

Young Children's Voices

Principles and Core Elements for Best Practice

Principles

- **All children have 'voice' and are capable of expressing it, regardless of age and ability.**

All children, including babies and toddlers, have thoughts and views, wants and needs, likes and dislikes, that are valid. They are fully capable of communicating these experiences in age and developmentally appropriate ways. The languages of young children are valued.



- **Babies and young children have a right to input into and influence their environments and experiences.**

The right to have one's voice heard and taken into account is fundamental in a just society. Babies and young children deserve access to that same right through a process of enabling participation. This sets them on a path to fuller participation as young people and adults, and leads to services and systems that are child-centred.

- **Participation of babies and young children should be voluntary and relevant to the child.**

While babies and young children have a right to have their voices heard, they also have a right not to participate. Steps should be taken to ensure that babies and young children participate freely and that the context is directly relevant to their experience.

- **Trusting relationships with parents and carers are central to eliciting babies' and young children's voices.**

Young children, especially when pre- or non-verbal, rely on parents and carers to interpret their daily wants and needs. Adults who are closest to babies and young children are more attuned to their individual modes of communication and expression, and are better positioned to elicit their voice. These relationships are established over time, through repeated warm and caring interactions. They can be key to provide a child-friendly and enabling environment.

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- **Authentic incorporation of babies' and young children's voice has visible impact.**

Listening to babies and young children, while critical, is only the first step. To fully validate their experiences and contributions, adults need to take these into account and make changes where warranted. This action should then be communicated back to children so they can see the impact of their input. This step reinforces to children that their voice is meaningful and taken seriously, and encourages future participation. This ensures transparency and accountability to children.

- **The voices of babies and young children living in poverty demand particular attention.**

Babies' and young children's voices are often discounted due to their age and perceived inability to contribute; however, babies and young children living in poverty are even further excluded. Their families may experience barriers to accessing spaces of influence and there may be reluctance to engage with them around sensitive topics that are part of their daily lives. These challenges highlight the importance of working even harder to enable and ensure that children living in poverty have the same opportunity to be heard as their peers.



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Core Elements

Eliciting babies' and young children's voices is...

- **Relationship-based.**

Listening to babies and young children occurs within the context of relationships. Adults need to establish an environment of trust and safety to facilitate babies' and young children's voices. Parents and carers who interact with a child frequently over a long period of time will be most successful at encouraging participation.

- **Multimodal and creative.**

Babies and young children's voices cannot always be captured over the course of one conversation or observation. To construct a holistic picture of their experience sometimes requires combining a variety of approaches and interactions. These may include observations, one-to-one conversations/interviews, small group discussions, as well as more hands-on or playful strategies such as drawing, photography, map-making and filming video. For babies and toddlers, speaking with parents and carers may also help to reinforce themes that emerge through observation.

- **A reciprocal process of 'meaning-making'.**

Listening to babies and young children is an active, relational and dialogical process. Adults may need to be prepared to engage in a shared dialogue that challenges their assumptions. Children may use different language to describe their experiences, which can require deeper exploration to fully grasp. Their priorities may not be immediately clear from any artwork they may produce. Arriving at a mutual and reliable understanding is the result of back-and-forth questions and reflections, dialogue, affirmation and reaffirmation between children and adults.



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- **Influential in their daily lives.**

Babies' and young children's voices are reinforced through a feedback cycle that demonstrates the impact of their contribution in a way that is relevant to them. McAuliffe (2003) articulates the steps of this Listening Cycle as Listen, Document, Reflect, Take Action and Feedback. For babies, this may be as simple as receiving recognition for any first attempts at mark-making. For young children, this could include adapting the toys and activities offered at nursery or at home in response to their expressed interests. While seemingly small, these steps gradually enable babies and young children to participate in meaningful ways, and strengthen their sense that their input is valued and valuable.

- **Part of a reflexive, ongoing practice.**

All adults who interact with babies and young children – whether practitioners, researchers, parents, or other key people in the child's life – need to take the time to reflect on how those interactions are going, and to make changes to their approach as needed. Just as it is important to attune to the needs and behaviours of babies and young children in this work, adults need to have self-awareness of their own assumptions, biases, emotions and motivations. These factors all influence how adults relate to babies and young children, and need to be recognised and managed as much as possible. There is an inherent imbalance of power between adults and young children that cannot be eliminated, but through reflexive practice it can be mitigated.

- **Safe.**

Listening to babies and young children can only be successful in places and spaces where they feel safe and comfortable. This includes the physical environment, which needs to be warm and inviting, with furniture and toys/activities suitable to the child's age or development. Babies and young children are likely to feel psychologically and emotionally safe in the presence of familiar adults. They can be encouraged to opt in or out of an activity at any time, either verbally or through their body language, with their preferences given due respect. Safeguarding policies and procedures need to be followed and risk assessed that is cognisant of the specific needs of babies and young children.

