Championing young children's rights and entitlements

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)[1] is an international human rights treaty that grants all children and young people (aged 17 and under) a comprehensive set of rights.

The United Kingdom signed the convention on 19 April 1990 and ratified it on 16 December 1991. It came into force in the UK on 15 January 1992. The Convention gives over 40 substantive rights to children and young people. All the rights in the Convention apply to all children and young people without discrimination.

Introduction

The Early Childhood Forum (ECF) believes that all children are entitled to participation, provision, play and protection, as required by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). ECF champions the rights and entitlements of young children; supports the training, development and education of early childhood practitioners; works in partnership; addresses inequalities and values diversity; and promotes the evaluation of practice and continuous quality improvement.

The UNCRC was ratified by the UK government in 1991. Aside from the 40 substantive articles relating to the rights of all children, there are a further 14 articles explaining how governments and international organisations should implement and promote the rights. Commitment to the UNCRC has been strengthened by the duty in the Childcare Act 2006, which requires local authorities in England to have regard to the views of young children in the development of early childhood services. In debates on the legislation, the Minister for Children, Young People and Families stated that:

'the government are committed to ensuring that the voices of even our youngest children are heard and are taken into account ... It [the duty] will encompass all aspects of the design, delivery and development of early childhood services.'[2]

Listening to young children through conversation and observation of their play and interactions has long been a cornerstone of early childhood education. Yet, too often, children's views and observations are not reflected in the development of practice, environments and policies. The UNCRC is the tool for ensuring that all young children are given what they need to lead a happy, safe and fulfilled life. ECF believes that practitioners should be educated about the UNCRC during their initial training and continuous professional development, and should use this knowledge to advocate children's human rights in their practice.

Early Childhood Forum

The Early Childhood Forum (ECF) is a coalition of 50 professional associations, voluntary organisations and interest groups united in their concern about the care and education of young children from birth to eight. It aims to bring together partners in the early childhood sector to debate issues, celebrate differences and develop consensus to champion quality experiences for all young children from birth to eight, and their families. It promotes inclusion and challenges inequalities. See www.ncb.org.uk/ecf for more information.

How can the UNCRC support continuous quality improvement? How does it address inequalities? What does the UNCRC mean for working with parents and what implications are there for the development of practitioners? By considering these questions, the following discussion highlights what the UNCRC means for our youngest children and how this is reflected in ECF's work with children and families. All contributors are ECF member organisations and reflect the diversity of the Forum.

Supporting the training, development and education of early childhood practitioners

All children from birth to eight should have equal access to a culturally and developmentally appropriate curriculum that supports and extends learning and develops their understanding, dispositions, skills and knowledge. It is vital that the training, development and education of early childhood practitioners address the UNCRC and the delivery of the articles in conjunction with other legislation and policies, to ensure each child's rights and entitlements.

A child-centred approach

Prioritising what is best for children should be at the heart of all training for early years practitioners at all levels. This is the essence of a 'child-centred approach', which sees children as important and unique, with their own interests, skills and talents. Research into brain development and how children learn shows that development is not a linear process, nor is it identical for each child.[3] Development is a process that takes place through the unique and dynamic interplay of the relationship between children's genetic inheritance – nature – and their family, culture and environmental contexts – nurture. The training of early childhood practitioners should enable them to identify the children's 'unique developmental pathways',[4] so they may recognise these patterns and build on the directions of their personality, interests and wishes. Training programmes must ensure that practitioners learn how to provide a broad, rich and holistic curriculum for children. This curriculum should be full of opportunities to explore, question and hypothesise, to make relationships and to develop positive dispositions such as motivation, enthusiasm and self-esteem.

Article 3 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child requires that: *'The best interests of children should always be a top priority.'*[5]

Learning to recognise 'unique developmental pathways' involves developing specific skills such as observation, reflection and planning.[6] However, focusing on what children are doing when they are in an early years setting accounts for only one aspect of their lives where development and learning takes place. Practitioners in early years settings should draw from, and build on, the rich learning that happens in children's homes and communities and ensure parents are involved in their children's learning.[7] Children, including the very youngest, have a perspective on their own learning. They know what they are interested in and want to explore, they know what they want and like to do and when to ask for help, and they know when they have mastered something. Children are able to communicate this, both verbally and non-verbally, to those who care for them. But how well do practitioners listen to this? And, are early years settings organised in a way that makes it possible to respond? Learning to tune in to children, and seek out and listen to their views are important practitioner skills that need to be nurtured.[8] The principle of listening and responding to children is fundamental and needs to inform practice.

Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child requires that: *'Every child has the right to express his or her views and these views must be taken seriously.'*[5]

Children's learning takes place in a social context and it is a social activity. Caring and responsive relationships with adults are important for children's physical and emotional well-being and are the basis for learning, as are their relationships with other children. Children enjoy the company of other children of their own age; those older and younger also have fascination for them. A good quality early years setting is a place where relationships are valued and nurtured and where children's friendships are encouraged.

Article 15 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child requires that: *'Every child has the right to meet people and to gather in public (unless there are legal restrictions).'*[5]

Learning to be a sensitive and effective practitioner, and learning how to spend valuable time with a small group in a way that fosters children's friendships and their concern for one another, will help children develop a sense of belonging in the early years setting.

Protection of children

Any practitioner working with children has a duty to ensure children's right to be protected from harm and abuse, so an essential element of practitioner training is about safeguarding children.

Article 19 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child requires that: *'Every child must be protected from all forms of violence, abuse, neglect and mistreatment.'*[5]

Practitioners need to understand the impact of violence and abuse on children, as well as what is required of them. They must learn about what child abuse is and why it may occur;[9] and, when recognising possible abuse, know what to do about it. Furthermore, many early years settings are attended by families who are already engaged in ongoing work with social workers, so early years practitioners need to learn how to work as part of the team in supporting parents and children in healing harmful relationships and moving on. To this end, practitioners also need to learn about their role in working in partnership with colleagues from other agencies.

Many children live in poverty or vulnerable circumstances, such as with a parent who is physically or mentally ill, misuses drugs or alcohol, or is experiencing domestic violence. Some may be experiencing wider discrimination as an asylum seeker or member of a minority ethnic group. The training of practitioners needs to consider the social issues that affect family life and should emphasise the possible impact these factors have on children realising their full potential. An early childhood setting, for example, a children's centre, offers support to families in many ways – it offers childcare that enables a parent to work, or train, or have time to meet other family demands, provides facilities to meet other parents, plus advice and information and opportunities for learning. These aspects of provision demand practitioners who are open to developing a range of skills to fulfil some of these wider roles. Practitioners also need to be able to identify when a child is 'in need' and requires additional support services. Working in multi-professional teams to assess a child's needs is an essential skill.

Article 27 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child requires that: *'Children have the right to a standard of living that helps them develop fully.'*[5]

Practitioners operate in a wider world, where things occur that may harm children's development. Practitioners, therefore, need to develop awareness of the debates that surround what may be harmful to children. For example, what role can practitioners play in ensuring that the food children eat in their early years settings is wholesome and nutritious? Or, how can practitioners ensure that what children watch on television supports their widening knowledge of the world and help them to think about the rights of others?

Article 36 of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child requires that: *'Governments must protect children from all other exploitation.'*[5]

Supporting practitioners rights

Working effectively to promote children's rights in all of these areas requires practitioners who are mature, confident, well trained and well paid. The rights of practitioners, who are responsible for the care and education of children outside of their homes, should also be valued, respected and recognised.

Working in partnership: acknowledging the primary role of the family

ECF believes that learning is a process of development through interaction and experience that begins before birth. Below, are some of the ways in which the UNCRC supports the importance of relationships between children, parents/carers and practitioners.

The importance of the quality of relationships to early brain development and emotional well-being

If young children are to feel happy, secure and able to take full advantage of their opportunities to learn, it is particularly important that they are given sensitive loving care during their first 18 months. It is during this time

that the area of the brain that is responsible for empathy and self-control develops most rapidly.

During their first few years, children develop a view of the world depending on how they are treated. This may make them feel confident, secure, loved and able to trust people. Alternatively, this may make them feel angry, fearful, insecure, unlovable and suspicious of others. The quality of their early love and care fundamentally affects children's ability to control their emotions, to be sensitive to others, to respond to stress and to form close relationships for the rest of their lives.

The parental role

The primary role of the family is acknowledged and promoted by the UNCRC.

Article 18 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child requires that: *'Parents are the most important people in children's lives and must always do what is best for them. Governments must do all they can to help parents look after children well.'*[5]

The care and guidance of young children is primarily the responsibility of their parents. The quality of the relationships children experience, particularly in infancy and within the family, have a crucial influence on their long-term mental and physical health.[10] The home is the first learning environment, and parents are their children's first and most enduring educators. An important aspect of training for practitioners is how to work in partnership with parents and how to fully involve them in their children's holistic development.

All children need at least one secure attachment with a loving, trustworthy adult. This relationship must continue over time if children are to feel confident and able to develop a sound base for being a happy and responsible individual. This attachment is usually with the mother, but, ideally, children will have other loving, supportive relationships – with the father, key person and other family and friends – that also last over time.

Article 5 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child requires that: *'Parents can give children advice and help about children's rights.'*[5]

The importance of close parental care is recognised in law, within the concept of parental responsibility, through the entitlement to maternity and paternity leave, child benefit and encouragement of flexible working patterns. Parents and carers have a unique and ongoing relationship with their children. Their interaction with their young children is predictive of their children's emotional security in later years.[11] This loving contact is also necessary for healthy emotional development, as parents and carers play a crucial role in the development of their babies' brains.

Article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child requires that: *'Every child has the right to the best possible health and health services.'*[5]

ECF recognises the importance of families being supported in order to best provide for their children. Parents may need reliable information from practitioners and children's information services about their children's social and emotional needs at different stages of development, particularly at times when they are making important choices about alternative childcare arrangements. The integration of services in children's centres has enabled children and their parents to benefit from a wide range of paediatric expertise, including health and maternity care. These services should be preventative as well as reactive regarding mental and physical disorders.

Supporting very young children in group provision

ECF believes that the rights of children must be placed at the centre of the planning and provision of high quality childcare. A number of research studies, including the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education Project (EPPE),[12] have shown the positive impact of high quality provision on children. Effective group provision, where children are divided into small groups, supports children in forming and enjoying friendships and in developing a strong relationship with their key person. In instances where the quality of care is of a lower standard, some young children may display higher levels of aggression or become withdrawn, compliant or sad.[13] Early years settings can raise the quality of their provision by following the suggestions on page 5 and 6, and engaging in continuous quality improvement processes, such as an

accredited quality assurance scheme that takes into account children's emotional needs.[14]

Whatever the family circumstances, any children who are cared for outside the family on a regular basis will need to be able to develop a close, trusting relationship with their carer. This relationship should complement those within the family. Parents should be informed about the benefits of continuity of care. Equally, managers of group settings need to organise their services to provide continuity of care for individual children and staff to child ratios that allow staff time to develop close relationships. Childminders and nannies are in a good position to develop a meaningful relationship with children and parents, and to offer one-to-one attention.

Article 20 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child requires that: *'Children who are separated from their parents have the right to special protection and help.'*[5]

Sometimes, mothers may not be able to form secure attachments with their children. This could be related to stress, depression, mental illness, or because they have had no secure relationships in their own lives. In these cases, the role of professionals is to support the parent in their recovery and to promote attachment with their child through therapy or counselling.

Very often, another family member can form a close attachment relationship with the children, which provides the level of emotional support the children need. For some children who experience abuse or neglect, there is no alternative other than to be 'looked after' by the local authority. In these cases, children are even more dependent emotionally on a carer who is not a family member. When children become looked after by the local authority, priority is given to finding a permanent substitute family to enable them to form long-lasting attachments, which are vital to the healing of emotional stress and rebuilding trust and resilience.

Local authorities should continue to maintain close contact with children who are returning to their families. In cases where children are to be permanently looked after away from home, change of carers must be kept to a minimum. Moreover, substitute parents must be informed of children's psychological needs and be able to provide consistent loving relationships.

More suggestions for effective practice

Children's emotional well-being is central to every aspect of their learning, and effective practitioners are able to form secure attachment relationships with the children in their care. In a new environment, the settling-in period is crucial. It is important for parents to help children to become familiar with their key person and surroundings before they are left at the early years setting. *'Ideally we should go at the child's pace and the separation should be accomplished without distress.'*[15] We can be guided here by knowledge of separation anxiety and by listening to what children are trying to convey to us about their distress, whether through words, crying or body language.

Practitioners must be valued and well supported, and must have adequate breaks during the day. Practitioners should also be trained in providing a calm and caring atmosphere and in meeting the individual needs of every child in their care.

Article 29 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child requires that: *'Education is about children developing fully.'*[5]

ECF has many suggestions for supporting the emotional well-being of young children and supporting their entitlements to Article 29 of the Convention:

- Respect children's individual needs, for example, for rest times and special interests.
- Provide children with a key person[16] and enable a similar second close relationship, in case the key person is not available; this can be achieved by pairing staff and designing rotas so that they are never both off for breaks or holidays at the same time, or by choosing home-based childcare with a childminder or nanny.
- Give high priority to ensuring that children are accompanied for an appropriate settling-in period until they are happy to be left.
- Ensure that when adults are interacting with children they are not interrupted, for example, by having to answer the door or telephone.

- Avoid unnecessary changes within the setting so that babies and young children can develop relationships with their peers as well as their carer.
- Maintain better than minimum adult to child ratios and ensure that back-up arrangements are always in place.
- Ensure that adults have a good understanding of child development and knowledge of how practice affects brain development.
- Keep group sizes to a minimum – large groups can be overwhelming for younger children – small groups are less threatening and more peaceful for all.
- Consider dividing children into different small groups for part of the day, so that they can enjoy being with siblings and mixed ages – this situation reflects home-based childcare. The under threes should still be with their key person.
- Provide opportunities for genuine 'listening' liaison with parents – to help carers to know and understand the child and, where necessary, to help parents understand their child's developmental needs.

ECF's statement on attachment is available at www.ncb.org.uk/ecf

Addressing inequalities and valuing diversity

Children have a right to environments where they do not experience discrimination. To achieve this, inclusion is essential. ECF believes that inclusion is a process of identifying, understanding, and breaking down the barriers to participation and belonging.

Article 2 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child requires that: *'All the rights in the Convention apply to children without discrimination.'*[5]

Role of early childhood practitioners

It is the responsibility of early childhood practitioners and, indeed, all adults to play their part in listening to young children and enabling them to have the confidence to challenge any situations where they feel their rights are not respected. They also have a duty and responsibility to protect these rights in every aspect of a child's life.

Children have an identity that is made up of multiple aspects. In addition to being a 'girl' or a 'boy', they also have ethnic heritages, a 'racial' identity and varying abilities. All children have the right to be respected and valued for the many aspects of their identity and must be given opportunities to grow and develop. Moreover, adults should support children in being proud of their heritage and family life. Children will be made aware that some people may be prejudiced against one or more aspects of their identity, either through comments made directly to them, or within their hearing. They must be given the opportunity to discuss, understand and challenge these attitudes, and to form their own opinions regarding how they want to live and behave.

In early childhood settings (including childminding), we have the opportunity to listen to children and to ensure they are not excluded or marginalised. Young children are learning about the world around them from birth. They learn attitudes from their family in the home and then from the environment in which they are growing. For instance, if children are criticised for eating lunch with their fingers in a setting when this is usual practice in the home, the criticism conveys a negative image of their home culture. Practitioners must intervene when other people reinforce negative stereotypes and negate children's identities through verbal and nonverbal language because this will prevent children developing positively.

Working towards inclusion

All children have a right to be fully included in an early years setting. For disabled children, and children with special educational needs, this means recognising their right to inclusion and participation alongside their peers. If children with impairments are excluded from some activities in the early years setting because the environment is not appropriate to their needs, this can cause them to feel left out and their peers to perceive them as different in a negative way.

The role of the practitioner is to ensure that all children's backgrounds and heritages are represented fairly and equally. Practitioners need to ensure that all children, and their families, are able to participate in, and contribute to, the life of the early years setting – to create a culturally rich environment where all feel that they belong.

Article 8 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child requires that: *'Governments should do everything possible to protect the right of every child to a name and nationality and to a family life.'*[5]

Children have a right to individual expression that can be demonstrated through cultural, gender or sexual identity or personal physical image. They should not be expected to conform to the cultural norms and beliefs of adults without question, nor should they be expected to reject their heritage in order to fit in to the mainstream society.

Diversity of families

It is important to recognise that there are many varied family forms in our society and that there are diverse adult relationships, for example, some parents and carers are in lesbian or gay relationships. All family forms can equally support children while growing up; practitioners should be accepting of all forms that support children. Practitioners also need to ensure that children grow up recognising and accepting these differences. It is as important to value these differences, as it is to understand, respect and value diverse cultures. Practitioners should be able to confront and discuss issues about sexuality. By understanding their own attitudes, they can offer other people the opportunity to discuss their fears and prejudices.

Equality legislation

There are statutory obligations to ensure that children's rights are protected.

Article 23 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child requires that: *'Every disabled child has the right to a full life and to achieve active participation in the community.'*[5]

Children need to have the opportunity to recognise and discuss negative attitudes and messages that they pick up at home, from their friends, from the media, or from wider society. They need to be supported to develop attitudes and beliefs that are accepting and that value diversity, and that will prepare them appropriately to take their full part in the world as they grow up.

Recommendations in government initiatives place responsibility on practitioners to protect the rights of children and to ensure their voices are heard.

Practitioners have a duty under the *Race Relations Act 1976* (as amended 2002)[17] to promote racial equality. Moreover, as stated in the Sure Start Children's Centre Guidance (2006),[18] children's centres should be aware of their responsibilities, under the *Disability Discrimination Act 1995* (as amended 2005), to ensure that they plan and provide services and make reasonable adjustments to meet the needs of disabled children, parents and carers. Local Authority Disability Equality Schemes should include details of how the authority aims to improve outcomes for disabled children, young people and adults and will cover the role of children's centres and early years settings. Children's centres should help local authorities to ensure they are achieving their aim by monitoring take-up of children's centre services.

Policies into practice

Each early years setting must have an effective equality policy that guides their work with children and families. This policy should include all aspects of the early years setting's roles and responsibilities, and it should be regularly monitored and reviewed. It must not be left to 'sit on the shelf', but be a working document. The curriculum, environment and resourcing of early years settings (including childminding) should be established through partnership with colleagues, parents and children, ensuring that it is relevant and accessible to all children. Parents and practitioners must be involved in developing policy. Discussion of one's own attitudes should also take place because, due to each person's upbringing and cultural history, no one is free from stereotyping or prejudice of some kind. In the early 1990s, Cecile Wright[19] showed that teachers in reception classes were excluding black boys from the curriculum without being aware of what they were doing. The research also demonstrated negativity towards some children based on class differences, which affected the support for learning they gave the children in class. Such discussions should take place freely and with no blame attached. It is important for all adults involved with children to have the opportunity to voice and review their own attitudes appropriately, so that

their attitudes are prevented from being conveyed, unintentionally, to children. By involving children and families in discussions, a valuable contribution can be made from several perspectives.

Preparation

Practitioners need to be committed to the discussion of difficult issues that may arise from listening to young children, including disagreement, discrimination, or child disclosures. Nicky Road[20] suggests that preparation is essential. Practitioners need time to think about situations that could arise and how, as individuals and/or as a team, these can be resolved. There needs to be extra thought given to accessing the views of children who are learning English as an additional language; for example, by ensuring they have access to speakers of their home languages. Some children have communication needs arising from a disability, or a special educational need, that will have to be addressed. Children will then have a better opportunity to learn and develop according to their individual needs, interests and abilities.

Children are individuals

To enable them to construct the multiple aspects of their identities and to be proud of themselves, children must be supported from an early age. They must also be able to admire and respect the uniqueness of others. By supporting children's rights in the early years, we can do something to make society a better place for future generations to live and work, with each individual being valued for who they are and who they want to be.

Evaluating practice and ensuring quality: outdoor play

ECF believes that the rights of children must be placed at the centre of the planning and provision of high quality services, and that outdoor play provision is of enormous importance for young children's learning and enjoyment. All children should have good access to high quality outdoor environments, for learning through play and real experiences.

Why do we need to listen to children?

Two of the most fundamental requirements of the UNCRC are that children have a right to be heard and the right to participate in decisions that affect their lives.

Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child requires that: *'Every child has the right to express his or her views and these views must be taken seriously.'*[5]

Most childcare professionals acknowledge the importance of listening to babies and young children. It is through being listened to that children begin to learn essential skills, such as listening to others, debating, negotiating and compromising. Also, through being listened to (or not) children discover whether others consider their voices and opinions worthwhile. However, listening is more than just 'hearing' a child's words, or a baby's sounds. *'Listening is a vital part of establishing respectful relationships with the children we work with and is central to the learning process'.*[21]

As identified by the Listening to Young Children Project,[22] effective listening takes account of children's varying needs and abilities and requires an active and positive response from the 'listener' through language or action.

Involving children in the development of their outdoor spaces

Children's entitlement to experience and enjoy the essential and special nature of being outdoors has a significant impact on working practices both indoors and outdoors. The meaningful involvement of children in the development of outdoor spaces is vital as practitioners, and childcare providers, work towards unlocking the true potential of their outdoor space.

Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child requires that: *'Every child has the right to rest, play, and to do things they enjoy.'*[5]

Play researchers and professionals widely agree that children's play is an expression of fundamental, innate impulses – to explore and define the self and the world. It is essential, therefore, that all children be allowed adequate time and space for free, spontaneous play, and that the adults responsible enable rather than direct this activity. It is also important that children have access to enriched play environments, which should include appropriate outdoor space. According to a 2006 survey,[23] commissioned by the Children's Play Council and conducted by the British Market Research Bureau, 80 per cent of children prefer to play outdoors rather than indoors.

When asked about their preference for different activities, 86 per cent of children preferred outdoor activities (including playing outside with their friends, building dens and getting muddy) to indoor activities (including playing computer games).

Outdoor play is clearly an important issue for children and it is widely recognised that children benefit from involvement in decision-making on issues that are important to them. The involvement of children in the development of their outdoor space has several advantages:

- children are 'experts' in their play; they can bring fresh perspectives and new ideas to the development and use of outdoors
- children's confidence and self-esteem is increased by being listened to, because they realise that what they say matters to the adults around them
- the acknowledgement of children's views and opinions allows outdoor spaces to be designed and developed in response to children's actual, rather than presumed, interests and needs.

Case Study
Listening to children provides new directions

Staff at Ditton Church Preschool acquired two very large planters for growing activities with the children. However, when the empty planters arrived the children were keen to climb into them and saw them as an inspiration for their imaginative play experiences. Staff took account of the views of children and a subsequent review of the plans for outdoors resulted in one planter being used for growing whilst the other was developed as an open-ended imaginative play resource.

Photograph reproduced with the kind permission of Learning through Landscapes

Finding ways to listen to and involve young children

How can we listen to and gather young children's perspectives about their outdoor environment? How can we make this information the starting point for changes and development in the way we access, equip, and use outdoors? The 2005 pilot study, Spaces to Play,[24] set out to involve children under five years old in decision-making processes and to explore how young children's perspectives can become the starting point for changes to an outdoor play space. The project expanded on a range of tools that were first developed as the mosaic approach – including observation, cameras, book making, tours, map making, magic carpet, child interviews, and practitioner and parent interviews – and evolved into three distinct stages:

1. gathering the perspectives of children and adults
2. discussing and reflecting on the perspectives of children and adults
3. deciding areas of continuity and change.

Children's involvement in the process of change and development was also explored by the Space to Grow project in Kent.[25] In this project, 22 settings were supported to develop their outdoor environments. The project sought to involve all stakeholders, including

children, by working through a cyclical process. This project developed in four stages. First they set out to discover children's feelings about outdoors and how they used the existing space. The next stage involved children in developing new plans for the space. The third stage looked at specific ideas and explored design options with children. The final stage involved children in implementing the plans, and a celebration and evaluation of the impact of the changes to outdoors.

The practitioners involved in the Space to Grow project discovered that when they listened and actively responded to children, the development plans for outdoors evolved in new directions.

Similarly, practitioners involved in the Effective Early Learning (EEL)[26] programme discovered that listening to children can provide unexpected insights into their capabilities, interests and priorities. The practitioners recorded the impact of listening to young children:

'One of most rewarding aspects of our involvement with the EEL project has been children's responses to the interview schedules. Their views on the way the school is run, the teachers' jobs and the parents' involvement have been expressed very naturally and with great insight. They have come up with some surprises and made us think.' [27]

All childcare professionals who recognise the importance of listening and responding to young children will benefit from consideration of the three key messages that emerge from the Spaces to Play project:[28]

- time and patience is required to gather children's perspectives
- there is a value to young children working together to share knowledge and explore meanings
- it is important to make young children's perspectives visible to adults with the power to bring about change.

Listening and responding to children is fundamental. However, listening that takes account of these three elements will be more effective in informing practice and will have a greater positive impact on young children's lives.

Final thoughts

Children's rights and entitlements are central to working effectively with young children. The UNCRC underpins much existing early childhood practice. However, there are many more articles to the UNCRC that as practitioners we should be taking into consideration in our practice.

Article 16 of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child requires that: *'The law must protect every child's right to privacy.'*[5]

Finding out what children think does not mean we can inundate them with questions. We must respect young children's choices not to tell us things, as well as respecting and responding to times when they do. Privacy is important in other respects too, such as adults not gossiping, sensitive sharing of information, respecting babies' and children's dignity, for instance, when nappy changing or changing clothes.

To find out more about the UNCRC see www.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm

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21. Clark, A and others (2004) *Young Children's Participation: Spaces to play*. Pilot Project Report. London: National Children's Bureau.
22. Lancaster, YP and Broadbent, V (2003) *Listening to Young Children*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
23. Children's Play Council (2006) Playday 2006 Survey. London: Children's Play Council.
24. Clark, A and Moss, P (2005) *Spaces to Play: More listening to young children using the Mosaic approach*. London: National Children's Bureau.
25. Ryder Richardson, G (2006) *Creating a Space to Grow: Developing your outdoor learning environment*. London: David Fulton.
26. www.worcester.ac.uk/businessandresearch/specialist/1230.html
27. Dupree E, Bertram T, Pascal C (2001) *Listening to Children's Perspectives of their Early Childhood settings* presented at 11th European Conference on Quality in Early Childhood Education, Alkmaar, Netherlands, 29 August–1 September 2001.
28. Clark, A and others (2004) *Young Children's Participation: Spaces to play*. Pilot Project Report. London: National Children's Bureau.

Further Reading

The following publications focus on the importance of listening to young children and provide information and ideas for involving children in decision-making processes.

Brown, B. (2001) *Combating Discrimination: Persona dolls in action*. Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books.

Clark, A and Moss, P (2001) *Listening to Young Children: The Mosaic approach*. London: National Children's Bureau.

Clark, A and Moss, P (2005) *Spaces to Play: More listening to young children using the Mosaic approach*. London: National Children's Bureau.

Connolly, P, Fitzpatrick, S and Harris, P (2006) 'Addressing diversity and inclusion in the early years in conflict-affected societies: a case study of the media initiative for children – Northern Ireland', *International Journal of Early Education*, vol 14. no 3.

Dickins, M, Emerson, S and Gordon Smith, P (2004) *Starting with choice: Inclusive strategies for consulting with young children*. London: Save the Children.

Early Childhood Unit (2005–) *Listening as a Way of Life*. London: National Children's Bureau.

(A series of leaflets that provide a guide to finding more information to help practitioners design creative and individual ways of listening to children and each other.)

To download the set go to www.ncb.org.uk/earlychildhood and select Information Gateway/Consulting children

Fajerman, L and Sutton, F (2000) *Children as Partners in Planning*. London: Save the Children.

Gerhardt, Sue (2004) *Why Love Matters: How affection shapes a baby's brain*. Hove: Brunner-Routledge

Goldson, B (1997) 'Childhood: an introduction to historical and theoretical analyses' in Scraton, P (ed.) *Childhood in Crisis*. London: Routledge.

Kinney, L and McCabe, J (2000) *Children as Partners – a guide to consulting with very young children and empowering them to participate effectively.* Stirling Council.

Contact Children's Services, Stirling Council, Viewforth, Stirling, FK8 2ET.

Lancaster, YP and Broadbent, V (2003) *Listening to Young Children.* Maidenhead: Open University Press.
(A five part resource pack for parents and practitioners, designed to enable them to offer young children opportunities to express their views of experiences and events in their daily lives)

Miller, J (1997) *Never Too Young: How young children can take responsibility and make decisions.* London: National Early Years Network and Save the Children.

Palmer, S (2006) *Toxic Childhoods: How the modern world is damaging our children and what we can do about it.* London: Orion.

Ryder Richardson, G (2006) *Creating a Space to Grow: Developing your outdoor learning environment.* London: David Fulton.

Spivey, A. (Winter 2001) *The First and Forever Bond.* University of Carolina: Endeavors Magazine.
research.unc.edu/endeavors/win2001/first_bond.htm

Useful websites

www.aimh.org.uk
Provides information to support those campaigning for resources for infants and their families and to promote infant mental health through publicity, strategic discussions and conferences.

www.ncb.org.uk/cpc
Promotes children's right to play and the development of play provision in England.

www.crae.org.uk
Lobbies for laws and policies to be fully compliant with children's human rights, monitors government action on implementing the UNCRC and disseminates children's rights information to the public.

www.ncb.org.uk/earlychildhood
Early Childhood Unit, NCB. Click on the Information Gateway for information and resources on specific topics within early years care and education.

www.ncb.org.uk/ecf
Coalition of 50 early childhood organisations, serviced by NCB.

www.worcester.ac.uk/businessandresearch/specialist/1230.html
Effective Early Learning is a programme of supported self-evaluation and improvement for settings that provide early education and care for children aged three–six years.

www.everychildmatters.gov.uk
Shared programme of change to improve outcomes for all children and young people, taking forward the Government's vision of reform.

www.familieschildrenchildcare.org
The Families, Children and Child Care research project website.

www.ltl.org.uk
The national school grounds charity supporting schools and early years settings to make good use of outdoors.

www.literacytrust.org.uk
The Literacy Trust has the Talk to your Baby initiative, which aims to encourage parents and carers to talk more to babies and young children.

www.participationworks.org.uk
This is an online gateway to the world of children and young people's participation. Visitors can share resources, learn about children's rights, search the knowledge hub or find out about innovative practice and new ideas.

www.pre-school.org.uk
A leading educational charity specialising in the early years; providing practical support to over 15,000 early years settings.

www.unicef.org.uk
The world's leading organisation working specifically for children. It upholds the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and works to hold the international community responsible for their promises to children.

www.un.org
A global association of governments, facilitating cooperation in international law, security, economic development and social equity.

www.whataboutthechildren.org.uk
Organisation that raises awareness of the emotional needs of the under threes.

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