

# Listening to children

*In February 1999, Early Childhood Matters 91 focused on the effectiveness of programmes for children under eight, taking the line that judging the worth of programmes needs reflective and critical input from its principle beneficiaries – the children. The articles went further and suggested greater participation by children in each stage of programmes, from conceptualisation, through operation, to monitoring and evaluation. This is in line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child which states that children have the right to participate. However, the articles were not suggesting that children should determine what is done with and for them: simply that children should contribute to the processes that result in those decisions. And clearly their ability to contribute will vary according to their stage of development and the opportunities that they have had to develop their participative capacities. Equally, their views have to be listened to and considered along with the views of the other stakeholders in the programmes.*

*Early Childhood Matters 91* made clear that, while child development programmes for older children had readily embraced participation, programmes for younger children had not. One year on, it seems that the picture has not changed much. In the current edition, we had hoped to feature examples of good practice that explored and discussed the realities of participation, and set out the implications for effective programming. Instead we have only been able to

gather articles that show how adults are taking the crucial first steps in developing that participation: establishing environments and practices that enable young children to express themselves confidently and fully, and to develop some experience in participation.

Drawing on experiences in Nepal and Bangladesh, Caroline Arnold (page 6) takes the long term view, showing how parents and communities can support

greater participation by young children in many aspects of their everyday lives, even when cultural norms and local contexts pose special challenges. The point is to start from where children, families and communities are, look for naturally occurring opportunities, and build towards what parents and communities decide is better. Arnold shows how positive experiences in the early years both encourage and enable young children to participate during that time, and help to ensure that they

will naturally and confidently grow into participatory roles in their families, their communities and their societies in the future. She also considers how to work with some of the challenges – for example, that children sometimes face real contradictions. A young girl may be encouraged to ask questions, analyse issues and solve problems in a particular setting with her peers yet, when she gets home, she is supposed to keep quiet and not offer opinions.



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The second article is about the practicalities of ensuring that children encounter the right participative environments in which they can express themselves readily, knowing that they will be listened to. It is based on work with children, project workers and leaders, and programme directors and coordinators in Nicaragua and Venezuela, in October and November 1999 (page 14). This was an exploration of strategies and approaches for everyday use with young children in 10 centres, an exploration that was amplified by discussions involving workers and leaders from many more centres. The positive and negative experiences were discussed, with project workers and educators working together to learn the lessons and develop the techniques further. However, this was in no sense a carefully structured investigation and this article should be seen simply as a collection of experiences from which some tentative pointers for practice have been drawn. It also includes observations and reflections about the capacities of young children by programme leaders, coordinators and educators from the City of Managua's preschool programme,

from the Preschool Department of the Nicaraguan Ministry of Education and from the Fundación La Verde Sonrisa. These reveal a considerable respect for young children's capacities, but also show that the impact of these capacities on programming is limited. For example, children's creativity is widely respected but it is exercised only within programme activities. It would be fascinating to watch its application to something like the evaluation by the children of an aspect of programming.

The article by Carmen Vásquez de Velasco (page 30) discusses an investigation in two Peruvian communities – one in a remote city, one in an area of the capital city – into helping 60 children aged three to five years to express themselves. She starts by reviewing the benefits of listening to children, linking this to the rights of children and to the needs of the adults who create and operate programmes. For this author, it is vital that adults believe in the importance of listening to children. She goes on to describe the use of cut out figures that children can arrange

and rearrange on a graphic background. As they do this, discussions and interviews involving puppets help them to talk freely and express their experiences in the early childhood programmes that they are attending.

Ingibjorg Sigurthorsdottir's article on page 36 is both an aid to developing discussions with children, and a reminder of what young children can do. It shows how discussions between children aged three and above can be developed so that, with the minimum of intervention from adults, they can explore a wide range of topics and themes. Based on the ideas of Dr Matthew Lipman (page 35), the article features children aged three to six years in a preschool in Iceland.

Complementing this we also include a review of a film about similar work with six year olds in a primary school in the USA (page 40). The nature and quality of the discussions reported here support Dr Lipman's conviction that young children are capable of investigating abstract concepts, analysing complex data, and presenting and justifying their ideas and findings. In doing this, they invite

us to be much more open to hearing and valuing what they have to tell us.

Overall, this edition offers a range of practical ways of listening to children. It shows that, if adults want to find out how effective early childhood development programmes are for young children, one way is to focus on what children have to say about those programmes. However, this edition raises other significant issues as well. By showing that many adults respect what young children can do, and by demonstrating that children under eight are capable of relatively complex exploration and reflection, it invites adults to reconsider the roles that young children have in programmes. Is it enough to simply ask children what they feel about the programmes that adults devise and operate? Or should adults be thinking hard about opening up the conceptualisation, operational and evaluation processes of programmes to input from young children? If so, how could and should that be realised? In a future edition, I hope we will be able to feature articles that show how practitioners are addressing these kinds of questions.

### The next edition

*Early Childhood Matters 95* will focus on the roles of parents within programmes as children's first educators. What does their participation in programmes really mean in practice? Under which conditions are parents best able to participate in ECD programmes? To what extent are parents engaged in determining the content of programmes? How do they complement and support the work of early childhood practitioners? How do they contribute to monitoring and evaluation of programmes? What other roles do they play? What are the constraints on their participation – and are some of these artificial? I welcome contributions from you that present and discuss successful practice in this area. ○

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Editor