Listening to Young Children

“The most basic of all human needs is the need to understand and be understood. The best way to understand people is to listen to them”

Ralph Nicols (Listening & Learning)
This toolkit aims to provide early years and childcare practitioners in Northamptonshire with practical support and guidance for listening to young children (aged between birth and 5 years old) and including them in everyday decision making processes.

There are many examples of how practitioners can listen and consult with children. The appendices section of this toolkit includes good practice case studies from different providers across Northamptonshire that practitioners can use in their own setting. These local experiences have been tried and tested and evaluated for effectiveness and have been included in the case studies.
Legal Duty

A brief outline as to why we should listen to young children. The law requires that children are included in decisions that affect them to ensure that their needs are paramount.

There is a legal duty to consult with children contained within many different pieces of legislation, the following are perhaps the most relevant and recent examples:

- The Children Act (2004) requires early years and childcare settings to promote anti-discriminatory practice within all their work, and requires all adults working with children to promote their needs with paramount importance;
- Children’s rights to be involved in the decisions that affect them are identified in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child – ratified by the UK in 1991;
- The Children’s Plan (first published by the Department for Children, Schools and Families in 2007) states that services for children and young people “need to be shaped by and responsive to children, young people and families”;
- The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) is the framework that enables young children to achieve the five Every Child Matters outcomes. It sets standards for: the learning, development and care young children should experience; equality of opportunity and anti-discriminatory practice; partnership working; improving quality and consistency; and lays a secure foundation for future learning;
- OFSTED’s Self Evaluation Framework is the mechanism by which registered providers, delivering the EYFS, consider and regularly record how they create, maintain and improve their settings. This is achieved through reflection and should also include the views of children, staff and parents.

1 UN Convention of the Rights of the Child, Article 12
3 EYFS September 2008
4 SEF September 2008 tbc
Listening comes in many forms; participating actively to include consulting with young children. Therefore, it is important to define what we mean by listening, participation and consultation.

What does ‘listening’ mean?

Listening means providing real opportunities (time, space and choice) for young children to communicate their views, concerns and aspirations (Lancaster 2003).

Listening means responding to what children are saying, it means recognising that children know and can tell us things without necessarily being able to put them into words. They express themselves through body language, expression, actions and behaviour as well as their voice.
Listening is the art of hearing

Listening includes babies. Effective listening entails respect and a belief that they are worth listening to. Adults need to give babies and young children the respect as people in their own right, competent to express their views.

What does participation mean?

Participation offers young children real opportunities to take part and express their views in different ways (The Hundred Languages of Children – Reggio Emilia) and ensures that young children are active participants in the day-to-day decisions that affect their lives.

Participation means that young children’s views are heard and taken seriously. Their views are supported and upheld. As adults, we check out that we have really understood their intended meaning.

It means recognising the existing power imbalance between adults and children. It means children are empowered rather than dominated. It recognises that we all have pre-determined assumptions and cultural values that shape our views of childhood and influence how we respond to children. Children need to be able to tell us what their lives are really like now.

Participation helps us highlight diversity and difference and it promotes socially inclusive relationships.

What does consultation mean?

Consultation goes beyond listening to the views of children, e.g. about how they would like things done and what resources they would like to use— it informs action which responds to those views. That is – feeding back to young children how their views have been acknowledged and acted on, as well as providing an explanation when it was not possible to act on them.

It means ensuring young children are given information about things that might change in a way they can understand. It means making clear what opportunities young children have to make decisions and that they can also change their minds later.

Informing young children when action is taking place and providing an explanation when their ideas are not turned into action. Sharing children’s views provides a valuable opportunity to celebrate achievements and discuss future plans that affect their learning and development.

“Asking children what they think, but taking it no further will send a message that there is little real interest in their view”

Mooney and Blackburn 2002
Many practitioners are very supportive of children’s listening, but because they do it intuitively, are not really aware of what works best and why e.g. eye contact, attending to the speaker, remembering and responding to what is said.

It is an ongoing learning process. Developing a listening culture needs to be explored thoroughly and needs to be understood by practitioners in the setting. Continued professional development is important and with many settings having high staff turnover it is more important to ensure that your staff members have the appropriate training.

Benefits for All
It is not just about legal duties, listening to and consulting with children benefits early years settings enormously by:

- Enhances emotional wellbeing and raising their self esteem;
- Developing a genuinely collaborative and inclusive play and learning environment;
- Recognising and celebrating diversity;
- Increasing knowledge and understanding of how children respond to and value their environment;
- Ensuring children’s individual needs are met;
- Supporting the quality of provision;
- Provide evidence for Quality Assurance and Self reflection;
- Providing evidence to inform Ofsted’s self-evaluation framework document;
- Developing decision-making skills;
- Developing overall understanding;
- Creating a sense of responsibility for oneself and others;
- Contributing to play and learning experiences.
Coram Family Training
This resource pack was developed by Coram family. It uses the visual arts to enable young children under the age of eight to articulate their experiences, express their views, choices, feelings and concerns. It explains how listening can be embedded in every day practice and examines how to ‘tune into’ young children, including babies. It shows how reflective practice can promote children’s participation in decision making and problem solving processes to inform and enhance their learning environments. It supports the essential underpinnings of the Early Years Foundation Stage from the Every Child Matters agenda and key outcomes.

The resource is in five parts
1 The Introductory Guide – an overview of the contents.
2 The Reader – provides the conceptual background and looks at three key strands, which support children’s participation: An inclusive approach, a participative approach and a supportive framework.
3 The Practitioner Handbook – sets out the key components of active listening and how to promote a listening culture.
4 A set of Shared Experiences – in eleven individual case study booklets based on the visual arts.
5 CD-Rom – illustrates 10 of the 11 Shared Experiences.
It aims to:

• Promote holistic approaches.
• Offers real opportunities for young children to participate.
• Create an accessible environment that enables children to express their views, choices, concerns, experiences and aspirations and to take these seriously.
• Develop socially inclusive adult-child relationships where young children know they will be heard.
• Strengthens the listening skills and attitudes of parents and practitioners.

It provides a framework that adults can implement to support listening to young children by:

Recognising a child’s many visual and verbal languages
Assigning space for children’s voices to be heard
Making time for children’s voices
Providing genuine choices
Subscribing to reflective practice

The aim of the eleven Shared Experiences is to be inspirational and flexible to enable parents and practitioners to tune into young children through observing their responses to a range of shared experiences such as: Likes and Dislikes; Visual Walks, Tuning In, Capturing Children’s Experience. A spiral framework is provided to support practitioners when using these shared experiences – known as PPR which is Preparation, Process and Reflection. The PPR signposts issues to address so that listening to and observing what children are saying and doing improves practice.

Ultimately the Listening to Young Children Resources Pack offers an ethical and practical framework and demonstration of how listening to young children can be implemented in a meaningful way that promotes best practice across all childcare settings. It provides a springboard for fun, creativity and fulfilling partnerships between children and their key carers for young children up to 8 years old. These key principles can be adapted for children beyond eight.

This Resource Pack is the core of a successful training programme offered within the Multi-Agency Training guide and has been the springboard to developing a number of ‘listening to young children’ approaches in settings across Northamptonshire. Some of these are described in the appendices of this booklet.
Strategies to improve listening skills

A reflective early year’s learning environment is not only conducive to achievement, but it is also required by the EYPS and the EYFS. Standard 22 of the requirements for Early Years Professional Status (EYPS) states that practitioners need to ‘give constructive and sensitive feedback to help children understand what they have achieved and think about what they need to do next and… to think about, evaluate and improve on their own performance.’ (CWDC, 2006, p10).

As discussed earlier it is also a requirement of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), under Personal, Social and Emotional Development, that we help children to ‘know themselves and what they can do’ (DfES, 2007, p22).

The EYFS Profile also highlights that ‘the importance of involving children in the assessment process is to enable them to develop their ability to express preferences and make choices, begin to understand that their views are respected and develop as autonomous learners’ (QCA, 2003, p103).

How are children’s views sought?

Different ways of listening to young children:

- Visual observations of children, written notes and photographs.
- Use of camcorders to record children’s activities that can be shared in discussions.
- Photograph books in book corners to promote discussion.
- Children taking photographs of things they would like the new children to know about the setting.
- Thinking tree – children can ‘pose’ thoughts for adults to consider when planning.
- Giving choice – e.g. Choice books that show range of equipment that is available but restricted by space to display it all.
- Listening can place any time, any place...
- Sustained, shared conversations.
- Giving children time, space, flexibility to make choices.
- Involve children in the planning.
- The environment needs to allow to listening time, body language, eye contact. Further more, it is very important to create an environment that is conducive to listening and noticing e.g. keeping distractions to a minimum - some children cannot concentrate fully if there is background noise such as a television, radio or computer games. Vary ways of asking children such as verbal questions, using cameras, questionnaires, ideas boxes etc.

Some of these examples are further explored in the appendices (case studies) and in the subsequent sections of this toolkit.
Being Self Reflective

As anyone working with young children will know, we learn by looking back at what we did and how to improve outcomes for children by doing things differently. One way of checking how we are listening to young children is by being reflective.

Section 4 of the Self Evaluation document asks providers to record the views of children and their parents or carers who are using the setting. The voice of the child needs to be included when reflecting on your practice – examples of when you have listened to young children and their parents or carers.
Improving outcomes for children

- Outcomes from consultations need to be recorded as evidence. Keeping accurate records not only supports accurate consultations, but it also helps you to reflect on practice to inform any future consultation activities.
- Raising self esteem of all children.
- Creating high levels of well being in staff and children and their families.
- Measuring children’s well being through observations, putting in strategies to improve the low levels of well being in some children.
- Effective key person system.
- High quality emotional environment that supports children learning and development.
- Flexible approach to planning that reflects children interests and developmental needs.
- The skill of the practitioners to know how to listen to the children, using an underpinning knowledge of child development.
- Role modelling effective communication skills, both verbal and non verbal.
- Allow time for reflection.
- Allow time to listen and value conversation.
- Allowing children time to respond to adults.
- The benefits of listening to children supports their interests at that moment in time.
- Communication is not only the spoken word, but communication through paintings, or role play, and dance!
- Providing an environment that is safe, and somewhere they want to be, allowing a comfortable place to listen and share and express themselves.
- A reflective practitioner needs to evaluate and monitor opportunities for children to be listened to too.
- Monitoring process needs to be completed by an experienced practitioner who is well versed in ‘listening to young children’ principles.
- The environment should foster independent access to resources where possible or appropriate.
- Evidence of the impact of listening to children, to support your SEF (Section 1 Views of those who use your setting).
Understanding children’s ways of communication

Children communicate how they feel and what they want, to adults who ‘tune in’ with all their senses. They recognise all of their children’s actions and interpret these in order to respond in the best possible way.

A key person system enables the practitioner to get to know the child and their family to recognise and be responsive to their individual needs. Adults need to secure knowledge of child development to be skilled listeners and have an underpinning knowledge of the stages of children’s communication skills. (The Science of Language- John Kirche).
Practitioners need to have regard to the development matters statements in the EYFS Practice Guidance.

Understanding listening is key to providing an environment in which all young children feel confident, safe and powerful, ensuring they have time and space to express themselves in whatever form suits them.

Taken from 'The Enabling Environments' Page 42 EYFS Guidance - it is advocated that practitioners need to provide time and relaxed opportunities for children to develop spoken language though sustained conversations, both 1-1 and in small groups and between the children themselves. Practitioners need to allow time for children to initiate conversations, respect their thinking time and silences and help them to develop the interaction.

All children are unique with unique responses. Observing children is as important as listening to what they say; much of what children say would not make much sense without observation. Children communicate through their body language and facial expressions. They respond in ways they have learnt to be appropriate, such as eye-contact, though this depends on different cultural traditions. Listening to children with disabilities may involve learning new communication techniques or fine-tuning skills they use every day. Practitioners need to value and support the communication skills of children with Special Educational Needs and English as an Additional Language and know how to access the relevant support and advisory services. Keeping daily diaries of children’s observation can help with planning activities around the child’s wants and needs.

Practitioners need to know how to access documents, strategies, research, theories and support e.g. ECAT, EEL, Letters and Sounds, SEAD (Social, Emotional Aspects of Development) etc. They should also show a commitment to working with families and other professionals in order to promote the voice of the child.
Listening to babies

“By watching your baby – understand that your baby’s behaviour is not random but can tell you something about how the baby is experiencing the world – you can be guided to give the care that is most appropriate”

The Social Baby (2000)

Listening to babies acknowledges their right to be heard from pre birth and throughout their lives. It builds up positive relationships between adults and babies. Babies demand constant attention. Babies are social beings from birth. Even at 20 minutes old a baby may imitate facial expression presented to them by an adult.

Listening and observing babies practitioners can gain an insight; a deeper level of understanding of the babies in their care. It begins with effective listening – demonstrating respect and belief that babies are worth listening to thus providing for their needs and improving a baby’s well being. Seeing the world from a baby’s point of view is a good start to understanding what babies are saying, interpreting their sounds and movements and reading their body language.

Babies’ communication includes all senses and emotions. For example; Verbal: gurgling, squealing, crying, and laughing.

Non-verbal: clenching fists, arm movements, facial expressions, back arching, body rigidity, eye contact.
“The qualities of good parenting (and care) are...the capacity to listen, to notice, to shape behaviour and to restore good feelings through some kind of physical, emotional or mental contact, through a touch, a smile, a way of putting feelings and thoughts into words. To be able to notice and respond to other’s feeling, takes up time. It requires a kind of mental space to be allocated to feelings and a willingness to prioritise relationships.”


Practitioners can listen in the following ways

• Informal observation is the easiest way to listen to babies. It will help you see the world through their eyes

• Using a tally chart to monitor a baby’s movement will help you monitor which toys a baby chooses to play with or an area they choose to play in. It will tell you their likes and dislikes.

• Tuning in to their body language will help you understand how babies are feeling and responding to different experience.

• Recording a baby’s sounds and actions and how you respond.

• Encourage and reward their communication by responding with interest (use smiles, cuddles and praise).

• Notice how they express feelings of happiness and distress by for example smiling, gurgling, hand waving, grimacing, turning away etc.

• Asking parents/carers about how their baby communicates, their preferences and routines.

Every child has different signals and ways of communicating how they feel.
Challenges

Busy home environment or setting – look at noise levels and consider creating a quiet area.

Having time to focus on babies.

Parents who don’t have time to engage with practitioner.

The number of adults that may care for the same baby: e.g. parents living in separate homes, childminders and settings.

Hints and Tips

Collect information from parents before placement starts – by designing your own baby friendly ‘All about Me’ pro forma that is accessible to parents/carers and easy to complete.

Share observations with parents.

Daily diaries.

Settling in process and policy e.g. home visits.

Thinking about opportunities to listen to babies e.g. using key one-to-one interaction opportunity when nappy changing or feeding times.

Talk to babies but always give opportunity for them to talk back.

Reflection

Do you know how each baby likes to sleep and do you respect these preferences?

Do you adapt activities and routines to follow the interests of the babies?

Do you try to see the world and environment through the eyes of the baby?

Have you ‘tuned into’ each baby’s verbal and non-verbal cues?

Do you make one to one time to listen to babies and build relationships?

Do you give the baby time to respond to you? Your words, your actions, your facial expressions, sounds you make, sounds they hear.

If you are Solihull Approach trained, keep the ‘dance of reciprocity’ in mind.

A quiet baby does not always indicate a happy baby.

Useful References:

‘Listening as a way of life’ Diane Rich (National Children’s Bureau)
Involving young children in Recruitment

CWDC has adopted the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in its entirety. Article 12 of the UNCRC says that all children and young people have the right to say what they think should happen when adults are making decisions that affect them, and to have those opinions taken into account; this includes the people who work with them.

It is important to stress that the employer must have robust and rigorous recruitment procedures in place which ensure that staff meet the specific requirements of the role and are safe to work with children.

Why do we involve children in recruitment & selection?

Involving children in recruitment has countless benefits. Before recruiting, ask children what attributes they like in workers, non-verbal children may be able to sign or indicate preferences. Children’s voices can be reflected in adverts.

• Feeling valued and empowered leading to raising children’s self esteem.

• Babies are social beings and can express their likes and dislikes. Adults need to be sensitive to signals and responses.

• Benefits for organisations e.g. better targeted services, chance to see recruits with young children.

• Pre employment visits give children the opportunity to meet potential staff and express their views.

• Candidates should be invited to visit the setting so that their interactions with the children and the children’s responses to them can be observed.

• Interaction can be observed including body language, eye contact, facial expression and hand gestures which can indicate children’s feelings, preferences and engagement.

• Direct observation of children participating in recruitment can be useful particularly if children and young people are unable to communicate verbally. Watching non verbal communication such as body language, eye-contact, facial expressions or hand gestures can tell you a lot.

Activities could include:

Reading with the children
Eating with the children
Doing activities with the children
Children could show candidates or new recruits around the setting

Children will be involved and their well-being enhanced by contributing to staff selection.
Case Studies

Thorplands Children’s Centre

Joanne Ashworth

Specific Aims:
To develop key worker system role and knowledge of children’s prepared activities.
To find out about children’s likes and dislikes regarding activities.
Developing engagement at group time
To inform Development Folder for each child.

Activity:
We used the booklet ‘Capturing Children’s Experiences’ from the Coram resource pack to help with our planning. Children were encouraged to take photographs or draw pictures of the activities they enjoyed during the session with the support of the staff members. The photos and drawings were placed on the key worker board and discussed at the end of the session during group time. Children described their own photos/pictures and the adults transcribed underneath to make clear what the child was saying.

We entered the children’s photos and drawings in their Development Folders so that the children could have access to them and look through them when they wanted. It was also a good opportunity to share them with their parents/carers and created a discussion point at parent’s evening.

The activity enhanced the knowledge of the child for the key worker. It informed planning regarding preferred activities and promoted sharing and listening skills between children and developed their language skills. It also contributed towards their positive self esteem.

We have embedded this activity into our practice and further expanded using photographs on the board. There are many benefits in doing this activity including developing use of language and communication and provided a real opportunity to listen to what the children are saying and in turn they feel valued and their self esteem increased.

Penrith Drive Children’s Centre, Wellingborough

Georgina Goodman and Kay O’Reilly

Specific Aims:
The project began in February 2010. We created a flyer to invite as many parents/carers to our event which we called ‘Dragon Fun’ to celebrate the Chinese New Year. The purpose was to increase children’s confidence and listening techniques for all, including parents/carers and staff.

Activity:
Using the Coram Family Resource pack we selected ‘Painting’ to share experiences and offer the children real freedom to experiment with paint and use it to explore their ideas, their feelings and situations.

Before the session began we asked the parents/carers to complete a brief questionnaire that looked at expectations and importance of the activity. For example,

1. What do you think children will learn from painting; do you do painting at home?
2. Why do you think painting is important?
3. How confident do you feel about your child painting at home?

They were also asked to rate the activity before and after on a scale of 1-5 where 1 = not confident and 5 = very confident.

The key to our project is preparation. We collected comments before the session and after the session from both parents/carers and the young children involved. This was to help inform any future sessions we plan.

We collected lots of different objects for the children and parents to use and create something to paint, including large and small boxes, cylinder objects etc. ‘Junk modelling’ is a good way for young children to express themselves, providing them with an opportunity to do what they wanted and not be focused on specific outcomes. Our outcome was to provide and opportunity for parents/carers to engage with their children. We provided ample space for the children to use to their advantage, and create something as big or as small as they wanted.
We videoed the activity and later used it to show the parents about how their children were using their imagination and exploration of the objects to convey their feelings in the painting activity.

Many parents/carers were surprised at how much their children expressed themselves at using other available resources so confidently and imaginatively. Some parents/carers said they would feel more confident to try this activity at home.

Busy Bees Preschool/Playgroup

Ann Byford and Hilary Hamilton

Specific Aims:

Our listening to young children project had several aims including to help children make choices, to help communication with children and to settle in new children.

Activity:

To produce a photo Album of all the toys in the setting and label it as a resource book. We believe that producing a photographic book of all the toys and activities that we have available would help children further to make choices and voice what they would like to do. The children helped us take photographs of the toys and then we had two copies produced. We used the ‘Likes and Dislikes’ booklet from the Coram Resource pack to guide us.

The first set of photographs were laminated and separated to the different areas of development and filed in an A4 folder. This folder was then placed for easy access to children and parents/carers.

The folder is used for many different purposes:

- Staff used the folder for planning, to identify activities to meet the developmental needs of the children in their care.
- The children made their own decisions about what they would like to play with.
- It helped settle newly arrived children by giving them the folder to look at and decide what they wanted to do - a new setting with lots of children and toys as we know can be overwhelming. One child who was new to the setting always asked for the folder to choose what she wanted to play with. She became more settled as a result and started to use her voice more. We believe it was the resource folder that helped her to do this.
- It also helped children to choose what they wanted to play with but who were less verbal.

- A potential parent/carer came to visit the setting towards the end of the day after everything was packed away. We were able to use the folder to share what resources the setting had with potential new parents/careers when they came to look around. It helped to explain how children are encouraged to make choices and to be independent.

The second set of photographs were used to create an identical folder to help us review activities for the day. Using a large plastic clear pocket sheet with lots of individual pockets, we placed the activities that children played with during the day in them. We laminated happy and sad faces and the children, parents/carer and staff were encouraged to put a smiley or a sad face in each activity pocket. The children found this an exciting new game. However, once the initial excitement had worn off, the children used the happy and sad faces to describe how they felt about the activity they participated in, and key workers came alongside to hear what they had to say. We have found it to be a great reflection tool which will inform our future planning.

Tudor Manor Day Nursery, Project: Feeling Stone

Vikki Cox and Gemma Humphreys

Specific Aims:

To involve the children in making choices around the nursery in everyday activities including outside play area. To enable staff to listen to young children to talk about their feelings.

Activity:

We wanted the young children to share responsibility in the planning of our project; choosing toys and other activities to play with. We used the Feelings booklet from the Coram resource pack to help give us some ideas. In our nursery each room has designated areas for the 6 areas of learning; Maths; Communication, Language and Literacy; Personal, Social and Emotional development; Knowledge and Understanding of the World; Physical development; Creative development. We decided to concentrate on activities addressing 2 of the 6 areas of learning as we foresaw difficulties in managing all 6 areas due to lack of storage. During our group times (with children aged 3-5) we explained to the children what we were going to do and included them in all the planning. We took photographs of the toys and activities available in the 2 areas of learning and developed an activity wall and labelled it ‘what we have chosen to have out’.
The older children were able to talk about the choices during group time with each other and why they made their choice and how they went about making their choices. The 1-2 year old children copied the older children. This helped children increase their self esteem. They were comfortable to go and choose their own activities. Furthermore, we dedicated a wall space with felt material so that the younger children could choose their own work to display using Velcro. We found that all the children were more engaged with the toys and activities they had chosen and the older children were more involved in the display activity, i.e. where to put work displays and how it should look. This activity helped members of staff to listen to children's feelings, hear what they gained from the activity and understand their emotional state and well being.

**Emotions Tree and Feelings Stone**

We had a decorative willow which we used as our emotions tree. The stone was large enough for children to hold in their hands and very smooth to the touch. We introduced the stone during group time to explain the idea. We made ‘emotion’ labels with different emotions and placed them within reach for the children and placed the feelings stone in a basket under the ‘tree’. Everything was within reach and accessible to the children. Children could hold the stone and rub their emotions into it when they were feeling happy or sad or wanted some comfort. The younger children often copied the older children. The feelings stone also helped one child who was having difficulty settling in.

We cut out lots of pictorial faces with different emotions that were clearly depicted e.g. happy face, sad face, worried face etc. We made the labels and laminated them and used ribbon to hang them on the tree. The children were able to hang their feelings on the tree. This could be done session by session and helped members of staff to gauge the emotional well being of the children in their care as well as provide an opportunity to engage with them at a deeper level.

We regularly communicated children’s emotional behaviour with their parents/carers when they came to pick them up so that they were aware. This helped them to ‘tune in’ to their children’s moods and feelings.

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**Oakway Children`s Centre**

**Debbie Wright and Felicity Botterill**

**Specific Aims:**

To develop children’s speech and language.
To encourage parents to listen to their child & encourage parent /child interaction.

The Project was promoted through the “What’s On” leaflet at the Children’s Centre that is distributed to all parents and a variety of community settings locally. We participated on the Listening to Young Children Course delivered by Northamptonshire County Council; however, we did not use sources from the Shared Experiences from the Coram Resource pack but adapted ideas from the Coram course to address the needs in our setting. We had received many requests from parents for help with behaviour management with their children. We found a lot of parents struggled with behaviour management and believed it was as a result of lack of listening skills; listening to what their child was saying leading to difficult behaviour for them to manage. To support this we decided to use this opportunity to address this in our Centre. We wanted to help parents/carers really listen to their children in the Children’s Centre and at home too.

**Activity:**

The ‘Chattersacks’ concept is similar to that of the ‘storysacks’ concept. They already existed with our resources at the Centre. We decided to take it a step further and introduce it as a resource to support behaviour management and to provide discussion points that families could use together.

The ‘Chattersacks’ were put together by members of staff. They took time out and sewed together large bags from colourful material. Most of the resources for the sacks were donated or purchased in charity shops. It was quite easy to explain to parents how inexpensive it could be to produce something similar at home.
We separated resources such as small finger puppets, storybooks and toys into the sacks under different themes or topics for the different age groups (baby, toddler and preschool). We produced an itinerary for each sack. For example, sacks contain books, colouring/pencils, toys (that match our story books) and DVDs/CDs along similar themes and created a signing out system to enable parents to borrow the ‘Chattersacks’.

Each sack contains a photograph of contents for the child to see to enable making choices easier. The sacks are placed on hooks on a rail at child accessible level and are open for them to see inside each sack. The themes range from traditional stories such as ‘Goldilocks and the Three Bears’ to ‘The Very Hungry Caterpillar’ to ‘How to Potty Train Your Baby’ to ‘Crossing the Road’. We often received requests to include different items of interest for the child, for example, a child’s favourite toy which led us to put one together on ‘Transport’.

We now have a parent volunteer who comes in on a regular basis to help manage the project including developing new ‘Chattersacks’. We use the ‘Chattersacks’ in a variety of sessions including ‘Rhymetime’ sessions, Stay and Play and other activities within the centre. The staff often use the sacks to model how to listen to children, including letting children finish what they are saying, turn taking and further to encourage discussion with the children.

Acorn Childcare

Rob Coles and Sarah Jones

Specific Aims:

After attending the Listening to Young Children course offered by Northamptonshire County Council we realised that we had to make changes within our setting to improve young children’s experience and outcomes. Our aim became to ensure all staff members listen to the children and give them a voice within our setting. Several changes were developed to achieve this for example.

Activity:

While talking to the children about their feelings we were told by one girl that she was sad because she wasn’t allowed to play with the things she had bought in from home. We realized that if we listened to the children we could change this. So we introduced an interest table to the preschool to give the children the opportunity to bring something into the setting that interested them or that they felt passionate about. The children had the chance to talk about their items in front of small groups. Other children valued and respected the treasured items bought in and they talked much more about the things they had done or that interested them at home. Allowing children more choice opportunities, particularly over the resources they played began to change staff attitudes too. They are much more relaxed about giving children more freedom to play and learn – including outdoor activities. In the nursery garden a small area was created for the pre-school. The children chose what plants and vegetables they want to grow and where to put them.

In the afterschool club (8-11yrs) an art and craft suggestions box was put into place. The children left their suggestions on art and craft activities that they would like to do and these were then collected by staff and used when planning what resources to buy.

We also introduced a Feelings Box to the club. The box provided a confidential means by which the children could post a message about their feelings and then write about them. The children know and trust that the messages are then taken by staff each day and if needed that they will find time to listen to the children and offer help if required.
Northamptonshire Childminding Association

The case study below provides an example of listening to young children in a home setting. Laura Ashby and Julie Lappin, Development Workers for The Northamptonshire Childminding Association, participated on the LTYC Coram Training and took their ideas to Childminders in their area. In partnership with Childminder, Clair Haylock, they came up with the following project.

Giving children opportunity to explore their feelings

Our project is to engage young children to talk their feelings creating an opportunity for Childminders to listen.

Specific Aims:

- Children to gain an understanding of how to express and recognise their feelings.
- Enable a childminder to actively listen to the child and meet their individual needs.

Activity:

We came up with many ideas for children to explore their feelings. We decided to use posters with facial expressions that were obvious. We were still undecided whether to use animated expressions using cartoon caricatures or real child expressions using photographs. We listed different expressions and decided to go for 6 different expressions; happy, sad, angry, excited and bored.

At this point we visited a childminder to discuss the project and the best way forward. After much discussion we decided to use real photographs of different expressions. Using images from the internet and other publications, we used cut outs of different people of different ages and ethnicity. We laminated them onto card and labelled them with different expressions as outlined above. We then cut small pieces of Velcro onto the front of the cards for the children’s photos to be attached.

At the same time we created 6 larger identical images. We laminated them and introduced them to the children to familiarise them with the different feelings and emotions. Once the childminder felt confident that the children understood the different feelings she moved onto the poster activity and introduced it.

To make this individual to the Childminder we used photos of the children in her care. We cut the photos down to size and glued them onto A4 card, laminated them and attached a small piece of Velcro on the back. The children will use their own photo and stick it to the expressions photos – relaying how they are feeling.

This activity creates opportunity for the childminder to initiate discussion with children about their own feelings and their reasons for them. It is also important for the childminder to listen and read children’s other means of communication such as body language. Through this activity a childminder can build a fuller picture of the child's mental health and well being.

Additional comments

Many parents found the ‘listening to young children’ training provided a useful insight in to how their child was feeling on that day. This prepared them for possible upsets or excitable behaviour!
Children’s Views on Childcare Quality
Listening to young Children Resource Pack
The Social Baby: Understanding a Babies Communication from Birth
Why Love Matters: How Affection Shapes a Babies Brain
The Hundred Languages of Children
Hempsall Consultancies
Listening As A Way of Life
Beyond Listening, Children’s Perspectives on Early Childhood Service
Listening To Young Children, The Mosaic Approach
Listening To Young children in their Early Years
Engagement and Active Involvement Strategy
Listening to Four Year Olds

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