

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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starcatchers.org.uk

Photography by Brian Hartley



WITH HUGE THANKS TO THE BABIES, TODDLERS, STAFF, AND FAMILIES OF HAMILTONHILL EARLY YEARS CENTRE AND FESTIVAL PARK DAY NURSERY FOR PLAYING, CREATING AND LEARNING WITH US.

Welcome to Starcatchers'
THE ART OF LISTENING TO BABIES



Taking a children's-rights approach to creative consultation

This workbook has been designed to support artists and early years practitioners to plan and reflect on creative consultations based on Starcatchers' Voice of the Baby research.

A bit about the project

The Art of Listening (to Babies) is a creative and research-led project exploring how the voices of babies and very young children can shape Early Years practice and strategy. In partnership with Glasgow City Council, Starcatchers artists are delivering three phases of creative consultations across six early years settings, collaborating with early years practitioners, parents and carers, and of course, the babies of Glasgow. Researchers from Queen Margaret University and the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland will be carrying out observations within these sessions, and consulting with early years practitioners across the local authority. This guide shares some emerging findings from phase one, information about the Voice of the Baby research that shapes our approach, practical ideas for creative provocations and reflective practice guidance so other early years settings can run their own creative consultations and feed into the wider consultation.

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.

Voice of the Baby

Since 2022, Starcatchers, along with researchers Dr Rachel Drury (Royal Conservatoire of Scotland) and Dr Cara Blaisdell (Queen Margaret University) have been pioneering new research to examine how the arts can be used to support the participation of babies and young children (0-3) in the realisation of their rights under Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Our youngest children are often those who are the least heard and the least able to access their rights. Babies and very young children realise their rights through lived experience. Artistic and creative experiences offer opportunities for self expression, and communication that helps young children realise their rights long before they can understand or use the language that describes them.

Voice of the Baby refers to a wide range of communications including, verbal voice, non-verbal communications like movement, expression, action, sound, gestures, and silences. Starcatchers' Artists use Voice of the Baby research to try and understand what your baby enjoys, and what they are telling us about themselves through the way the play and interact with others. We do this by using Starcatchers Engagement Signals, the Reflective Guide for the Arts, and our artists' knowledge of child development and schematic play. The most important part of the Voice of the Baby, is your knowledge of your own child, what are their likes and dislikes, how they are feeling, how you play together. Guided by you and by our Voice of the Baby approach means our sessions are baby-led, and that our artists can develop a meaningful understanding of what makes your baby tick and the activities that best reflect what interests you and your baby.

The Question

How can the voices of the youngest children, those from birth to 2 years old, shape the experience of early years in Glasgow?



Project timeline

Phase One
April - June

1. Artist-facilitated creative consultations
2. Continued research and dialogue with practitioners

Reflective practice day on **13 August** with Starcatchers



Reflective practice day on **10 October** with Starcatchers

Phase Two
August - October

1. Artist-facilitated creative consultations
2. Practitioner Facilitated Creative Consultations
3. Researchers work with early years practitioners

Phase Three
October - December

1. Artist-facilitated creative consultations
2. Practitioner Facilitated Creative Consultations
3. Researchers work with early years practitioners

Final Reflective Practice Day **21 January 2026**

March 2026
final recommendations to Glasgow City Council

BEFORE USING THIS WORKBOOK...



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

YOU MAY ALSO FIND USEFUL...

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.

HOW TO USE THIS WORKBOOK...



This is a how-to guide for planning, delivering and evaluating your creative consultations using The Voice of the Baby approach. Starcatchers uses three established frameworks to elicit and support the voices of pre- and non-verbal children:

The 5 Areas of the Reflective Guide for the Arts as a sense check when session planning:

1. **Space** *creating permission for play and creativity*
2. **Relationships** *non-judgemental, warm, affectionate interpersonal interactions*
3. **Identity** *of yourself as the artist, the space, and the people within it*
4. **Communication** *respecting and validating the complex communication of babies*
5. **Making Time** *for young children to be heard*

Starcatchers' 7 Engagement Signals to measure participation and identify play patterns during sessions:

1. **Attuned** When a baby or child is intensely watching and cued in to what is going on
2. **Absorbed** Intense attention for a period of time, including ignoring any distraction
3. **Mirroring** Watching and reciprocating through repeating or copying
4. **Responsive** Can include positive or open body language - smiling, nodding, reaching
5. **Interactive** Physically responding to another person in a 2-way exchange
6. **Instigative** Provoking others' actions through their own physical response or vocalisation
7. **Experimental** Taking individual action with materials or props.

The **What they told us, How we know, What we did Framework** to prompt reminders of key moments from the session to guide reflections and evaluation:

1. **What they told us**: *We need to burn energy before we engage in focused play!*
2. **How we know**: the little ones used the mark-making rolls paper to make lots of noise by jumping up and down on it together and engaging in big movement play.
3. **What we did**: In the short-term (during the session) we took out more rolls of paper to support this play. In the medium-term (planning future sessions) we planned in time at the beginning of sessions to allow the children to engage in big movement play. In the long-term (consultation) we discovered there is no provision for this kind of play in the local area, i.e. there are no parks with fences or boundaries to allow younger children to run free and the parks are filled with litter so there is no safe place for play.

EMERGING THEMES
from Phase One

Artists positioned themselves as a gentle presence in the space

Invitations to play, not instructions -children set the pace and guided transitions

Easy access to the outdoors



Flow-state play: copy, experiment, and discover together, interact without words. If you've set the stage with the right materials - leave space for surprise.



Large rolls of paper to facilitate individual mark-making or co-creation

Pop-up tent → group play/cosy retreat

Permission to Engage at Own Pace

Patterns of Play & Interaction Observed

Solo Play or Engaging Alongside Others

Inflatable paddling pool → used to collect materials, for group imaginative play, or quiet rest/ observation

Non-prescriptive offerings: demonstrate an alternative use for a child's familiar item (a toy, book or object)

Elaborate & Validate Children's Offerings

Notice and respond to children's interests

Mirror and elaborate on a child's vocalisations, movements and actions to create a sense of dialogue and connection with non-verbal children

Always engage with children at their level - crouching, squatting, crawling, or rolling on the floor



Key Themes identified for Future Sessions

- Private Space and Boundaries
- Large Marks / Impressions
- Controlling Lighting
- Sorting & Organising
- Mark-Making
- Large, Exuberant Physical Activity

TIPS FOR SUCCESS

What we found helpful



Big movement play was challenging in confined or shared spaces. Artists would redirect energy towards an activity that satisfied the same need without the potential of making the space unsafe, i.e. big rolls of paper for large-scale mark-making.

Make time together after the session to reflect on key moments

Commit an hour to the session

Children consistently responded with curiosity and enthusiasm when familiar or everyday objects were used in unexpected ways: Plastic sink insert repurposed as a drum, plastic plant pots became hats or containers for sorting

Photography and iPads can distract from the experience - try to keep photography to the first and last 10 minutes of the session

Consider where there is space for creative provocations to have the biggest impact

Communicate what you're doing and why to your colleagues

Make sure a minimum of two practitioners deliver the session



Think about your day and any routines that might pull focus

Anything is possible! Don't place expectations on a particular outcome

HOW TO USE PLANNING PAGES

Begin with the creative provocation, in this example it is storytelling and the aim is to create open-ended invitations to play via a 'big splash', something exciting and new to draw attention and create permission to play and explore. The 5 areas are a sense check once you have developed your plan, or you can use them as a guide to help build your session.

Title of session

The Frog Who Swallowed all the World's Water

Setting the scene (*who is the creative experience for? What age(s)? Is this a one off session?*

Creative play session: Storytelling theme for children aged 1-2, 'Big Splash' provocation

Creative offer (*session plan?*)

The artist will perform a story as the *big splash*. The story of a frog who swallowed all the world's water, before getting too full and spitting out all the ponds, rivers, lakes, seas and oceans. They will tell the story at volume, for the whole room to hear, and sit where all the children can see them, allowing babies to choose their level and distance of engagement. The storyteller will incorporate repetition of sounds, animal noises and physical movement.

Materials:
The frog is a guiro percussion instrument
The sea is blue scarves – nylon, cotton, soft, sparkly or stretchy fabric

Voice/influence from previous session:
Access to the storytelling corner in the setting for children to access their favourite books

Five Areas of Practice (*use these as touchstones to reflect on your creative offer)*

Space: Protected space in the setting where the storyteller can be in the centre with the children able to move freely around the space
Relationships: Between the artist and the children, between the characters and the children, peer-to-peer engagement, relationships with the materials becoming living things.
C**ommunication**: Face-to-face storytelling, potential to mirror and reflect children's reactions
Identity: Characters in the story the children can become, open-ended for them to explore using their whole bodies to move around and engage with the artist. Perhaps they will be still and attuned to the story. There are various materials for them to explore identity in terms of what role the material might play in the story.
Time: There is 1 hour committed to this session with the materials chosen to enhance the 'big splash' offer to allow lots of time to explore potential

HOW TO USE REFLECTION PAGES

Record significant things that happened in the session. This could be something that worked well or something that surprised you. It can be useful to ask yourself “if someone else brand new was working with this group tomorrow what would you tell them about this group?”).

Example from Storytelling theme:
The adults could follow and encourage the babies interest by following the words, and the babies were entranced by the whole performance. Though the story was short, it gave plenty of stimulus for babies and adults to extend the play of water, small world animals, book reading, and physical play – frog moves and sounds, the hiding and revealing of blue material, pretending to eat, drink and swim.

If your babies are showing interest in a kind of story, a kind of character, or a kind of place – you can use these elements to inform what kind of story or song you want to tell. As long as it feels like a special occasion, the babies will treat it as so.

What they said, How we know (reflect on key moments from the session).

What they said (what interests/needs were we observing)
'They like a show'
Big performative storytelling, use of different voices and pitches
Physical embodiment of a story, Artists playing characters, making animal sounds
Visually rich props and materials
Theatrical use of objects
Big physical movement - rough & tumble

How we know (what behaviours were we observing): Children were visibly engaged and interested in big theatrical storytelling, seeming to enjoy the performative element of it, laughing, maintaining attention, clapping their hands. It felt different to when they were read a story, her focus on them and not on reading from a page seemed to feel novel to them. Having large pieces of cloth with various textures led to sustained play and engagment, the cloths functioned as an ocean, as clouds, as clothes which they wrapped around themselves.

What we did (*key thoughts or learning to inform future sessions based on the needs and interests of the participants).*

During the last sessions, there has been a lot of curiosity around Claire's clipboard (for notes), and an interest in joining in with mark-making. We'd like to extend this as an offer, with a focus on artistic opportunities around this activity.
(As you are working year-round in these settings, the inspiration for sessions can also come from regular play observed through the week. Observation of schematic play can influence this, if you notice your learners’ desires to spin, envelop, collect, leap, hide)

HOW TO USE PLANNING PAGES

Begin with the creative provocation, in this example it is storytelling and the aim is to create open-ended invitations to play via a 'big splash', something exciting and new to draw attention and create permission to play and explore. The 5 areas are a sense check once you have developed your plan, or you can use them as a guide to help build your session.

Title of session

In-tents Light

Setting the scene (*who is the creative experience for? What age(s)? Is this a one off session?*

Den building theme: enclosure, shared imaginative play, ages 1-2

Creative offer (*session plan*?)

A black piece of cloth will be draped over a small tent to allow one or two children to sit comfortably inside. Multi-coloured egg-shaped lights placed inside the tent, glowing gently in different pastel shades.

Materials:
Small tent, Empty inflatable paddling pool, Large pieces of cloth, egg-shaped lights, pom poms, cardboard tubes, large wooden disks which are tree-cuts to play with rough and smooth textures (lightweight so good for collecting/transporting).

Voice/influence from previous session:
Various smaller creative offers that were everyday objects to stimulate exploration based on success of familiar items being used in novel ways.

Five Areas of Practice (*use these as touchstones to reflect on your creative offer)*

Space: The tent is set up with room for co-play, while the lights and dark cloth will create a cosy retreat for those who want or need it.
Relationships: Connections with the offers and the tent itself, will these create invitations to play that the children might use to connect with each other in the space?
Communication: Shared language developed through mirroring and elaborating on a child's play and their engagement with the offers
Identity: What happens when a child enters the tent? Who will they become? The tent is open-ended allowing for imaginative play or quiet time. Identity of the everyday items changes and leads to surprise.
Time: There is 1 hour committed to this session with the materials chosen to enhance the 'big splash' offer to allow lots of time to explore potential

HOW TO USE REFLECTION PAGES

Record significant things that happened in the session. This could be something that worked well or something that surprised you. It can be useful to ask yourself "if someone else brand new was working with this group tomorrow what would you tell them about this group?").

A key moment example from den theme:
A boy crawled inside and was visibly delighted when he realised it was dark and had glowing orbs. He did not come out for a while, enjoying the time to himself. Occasionally, researchers and staff pulled back the cloth and saw him lying on his back, smiling, and watching the lights.

As a starting offer, our 'big splash' was Loose Parts. We recommend starting with nursery-unconventional materials, that encourage the exploration of texture and form. We brought, based on success in other early-years focused sessions, baby-friendly, cheap/household items.

What they said, How we know (reflect on key moments from the session).

What they said (what interests/needs were we observing)
Gathering and collecting, Gross motor play, Private spaces /Smaller spaces within an open plan area, Call and repeat vocalisation/play, Storytelling through items, Novel/unconventional scale

How we know (what behaviours were we observing): The presence of smaller designated spaces encouraged a lot of collecting/gathering types of play, children liked being rocked and pulled along inside the pool, they liked jumping in and out of the tent. Some children really enjoyed having the tent/pool to themselves as a more private space, they became a bit protective at times. A lot of play involving copying movements and vocalisations in a call and response manner, children would laugh and smile when the thing they did was mirrored back at them. Children would bring their own items of interest into the play space, such as a book or a toy, artists would use this as a prompt and elaborate on the offering through movement, vocalisations or other play. Children really enjoyed the novelty of adults (artists) trying to get into the child size tent.

What we did (*key thoughts or learning to inform future sessions based on the needs and interests of the participants).*

Smaller spaces offered changes in light levels, which we felt offered a novel sensory experience for the children - we have decided to build the next week around the concept of light and dark with the small tent which we could easily convert into a darker space.

PLANNING

Title of session

Setting the scene (*who is the creative experience for? What age(s) are they? Is this a one off session or part of a series*?)

Creative offer (*session plan*)

Five Areas of Practice (*use these as touchstones to reflect on your creative offer*). Space, Time, Communication, Relationships, Identity

REFLECTIONS

Artist/Practitioner Reflections (*record significant things that happened in the session. This could be about something working really well or not working as you expected, or something that surprised you. It can be useful to ask yourself "*if someone else brand new was working with this group tomorrow what would you tell them about this group*?"*).

What they said, How we know (reflect on key moments from the session).

What they said (what interests/needs were we observing)
How we know (what behaviours were we observing)

What we did (*key thoughts or learning to inform future sessions based on the needs and interests of the participants).*

STARCATCHERS

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