

Listening as a way of life



Are equalities an issue? Finding out what young children think

Nicky Road

Why find out what children think about equalities issues?

Children learn about differences from an early age. A baby's own individuality and sense of self emerges from the moment of birth. As babies mature they become

increasingly aware of others. They develop skills through observation, imitation and experimentation. They develop emotionally and socially, through the support provided to them by their significant carers. They learn how to respond to new people and events based

on the experiences they have had to new and different situations and the messages they have picked up from their key carers.

We now know that through this process of growing and developing even the youngest children start to learn about what is different, as well as what is similar, between people. For example, they see and note, often unconsciously, differences in people's skin colour, hair texture, physical features or size and agility. They begin to form values and responses to these differences by observing other people's behaviour – their actions, reactions, body language and words – as well as through images presented to them. Whether these messages are blatant or subtle, children are acutely sensitive to them. Children therefore learn about the way inequalities are embedded in our society and, as a consequence, this affects their

Listening to children is an integral part of understanding what they are feeling and what it is they need from their early years experience. 'Listening' in this document is defined as:

- An active process of receiving, 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.
- An ongoing part of tuning in to all 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 children feel confident, safe and powerful, ensuring they have the time and space to express themselves in whatever form suits them.

attitudes to those who are different from them from an early age. These differences may be because of their ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, ability/disability, family background or other factors.

Helping children make sense of differences

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

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

Hearing and responding to children's perspectives

The Preschool Equity and Social Diversity (PESD) project in Australia (MacNaughton 2003) is studying the relationships

between pre-school children's understandings of social diversity and equity and their own gender, class and racial identities. They have begun to discover ways of hearing children's perspectives on equality issues, a dimension that has often been missing.

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

If we ask these kinds of questions and find ways to enable children to express their views and feelings, we must also be prepared to respond appropriately and sensitively to what they tell us, however uncomfortable or difficult this may be. Children are often silenced because of our fears of hearing things we do not want to hear or of dealing with things we do not feel confident to deal with. We must anticipate that this may happen and prepare ourselves. It is important to practise responding to whatever might come up, before finding ourselves in a position of needing to respond.

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

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

Active listening

Being an active listener makes different demands on those who work with children. *Listening to Young Children* (Lancaster and Broadbent 2003) sets

out a three-step spiral framework of preparation, process and reflection (PPR). Preparation provides opportunities for creative thinking, discussion and planning. Process looks at how the children respond to taking part in a facilitated activity or 'shared experience', within a child-led approach. Reflection aims to provide both adults and children with the opportunity to think about and evaluate what happened in the activity or shared experience. The evaluation includes thinking about the learning that has taken place. It looks at the experiences that have emerged as expressed by the children, including their concerns and feelings. It reflects on the understanding that practitioners have gained and how this will inform the next preparation.

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

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

Case study

Helping children challenge injustice

The following example shows how practitioners can work with children in developing both their understanding of inequality and their experience of countering it.

To celebrate the tenth anniversary of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, children from 40 nurseries and after-school clubs in Birmingham were given information and activity packs about the Convention. They were invited to express their views about children's rights on a Graffiti Wall made of ten-metre sheets of calico. There was

no explicit intention to consult the children, as the initial aim was to tell them about their rights. However the 'wall' showed that the children felt strongly about many issues including play, discrimination, violence and freedom of choice. Following this event the children reported their concerns to the Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership. As a result it was agreed that the children should be supported in deciding what actions they wanted to take to address their concerns.

(Case study from Fajerman, Jarrett and Sutton 2000).

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

Storytelling

One way of encouraging children to express their feelings and views can be through storytelling. There are a growing number of authors and illustrators who are consciously trying to reflect the diverse community in which children grow up. This helps to redress the balance found in many well-known stories with messages which may, for example, foster attitudes of superiority by white children and devalue and reject other lifestyles and languages. Messages which may also encourage black children to develop feelings of inferiority, alienation, lack of

worth and confidence which interfere with their abilities to learn. A world which does not acknowledge or value them and one which may cause them to feel conflict between home, where they are valued, and the early years setting, where they feel they are not. This is equally true for children with disabilities and for gender stereotyping. The principles of these stories may also enable all children to recognise the damage caused by having attitudes based on such notions of superiority or prejudice. Seeking out books which explore these issues and encourage children to talk about them can help young children identify and empathise with characters who have been unfairly treated. We can try to uncover any stereotypical attitudes and negative beliefs they may have picked up by asking them questions such as:

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

Helping children to create their own stories is another way. Practitioners can

encourage children to select a prop or object from dressing-up clothes or musical instruments. They can encourage children to create some characters through the use of art, role play and drama, which suggest something to that child. Through asking the children open-ended questions, the children can decide who they want to be and what happens to them. Practitioners can ask the children how they want the story to begin, how it develops, how that makes them feel and so on.

Using Persona Dolls is a well-developed way of exploring issues of equality and developing concepts of empathy in young children. Louise Derman-Sparks (1992), who developed their use in her work in the US, explains that Persona Dolls become 'people' in the classroom or setting because they get introduced to the children in the first week of school or nursery and have the same problems settling in as the children. The Dolls also enable practitioners to present children with an inclusive view of the world. The stories can give children opportunities to see black people, refugees, people with disabilities, Gypsy and Travellers living happy and successful lives. Other stories can describe difficulties the

Dolls experience that flow from the discrimination and prejudices they encounter, like teasing and name-calling, because all the things that happen to the children, happen to the Dolls.

MacNaughton (1999, see Brown 2003) emphasises the importance of using Persona Dolls with skill and sensitivity. The storytelling process has to go hand-in-hand with the process of listening to children in a spirit of commitment to fairness and respect for all those involved.

Discovering children's concerns

Consulting children on what they think about their settings or the curriculum

routinely throws up concerns that children have as to what they do not like or what worries them. Finding out what children both like and dislike about their environment is a good way of exploring with them their reasons for such thoughts and what can be done to make things better. Consultations can be through focus groups and circle time. It can also be done by children recording what they like and dislike by walking around their indoor and outdoor play and work area tape-recording their comments, videotaping or photographing places and things.

It is important to involve parents and carers so that they know what their children are doing and for what reason.

Both children and families need to give their permission if they are being recorded or photographed and to be clear what they are giving their permission for.

In whatever way children express their feelings and views the issue of interpretation is critical. Children should be enabled to tell their own story about their picture or the image they have created. The practitioner should write down the children's descriptions of what is happening. When listening to disabled children it is important to understand their preferred method of communication. If children do not have verbal language or sufficient English, thought needs to be given to how best to interpret what

Case study

Using Persona Dolls

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

The keyworker refreshed the children's memories of Emily, the doll on her lap, by speaking about the last story she had told them about her. She asked if Emily looked happy today and when the children replied 'no', she said that Emily had asked the keyworker to tell her story, as she was feeling too sad to tell it herself. The story she told was of Emily going to the park with some friends. She was having a really lovely time until some big children came up and asked Emily's friends if they wanted to join their game. They left Emily out. She wanted to play too but was told that she was too small and small people were stupid so they didn't want her in their game. Off they all ran, leaving Emily alone.

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

The story had a range of possible solutions. By weaving in the children's contributions, the keyworker drew it together by emphasising the pleasure of inclusion and the pain of exclusion. She picked up the contributions made by Rashid and Christopher and stressed the solutions that mirrored Kylie's and Jeff's response to Rashid. She hoped that thinking about how Emily was feeling might have helped Christopher gain an insight into his own behaviour and learn that some things he is told are untrue.

(Case study from Brown 2000)

Case study

Exploring gender and sexuality

At lunch five-year-old Tommy announced that when he grows up he was going to marry his best friend Sam. Ethan asked his teacher whether Tommy and Sam could get married as he was fairly sure that they could not, as only men and women marry each other. The teacher, observing what had taken place at lunch and then being asked a question about it, needed to know how best to respond. Being aware that children may raise issues of sexual development and sexuality she had to be prepared. She also needed to find appropriate ways of talking to families about sexual orientation and various cultural values. She did not know what Tommy and Sam had in mind when they said they planned to get married. Perhaps, as best friends, they thought that getting married was the best way to express their deep friendship. They might grow up to be gay, or one or both might become heterosexual men. Not knowing how their sexual orientations were developing, and wanting to be inclusive of all that children are and will become, she had to respond thoughtfully.

Ignoring the question, because she felt uncomfortable and uncertain as to how best to deal with it, would be understandable. However ignoring the child's question reinforces the sense of taboo on this issue and devalues the children's thinking. Some may feel that this is a question that should be dealt with at home, as many families have strong and different beliefs on these issues. However the child has asked the

teacher a question and is awaiting a response. Whilst parents should be told about their child's question and how the teacher handled it, the responsibility for answering the question rests with the teacher.

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

Ethan's teacher could have planned a class discussion on Ethan's question, as a way of exploring a wide range of issues with the children. She might then decide to inform parents in advance. She is likely to get a range of responses from questions on how the question arose in the classroom, to anger that this is being discussed. Teachers and parents may need to negotiate with one another to arrive at responses with which they are both comfortable.

(Case study from Cahill and Theilheimer 1999)

they have represented. This may be through involving the parents and asking them what is significant to the child, a bilingual speaker, interpreter or someone else who knows the child well.

Possibilities and Challenges

One of the Foundation Stage requirements is to: 'provide a safe and supportive learning environment, free from harassment, in which the contribution of all children is valued and where religious, disability and gender stereotyping are challenged.'

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

Understanding differences and avoiding stereotypes

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

A useful resource, developed from practice in a primary school in London on

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

Requirements of legislation, and policies and procedures

As a result of the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000, schools and other statutory services have specific duties to promote race equality and good relations between people of different racial groups. They must also ensure that

they monitor the impact of their policies on different racial groups of children. It is clearly good practice for all service providers, whether they are in the maintained or non-maintained sector, to collect, analyse and evaluate ethnic data on specific key issues of relevance to their service. Equally, the SEN Code of Practice 2001 also requires the collection, recording and updating of relevant information about individual children with SEN. This is normally part of the SENCO's role.

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

Staff development and support

Staff development and teamwork help to decide how to create an open and listening culture, one which enables children to express their views and feelings. We need to anticipate what

this may throw up and plan how we will respond both as individuals and as staff teams. We need to practise what this may look like and provide support to one another, the children and their families. This can involve drawing up procedures on how to deal with difficult situations which relate to staff, parents and possibly the wider community. Examples may cover situations where children are told by their parents not to play with certain children: 'My mum says I shouldn't play with girls who have scarves over their heads' or parents saying that certain children should not be allowed in the group 'because Gypsies are always stealing things'.

Guiding and assisting children

Children are quick to learn what they can and cannot do or say and with whom. Most people behave differently in different situations, depending on the role they are playing. We learn about these different values and codes of behaviour from an early age in everything we do. Teachers and practitioners sometimes say, for example, that bullying, homophobia or racist taunts are not problems in their setting, class or school. Yet children report that these go on in the outside play area or playground or on their way to school or their setting. There is also the view expressed that 'we have none of them here' so the issue of racism, for example, does not apply. In Britain

there are very few areas that could be genuinely described as 'white'. Wherever we live the principles of promoting equality are the same.

Milner (1983) found that three-year-old children notice differences in skin colour and that from three to five they have learnt from the world around them that it is 'better' to be white in Britain than black. Black and white children are damaged by racism, but in different ways. Many young black children suffer abuse and rejection from their white peers, causing them to become angry, frustrated, depressed or withdrawn. Such feelings are compounded if adults fail to react positively. As a consequence of racism many white children develop feelings of superiority, which may cause them to respond insensitively or uncaringly, limiting their ability to empathise or sustain stable relationships. Some black children too may have learnt negative attitudes about others. Equally by the age of three boys and girls have developed fixed ideas about roles of men and women. By five many think the female role is the one less valued and valuable and that they can only play certain roles or do certain jobs in life.

We must be prepared to reply to comments and questions – simply and directly. We must listen carefully to what children want to know and what they are feeling. We must teach children to challenge prejudice directly themselves

Case study

Exploring what children really think

A teacher in an all white nursery showed a group of pictures of black and white people doing a variety of jobs. The discussion that followed supported the head's view that the children did not discriminate between people on the basis of the colour of their skin. However some

children in another group left to discover the pictures for themselves, without any input from the teacher, made negative and derisory comments about the black people.
(Case study from Jeffcoate 1980)

and to give them the skills to do so. Children can express views that are the beginning of prejudice. We should not ignore these. This is not to underestimate how difficult this can be for practitioners. Fears of saying the wrong thing, not wanting to rock the boat, wanting the setting to be a happy place for children, are all understandable concerns. Worries about the lack of appropriate resources, anxiety about parental reaction and being seen as having a chip on the shoulder are also deterrents.

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

Specific information on finding out what young children think

Clark, A and Moss, P (2001) *Listening to Young Children: The Mosaic approach*. National Children's Bureau

Outlines a framework for listening to children's perspectives on their daily lives.

Kirby, P, Lanyon, C, Cronin, K, and Sinclair, R (2003) *Building a Culture of Participation*. National Children's Bureau.

An overview of the range of participation activity currently being undertaken at local, regional and national levels.

Lane, J (1999) *Action for Racial Equality in the Early Years. Understanding the past, thinking about the present, planning for the future*. National Early Years Network (available from EYE and NCB)

The author asks 'what do we mean by prejudice

and discrimination?' and discusses how children learn about racism.

Lindon, J. (1998) *Equal Opportunities in Practice*. Hodder & Stoughton

Looks at the principles and practice of equal opportunities.

Marchant, R and Gordon, R (2001) *Two-Way Street: Communicating with disabled children*. NSPCC

A practice guide for involving disabled children in assessment, planning and review processes.

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

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

References

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

Brown, B (2000) 'Someone to talk to', *Nursery World*, 100, 3710, 28

Brown, B (2001) *Combating Discrimination - Persona Dolls in Action*. Trentham.

Quotes paper by MacNaughton, G (1999) *Dolls for equity: young children learning respect and unlearning unfairness*, presented at Persona Doll Conference, London

Cahill, B and Theilheimer, R (1999) "'Can Tommy and Sam get married?'" Questions about gender, sexuality, and young children', *Young Children*, 54, 1, 27-31

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

Derman-Sparks, L (1998) 'Standing up to fairness: activism with young children', *Early Childhood Matters*, 88, 20-3

Dickins, M, Emerson, S and Gordon-Smith, P (2004) *Starting with Choice: Inclusive*

strategies for consulting young children. Save the Children

Early Years Trainers Anti-Racist Network (2001) *A Policy for Excellence: Developing a policy for equality in early years settings*. EYTARN

Fajerman, L, Jarrett, M and Sutton, F (2000) *Children as Partners in Planning*. Save the Children

Farrell, A, Tayler, C and Tennent, L (2002) 'Early Childhood Services: What children can tell us?', *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, 27, 3, 13-17

Jeffcoate, R (1980) *Positive Images Towards a Multi-Racial Curriculum*. Writers & Readers Publishing Cooperative

Lancaster, Y P and Broadbent (2003) *Listening to Young Children*. Open University Press

Lane, J (1999) *Action for Racial Equality in the Early Years. Understanding the past, thinking about the present, planning for the future*. National Early Years Network (available from EYE and NCB)

MacNaughton, G (2003) 'Eclipsing voice in research with young children', *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, 28, 1, 36-42

Milner, D (1983) *Children and Race: 10 years on*. Ward Lock Educational

National Early Years Network and Save the Children (1995) *Playing fair: a parents' guide to tackling discrimination*. NEYN /SCF. UK version of original American version by Louise Derman-Sparks (1992)

Persona Doll Training (2004) *Celebrating Diversity: Inclusion in practice*. Persona Doll Training

Salisbury World and Save the Children (2004) *Home from Home: A guidance and resource pack for the welcome and inclusion of refugee children and families in school*. Save the Children

Useful websites

www.earlychildhood.org.uk

earlychildhood.org.uk is a website from the Early Childhood Unit (ECU) at the National Children's Bureau in England. This site contains capsules of information on specific topics within early years care and education including work on consulting young children.

www.coram.org.uk

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

www.article12.com

A12 is a children's rights based organisation run by under 18-year-olds, for under 18s in England. It aims to get young people's views and opinions across to everyone and to be taken seriously at all times

www.earlyyearsquality.org

Early years equality (eye) is a registered charity working to promote race equality in the field of early years provision. It aims to work with intermediaries and policy makers to influence practice at grass roots level.

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. NCB challenges disadvantage in childhood.

www.ncb.org.uk/aba/

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

www.ncb.org.uk/sef

The Sex Education Forum is the national authority on sex and relationships education (SRE). Established in 1987, the Forum is a unique collaboration of over 50 organisations. The Forum aims to ensure that all children and young people receive their entitlement to good quality SRE in a variety of settings.

Listening as a way of life

This leaflet is one of five leaflets from the Sure Start funded project 'Listening as a way of life'. The series provides a guide to finding more information to help practitioners design creative and individual ways of listening to children and to each other.

Others in the series include:

- Why and how we listen to young children
- Listening to babies
- Listening to young disabled children
- Supporting parents and carers to listen – a guide for practitioners
- Listening to young children's views on food

For copies contact Patricia Thomas on 0207 843 6064 or email pthomas@ncb.org.uk

Acknowledgements

Author: Nicky Road
 Critical Reader: Jane Lane
 Series Editor: Ann-Marie McAuliffe
 With thanks to colleagues in and working for the Sure Start Unit for their comments and support.

DfES Guidance

Lancaster, Y P and Broadbent, V (2003) in *Listening to Young Children*. Open University Press

A five-part resource from Coram Family, London. The pack is aimed at practitioners and parents in a range of settings and is designed to enable them to offer young children opportunities to express their views of experiences and events in their daily lives.

Listening to Young Children: A training framework (Lancaster and others 2004) is closely linked to this resource and is included in the DfES Sure Start Guidance.

NCB Library and Information Service

If you would like more detailed information or further references in this subject area, contact NCB's Library and Information Service.

The library is open to visitors by appointment, Monday to Friday, 10am to 5pm. NCB members can visit free of charge. The rate for non-members is £10 per day.

Enquiry line: +44 (0)20 7843 6008
 E-mail: library@ncb.org.uk
 Written enquiries: Library & Information Service, NCB, 8 Wakley Street, London EC1V 7QE.



Published by the National Children's Bureau on behalf of Sure Start

National Children's Bureau
 8 Wakley Street
 London
 EC1V 7QE
 tel: + 44 (0)20 7843 6000
 fax: + 44 (0)20 7278 9512

Membership and general enquiries: 020 7843 6080
 Conferences and Training: 020 7843 6041
 Young NCB: 020 7843 6099
 Book sales: 020 7843 6029
 Library and Information Service: 020 7843 6008
 Visit our website at: www.ncb.org.uk
 Registered Charity 258825. © Crown Copyright 2004


 national
 children's
 bureau
 making a difference

SureStart