**Listening to every child**

**Some questions/ideas to think about:**

* Explain some of the different ways in which we can listen to babies and children.
* Why is it so important that we support young children to communicate?
* Find out what, if any, alternative communication systems are used in your setting.
* Have a look at the Communication Trust’s website and find some ideas or resources that you could use to promote communication.

The importance of listening to every child as central to the delivery of effective inclusive practice for all young children. This is one of the key principles underpinning the SEND code of practice (2015) and is also embedded throughout the EYFS Framework.

The definition of listening adopted by the Young Children’s Voices Network in a series of publications called ‘Listening as way of Life’. Listening is defined as:

‘An active process of receiving (hearing and observing), interpreting and responding to communication. It includes all the senses and emotions and is not limited to the spoken word.

A necessary stage in ensuring the participation of all young children, as well as parents and staff in matters that affect them.

An on-going part of tuning into all young children as individuals in their everyday lives.

Sometimes part of a specific consultation about a particular entitlement, choice, event, or opportunity.’

(‘Listening as a way of life; Listening to Young Disabled Children,’ Council for Disabled Children/National Children’s Bureau, 2017)

Babies are born able to recognise familiar sounds and the voices of those people in their world (unless they have a hearing impairment). ‘A child’s journey to language begins before birth, as babies in the womb hear clearly enough in the last few months of pregnancy to distinguish their mother’s voice’ (Cathy Hamer, 2012). Babies are also born attracted to human faces and are ready to engage in interactions which evolve over time and through the developing relationship with care givers. This early phase of development of communication is important for a child’s all-round development and specifically lays the foundations for emotional wellbeing and social interactions and emotional self-regulation.

From birth, babies use many forms of communication to ensure that the adult carers around them notice them, respond to them and engage in meeting their needs for survival. This capacity to attract care givers is the very essence of communication and interaction. Babies and young children very quickly develop a sense of who is going to respond to them and the best ways in which to achieve this. In the first instance, this is merely trial and error but it soon becomes their preferred way of getting their needs met. In this way, a baby starts to develop a range of strategies which will draw their adult close enough for safety, reassurance and to work out what they need. The babies’ tried and tested strategies become part of what is often referred to as a game of ‘serve and return’, just like a game of tennis. As Suzanne Zeedyk suggests, ‘Babies come into the world already connected to other people’ (The Science of Human Connection, 2012).

The set of strategies learned from a very early stage is connected with the need for every baby to have a secure attachment relationship with a primary care giver. Babies who are born with complex needs at birth which may include medical, physical, visual or hearing difficulties require their carers to learn the cues and clues which are unique to their baby. This can sometimes become frustrating for baby and caregivers, but with appropriate support and encouragement this can be a joyful learning and discovery process for all involved.

‘Listening to young children is essential in enabling their right to express their views on matters that affect them, and to have their views taken into account in a meaningful way. All children have an equal right to be listened to, an entitlement which includes babies and very young children, each with individual needs, capabilities and means of communicating.

(‘Listening as a way of life; Listening to Young Disabled Children,’ Council for Disabled Children/National Children’s Bureau, 2017)

Listening to babies and young children also plays a vital role in enabling children to realise that they can influence the world around them and how they can become competent in sharing their preferences, views, interests, concerns and aspirations This is true for all children, and we need to begin to offer children the opportunity to express themselves and be listened to at the earliest stages of their life. It has been thought in the past that until children have acquired verbal language and communication skills that they are not capable of expressing a view. We now know this is not so, and that children express their wishes, views and feelings in a range of ways, including facial expression, movement, vocalisations, body language, and using gestures, signs, symbols, pictures, objects and people!

It is therefore important to prioritise opportunities for engagement, interaction, choice-making and decision making, and to provide opportunities to be part of a communication friendly setting that provides time, places and spaces for connection and listening. Some children may take longer than others to establish their own way of participating, however the practitioner should always be prepared to be a willing and motivated facilitator of these opportunities.

The lives of young children with SEND and their families often involve many professionals offering support and advice and it is not uncommon in this situation that the views of child and family are lost sight of or even not sought. Additionally, ‘Disabled children have many things done to, and for, them and they are significantly more vulnerable to abuse than non-disabled children’ (NSPCC 2003, cited by NCB).

The SEND code of practice is very clear that: ‘All those who work with young children should be alert to emerging difficulties and respond early. In particular, parents know their children best and it is important that all practitioners listen and understand when parents express concerns about their child’s development. They should also listen to and address any concerns raised by children themselves.’ (DfE and DH (2015) SEN and disability code of practice: 0-25 years, para 5.5)

Every adult can play a part in developing each child’s confidence and skills in participation. Practitioners can become skilful supporters of enabling children to participate. This requires the practitioner to gather information and insights from parents and develop these. Often it is the adult listener who needs to seek more creative ways of getting young children’s views and ways in which to offer support for young children to extend their participation.

As adults supporting children to interact, communicate, engage, and express views, wishes and concerns, we must invest time in developing a trusting and responsive relationship with children. This will enable them to feel genuinely valued and respected as individuals with the capacity and opportunity to be involved in day to day practice as well as be given the additional opportunities to be part of decision making processes.

The adult can listen in many different ways, including:

* Using regular opportunities to observe young children in their daily activities and to reflect on what the child’s actions are communicating to us.
* Providing resources that children can use to represent their thoughts, feelings, wishes, choices.
* giving children different ways of recording their perspectives,
* Using informal and spontaneous opportunities for engagement to build children’s involvement, it often won’t wait until ‘circle time’. Young children take time to process and organise their thoughts and feelings before they express themselves.
* Allow plenty of pauses and avoid filling in the gaps. Pauses are good; young children take time to process and organise their thoughts and feelings before they express themselves.

Young children require us to be curious about their understanding, perception and experience of the world around them and to provide a range of ways in which they can share with us what they are discovering, learning, feeling and thinking. As adults we need to be actively engaged in the process of listening.

Learning to speak, use language and effectively communicate is a complex process which takes a long time. The Communication Trust and ICAN are two of the main organisations which support children who have difficulties with speech, communication and language. These difficulties are very common in the early years.

The Communication Trust’s publication ’Other Ways of Speaking’ (2011) states that ‘Being able to communicate is the most important skill we need in life. Almost everything we do involves communication,’ It estimates that ‘10% of children and young people in the UK have long term or persistent difficulties with speech, language and communication and 1% have difficulties with communication which affects their ability to express their most basic needs’.

It is important that we work with parents and other professionals to discover the most appropriate form of communication for each child. The essence of communication is about exchanging messages, information, thoughts and feelings. For this to be a positive experience and to feel included, it is important that those involved understand the meaning of the message and can take part. For some young children, this can be a challenge; therefore we need to discover what support they require to develop effective communication. All children use a combination of communication methods and adults will need to learn which are unique to each child.

Some children will need additional help with speaking and verbal communication, and others may need an alternative to speaking which may involve using additional equipment. You can find out more information from The Communication Trust publication ‘Other ways of Speaking’.

There are numerous ways in which young children with SEND can be supported in developing their communication skills.

Young children will first need to use familiar objects, for example, toys chosen on the basis of what interests the child and motivates them to want to communicate. This stage of using real objects is a good way of establishing children’s chosen method of indicating yes, no, more or stop, and then for them to start to indicate preferences, likes and dislikes.

Some children move on quite quickly to representations of objects such as pictures, photos, line drawings and so on. It is important not to assume that a child is ready to use representations of objects too soon, as visual representations vary so much in detail and accuracy. Some children will need to be supported to gain a broader, more generalised understanding of words and objects before moving onto representations of those objects. For example, experiencing and range of different types of cups before moving on to pictures and drawings of cups.

There are also comprehensive approaches which use signs, such as Makaton, Signalong and British Sign Language (BSL). Each system varies but all have in common the fact that hand shapes and movements are used to aid communication. If you are thinking of using a signing support system you should make sure that the system you choose is consistent no matter where the child is. Some local authorities have policies which ensure consistency of systems so that the child or young person does not have to learn a new system as they move on in life.

BSL is generally used by children who are deaf or have a severe hearing loss. You must seek support and consult a specialist teacher for the deaf, if they are not already involved with the child.

Symbols supporting communication are also very useful and popular. There are plenty of symbols in our day to day environment that children quickly learn to recognise, such as those for food outlets or supermarkets! There are a number which are used frequently such as Widgit symbols including ‘communicate in print’, and there are also symbols that accompany Makaton and Signalong. Once again, choosing which symbols to use depends on what the child is already familiar with or what can relied upon to be used consistently throughout the child’s experiences

There are also some specific approaches such as Picture Exchange System (PECS) which is often used for children with social communication difficulties. Once again, you should seek support to understand the use and implementation of this approach and particularly whether it is an appropriate system for a child.

Children’s communication preferences develop and change and we need to ensure we keep this in mind.

If you are considering using any of the above it must involve the child’s parents and be a whole setting approach so that the child’s communication is responded to consistently.

It is also important to start from an early age to support children to express their emotional world as this will a life-long tool which children can use to communicate their feelings and emotions and so avoid confusion, frustration and the potential for inappropriate behaviours which can become a substitute for not being able to express feelings and emotions.

You can get further ideas for support from:

* **Listening as a Way of Life** One of a series of publications by Council for Disabled Children and NCB and the Young children’s Voices network ; Listening to disabled children: <https://www.ncb.org.uk/sites/default/files/field/attachment/Listening%20to%20Young%20Disabled%20Children.pdf>
* **The Communication Trust** is a coalition of not-for-profit organisations working together to support everyone who works with children and young people in England to support their speech, language and communication: <https://www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk/resources/resources/resources-for-parents/other-ways-of-speaking.aspx>

[www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk/early-years/](http://www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk/early-years/)

* **I CAN** is the children’s communication charity that supports children with speech, language and communication difficulties across the UK: [www.ican.org.uk](http://www.ican.org.uk)

* **Participation Works** is a partnership of national children and young people’s agencies that provides a voice to anyone wanting to give a voice to children and young people. Resources are provided on how to involve disabled children and children and young people with communication impairments in decision-making: [www.participationworks.org.uk](http://www.participationworks.org.uk)
* **Helen Sanderson Associates**

A website which hosts a range of useful Person Centred Approaches, including One page profiles, which are a simple but effective way of capturing and sharing important information about an individual child based upon ‘What is important to them’ and ‘What is important for them’. A great way to start you person-centred approaches and develop participation:

<http://helensandersonassociates.co.uk/person-centred-practice/one-page-profiles/one-page-profiles-education/sen-one-page-profile/>

* **Communication Passports**

Communication Passports are very useful tool to provide a more detailed picture of an individual child’s communication methods and how to respond and interpret a child’s communication: <http://www.communicationpassports.org.uk/Home/>

* **SCOPE** https://www.scope.org.uk/support/families/communication

Tips on communicating with children and young people who use augmented or alternative communication systems. This includes a guide to making personal communication passports: <https://www.scope.org.uk/support/professionals/preschool-teachers>

**Reflection questions and activities:**

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| **Question/activity** | **Response** |
| Explain some of the different ways in which we can listen to babies and children |  |
| Why is it so important that we support young children to communicate? |  |
| Find out what, if any, alternative communication systems are used in your setting |  |
| Have a look at the Communcation Trust’s website and find some ideas or resources that you could use to promote communication |  |