
EXPLORING THE FIELD OF LISTENING TO AND CONSULTING WITH YOUNG CHILDREN

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Introduction

This research study was commissioned by the Sure Start, Early Years and Childcare Unit, now the Sure Start Unit of the Department for Education and Skills (DfES). The aim was to carry out a State of the Art Review into listening to and consulting with young children, under five years old. The focus of the review was young children's views and experiences of education and childcare. The principle objectives were to examine:

- *Methodology*: different approaches used in research and consultations for listening to young children, including those which can operate alongside listening to practitioners and parents and tools which are open to young children with special needs
- *Impact*: evidence gained of children's experiences and priorities and subsequent changes to attitudes and practice. This includes evidence of the impact of listening on practitioners, parents and young children.

The final stage of the review was to identify good practice in listening to and consulting with young children, drawn from a range of early years provision

The research was undertaken by Alison Clark, Susan Mc Quail and Peter Moss of the Thomas Coram Research Unit which is part of the Institute of Education, at the University of London.

Key Findings

- Only a minority of childcare audits carried out by Early Years and Childcare Partnerships (EYDCPs) during 2001-2002 seem to have focused on the views of children under five years old. An analysis of 50 childcare audits which included consultation activities revealed that only seven had concentrated on the under fives.
- The review demonstrated that some imaginative methods are being used by researchers, practitioners and consultants to listen to and to consult young children. These include methods adapted from work with older children including interviews, questionnaires, group work and participatory games. Other techniques such as observation have a strong tradition in the early years field. These have been combined with the use of multi-sensory methods including the use of media, role play, drawing and puppets.
- Key themes have emerged from the literature about young children's priorities in early years provision. These include the importance of friends, food, drink and cooking, outside play, the role of the staff, time to finish their activities and support for periods of transition.
- There were only limited examples in the published literature where the views and experiences of young children with disabilities have been gathered about early education and childcare.

- There was evidence of the impact of listening to young children occurring at an individual, institutional and strategic level. At an individual level, research indicated young children experienced increased self-esteem and social competency, together with an insight into decision-making processes. Impact at an institutional level included opportunities for practitioners to reflect on practice, changes to policies and to designs of outdoor and indoor spaces. There were few examples found of the impact of young children's views on change at a strategic level.
- This review points to the need for early years practitioners to bring their knowledge about the ways young children think and communicate into debates around consulting children and children's participation. Listening to young children needs to be part of a culture of listening which respects the views of adults and children. Research points to the importance of debating the principles of listening.
- At a policy level, the review reveals the place for training on listening, consultation and children's rights as part of initial teacher training and NNEB training. In addition, there are in-service training implications for early years practitioners and managers. There needs to be further discussion about appropriate ways to include the views and experiences of young children in the inspection process.
- This review reveals the small number of research studies carried out into young children's views and experiences of education and childcare. More studies should be undertaken which draw on children's expertise of different forms of childcare including childminding and their perspectives on the indoor and outdoor environment. There is a particular need to explore methodologies to include the experiences of young children with special needs and how to represent young children's views at a strategic level
- Comparative studies are needed which identify approaches to listening to young children in early years provision in other countries. These exchanges should be within the UK and within Europe. The literature review suggests that practice in Denmark, the Netherlands and Italy

could be considered together with practice in Scotland and England.

Definitions

There are a range of definitions in use regarding 'listening', 'consultation' and participation. This research study has identified two different purposes for listening to and involving young children in education and childcare settings:

- everyday listening by those who regularly work with young children, giving opportunities for decision-making in routines and activities and
- one-off consultation about a particular issue, event or opportunity

Research Methods

The research study has based its findings on the following components:

- Literature review including articles, reports and material for practitioners on current practice covering all countries where English language literature is available.
- A review of a sample of 50 Childcare Audits to find examples where young children have been consulted. Two sources were used for this sample: childcare audits for 2001-2002 received by DfES by July 2002 and EYDCPs which identified themselves as consulting children in response to a related study to inform the Investors in Children initiative.
- Overseas reviews of articles from Denmark and the Netherlands to increase the scope of this study with material from two countries known to offer important contributions to listening to young children.
- Six case studies, five English and one Danish case study to highlight current practice. The six case studies were chosen to illustrate innovative approaches to everyday listening and to consultations across a range of early years provision. The selection process began by identifying early years settings through the literature and EYDCP childcare audits. This was supplemented by contact with key informants to include representatives of national early years organisations, arts organisations, academics and Sure Start Regional Managers.
- An invited seminar to bring together policy makers, academics, voluntary sector

representatives and practitioners to discuss issues arising from the review about listening to and consulting with young children

Childcare Audits

Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships have been required to conduct annual audits since their formation in 1998, including gathering children and young people's preferences for childcare and other support services.

A review of this sample indicates that only a minority of EYDCPs are focusing their consultations for the childcare audits on the under fives. More research is needed to gather evidence of the particular issues which EYDCPs face in including the views and experiences of young children.

Seven EYDCPs from the sample of 50 identified consultation activities focused on the under fives: Ealing, Islington, Kingston upon Hull, Plymouth, Rotherham, Shropshire and Wigan. There were other EYDCPs which had included the under fives as part of a wider consultation. Islington EYDCP was unique in providing an extended period of training for staff on listening to young children, organised as part of its consultation by Save the Children which led to short term and long-term changes to everyday practice (Case Study Two).

Case Studies

The English case studies featured a rural playgroup, an Early Excellence Centre which had taken part in an EYDCP initiated training programme; an urban and coastal Sure Start programme and an Infant and Nursery school. The sixth case focused on an example of Danish early years provision for children under three.

The case studies illustrated different aspects of the two purposes of listening to children identified in the review.

A. Everyday listening by those who regularly work with young children giving opportunities for decision-making in routines and activities. Methods and approaches used in the case studies included:

- Prioritising time to listen to children talking, in groups and individually
- Using children's records of progress or 'profile books' as a daily listening tool

- 'Tuning in' routines to young children's rhythms, interests and developing skills
- Giving young children increasing control over their personal care
- Explaining, discussing and negotiating rules
- Seeking young children's opinions and solutions to problems which arise
- Developing ways of listening to and involving young children which open up more channels of communication with parents
- Designing personal 'passports' to listen to and empower young children with special needs
- Taking part in a training programme by a specialist organisation on listening to young children

B. One-off consultation about a particular issue, event or opportunity. Methods and approaches used in the case studies consultations included:

- Involving a Community Arts team to engage both parents and young children in consultations about a new building
- Involving older children to inform decisions about provision for children under four
- Employing an action researcher to involve young children in the planning and reviewing of services for parents and children.

Methods

The review brings together methods which have been used by researchers, practitioners and consultants to understand the views and experiences of young children about education and childcare. Examples are drawn from the review of literature in English and the reviews undertaken in Denmark and the Netherlands.

- Observation. Examples draw on the strong tradition of observation as a tool in ethnographic research and early childhood education practice. Observation is a starting point for other methods and is of particular importance in reviewing the experiences of pre-verbal children.
- Traditional consultation techniques. There is evidence of interviews, focus groups and questionnaires being used to gather the views of young children. Some publications have addressed ways of adapting these methods for appropriate use with young children, for

example focusing on types of language used and the structure and setting on the interview.

- Structured and multi-sensory methods. There are a range of techniques for listening to young children which shift the balance away from the written or spoken word to approaches which focus on visual or multi-sensory methods. These include role play activities and the use of puppets. Participatory games have also been adapted for the under fives.

These new approaches have incorporated the use of different media, for example cameras for young children to record their own perspectives.

Key Themes

There are a number of key themes which have emerged as matters of importance to the young children who have taken part in consultations about early education and childcare.

- The importance of relationships are mentioned in many studies, especially friends and key adults.
- Children referred to the quality of food and drink and their access to these facilities
- Access to the outdoor environment was another priority, in particular use of favourite equipment.
- Other studies highlighted the importance of having time for children to finish their 'projects'
- Young children discussed difficulties arising from transitions to new settings

There is a danger of making children out to be a homogenous group with identical views. This is particularly the case when we are reliant on such a small number of published work. This will only be redressed when more young children are given the opportunity to describe their experiences. This includes young children from diverse ethnic backgrounds as well as children with disabilities.

Inclusive Practice

A number of imaginative approaches are being used for gathering the views and experiences of young children with special needs. These methods are most effective when they result in empowering children in everyday routines. There remains a need for more research and development work into

inclusive practices in young children's participation which opens up channels of communication for children from diverse communities and with different abilities.

Impact

There is evidence of the impact of listening to young children at an individual, institutional and strategic level. Firstly, research indicates that young children can experience increased self-esteem and social competency, together with gaining an insight into decision-making processes. At an individual level the impact of listening to young children can have an impact on parents and staff attitudes and perceptions of children's capabilities and insights. Secondly, impact at an institutional level has led in some instances to changes in policies and to designs of outdoor and indoor spaces. There were few examples found of the impact of young children's views on change at a strategic level.

Emerging issues

This review points to emerging issues for practice, policy and research.

Practice

- There is a need to help practitioners reflect on their skills in the light of emerging debates about young children's participation.
- Listening should be a reciprocal process. One of the challenges to practice is how to promote a culture of listening where children, staff and parents are respected and listened to.
- Debates around learning, listening and consulting need to be considered together. Listening to young children should not rely on a 'bolt on' activity but be part of everyday practice (Marchant and Kirby, 2003).
- There is need for debate about principles on which to base listening and consulting with young children. One starting point for discussion is the framework adopted by Clark and Moss (2001:5) in which listening is participatory, adaptable, multi-method, reflexive and embedded in practice.

Policy

- At a policy level, the review reveals the place for training on listening, consultation and children's rights as part of initial teacher training and NNEB training. These training

needs extend to in-service training for early years practitioners and managers.

- There needs to be further discussion about appropriate ways to include the views and experiences of young children in the inspection process. There is the risk that quick, short hand methods will be adopted which fail to tap into the competent ways young children can express their points of view.
- The review shows little representation of young children's views at a strategic level. Time and resources need to be given to devising appropriate methods for representing young children at a national policy level.
- There are budgetary implications for implementing a participatory approach to providing early years services. This relates to the costs of consultation as well as the resource implications of taking young children's views seriously.

Research

- This review reveals the small number of research studies carried out into young children's views and experiences of education and childcare. More studies should be undertaken which draw on children's expertise of different forms of childcare including childminding and their perspectives on the indoor and outdoor environment. There is a particular need to explore methodologies to include the experiences of young children with special needs and appropriate methods for representing young children's views at a strategic level.
- Comparative studies are needed which identify approaches to listening to young children in early years provision in other countries. These exchanges should be within the UK and within Europe. The literature review suggests that practice in Denmark, the Netherlands and Italy could be considered together with practice in Scotland and England.

Summary

This review has been undertaken at a time of growing interest in listening to young children by practitioners, policy makers and academics. The review has highlighted examples of everyday listening and consultations in a range of early years provision. The review has indicated the types of

methodologies available but also the increasing body of evidence into the impact of listening.

Young children will best be served by changes to policy and practice which remain alert to their differing perspectives and interests as well as their needs.

References

Clark, A. and P. Moss (2001). *Listening to children: the Mosaic Approach*. London, National Children's Bureau.

Marchant, R. and Kirby, P. (2003) *The participation of young children: communication, consultation and involvement*. Joseph Rowntree Foundation

Additional Information

Copies of the full report (RR445) - priced £4.95 - are available by writing to DfES Publications, PO Box 5050, Sherwood Park, Annesley, Nottingham NG15 0DJ.

Copies of this Research Brief (RB445) are available free of charge from the above address (tel: 0845 60 222 60). Research Briefs and Research Reports can also be accessed at <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/research/>

Cheques should be made payable to "DfES Priced Publications".

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