

Young Children's Voices

Importance

Summary

Article 12 of the [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child \(UNCRC\)](#) outlines the importance of listening to all children as part of realising children's rights, but all too often, babies and young children's voices are not heard. England and the devolved nations have pathways in place to ensure children's voices are heard. The importance of protecting children's right to be heard has been highlighted very recently across the UK as a result of the pandemic.

The UNCRC was ratified by the UK in 1991 and ensures that children grow up in a spirit of peace, dignity, tolerance, freedom, equality and solidarity. It is only guaranteed that the rights in it will be respected, protected and fulfilled if steps are taken to implement the Convention into domestic law, policy and practice.

Article 12 of the UNCRC asserts that all children have the right to express their views on matters concerning them, and that those views should be taken seriously. Every child has the right to be heard: this includes the youngest children, children experiencing poverty and marginalised children. Every child is also capable of making sense of their relations in an environment and with people. They should be given the opportunity to share their opinions on and to influence the services they receive, the experiences and activities they enjoy, and the relationships they engage in. Through this process, babies and young children develop the sense that they are important, that their voice can make a difference, and that they too are rights bearers.

Babies and young children may express their voice differently to adults and listening to them requires adults to tune into the many, or - according to the [Reggio Emilia Approach](#) - the hundred, 'languages' of children, their ways of thinking, understanding, constructing knowledge, and expressing. It is the responsibility of adults in children's lives to value all of these verbal and non-verbal languages of babies and young children. Often, they are left out of the conversation and opportunities to participate in society. Adults may question their maturity level and capacity to engage, and may filter babies' and young children's views through the lens of 'grown-up' experience and agendas. Similarly, babies and young children experiencing poverty or who are marginalised may not have the same opportunities to be listened to in the first place.



Young Children's Voices

It is particularly important, then, to articulate and promote best practices for listening to babies and young children, and young children experiencing poverty or who are marginalised, so that their right to be heard is fulfilled and changes that impact on their opportunities and outcomes can be identified and promoted.

This is true within a devolved nations context as well as in England. For example, the Scottish Government currently require [Children's Services Plans \(CSPs\)](#) in each area of Scotland as the statutory framework for delivering on the principles of the UNCRC. CSP partners need to give full consideration to the views and needs of all babies, children and families when developing these plans for local services.

Similarly, Wales became the first country in the UK to make the UNCRC part of its domestic law in 2011. Welsh Government have taken a lead in promoting children's rights, basing their approach on UNCRC principles. Children's rights are enshrined in Welsh law under the [Rights of Children and Young Persons \(Wales\) Measure 2011](#), which underlines the commitment in Wales to listening to children.

The Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People has produced a [Statement on Children's Rights in Northern Ireland](#) every two years since 2018, specifically to assess performance against key rights for children and young people. The right to participation, which incorporates Article 12 of the UNCRC, features prominently in these Statements, with ongoing recommendations that particular attention should be paid to involving younger children in matters that concern them.

The importance of protecting children's right to be heard has been highlighted very recently across the UK as a result of the pandemic. Speaking at the [Covid-19 Inquiry](#) on 6 June 2023, Rajiv Menon KC of Garden Court Chambers said 'it appears that little or no progress has been made since you acknowledged the importance of children being heard ...to ensure that the United Kingdom's more than 14 million children will not remain voiceless during the listening exercise. Children's rights organisations are justifiably worried that without swift action by the inquiry to ensure the effective participation of children the window will close and it will be too late. Without capturing the testimony of children's first-hand experiences of lockdown it will be impossible to learn lessons from the decisions made during the pandemic that impacted our youngest so heavily and mitigate some of the negative impact the pandemic inflicted on children.'

<https://crae.org.uk/news/leading-childrens-rights-organisations-warn-covid-19-inquiry-risks-failing-understand>) Considering that there is already ample evidence that the pandemic had an unequal impact on the poorest and youngest children, it is especially critical to include babies and young children experiencing poverty.

