

Are you listening to me?

Oxfordshire's babies speak
up for themselves



Foreword

Oxfordshire are further pushing the boundaries with their new publication "Are You Listening to Me?" - Oxfordshire's babies speak up for themselves.

It documents the themes which emerged when some of the most experienced and well-qualified managers of day nurseries and development workers observed the "Everyday stories" of babies and toddlers.

Their work represents a strong commitment to the principle of listening to very young children to include their views as part of developing quality provision in their settings.

It should inspire those who read it to reflect on and develop their own practice.

Anne Nelson
Chair of Oxfordshire EYDCP

Acknowledgements

This publication is based on the report written by Dorothy Selleck (Early Years Consultant) "Listening to children under two, tracking and observing – Everyday Stories" documenting phases 1 and 2 of the managers listening to children under 2 project commissioned by Early Learning and Childcare.

Many of the words and phrases used to document the evidence "What actually happened?" and interpret this evidence "What might that mean?" are hers.

I would like to thank Dorothy for her commitment and enthusiasm for this work, the nurseries who took part:- Oxford Brookes; Rosehill Imagine; Slade; Roundabout; Wolfson; East St.; Cygnets; College Kidz; Oxfam; Orchard Fields and Gems at ACE Centre and the development workers who supported them.

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Introduction

More than just "listening"

We all listen to babies, they attract our attention by such actions as gurgling, snuffling, crying. It helps us to get to know them as individual people, facilitates the development of the caring relationship and helps ensure their needs are met.

By listening to babies we are acknowledging their "right to be heard" (Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child), demonstrating our respect for them as individuals and contributing to their sense of wellbeing and self-esteem. Conversely, not listening to babies can cause stress and impact adversely on later behaviour (Bruce 2004)

The Every Child Matters: Change for Children programme aims to ensure that policies and services are designed around the needs of children and young people. Participation of children should be embedded in planning, delivery and evaluation. This is more easily said than done, particularly in relation to our youngest children.

Effective listening involves adults recognizing and responding to the variety of ways in which babies

communicate, not only by sounds but also movements and actions. By using observation, adults can follow what a baby is doing, making decisions about how best to respond to him/her, based on skills of interpretation - trying to see the world through the child's eyes.

A group of nursery managers in Oxfordshire, who had been meeting to support the development of the "Key Person approach" in their nurseries, were committed to "listening to children under 2 years of age" to try to ensure the children's perspective was included in decision-making about developments in their settings and in assessing the meaning of "quality". Their request for further support in this innovative area of work provided the impetus for this project.

Managers listening to children under 2 years through observing/tracking

The main aim of the project was "Encouraging listening to children under 2 years through observation in order to reflect on and include children's experience and opinions to underpin change"

Phase one included participants from 6 local day nurseries.

The components of the project were:-

- A training day for 2 staff members from each setting (Manager and another Senior staff member) and identified mentors from various development teams run by Dorothy Selleck Early Years Consultant. This included an introduction to the observation tracking technique and the opportunity to practise and discuss.
- A full day of observation with a mentor
- A half day workshop with Dorothy and the mentors to analyse the observations.
- A full day of independent observation on the "management focus for change"
- A half day workshop with the mentors
- A written report

The results of Phase one were documented in December 2005.

Phase two, which involved the same process with an additional 5 nurseries began in May 2006, following an

evaluation in March which highlighted the need for more discussion on how to explain to staff about purpose of observations, more on feeding back to staff and more support from mentors. This was documented in December 2006.

Phase 3 is now in progress and involves all Advisory Teachers, 3 EYSENITS and 1 Children's Centre Teacher who work with settings to improve quality for their under three's. They have undertaken a similar training programme to the managers and mentors in Phases 1 and 2, have conducted observations and been supported by Dorothy Selleck in analysis workshops. Encouraging and supporting settings in carrying out their own observations and using the results to bring about change will be a main focus of their ongoing work.

Further information relating to the observation/tracking technique and interpretation of evidence can be found in the appendix.

So, what have we changed?

Managers' Comments relating to the process of observation, feedback and change in their nurseries taken from their final reports.

'Since our first observations our key person approach has been introduced. We are beginning to see a difference in relationships with both children and parents.'

'As a result of my opportunity for day-long observation I held staff meetings to agree on how to change and improve the way we run lunch times. We have divided the tables into units seating small mixed age groups and an adult eating lunch together. This has created a happy social occasion that benefits everyone.'

'My only concern is that of it feeling rather heavy-handed, as was the case when three of us were observing in a small space, I got the impression, I may have been wrong, that this felt uncomfortable to staff.'

'I fear that, when other things seem more pressing, I will not make time to do this effectively, other than when something is problematical.'

'I think the project has supported and continued our beliefs in the importance of observing children and also about the importance of being reflective practitioners, most importantly from the child's point of view. It has made an impact on the structure of our nursery environment and also on the routine of the day for the children in our setting.'

'Staff have discussed the importance of "tummy time" and implications for resourcing – adding soft blocks, silk scarves, 2 huge mirrors and wedges and have planned the new baby room to have less furniture and free up more floor space.'

'I was dismayed by my overall impression that the children were experiencing a fragmented and perhaps bewildering time at the nursery.'

'We will review our daily routine and manage our time to ensure time is available for sustained interactions.'

'This project has enabled me as a manager to stop and really see the day through a child's eye, from their perspective, and to be able to see the changes the children really needed within the nursery to improve their quality of care and opportunities.'

What did we hear?

Please treat me with respect, don't do things to me without helping me to understand what is coming next.

Please really talk to me and get to know me and my family. Please be less busy - stay and play with me. understand what is coming next.

I need a Key Person in the nursery to be close to, who will listen to me and understand me, and keep me safe and included.

Please make places in my nursery where I can find spaces to move freely, be tranquil, as well as places that are busy and bustling with my friends and things to do.

You need to understand what I am interested in and the project I am working on. Please try not to interrupt me when I am busy. I want you to give me the materials or attention that will nourish my 'schemá'

Please give me experiences that challenge me, and new things to touch, taste, hear, smell and see. I like being out and about, as well as in our familiar room.

I have lots of ways of communicating - please listen and watch the ways that I do it.

Messages from 33 children in 11 nurseries from 169 hours of observation in Oxfordshire illustrate the 'voices' of babies and toddlers. The small episodes are the evidence identified in each story to support the 7 themes or messages from the children. We have been mindful of each child's right to express their views, and in this development project to employ methods that help us listen respectfully without undue intrusion or voyeurism (Clarke, Kjorkolt and Moss 2005).

The children's names have been changed and the adults are identified by either: KP = Key Person or A= adult to preserve anonymity.

Please treat me with respect, don't do things to me without helping me to understand what is going to happen next

What actually happened...

Lia was busy playing when a health visitor came into the room. Lia did not know her. Without any greeting the health visitor proceeded to examine Lia's ears. Lia appeared to be surprised and puzzled by this intimate physical examination.

Chloe leaves the table where she had been playing with gloop, her hands still messy. A. picks Chloe up without warning and carries her upstairs to the sink where her hands are washed and dried for her.

What might that mean?

Perhaps Chloe might have had an explanation about what was to happen next and offered support for washing her hands. It could be that rather than being attended to she could have been invited into an interactive encounter that offered her choices and respected her wishes.

What actually happened...

- KP approaches Mikey 'Shall we do your nappy now Mikey?' Mikey repeats: 'nappy'. KP takes his nappy and wipes from his bag and she holds the nappy out to Mikey. 'Mikey, can you carry this for me?' she asks. Mikey takes the nappy and they both walk towards the nappy changing room.

What might that mean?

Here is an example of how KP helps Mikey understand what is coming next and respectfully involves him in the nappy change. In this interaction there is turn taking and shared involvement. Mikey has the chance to express his agreement to the nappy change rather than merely acquiescing to the physical procedure.

points for reflection

How might you feel if someone removed your plate when you were part way through a meal or took away your pen as you were about to begin writing?

In your setting, how are children prepared for what might happen next therefore avoiding unnecessary distress?



“Please really talk to me and get to know me and my family.
Please be less busy - stay and play with me.”

What actually happened...

Corin was playing with a telephone with KP in the nursery. ‘Hello Mum’, Hello E’ (Name not clear) KP knows it is E’ his sister so she continues a conversation about Mum and E. And what they would be doing now.

Joseph on the floor with his water bottle, started talking about his family. “Mum is at work”, “J is at school”. There was a short response from A but it did not develop into any conversation.

What might that mean?

Many children seemed to be saying to us that they needed to think about, remember and stay connected to their families during their separation from them. We are more likely to understand what each child is ‘saying’ if we know their home people and places well enough to be able to tune into their train of thought.

What actually happened...

- Sophie had 62 encounters with adults in 2 hours, mostly fleeting 2 word instructions or praise e.g.: ‘Apron on’, ‘Get a tissue’, ‘good girl’. Sophie initiated 29 encounters by calling, offering toys, and shouting out to others from her hiding place in the bushes outside.
- In one attempted interaction with KP Billy was running a car up and down her leg in a bid for her attention. KP “Hello-nice car” but no further reciprocal exchange.

What might that mean?

Children sought out more sustained authentic reciprocal ‘conversations’ from the adults who interacted with them but who then swiftly passed on to another duty or another child. There were many examples in the observations of adults busy changing, feeding, offering toys and showing children things but not ‘often enough’ waiting for the children’s ‘answers’, their reactions or responses

points for reflection

How are children’s needs prioritized over preparation/admin. tasks?

Is sufficient time given to really get to know about a child’s family and what is important in their lives outside the nursery?

What is the Key Person Approach?

The key person approach is a way of working in nurseries where the whole focus and organisation is aimed at enabling and supporting close attachments between individual children and individual nursery staff. It is a reciprocal commitment and relationship between a member of staff and a family which has very positive benefits for all.

Every child deserves to be special to someone and the key person approach recognises this. It provides the child with a sense of security so that they feel confident to explore their world and form further relationships. The key person has an 'invisible elastic thread' of attachment to their key child, holding them in mind throughout their time at nursery, ensuring they are cherished and thought about by someone in particular while they are away from home.

Roles of the key person include:

- getting to know their individual child and supporting their sense of identity and individuality
- having an awareness of their key child and families' needs, interests and developments and opportunities to extend and support them

- managing transitions between the family and setting
- providing for the child's intimate care such as nappy changing, putting to sleep and physical closeness

The role does not include shadowing or clinging to the child nor does it mean that the key person must manage on their own.

Each key person is paired with a 'buddy' who takes on the role of the key person in their absence with the support of other staff. It is also part of the key person's role to ensure that the buddy and other staff are aware of their child's needs.

There is a clear distinction between the terms 'key worker' and 'key person'. A 'key worker' is often used to describe how staff work in nurseries with respect to organisation and record-keeping. This is only a small part of being a 'key person' whose focus is to provide a close relationship that is affectionate and reliable.

"Since our first observations our key person approach has been introduced. We are beginning to see a difference in relationships with both children and parents!"

"The key person approach is very important and having a special relationship with individual children and staff supports the attachment theory."

"We would like to carry out observations in other settings which have implemented a key person approach."



I need a 'Key Person' in the nursery to be close to, who will listen to me, talk to me, understand me, and keep me safe and included.

What actually happened...

KP crouches down next to Jodie. "Shall we see if you want your bottle", Jodie looks at KP. KP picks Jodie up and takes her to the sofa, sits her on her lap, offers her a bottle of milk, cradles her and she begins to drink. Jodie holds her bottle and fiddles with A's hair and touches her arm.

What might that mean?

This interaction demonstrates Jodie's confidence to expect and elicit the 'high quality' interactive relationship we know is important for children's well being and development.



What actually happened...

A1 asked Finn to use his fork. A2 tried to feed him and he turned away and cried a little. Finn put down his fork and used his fingers for a while. A3 asked if he had finished, he nodded so his plate was taken away. A4 (not known to Finn) shouted to him to get washed.

What might that mean?

4 carers all attended to Finn during this one meal. If one KP had been alongside him during his meal then perhaps he would have been able to relax and enjoy his food more.

What actually happened...

On arrival, Steven started crying and took 35 minutes to settle. His KP did not start until 9:00am but when she came Steven was very pleased to see her. Meanwhile 2 members of staff cuddled Steven, held him, fed him breakfast and empathised with his distress. But they were called away to answer the phone etc. he sat alone with a book on the sofa.

What might that mean?

If his key person was there, when he arrived, would he have settled better? Each child needs someone rather than anyone or everyone to welcome them and to contain any anxiety they feel when separating from their parents.

points for reflection

What could you do in your setting to improve children's separation experiences on arrival and departure ?

Could supply staff be better utilized in freeing up "key people" to be with their children?



Please make places in my nursery where I can move freely, be tranquil, as well as places that are busy and bustling with my friends and things to do.

What actually happened...

Lucie paced out a triangle between the door, the tray and the mirror to see what was going on 'out there' before joining in. She returned to her 'triangle' in between engaging in other activities

Joseph returned to the same curtain on several occasions, mostly alone but twice with other children. The length of time he stayed behind the curtain varied from 10 seconds to 1 minute.

What might that mean?

Staff need to allow physical space and opportunities for children to 'come down' from the excitements of friends to play with and new things to explore

What actually happened...

- After tea time, Billy and Oliver go under the table. Oliver says "Night, Night" and Billy lies on the floor with him. This continues for a few minutes and they seem to enjoy the interaction with each other.

What might that mean?

A number of the children seemed to seek out private places to play and be together. They seemed to be saying, 'I enjoy playing with my special friend- please can you help us be together'.

What actually happened...

In his chair, Ibrahim stretches and cries putting his arms above his head. KP lifts him out of his chair and cuddles him. She puts him on his back on the floor, Ibrahim continues to whimper. She pulls him up to sitting position and gives him some rattles. He falls onto his tummy but is immediately picked up and put on his bottom again.

What might that mean?

It is important for babies to have 'movement play' and time laid on their tummies for exercise and physical challenge. Ibrahim had every assistance to sit up but less for the freedom he needed for stretching and rolling.

points for reflection

How can we accommodate children's need for stimulation and tranquillity?

Have you considered the importance of early movement experiences such as 'tummy time,' belly crawling and crawling?

Is there sufficient space in your setting for babies to move freely?

How can children's cooperative relationships be supported by the help of adults around them?



Schema

Schemas are patterns of behaviour. Children demonstrate patterns of behaviour when they are exploring the world and by observing children we can identify schemas inherent in their play. Chris Athey and Tina Bruce worked with families in the Froebel Project in the 1970's and this research has been the foundation for many projects based on schema. Chris Athey defines schema as "a pattern of repeatable behaviour into which experiences are assimilated and that are gradually co-ordinated". Children can exhibit one or two schema or a cluster of schemas. By closely observing children's play, and identifying preferred schemas, adults can extend children's learning by providing materials and opportunities which will engage children.

There are approximately thirty six different schema, some of the most common being trajectory, enveloping, rotation, connecting, transporting. Trajectory schema is about straight lines. Examples of trajectory behaviour are drawing or painting lines, making lines of cars, bricks, play people, jumping off the

climbing frame or furniture, playing with running water (a moving trajectory).

Identifying schema can unite a wide range of activities. In introducing particular stories we can extend children's thinking e.g The Lighthouse Keepers Lunch is particularly interesting to children who display a connecting schema.

The Pen Green Centre has been very involved in research and practice relating to children's schemas. They have found a knowledge of schemas has helped parents in understanding their children's behaviour. The Pen Green project "Involving Parents in their Children's Learning" has used schema as one of the four areas for working with parents. Parents have become experts in "schema spotting" and work with early years professionals in planning and developing their children's learning.

"I found that during the Observation, I was totally absorbed in what Petula was doing not even noticing what was going on around us unless it was part of what Petula was experiencing."

"I think the project has supported and continued our beliefs in the importance of observing children and also about the importance of being reflective practitioners, most importantly from the child's point of view. It has made an impact on the structure of our nursery environment and also on the routine of the day for the children in our setting."

"Freddie wanted to climb on chairs and other fixtures and fittings in the nursery. Staff worried for his safety but started to think of other objects and obstacles to nourish his climbing schema."



“You need to understand what I am interested in and the ‘project’ I am working on. Please try not to interrupt me when I am busy. I want you to give me the materials or attention that will nourish my ‘schema’”

What actually happened...

Initially, Daniel appeared to be all over the room – moving round all the time. Wherever Daniel moved in the room, he was putting objects ‘in’ or ‘in-between’ another toy or place. (For example: in the play oven, in the bucket, in-between legs of chairs, squeezing himself in-between furniture.)

What might that mean?

There were repeated patterns of interest for many of the children, and a theme to their play or explorations. They seemed to be practising a new skill or trying out an idea in different contexts. There seemed to be a logic to what at first glance could be thought of as a meaningless activity. The observations seem to reveal children making meaning in their environment.

Keira, seemed to be working on a ‘getting to know people’ schema. She repeatedly offered books, toys and other objects as gifts in her give and take game to both adults and other children as she ‘greeted’ and initiated interactions.

with. When interactions were acknowledged but finished swiftly with a brief “thank you” she found other gifts to renew her ‘conversations’. It may be that the toys were a way of asking for attention?

What might that mean?

It seems that Keira is less interested in playing with the toys – it is the contact with the people she is most preoccupied

What actually happened...

Finn wanted to climb on chairs and other fixtures and fittings in the nursery. Staff worried for his safety but started to think of other objects and obstacles to nourish his climbing schema.

Paula was interested in holes! She pushed her fingers through the holes in the pegs, through the mesh of the shopping basket, the net on the travel cot - moving round the nursery to find other places to fit her fingers.

points for reflection

How are children supported in pursuing their own interests in the nursery rather than following the adult’s agenda?

What procedures are in place to enable staff to recognise children’s schemas?



“Please give me experiences that challenge me, and new things to touch, taste, hear, smell and see. I like being out and about, as well as in our familiar room.”

What actually happened...

Harry spent time watching older children in the garden, visitors to the room, adults clearing up the lunch table and children squabbling.

He became deeply involved and persistent in overcoming challenges – e.g. trying to stretch up to put something in the high play oven cupboard or push a trolley over an obstacle. Harry seemed busy and engrossed in his trolley challenge.



What might that mean?

However, as adults saw his work they seemed to interpret it as a frustrating predicament rather than an interesting operation (from Harry's point of view). The adults removed the obstacles that Harry was working out how to push over. They cleared his path, and took away his challenge?

What actually happened...

Jack dipped his finger into the water, shrieked, and repeated this several times. He wiped his wet finger on his cheek. One by one he began to remove leaves that were floating in the water, when they had all gone he returned the leaves, and then began to pick them out again.

What might that mean?

This lasted for 7mins – 14 times longer than most of the play episodes of 30 seconds in the room. This exploration of wet leaves seemed to present more sensory experiences and challenge for Jack than those presented to him indoors.



What actually happened...

Helen crawls over to the stairs sits for a moment, turns and climbs the stairs. A. lifts Helen down and plays with her – they have lots of eye contact but then Helen watches as A1 goes past her and crawls after her up the stairs.

What might that mean?

Many children seem to be seeking the physical challenge of climbing. Finding suitable physically challenging equipment for active toddlers keen to climb and teaching them how to keep themselves safe at this stage, rather than stopping them climbing at all, are important in nurseries.

points for reflection

Do adults observe what children are trying to achieve for themselves before stepping in?

How is it possible to ensure children's safety whilst still offering the necessary challenge?



I have lots of ways of communicating -please listen and watch the ways that I do it

What actually happened...

"Please read me this story"

Oliver offered a book to A. A tidied it away. In the book area, Oliver sorted through the books, carefully selected the same one, taking it again to, who tidied it away. This happened on 3 different occasions.

What might that mean?

Oliver knew exactly which story he wanted and worked hard to find it again each time it was tidied away unfortunately his 'voice' was not heard.

What actually happened...

"My bib is uncomfortable and I have finished my meal".

A starts to feed Lucie some peas from her bowl. While Lucie eats them she pulls at her bib, nearly pulling it off. A "Leave it on, please". A puts it back on around her neck and carries on feeding her peas.

Lucie shakes her head and says "Na". She pulls her bib off.

A then notices a red mark on Lucie's neck. "Oh it was rubbing your neck (referring to the bib). "Was the bib rubbing your neck?"

What might that mean?

Lucie's vocalisations are listened to and understood by an adult who regularly works with her and is able to understand her talk at 19 months.
explanation/interpretation

What actually happened...

- 'I want to go outside
- Jack is sitting watching other children going outside. he crawls quickly towards the gate to outside. A picks him up " Do you want your milk?", Jack pulls away, wriggles and cries. A offers juice instead, Jack takes a few sips, climbs down onto floor. He turns to A, verbalises and smiles, looks towards gate to outside. A takes Jack's hand, they walk outside together.

What might that mean?

Jack's movements, crying, smiles and verbalizations result him being taken outside.

points for reflection

How responsive are the adults in the setting to the variety of ways children communicate?

Are there sufficient opportunities to share children's chosen methods of communication with their parents/carers?

Baby Room Observations – 22/11/05

Oxford Brookes Nursery

Kiera's Story

Child's Age: 16 months

Cast of Characters: Children: Kiera, James, Alan, Davidle, Charlie, Luke, Anthony, Larry, Stuart Staff: Anne, Laura, Steven, Pat, Mandy

Observations AM:

9:07 Kiera arrives into the room. Mum carries her over to Anne, her key person and puts her down on the floor. Anne greets mum and Keira and asks how she has been. Mum says "fine, apart from a runny nose".

9:08 Kiera picks up a nearby toy and Anne says "Oh, that's a pig!" Anne then shows Kiera that there is also a picture of a pig in the book she is holding. Kiera gives Anne lots of eye contact and then looks at the picture in the book. She then picks up a sheep and Anne asks Kiera if she thinks there will be a sheep in the book too. Anne shows Kiera the other animals on

the floor and counts out the elephants. She ask Kiera "Shall we put them in the ark?" Anne starts to do this and Kiera copies her, giving Anne lots of eye contact.

9:10 Kiera points to the book. Anne responds by saying "Shall we have a look at the book?" Kiera however, crawls off to another toy which she picks up and puts down again. James approaches Kiera. Kiera looks at him and then stands up and walks to the ball pool. She stands by the ball pool, looking around the room. Her gaze fixes on the children playing with the pasta as they are making quite a lot of noise.

9:12 Kiera walks to the Megabloks, picks up a brick and places it on top of a pre-built tower. Mandy claps her hands in recognition and Kiera looks at her. Kiera then walks to the small world play and picks up a figure. She walks backwards, falls over, gets up and then approaches Mandy and gives her the figure. Mandy thanks her and Kiera goes back to pick up 2

more people and returns to give 1 to Mandy and 1 to Alan who is sitting on the floor. Mandy again says "thank-you".

Codes

You may devise your own codes, but these are the analysis codes used here:-

TC = child you are observing

C = other child

KP = Key person (Anne)

A2 = Adult (Mandy)

➡ fleeting interaction

(dotted double head arrow) sustained interaction

PP = activity involving parent

EAL = access to own language resources

RSE = rich and stimulating experience (adult initiated)

EER = explore, experiment, represent (child initiated)

Coded Observation

9:07 TC arrives. Mum carries her to KP, who welcomes them both, and puts TC down on floor. PP

KP ➡ TC (smiles)

KP ➡ mum "How has she been?"

Mum ➡ KP "Fine, apart from runny nose"

9:08 TC picks up toy pig, KP ➡ TC "Oh, that's a pig!" (shows picture of pig in book she is holding)

TC ↔ KP (lots of eye contact/discussion of book for 2 minutes) EAL

9:10 TC crawls off to another toy which she picks up and puts down again

C ➡ TC (approaches)

TC ➡ C (glances)

TC walks to ball pool, looking around room. Watches children playing with pasta

9:12 TC walks to Megabloks, places brick on pre-built tower

A2 ➡ TC (claps hands)

TC ➡ A2 (glances), TC picks up toy figure, walks backwards, falls over, gets up & approaches A2

TC ➡ A2 (gives her figure)

A2 ➡ TC "Thank-you"

Baby Room Observations – 22/11/05

cont...

TC picks up 2 more figures and gives 1 to A2 and 1 to C

A2 ➡ TC “Thank-you”

Observations PM:

4.41 Kiera fills the jug with pasta and tips it towards her, emptying it everywhere. Anne leans into the tray and use her full arms to scoop up the pasta, she uses lots of descriptive commentary to talk about the pasta and what she is doing. Kiera tries to reach for the cup. Anne hands it to her and she pretends to drink. Kiera then picks up the jug again and looks at Anne while she fills it with handfuls of pasta. She tips it towards her again and some pasta goes down her vest. “Has it gone down your vest?” asks Anne.

4.50 The other children have now all left leaving Kiera to be the only remaining child, having Anne’s sole attention. They spend the next ten

minutes playing together in the pasta, copying each other and interacting with lots of eye contact.

5.00 Anne asks Kiera “Would you like to paint a picture?” Kiera looks at Anne saying “Ra, ra”. “Shall we get some paints down?”, “Ra, ra” says Kiera. Anne brings some paints and brushes to the table and puts an apron on Kiera. Kiera reaches for a brush, pulling one out of a pot with her right hand. She puts it on the paper with a backwards and forwards motion. Anne holds the blue brush. Kiera puts down the green brush and takes the blue one, moving it across the paper. She then picks up the red brush in her other hand. She studies the blue brush and brings it up to her mouth, she then holds it out towards Anne’s hand. “Are you going to paint my fingers?” asks Anne. Kiera turns the brush upside down and taps it on the paper.

Coded Observation

4:41 TC fills jug with pasta, tips it, emptying it everywhere

KP leans into tray using full arms to scoop up pasta and lets go

KP ↔ TC (19 minutes) lots of descriptive commentary from KP, lots of interaction, smiles and copying between KP and TC. RSE

5:00 KP ➡ TC “Would you like to paint a picture?”

TC ➡ KP “Ra, ra”

KP ➡ TC “Shall we get some paints down?”

TC ➡ KP “Ra, ra”

KP produces paints and brushes and puts an apron on TC

TC reaches for a brush, pulls it out of green pot with right hand and pushes it backwards and forwards on the paper. She swaps for blue brush then picks up red brush in

other hand. Studies brush, brings up to mouth and offers it to KP

KP ➡ TC “Are you going to paint my hand?”

TC turns brush upside down and taps it on the paper. EER



Interpretation of Observations

If we are able to explore alternative interpretations, suspending our judgements in a hiatus of uncertainty then we may be enriched by being open to difference, and ready to have our assumptions of quality challenged. (Elfer and Selleck 1999)

In their workshops, led by Dorothy Selleck, both Managers and mentors worked hard to interpret the evidence gathered through observation in their settings. The following piece of evidence has the potential to be interpreted in various ways.

What actually happened...

Rory stayed at the playdough table with A for about two minutes then walked over to see 'Stinky' the fish, and 'Bill' the African Land Snail. A. followed him and said, 'Shall we feed Stinky?' Rory stood on a chair that was close by and put one finger into Stinky's tank. A. said 'Yuk' and took his finger out of the water. Rory turned his head to watch another child coming up to see Bill.

Whilst he was still with A. he made a squealing noise and she picked him up and swung him around in her arms. Rory laughed and squealed at this and then A put him down.

What might that mean?

we see how a significant adult can catch the excitement of a child making a new and exciting discovery – snails and fish – sharing in his sensations and squeally exuberance. In this moment of fun she seems able to give value and recognition to his experiment. Perhaps only a Key Person is able to have the trust and insight for joint joy and recognition of the child's own discovery?

Or it might mean that...

A may not be in tune with this child's interest in Stinky's tank at all. Does she say, 'Yuk' meaning – don't touch, or is 'Yuk' a recognition of his interest? Does A take his finger out and away from his sensory exploration in the water and twirl him around to distract him from feeling

for the fish? Are his squeals of protest (rather than excitement) at being taken away from his experiment in the fish tank?

These alternative interpretations illustrate how important it is to reflect and revisit our documented observations – to take time to attend to the children's voices and discuss our responses to them. Carlina Rinaldi in her many definitions of 'Listening' says:

Listening is emotion, it is generated by and stimulates emotions, including curiosity, desire, doubt, interest...

Listening is welcoming and being open to differences, recognising the importance of another's point of view and interpretation...

(Rinaldi in Dahlberg and Moss 2005)

A Key Person relationship is an emotional tie as well as an intellectual engagement. If A had been in a Key Person relationship with Rory then perhaps the first sympathetic interpretation is more likely to be nearer the truth, Rory would more likely have been able to continue with his enchantment in the fishy depths of the tank rather than frustrated by being taken away from it.



Observation template

Child's name:

Age

Name of Key Practitioner

Other staff

Name of setting

Date

Boy/Girl

Ethnic identity

Evaluation Code

Time Code

Narrative Observation

A story of what the child is doing and saying, a record of their experiences

Suggested Reading

Athey, C 1990 **Extending thought in young Children**. Paul Chapman Publishing.

Bruce, T. 2005 **Early childhood education**, Hodder and Stoughton

Buchanan, K. 2004, **Are you listening to me?** Seven inspiring case studies that illustrate listening to very young children Oxfordshire County Council

Clarke. A Kjørholt, A Moss P. 2005. **Beyond Listening: Children's Perspectives on Early Childhood Services**. London Polity Press

Coram Family, 2003 **Listening to Young Children** resource, Open University press

Dahlberg G, Moss P, and Pence A, 1999 **Beyond Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care**. Falmer press

Elfer P and Selleck D 1996-7 **Everyday Stories**, Working with children under three
at:<http://www.ncb.org.uk/features/eds/index.htm>

Elfer P. Goldschmied E. and Selleck D. **2003 Key Persons in the Nursery. Building relationships for quality provision** David Fulton Publishers

Forbes, R. 2004, **Beginning to play: young children from birth to three**, Maidenhead, Open University Press

Goldschmied E & Jackson S.2003 **People under three – Young children in Day Care**. Routledge

Greenland P. 2005. **Developmental Movement Play** JABADAO

Nutbrown C. 2001 2ndEd. **Threads of Thinking** Paul Chapman Publishing

Ritchie K and Roberts A. 2004 **A Place to Be**. Oxfordshire County Council

Selleck D. Being Under Three – Enhancing quality experiences - in Pugh G (Ed), 3rd edition 2001.**Contemporary Issues in the Early Years – Working collaboratively for Children**. Paul Chapman Publishing.



Listening to children under 2

Tracking and observing - Everyday Stories - Oxford Brookes Nursery

We observed five children over two days during their whole session at the nursery; Kiera aged 16 months, Danielle aged 6 months, Charlie aged 21 months, Adam aged 12 months and Victor aged 15 months.

What did we find out?

So much was revealed by the children but three main points emerged:

1. Sustained observations revealed patterns of the children's learning and threads of thinking – 'schema' – Kiera repeatedly offered books and toys as gifts in a give and take game as she worked on her 'getting to know people' schema, Charlie repeatedly pushed the Little Tikes car forwards and then backwards in the garden as he worked on his 'trajectory' schema. This is something that, although staff were aware of the developmental stages of the children, they were not picking up on the children's individual schema and therefore failing to provide for their learning in this way.
2. Adult intervention by 'well meaning' adults can be inappropriate for the child, interrupting their learning or

unintentionally putting them in a stressful situation – Danielle was fascinated by the buckles and straps on her highchair, manipulating them, mouthing them etc. until an adult approached from behind to place her bib on and completely concealed them, making her lose her work. Danielle had earlier been placed on her back on the floor in the middle of a busy play area and become quite distressed, while the member of staff answered the door.

3. The operation of a key person approach is vital to the emotional well being of the child. Failure to organise this approach successfully has an adverse effect on the child. Adam spent most of his morning playing alone with only fleeting adult interaction. Although he appeared happy to have such freedom for uninterrupted play, because his key person had the morning off and the buddy was completely taken up with settling-in a new child (Victor), another staff member saw to Adam's physical needs and it was only for the last ten minutes of his session, when his key person arrived, that he had any real sustained quality interaction with an adult.

What did we change?

Each observation day was followed by a feedback session to the staff involved. We also organised an additional room meeting to disseminate information discussed at the first workshop and to discuss actions to be implemented as a result of the above three main findings. The related action points were decided upon:

1. Staff needed further training in the identification of children's schema and ways in which to support and develop them. A decision was made to devote the next full staff training day in January 2006 to this subject and Dorothy Selleck was asked to facilitate the training.
2. Through discussion of particular interventions that had made a negative impact on the child, staff became more aware of this and it was agreed to be more sensitive to any disruption of their activity. It was also decided that the environment could be improved to provide a quieter, 'safer' area, particularly for the younger babies, so that if staff needed to place them on the floor to attend to something else there was a more secure area for them to be in.

3. The importance of ensuring the buddy is available for a key person's children, when the key person is settling-in a new child, has prompted us to take this into account when booking settling-in visits for new children.

What impact have the changes made on our provision?

The immediate impact on the provision was that the level in which we were so closely examining the children's experiences really opened the staff's eyes to how absolutely everything has an effect on the children.

Staff now allocate time to carry out extended observations on their children, enabling them to recognise any schemas they may be working on, information which helps to inform their planning. Staff also now make time during room meetings to collaboratively discuss observations on their children to ensure they are making shared judgements on their development. Our quiet area has helped to provide a 'safe haven' from the busier part of the room when needed. Also, improved organisation of the key person and buddy during settling-in times has meant that the experiences of

Listening to children under 2 cont...

the other children are no longer as compromised when key people are particularly busy.

Involvement in the project has proven to be a very valuable exercise and truly made us put our provision under the microscope and see it through the child's eyes. We are committed to continuing this form of self evaluation and would back Dorothy's proposal that the managers involved form a support network to sustain and improve on this critical area of development work. The findings have forced us to not simply make decisions on our own perceptions of best practice, but to make informed judgements, based on the most important evidence of all – the voice of the child.

Sarah Hinkin 22/02/06
(updated February 2007)

Conclusion

By effective listening and careful recording of babies' experiences of daycare, replicating the methods from "Everyday Stories" (Elfer & Selleck 1996-7) managers and mentors gathered a wealth of evidence from 33 children in 11 nurseries. The 169 hours of observation were analysed in workshops where they tried to make meaning of the children's voices.

The 7 powerful messages which emerged are essential for managers to take into account when considering changes in the nursery to develop high quality provision and practice. They demonstrate the value of co-constructing quality with the babies who attend the nursery.

This work demonstrates the managers' strong commitment to make time to listen to children although their reports comment on the difficulty of prioritizing observations in a busy schedule.

It also highlights the training and support needs of managers and their staff in areas such as observation methods, feeding back to staff, key person approach and identifying schema.

Managers also value the regular support of Advisory Teachers to help them in the challenging work of managing change in their nurseries.

"This project has enabled me as a manager to stop and really see the day through a child's eye, from their perspective, and to be able to see the changes the children really needed within the nursery to improve their quality of care and opportunities. "



Are you listening to me?

'This project has enabled me as a manager to stop and really see the day through a child's eye, from their perspective, and to be able to see the changes the children really needed within the nursery to improve their quality of care and opportunities.'



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