

STARCATCHERS ENGAGEMENT SIGNALS

These engagement signals were initially developed by researchers from the University of Exeter and the University of Edinburgh on our pilot project and expanded upon by a research team from the University of Strathclyde during our second phase of project working. They were used to inform the different ways babies and young children engage in expressive arts experiences in both our productions and workshop settings. We're sharing them here because we think they can be useful for your early years practice.

Attuned

When a baby or child is **intensely watching** and cued in to what is going on. This includes their eyes tracking or focusing on whatever, or whoever, they're attuned to. This doesn't necessarily mean eye contact - they may watch and follow your hands, or an object you're holding.



Absorbed

Intense attention for a period of time, including **ignoring any distraction**. This could be engaging an activity physically, or watching intensely (tying into **attuned**) for an extended period of time. There's no set period of time for it to be "extended", you know the children you work with and will be able to sense what has grabbed their attention for longer than usual.



Mirroring

Watching and reciprocating through **repeating** or **copying**. This could be physically mirroring - e.g., copying or slightly adapting your movements, or it could be vocal - they might copy the sounds or noises you make. They also may not copy people - if they see a character or object spin, they might try spinning too.



Responsive

Signs of responding positively can include positive or open **body language** - smiling, nodding, reaching. They may also indicate they are following what's going on by nodding, or **responding** with suggestions or questions. It can also include **social referencing** - which is the process whereby babies or young children look at other's facial expressions to understand how they are feeling. For example, a wee one handed a paintbrush may look at a keyworker for confirmation before playing with it.



Interactive

Physically responding to someone else, this is similar to **responsive** but it's a **2 way exchange** with another person. They are watching the other person and engaging with their actions or movements. For example, clapping in time with someone else or taking it in turns to mark-make together.



Instigative

Provoking action in others through their own physical response or vocalisation. For example, making a noise doing a song that prompts the singer to incorporate it into the song, or making a suggestion for what should happen next in a story.



Experimental

Taking **individual action** with materials or props. This will be self-led **investigation**, where they will be **exploring** "what happens if..." for example playing with an instrument that's been brought out during singing or music.



USING ENGAGEMENT SIGNALS

In our work, researchers tracked the engagement signals in children by:

- discussing the engagement signals with colleagues;
- tracking two children at a time for ten minutes, then;
- scanning a whole group of children at a time for ten minutes
- looking at photographs or videos of children after delivery

These engagement signals can be used to evaluate, expressive arts experiences. Some children, for example, may not participate in the traditional sense of physically joining in - but are still engaged through signals like **absorbed**, **attuned** or even **experimental**. These engagement signals help us understand how those children can still be inspired by, or benefit from a creative experience. Some wee ones need to watch something again and again before they're moved to join in!



We can also use them to plan delivery. You're an expert in the children you work with, so knowing how they engage through looking at what engagement signals they display whilst playing, can give you an insight into what they enjoy. If you, for example, work with a wee one who usually engages with physicality and movement, use that to inform how you deliver experiences with them, e.g. taking a story on a walk instead of sitting still for storytime!

Further Links:

[Starcatchers Research Report, 2011](#)

[Creative Skills Podcast: "How do I... know the arts make an impact?"](#)

"Babies are making active choices, even at an early age, and deciding how they prefer their world to be."

Realising the Ambition: Being Me, Education Scotland, 2020, page 19

THE VOICE OF THE CHILD

When we talk about the "voice" of children, this isn't always verbal, although it can be. Children communicate with us about what is important to them in many different ways. This can include speaking and vocalisations, but also physicality: body language such as reaching or nodding, or facial expressions like smiling.

The engagement signals give us a language for understanding how children show us what they enjoy and what inspires them. Through noticing what absorbs them, or moves them to interact, we can learn more about what is important to them and their personalities.

The expressive arts are also a fantastic space for children to experiment and problem- solve, confidence in those decisions and develop agency. By arts experiences with early years children, we're giving them the opportunity to express themselves. When we tune into what motivates them, then we demonstrate how important their voices and decisions are.

