Tapping a key resource

David Tolfree is a freelance consultant with a particular interest in children in difficult circumstances.

Martin Woodhead is a developmental psychologist at the Open University, United Kingdom, and coordinator of the MA course in Child Development. His recent work has concentrated on cultural aspects of child development and children's rights.

In this article they argue for practitioners, researchers and policy makers in early childhood development (ECD) to listen to children. They then discuss processes of working with children that acknowledge the extraordinary capacity that children have for trying to make sense of their situation and find ways of dealing with it. For clarity, the article is set out in three sections: 'We should listen to children because ...'; 'How to do it' and 'Special factors'.

David Tolfree and Martin Woodhead

Ethiopia: group work with shoeshine boys
photo: Martin Woodhead

The boomerang of kindness

With a group of children who were facing the dangers of attacks by Muslim and Croat forces in Banja Luca, Bosnia, the use of playful techniques freed the emotional expression of children – which itself helps to promote development and problem solving. It also seemed to unlock their capacity for very creative thinking and positive ideas. They came up with the 'Boomerang of kindness'. The idea was that throwing out a boomerang of kindness meant that kindness came back to them too.[1]

We should listen to children because ...

... it helps their development

Eliciting children's views is validating and empowering. It is important in itself for adults to reveal their ignorance to children and ask children what they think. Listening must not wait until children are able to join in adult conversations. It should begin at birth, and be adapted to their developing capacities for communication and participation in their social world.

... we need to avoid assumptions

Pre-conceptions about what children think, want and need in particular contexts; assumptions about features of childhood that are often assumed to be universal; and labelling children and then making broad assumptions about them, make us less effective.

... what they experience may be different from what we intend or expect

We can learn what their real preoccupations are rather than what adults think or hope they might be. In one country in Africa for example, we enabled a group of working children to compile a newsletter about the educational programme they were in. One recurring theme was physical punishment – something that none of the staff had mentioned to us.

... they can change the ways in which we view ourselves as adults

Recognising children's competencies and their ability to contribute, helps break down the boundaries between the worlds of adults and children. It helps adults to reflect on the limitations of their understandings of children's worlds. Children, like adults, are social actors trying to make sense of situations they find themselves in.

... they have something to say

In their own terms, children think deeply, are very sensitive and aware, and are concerned about what they are doing, why they are doing it and how to make sense of it. They also have considerable ability in articulating their ideas, concerns, opinions, beliefs and feelings – although this will depend on their age, their cultural context and their educational experiences.

... they are valuable partners

Children can be powerful social actors with something to offer to their wider families and communities. For example, because of armed conflict, many parents in the Former Republic of Yugoslavia became frozen emotionally and were depressed. That inhibited their ability to see what was happening in their children and respond to it. In workshops conducted by an organisation called Zdravo da Ste[2] to promote the development of refugee children living in centres in Serbia, the children could sometimes recover their capacity for emotional expression more quickly than could the adults. Some children could even be seen trying to draw their own parents into self-expression.

... they can help us understand their unique perspectives

There's no simple cause and effect relationship between certain types of events and certain types of behavioural or emotional reactions in children or adults. They're mediated through a whole range of different variables – the individual family, community, the wider context, cultural factors and so on. To understand the impact of particular circumstances, there is no substitute for finding out from individual children how each of them is reacting.

Ethiopia: role play by childstreet vendors
photo: Martin Woodhead

... they can help us shape policy and practice
Children – the principal stakeholders – rarely get heard in policy debate or in discussions about what is best practice. This has been especially true in recent international actions to eliminate child labour: some of those involved seemed reluctant to include representatives of working children within their discussions. This can lead to ineffective or even harmful interventions.

... they should be an important part of any evaluation study
Evaluations generally measure children's behaviour, abilities and social adjustment but frequently bypass children's experience, ideas and opinions. For example, evaluating education according to an input-output model often involves judging the curriculum and teaching in terms of children's performance in tests and examinations. But it is important to include how children perceive the teaching and learning processes, and the dynamics of the relationships between teachers and pupils, and pupils and pupils.

How to do it

Working with children is a creative process that occurs within a particular kind of setting, in a particular relationship and a particular context. It's not so much a matter of eliciting children's pre-formed ideas and opinions, it's much more a question of enabling them to explore the ways in which they perceive the world and communicate their ideas in ways that are meaningful for them.

The setting
A supposedly neutral setting may have different connotations for children according to their past experiences. Adults have to understand what these might be for children and take account of them. In general, children need to feel safe and reasonably comfortable in a setting that isn't too distracting.

The relationship
Children are trying to make sense of the adult who is asking them questions. They will be affected and may be inhibited according to how they understand the power relationships in the situation. They may put an adult in a certain category – parent, teacher, priest, employer, customer – and adapt what they say according to what they believe is safe. This means we may have to interpret what children say in the light of what we think they think about us. Very often, formal or informal research with children is done one-to-one, adult and child. But we have to ask 'What does it mean to children to have a one-to-one encounter with a stranger?' Although childcare workers will have closer relationships with children than researchers and policy makers, those relationships will still inhibit certain types of conversation.

Communicating ...
Children don't always readily express themselves in ways that adults might prefer or expect. For example, it may be very important to create settings and modes of communication that don't rely on language.

... through drawing/mapping
Drawings are widely used in participatory work with children, as are mapping techniques. Both can help children lead the adult through their daily lives. In Ethiopia, Bangladesh, The Philippines and Central America, we asked working children to draw the 'important people' in their lives as a starting point for talking about parents' expectations of children[3]. In the Former Republic of Yugoslavia, drawings were used as a means to help children communicate their feelings and understandings about violence, loss and separation. The drawings expressed what talking or listening conventionally might not have revealed.

... through sorting and ranking games
If children are asked directly to talk about their lives at home, at school, or at work, they may seem to have nothing to say, or offer an evasive reply such as 'All right' or 'OK'. Instead, we asked working children to sort and rank picture cards depicting themselves alongside other children, doing different kinds of

Bangladesh: a mapping exercise
Children's Day
Martin Woodhead collection

work. They had no difficulty making comparisons and articulating the relative cost-benefits of different children's lives. For another activity, we used cards of 'happy' and 'sad' faces to find out how children experienced life at school.

... through drama, music and dance

In Sweden[4] work with children from a refugee background included dance, drama and music in a kind of workshop setting. In Zimbabwe[5] we came across childcare workers using a traditional dance with children but adapting it to include references to particular issues they were grappling with, such as their experiences with conflict and their hope to return to a peaceful Mozambique.

... through role-play

Role-play about a situation can enable children to spontaneously express all sorts of things they might not consciously have thought about but can now express in ways that are acceptable to them. Issues emerge and, through discussion and interpretation, thoughts and feelings can be articulated.

... through groupwork

It can be much more effective to work with children in group situations rather than through individual conversations. Group work can provide a richer, more creative process of communication. In a sense the adult – by asking permission to join in a peer group encounter – is setting a context in which children feel at ease with each other. Groups also have the advantage that they give children a greater feeling of safety: they are less imposing/exposing than for children on their own. Finally, children in groups stimulate each other.

... from child to child

It's not just adults who can communicate with children. Some very interesting work is being done, especially by Save the Children UK[6]. They invited children to do research with children. Children know what the issues are from their point of view, and therefore know which are the most relevant. They can also elicit information from other children that adults can't. Particularly stunning is a piece of work that a group of children did into children leaving institutional care. Because the interviewers had also left care, there was a kind of empathy there that somehow unlocked greater honesty (or at least a very different perspective) than might have been created if adults had been asking the questions.

Special factors

Invisible children

Difficult circumstances can impact on children's ability to communicate. Play, for example, can be inhibited, children become silent and unresponsive, they may be depressed or withdrawn, and may not even be seen in the public places that fieldworkers often take as the starting point for their studies. Communication with these invisible children is important, not just in finding out what they think and feel and so on, but also in helping them break out of the vicious circle of depression and, frequently, exclusion.

The impact of cultural differences

Different cultural 'currencies' of communication are important. In some countries children seemed to relate most easily to visual representations – drawings and picture games. In others, oral methods such as role-play, little dramas or discussions were better. There are often powerful cultural rules that shape what children feel comfortable about sharing, and with whom. In Sudan, for example, we found that people don't talk about personal and painful issues with anybody except those within their very closest circle of family and friends. There are also rules about expression of feelings. For example, it would be a source of huge embarrassment and shame to children if they cried in front of a stranger.

Such conventions vary within societies – notably according to children's age and gender – and they also change from one generation to another. It is also essential to be aware that different cultures have different languages of feelings.

Reliability of approaches, processes and responses
Successful approaches must ensure that children both feel safe to talk and actually are safe to talk. Encounters must be reflexive and dynamic with children and adult reacting to each other – it's not a question of the adult being a passive observer, asking the questions and writing down the answers. Adults must also be facilitators, self-consciously aware of how they are shaping the situation to help children to express themselves. Until all of this is working well, children tend to skew their responses to what they think adults want to hear.

Informed consent/ethical issues
It isn't sufficient merely to gain children's consent. What does it mean to obtain children's informed consent? In research, for example, what do they think they are consenting to? Do they understand how the information is going to be used – what, for example, do they assume about the information getting back to people who are in positions of power and authority?

We also have to consider their ability to understand the implications of giving that consent, the possible consequences of their participation, as well as the requirements for seeking the consent of adults (parents, teachers and so on). Clear conventions for carrying out research involving children apply within many countries but may vary between countries. There may also be other issues to bear in mind. For example, if children are living away from parents or in minority groups or conflict situations, parents may be suspicious of an outsider who wants to talk with their children.

It is also essential to have a clear policy and procedure for responding appropriately to children who disclose information that you feel you have a moral obligation to do something about. How do you determine where confidentiality has limits? And how can you deal with that without putting children into a more vulnerable position?

Shedding power
It is essential to shed some of the power and domination that you might expect to exert over children and to show that you regard what they say as important. It is also necessary to be willing to expose yourself to real expressions of pain and distress.

Talk to children – it pays
Our experience shows that the reason for talking to children is clear: all stakeholders gain. However, this is not something to be undertaken lightly and there are pitfalls. But there are already a number of well-proven ways of working with children in ways that are both fair to the children and rewarding to the listener. It takes time, it takes skill, it isn't easy. It's very frustrating when it doesn't work and very rewarding when it does. ❍

1. See Tolfree D, *Restoring Playfulness*; (1996) Rädda Barnen, Stockholm, Sweden.

2. Tolfree D, as above.

3. See Woodhead M, *Children's Perspectives on their Working Lives: A Participatory Study in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, The Philippines, Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua*; (1998) Rädda Barnen, Stockholm, Sweden.

4. Tolfree D, as above.

5. 'Makwaya: dancing with hope' video; *Save the Children* (USA).

6. West A and others, *You're on your own: young people's research on leaving care*; (1995) Save the Children (UK), London.

David Tolfree's publications include *Roof and Roots*: *The Care of Separated Children in the Developing World* (1995) Arena, Aldershot, England; *Residential Care for Children and Alternatives Approaches to Care in Developing Countries* (1995) *Save the Children*, London, England; *Restoring Playfulness* (1996) Rädda Barnen, Stockholm, Sweden; and *Old Enough to Work, Old Enough to Have a Say* (1998) Rädda Barnen, Stockholm, Sweden.

Martin Woodhead's publications on childhood issues include *In Search of the Rainbow: Pathways to Quality in Large-scale Programmes for Young Disadvantaged Children* (1996) Bernard van Leer Foundation, The Hague; *Children's Perspectives on their Working Lives: A Participatory Study in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, The Philippines, Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua* (1998) Rädda Barnen, Stockholm, Sweden; and (as co-editor) *Cultural Worlds of Early Childhood* (1998) Routledge, London.