



Leadership for listening

What is leadership for listening?

The aim of this leaflet is to inspire and support early years practitioners in developing a culture of listening in their settings through effective leadership.

A listening culture is one in which listening to individual experiences and views is identified as a core feature of the setting's approach and ethos. It is an environment in which practitioners and managers value the importance of listening; are aware of and reflect on how they listen to staff, parents and children; and acknowledge and respond to experiences and views without discrimination.

There are many different professional understandings of leadership but, for the purposes of this leaflet, a working definition has been adopted based on an early years specific model of leadership as an active process.

Leadership is:

an enabling process through which individuals can inspire, articulate, influence and implement a shared, collective vision of principles, policy and practice.

This definition can be applied to other professional models and groups who wish to explore leadership approaches.

Integral to this understanding of leadership is the idea that leadership

and management, although linked and often interdependent, should not be seen as synonymous. As Schon (1983) observes:

One can, for example, fulfil many of the symbolic, inspirational, educational and normative functions of a leader and thus represent what an organisation stands for without carrying any of the formal burden of management. Conversely, one can manage without leading. An individual can monitor and control organisational activities, make decisions and allocate resources without fulfilling the symbolic, normative inspirational or educational functions of leadership

YOUNG CHILDREN'S VOICES NETWORK (YCVN)

YCVN is a national project promoting listening within the early years. The network supports local authorities in developing good practice in listening to young children, so that young children's views may inform policy and improve early childhood services. Local authorities across the country have established local networks that focus on developing a listening culture. These networks support practitioners by offering opportunities to share effective practice, providing training and undertaking projects. This leaflet celebrates the work of YCVN and provides case studies and guidance emerging from the project.

LISTENING

In this leaflet listening is defined as:

- an active process of receiving (hearing and observing), interpreting and responding to communication – it includes all the senses and emotions and is not limited to the spoken word
- a necessary stage in ensuring the participation of young children as well as parents and staff, in matters that affect them
- an ongoing part of tuning in to all children as individuals in their everyday lives
- sometimes part of a specific consultation about a particular entitlement, choice, event or opportunity.

What is argued for here, is a model for distributive and consultative leadership – where several people can simultaneously fulfil a leadership role in the same early childhood setting. In order to embed a culture of listening, we need to establish common values, a shared vision and creative practice; and move away from the idea that leadership is the exclusive preserve of one person.

Case study 1: What young children think

Bright Beginnings (BB) nursery in Leeds offers full daycare, with some children there for a considerable length of time. It is important that children feel comfortable in their surroundings and with the people who care for them.

Staff wore a 'uniform' that included BB T-shirts and decided to consult children of all ages accessing the setting as to what they thought about these clothes. They considered how to create an activity which could be adapted to meet individual levels of development and interest. They placed different items of clothing and fabric in a large attractive basket along with the BB T-shirts. Familiar carers supported the children to explore the textures and colours, and to express their views. They observed the children to assess preferences, took photographs, recorded verbal comments and offered the older children drawing materials.

Babies of 3–16 months loved the different textures, bracelets and beads. They did not explore the BB T-shirts. Children of 16–24 months explored the basket and chose items they wanted to wear, which did not include the BB T-shirts. Children of 24–36 months selected and discussed favourite items; they showed no preference for the BB T-shirts. Children of 36–60 months dressed a member of staff to make her beautiful. The only two items they did not select were the BB T-shirts. Their drawings featured clothes full of colour, 'a marrying dress', rainbows, balloons, suits and different-coloured hair.

Staff learnt that the children did not find the colours and textures of their uniforms interesting – they liked fabrics, colour, texture and individuality. They decided to respond to the children's preferences and to no longer wear the uniforms, and have since widened the involvement of other staff in the nursery to see what they and other children felt.

Why is leadership important?

Research over the last 25 years indicates that there is a strong connection between quality of leadership and quality of early years provision.

Whilst expectations of leadership in and for early childhood services are high, leadership in early years practice is not clearly defined, and studies have often focused on the leaders themselves rather than viewing leadership as a cultural system. The current popular view is that leadership is about a single person and that leaders are usually focused on a competitive and business-oriented approach. This does not sit well in the early childhood sector, which is primarily concerned with promoting and protecting the welfare of families and young children (Ebbeck and Waniganayake 2003, Neugebauer 2000). In particular, Neugebauer described the best type of leader within an early childhood programme as a 'democratic motivator'.

Leadership is essential for enabling continuous quality improvement in early years settings – to motivate and inspire staff to work together and provide all children in their care with high quality early years experiences that support their learning and development.

Sharing vision and values

A useful perspective in relation to leadership for listening is the idea of social pedagogy. This approach recognises the importance of the 'social and personal variables' that every learner brings to the learning situation and puts the learner at the centre. West-Burnham (2010) states that leadership derived from the principles of social pedagogy might be best defined and explained through the following elements:

- a holistic focus on the person, recognising and respecting the dignity and significance of the person in personal, social and cultural terms
- an active engagement with the person, seeking to understand and develop an effective relationship with them on their terms
- recognising the need, as appropriate, for restorative and compensatory intervention to build personal capacity
- embedding the relationship in a framework of rights, entitlements and the value and dignity of the individual.

He observes that the principle of collaboration is central to 'supporting and sustaining innovation and improvement'. These elements are also central to the creation of a listening culture, which can be seen as the manifestation in practice of a person-centred rights-based approach.

This does not suggest that the traditional notion of a manager is redundant. Jones and Pound (2006, p10) suggest that the identified person, usually in a managerial role, should be viewed as a 'leader of leaders'. They suggest a broader concept of leadership in early years settings in order to create a culture of 'inclusive leadership' in which each individual is encouraged to see themselves as a potential leader.



The Listening Cycle (McAuliffe 2003)

The Listening Cycle (McAuliffe 2003) shows a process of listening to young children which the Early Childhood Unit at NCB has highlighted as an effective model to underpin good practice. Leadership which promotes this process of listening to and involving not only children but also staff and parents can enable everyone's

participation in developing children's services. Leadership for listening can contribute to quality improvement and to sustaining a listening culture that values everyone's experiences of the setting.

Principles of listening for leadership

A listening culture demands an open style of management where the power to make choices and decisions is negotiated and shared, tasks are delegated effectively and change is viewed as an opportunity rather than a threat. Rodd (2006) argues that supporting the development of relationships between all members of early childhood communities, and also teamwork, are vital if leadership in early childhood settings is to be effective.

Leadership emanates out of vision that is based in philosophy, values and beliefs, which in turn guides policy, day-to-day operation and innovation. It is manifested through strategic planning that grows out of reflection.

Listening is a vital part of establishing respectful relationships between parents, staff and children in an early years setting. In turn, such relationships are the core of ethical and meaningful participation and belonging for individual early childhood communities.

Case study 2: A listening culture

Spencer Nursery and Children's Centre in Surrey provides a service to 50 children and their families. Over the past few years, it has endeavoured to further develop and strengthen the relationships between practitioners, children and their families so that they reflect the views of all partners. Part of this process has involved the development of systems to record, analyse and resource children's learning needs through the collection of information. Fiona Downing, Head of Centre at Spencer, has linked this to the developing leadership role of practitioners to reflect the supportive nature of their posts as key persons to a named group of children and their families.

Fiona says that:

At Spencer we value the experiences of all our staff. One of the challenges of motivating less qualified staff to take a leadership role is that they do not perceive themselves as leaders. This is often dependant on past educational experiences and the distinction that is currently made between teachers, Early Years professionals and less qualified nursery staff.

My job is to support staff and convince them that they have got the ability to lead on our work with children and families and that they are already making daily decisions and sharing responsibilities that lie at the heart of our practice.

Fiona sees her role as overarching but not controlling. When things go wrong, shared solutions are found. She sees mutual trust as fundamental to effective leadership; and daily interaction as essential. She compares her team to a mosaic, each individual having something important to contribute to the whole work of the setting, and says that staff often take on leadership responsibilities without realising it. She sees her role as manager as being:

to watch and listen from the sidelines and be supportive. Even if sometimes things go in a direction that I would not have chosen.

This collaborative and democratic approach is extended to direct work with children and families.

One key tool we use to document children's learning has been the development of our Learning Stories, which record not only what children do whilst in the setting but invite and enable families and children to contribute their own stories and views. This has been a practical way of not only valuing families as their child's first and most influential educator but it has also given us the opportunity of learning from the child what they feel about themselves and the world around them.

Leadership in practice

In order for settings to be successful, collaboration and cooperation from all staff is vital.

The first principle of effective teamwork is for staff to agree on a purpose; code of conduct; protocol and procedures; vision; values; and roles and responsibilities as early as possible. A setting that has agreement on these issues can more easily ensure that its efforts are purposeful and that all members contribute effectively.

Effective listening and communication through regular team meetings and a review of policies and procedures will thus be central to this process. Siraj-Blatchford and Manni (2006 p17) found that effective leaders accept the inevitability of change and are able to plan for and manage it so that everyone feels part of the process.

Any resistance to change appeared to be overcome by the development of a climate and culture for change that was established through the routine collaborative review of current practice and policy. These routines of review validated the processes of change, promoting confidence and acceptance where there might have been fear or resistance. The staff had come to regard change as manageable because they could see that it often emerged out of needs, observed or experienced, rather than out of any obligation or for the sake of change.

They see effective leaders as (p22):

reflective practitioners who influence and develop people by setting an example, and providing a model, both morally and purposefully.

Assessing and evaluating current practice is an important first step. Whilst it is necessary to identify weaknesses as part of this process, it is also important to affirm and celebrate existing strengths.

If every staff member can be enabled to share the same values and vision, individual strengths are much more likely to be valued and utilised, and colleagues will listen to each other more effectively. A well-motivated and dynamic team usually enjoys challenge and demonstrates more willingness to solve problems as they arise.

Case study 3: A team approach to listening

Stanley Scamps Out of School Club in Blackpool provides a service for children aged 3–11 years old and has been working with the local authority in order to improve listening practice within the setting. Over the previous year, the setting had been reflecting on and developing practice related to enabling children's voices within the setting.

Through attending training and professional reflection, the centre leader developed a clear philosophy around the importance of providing a listening and responding ethos in the setting. Materials from the training she attended were used to disseminate a clear message to the team and promote discussion around the best way to achieve a shared vision. In these discussions concerns were raised and worked through.

Initially some team members thought that this development would mean that whatever the child said they wanted would have to happen – that children would be allowed to do dangerous things that the team member would find uncomfortable.

The whole team was invited to assume the role of a children's participation champion, with the responsibility of ensuring children's voices were heard. The team discussed ways in which they could be guided by the children about what they liked and didn't like about the resources, snacks, opportunities and experiences offered, and the people who worked at the club; and why they did and didn't like the above. These decisions were analysed and, if not acted upon, staff explained why and worked with the children to find an alternative action.

As the team began to gain confidence they were able to ascertain from the children which methods of consultation and participation they preferred.

To enable children's informed participation in decisions, a visual representation of the budget with removable pieces is displayed on the wall, so that all the children can understand what effect spending would have on their allocated budget. Team leader Rachel Howson outlined some of the challenges.

There was a time factor involved in changing embedded habits – for the children and the team. Some of the team were comfortable that consultation might be something we did once a term or for a particular event, for example planning a party, rather than everyday practice. It took over a year for all the team to embrace this new practice.

At a recent Ofsted inspection, the setting received an outstanding grade and the first words of that report are:

The children have a strong voice within their setting.

Identifying and overcoming barriers

Inclusion is a process of identifying, understanding and breaking down the barriers to participation and belonging.

This definition was devised by members of the national Early Childhood Forum (Early Childhood Forum, 2005)

There are many barriers that potential leaders for listening may face. In some early years settings there are hierarchical frameworks, where roles and responsibilities have traditionally been inflexible and factors such as qualifications or experience have dictated status and power within the setting. It may thus be necessary for all team members to reinterpret their professional role and how they operate within the team. Anxieties and misgivings may develop around any or all of these issues.

Rodd (2006 p153) describes how conflict and power struggles can diminish team productivity and lead to members becoming 'stuck' in a 'destructive cycle of discord'. She argues that an effective team leader employs a set of strategies in which listening and communication skills are central (p161):

- uses personality to lead by example, thereby stimulating a particular team culture:
- is innovative, and is perceived to be making things better by improving team morale and productivity
- ensures that constructive relationships are established and maintained with the staff and peers
- focuses attention on the behaviour or the situation, not on the person
- fosters the self-esteem and confidence of team members; and coaches team members to improve their performance.

There may also be attitudinal and cultural barriers to overcome. There are huge variations in how individual settings currently understand and implement inclusive practice and address equality issues. In the process of embedding a listening culture, team members may need to consider how specific issues such as prejudice and discrimination may impact on the experiences of children, families and individual team members, and thus on the accessibility and quality of the service.

The following will help to underpin a listening culture that promotes equality:

- access to appropriate training and support
- opportunities for honest personal and professional reflection

- support for staff to find language they feel comfortable with, so they can listen and respond to families with confidence
- the celebration and sharing of positive practice.

Moyles (2006 p60) makes the point that empowering staff can lead directly to the empowerment of children:

Like all good cultural changes empowerment has a knock on effect. As well as the children the staff should feel enabled and in control of their teaching, having a strong sense of ownership of the areas of the setting in which they operate.

Establishing a network

Local authorities and settings can set up networks to focus on developing good practice in listening to young children, so that young children's views may inform policy and improve early childhood services. Local networks provide opportunities for practitioners' views to be heard and valued, and for collective reflection on local effective practice. Many networks have motivated practitioners to become leaders of practice and 'change agents' in their own settings, as well as in collaboration with neighbouring settings.

Local YCVN networks are designed to:

- train and support practitioners in listening and responding to young children
- help practitioners be more confident in enabling young children to participate in the design, development and delivery of services
- offer a local platform for sharing young children's perspectives with strategic partners to inform local policy and continuous quality improvement
- provide evidence of listening and participation activity to support local authorities in meeting their duty to listen.

Local YCVN networks can create their own collective vision of a listening culture. They can set local objectives on how to extend and embed listening practice to enable young children's participation in children's services.

The purpose of the national Young Children's Voices Network is to support local authorities in meeting their statutory requirement to listen to young children and their parents. Section 3 of the Childcare Act, 2006 states that:

All English local authorities must have regard to such information about the views of young children as is available to the local authority and appears to them to be relevant to the discharge of these duties

Case study 4: A local authority approach

Newcastle City Council adopted their current Listening to Young Children Strategy in 2008. Prior to this in 2005/6, as one of the YCVN pilot programmes, a Children's Champions Network had been developed to share good practice and information about participation work with young children. To support this process, a Listening to Young Children Officer (LTYCO) was appointed by the local authority to work directly with practitioners by providing a range of training opportunities and peer support networks. From the onset it was agreed that to empower young children to participate in democratic processes, the qualities of listening to young children would need to be embedded as a way of life within the workforce.

The current LTYCO, Louise Cameron, works directly with staff teams within settings to embed good practice, challenge myths and develop an ethos of listening. During the workshops that she runs, teams are encouraged to take a solution-focused approach



and to work collaboratively. They are able to identify and celebrate areas of success, identify gaps and discuss realistic solutions to barriers. Louise describes how:

The whole team adopts the collective responsibility of listening whilst recognising individual responsibilities and strengths. The ownership of listening to children becomes unique to a setting and becomes embedded as a natural process. As settings listen to children as experts on their own lives, the relationships between children and practitioners develop into an inspirational partnership. As staff 'tune in' to young children, a culture of consultation and change promotes confidence and raises the self-esteem of all of those involved.

Through practitioner network meetings the Listening Champions then discuss, explore and review consultation methodology with a view to improving opportunities for children to influence change from early years communities across the city. The network supports local, citywide and national consultation projects. As Louise says, the overall aim is that 'Children will never be seen and not heard here in Newcastle.'

Summary

This leaflet has sought to demonstrate that valuing and responding to the voice of the young child requires an open style of leadership where the power to make decisions is negotiated and shared in relation to all relevant members of staff, parents and young children.

A listening culture and ethos can thus be developed by valuing people's respective voices so that everyone can contribute to a more sensitive, reflective and ultimately effective service.

Whilst this process is likely to bring benefits in terms of quality improvement for the setting and better outcomes for individual children, as Peter Moss (2001) points out:

'Listening' is not only a complex concept, but it goes to the heart of the theories, relationships and practice that shape early childhood work. It should not be an add-on, to meet some external requirement ... if we choose to listen to young children, it should be because listening is part of our beliefs about learning, relationships, democracy and ethics. It is an integral part of how we think life should be lived.

Key Questions

Settings that want to develop a listening culture can start by asking themselves the following:

What is the value system that underpins our current practice – and is a listening ethos part of this?

Do we have an enabling approach to leadership in our setting where every member of staff has the potential to influence positive change?

Do we operate effectively as a team where individual's ideas for improving listening practice are encouraged and supported?

What are the strengths and weaknesses of our current approach to listening to children, parents and practitioners?

How can we overcome weaknesses and build on our current strengths to inform and develop future practice?

Do we know where to go for advice, training, support and information?

References

Early Childhood Forum (2005) *Participating and Belonging in Early Years Settings: Inclusion – Working towards equality*, London: NCB.

Ebbeck, M and Waniganayake, M (2003) *Early Childhood Professionals: Leading today and tomorrow*. NSW: MacLennan and Petty.

Gill, C (2008) *Evaluation of the Young Children's Voices Network Project: Report*. London: NCB.

Jones, C and Pound, L (2006) *Leadership and Management in the Early Years*. Maidenhead: Oxford University Press.

Neugebauer, R (2000) 'What is management ability?' in Culkin, ML (ed) *Managing Quality in Young Children's Programs: The leader's role*. pp 97–111. New York: Teachers College Press.

McAuliffe, A (2003) 'When are we having candyfloss?' Report on a project to investigate consultation with very young children in early years services. London: NCB.

Moss, P (2001) 'All about consulting with children', *Nursery World*, 5 July 2001.

Moyles, J (2006) *Effective Leadership and Management in the Early Years*. Open University Press.

Rodd, J (2006) *Leadership in Early Childhood*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Siraj-Blatchford, I and Manni, L (2006) 'Effective leadership in the Early Years Sector', ELEYS Study, London: Institute of Education.

Schon, D (1983) *The Reflective Practitioner: How professionals think in action*. USA: Basic Books.

West-Burnham, J (2010) 'School leadership for well-being', *Highlight*, 257. London: NCB.

Further reading

Clark, A and Moss, P (2001) *Listening to Young Children: Using the mosaic approach*. London: NCB.

Clark, A and Moss, P (2005) *Spaces to Play: More listening to young children using the Mosaic Approach*. London: NCB.

Clark, A, Moss, P and Kjørholt, A (eds) (2005) *Beyond Listening: Children's perspectives on early childhood*. Bristol: Policy Press.

Dickins, M, Emerson, S and Gordon Smith, P (2004) *Starting with Choice: Inclusive strategies for consulting young children*. London: Save the Children.

Garvey, D and Lancaster, A (2009) *Leadership for Quality in Early Years and Playwork: Supporting your team to achieve better outcomes for children and families*. London: NCB.

Hamer, CW and Williams, L (2010) *Let's Listen: Young children's voices – Profiling and planning to enable their participation in children's services*. London: NCB.

Young, J (2009) *How to build a culture of participation*. London: NCB for Participation Works.

Kirby, P and others (2003) *Building a Culture of Participation*. London: NCB.

Lancaster, YP and Kirby, P on behalf of Coram (2010) *Listening to Young Children, 2nd edition*. Buckinghamshire: Open University Press.

Lancaster, YP (2010) 'Listening to young children: Enabling children to be seen and heard' in Pugh, G and Duffy, B (eds) *Contemporary Issues in the Early Years*, 5th Ed. London: Sage

Lansdown, Gerison (2005) 'Can you hear me? The right of young children to participate in decisions affecting them', *Working Papers in Early Childhood Development*. The Hague: Bernard van Leer Foundation.

Listening as a way of life leaflets – See page 8 for details

Miller, J (1997) *Never Too Young: How young children can take responsibility and make decisions – A handbook for early years workers*. London: Save the Children.

Useful websites

www.nationalcollege.org.uk

The National Professional Qualification in Integrated Centre Leadership (NPQICL) is aimed at leaders of designated children's centres. This includes leaders of centres that have originated from Sure Start local programmes; neighbourhood nursery initiatives; and maintained nursery schools that have become or been nominated as children's centres.

www.participationworks.org.uk

Participation Works is a partnership of six national children and young people's agencies. It enables organisations to effectively involve children and young people in the development, delivery and evaluation of services that affect their lives. The site contains an Early Years topic with specific information on listening to young children, developed by the Early Childhood Unit at NCB.

www.peal.org.uk

PEAL offers training for practitioners in working in partnership with parents. It aims to build parents' confidence and active involvement in their children's early learning and development.

Useful websites (continued)

www.ncb.org.uk/yevn

Young Children's Voices Network (YCVN) is a national project promoting listening within the early years. The network supports local authorities in developing good practice in listening to young children, so that young children's views may inform policy and improve early childhood services. Practice development, consultancy, networking opportunities, and resources are available.

www.ncb.org.uk/bvn

The National Black Voices Network is an email-based network of around 300 black and white practitioners who work across the children's sector. NBVN offers a collective voice, from black and anti-racist perspectives, to influence policy and practice and to promote an understanding of how racial identity and racism can impact on opportunities and life chances. The aim is to nurture a generation of leaders who actively support young children to be proud of their heritage, and are prepared to hear what young children say about their world.

www.ncb.org.uk

NCB promotes the interests and well-being of all children and young people across every aspect of their lives. NCB advocates the participation of children and young people in all matters affecting them and challenges disadvantage in childhood.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Author: Mary Dickins
Critical reader: Rose Bailey
Series editor: Lucy Williams

With thanks to Fiona Downing, Rachel Howson, Liz Cameron, Louise Cameron, Jennifer Lewis, Fiona Hakin and Herjinder Sambhi for providing case study material; Anita Bright for use of photograph; and Joyce Connor, Patrice Lawrence, Judy Miller, Ann Robinson, and colleagues in the Department for Education, for their comments and support.

STATUTORY GUIDANCE

The requirement under section 3 of the Childcare Act 2006 states that LAs must have regard to any information about the views of young children which is available and relevant to those duties. For services to be successful, the voices of young children need to be listened to and actively taken into account. Children need to be recognised as 'partners' in the planning and commissioning of services. By regularly listening to young children, local partnerships can respond to children's needs, identify barriers to learning and development, and ultimately work towards improving services for children and supporting children to achieve their potential.

Listening as a way of life

This is the second leaflet in the second series of 'Listening as a way of life' leaflets. The first, *Developing a listening culture* (2009), shares learning from the Young Children's Voices Network pilot project funded by the (then) Department for Children, Schools and Families.

The first series of the Listening as a way of life leaflets provides guidance to practitioners in designing creative and individual ways of listening to children and to each other.

Titles from the first series include:

1. *Why and how we listen to young children*
2. *Listening to babies*
3. *Listening to young disabled children*
4. *Are equalities an issue? Finding out what young children think*
5. *Listening and responding to young children's views on food*
6. *Supporting parents and carers to listen: a guide for practitioners.*

For copies, contact the Early Childhood Unit on 020 7843 6064, email ecu@ncb.org.uk or visit www.ncb.org.uk/yevn



National Children's Bureau
8 Wakley Street
London EC1V 7QE

tel +44 (0)20 7843 6000
fax +44 (0)20 7278 9512

Registered Charity Number 258825

Useful numbers

Book Sales: 0845 458 9910
Conferences and Training: 020 7843 6041
Fundraising: 020 7843 6329
Library and Information Services: 020 7843 6008
Membership: 020 7843 6080
Young NCB: 020 7843 6099

www.ncb.org.uk