

# Young Children's Voices

## UK Evidence

### Background

The practice of listening to babies and young children has evolved over recent decades in the UK. After the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the prioritisation of babies' and young children's voices has ebbed and flowed depending on sector need and capacity. [The Childcare Act 2006](#), for example, required early years settings to incorporate children's voice into their practice. This sparked the creation of the Young Children's Voices Network, which supported Local Authorities across England to develop entire programmes of activity and resource to facilitate and take into account the voice of the young child.

While there may not be as much statutory incentive to prioritise voice in the early years today, there is a growing acknowledgement in the field that enabling participation for the youngest children is a rights-based issue of critical importance.

To promote this position, a core group of researchers and practitioners across the UK are actively investigating and promoting best practice around listening to babies and young children's voices. [The 'Look Who's Talking' project](#), coordinated by Lorna Arnott and Kate Wall, brought together academics and practitioners in the early years to look at how we can better understand children's perspectives. The *Theory and Practice of Voice in Early Childhood: An International Exploration* (2022) explores the resulting themes of voice, democracy, culture, listen with purpose, space and place, skills and tools, enable, and build capacity. The book also offers innovative and practical examples of these themes in international settings. This resource, among others, outlines and advances the benefits of listening to young children's voices.



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## Young Children's Voice in Early Years Practice

The foundational approaches and principles of influential thinkers such as Reggio Emilia, Montessori and Froebel have long promoted listening to children and centring them in their own learning, acknowledging that they are active participants in their development. But recent research takes a more rights-based perspective, and reveals how influential young children's voices can be within the context of early years service provision. In *Listening to Young Children: A Guide to Understanding and Using the Mosaic Approach*, Alison Clark outlines a comprehensive and creative approach to involving young children in service design and delivery. Viewing children as 'experts in their own lives', this framework outlines how to listen to young children's perspectives through talking, walking, making and reviewing together. Drawing on the Mosaic approach, the Map-Do-Review method, developed by Sarah Laing, is another form of participatory practice used by early years settings to facilitate children's voice in decision-making.

In this approach, practitioners utilise listening and responsiveness to guide children through a cycle in which they communicate intent for play, engage in play activities and reflect afterward. Map-Do-Review fosters language development, curiosity and creative play among young children while incorporating their voice in early years services.

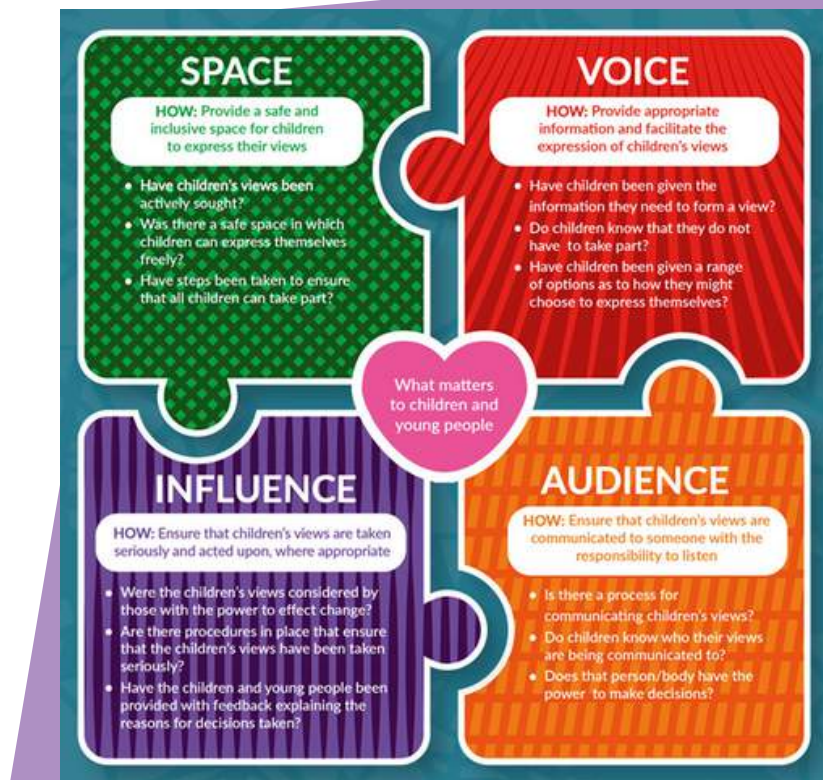
There are also current efforts to highlight the benefits of facilitating infant and toddler 'voice' within early years practice. Although the very youngest children may not have the capacity to express themselves verbally, there are still effective ways to support their right to be heard. For example, the Scottish Government's Perinatal and Infant Mental Health Programme Board recently released [Voice of the Infant: best practice guidelines and infant pledge](#). This publication outlines the Scottish Model of Infant Participation, a framework for facilitating infant voice based on the Lundy model of child participation (Lundy, 2007). It adapts the four key concepts of Space, Voice, Audience and Influence for application with babies and very young children. 'Space' addresses both the physical and emotional conditions that best foster a safe, comfortable and accessible environment for infants. 'Voice' refers to developmentally appropriate methods of supporting infant communication through observation or reciprocal interaction. 'Audience' reflects the notion that adults should clearly acknowledge infant voice, such that babies understand they have been listened to. 'Influence' means that infants' views are acted upon in a tangible and visible way.

## Map making with children



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To facilitate implementation of these guidelines, Scottish Government includes a '[Good Practice Checklist](#)' that settings can refer to. There are also other practical tools available specifically to support more formal observation of babies and young children with an eye to eliciting their voice. Developed by the Brazelton Centre UK, the Newborn Behavioural Observations (NBO) system is an instrument designed for parents and practitioners to use together, interpreting babies' signs, movements and responses as a form of communication.



The NBO can be used with babies from birth to 3 months old, and requires training to utilise successfully. Other tools are less formal and more accessible, such as the versatile '[Observational tool for infant-caregiver activities and therapeutic interventions](#)' (Armstrong & Ross, 2021). This is a checklist designed to encapsulate infants' (ages 0-3) experiences during focused activities when they are engaging directly with their caregiver. It can be used for one-off sessions or to measure change over time. While this observational tool was originally created for practitioners to use at a creative [arts intervention in Dundee](#), the fact that it involves parents and carers so closely is significant. This piece notably fills a gap in much of the current evidence base, which is detailed further below.

## Young Children's Voice in Influencing

Listening to babies and young children can and should also have implications at a national policy level. Enabling their participation for influencing purposes, though, still requires a strong base in practice so as not to be tokenistic. This is especially important for groups such as children living in poverty, who may not have as much opportunity to be listened to when national policy is developed. There is an opportunity to bridge this gap through best practice and proactively promoting the consideration of babies' and young children's voice.



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One example when listening to young children in a practice setting contributed to a broader policy change was conducted by the National Children's Bureau (NCB) in 2010. The report, '[Am I staying for lunch today?](#)' sought to capture the experiences of three- and four-year-olds as their nurseries expanded free entitlement hours for families. Findings showed that friendships, practitioners and play were very important to young children, and were often disrupted during daily transitions resulting from the flexibility of individual entitlements. NCB subsequently recommended amending the Code of Practice of the Free Entitlement for 3 and 4 Year Olds, which provides statutory guidance to all English Local Authority nursery providers. The updated version specifically requires consideration of children's sense of continuity and control over their daily lives. Key person, friendship groups and children's interests are now prioritised during implementation of the entitlement (Williams, 2010).

Other relevant examples include young children's experiences of mealtimes at one nursery, serving as a best practice promoted by Education Scotland across the country (Paterson, 2022), and young children's voice contributing to the design and review of their built environment (Clark, 2010).

Crucially, these instances of successful influencing on behalf of young children are all firmly embedded in high-quality early years practice, and did not take place as one-off consultations or interventions. This ensures that young children have safe and meaningful ways to contribute to policy change at a larger scale.



## *Insights from Save the Children UK*

At Save the Children, we take a rights-based approach to working with children and families living in poverty. We have a responsibility to embed their voices in our work and to be led by their experiences and needs. As we have shifted to a more community-centred model of programmatic delivery, we have also heard a desire from our partners to facilitate the inclusion of babies' and young children's voices in their own practice.

While there is increasing momentum within this theme, there are relatively few organisations in the UK specifically supporting systemic change across the sector. Save the Children has a long-standing interest in participation with young children (e.g. Miller, J. *Never Too Young: How young children can take responsibility and make decisions* 2003 and [How to write a Child-Friendly Document](#)) and is keen to convene, support and facilitate best practice and collaborate on innovative approaches to listening to babies and young children.

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Save the Children works in specific communities with and for local organisations and families, and is keen to test and implement strategies to listen to babies and young children. We can work together with experts in the field to influence more widely, incorporating babies' and children's voices into our advocacy work across the UK.

## Case Study

One recent example of the potential power of elevating young children's voice comes from Save the Children Cymru. The Starting Strong project (2023) aimed to help young children adapt to the transition to primary school, ensuring that they and their families had the right support around them at this critical point in their lives. We wanted to find out what tools, techniques and approaches could facilitate this process, particularly for children living in areas of high deprivation in Wales. Along with schools and nurseries, Save the Children delivered participatory workshops with young children to understand their hopes, fears and wishes around starting school. The themes that emerged were then used to develop workshops for parents. The results of both of these series of workshops were presented back to schools and nurseries to support innovative planning for their upcoming early years transition activities. In this way, alongside our partners, we were able to facilitate young children's involvement in decision-making in matters that concerned them. More in the reports from the [children's workshops](#), the [parents' workshop](#) and the [main report](#).

