

Listening as a way of life



Supporting parents and carers to listen A guide for practitioners

Julie McLarnon

Why we encourage parents to listen to very young children

As adults, if we feel that we have been listened to and what we have expressed has been acknowledged, we

are more likely to feel valued and loved. It is the same for young children.

The benefits of being listened to as a child are well documented. What we

learn about ourselves from the adults closest to us depends on the quality of our experience with them and this in turn affects how our self-esteem and sense of identity develops (Leach 1994). Through being listened to:

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

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.

Case study

Children's prospectus

The Children's Society in Warrington's preschool group, Play and Learning Sessions (PALS), has developed a prospectus for new children as part of their settling in programme. The booklet is a collection of photographs of what they will find in the building and what will happen when they are there. There are photographs of where they can hang their coat, the toilets, where they will wash their hands, the snacks and drinks available

and the kind of activities there for them. The prospectus sends out a clear message to the children that this is their playgroup and that they are important. To the parents, the message is that the setting is child centred and encourages a dialogue between them and their child as they can talk about the pictures and match them to what they find at the playgroup.

The voices of our parents and close family members are usually the first we hear. They are the first people we learn things from and, as such, they have a powerful effect on our attitude to life and later achievements (Bastiani 2003). For children 'to do well' – emotionally, educationally, mentally or physically – it is important for parents to listen to their children and take note of what they say. Practitioners within the very broad field of children's services, which spans education, health and social care, are uniquely placed to support parents and carers to enhance the way they listen to their children, and to champion the voice of the child so that it is heard both at home and in services outside of the home.

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

How to support parents

Setting a good example

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

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

Practitioners are already supported by Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Children Act 1989 and the making a positive contribution goal contained within *Every Child Matters* (DfES 2003) which supports the principle that every child has the right to participate in decisions that affect them. Central

government has also been placing greater emphasis across a range of services within the health, care and education fields to work in partnership with parents (Evans 2001). This is evident in many Sure Start Local Programmes.

Legislation and guidance is one thing; making 'being heard' a reality for young children is another. Whether we work in a care and education setting, a GP's practice or hold a mobile clinic, it should be obvious to the children, parents and professionals who use the services that the work being done is child centred. For this to take place staff commitment to working towards a broader culture of listening is important. A practitioner actively listening to other adults and children gives parents the opportunity to ask questions and discuss their experiences.

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

- all children aged from birth to eight years of age are important and unique individuals
- they are not too young to show us what is important to them
- listen to what they are telling us

Case study

Tony's story

When Tony started preschool he showed interest in a range of toys and activities. He played in the sand tray and with the cars. Outside he pushed a pushchair around the playground and pushed himself with his feet on the trikes. He especially enjoyed anything to do with trains including books, pictures, puzzles, as well as the train set itself.

Some aspects of preschool however were very difficult for Tony. He found it hard to understand why his favourite toys were sometimes packed away or why he had to come inside. He could also see things he wanted but did not know how to ask for them. Sometimes when he was distressed Tony would run and press himself into a corner.

Not long before starting preschool Tony had been diagnosed with autism, a condition that seriously impairs an individual's understanding of social situations and ability to communicate with others. This did not mean that Tony did not have opinions, but we needed to find a way of listening to what he was trying to tell us.

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

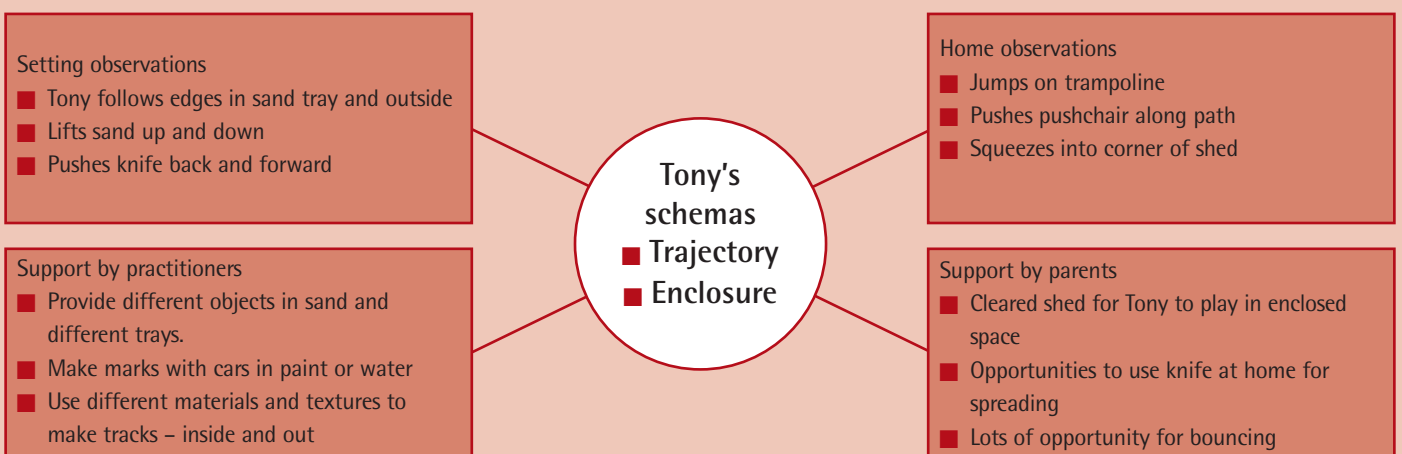
Tony was observed at preschool and at home and we identified patterns in his play. He was observed going round the edge of the playground both with a bike and a pushchair before going to the activities in the middle. This pattern was repeated in the sand tray when he pushed vehicles around the edge of the tray. He appeared to be enclosing the area in which he was playing. When distressed, Tony squashed into small spaces and enclosed himself.

Tony also consistently showed an interest in lines, both horizontal – following paths, making tracks, cutting – and vertical – bouncing, going up and down the slide, watching sand fall through his fingers. This is called a trajectory schema.

Using this information we were able to plan activities to extend Tony's play and develop his learning.

All the way through the project, Tony's parents worked very closely with us and did their own observations. At the end of the project they reported that he was using verbal communication more readily. Mum had cleared out the shed and put his trains in there as she now knew he liked the enclosed space. He was enjoying cuddles and had started coming to her for help.

Close observation and identifying schemas was one way for us to listen to what Tony needed and allowed us to support his needs together.





Case study

Reece's story

Reece has been attending playgroup since he was two-and-a-half-years-old. He is a quiet child who does not talk much (but is not speech delayed), likes to focus on detail and does not like to get messy. Lately Reece has been behaving differently. He stands very still, holds his body rigid, clenches his fists and wets himself; he only does this at home and not at playgroup. Jade, his mother, is really worried about this – she thinks it is because he is jealous of his baby sister Monica and is seeking attention. Staff at the playgroup advise Jade to just watch him and to write down when and where it happens, and the circumstances leading up to and after the event. Jade fails to do this because she is discouraged by her mum who says Jade is being too soft with him. The problem is not getting better and further prompting by staff reveals that it only happens at Jade's parents. A member of staff offers to pop round to chat with both her and her mum. Jade agrees. The worker drops by and hands over an observation sheet and explains how it should be completed. The worker observes that the house is spotless – there are many toys but they are arranged neatly in rows. Jade writes down what she observes (her mother dismisses the exercise as daft – he just needs a good smack) and over the next few weeks she notices a pattern emerging. The incidents all begin with Jade's mother getting annoyed with the mess Reece is making while playing. Reece seems to be not jealous of his sister but angry with his granny. He couldn't stop her spoiling his games or continually telling him off but he could do what upset her most – he could wet his pants and make a mess.

By observing her son Jade had heard what he was expressing – he was not being naughty and to discipline him would only have added to the unhappiness of his situation. Jade started to make comparisons with the way she rebelled against her very controlling, house-proud mother. She did not want her children to feel as she did as a child – that appearances were more important to her mother than she was. While the playgroup could not be expected to help resolve all the emerging issues, they could support her to give Reece the freedom to play and explore.

The first step was to support Jade to learn how to play with Reece and Monica and concentrate less on the routines of feeding, dressing and sleeping. She attended a course of parent and child play sessions where play homework was given. As this homework could not be done at her mum's, Jade started to spend more time at her flat where it was alright for Reece to make a bit of a mess. Jade learned the importance of play as a way of communicating with her children. It was a revelation to Jade that Monica could adapt the way she behaved so that Jade would attend to her needs and that she could mimic her expressions or that peek-a-boo and tickles were a baby's equivalent of having a good old chat. Jade learnt that communication is not reliant just on what her children tell her through speech but what they tell her through their actions. Jade started to relax and feel more confident as a mother and her priority was no longer how things *look* but how they *feel* – something she learned from her children.

- through a range of methods
- reflect on what the children have said and take action where possible
- feedback to the children what we have done
- if you can't take action or give time you need to explain why
- what they tell us and how they feel is as valuable to the adults around them
- we, as adults, can facilitate change

by involving children in the way in which we plan environments and activities.

The development of such underpinning statements supports practitioners to create an environment that actively encourages and makes space for the voice of young children to be heard. Not only do these statements act as a reminder, they open up opportunities

to challenge incidents where children are not being listened to and promote conversation around the subject.

Encouraging parents

Practitioners could also develop some simple guidelines for the parents and families with whom they work in partnership. Whilst these guidelines must be sensitive to a child's culture

and take into account the impact of the local community and the environment in which they live, the message is the same – no matter how young, children can and do make positive contributions to family life and it is important that parents tune in effectively by being:

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

It is also important to:

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

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

Possibilities and challenges

Possibilities

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

It could be argued that it is easier for practitioners who work in a nursery or playgroup to champion the idea that being heard should be the everyday experience of all children, no matter how young. Practitioners in this situation have regular and long-term access to both parents and children and have a physical space in which to establish and enforce principles and ground rules, run workshops and demonstrate good practice. However, for those, such as health workers, who work from clinics and do home visiting, it may be more challenging as they are coming into the home where parents set the ground rules. To suggest changes to this environment may be interpreted as interference and not be well received. On the other hand, being in someone else's home means it is still possible to demonstrate good practice and can give more opportunities for spontaneous conversation regarding effective listening techniques in a private and safe environment.

When supporting parents to tune in to what their children are saying, it is important to help them to think about whether or not their home environment encourages talking and listening. Practitioners can share their imaginative methods in supporting parents to help them identify where in their often busy

and pressured lives room can be made to have a conversation with their children in all its many forms, be it verbal or non-verbal.

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

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

It is more difficult to encourage effective listening if the parent concerned is wary of what could happen if an established routine is

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

Challenges

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

There are some circumstances where adults blame the age of the child, as in the example of the 'terrible twos', without reference to the context such as the adult's role in the situation (Alderson 2000). It is important that parents and practitioners see children as individuals and react to them in a positive and supportive way. There are some adults who label children who are assertive as cheeky and scold a child who does something believed to be outside of their capabilities for taking too many risks. As Lindon comments: 'Children need opportunities to take acceptable risks in an environment that encourages them to push against the boundaries

of their current abilities, to stretch their skills and confidence.'

The notion (often subliminal) of the only way we can protect our children is to control them, can curtail their freedom and limit their experiences.

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

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

Specific information on supporting parents and carers

Athey, C (1990) *Extending Learning: A parent teacher partnership*. Paul Chapman Publishing

Bruce, T (1994) 'Seeing play for what it is: parents and professional workers together' *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 2, 1,17–22

Play is seen as part of the whole network of early years learning. When parents and professionals help children activate this network, the learning is broad, deep and relevant.

Buckton, C (2003) *Talk and Listen Together*. Basic Skills Agency

A pack of A4-size glossy sheets that set out the many things that parents can do to help their children with talking, listening and communication skills from birth to three years. Includes activities, songs, rhymes and finger play.

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

Outlines a new framework for listening to young children's perspectives on their daily lives called the Mosaic approach.

Gillespie Edwards, A (2002) *Relationships and Learning: Caring for children from birth to three*. National Children's Bureau

Drawing on the detailed observation of 15 children in day-care settings, from their arrival and separation from parents in the morning to their departure and reunion with parents in the evening, the author highlights the importance of one-to-one relationships with young children for fostering their self-esteem, well-being and their ability to learn.

DfES and Sure Start Unit (2002) *Birth to three matters: A framework for supporting children in their earliest years*. DfES

The framework offers guidance for practitioners and other professionals involved in the delivery and planning of services to children aged between birth and three. Website: www.surestart.gov.uk/ensuringquality/birthtothreematters/

Kirby, P, Lanyon, C, Cronin, K and Sinclair, R (2003) *Building a Culture of Participation*. DfES

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

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

Alderson, P (2000) *Young Children's Rights. Exploring beliefs, principles and practice*. Save the Children/Jessica Kingsley

Bastiani, J (2003) *Involving Parents, Raising Achievement* ed. White, S. DfES

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

Department for Education and Skills (2003) *Every Child Matters*.

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Evans, J (2001) 'Two-way Talk. The importance of helping parents to be involved with their child's life at nursery', *Nursery World*, 18 January, 14

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Kitzner, S with photographer Nilsson, L (1986) *Being Born*. Dorling Kindersley

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Leach, P (1994) *Children First*. Michael Joseph

London, J (1999) *Too Safe for Their Own Good*. National Early Years Network

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

Pugh, G and Selleck, D (1996) 'Listening to and communicating with very young children' in David, Upton and Varma (eds) *The Voice of the Child. A Handbook for Professionals*. Falmer Press

UNICEF (1989) *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*.

Willow, C and Hyder, T (1998) *It Hurts you Inside. Children talking about smacking*. Save the Children and National Children's Bureau

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 and information on very young disabled children. The site also contains information that parents may find of use.

www.literacytrust.org.uk

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

www.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.coram.org.uk

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

www.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.

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
- Are equalities an issue? Finding out what young children think
- Listening to young disabled children
- Listening to babies
- Listening to young children's views on food

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

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

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Enquiry line: +44 (0)20 7843 6008
E-mail: library@ncb.org.uk
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