

Listening as a way of life



Listening to babies

Diane Rich

Babies by their very nature demand constant attention. This starts even before they are born. Mothers develop a bond with their baby over their nine-month period together and this

is where communication begins. Medical staff monitor the growth of babies and listen to them in the womb. Babies' actions are felt by their mothers and sometimes can be seen

by those around when they stretch, turn or kick. Affectionate comments such as, 'Baby's going to be a footballer!' 'I think baby's dancing in there!' show that their early actions are being observed and thought about.

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.

Of course, children are usually very interested in babies and listen to them well, but this leaflet refers to listeners as adults.

Adults' responses to children vary enormously. Many respond instinctively towards babies, engage in quality interactions with them and have respect for babies, believing that babies have a right to be listened to. But others do not.

The importance of listening to babies

Who counts as a baby?

The Department for Education and Skills publication *Birth to Three Matters: A framework to support children in their earliest years* identifies four broad areas of development for children from birth

to three years old. In the framework, the terms children, young children, babies and young babies are used.

- 'Children' refers to those from 24 to 36 months.
- 'Young children' refers to those from 18 to 24 months.
- 'Babies' refers to those from eight until 18 months.
- 'Young babies' refers to those from birth to eight months.

Although the principles for listening to babies may be relevant to all adult – child relations, this leaflet focuses on young babies and babies as defined by the DfES, namely those from birth to 18 months. Both of these age groups are referred to as babies throughout the leaflet.

What is listening?

Effective listening to babies entails respect and a belief that they are worth listening to. Listening is a two-way process which is not limited to the spoken word. It involves babies being active through sounds, movements and actions of many different kinds. Adults need to have the skills to interpret these. In daily encounters, they will make decisions informed by their observations and interactions with babies. They will decide, moment-by-moment, how best to provide for the babies they care for, sometimes getting involved but at other times leaving babies content in their own explorations.

Why is it important to listen to babies?

Listening to babies helps to ensure that:

- they are valued and feel valued
- they are responded to caringly and attentively
- their physical, emotional and

cognitive needs are met

- their interests and experiences are developed in appropriate ways.

Listening acknowledges babies' right to be heard from pre-birth and throughout their lives. It builds up positive enriching relationships between adults and babies (Gillespie Edwards 2002). It helps adults understand a baby's priorities, interests, concerns and rights. Adults are better able to provide for babies when they listen to them. Through listening a deepened understanding of each individual baby is developed.

Babies who are not listened to are likely to grow up with low self-esteem, while those who are listened to have a sense of well-being and are likely to be less anxious. Roberts (2002) reports that babies feel valued when their actions are responded to calmly. She writes:

Sharing children's distress with them in a calm way without fuss or panic is one of the most effective things that 'important people' can do to help children grow up feeling good about themselves and other people. (Roberts 2002, p.42)

Bruce (2004) refers to the stress that not listening to babies can cause them. This can lead to later anxiety and aggressive behaviour, as they grow older. Listening to babies is important because it has an impact on self-image and behaviour in later life.

Listening is not only restricted to adults: babies and children are listeners too. Babies interact with others all the time. They can hear before they are born and become familiar with key voices and sounds that will surround them once they have entered the world. Babies naturally prefer the sound of human voices to other sounds and they respond

to these familiar voices. Babies are already expert communicators and they learn even more about listening from the listeners who are all around them. They also learn early on that listening is important and is part of the social world. Being listened to plays a key role in developing as a skilful communicator. Much is written about the importance of early interaction, which includes being listened to, and its impact on developing communication, language and literacy (Rich 2002). Makin and Whitehead (2004) recognise this too and also acknowledge that babies are ready to learn. They say that:

Babies

- *understand the people who look after them every day*
- *think about what is going on around them*
- *enjoy new things and new experiences*

... babies are born already prepared to find other people interesting and worth communicating with from the start.

(Makin and Whitehead 2004, p.16)

Birth to three matters states that, 'Babies and young children are social beings, they are competent learners from birth' (DfES 2002). Babies learn by being listened to because listening adults respond to babies' interests and are then better able to meet their needs.

How to listen

How can listening to babies be achieved?

Most adults enjoy listening to babies. They love the reactions from babies when they engage with them. A baby's smile is a great sense of real pleasure to many parents. A gurgle, a laugh, a baby sound, hand wave or a kick might

be celebrated. Such actions from babies are communications that can demand attention of some sort.

Adults are listening to babies all the time and especially when they are cuddling their babies, feeding them, changing their nappies or bathing them (see 'Lara's story'). Adults even listen to them when they are asleep.

There may be complaints from babies when an attentive adult leaves the room, or a cuddle ends. Roberts (2002) states that adults should show sympathetic acceptance of babies' grievances. Calm feedback shows babies that they have been listened to but at the same time acknowledges that it is

not always possible to alter a course of action. For example Katie's mum calmly acknowledges her daughter's protests, but she does not change what she is doing (see 'Katie's story').

Although Katie's mum did not stop dressing Katie, despite her protests, she recognised that Katie does not like the intrusion of being dressed and that her tights are rough. In future she will be able to choose different clothes for Katie. She has listened to her baby. Being listened to is much better than being ignored.

Listening to babies can be achieved when adults think of babies as capable communicators and when they recognise and tune-in to the many

different ways babies do this. Generally it is parents who tune in to their babies and consequently listen to them well. If babies spend time with other carers the knowledge parents have needs to be respected, valued and shared. Listening to babies involves listening to parents too, and finding out from them about daily events in the home worlds of babies, including what they like, dislike, their preferred food and sleep patterns, what they can do and what currently interests them. Developing relationships with parents is important. Gillespie Edwards (2002) confirms that:

There is immense potential in the parent-staff relationship to support the child, by offering opportunities

Case studies

Lara's story

Babies enjoy close attention from adults at nappy changing or other times, as this example shows:

Tina picks up seven-month-old Lara and says, 'Let's check your bottom!' They go together to get a tissue and a nappy and she carries her on her hip from the mat area into the bathroom area, and then lays her on the mat. Tina undoes Lara's clothes and says, 'That looks a lot better, doesn't it?'

and then, 'Hiya, hiya', looking at her face to face. Lara kicks and Tina says, 'Those legs!', as she fixes the nappy. Then she says, 'There we go. Are you pulling my jumper?' Tina smiles closely at her in between fixing the poppers on her babygrow and Lara, seeming to enjoy the attention pulls at Tina's clothes and kicks her legs.

(Case study taken from Everyday Stories, NCB)

Katie's story

Katie's mum calmly acknowledges her daughter's grievances:

Katie, three months old, lies on the mat as her mother kneels over her getting her dressed. She talks to Katie in a high, excited voice as she dresses her.

'Who's a clever girl? Who's a clever girl? You are. You're a clever girl, aren't you and I'm taking my clever girl to the shops. I am!' Her mum rubs Katie's tummy and Katie laughs.)
'You *ARE* a clever girl. Mummy's clever girl, Katie. And we're

getting ready, aren't we? Yes we are... yes we are. Let's put your little toes in here, come on, ready for the shops... That's a good girl! (Katie squirms and tries to wriggle free.) 'Oooh, you don't like these tights, do you?' (Katie starts to cry.) 'Oooh, Katie, I know you don't like this, but soon we'll be at the shops. Nasty tights. We'll have to get you some comfy soft ones at the shops, won't we? Come on now... nearly ready for the shops. The shops...the shops. We're going to the shops. Yes we are...'

(Katie and her mum)

for continuity, complementarity [SIC], mutual respect and deepened understanding of the child as an individual, as part of a family with a particular cultural background and as an active learner with strong interests of his own. When such a partnership is achieved it leads to confidence all round: confident staff, confident parents and confident children. (Gillespie Edwards 2002, p.3)

Listening happens best when adults have good relationships with babies and when these adults respect each other's ways and communicate together about the babies they care for.

How do babies communicate their needs?

Although babies cannot talk, they have no problems communicating and have little difficulty in letting those around them know what they want, how they feel or what interests them, without words. They are very skilled at it. Crying is commonly thought of as one of the key ways babies communicate. They cry for different reasons. Sometimes, as Winnicott (1964) suggests, it is simply to exercise their lungs; at other times it may be to signal hunger, pain or even the memory or fear of pain. Sometimes babies might cry if they are sad. Crying might occur simply because it is enjoyable to make sounds and be in control. Exploring the world and wanting

to be in control is natural for babies, especially as they grow older. This can lead to frustrated crying when the physical restrictions of simply being a baby limits what they can do and what they can get hold of, or when things they don't want are in their way. Leach (1997) records that some babies might be over-stimulated by too many toys or people around them so they cry to register feelings, such as rage or frustration.

Adults who are tuned in to babies can identify their different cries and will respond appropriately. Taking action is not always possible, but responding to babies, understanding and paying attention is important. Sometimes just acknowledging that they feel sad or frustrated is all that can be done.

Case studies

Lara and Mary's story

Calmly supporting babies while giving them time and space to express how they feel is important.

Lara, seven months old, topples onto her face with a big bump. Lara then cries very loudly and seems very shocked by her fall onto her face. Mary is very sympathetic and says, 'Oh dear', and says to her, 'It's not that bad, it's not that bad', but then goes on to say, 'It's

very sad, isn't it?', as she holds her gently, and then decides to wait while Lara carries on screaming. Mary also remarks, 'It frightened you, didn't it, Lara?' She responds to the insistence and passion of Lara's screams. She rocks her and holds her and comforts her.

(Case study taken from Everyday Stories, NCB)

Samson's story

Adults try to tune in to what will stimulate, interest and engage babies.

Samson, seven months, drops a spoon into a tin and listens to the noise that it makes as it drops down. Then Samson picks the spoon up and mouths it again and Sonia sorts through the basket and draws his attention to some of the other items. Samson frowns at the new things he is offered and carries on examining the spoon and tin very carefully.

Sonia seems to notice that he has spent quite a long time playing with the tin and spoon and she comes alongside his play by clapping a wooden spatula on the side of the tin in time to the tape and the music that she has put on. Samson listens attentively and then reaches for the wooden spatula. He tries this on the tin...

(Case study taken from Everyday Stories, NCB)

Responding to babies calmly and acknowledging how babies feel is very important if babies are to grow up feeling good about themselves. Listening adults will acknowledge babies' feelings, interests and what they are asking for. Listening adults will give babies space and time to express how they feel (see 'Lara and Mary's story').

Babies give messages about how they feel not just through crying, but also through all of the sounds and actions they make. Makin and Whitehead (2004) report that they might wave their arms, or kick or make sounds of pleasure. They squeal, gurgle, sigh, blow bubbles, hiccup, giggle and babble. They move their bodies in different ways too. They kick their legs, wave their arms, stiffen their bodies, arch their backs, stretch and clench their fingers. Observations of non-verbal language allow adults to see babies communicate through their many actions. Babies learn about more conventional communication through watching. They are great watchers and can watch those near to them and fix eye contact. Through watching they can mimic the speech of those interacting

with them by opening their own mouths and by getting excited (Trevvarthen 1993). Babies move their gaze away when they are bored. In these many varied ways they communicate and get reactions from listeners. They entice adults into a two-way communication.

What adults do when they listen to babies?

Observation is an important starting point for listening to babies and this can happen all the time, especially during the daily routines such as feeding, nappy changing, bathing and getting ready for sleep times. Babies communicate how they feel, and what they want, to adults who 'tune in' with all their senses. They recognise all of their baby's actions and interpret these in order to respond in the best possible way. Listening adults follow what babies seem to be looking at and talk around this (Bruce 2004). They provide things for babies that are good to feel, to hold and touch, to taste, to look at and listen to. They try to see the world from the baby's perspective and tune in to the things that will stimulate,

interest and engage them. Often these can be very simple things, as Sonia, a keyworker in a day nursery, shows when she tries to do exactly this for seven-month-old Samson (see 'Samson's story').

Listening adults interpret the sounds and actions of babies. In a day-care setting a practitioner may know that a specific cry or action from one baby is a sign of hunger, or tiredness or needing a nappy change, while a similar cry or action from another baby may mean something different. Strangers in a baby's home can be amazed when a parent reacts to a baby's squeal by simply saying, 'He wants to sit up now!' The adults have tuned-in to their children and recognise that they are worth listening to and that they have a right to be heard.

Adults often ask babies what they want and respond to their answers. Fifteen-month-old Verity is able to make decisions about where she goes and what she does within her day nursery. She is supported by staff in a day nursery who tune in to where she wants to be (see 'Verity's story').

Case study

Verity's story

Being given choices is a significant part of being listened to.

Verity is sucking a plastic toy and as she does so, she moves to the corner of the room where there are large, soft play shapes covered in coloured plastic.

Jackie notices and moves to the centre of the room where there is a large, soft cylinder supported on two blocks that the children can ride on. She smacks the sides of the cylinder with her hands and calls to Verity, 'Are you going to play on this? Come on then.'

Verity comes across and with some help, climbs up tentatively. She sits straddled on the cylinder but looks slightly ill at ease and Jackie says, 'Don't you like it, Verity?' Verity shakes her head very slightly. She slides off.

Verity looks on as the games on the cylinder are repeated with Jake. Then Jackie says, 'Do you want to do it, Verity?', but Verity does not move and Jackie comments, 'She knows what she doesn't want to do, doesn't she!'

(Case study taken from Everyday Stories, NCB)

Many adults talk to babies as if they understand what they are saying. The earlier episode with Katie and her mum is a good example of this. Adults seem to naturally respond to the fact that babies cannot understand words. It is common to see people who communicate with babies by pulling faces, making exaggerated sounds, repeating words and using a higher-pitched voice than usual. This helps to hold a baby's attention and gets messages across to babies. Listening adults will engage with babies as they:

- direct their talk to them
- give babies choices
- take turns in making sounds and actions with babies
- respond to what babies show interest in
- calmly and caringly acknowledge babies' emotions
- sing a variety of songs to them ranging from traditional lullabies from many cultures to pop-songs from the charts
- tell them stories
- sing nursery rhymes and get babies involved in action songs
- give commentaries on everyday actions
- model how to be a listener and how

- to be a communicator
- share toys and picture books with them
- laugh with their babies.

Challenges and possibilities

Challenges

Being in busy home environments may mean that babies do not get to be heard by adults and those around them. Listening to babies and doing all of the activities in the list in the preceding section requires time, patience and commitment. It means that daily routines cannot be rushed, although this is of course not always possible in day-to-day lives. In homes where there is a lot of background noise from the TV, radio, or computer games, babies' sounds and actions are sometimes not acknowledged.

Deaf or blind babies communicate their feelings, interests, likes and dislikes in the same ways as all other babies, using all the senses they have (see 'James' story'). They can mimic adults and respond to them. When listening adults tune in to babies with all their senses they will hear what is being said and

respond to their babies in the best way for each unique baby.

Parents of deaf babies often use more direct face to face communication with babies, with expression as well as touch or gestures. They encourage others to do the same especially when different adults care for their child.

When different adults care for babies, for example, family members, child-minders, nursery staff, and parents living in separate homes, there will be challenges in maintaining relationships, which keep every 'listening adult' informed about individual babies. Regular time spent sharing information about babies is important in helping listeners tune in to them most effectively. Documentation of observations is particularly useful to ensure continuity of care for the baby. Diary sheets and profile books are good examples of how this can be achieved.

Having time to focus on babies is a challenge for all busy parents and practitioners but it is important to provide children with their rights from the earliest age.

Case study

James' story

Mum stays close to James when she gives him a new soft toy to explore, She reassures him that she is there by staying close and talking to him.

Four-month-old James, blind from birth, holds his mum's hair as she talks with him. 'Ouch, that's my hair James. That's mummy's hair. It's long hair for James to pull! She calmly says, 'Gently, James, do be gentle! He squeals as he pulls her close and puts her hair in his mouth. He kicks his legs fast. Mum's face is very close to his own, and he nuzzles it with his cheeks. He smiles as he touches her face and makes gleeful sounds as he carries on kicking his legs

vigorously. 'That's right, It's mummy. It's mummy come to play with you James! She keeps her face very close to James as she puts a soft toy gently onto his face and then into his hand. 'Does that feel nice James? Mummy likes it. Does James like it?' He releases her hair and stops kicking as he lifts the toy to his mouth and nose. He rubs it on his face. He feels it on his cheek and breathes in the smell. He explores it with his fingers. Mum stays very close. 'Mummy thought you'd like that teddy James!'

(James and his mum)

Possibilities

When adults respect babies and believe that they are worth listening to, listening becomes possible. Focusing on the needs of the baby is a starting point for building a good relationship. Where this does not exist, support can come from baby massage classes or seeking help and support from other family members or early years workers. Parenting classes that are often held at local children's centres will support parents through listening to others and sharing experiences.

It is not just relationships with babies that are important; good communicative relationships between all those who look after babies have to be maintained and developed so that information can be shared on a daily basis. The more that adults commit to this, the greater potential there will be for all babies to be listened to. Starting at the very earliest years will mean that a generation will grow up with listening as the norm, which will inevitably have a positive impact on society as a whole.

More information on listening to babies

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 – the Mosaic approach.

Goldschmied, E, and Jackson, S (1994) *People Under Three: Young children in day care*. Routledge
A practical book focusing on the under-threes, their emotional well-being and cognitive development.

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

Bruce, T (2001) *Learning Through Play: Babies, toddlers and the foundation years*. Hodder and Stoughton

Bruce, T (2004) *Developing Learning in Early Childhood*. Paul Chapman

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Leach, P (1997) *Your Baby and Child – New Version for a New Generation*. Penguin

Makin, L and Whitehead, M (2004) *How to Develop Children's Early Literacy*. Paul Chapman

Peers Early Education Partnership (2000) *Learning Together* (a series of folders, song tapes and videos). PEEP

Rich, D (2002) *More Than Words: Children developing communication, language and literacy*. The British Association for Early Childhood Education

Roberts, R (2002) *Self Esteem and Early Learning*. Paul Chapman

Sure Start (2003) *Birth to Three Matters: A framework to support children in their earliest years*. DfES

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

The Early Childhood Forum (2003) *Quality in Diversity in Early Learning: A framework for early childhood practitioners*. National Children's Bureau

Trevarthen, C (1993) *Playing into Reality: Conversations with the infant communicator*. Winnicott Studies, Spring, 7

Winnicott, D W (1964) *Home is Where We Start From*. Penguin

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.ncb.org.uk/features/eds/

This site hosts research funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Charitable Trust and conducted by the Early Childhood Unit in 1996-97. The detailed observations of 15 different children, in 15 nurseries for a full day, provides excellent support material for those working with under-threes in day-care 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
- Are equalities an issue? Finding out what young children think
- Listening to disabled children
- Supporting parents and carers to listen – a guide for practitioners

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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.deafnessatbirth.org.uk

This resource provides information and news about the work funded by the UK Department for Education and Skills (DfES) to develop services for disabled children under three and their families.

www.rnib.org.uk

RNIB believes that children with sight problems should enjoy the same rights, freedoms, responsibilities and quality of life as those who are fully sighted. It aims to support, inform, enhance, expand and complement the statutory and other provision that exists.

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.

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.

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.

www.cafamily.org.uk

Contact a Family brings together families who have a disabled child. It has information on rare and unusual conditions, and the groups associated with them. It runs a national helpline for parents.

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.



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