

Children's Voice



The voice of the child is a general term used to express how we are creating meaningful engagement with our children. Daily direct work should focus on listening to and responding to what children are saying is important to them, taking on board their views and considering their wishes.

Aaron Bradbury

‘Listening to children’s voices and recognising these are expressed in a range of ways, including non-verbally, is central to inclusive practice.’

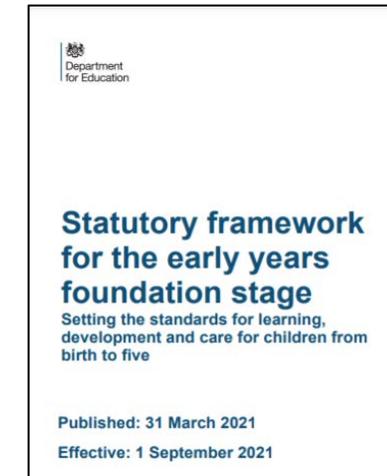
Birth to Five Matters

We have a duty to consult with children and 'act' upon their voice

Children's Act (2004) Requires early years and childhood settings to promote anti-discriminatory practice within their work and requires you as a professional working with children to promote 'their needs' with a paramount of importance.



Article 12 of the **United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child** (UNCRC 1989) stipulates every child's right to be heard and have their views taken seriously.



EYFS Statutory Framework including Safeguarding Requirements. (1.11) "Practitioners must consider the individual needs, interests, and development of each child in their care, and must use this information to plan a challenging and enjoyable experience for each child in all areas of learning and development."

SEND Code of Practice (2015) Through the Code of Practice, local authorities are mandated to ensure that children's and families views are sought and contribute to educational decision-making.'

Ofsted Early Years Handbook (Sept 2021)

[Inspectors] will find out how practitioners seek children's views and engage them in planning of activities (Annex A paragraph 12).

When observing interactions between staff and children, inspectors should consider how well staff:

watch, listen and respond to children

encourage children to express their thoughts and use new words

encourage children to speculate and test ideas through trial and error

support independence and confidence

Reflection point:

What would an inspector see in practice in your setting?

What does 'the child's voice' mean?

Young children are acutely sensitive to their surroundings and very rapidly acquire understanding of the people, places and routines in their lives, along with awareness of their own unique identity. They make choices and communicate their feelings, ideas and wishes in numerous ways, long before they are able to communicate through the conventions of spoken or written language.'

(The committee on the Rights of the Child 2006, paragraph 14)

Child's voice is a general term used to express how we are creating meaningful engagement with children. (Bradbury 2016)

It has little to do with the eloquence of a child and everything to do with the seeing, hearing, tuning in and interpreting skills of the adults.

Child's voice not only refers to what children say directly, but how they respond, interact with others and experiences, and how they present throughout the day.

Why is the child's voice important?

Giving children a voice promotes self-esteem and self-worth. By giving children a voice through choices, opinions, feelings and emotions, children can develop and learn that they are important and valued.

Children feel listened to and respected.

When children are involved, plans are more successful.

We can see their experience, from their point of view.

Children can develop their own story about what is happening in their lives.

Benefits of listening to the children's voice

Planning becomes easier and more relevant as it focuses on children's interests and needs.



Practice becomes more child-centred which leads to higher engagement and wellbeing. Practitioners can see each child for who they are and respond more effectively.

Children are valued and empowered.



Children are engaged, resilient and confident to explore. They are more in charge of the learning. The quieter children are heard.

Children learn that their views and thinking matter.

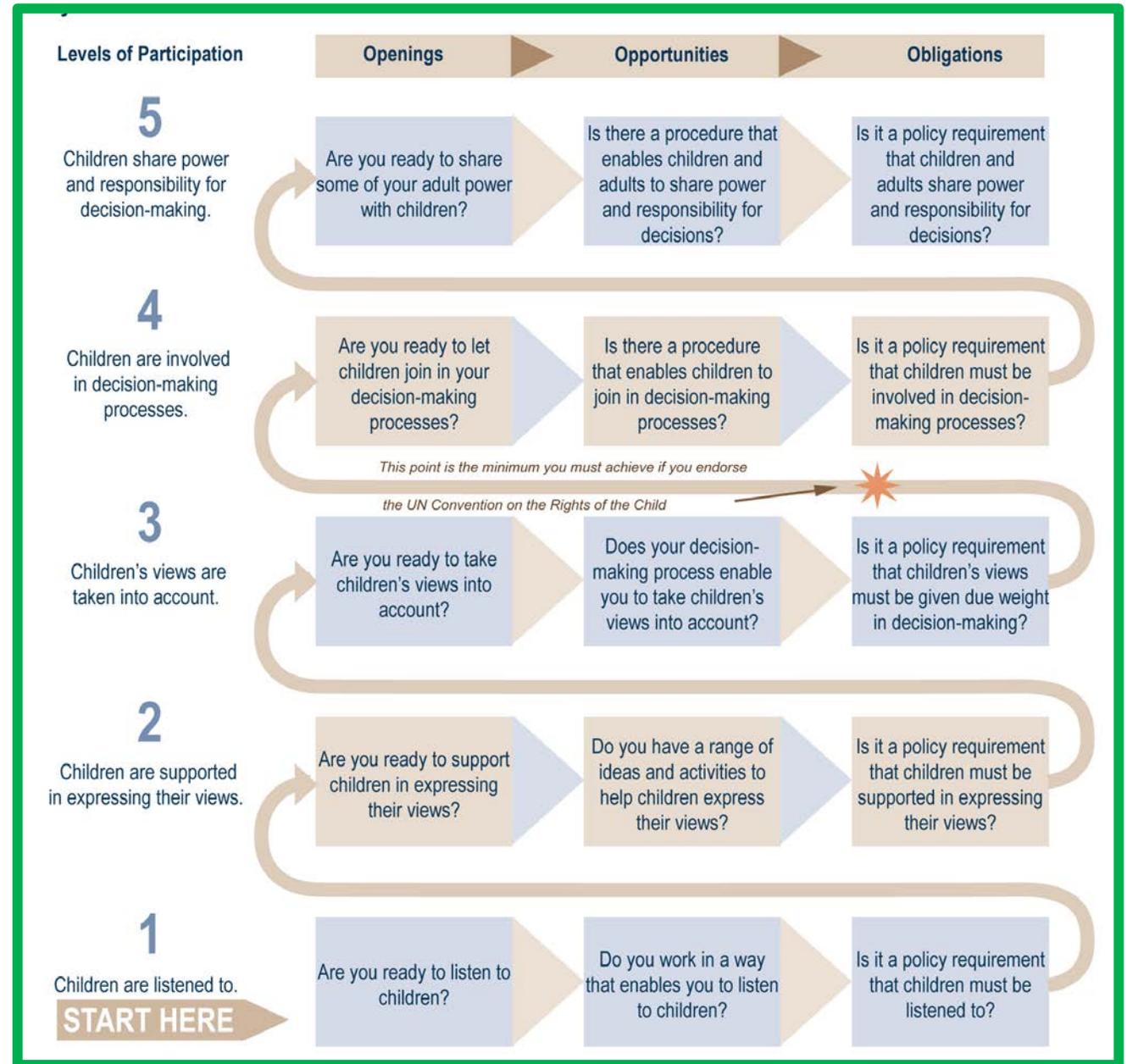


Children feel positive about themselves. They learn to become good listeners themselves and develop respect for others. Children's wellbeing is good and therefore they are more likely to learn.

Shier's model of participation

This model can be used to reflect on how the child's voice is embedded in practice and identify areas for improvement.

Find out more about Shier's model 



'Hearing' the
child's voice
when there are
Speech,
Language and
Communication
Needs (SLCN)



Consider barriers

Barriers for a child with SLCN include practitioners not knowing enough about their communicative needs and assuming the child would have no useful information or ideas to share.

Observe and interact

Play and language are closely linked. Observe and interact with children during roleplay, imaginative play, messy play etc... listening to words, sounds and watching for body language.

Conditions for communication

Create the best conditions for communication. Consider the environment for distractions, including noise. Be generous with your time.

Levels of language

Keep your own language simple, appropriate to the child's developmental level. Avoid 'being too helpful' by asking lots of questions.

Alternative communication

Augmented or alternative communication (AAC) supports children being heard. This includes signing, gestures, visual materials and technical supports provided by Speech and Language Therapists.

"Just because a child can't speak doesn't mean they have nothing to say."

For a child who has no verbal communication, we need to interpret and understand what signals they're giving. For many non-verbal children, the answer lies in their behaviour.

'Hearing' the child's voice when they are non-verbal or pre-verbal



Key staff

Recognise who is in the best place to interpret sounds, gestures, and behaviours.

Involve parents

Ask for a parent's thoughts when you're trying to interpret a child's behaviour – they are the ones who know the child best!

Understand unique behaviours

Stimming is self-stimulating behaviour. It includes arm or hand-flapping, finger-flicking, rocking, jumping, spinning or twirling, head-banging. There is no single reason for this behaviour. For some it may mean excitement, while for others it may mean 'I'm scared' or 'I don't know what to do next'.

To understand what a particular child's stimming means, we need to observe and learn from the situation.

Opportunities to communicate and express

Loris Malaguzzi wrote 'The One Hundred Languages of Children' in recognition of the multitude of ways in which they can express their ideas, thoughts, feelings or frustrations.

[100 languages | Reggio Children.](#)

Hearing the
voice of babies



Babies can show us what they feel by what they do through their body language, actions and sounds.

Observation and tuning-in to these behaviours are key. It's about knowing the signs and responding appropriately.

Aversive behaviours

provoke a response from the adult to get the baby to stop the behaviour, such as crying; arching the back; breath-holding.

Attractive behaviours

provoke a response for the adult to get the baby to do more of the behaviours, such as smiling; cooing; reaching towards the adult.

Active behaviours

(can be 'aversive' or 'attractive')

emerge as a baby can do more. They can actively approach the adult, such as moving to the adult and holding on to them; asking to be picked up; or by doing something destructive.

Cultural inclusion in early years settings is fundamental if children are to have a sense of belonging.

Cultural considerations



Know your families

Being aware of each family's culture is an important part of knowing the child, e.g. one culture may celebrate the extrovert, another reverence.

Cultural expectations

Diversity exists with behaviour over cultural aspects such as food; eye contact; personal space; expressing feelings; language; and clothing.

Involve parents

Develop the confidence to talk openly to parents about their culture, their language, their expectations, and the differences with your own.

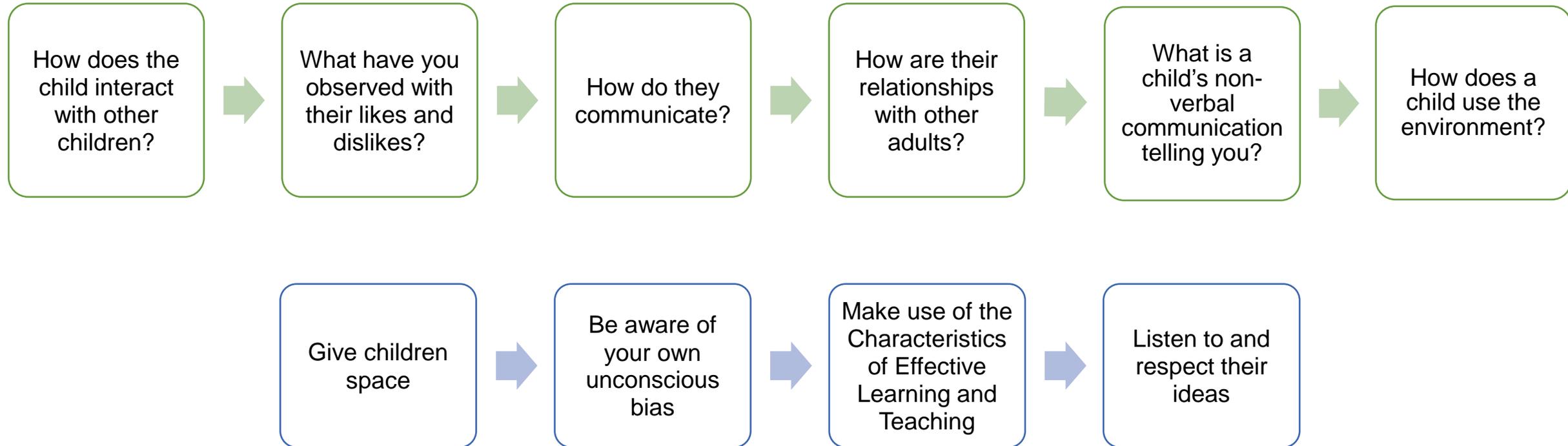
Observe

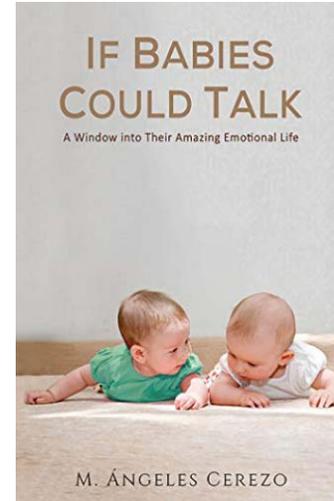
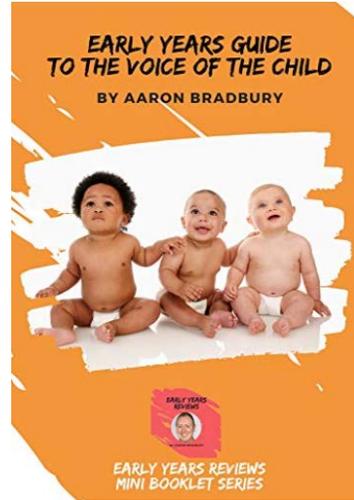
Listen carefully; watch for the non-verbal communication; be wary of your unconscious bias; give time, attention, and an open mind.

Consider your own culture

Recognising and appreciating the impact of your own culture on your practice, especially your interactions, is essential.

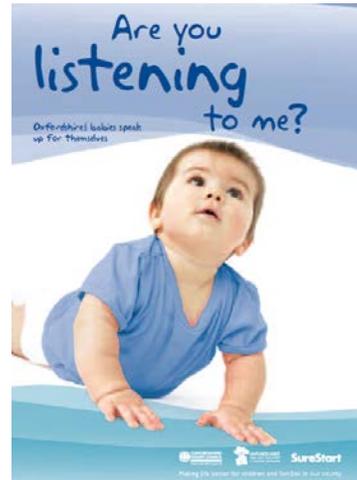
Top tips for you to hear the voice of the child





[A quick guide to Baby cues and body language](#)

[Connecting and communicating with toddlers](#)



Are you Listening shares outcomes from a listening to babies research project



First Steps is a handbook for practitioners to engage children in discussion and raise awareness of their own rights in a fun and interactive way.