STARCATCHERS



THE ART OF LISTENING TO BABIES

Connecting research with the arts to explore how the Voice of the Baby can shape Early Learning and Childcare

Glasgow City Council

Royal Conservatoire of Scotland

Queen Margaret University Edinburgh



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Photography by Brian Hartley

Welcome to Starcatchers'

THE ART OF LISTENING TO BABIES



Taking a children's-rights approach to creative consultation

About this resource

This resource was developed through The Art of Listening to Babies, a creative research project led by Starcatchers in partnership with Glasgow City Council. The project explores how the voices of babies and very young children can shape early years practice and decision-making through creative consultation.

The resource draws on Starcatchers' Voice of the Baby research, developed since 2022 with researchers from Queen Margaret University and the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland. This research investigates how arts-based approaches can support babies and young children (birth - 3 years old) to express themselves and participate in ways that uphold their rights under Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Informed by creative consultations with babies, families, practitioners, artists and researchers, this resource shares practical approaches to support early years practitioners to listen to and respond to the voices of babies aged birth - 3 years through creative practice.

About Starcatchers

We are Scotland's Arts and Early Years organisation. We believe that our youngest children, those from birth-to-five, should be able to fulfil their rights under the UNCRC through access to arts and creative experiences that give inspiration, joy and wonder to early childhood in Scotland. Our mission is to inspire babies, toddlers and young children by including them in high quality live performances and creative experiences that fulfil their right to access a rich arts and cultural life in Scotland regardless of where they live or their background.

THE PLAYFUL ADULT

"The Playful Adult is a playmate and companion who shares in discoveries, earning wee ones' trust to be a friend"



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The Playful Adult plays a vital role in listening to and valuing the voices of very young children. By staying curious, being fully present, and remaining open to their ideas, you create a safe and encouraging space where children feel confident to share their thoughts, questions, and suggestions. It helps to create a "yes space". We understand that it's not always possible to say yes to everything, there is a duty of care to all children and staff in your setting, when creating a 'yes' space you may need to find different ways for your 'yes' to meet the wee ones' 'yes'.

As Early Years practitioners, you are already skilled at improvising and responding to the unexpected. By slowing down and giving children your time, attention, and meaningful opportunities to explore, you nurture their creativity, confidence, and sense of agency. Robert Poynton shares the need to be more in the moment; to notice more, let go, use everything and therefore everything becomes an offer.



1

This aligns with effective practice with Early Years children. It invites us to be truly available to them, to observe carefully, and to let go of any pre-conceived assumptions/thoughts about perfection, structure, or predetermined outcomes. Instead, we can treat the world around us as full of possibilities. A cup might become a hat; a stick might transform into a fishing rod. The key is to follow the child's lead, allowing their imagination to shape the experience and trusting the moment to unfold.

As practitioners, we understand that the age and stage of the children you support, along with ratios and daily demands, can make opportunities to be the playful adult feel limited.

With larger groups and competing responsibilities, stepping fully into that role is not always easy. But we are not suggesting that anyone should be the playful adult for twelve hours a day. Even dedicating just one hour a week, with one practitioner intentionally embracing that role, can make a meaningful difference. A practitioner enquiry approach could be used to explore your own practice.

During that time, remove distractions such as iPads and focus on being fully present. Not every moment needs to be documented. And if recording learning feels necessary, invite a colleague to observe and map the outcomes linking to quality indicators, while you engage in the most important job - playing.

1. Robert Poynton, *Do Improvisation, https://thedobook.co/products/do-improvise-less-push-more-pause-better-results-a-new-approach-to-work-and-life?Format=Paperback*
2. *Trevarthen, Colwyn. (2004) Learning about ourselves from children; why a growning human brain needs interesting companions*

THE PLAYFUL ADULT: GETTING STARTED

1



I wonder what this is?

Take an object and pretend it's something else. I wonder what this is... a hat? A steering wheel? A dinner plate? Act out as many ideas as you can think of, making sound effects and funny faces as you go. Let your wee one play with the object – they may copy your ideas, they might act out their own.

2



Take my hand

Try offering your hand as an invitation and notice how your wee one responds. They might come over and hold it, transform it into something new, or simply choose to ignore it. All of these responses are valid. The gesture communicates openness, sparks curiosity and shows that you are available for exploration, connection, and shared imagination.

3



Mirroring

Try copying your baby's facial expressions, movements, and sounds. Your wee one will love that you're taking the time to tune into them.

4



Yes and...

Try making a "Yes, and!" story together: whatever the other person suggests, no matter how silly, you say "YES" then add your own idea.

TRANSFORMING YOUR SPACE

Transforming your space in simple ways can make a huge difference when supporting young children to explore the world around them, promoting their sense of agency. It doesn't require a lot of time; a few simple ideas to transform the space can make all the difference.



Creating spaces within your space

You can section off and set up an area to explore together before they arrive, or you can transform in the moment.

Stagger curating the space

Stagger the offer within the space. This helps give value to each interaction and reduces overwhelm.

Make an interesting invitation

Try setting up objects in new and unexpected ways to spark curiosity in the wee ones you work with. For example line up paint sticks across the floor, hang scarves from the walls, or roll out a big roll of paper for you to explore together.

Transform a space with light

Consider the tone and colour of your lighting — could you add coloured film to gently shift the mood? Create cosy, dimmed areas and use small lights to softly illuminate corners, adding a sense of wonder and magic. You can even make simple lanterns using empty jars and fairy lights.

Make smaller spaces

Can you create smaller spaces within your space, for example, could a chair become a tunnel, or a table transform into a cosy den? It's a simple yet powerful way to shift perspective and spark imaginative play.

MUSIC

Music can support being a playful adult in so many ways. It can transform the atmosphere of a space, support language development, encourage movement, and give children a powerful outlet for expression. Here are a few tips to help get you started!



Choose a song you enjoy

When playing music, choose songs you also enjoy. Wee ones enjoy discovering a wide range of music genres and are keen to connect with different melodies, rhythms and beats. It doesn't have to be the 500th repeat of "Baby Shark." When you play music you love, you'll naturally engage more in the play and feel inspired to join in with the children.

Curate Your Musical Instruments

When selecting instruments for your space, choose ones that are age-appropriate. For babies, pick instruments that are easy to hold and produce a pleasant sound. For older children, think creatively! They can make music with shakers on their feet or experiment with big rolls of paper and stomping (maybe even on crushed ice.) As a playful adult, be curious about different instruments. Sometimes using instruments in different ways that are not traditional can create unique and wonderful sounds, eg. rolling bells on the floor, sweeping a drum.

Top Tip: Don't include instruments you don't enjoy. The experience should be just as fun for you!

Treasure Hunt with Musical Instruments

Give the classic treasure hunt a musical twist! Instead of hiding treasure, hide musical instruments around the space - bells work especially well. The hiding doesn't need to be secret; little ones can watch you set things up and join in the wonder. You can also wander the space and ring the instruments randomly to spark curiosity. They'll delight in exploring the area, discovering sounds, and "dinging" all the bells along the way. Wee ones might want to hide the instruments for you to find!

Musical Conversations

Engage in a musical conversation with your little one — a fun call-and-response game that puts them in the driver's seat. It's a wonderful way to use the improvisation skills that all Early Years Practitioners naturally have. If they hit a drum once, copy their action and play it back. Keep the exchange going, and they'll delight in knowing you are truly listening and responding to them.

MARK MAKING

Mark-making is a wonderful way for little ones to express themselves — and for you to step into the role of a playful adult, tuning in and capturing their voices through the process.



Follow their lead

Follow their lead by copying their drawings or the movements they made to create them. You don't need to know what the marks represent — simply mirroring their actions shows that you're interested and engaged. You could also offer a selection of colours and let them choose which ones they'd like to use, giving them even more agency in their creative play.

How do I mark make with babies?

You can invite babies into mark-making in playful ways: trace around their body, let them crawl across chalk on black paper, or use edible paint to swoosh their hands freely across the surface. You can even create stories around their marks, turning each movement into a shared, imaginative experience. Being on their level and having the materials within reach really supports their independence and right to participate.

The Magic of a Big Roll of Paper

Big paper is great for wee ones! They can still engage with mark-making while using their whole bodies! Whether it's old wallpaper, parcel paper, or even an old sheet laid out on the floor or taped to the wall, it creates space for big, sweeping movements and creative freedom. It also opens up opportunities for shared creativity, inviting both the babies and you to explore, experiment, and create together.

Progression of Materials

You don't need to offer all the materials at once. Observe how the play is unfolding and introduce messier or more complex materials gradually. You might start with chalk or paint sticks before moving on to paintbrushes. You can also explore sensory options like vegetables, spaghetti, or edible paint to keep the experience playful and engaging.

And remember...

This is not about "making something" an adult would recognise. It's all about the process - and the outcome is agency. Mark making is offering babies choice and experience where they are the lead, they tell YOU what they want. You might set up a mark-making experience with one idea in mind, but they may use the materials completely differently, and that's okay! Play evolves, plans shift, and the magic often happens in the unexpected.

BIG MOVEMENT PLAY

Big movement play, also known as rough and tumble' is not about aggression or being rough with each other, it's high energy, physical play such as chasing, rolling, playful pushing and pulling etc, that can support physical, social and emotional development.

Getting on their level (or a level that is comfortable for you!)

Get down on their level! Clear a space and get down on the floor: crawl, travel and move across the floor. Try mirroring what your wee one does. It lets them be in the lead, and is a great way to get in sync with them. Not comfortable with Big Movement Play? Try using a teddy to copy their movements instead!

Interaction

Big movement play creates opportunities for wee ones to connect and interact in ways that feel right to them. Every child communicates differently, and there is no one-size-fits-all when it comes to wee ones. Some children may seek eye contact and close interaction, while others may prefer to connect through movement, shared space, or gentle physical contact such as leaning alongside a trusted adult. By recognising and responding to these individual preferences, practitioners can support meaningful interactions that are comfortable, enjoyable and led by the child.

Respecting Boundaries

If play begins to get a little rough, try guiding it towards leaning, gentle pushing, or pulling or spinning. This can provide a safe and constructive way for children to release pent-up energy while still respecting boundaries.

Big Play Materials

Open-ended materials, such as scarves, ribbons and parachutes, are a wonderful way to extend movement and help children express big energy. They can also feel supportive if you're not yet confident facilitating big movement play yourself.

And remember...

What matters most is having enough room for little ones to move freely and explore their full range of movement. If space is limited, try using open-ended materials like scarves to help extend that movement.

TOP TIPS FOR SLOWING DOWN

We know it can be tricky to step back after so much fun being the playful adult. Here are some tips to help you and the wee ones transition into different roles while keeping the experience positive for both you and them.



Creative Prompt
The offer or invitation of a different creative play encouraging independence or new curiosity supports the transition between experiences, keeping the wonder and discovery very much at the heart of the engagement.

Time and Space
Slowing the play down and changing energy levels can help to signal a transition is happening. It allows time and space for wee ones to feel seen and heard and to regulate their own energy in preparation for transitioning.

Twirl into Transitions
Using Big Movement Play to move from space to space supports the emotional regulation we may feel when moving on from one experience to the next. It offers expression through the full body and an opportunity to focus on what comes next.

Use a special container or box
Use a special container or box to signal the end of play. Placing the objects in a designated box or basket can help children understand that playtime is wrapping up, making the transition smoother and more predictable.

Thoughtful Ted
Using a transition teddy to 'look after' the area while they move on to another experience supports the reassurance of revisiting the play another time. The ted or object is there and will be there when they return. Knowing that it isn't the end of this engagement will help support emotional regulation.

USEFUL LINKS



Read more about our Voice of the Baby research on our website

Read the Voice of the Baby: A Reflective Guide for the Arts on our website

For practice examples that help illustrate the five areas of practice, check out Voice of the Baby: In Practice

In-practice examples to illustrate the ***What they said, How we know, What we did*** **Framework**

Watch a series of videos that summarises the 5 areas of the Voice of the Baby

Scan the QR codes below to explore the techniques Starcatchers uses as part of our Voice of the Baby approach. These resources are all available for free on our website.

Engagement Signals Resource

Engagement Signals video

Schemas: A Practical Handbook

Wee Inspirations: accessible, no-fuss ideas that support you to put the voice of your baby at the heart of your play together.

STARCATCHERS

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Living Wage Scotland

We are part of the Green Arts Initiative

Starcatchers Productions is a limited company,
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