



Lets Talk About... Podcast Transcript

Episode 4: How the arts can encourage connection in babies

Featuring Suzanne Zeedyk

Quick links

- **Let's Talk About...:** www.starcatchers.org.uk/work/letstalkabout
- **This podcast episode:** www.buzzsprout.com/1853569/episodes/9598745
- **Suzanne Zeedyk Website:** <https://suzannezeedyk.com/>

If you have any feedback or thoughts around the podcast, please get in touch and contact:

Natalie Gibson, Administrative Coordinator

natalie.gibson@starcatchers.org.uk

Starcatchers

Company number: SC39261 Charity Number: SC042222

www.starcatchers.org.uk

Rhona Matheson 00:10

Welcome to Starcatchers brand new podcast series, Let's Talk About... a podcast celebrating Starcatchers 15th birthday in 2021, I'm Rhona Matheson Starcatchers Chief Executive, and I'll be joined by friends and colleagues from across the arts, education and third sectors of Scotland to talk about a range of topics from baby theatre and children's rights to being an advocate and why the arts. Let's Talk About.. the arts and child development. I'm joined by developmental psychologist and research scientist, the brilliant Suzanne Zeedyk who's fascinated by babies' innate capacity to connect. Join us as we explore the incredible theme of how the arts can encourage connection in babies.

Rhona Matheson 01:00

Today, I am absolutely delighted to be joined by Suzanne Zeedyk, who is a developmental psychologist. Who I first met, probably about 12 years ago, 13 years ago maybe, and I vividly remember the first time that I met you, it was art session that Scottish Book Trust and Book Bug were running. Around. Well inevitably it was, it was around, something to do with attachments and at that time I was kind of going, what is, what is this attachment. And I went along to a session and I was really stressed because I was trying to write some sort of paper or a funding bid. But I was also completely taken with what you shared in that session. I remember coming up to you then going, this is who I am and this is what I'm doing, and you were incredibly warm and open, and it seems to be really interested in what I was talking about but also sort of very kindly sent me on my way to go and do the bit of work that you can see that I was really stressed about. But that was the beginning of a kind of a conversation and a relationship that we've had over the last 13 years and we both, Starcatchers and you, Suzanne have been on a bit of a journey over that time too. Do you want to introduce yourself a bit more and tell our listeners a bit more about the work that you do and what you share?

Suzanne Zeedyk 2:34

Rhona that is fascinating to hear, because I remember the first time we met, but I hadn't realized what impact it had had on you. Because what I remember, was thinking, okay, she's basically talking about baby theatre what's baby theatre? And you got me thinking in whole new lines about how we engaged with babies, how we helped other people to understand the babies could be engaged with, which is perfectly obvious to me, but is not obvious, often to a lot of other people. So, it means that we miss out on meeting baby's needs, and although I'm using the word babies and of course you work with all older children, toddlers, pre-schoolers, the extremity of the idea that you can have theatre for babies. Is this wonderful weird thing for lots of people. And I loved that there was an organization that was trying to think about how to do that and how to talk about it, how to make it make sense for people. Because one of the things that I love most the Starcatchers says is that babies are your toughest audience. Babies tell you immediately if you're getting boring. And they don't hide it, they don't know how to hide it, and, and therefore they are really challenging. And that is such a contrast with people who think that babies aren't really very aware, and you can kind of, they'll, they'll swing with anything and that they're not really bothered and what we don't realize is how much babies are taking in, and that whatever happens to them is having a biological impact on their development, which will last with them throughout life. So, I'm hoping that we're going to come back to some of those ideas in this fabulous conversation.

Rhona Matheson 4:27

Absolutely. Well I suppose you're touching on something there, you know, about babies' responses and one of the phrases that I share with lots of artists that we work with, particularly if they are new to this area of work, and the idea of work for babies and how you do it and why you do it. And I come back to one of the lines that you use in, in a lot of your presentations which is that moment where babies come into the world connected. And that is absolutely lodged in my brain, I can almost I can hear you saying that to me. When I, when I think about it, and you know, I think being able to really share that with people who are working with babies to really enable them to understand that capacity that babies have to connect and to communicate with, with us as adults. When we started and people kind of went, oh baby theatre, why on earth would you do that when you can, you can just put babies in front of the TV or in front of you give them a toy. I know, but that was kind of some of the conversation that I was getting when we first started. Why on earth would you do it for babies? But the people who were sceptical, as soon as they came and saw it, it was like the pennies are dropping all over the place because they are, they're seeing this capacity that babies have to engage and connect. So, it's it's so important and I think that's why having these conversations and bringing you into our world has been so valuable.

Suzanne Zeedyk 6:05

Rhona, the idea that babies come into the world already connected to other people, is profound. And yet, ordinary. So, the profundity of that isn't really about the babies. It's really about us adults who don't realize this. It feels like it's about the babies, but it's not. It's about us, nobody is stunned by the idea that babies are born with 10 fingers and 10 toes. We expect that, parents will check to make sure that the baby has 10 fingers and 10 toes, but they're not stunned by it. People are stunned by the idea that babies come into the world connected. It's not how we think about babies. And yet, it's what all the science tells us. And so just giving people a chance to think what does that mean and what are the implications of that. Something sometimes kind of changes your perspective about like how humanity works. So, let me just give some examples, and I'm fascinated by this. Okay, so I'm a developmental psychologist. I work with babies. I spent my whole life as a research scientist, which studies how babies communicate and how the way that people respond to that communication shapes their brain and their body and their stress system and their immune system, and that has an impact on their adult life. This is endlessly fascinating to me. I will never cease to be fascinated, even though I spent my life doing this. So, let's just think about the last 18 months, we've all just lived through a pandemic, which we're hoping will end soon, and become the past so that we could go back to our lives, as they were, or the new lives that people have planned. We want it to be history. Um, there were a whole lot of babies born during the pandemic, they will carry in their bodies, the experiences of stress, or comfort of laughter, or of tension that they had in their families during the pandemic. They will carry that in their bodies. It will not be history, they will carry that in their bodies. If they had enough stress enough scary times that will influence how their general level of anxiety. Okay, I've gone into the juggler there, right. If, if there are any parents listening to this podcast, who had a baby during the, during lockdown. I probably just made them nervous. I don't apologize for that.

I absolutely acknowledge it. Because it's really easy to shut down and go into denial. The idea that our babies are influenced by the experiences we give them. That is uncomfortable. And so, when you start to get your head around this science lots of people kind of squash it. But let's think. Let's just stick with this wonderful uncomfortableness and think about what that means. We know that domestic violence has gone up during the pandemic not for everybody, but for quite a number of families. We know that lots of families have been in crowded accommodation which will create squabbling and arguing. We know that many parents have been anxious about whether or not they're going to have enough income, or whether or not should the older kids get to school. If you were, if you were in mummy's tummy, and mummy went to have a scan. Mummy's partner, daddy or other mummy or grandma or big sister, which would be your aunt, don't get to come with her, so she has to do all of that on her own. If those experiences are scary. Domestic violence is scary people shout at each other people get hit. I am really pushing us to think about that babies in the womb, can hear in the last trimester of pregnancy can hear that shouting. They are influenced by mum's anxiety hormones that cortisol, so they, that means that they are born with higher levels of cortisol already in their system and already shaping the neural pathways in the brain. They are born more anxious. I think that's fascinating and scary to think about. But if we don't think about it, then we don't pay attention to it we don't help those babies, we don't get curious about their behaviour, we don't put in place systems that will help with that. And therefore, we make it worse for them, and we don't have to make it worse for them. We can make it better. The first we have to be brave enough to be curious about what this idea means that babies come into the world already connected to the world around them.

Rhona Matheson 10:57

I mean, there's lots of what you've just said that I, that I absolutely agree with and I think there's something about the, the impact of the pandemic on our children but maybe we can come back to you in a moment. But one of the, one of the questions that I suppose when, when I heard you, when I first heard you talk and then I've heard you on a number of occasions and I've seen the work that you've done, develop and evolve over the last sort of 10 years. Why is it that we are still not in a position where we really get it? You know, that policymakers or parents even or grandparents or teachers are still kind of not quite in that space where, you know, we understand that babies have got 10 fingers and 10 toes but the idea of this, the kind of connection and impact is still something that is for some people is a bit too, kind of, over there and actually we're not going to really think about that we're going to focus on the policy that's about attainment or education, or, kind of, I don't know, housing or you know, all of those things as opposed to going well, actually if we start with this, we get this bit right, but actually everything else will flow from it.

Suzanne Zeedyk 12:23

I think it's a brilliant question, it's a really important question. What lots of people do these days is provide information about infant development, brain development. And I often think that sometimes what we should, we need that information. But we need to also ask exactly the question you just asked, why do people not get this? Okay, because that helps us to understand what the blocks are. So, I would love it if we were in a big room with people at the moment I would just look around the audience and I would just go what do you guys think we don't get it? So, if everybody could ask ourselves that question. Then we come up with more answers than just Suzanne's. But since we're not in a big audience. Here are some of mine. I think it's just weird to think that babies who can't talk, and who too many people just kind of lie there and one day they start to crawl, have a brain that turns into the world around them. So, it's not cultural for us to think about babies in that way. Secondly, we're a culture that's really influenced by behaviour. So, we punish children for behaviour. Schools have behaviour policies. We call two-year-old behaviour temper tantrums. So, we look on the outside, and our culture doesn't teach us to get curious about what is driving that behaviour what emotions are going with that. Because if you're focused on behaviour. What it means is that you're not focused on emotions, and it's emotions that are driving behaviour, but we don't have a culture that has traditionally been interested in that, so not all that long ago, we it was legal to strap children at school because they didn't do what you wanted them to do. And that was just normal. And when people began to question do you really think it's okay that we assault, children with tools that are specifically designed to cause pain? A lot of people were uncomfortable with that questioning of normality. So when you come along today and go, you know what babies are really in tune and we need to think more about the care that we give them. So, we need to think more about drop off in nurseries, and we need to think more about pickup in nurseries, and we need to think again about sleep training. That makes everybody uncomfortable, because to question normality means you have to think and reflect. So, I think the idea that babies are connected on the surface sounds sweet. Oh ,that's really sweet. You mean if I sing in the house, my baby in the womb, can you hear me. Yes, it's amazing. You mean if we laugh a lot. The baby can hear it. Yes, it's amazing. So, it's easy to feel excited about the sweet stuff. We look at photographs of babies and fathers looking into each other's eyes. And we think that's really sweet. But then when you start to really push it and you go actually so that means that babies you don't get to look into father's eyes or mother's eyes. They're building up a higher level of anxiety, they're having different neural pathways in their head, And we don't have a service that supports maternal depression. We now get uncomfortable and human beings love to go into denial. And we shut it down. So, to summarize some of what I just said. It's just weird. We have a culture that focuses on behaviour rather than feelings. It makes us uncomfortable and we want to go into denial. And finally, I would say it and it triggers all those unconscious experiences that we had as children as well. Right, so and there are lots of people who will still go oh unconscious that's a bit airy fairy. That's the whole point of the ACES movement, is that the experiences we had as children, and I would say as babies have created, difficulty in being in touch with our own emotions. So in other words, there's a developmental perspective there, so that we have to think the ACES movement, adverse childhood experiences or trauma for anybody who's new to that forces us to think about the impact of childhood experiences on adulthood. That means we have to think developmentally.

And that means that we have to think not just about the children with us today, but we have to think about our own childhoods. And very often, really uncomfortable things happen to us in our childhood that we can't remember, but our body remembers. And so, I think we get triggered by thinking about babies, and we want to keep it sweet. And part of my self-appointed job. As I began to work more with the public, is to try to keep us thinking about the uncomfortable things, and therefore to take the laughter and the sweet things more seriously, rather than as twee.

Rhona Matheson 17:15

Yeah. And I suppose that's where I guess the that sense of us coming together has been really interesting because you know it, you know we were coming from this place of, we were a pilot project based in an arts centre in an area of deprivation in Edinburgh, we were exploring theatre for babies, something that just wasn't happening in Scotland. Before that I was coming from, you know I've got a degree in Scottish history in theatre studies I've worked in the arts, I have worked for another children's theatre company but all of a sudden, I'm looking at this project that's about, about theatre for babies, it's but it's much more than that and it became clear really early on in that pilot but it was much more than that. And so, you know that I sort of remember in those kind of early days of just kind of going. What is all of this, you know and and what are all of the pieces that have the the jigsaw around this work. Because, actually, we've got this incredible opportunity in the work that we do to provide beautiful experiences for babies and their parents and carers and so the relationship between the child whether it's a baby or a three year or four year old or five year old, and the adult who comes with them in whatever we offer became really really core, so we all, we've always had the child and the heart of the work, but it became more than that because the children never come on their own. We don't run programs, we don't run crèche programs or kind of groups where parents come and drop their kids and we do some art activities and the parents come and pick them up and take them away. It's always about what happens when the child and the adult are together. So, understanding kind of relationships, and what's taking place has become a really important part of the work that we do. And we've absolutely been influenced by the, the conversations that you've been having. And it's been really, it's been really important because we're not just working, we are making love beautiful theatre productions or visual art installations that we're taking to public venues around the country that people can buy a ticket for, but we're also running these programs of engagement in areas where people have real challenges in their lives. There's high levels of poverty isolation, deprivation, and, and everything that goes with that and so you know when we're thinking about, you know, when you take the ideas around ACES and actually, where we are as adults and how we process what that means. And I think about the people that some of the people that we're working with and kind of going well we've got these adults and we've got these babies and actually what is going on there, and you know how, if we're trying to provide these rich experiences that can absolutely support the child, it can absolutely support the adult as well and they're having that experience together.

Suzanne Zeedyk 20:46

Oh my god. Yeah, right. We call it child care, right, I'm just trying to come up with examples which help us to reflect on how our society sees this, because that's what I think you're talking about. So, we call it child care and early learning. What if we call it family care. How would that simple language change alter the way we understand what childcare is because it turns out that in childcare. So, when you drop your child off at childcare. It turns out that you're not caring just for the children, you're also caring for the parents. So when you transition when you do a drop off. The parent has to cope with the feelings about that drop off as well. We don't have a childcare sector that helps us to think about that, because we just think we're caring for the child. So, in other words we often see the child as separate from the family, and what you're saying is, it would be better if we didn't do that. Right, what you're saying is we are providing family shows, but we're thinking about the interests of the baby as well. So, it comes up for me it comes all the way back to our culture that goes really babies have an interest?

Rhona Matheson 22:05

That's the incredible thing, so I say I think about some of the, when we first started making performances and we were kind of going is this kind of work you know it's like theatre for babies. You know, I've done some early years work previously and I'd seen some young children in theatres, watching shows and they were you know they were engaged with what was what was taking place, but the idea with the you know the in the pilot, we were trying to kind of understand what will babies engage with and you've got people who are coming along to, you know, the adults are taking their babies to the theatre for the first time and we're doing this for the first time and it's all very new and kind of, what's this going to be like? But immediately in our very first show. And I reflect on our very first show Little Light, which has everything on the kitchen sink in it. Because that's where we were that you know that was, you know, I can still hear the music and the the lyrics of the songs in my head. And we had big balloons, we had shadow puppetry, we had feathers, we had a glitter ball we had all of these things, and that I now look and kind of go when I see other work I'm kind of like if there's a reason for having that, then that's great, but like can we make some make the choices. But that's where we were, but what I really remember was the parents being amazed at their baby's capacity to engage. And that's the thing that we've heard production after production experience after experience. This feedback from parents and carers about this, almost a dawning realization, particularly when we had worked for the babies who were coming from maybe five or six months old, and they were you know the, if they were able to sit, they were sitting and they weren't completely captivated. And that's why we you know we worked with researchers and developed engagement signals and things because we were trying to understand what was going on. But it's that point at which there's almost like a switch for the parents and carers where they recognized almost for the first time the agency that their babies have. And it's incredible. And I think that's why this work becomes more and more important because if we want to start to think about babies and childhood, and what that means, if we want to think about that differently. Then we have to be able to understand the capacity of very, very young children to communicate with us.

Suzanne Zeedyk 24:45

You just use the word agency. There will be lots of people who have never heard that word used with relation to babies, and yet it is this, it's saying the same thing that I've been saying all morning you know in our conversation here, right. Babies come into the world, paying attention to it, making sense of it. They're participants in it. They're not sitting outside the world, observing it, they're not watchers. They're part of it. So, when we go to the theatre, as adults kind of see us as we look upon a story that is being performed for us, we're separate from it, we're observers. That's not how babies do the world, babies are participants in the world. So that means that they think everything that is happening around them is happening to them. Right. That's fascinating. So, there's stuff that happens all around babies, all the time that has nothing to do with them. So, mum answers the telephone mummy and daddy have a fight. The, the dishwasher explodes. That's nothing to do with a baby. But the baby doesn't know that. The baby, its brain is trying to figure out how the world works. The baby has to figure out how the world is working with relevance to the baby, because the baby's trying to figure out when I cry do I get picked up? When I crawl does that get me across the floor? When I reach for my bottle. Oh my gosh, look I can reach across that table. Those are examples of agency. Right, so the baby is acting on the world, and is participating in it, babies are not passive blank slates that the world is thrust upon them where they have to learn. We used to think that, scientists used to think that, but in the 1970s there was a big switch in the 1970s, basically because there was some new equipment when you could look more closely a baby's behaviour. And we began to see babies as agents as active participants in their world. And, as in, making sense of, so when they come to your performances. They think they're part of the performance right that's why they're engaged, they're part of it, they don't know that this was like a theatre thing put on that they're supposed to observe, they're part of it. Because we have this kind of idea that babies are passive observers of the world and I don't know, we have to teach them everything they. There are things they learn from us about the rhythms in the world and about how responsive the world is, but their brain is actively making sense of the world because that's the way brains work. And so, it doesn't surprise me at all, since we don't really think of babies that way that your performances, wake parents up to something that they didn't know about their own baby. And it's fascinating and it's exciting and it's slightly uncomfortable when you get a chance to think about it, because the performance of mummy and daddy fighting given that I'm trying to keep us in discomfort, as well as fascination. That means it's not a performance going on in front of them. It means that the baby is part of that performance too.

Rhona Matheson 28:12

I had never thought about it in those terms.

Suzanne Zeedyk 28:18

So, good, I'm glad I'm glad I want us to keep pushing our thinking to go oh my gosh, I didn't see that. I haven't thought about a baby's world in that way, because when we do, we make a better world, both for babies and for ourselves in ways that are often really simple. So, and I'm purposely trying to find examples that are not baby theatre, so that we can do exactly what I think you are trying to do. You're trying to use baby theatre to help us to think in new ways about babies, not just to give them wonderful experiences. And that's important enough, but to rethink the nature of baby hood and therefore to rethink the nature of humanity. So let's just think about you got a baby in a stroller, and you push the baby into a cafe. Okay, so baby has gone from being cold outside on the street with all the outside noises, and now they've been pushed into a cafe where the sound is echoing off the walls, and

suddenly there are all these people and these things that the adults called table legs, can we think about that for a minute. The baby has to adjust the baby has to go, Whoa, we're somewhere new, mum, mum, we're somewhere new, how did we get here? But the mom is pushing the baby from behind. So, the baby is left to cope with this brand new environment, they don't know what it is, on their own. Unless mum comes around and goes, oh this is called a cafe. What do you think about all those people there? Will we lift you out of this stroller because then you can see higher and mum's voice signals that something is about to happen. The baby's body is about to be moved, and the baby makes that transition with help. Not suddenly, but if you haven't ever thought about a baby is an active participant in the world, you might not think to do that. And so, the baby starts to experience the world as full of jolting unpredictability, which is a bit scarier. And so, if we can just find ways to help people to go. Never thought about that experience of a baby's world before. Then we can tune in more to what they need and very often, it's really a lot of it's really simple. It just takes us thinking about it. And I love that the baby theatre isn't just over when the performance is done, you send people away with a new vision of what it is to be a small human being, and therefore rethinking humanity. That that's why I talk about baby theatre and your work all the time, because I think it I think it gives us a different vision of of humanity of what it is to be human. And if the kind of world we want to create for ourselves.

Rhona Matheson 31:15

Absolutely. You know, I suppose if you go back to, you know, where theatre came from. And you know what it is, you know even that there's lots of different aspects to it, that you know even theatre for older children and theatre for adults, it's about that, it's about the sharing of stories, it's about the shared experience that you're having. And that you, you have a, you have an emotional reaction to it, whether that's a good one or you know you see piece of theatre that makes you really angry or frustrated or upset or it makes you laugh raucously and you're still coming away with some sort of emotional response to that experience. And we don't really think about that as, as adults, but, you know, theatre is about sharing stories, it's about sharing space, and theatre for babies is about doing all of those things, but more.

Suzanne Zeedyk 32:10

Yes!

Rhona Matheson 32:12

And, you know, I suppose we are thinking about where we've been over the last 18 months, and we haven't been able to do theatre. We've had to do lots of our other work so we've been working with families and communities, we've been sharing, we've been delivering parcels of creative activities,

we've been doing little pieces online. We've been doing lots of work outdoors in, in different parts of the country and, and that's. We know that that's been really essential for the families that we've been working with. But in the last couple of weeks we've been back in a theatre, we've been shooting a new production. And I think this comes back to some of the points that you were talking about earlier on and my observation of. This is a piece for slightly older children, and there's beautiful storytelling performance really simple performances. Two performers, and even in the venue that I saw it in. It wasn't with full lighting or anything like that, although in other spaces there, there is that depends on the venue that we're in. But my observation, and from talking to colleagues who've been in other venues, that a running thread that we're seeing is that children are completely engaged but they are holding on, particularly to their adults. And clearly, COVID is a big kind of elephant in the room in there that these children have had, some of the children that were at the performance that I saw had seen some of our work before but that's at least two years ago, when those sort of three, four year olds were one year or 18 months maybe two years old. They haven't had this kind of experience before. Since, and the world is really different. And despite the fact that we are doing everything that we can and what we would normally do in terms of taking care of the space and taking care of the audience that sense that there is this level of anxiety within those children watching a story about dinosaurs. Actually, it's a story about a relationship between a granny and the granddaughter, but it's also about dinosaurs, and there was a there was a level of overwhelm there and I'm, I'm curious as more things are opening up and there are more performances and and what they are and how that might impact, or how children might respond to those experiences because of this strange world that we've been in that, that some of them maybe you're talking about babies who have been born in the middle of pandemic, they don't know anything else.

Suzanne Zeedyk 34:56

Our babies have changed. Our young children have changed, as a group. All our babies, across the country for the last two years, 18 months have collectively had a different experience than the babies who were born in the 18 months before lockdown. And some of them have had more anxious experiences, what proportion of them? Well that becomes an interesting question. But some large proportion of them will have had anxious experiences, scary experiences of the kind of uncomfortable experiences at homes that I've already been highlighting, but all of them have had less experience of groups of children, of mums and toddlers groups, of going to nursery, of the sound of all the children together, of being in unusual venues. So, and that's happened collectively. So the kind of expectations that we have of what children will do and how they will cope and how they will behave need to stop. We need to get more curious, as the grown-ups and go, oh look, lots of these children are holding their mommy's knee more tightly, are tenser in their bodies, they seem shyer, they are slower to warm up. Yeah, cause the world is new to the three-year olds in a way that the world didn't used to be new to three-year olds before. And so, in our society, we can go well three-year olds have the following capacities and these are the things I expect a three-year olds, those are three year olds that didn't live through a pandemic. And all we have to get is curious and attuned, it's exactly what you're describing. So maybe what we need to do is slow down. Introduce all that stimulation more slowly, talk to them more, give them more time to transition. It's not hard, but it requires curiosity on the part of adults. And I'm not sure we're getting that. Because once again, we have this idea about what babies are and what they do and it's an unconscious idea about how they relate to the world. And part of what I'm trying to say is it's, it's inaccurate it's wrong. Babies are much more engaged than we realize, and therefore they carry stress that we don't think is significant, but it is stressful for them and if we don't pay attention to that, we make their lives more difficult without ever intending to.

Rhona Matheson 37:25

It's making me think about some of the things that we want to try and explore moving forward. So, one of the things that we are having conversations around is, is about how you do participation and consultation with babies. Yeah, cause that is all, you know, given the, the, the social political context that we're in in Scotland at the moment, we're on the brink of implementing the UNCRC bill into law and there's lots of conversation around consultation with children and the lots of participatory work around the convention and the articles and seeking children's views on what's happening and that is going to, that's going to continue to build and grow moving forward. But my perspective on this is that we're always looking at that sort of voice of the child through a verbal response, it's a very literal interpretation of that article twelve, kind of voice of the child, it's about what they will tell you. And as a result, pre and also nonverbal children so children with additional needs who are not babies, they are, they are the ones who are excluded from these opportunities to express themselves and have their voices heard. So we, one of the things that we've been talking about as an organization is, is there something that we can be doing, and developing using all of the understanding that we already have around how we connect with very young children, pre verbal children, nonverbal children, and can we explore an art space methodology that can be shared with people across sectors, around how they can actually really listen to the voice of our youngest children, because if government wants to get this really right. You know, we actually have to make sure that we are actually listening to the voices of children of all ages because that convention starts from birth, well it does here anyway. Birth to 18 so, you know, those pre verbal children have rights, and they have the entitlement to claim those rights, and the way that they're going to be able to do that is through the adults who are around them. So we have to find the ways of, you know, empowering those voices of those youngest children.

Suzanne Zeedyke 40:07

Rhona, what I love is that for some people, that the idea that babies have rights may makes you kind of go what? Right, I love that it is reframing our understanding of humanity. Well, okay, so let's just forever me taking it bigger and thinking culturally. What is a right? And who has rights? Once upon a time we thought that people who have black skin, did not have rights. And there's a lot of controversy, we know that Black Lives Matters, and so we have not got everything right. But, but it's not so confusing now to say that black people have rights. Right, there's lots of people go, "of course they do". And once upon a time women didn't have rights. And now we live in a world where women have rights. Now they're not all being seen to. The "Me Too" movement is about how women's rights are often violated, but we get the idea that women have rights that are violated, we're still kind of working on this idea babies have rights. And we haven't really got to violating the rights of babies, because it's a surprise to us the babies have rights, what would they look like well once upon a time we went, what would women's rights look like? What would black people's rights look like? What would disabled people's rights look like? So, if we look back to where we've travelled some of that, we realize that, you know, there was a journey. So, I think we're on that journey now babies have rights. What do they have rights to? What are babies entitled to?

Anna Newell, who is another baby theatre person who operates in Ireland. One of the things she says all the time is babies have rights to beauty, and I love it because it makes people go, do they? Do babies experience beauty? Do babies have rights to beauty? And then that makes us go, what else do babies have rights to? Do they have rights to be heard? Do they have rights to be picked up, if they're if they're anxious, do they have rights to a comfortable bed. What would we say babies have rights to? And then we could go are those rights being fulfilled? And since they can't tell us themselves. It needs adults who are willing to listen to babies. And I bring us all the way back to culture. We come from a culture that has traditionally not listened to babies because we didn't conceive that they needed listened to. Let me just keep being edgy, the whole debate about sleep training. You can see through a children's rights view, like do babies have experience of ,of sleeping? We see it behaviourally, can we get the baby to stop crying? Is, is the way we respond to babies in bed and they stopped crying? Is, is that teaching babies to self soothe? That's the language that used teaching babies to self soothe now. It's a big controversy developmental psychologists will often say, you can't teach a baby to self soothe. What do you what do you do if you see that through a rights lense? And I think it helps if we realize that we'd come from a culture that has traditionally not done that. Let me give one more example. I've already talked about babies, wheeling a baby in a nurse in a stroller, into a café. To have any question about what is the baby's experience of a stroller is nothing that parents can help to think about when they're sold a stroller. So we have a travel system that costs a 1000 quid. What is the baby's experience of facing forward, or facing backwards, or being lifted in in the carry cot? We're not helped to think about what is the baby's experience.

Do they have a right not to be jostled? I'm saying that because it sounds nuts. But what if it's uncomfortable for the baby? What if that is uncomfortable for the baby's neck, and the baby's shoulders because of the way they've been carried up the steps. I'm taking a risk given those examples. Sometimes people say to me, "Suzanne that doesn't sound very scientific. I think that's a bit silly. Are you really serious, you want to talk about baby's experiences in the carry cot?" Yes. Because babies have experiences of the carry cots. Babies have experiences of car seats, and I'm trying to help us to think about examples that that are just beyond our thinking that once you start to point it out, babies must have experiences of car seats. And if you're in a car seat in the car, and you've driven for an hour, and you're facing backwards, and nobody's spoken to you and the music's up loud. Lots of neural pathways have been created in the baby's brain in that time. So, unless we're thinking about babies experiences we can't think about rights, and we can't think about how to listen to babies. There's a procedure called the Braselton, that's, that's done, often with new borns with Braselton trained to help visitors or paediatricians or midwives. It helps parents to learn to listen to their babies to like pay attention to their eye gaze to pay attention to their head turns to pay attention to what their hands are doing. And as we're talking I'm making all those motions that new parents often don't know to listen to. It takes half an hour. Once those professionals who are trained in that have helped parents to understand that that behaviour is communicating something about the baby's attention to the parents about the comfort in the baby's bodies. It transforms the lives of those parents with those babies, because they see them differently. So what I'm really trying to say is that there are methods out there already, to help us to pay attention to what babies are saying, but they tend to be used with individual families, and often where there's a struggle. We could use those at a wider level at a policy level at our childcare level, at a baby theatre level to help people to go, "Oh my gosh, that had turn means something. It's not random. It's actually meaningful and communicative." Have I said too much Rhona?

Rhona Matheson 46:39

No, you've just given me more to think about in terms of, you know some of the conversations that we're having around, that kind of that piece of work and, and what that could look like and how it might evolve so you know I think we're, you know, the starting point for some of what we've been thinking about are some of these established approaches that are maybe used with slightly older children. Things like the mosaic approach you know that kind of looking at children's experiences, and the kind of their approach to participation, and how do you translate those kinds of approaches into a kind of a pre or non verbal context? But actually, there's I suppose part of our process is that we need to cast our net much broader in terms of what else is being used in terms of understanding how babies engage and connect and, you know, where there's meaning.

Suzanne Zeedyk 47:34

Rhona, let me give an example of this from one of your own shows. Okay, so, at the last Edinburgh Festival, which feels a century ago now, you staged a show in which there was an outside room, and all the families gathered there, and then you went, and everybody was meant to take off their coats and their shoes. And then, when we were ready. You let us all through the door into the performance space. And so I was at that performance. And I was sitting out with all the families, and there was this little teeny drama that was going on for one family that would have gone entirely unnoticed in the bigger melee. And so, daddy took off his shoes, and I think the baby was probably about 18 months, took off her shoes. And you had boxes to put the shoes in. And Daddy put his shoes in one box. And clearly, the idea was to put for the child to put her shoes in another box. But that wasn't the sense she was making of that space. She wanted her shoes to be with daddy's in the box that his shoes were in. And she tried to put them in but I think daddy was worried about getting this all right, for all I know daddy, this was the first time that he had ever been to one of these weird baby performances, and he was trying to do what he'd been instructed to do and to get his child to perform the instructions and put the shoes, put the baby shoes in their own box. That wasn't what the baby had in mind. The baby wanted to keep the shoes together. So, the baby tried again to put her shoes in the box with daddy's shoes. Now, that would have been fine with you. Daddy I think was anxious. So, it turned into a fight between daddy and the baby, about where the shoes were gonna go. And by the time they got through the performance space. Daddy and the baby were now in rupture. They were having a fight, because daddy, who I think was anxious, couldn't read the baby's behaviour as saying something about the baby's connection to daddy. She was in a new space too and having her shoes with daddy's issues meant they were still connected. But daddy was too anxious to get curious about what the baby's behaviour was telling him, and I think that's what happens is that we get anxious about what the people around us are going to think. About whether we're doing it right, about whether or not we can keep our babies under control, about why is that child screaming in ASDA? Our own anxiety is to try to control the babies and reinforce a particular way of doing it, rather than getting curious about how the child sees the world is making meaning of it. And I just watched this whole drama play out before me. The baby didn't know that the performance was through the door. For the baby, the performance had already started here with the shoe box thing. And, for all I know they never enjoyed that performance at all, because they started in a fight. So, does that mean that you need more members of the cast of Starcatchers who are outside the door, who think the performance has begun now who are helping parents to relax into what we typically see is the pre-performance stuff. Because we decided the performance was through the doors, but the babies don't know that. Okay so once you get that idea, which is exciting enough and I can see your face sort of going oh no we had a family who was fighting. Right. Then you go does the baby think that performance is before you even came into the room with the shoe boxes?

Rhona Matheson 51:17

Absolutely, and I suppose that's one of the things that we do try and think about is you know because for me the experience actually starts at home. Before they've even left the house because it's, it is about the process of getting from home to the venue, from the box office to the, to the kind of front of house foyer area to doing that taking off of shoes and leaving of buggies and phones and things, knowing that they'll be looked after and, you know, people will stuff won't get stolen and whilst they're having this other experience. Because what we're trying to do is leave that stuff in that pre area, so that people can just be and be together, and hopefully enjoy together this performance experience that, that they have. We can't get it right for absolutely everyone, but that's, that is life you know that's part of the world that we're in.

Suzanne Zeedyk 51:19

We shouldn't seek to get it right, ruptures, you know, families, children, couples. Communities need ruptures, to come back together to create more trust. So when we worry about getting it right all the time and keeping babies from feeling anxiety and frustration. We actually misunderstand the nature of development. If you can pay attention to all the little tiny dramas like that shoe box drama that I was giving. The point of that story for me is that because daddy got anxious. He probably didn't even know he was anxious, but because us grown-ups get anxious. We're less able to pay attention to the experiences of our children around us, and they are having all these experiences that we're often oblivious to. So, if we go back to the car seat, and you just said, the performance begins at home. And then you could go the performance begins last night, then you can say the performance begins... How far back do you take it? The real point of that is that life is happening to children now there's not a time that's before. So, when you're in the car seat we often go up in our heads that this isn't the performance. This isn't childcare, this is, this is the between time. There is no between time for a child. A child is making sense, all the time and is building neural pathways, and a stress system based on all their experiences, and that idea is weird for us. So simply getting that idea so that we can get more curious about the life that my baby is living that I didn't know about. Then, then, our role shifts and, and babies become more fascinating. Although earlier I said, my self-elected job is to keep us uncomfortable, my real self-elected job is, can I just help us to be more fascinated by babies more curious about the world. Because most parenting books that are out there, tell you how to parent, they tell you what to do to your baby. They don't help you to get curious about what your baby's experience is so that you could then respond to that experience because you know your baby better than anybody. But you might not feel confident about that. Some just getting more curious about what babies experiences are changes their world in our world and we don't have a world that is curious enough about babies or policymakers who are curious enough about babies' experiences. So, could we have a world that is more curious about babies' experiences, and then we'd have a better world.

Rhona Matheson 54:56

I think that's absolutely bang on. And I think, I think that's something for us to take away from this conversation is that sense of actually how can we contribute towards that? How are we more curious about babies, and the experiences that they're having and how can we use sort of convey our curiosity? Not just to the babies but also to the parents and carers who are alongside them. And through that, because you know I fundamentally believe that the kind of that working with artists and sharing arts experiences with babies is absolutely transformational and that if we had more of it, then actually we could be thinking very differently about, you know what we think about babies and children and childhood. And that sense of, you know we have this grand ambition in Scotland to be the best place in the world to grow up and I get really frustrated with that. I understand why the government has that as a, as a strap line because it's a really positive kind of great statement. But actually, what we want is that actually Scotland is the best place in the world to be. And that means that people have a good standard of living, they have a good place to live in, they're looked after, they have a good education, that there's health care. And that, actually, that our children are seen as being a fundamental part of our society and that they are citizens who contribute and they don't just have to, we don't have to rush through a childhood to get to adulthood in order for them to contribute. That actually they contribute, from the moment that they arrive, because the moment they arrive, the world for the family that they've arrived into the world shifts your world changes. There's a contribution that's being made. So, I think if we can, you know we are playing our part in a wider community of organizations and people like you who are trying to make these positive changes and I see a massive difference now from 15 years ago when we started, but we still got a hell of a long way to go. But I think if we can keep having these conversations, and figuring out how we keep sharing this kind of information that eventually, and it may take another 10 years, it may take another 15 years, but actually we will we will really see a culture shift, take place. And if you know if we do want the fairer society the Scottish Government talks about then we absolutely have to.

Suzanne Zeedyk 57:56

Rhona, it doesn't, we don't have to wait on the government. Right, we can create that in our own families, and our own communities. Let me keep being edgy. Um, sometimes we need to say no to some of the policy. Right, so and that takes courage, but some of the policies that we have is not informed by, by understanding how babies and children develop. It's actually not good for us. So, what I mean is, sometimes it's easier to wait for the lead to be taken by other people. Part of what I hope that these conversations can do because I don't know what to do is said keep talking, talking and talking, finding examples finding stories, telling how people have put this stuff into place. So that we can go, I would like to create this in my family. I would like to create that in my cafe. I would like to ask the people that I buy a buggy of about this information, and, and ask them why they haven't told me. I would like to say to my childcare provider. How much do you cuddle my baby? You know, I would like to speak to my MSP about how much do you know about baby development? In other words, we can take control of that we don't have to wait for other people. And I think that's exciting. And I think it's empowering, and I think one of the very best communities to help us do that is artists. I wish artists were in charge of more policies, and in charge of the language that we use. We often choose professionally sounding things so infant mental health, infant mental health is a thing, and it matters, but infant mental health is not a thing that you're probably going to talk about in families? What language do we use to talk about an infant mental health programme? Artists are great at helping us think that up. How do you convey scary information to families? Artists are great at thinking that up.

How do you create a more inviting ASDA? Artists are the people to help us to think of that. So, if I were in charge of the country. I would put artists in a much more central role, across all of our services. When we think of artists as sweet storytellers for entertainment and theatre, we miss understand the power of art, which is why I am so delighted to be a partner with Starcatchers.

Rhona Matheson 01:00:38

Aw, well, Suzanne, that's amazing and I think that's the perfect place for us to end our conversation this morning. Thank you so much for your time. We really, really appreciate it.

Suzanne Zeedyk 01:00:48

It's been a delight to be here today I truly mean that.

Rhona Matheson 01:00:53

Thank you for listening to the Let's Talk About... podcast. The music used in this episode is by Marcus Britton, Matt Elliot, Nick Padgett Tomlinson and Barney Strachan from Mixed Up by Katy Wilson. You can view the transcript of this episode at www.starcatchers.org.uk

Join our birthday celebrations and stay tuned for the next episode in the series on our social media channels, @StarcatchersUK