by effective support for communication and a focus on including all children as active members of the community.

## Practice example: Making it REAL

Lily arrived at nursery with limited language skills and she was reluctant to engage in play or interact with her peers and staff. She was identified by our Special Educational Needs co-ordinator as a child who needed extra support with developing language and communication skills.

The first Making it REAL home visit with Lily and her family was based around story sacks. Dear Zoo was a good starting point as this was clearly already a known and favourite story. It broke the ice with Dad who was quite shy as he was able to say that he read this story to Lily at bedtime, and went on to show me other books she enjoyed. Lily was thrilled to play with the Dear Zoo puppets and it was then that she started to speak to me.

Both parents were present for all the home visits and group literacy events, and it was noticeable how much more involved they became in tuning into Lily's interests and supporting her learning. Lily's confidence started to grow through the next home visits and over the course of the project she began to seek out friends, initiate conversations and access all the activities at nursery.

On the final visit, we all played with building bricks and farm animals and Lily made up her own story as she played. I took photos and printed them so that Lily could make a book of her own. I left the

book with the family and the next day Lily was very proud to bring it into nursery, complete with her voice recording of her story. She confidently shared this at nursery with her key worker group, and it was really lovely to see her smiling face as she pressed the buttons and retold her own story.

For further information about the impact of the Making it REAL project visit [www.ncb.org.uk/ecu](http://www.ncb.org.uk/ecu)



By practitioners and parents listening to children together, new opportunities can be created for children to develop skills and confidence in communicating effectively. The benefits for adults include increased understanding of the child's ability to express their interests and preferences, and how these can inform further learning opportunities which the child is more likely to engage with and enjoy.

## Listening to individual children

In order to hear children's views and to know how to listen to them, it is important that practitioners collect as much information as possible from parents, professionals and other carers about how an individual child already communicates. Other children, siblings and friends may also have important knowledge and observations to contribute. Observation of the individual child and how they interact and

communicate is an essential part of this process. Observing children is as important as listening to what they say – much of what young children say would not make sense without observation. Children communicate, for example, through their behaviour, creative expression, gestures and sounds, and also by their inaction, what they choose not to do or say.

### Practice example: Songbirds – Listening to individual children through music

On ward 83 at Royal Manchester Children's Hospital, musicians Ros Hawley and Mark Fisher work closely with a play therapist and hospital staff to create interactive learning opportunities for children with acquired brain injury and on long term ventilation.

As part of the Songbirds project Ros and Mark create unique compositions to act as a starting point for a visit with each child and then they watch and listen to see how individual children respond – it might be a gentle turn of the head, or tracking the sound of the guitar, or reaching out a finger or a hand in their direction. It may also be clapping hands, making mouth sounds or shapes, making eye contact or just showing the physical signs of relaxation and de-stressing.

*"Having participated in the musical sessions with staff, parents and the children on ward 83 I have seen first-hand the obvious benefits that music provides. The children enjoy it enormously and learn new words whilst mastering different*

*coordination techniques. Parents also have the opportunity to bond with their children."*  
3rd Year student nurse.

#### To read more about the Songbirds project visit:

<https://musicforhealth.wordpress.com/2015/09/13/a-songbirds-tale-one-two-three-hop-a-story-for-families-inspired-by-musicians-residency/>

Songbirds is funded by Youth Music with the support of Central Manchester University Hospitals Foundation Trust. For further information about Youth Music projects visit:

<https://www.youthmusic.org.uk/lydias-story>

The learning opportunities provided in projects such as Songbirds places listening at the centre of interactions between young disabled children and practitioners. This can lead to benefits that include improvements in young children's language development and their physical development and wellbeing.



## Practice example: Communication Passport

Fountains Early Years Centre (formerly Roundabout Nursery), based in Staffordshire, offers nursery and reception provision for young children with disabilities and complex needs.

The Communication Passport below is an example of a child-centred approach to communicating with individual children developed by staff in partnership with parents and carers.

"The learning journey for children starts with a chat with their parents, as they know their children best. From the very beginning we work together to develop an individual Communication Passport for each child so that everyone who comes into contact with the child knows what will work best for them. This means that we are tuned into their needs."

Hi, I'm...

---

---

Photo of  
child to  
go here

Important things you  
should know about me:

- I should be attached to my pump feed (65mls per hour, 23 hours a day)
- I should be wearing my hearing aid headband
- I am very flexible but don't have good muscle control so need support to sit and stand
- I am very visual and pick up on visual cues
- I am very sociable

How I communicate:

- I will discard toys that I no longer want to play with
- I will smile and vocalise when you give me attention
- I am starting to use my voice to gain attention
- I give good eye contact and I smile
- I will moan if I am not happy



Things you can do to help me:

- Ensure that I have suitable support for sitting or standing
- Offer me a wide range of activities to engage in
- Practise my physiotherapy programme exercises with me

Things I don't like:

- Being ignored or left alone



Things I like:

- Attention
- Noisy cause and effect toys
- Wet, messy play e.g. paint, paste, shaving foam



## Effective support for communication

### Unique and individual

The ways in which young children communicate are likely to be idiosyncratic, and practitioners will need to observe each child effectively and get as much information as possible from parents and relevant external professionals such as health visitors about how the child currently communicates.

### Combining communication methods

When collecting information about how an individual child communicates keep an open mind and remember that all children use a combination of communication methods, and that these will be different for each child.

### Understanding children's communication

Interpreting children's communication requires careful and sensitive assessment. Smiling, for example, does not automatically mean 'yes'. Don't make any assumptions about particular facial expressions or actions, but instead tune in to an individual child's communication methods.

### Communicating yes and no

It is important, where possible, to establish the child's means of communicating 'yes' and 'no' and to

incorporate, where possible, a range of familiar objects for reference (toys, photographs, etc.). Where it is not possible to establish a reliable 'yes' and 'no' it might be helpful to think in terms of distress or happiness, consent or refusal.

### Changes over time

Children's communication methods change, so it will be important to review and update personalised guides in response to the child's most recent learning experiences and development. You may choose to indicate ways in which you can respond to children's communication to provide clearer guidance to other members of staff or professionals who will be working with the child. An example is shared below.

There is a wide range of methods to support communication. These include the use of signs, symbols, pictures and objects. Some of these are in regular use, Makaton for example; others, such as Talking Mats, may usefully be exploited more widely. A range of resources for professionals and parents can also be found at: [www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk/early-years/](http://www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk/early-years/)

## Jonny's communication

When I do this:	People think I mean:	You should:
<b>Smile</b>	I am saying 'yes' I am happy I like what I'm doing	Give me time to smile Act according to my answer of 'yes'
<b>Lift my left hand and bang the tray (I'm just learning to do this)</b>	I am trying to say 'no'	Ask me the question again Act according to my answer of 'no'
<b>Stick my tongue out</b>	I am thirsty	Give me a little warm drink of water from my special mug. Please see my practice support plans to help you do this properly

Adapted from *Listening to young disabled children, Listening as a way of life* leaflet series, NCB (2004).

## Everyday listening and consultation

A practitioner may consult children every day about their choices, likes and dislikes without giving it much thought. Consultation does not have to be a formal process. A typical circle time, for example, will usually involve information-sharing and listening skills. Consultation in groups can be an extremely useful way of involving children in planning outings, buying equipment and contributing to child-led activities and learning. It is vital that disabled children are included in these opportunities and practitioners explore the reasonable adjustments that must be made to ensure they are.

Once established, listening and consulting become part of the everyday fabric of good practice. Consultation for all young children needs to be carefully planned and supported, and no child should take part in a consultation if they really do not want to. The best participatory methods are those that are enjoyable, creative, flexible and open to negotiation with the individual child or group of children.

Remember that the more opportunities children have to influence the agenda, the better the outcome is likely to be. When we plan to consult children, it is crucial that we consider how we will process and use the information they give us. If the children's views, suggestions, likes and dislikes, etc., have been established and recorded, the children then need to know that these have been taken seriously. One way to do this is to present their views respectfully in ways that are accessible to them – for example, using their own words, signs, symbols and art. Feedback is a crucial part of the process and shows children how their views have influenced decisions.

***“Don't feel that you have to have an answer or a solution for everything.”***



## Practice example: In-the-Picture



Researchers Alice Paige-Smith and Jonathan Rix (2011) have built on and adapted the Mosaic approach in a study of the perspectives and experiences of early intervention programmes. The study focused on two families with young children identified as having Downs syndrome.

As part of In-the-Picture, a multi-method approach, the researchers carried out detailed first-person narrative observations and took photos of the children's focus of attention whilst engaged in activities to help to build up a composite picture of the families' experiences of speech therapy, play activities, Portage and physiotherapy.

The photos were shared with the children in various forms, enabling their verbal and non-verbal responses to contribute to further understandings of the children's experiences and their interests. The first-person narratives also sensitised the research to the child's perspectives and, alongside the reflection time with children, became the catalyst for further discussions with parents to deepen understanding about children's experiences. The main theme emerging from the study relates to children's participation and empowerment through choice of activities.

For example, Tim had been engaged in a game of ball with his father Alan. At the end of the play session Tim saw his father's boots and said 'Dad's boots'. When Tim looked at the photographs a week later he again showed significant interest in the photograph of the boots, above all the other photos of that session. This process of reflection

provided both parent and researchers with an insight into how learning opportunities could have been extended by following Tim's interest in the boots, which initially went unnoticed at the time of the session as the focus was on the activity of playing ball. It was also felt by the parent to have facilitated the child's increased awareness of his own identity and the expression of his voice:

*"He's certainly been provided with feedback, particularly the photographic feedback of himself doing more, more than he otherwise would have been, so I think that there's been a greater push on him to think of himself as 'me!'"*

The father also recognised that it had provided him with space to consider his attitudes towards his son's actions. Prior to the research he was trying to stop Tim throwing because it might hurt his sister. As a result of the first-person narrative and reflective discussion, he came to recognise that Tim threw for so many different reasons, and so he needed to encourage it as a constructive activity rather than to stop it. Paige-Smith and Rix (2011).

---

These examples highlight the benefits of listening to young disabled children: by taking the time to stop, look and listen, practitioners can help children to articulate their interests and preferences and in turn support children's personal and social development. In the examples above we see how listening to and reflecting upon children's interests can nurture children's confidence in who they are and what they can do, and how we might better support them.

## Inclusive strategies and developing a listening culture

A focus on inclusion and equality is essential for underpinning effective listening and for the development of a listening culture in which practitioners value the importance of listening, are aware of and reflective about how they listen, and acknowledge and respond to experiences and views without discrimination (Williams, 2009).

The following tips on consulting with children may be useful to inform guidelines for 'whole setting' inclusive approaches and strategies to support effective listening with young children:

- Show interest in everything the child has to say, using your judgement later on to draw out the information you actually need for future planning.
- Give children time and try not to interrupt or finish sentences.
- Don't attempt to fill the silence.
- When the child has finished talking, sum up what he or she has said and reflect it back, for example, 'It sounds like you felt very angry when Tommy took your ball away'.
- Don't feel that you have to have an answer or a solution for everything.
- Acknowledge the feelings that are being expressed and give them validity.
- Avoid closed questions that leave you open to a yes/no answer, for example 'Are there things you like at nursery?'; use open-ended questions instead such as 'Tell me some of the things you like about nursery?'
- Make eye contact and get down to the child's level, but bear in mind that some children, particularly those on the autistic spectrum, may find eye contact very difficult.
- Remember that 'why?' question can sound like an accusation.
- Talk respectfully to children; they know when they are being patronised.
- Be honest if you don't know something.
- If you make a mistake, apologise.
- Respect children's privacy, they may not want to share.

Many of these tips have been drawn together from Save the Children projects and training. 'Starting with Choice: Inclusive strategies for consulting young children' (2003).

## Ethical issues in consulting young children

The biggest ethical challenge for researchers working with children is the disparities in power and status between adults and children. Morrow and Richards (1996)

For disabled children there are additional power issues as they face the double challenge of being young and disabled. Listening to, and consulting, young disabled children, especially where children are communicating without speech, may involve a high level of interpretation on behalf of the listener. This raises ethical issues that need to be taken into account as part of the process of listening and consulting. Such issues include the following:

- **Conflicting agendas** – As adults we may be inclined to hear what we want to hear. It is important to allow for the emergence of differences of perspectives and opinion, to be honest about them and be willing to negotiate. Children may also have conflicting agendas; for example, where choices are indicated in a group consultation it may well be impossible for everyone to get their own way. When this happens it is important to explain, as far as possible, the reasons why a particular choice has been made.
- **Informed consent** – It is important to make every effort to ensure that the individual child is aware of what they are being asked to do, its purpose, and that they have the right to say 'no' to anything. All young children need support and appropriate information to enable them to express their views. Consent should be ongoing and it is important that we are aware of and respond to any body language or gesture that may indicate that a child does not want to continue or hasn't finished and has more to say.

See the Further reading section for more information on the ethics of involving young children in research and consultation processes.



## Young disabled children can!

Young children, even those with complex needs, can participate effectively and have a right to do so. The 'Ask Us' project (led by the Children's Society) and 'Two-Way Street' (led by Triangle and NSPCC) both found that disabled children and young people had strong views about the society we live in, how they are treated, the services they receive, their education, health and leisure. They found that disabled children wanted to have a say in things that affect them, and

to be respected. Early years services and settings can do much to help children in the process of developing decision-making skills and forming a positive sense of identity. Taking disabled children and their views seriously and listening to what they have to communicate is an empowering process that can help to ensure their sense of belonging and membership of a group, as well as enabling them to achieve their full potential as individuals.

## Practice example: All Join In – enabling participation

All Join In is a unique video, made with a diverse group of 3-7 year olds, designed to help children develop skills in communicating, making friends and for understanding their own and other's feelings. All Join In has been heavily influenced by young children from start to finish. The 14 children who appear in the video were involved in planning filming and editing. More than 200 other children have watched and given feedback at home and in nurseries and schools at different stages in the project.

All Join In looks at new experiences and new relationships through a child's eyes, to encourage:

- Inclusion – children are encouraged to wonder about other children and about differences in a positive way.

- Communication – children are introduced to strategies for making sense of one another's behaviour. These strategies include sign language around feelings and getting along.
- Emotional literacy – children are shown skills for observing and understanding each other's feelings. The video is almost adult-free, interactive, lively and fun. NSPCC/Triangle (2004).

All Join In provides a model that explicitly highlights the benefits of enabling children's participation in peer-led activities, and shares and celebrates children's voices.

## Enabling young children's participation in decisions that affect them

There is a wealth of resources promoting creativity in enabling young children's participation in children's services. Practitioners have found that even young children with complex needs can participate effectively so long as they establish the best way of listening to the individual child. Examples in the Save the Children Choose project (2003) demonstrated how an inventive and committed staff team can devise ways of involving all children in their planning. Some of the disabled children involved demonstrated their preferences by smiling, blinking or even sneezing. (Dickins, Emerson and Gordon-Smith 2003).

See Further reading for resources that include practical ideas about enabling young children's participation in early years settings to inform daily practice, service design and policy.



## Practice example: A whole setting approach to listening

The Head of Early Years at Fountains Early Years Centre takes a holistic approach to listening to children and enabling their participation in decisions that affect their daily lives.

*“We provide a sensory environment in which each practitioner uses a particular perfume and item of jewellery, such as a bangle, that helps children recognise them. We have children with very limited vision and these cues help to support them to recognise who is working with them.”*

The early years staff also use lots of visual communication in the setting to ensure that children can understand their daily routines, make choices and participate in decisions that affect them.

*“We give children with complex needs cues for changing from one activity to another using objects of reference. Some children are able to recognise symbols using Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) and often start learning this with symbols of food they like. Our timetables are all symbol-based which helps children show us what activity they are choosing, for example, a symbol of water lets us know they'd like a drink.”*

Developing a listening culture means listening to children, parents and staff on an ongoing basis as

part of day-to-day practice. A listening culture is one in which listening to individual experiences and views is identified as a core feature of the setting's approach and ethos. It involves practitioners interacting respectfully with young children and adults and explicitly documenting the listening process, including examples of changes made in the light of the views expressed. For example, using learning journey books which are created with and for each child is a great way to evidence children's learning, vocalisations and responses. This method allows us to capture, record and take into account children's experiences in, and perspectives on, the setting, including their own progress and developing interests ascertained by listening. Learning journey books can include speech bubbles, photos, children's art work and also any documentation related to children's participation in decisions that affect them such as choosing friends and staff to spend time with, and sharing views about what they would like their daily routines to include.

Learning journey books can be shared between children, practitioners and parents and provide a fabulous resource for everyone at the setting.

*“Children often contribute using smiley faces or their friend will give a ‘thumbs up’.”*

### Planning and assessing listening practice

When thinking about inclusive strategies and developing a listening culture it is useful to assess existing practice and to identify areas for improvement: to ask, for example, if practitioners are providing equal opportunities for all young children's voices to be heard.

Practitioners may want to review:

- how individual children, particularly those with complex needs, are currently engaging in opportunities to express their views and contribute to meaningful decision-making;
- whether the environment is fully enabling for all children and whether the learning and development opportunities provided are genuinely inclusive and responsive to all children.

'Let's listen' (Hamer and Williams, 2010) is a useful resource for practitioners and leaders to use to support profiling and planning in listening to young children in relation to the EYFS. It also provides a framework for developing a listening culture in and across early years services and with partners. It is particularly important when supporting young disabled children to think about ways of engaging partners as young disabled children are likely to receive support from many different professionals, often at the same time. Joined up provision can be greatly enhanced by the sharing of information about children's voices.

## Some of the key drivers for listening to young disabled children include the following:

### The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)

This was ratified in the UK in 1991 and states in Article 12 that:

*“parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.”*

### The Childcare Act 2006

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

### Equality Act 2010

All early years providers have a duty not to discriminate against disabled children in the provision of education, care or other services. In particular, providers of all services must make ‘reasonable adjustments’ to ensure that disabled children are not at a disadvantage compared with other children. This includes making adjustments to ensure that disabled children are included in consultations and planning along with their peers.

For further information download ‘Disabled children and the Equality Act 2010: What Early Years providers need to know and do, including responsibilities to disabled children under the Children and Families Act 2014’ at: [www.councilfordisabledchildren.org.uk](http://www.councilfordisabledchildren.org.uk)

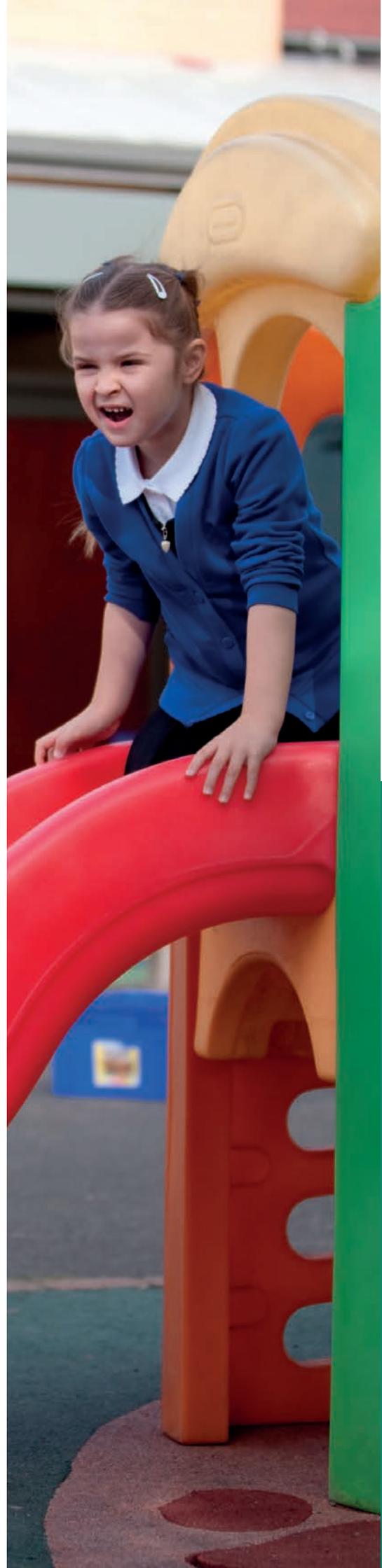
### The Children and Families Act 2014 (CFA)

This changes the special educational needs (SEN) framework and brings in responsibilities for local authorities that apply to disabled children as well as those with SEN.

Part 3 of the CFA sets out duties towards children and young people with SEN and disabilities. The legislation promotes early identification, co-ordinated assessment and planning and co-operation between all agencies. The duties in this part of CFA are based on core principles that set out the importance of:

- the views, wishes and feelings of the child or young person and the child’s parents
- the child or young person, and the child’s parents, participating as fully as possible in decisions, and being provided with information and support
- supporting the child or young person’s development to help them achieve the best possible educational and other outcomes.

All early years providers in the maintained, private, voluntary and independent sectors that are funded through the local authority are required to have regard to the SEN and disability Code of Practice



(2015) (the Code). The Code explains the duties in CFA and, in line with the principles in CFA, promotes the importance of listening to children and their families.

*“All children are entitled to an education that enables them to achieve the best possible educational and other outcomes, and become confident young children with a growing ability to communicate their own views and ready to make the transition to compulsory education.” (para 5.1, the Code, 2015).*

The Code provides statutory guidance on CFA but also draws on UN Conventions and the Equality Act, and sets out a wider range of principles that should be observed by all professionals working with children and young people with SEN and disabilities. The Code emphasises the importance of all practitioners listening and responding to parents' concerns about their child's development. They should also listen to and address any concerns raised by children themselves. Where a child requires an education, health and care needs assessment, and may need an education health and care plan (EHCP), parents and children must be fully included in the process (Stobbs, 2015).

For further guidance about the SEND reforms and what the changes mean for early years providers the Council for Disabled Children and 4Children have produced the following resource: 'Special Educational Needs and Disability in the Early Years: A toolkit' (2015)  
[www.councilfordisabledchildren.org.uk/resources/sen-and-disability-in-the-early-years-toolkit](http://www.councilfordisabledchildren.org.uk/resources/sen-and-disability-in-the-early-years-toolkit)



## Models of disability which inform our attitudes and practice

Throughout history society has sought to explain disability to itself. There are two significant models of disability that inform our thinking and our attitudes. The first is the medical model of disability which is the view that disability is a medical 'problem' that we must 'treat.' The underlying impairment becomes the primary focus of attention and professions must cure or alleviate it in order to be successful. In this model the child is seen as 'faulty.'

**The social model of disability** sees dis(ability) as socially constructed. It is the social and physical barriers that society itself creates which are regarded as the disabling factors. (Dickins 2014; Reiser and Mason 1992). If we are working from a social model of disability the focus is on the changes, or adjustments, to be made to enable access, rather than on the impairment.

The social model of disability demands that we listen to disabled children and adults as individuals and take their views on board. Although, in recent years, considerable attention has been directed at seeking

the views of children generally, younger disabled children in particular have remained a relatively neglected group. The fundamental right to be consulted has often been ignored, particularly for children with high support needs and/or communication difficulties (Ward 1997). The problem is highlighted by an example in a recent Education Health and Care Plan for a young child: "Due to Aaron's difficulty with language it was not possible to gain his views."

Many would argue that more training and support is needed to enable practitioners to provide young disabled children with opportunities to have their voices heard, and to access fully inclusive early education provision alongside their peers. NCB provides an array of specialist training for early years practitioners which includes a focus on listening to children, supporting early learning and partnerships with parents. For further information about training courses visit <https://www.ncb.org.uk/ecu>

## References

- Chamba, R and others (1999) *On the Edge: Minority ethnic families caring for a severely disabled child*. Policy Press
- Clark, A and Moss, P (2001) *Listening to Young Children: The Mosaic approach*. National Children's Bureau
- Council for Disabled Children and 4Children (2015). *Special Educational Needs and Disability in the Early Years: A toolkit*
- Dickins, M (2014) *A-Z of Inclusion in Early Childhood*. Open University Press
- Dickins, M, Emerson, S and Gordon-Smith, P (2003) *Starting with Choice: Inclusive strategies for consulting young children*. Save the Children
- Dickins, M (2004) *Listening to young disabled children*. Listening as a way of life leaflet series. National Children's Bureau
- Hamer, C and Williams, L (2010) *Let's listen – young children's voices profiling and planning to enable their participation in children's services*. National Children's Bureau
- Lane, J (2008) *Young Children and Racial Justice*. National Children's Bureau
- Marchant, R and Gordon, R (2001) *Two-Way Street: Communicating with disabled children*. NSPCC
- Morrow, V and Richards, M (1996) *The Ethics of Social Research with Children: An overview*. *Children and Society* 10, 90-105
- National Working Group on Child Protection and Disability (2003) *It Doesn't Happen to Disabled Children: Child Protection and Disabled Children*. NSPCC
- NSPCC/Triangle (2004) *All Join In*. NSPCC
- Paige-Smith, A and Rix, J (2011) *Researching early intervention and young children's perspectives-developing and using a 'listening to children approach'*, *British Journal of Special Education*, 38 (1) 28-36
- Stobbs, P. (2015) *Disabled children and the Equality Act 2010. What Early Years providers need to know and do, including responsibilities to disabled children under the Children and Families Act 2014*. Council for Disabled Children
- Ward, L (1997) *Seen and Heard: Involving disabled children and young people in research and development projects*. Joseph Rowntree Foundation
- Williams, L (2009) *Developing a listening culture*. Listening as a way of life leaflet series. National Children's Bureau





## Further reading

Clark, A and Moss, P (2011) *Listening to Young Children: The Mosaic approach*. Second edition. National Children's Bureau.

Clark, A and Moss, P (2005) *Spaces to Play: More listening to young children using the Mosaic approach*. National Children's Bureau  
These two books outline a framework for listening to young children's perspectives on their daily lives – the Mosaic approach. *Spaces to Play* demonstrates its use in involving young children in the redevelopment of their outdoor play area.

Clark, A. (2014) 'Developing and adapting the Mosaic approach' in Clark, A., Flewitt, R., Hammersley, M. and Robb, M. (eds.) *Understanding research with children and young people*. Sage with The Open University, 200-209

This describes the development and adaptation of the Mosaic approach including raising ethical questions about listening to all children.

Davies, A and Hamblin, E (2016) *Ready to listen: involving young children and their families in local decisions about health and wellbeing*. National Children's Bureau

This resource aims to support discussion with children aged 0-7 and their parents/carers about health and wellbeing, and to facilitate their involvement in decision-making about local health structures, systems and practice.

Dickins, M., with Denziloe, J (2003) *All together: how to create inclusive services for disabled children and their families. A practice handbook for early years workers*. National Children's Bureau

Explores the principles, policy and practice of inclusion for young disabled children and their families.

Harcourt, D., Perry, B. and Waller, T. (2011) *Researching young children's perspectives: debating the ethics and dilemmas of educational research with children*. Routledge

Explores the challenges of including children as full participants in research projects and invites researchers to view deep listening as essential to any investigations that inform meaningful knowledge about children's lived experiences.

Lancaster, Y P and Kirby, P on behalf of Coram (2010) *Listening to Young Children, 2nd edition*. Open University Press

This comprehensive resource pack supports practitioners in understanding what it means to listen and respond to what young children have to say. The pack includes a Reader, DVD and case studies of real life scenarios.

Lindon, J (2006) *Equality in Early Childhood-Linking theory and practice*. Hodder Arnold

Makes links between anti-discriminatory practice and child development, with a sound basis of children's own knowledge, experiences and understanding.

## Further reading (continued)

Marchant, R and Cross, M (2002) *How it Is: An image vocabulary for children about feelings, rights and safety, personal care and sexuality*. NSPCC and Triangle

The vocabulary comprises 380 images that are designed to be used as a flexible, child-centred resource to support children to communicate about their feelings, bodies, rights and basic needs.

Marchant, R and Jones, M (2003) *Getting it Right: Involving disabled children and young people in assessment, planning and review processes*. Triangle

This booklet considers the systemic and practical challenges to meaningful involvement and suggests approaches and resources to meet these.

McLaughlin, H (2014) *Involving children and young people in policy, practice and research*. National Children's Bureau

A collection of papers, identifying some of the key themes and considerations in the involvement of children and young people in practice, policy and research.

Miller, J (1997) *Never too Young: How young children can take responsibility and make decisions*. Save the Children

Shows how children under the age of eight can participate, make decisions and take responsibility for their actions.



## Useful websites

[www.ncb.org.uk/ecu](http://www.ncb.org.uk/ecu)

The Early Childhood Unit at NCB works to support and improve services for young children and their families so that they have rich and fulfilling early experiences and can grow up safe, happy and healthy.

[www.ncb.org.uk/cdc](http://www.ncb.org.uk/cdc)

The Council for Disabled Children is the umbrella body for the disabled children's sector bringing together professionals, practitioners and policy-makers.

[www.anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk/](http://www.anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk/)

The Anti-Bullying Alliance (ABA) is a unique coalition of organisations and individuals, who work together to stop bullying and create safer environments in which children and young people can live, grow, play and learn. ABA is hosted by NCB.

[www.cafamily.org.uk](http://www.cafamily.org.uk)

Contact a Family is a UK charity for families with disabled children and offers information on specific conditions and rare disorders. It runs national helplines for parents.

[www.crae.org.uk](http://www.crae.org.uk)

CRAE protects the human rights of children by lobbying government and others who hold power, by bringing or supporting test cases and by using regional and international human rights mechanisms.

[www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk/early-years/](http://www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk/early-years/)

The Communication Trust is a coalition of not-for-profit organisations working together to support everyone who works with children and young people in England to support their speech, language and communication.

[www.ican.org.uk](http://www.ican.org.uk)

I CAN is the children's communication charity that supports children with speech, language and communication difficulties across the UK.

[www.mefirst.org.uk](http://www.mefirst.org.uk)

Me first is an education and training resource that is designed to help healthcare professionals to develop their knowledge, skills and confidence in communicating with children and young people.

[www.participationworks.org.uk](http://www.participationworks.org.uk)

Participation Works is a partnership of national children and young people's agencies that provides a voice to anyone wanting to give a voice to children and young people. Resources are provided on how to involve disabled children and children and young people with communication impairments in decision-making.



National Children's  
Bureau

## Listening as a way of life

The Listening as a way of life series provides a guide to help practitioners design creative and individual ways of listening to children and to each other.

This leaflet is one of eight in the series. Others in the series include:

- Why and how we listen to young children
- Listening to babies
- Supporting parents and carers to listen: a guide for practitioners
- Are equalities an issue? Finding out what young children think
- Listening and responding to young children's views on food
- Developing a listening culture
- Leadership for listening

Visit: [www.ncb.org.uk/listening-and-participation-resources](http://www.ncb.org.uk/listening-and-participation-resources) to download,  
or email: [ecuadmin@ncb.org.uk](mailto:ecuadmin@ncb.org.uk)

### Acknowledgements

Authors: Mary Dickins and Lucy Williams

Critical Readers: Philippa Stobbs and Pam Shaw

Series Editor: Lucy Williams

With thanks to Dr Alison Clark, Dr Cathy Hamer, Ros Hawley, Miriam Price, Professor Jonathan Rix and Helen Wheeler for providing case study material and Susan Burgess at Bamburgh School, South Shields for providing photos.

National Children's Bureau,  
8 Wakley Street, London EC1V 7QE.  
T: +44(0)20 7843 6000. F: +44(0)20 7278 9515.  
[www.ncb.org.uk](http://www.ncb.org.uk)  
@NCBtweets



Produced in association with the Council for Disabled Children.

© National Children's Bureau 2017. Registered Charity No 258825. Registered in England and Wales No 952717.

Photo page 6: <http://www.123rf.com/>