



STARCATCHERS

Voice of the Baby: A Reflective Guide for the arts

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Introduction



This Reflective Guide outlines a series of 5 areas for creative artists to consider in relation to rights-based approaches (in particular, participation rights and the ‘voice’ of the child) in the arts when working with babies and young children from birth to 3. It aims to provide a basis for reflection, discussion and development of ideas and practice for creative artists working with this unique group.

This Reflective Guide represents part of a larger research collaboration between Starcatchers and the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland (RCS) exploring the ‘voice’ of the child in relation to creative arts experiences for babies and young children. The guide represents phase 2 of the broader project which has seen the research partnership expand through collaboration with Queen Margaret University.

The Reflective Guide has been shaped by engagement with current research and developed alongside professional artists across Scotland

to capture their thoughts, ideas and approaches to rights-based practice with very young children. As such, the guide very much represents a bottom-up approach where the starting place has come directly from the exploration of artistic practice.

Through this work, we hope to begin to build a much-needed body of work situating the creative arts as an important area for consideration when it comes to exploring how rights-based approaches can be embedded for babies and young children.

Introduction

The Need for a Reflective Guide

Whilst there is a body of research that explores rights-based approaches in early years, and that often includes references to the creative arts, the majority is situated in either educational or care settings. There is very little research that has explored rights-based approaches for babies situated in the creative arts context. There are also very effective and established models of participation for children (for example, the Lundy Model), however, these are mostly designed for children who have spoken language and/or the ability to draw.

We found that whilst many artists described a common and intuitive understanding of how they embedded rights-based practice in their work, there was little guidance or research that was able to provide an underpinning of this. We strongly believe that the creative arts can play a crucial role in supporting babies and young children to exercise their rights in the same way that others can. The Reflective Guide offers a first step towards validating the amazing work that is already happening across Scotland in addition to supporting the future development of artistic practice with this unique group.



Introduction

Rights-Based Approach

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), or UNCRC, enshrines children's right to express their views on all matters affecting them, and to have those views given due weight (Article 12). Babies and young children are entitled to all the rights enshrined in the UNCRC—including the right to be heard—but in early childhood this right is often overlooked or neglected. Full implementation of Article 12 requires recognition and respect for both verbal and non-verbal communication, and the arts offer great potential for children to exercise their right to be heard.

As Scotland moves toward incorporation of the UNCRC into Scots law, it feels timely to investigate how the arts can enable very young children to exercise their right to be heard. This Reflective Guide is designed to offer key themes to consider in allowing babies and young children to realise their full participatory rights in the context of art and culture.



Introduction



The Aims of the Reflective Guide

- To provide a guide for embedding rights-based approaches in the creative arts for practitioners working with babies and young children
- For the guide to be dynamic and flexible enough to help artists reflect on all aspects of their practice through the design, delivery, and evaluation of their work
- To provide a grounding for, and validation of, current practices and to encourage discussion and reflection of how they might develop

Piloting and Reviewing

The Reflective Guide is undergoing piloting and evaluation during 2024 after which it will be reviewed and updated. We welcome feedback from all artists who may use this guide to inform their practice (a link to a short evaluation form can be found at the end). We recommend that the Guide is reviewed every 3 years beyond this point so that it remains responsive to ongoing developments in the field.

Links to Other Resources

This Reflective Guide sits alongside a range of other research and policy relating to the creative arts and rights-based approaches for the very young. We have provided a list of resources at the end of the guide but welcome feedback during the pilot phase if we have missed key documents.

Introduction



Defining the Voice of the Baby

Voice of the Baby: refers to a wide range of communications including, but not limited to, verbal voice (semantic or otherwise), non-verbal communications like movement, expression, action, sound, gestures, and silences.

The term ‘voice of the baby’ is used in this Reflective Guide while acknowledging the limitations of ‘voice’ as a shorthand for very complex communication and processes of interpretation.

Using the Reflective Guide

We encourage you to consider the 5 areas in this guide in turn but with the overarching knowledge that they are all intrinsically linked to one another.

In each area, there are considerations for you, for the baby / babies you are working with, and for the adults they bring along with them.

Often, the baby’s adult(s) is/are a crucially important factor in how they are able to participate (not least by having brought them to the experience) and how they are able to communicate. All voices need interpretation, babies’ voices even more so. You, the artist, can interpret directly from the baby, but also indirectly from their adult.

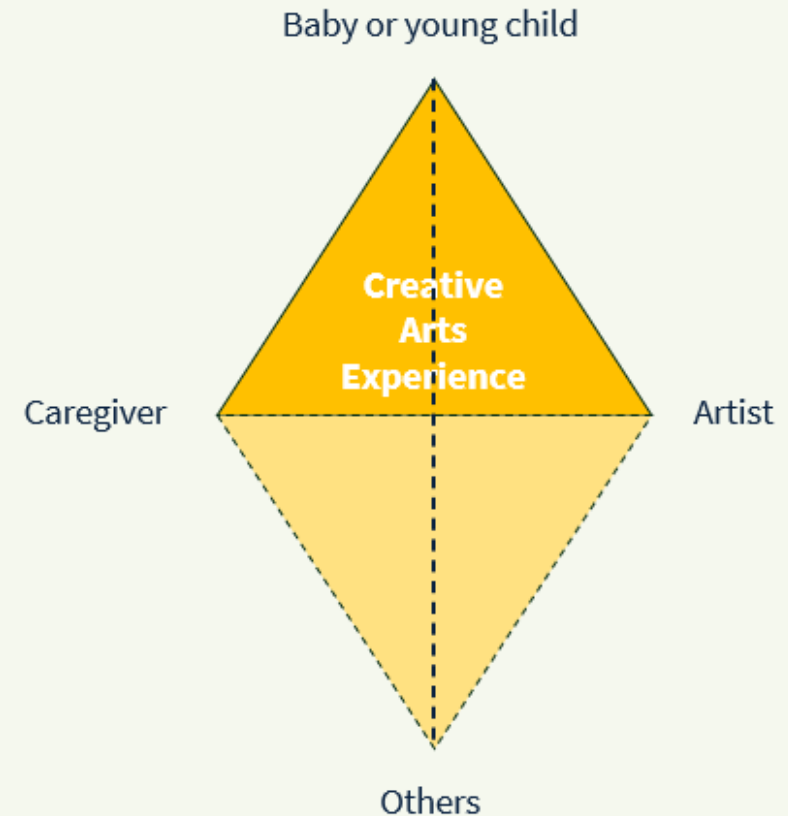
Context

Social construct of participation

One thing that sets this age group apart from others is that babies and young children are accompanied by a caregiver(s) to help them access and participate in a creative arts experience. As such, the significant adults in their lives become an integral part both of their participation experience and of their 'voice' at this stage.

We offer our 'Kite' model to help you consider all the 'in the moment' reciprocal interactions between those involved when working with babies and young children to enable them to participate fully. If you are working with only one baby and their adult, you only need to consider the top triangle of the kite. If there are others involved in your session, you can use the whole kite.

The Kite model



The 5 Areas

Curating the Space

creating permission for play and creativity

Building Sensitive, Informed Relationships

warm, affectionate interpersonal interactions

Navigating Identity

of yourself as the artist, the space, and the people within it

Respecting and Validating

the complex communication of babies

Making Time

for young children to be heard



Curating the Space

creating permission for play and creativity

This area relates to the nature of the space itself, and the materials and experiences curated within it

Whether your space is purpose built or community space that is being borrowed for the duration of your work, or whether it is one you regularly use or not, the need to curate it will still be an important factor in creating a space where babies can be creative, engage in meaningful participation and demonstrate their influence.

How does the space influence the creative arts experience?

How does the creative arts experience influence the space?

How do you want the space to feel, sound, or look like?

How will the space and the resources help to create permission for play and creativity for babies (and their adults)?

How does the space encourage children's communication with you and others as they move through it?

Building Sensitive, Informed Relationships

non-judgemental, warm, affectionate interpersonal interactions

This area relates to an affectionate ‘hosting’ approach to babies, young children and families, warm relationships, and navigating tensions around expectations

An arts context allows for an approach that is tangibly different from other ‘services’ that babies and adults encounter (such as education, healthcare etc). As such, the relationships with babies and adults are crucial in facilitating participation.

How does your approach encourage the building of relationships within the space?

How does the arts experience you have created facilitate the process of building relationships for everyone in the space?

How might relationships differ in the space?

How do the relationships inform the arts experience?

Navigating Identity

of yourself as the artist, the space, and the people within it

This area relates to questions about gender stereotypes, supporting the diverse identities of babies and families, maintaining the space for babies, and artists helping with care routines

We encourage you to think about identity in a variety of ways: for example, your own identity in the space, the identity of others in the space, and also the identity of the space itself. Often, we have multiple identities that are in play at any given time.

What role(s) do you occupy within the space, and in any given activity? What roles do others play?

How does your role, and the role of others, influence the space and the people within it?

How do you maintain the integrity of identity of the space? (for example, when challenged by older children being present)

How might the arts experience create a sense of belonging that support babies' diverse identities? Do you notice that in-groups or out-groups are forming in your sessions?

Respecting and Validating

the complex communication of babies

This area relates to artists tuning in, interpreting, and validating babies' verbal and non-verbal communication

There is considerable skill involved in the creation of a genuine two-way interaction between artist and baby. Knowing when to initiate, knowing when to follow a baby's lead, knowing when to leave space, knowing when to fill space, and all of these without the ability to be able to fall back on spoken word.

The 'Voice of the Baby' refers to a wide range of communications including, but not limited to, verbal voice (semantic or otherwise), non-verbal communications like movement, expression, action, sound, gestures, and silences.

How does your creative offering allow babies to make choices and influence what comes next?

What does their influence look like? Is it evident in the moment, is it evident over time?

How are their choices validated in the experience?

Making Time

for young children to be heard

This area relates to babies' development and the period of time that artists work with them. For some artists, this might be over a number of weeks or months, for others, it might be for the duration of a performance.

Time is an area that perhaps has the most obvious link to all the other areas in the Reflective Guide. We encourage you to think about all aspects of time from child development (the significance of 4 weeks in the life of a 4-month-old baby, for example), the duration of the arts experience you are sharing with them that day, the duration of time over which you have worked with them, right down to the amount of time you leave for a baby to be able to respond to a stimuli or initiate the next course of action. Even how often a stimuli is given, repeated or revisited is a consideration within the theme of 'time'.

In what ways does time influence your approach?

How might time influence the participatory needs of the babies you are working with?

How does time interact with the other areas of the Reflective Guide?



Bringing it all Together

How do all the areas intersect with one another when we consider the participatory rights of the child?

Links to Further Resources



- [Starcatchers Engagement signals resource](#)
- [Starcatchers Engagement signals video](#)
- [Schemas: A Practical Handbook](#)
- [Starcatchers Creative Skills podcast: A Schematic Approach to Arts in Early Years](#)
- [Making My Mark resource: Young Children's Rights Through the Creative Arts](#)
- [Child-friendly UNCRC Resources from the Children's Commissioner](#)
- [University of Strathclyde: Talking Point Posters from Look Who's Talking \(Voice 0-7\) Project](#)
- [Voice of the Infant Best Practice Guidelines and Infant Pledge](#)

Glossary of Terms



- **Participatory arts:** refers to artistic experiences that are reciprocal in nature and rely on collaboration between artist and participant(s) to inform both the creative process and outcome. Participation, therefore, refers to an engagement and interaction with artist / artistic experience.
- **Rights-based approach:** refers to an approach that has the rights of the child, as enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), at its core. In particular, this project focuses on young children's participation rights, particularly their rights to express their views freely on all matters that affect them and have those views given due weight (Article 12), their right to freedom of expression (Article 13) and their right to rest, leisure, play, and participation in cultural life and the arts (Article 31). These rights are indivisible and interdependent.
- **Relational understanding of rights:** refers to children exercising their rights in a web of relationships with people, places, spaces, policies, and power relations which affect how those rights are lived and experienced by children.
- **Voice of the baby:** refers to a wide range of communications including, but not limited to, verbal voice (semantic or otherwise), non-verbal communications like movement, expression, action, sound, gestures, and silences. The term 'voice of the baby' is used in this report and project, while acknowledging the limitations of 'voice' as a shorthand for very complex communication and processes of interpretation.

Acknowledgements



The development of this Reflective Guide has been made possible through our interactions with a number of key people whose expertise, willingness to collaborate, and generosity have been invaluable.

We would like to thank:

The babies, children and families who welcomed us into their space

The Research Steering Group who informed Phase 1

The Starcatchers' Artists and Staff Team

Prof Stephen Broad, Deborah Keogh, Claire Ruckert from Royal Conservatoire Scotland





Feedback



We would love to hear your thoughts on this guide. By completing this questionnaire your feedback and knowledge will help build a vital resource for use across Scotland and ensure the very youngest children are heard and respected in policy matters and decision-making at the highest level.

Please note:

- This form will take no more than 10 minutes to complete.
- You do not need to answer every question to submit the form.
- Your comments and answers are completely anonymous.

Scan the QR code opposite to access the feedback form.

<https://forms.office.com/e/K8JWWx3H86>