

Young Children's Voices

Challenges

Despite the importance of listening to babies and young children to inform policy and practice, there are a variety of factors that can inhibit this. Some barriers are quite practical:



- The process of listening to babies and young children can be time-consuming and resource intensive. Listening to babies and young children requires deep and trusting relationship with them, which take time to evolve. Eliciting their voice requires dedicating additional time for the process of 'making meaning' of their verbal and non-verbal expressions, both in dialogue with babies and young children and with other important adults in their lives.
- Capturing the voice of pre- and non-verbal children requires greater creativity and effort. It may be necessary to use multiple methods of engagement, such as observation, one-to-one interactions, group conversations, and visual activities or games (e.g. drawing, photography, map-making, filming videos, etc.).

- There is an unavoidable power dynamic between adults/carers and babies and young children, who rely on grown-ups to meet their basic needs. Some practitioners may be reluctant to engage with babies and toddlers because of the heightened concern or need for safeguarding precautions. Researchers may feel less confident involving babies and young children in their studies due to more complicated ethical considerations. Arguably, these challenges reinforce the importance of listening to the youngest children, as they have fewer opportunities and avenues to advocate for themselves particularly if they are at risk.



Young Children's Voices

Other challenges are cultural or systemic, and are embedded in the ways that adults think about and interact with babies and young children:

- Babies' and young children's voice may be perceived as not possible to gain, due to adults assuming that they are too immature and incapable of contributing to the discussions of issues such as poverty, climate change or conflict. It is important to acknowledge the importance of maturity, and that listening to babies and young children at different stages of their development will look different. It is the responsibility of the adult to give due consideration how the voices of babies and young children can be captured.
- Often, the ways in which babies' experiences and views can be explored is underestimated and may not recognise babies and young children's capabilities.
- There is also an inherent challenge in how to ensure that the issue at hand is directly relevant to the child, and if this is not the case, the purpose of participation could be reconsidered to establish if it's the right opportunity for the children involved. Complex issues may be possible to be translated in a way that they relate to the child's direct experience in accessible, age-appropriate ways which enables babies and young children to share insightful views in ways they choose to express them.
- Babies and young children may not be considered to have the knowledge or views to share on specific topics, while adults may be overly confident in their superior knowledge. However, babies and young children are the experts in their own lives. There is a need to balance adults' wisdom and practical knowledge with the realisation that we are far removed from the day-to-day experience of being a child and it is those insights that are hugely valuable and can inform decisions that affect them. Children's views can contribute to the bigger picture, where due weight is given, in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.
- There may be concern that babies and young children should not be exposed to certain risks and responsibilities inherent in participation. Safeguarding and protecting children is paramount and appropriate safeguarding procedures should be followed. However, this should not come at the cost of limiting babies and young children's opportunities for participation such that they are excluded entirely and further marginalised.

