

Centre for Public Health Research

**Consulting with children under five
A literature review**

**Sarah Davies
Miranda Thurston**

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1 Why consult with young children?

Eliciting and understanding children's views have become increasingly important, for a range of reasons including legal, political, economic and academic (Clark, McQuail & Moss, 2003).

Sinclair (2004) argues that new paradigms in social science have encouraged the view of children as social actors, playing an active role in shaping their environment. Recent research has suggested that children are more competent than previously thought, in their ability to comment on their own lives and to be involved in making decisions (Sinclair, 2004). Indeed, theories of child development are often cited as a reason why young children can not be consulted, in that they are not able to understand the issues or make meaningful contributions. However, as argued by Alderson (2000), an alternative approach would be to assume that young children might understand enough in order to be consulted on particular matters, or on some aspects of them, or indeed that they may be able to understand if they are asked in different ways. Alderson (2000) demonstrates this by describing research which challenged the commonly accepted view of children's cognitive and moral abilities based on Piaget's (1932, cited in Alderson, 2000) findings that young children under seven are unable to understand that other people have a different viewpoint from their own. The original research on which these findings were based was repeated by Donaldson (1978, cited in Alderson, 2000) who found that by altering the way the questions were asked, children as young as three were able to solve the problems presented and therefore demonstrate an understanding that others have a viewpoint different from their own. The way in which the questions were asked was therefore found to be the crucial factor in allowing children to demonstrate this ability. Alderson (2000) argues that although this research demonstrated that children are more able than commonly believed, it is far less widely quoted than Piaget's older work, which promotes a view of young children as incompetent. Alderson (2000) states that as a consequence of this, many adults, both in professional and public arenas, hold the view that children should be protected and controlled, and that it is not necessary to consult them.

Many of the articles in the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* refer to respecting and including children, which Alderson and Morrow (2004) argue has resulted in an increasing respect for children's rights. Article 12 of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989) affords children the right to express their views on all matters that affect them and to have those views taken into

account. The term 'children' encompasses a broad and diverse group and therefore appropriate methods of communication and engagement will need to be developed, to suit the child and enable participation (Sinclair, 2004).

Recent government agendas have highlighted a need for "children and young people to have more opportunities to get involved in the design, provision and evaluation of policies and services that affect them or which they use" (Children and Young People's Unit, 2001, p.2). Involving children and young people in this way has the aim of producing better services, leading to better outcomes for children and young people (Children and Young People's Unit, 2001). The Government has set out core principles for increasing the involvement of children and young people, which all government departments are expected to follow. No lower age limit of children has been set for participation policies (Children and Young People's Unit, 2001). Indeed, the guidance reports one case study in which children aged between two and four years old in nurseries, took part in a consultation (Children and Young People's Unit, 2001).

The Government Green Paper *Every Child Matters* (2003) outlines a range of measures designed to reform and improve children's services. It states that "Real service improvement is only attainable through involving children and young people and listening to their views" (Department for Education and Skills [DfES], 2003, p.10). It also describes the Government's commitment to enabling children and young people to become involved in the planning, delivery and evaluation of policies and services which relate to them.

In a research study commissioned by the Sure Start Unit, (Clark, McQuail & Moss, 2003), 50 Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships' (EYDCPs) childcare audits, which included consultation activities, were studied, in order to find out to what extent pre-school children were being consulted. Only a small minority were found to have focused on the views of children under five. Clark, McQuail and Moss (2003) argue that consulting with young children should be a critical factor in new government initiatives and that young children should be involved in planning, maintaining and reviewing services, with regard to the development of children's centres.

Clark, McQuail and Moss (2003) identified two different purposes for listening to and involving young children in education and childcare settings, namely:

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- everyday listening by those who regularly work with young children, giving opportunities for decision-making in routines and activities, and
 - one-off consultation about a particular issue, event or opportunity.
(Clark, McQuail & Moss, 2003, p.8).

2. Definitions of listening, consultation and participation

Clark (2004) advocates listening to children as a crucial factor in understanding children's experience. 'Listening' is defined in the following way:

- An active process of receiving, 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 all children.
- 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.

(Clark, 2004, p.1).

Consultation is defined by Clark, McQuail and Moss (2003) as involving listening, but that the listening has the purpose of "seeking the views of children as a guide to action" (Borland, 2001, cited in Clark, McQuail & Moss, 2003, p.13). The term consultation implies a power imbalance as those who seek the views of others do so on their own terms, by deciding which questions to ask (Alderson, 2000). Furthermore, those doing the consulting decide the consequences of the consultation in that they can choose whether or not to act on their findings. By contrast, the term participation implies that power is shared between all those involved (Miller, 2003).

Hart (1997, cited in Clark, McQuail and Moss, 2003) argues that consultation is in fact one of many levels of participation. Participation by children can be at a range of possible levels. Hart's (1992) *Ladder of Participation*, adapted from Arnstein's (1969, cited in Shier, 2001) model of participation, describes eight possible levels of participation. The first three levels, namely manipulation, decoration and tokenism, are not seen as true participation. There are then five increasing degrees of participation, rising up the ladder. These are assigned but informed, consulted and informed, adult-initiated but decisions shared with children, child-initiated and directed, up to the top level of participation, child-initiated and decisions shared with adults. The National Youth Agency (2005) argues that unless involving children and

young people is accompanied by a commitment to attitudinal and organisational change and to service improvement, then children's participation will remain at the lower levels of the ladder.

Shier (2001) has developed a model of the different levels of participation, based on Hart's earlier model but intended as an additional resource for practitioners, to enable them to explore aspects of participation in their organisation. Shier's (2001) model does not include the three lower levels of Hart's (1992) ladder, namely those representing non-participation. Instead, the model comprises five levels of participation, as follows:

1. Children are listened to.
2. Children are supported in expressing their views.
3. Children's views are taken into account.
4. Children are involved in decision-making processes.
5. Children share power and responsibility for decision making.

(Shier, 2001, p.110).

Each level is accompanied by questions which allow the practitioner to identify where he or she currently is in practice and also what the next steps are to increase the level of children's participation (see Appendix 1).

3. The benefits of consultation

Clark (2004, p.1) argues that there are three main benefits of listening to young children, for the children themselves, as listed below.

- Everyday experiences can change.
Adults may make changes to children's everyday routines as a result of listening to children's views.
- Self-esteem can be raised.
The experience of being listened to by adults can increase children's self-confidence.
- Skills and understanding can be developed.
The process of listening to young children can lead children to think about their own experience and better understand it. They could also develop practical skills through more creative methods of consulting with young children, such as how to use a camera. Children's social skills can also be developed.

Benefits of consulting with children can also occur at service level. This approach can provide opportunities for practitioners to reflect on their practice (Clark, McQuail & Moss, 2003). Miller (2003) argues that the understanding of children's perspectives gained through children's participation can lead to adults providing services that are more relevant to children's needs.

4. How to consult with young children

Save the Children (2000) argues that although often the assumption is made that young children will not have much to say about their experiences, if innovative methods focusing on visual techniques, rather than verbal and written techniques, are used, it is possible to elicit the views of young children. Furthermore, Dickins, Emerson and Gordon-Smith (2004) argue that if young children are to express their views they must learn the necessary decision-making skills and need to be given opportunities to do so.

Clark, McQuail and Moss (2003) conducted a review of different methods used to consult with young children about their views and experiences of education and childcare. They found that there were three broad types of methods used:

- observation;
- traditional consultation techniques, such as interviews, focus groups and questionnaires;
- structured and multi-sensory methods, such as role play and the use of puppets.

In practice however, a combination of different consultation techniques can be used together, or different techniques may be used to explore different things (Dickins, Emerson & Gordon-Smith, 2004).

4.1 Observation

Observation is a traditional technique often used when trying to understand the abilities, needs and interests of young children (Clark, McQuail & Moss, 2003). Indeed, Ball (2002) argues that young children are not able to contribute a lot verbally to the evaluation of services, although conclusions can be drawn from observations of their behaviour. Observation can be particularly useful as a starting point when the aim is to listen to young children (Clark, 2004).

4.2 Traditional consultation techniques

Traditional consultation techniques, such as questionnaires and focus groups are often considered more appropriate for older children. Interviews are also a popular method for consulting older children and there are some concerns about the appropriateness of conducting interviews with young children (Clark, McQuail & Moss, 2003). However, if the method is adapted appropriately, for example with the use of picture cards, then interviews can be used with young children and can also be used to allow those with communication difficulties to express their views. Dickins, Emerson and Gordon-Smith (2004) describe an example of interviews being used with children in a nursery setting, to find out about children's food preferences at snack times.

4.3 Structured and multi-sensory methods

Projective techniques, which use persona dolls, can be used as a method of consulting with young children. In this method, a persona doll, a doll with its own name and given personal history, is introduced to children. The persona doll can then be used to ask children questions about themselves and their views. Some children may be more comfortable expressing their views in this way rather than in response to direct questioning (Dickins, Emerson & Gordon-Smith, 2004).

Multi-sensory approaches used to consult with young children include the use of cameras, tours and map making, audio recording, and arts activities (Clark, McQuail & Moss, 2003). For example, Clark and Moss (2001) gave cameras to young children and asked them to take photographs of the places they considered important in their pre-school setting. Art activities, such as painting and drawing, can allow children to express their feelings in visual rather than verbal ways, which they may find easier (Miller, 2003).

5 Barriers to consulting with young children

The literature describes a number of possible barriers that may need to be overcome in order to involve young children and enable them to express their views. These possible barriers include adults' attitudes and the resource implications associated with consulting with young children.

5.1 The attitudes of adults

Miller (2003) argues that the main barrier to children's participation is the attitude of those adults who do not believe that children have the capacity to make informed

decisions. However, children's competence is increased through experience, not age or ability (Alderson, 2000). Indeed, Alderson (2000, p.131) expresses the view that "Policy, practice and research which appreciate children as social beings in their daily context, and go beyond the strong traditions of seeing them as isolated individuals, reveal children as much more competent than was formerly thought possible".

There are also implications stemming from the changes to working practice that may be necessary in order to consult children. Alderson (2000) argues that some adults resist consulting children as they are worried about losing control, although this can be overcome by mixing a respectful attitude with a firm confident approach. A further concern may be that adults are anxious about the possibility of children becoming distressed (Alderson, 2000). There can also be a lack of confidence among professionals about consulting young children (Alderson, 2000). Clark, McQuail and Moss (2003) suggest there may be a need to help practitioners to reflect on their skills of listening to, and observing young children, to increase their confidence in their own abilities. This may have implications for training.

Some approaches to early childhood care lend themselves to a consultative approach more than others and so would not necessarily entail a significant change in working practice. One such example is the High/Scope approach, which has been adopted widely within Cheshire Sure Start. This approach utilises active learning, encouraging children's learning through their direct experiences. Following a plan-do-review format, children make choices themselves about the activities they would like to do. They plan the activity, carry it out and are then supported by an adult to review their actions and what they have learnt (High/Scope, 2006). The High/Scope approach involves adults sharing control with children, respecting children's choices, and encouraging children's initiative and independence (High/Scope, 2006). Practitioners working with this approach may already have developed the skills and methods necessary to consult with young children, or may be more inclined to do so.

The attitude of parents is a further possible barrier to consulting young children as they may hold the belief that adults talk to adults and children should listen, which could make it difficult to consult the child without deferring to the parent (Alderson, 2000). There could also be tensions created if the child experiences different expectations at home and in the pre-school setting.

5.2 Resource implications: time and financial cost

Consulting young children can be time consuming. However, Miller (2003) argues that if participation is made part of the curriculum, the necessary planning and preparation time are not significantly extra to what is already done.

Added financial cost implications can also be a barrier to consulting with young children. Consulting with young children may require a more creative approach and use of a range of methods compared with consulting with adults. However, as Miller (2003) argues, most early years settings will already have the necessary resources available. There may be costs associated with any necessary staff training which will need to be considered.

6 Resources available to support consultation with young children

There are some commercially available resources to support consultation with young children which could be useful in Sure Start settings. A brief description of each is provided below.

6.1 The Mosaic approach (Clark & Moss, 2001)

The Mosaic approach was designed to be used with three and four year olds in an early childhood institution and has also been adapted to make it suitable for children younger than this, as well as children for whom English is an additional language. The aim in developing the Mosaic approach was “to find practical ways to contribute to the development of services that are responsive to the ‘voice of the child’ and which recognise young children’s competencies” (Clark & Moss, 2001, p.2). It is a multi-method approach which utilises photographs taken by children, tours and maps, alongside observation and discussion. Therefore it does not rely only on verbal methods of communication but enables young children, including those who are pre-verbal, to express their views and experiences in a range of creative ways.

In developing a framework for listening to young children, the following factors were considered, so that the framework is:

- *multi-method*: recognises the different ‘voices’ or languages of children;
- *participatory*: treats children as experts and agents in their own lives;
- *reflexive*: includes children, practitioners and parents in reflecting on meanings; addresses the question of interpretation;
- *adaptable*: can be applied in a variety of early childhood institutions;

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- *focused on children's lived experiences*: can be used for a variety of purposes including looking at lives lived rather than knowledge gained or care received;
 - *embedded into practice*: a framework for listening which has the potential to be both used as an evaluative tool and to become embedded into early years practice.

(Clark & Moss, 2001, p.5).

There are two stages to the Mosaic approach. Stage One involves “children and adults gathering documentation”. Stage Two consists of “piecing together information for dialogue, reflection and interpretation”. (Clark & Moss, 2001, p.11). The range of methods used in the approach includes observation, child conferencing, photography, tours, mapping and role play. The perceptions of parents and practitioners are also utilised. Each of these aspects are brought together to develop an understanding of the young child's priorities.

The Mosaic approach is presented as a book. It explains each of the different methods used in the approach, provides examples of them being used in practice, and discusses the issues involved with their use. It also presents case studies demonstrating how the results were brought together and interpreted. In this way it is a practical resource. However, the Mosaic approach was designed to be embedded into early years practice, rather than being merely an approach to consultation with young children. It advocates an approach which fully respects children, and views “listening as an ongoing conversation” (Clark & Moss, 2001, p.10). This has time implications for both the introduction of the Mosaic approach and its actual implementation.

The introduction of the Mosaic approach into a particular early childhood setting would require participating staff to become familiar with the approach, either by detailed reading of the book or through dedicated staff training time to explore the methods and tools.

Implementation of the approach also requires a time commitment for gathering the material and then interpreting it. The approach involves using several different methods with each child in order to build up the whole picture of their views and experiences.

The Mosaic approach focuses on children's lived experiences and so may not be useful for consulting with young children about issues which are not of direct relevance to their everyday lives. Rather it could be useful for gaining an insight into how the children understand their early childhood environment as well as eliciting views about their priorities and experiences.

6.2 Never Too Young (Miller, 2003)

This is a handbook which "shows how young children under the age of eight can participate, make decisions and take responsibility for their actions" (Miller, 2003). It is arranged into three sections.

The first section explores the concept of childhood and examines some common beliefs in detail. It explains how the perceptions and attitudes of adults will affect whether and how children are encouraged to participate. The case for consulting with young children is presented and the different stages of developing a policy for participation within the childhood setting are described.

The second section aims to encourage practitioners to reflect on their current practice by posing some key questions about how the activities and the environment are organised and how decisions are made. Some general approaches which can be used to increase children's participation are described in detail.

The final section provides a range of methods of facilitating children's participation. Activities are organised into groups depending upon the focus, for example, there are activities to develop confidence and self-esteem and activities to help children to express feelings and opinions. The age range considered appropriate for each activity is given and detailed instructions are provided.

This resource offers a comprehensive introduction to the area of children's participation as it provides detailed background information and also encourages practitioners to reflect on their own practice. It is written in a friendly conversational style, rather than an academic style, and provides detailed descriptions of various activities which can easily be used in practice. Indeed, the activities are scaled according to ease of use and any extra resources that will be needed are listed. As such, it is a very practical resource and may appeal to early years practitioners.

6.3 Listening to Young Children (Lancaster & Broadbent, 2003)

This is a resource pack developed to support children under the age of eight to express their views and feelings and therefore encourage participation in issues relevant to them. It was devised to be used in a range of different settings, in education, health and social services, such as nurseries or Sure Start local programmes (Coram Family, 2005).

The resource pack aims to:

- promote a holistic approach to gain understanding of how young children are making sense of the world around them;
- offer real opportunities to young children to participate in planning, designing, evaluating, problem-solving and decision-making processes to improve practices and services;
- create an environment that enables children to express their views, concerns, experiences, interests and aspirations *and* for these to be taken seriously;
- develop socially inclusive adult-child relationships, within which children know they will be heard;
- strengthen the listening skills and attitudes of parents and practitioners necessary for them to engage effectively with young children.

(Lancaster & Broadbent, 2003, Getting Started, p.1).

The resource pack is made up of five linked parts:

- Getting Started – the introductory guide;
- Promoting Listening to Young Children – the reader;
- Listening and Looking – the practitioner handbook;
- Shared Experiences – eleven individual case study booklets;
- CD-ROM with audio-visual material to illustrate the case studies.

This is an extremely detailed resource which aims to provide practitioners and parents with an understanding of how to listen to young children, as well as the skills necessary for doing so. As such, it addresses “the why, when and how to listen to young children” (Lancaster & Broadbent, 2003, Listening and Looking, p.1). Therefore a conceptual framework for listening to children is provided, alongside in-depth guidance about how to facilitate it in practice. This framework consists of a three-step spiral process, namely Preparation, Process and Reflection (PPR). This

aims to highlight issues raised through listening to children so that these can be addressed and practice improved.

This resource is the most comprehensive of all those presented. It advocates a holistic approach to enabling young children's participation in planning, designing and evaluating services, rather than providing a list of possible activities. It would require a substantial commitment by practitioners in terms of time and also motivation to fully implement this approach. There would need to be regular staff development sessions in order to introduce it. However, if the commitment is there, then detailed materials are available to support its introduction and implementation. Adopting this approach may result in significant changes in attitudes and practice if the way of working is different from current methods of working.

6.4 Starting with Choice (Dickins, Emerson & Gordon-Smith, 2004)

This book provides guidance on inclusive strategies for consulting young children. It focuses particularly on involving young disabled children in decision making but points out that the methods and approaches suggested are equally appropriate for all young children, not just those with disabilities.

A range of consultation techniques and ways of giving children choices are suggested. Within this, the techniques and approaches, such as interviews, use of drawing and use of mapping, are described and the issues that need to be considered when using the techniques with young children are explained. Examples of each technique having been used in early years settings are given. The ways of giving children choice are presented in the form of examples of semi-formal consultations about buying toys and equipment and about going on an outing. The recommended process is described as well as practical ideas about the methods to use.

It includes guidance on how to involve parents in a consultative approach. It also contains information about how to train and support early years practitioners to consult with young children by providing an outline of the issues to be considered.

This resource is briefer in content than the others described and so is less comprehensive. However, it is focused upon providing clear and practical guidance about using the consultation techniques suggested and so may be useful as an

additional resource for practitioners who are already committed to consulting with young children.

6.5 Children as Partners in Planning (Fajerman, Jarrett & Sutton, 2000).

This handbook is designed for professionals who work with children in early years centres and out-of-school clubs as part of Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships. The focus is on those working with children aged between nought and 11 years old. It aims to help “lay the foundation for consulting children about their experiences and preferences” (Fajerman, Jarrett & Sutton, 2000, p.7) and is actually a training pack to use when introducing consultation with children into a children’s services setting.

The resource is presented in the form of three different workshops, the half-day workshop, the one-day workshop and the two-day workshop. For each workshop a detailed programme and notes for the facilitator are provided. The activities are described in detail and relevant overhead transparencies and handouts to accompany the activities are provided. The workshops are highly participatory in nature.

The aims of each workshop, taken from Fajerman, Jarrett and Sutton (2000, p.18), are presented below.

The **half-day workshop** aims to:

- introduce the concept of consultation within the framework of the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*.

The **one-day** workshop aims to:

- introduce the concept of consultation within the framework of the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*;
- identify opportunities for consultation and the barriers to its effectiveness;
- enable participants to draft a statement of intent on consultation.

The **two-day** workshop aims to:

- introduce the concept of consultation within the framework of the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*;
- explore a range of approaches to children’s participation;

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- enable participants to plan a consultation in their setting;
 - enable participants to return after several weeks to share what they have learned from their consultations, and to develop a policy statement for their setting.

This resource would be useful in a setting where consultation with children is being considered, as it enables practitioners to reflect together on their current practice and also to plan the steps forward. It would require a member of staff to act as the facilitator during the workshop. This role would also involve some preparation beforehand in terms of becoming familiar with the materials and gathering together the resources to be used during the workshop.

7 Conclusion

The reasons for consulting young children and the possible benefits of doing so have been discussed. Consultation with young children may require creative approaches, rather than more standard methods of consultation, in order to enable participation. Methods of consulting with young children, from the available literature, and examples where they have been used in practice, have also been provided. There are resources available to support professionals and organisations in facilitating young children's participation, and the details of these have been given. However, the review of the literature suggests that there are possible barriers to consulting with young children, both at the level of individual adults, as well as at an organisational level. If young children's participation is to be increased then the potential barriers will need to be addressed, for example through staff consultation and training.

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Appendix 1

Shier's (2001) model of children's participation

Levels of participation	Openings	Opportunities	Obligations
5. Children share power and responsibility for decision making.	Are you ready to share some of your adult power with children?	Is there a procedure that enables children and adults to share power and responsibility for decisions?	Is it a policy requirement that children and adults share power and responsibility for decisions?
4. Children are involved in decision-making processes.	Are you ready to let children join in your decision-making processes?	Is there a procedure that enables children to join in decision-making processes?	Is it a policy requirement that children must be involved in decision-making processes?
3. Children's views are taken into account.	Are you ready to take children's views into account?	Does your decision-making process enable you to take children's views into account?	Is it a policy requirement that children's views must be given due weight in decision-making?
2. Children are supported in expressing their views.	Are you ready to support children in expressing their views?	Do you have a range of ideas and activities to help children express their views?	Is it a policy requirement that children must be supported in expressing their views?
1. Children are listened to.	Are you ready to listen to children?	Do you work in a way that enables you to listen to children?	Is it a policy requirement that children must be listened to?

Pathways to participation. Reproduced from Shier (2001).

This can be used by practitioners to identify where they currently are in their own practice and also what the next steps are to increase the level of children's participation.