

Babies and Young Children's Perspectives in Practice

Learning from a project to support Home-Start Richmond, Kingston and Hounslow (RKH) to embed the perspectives of babies and young children in their work.

October 2024

The Centre for Research on Play in Education, Development and Learning (PEDAL) is part of the Faculty of Education at the University of Cambridge. We conduct world-leading research on childhood and mobilise knowledge to help to improve children's lives and life chances.

Within PEDAL, we have researchers with expertise in eliciting young children's perspectives. We wanted to understand if and how our research expertise might help other organisations to elicit and use young children's perspectives in their practice. This paper describes a project we did to support Home-Start Richmond, Kingston and Hounslow (RKH) to develop a baby- and child-centred approach, where staff and volunteers routinely seek out, capture and reflect on babies' and young children's perspectives and experiences to inform their work. In it, we describe what we mean by babies' and young children's perspectives, what the project with Home-Start RKH involved, and key lessons learned.

Summary

- Babies' and children's perspectives include their lived experiences, beliefs, preferences, concerns and interests. Understanding children's perspectives involves tuning-in to how they understand and feel about the world and what they want from it. We do this because we recognise children as people with their own individual rights and unique experiences and feelings.
- Being attuned and responsive to babies' and young children's perspectives enables us to uphold their rights, value them as people and do what is best for, and with, them. Children's perspectives give us new insights into their lives and help us to improve the services and support that we provide.
- Home-Start volunteers work alongside parents in their own homes and communities to help them cope with the stresses and strains of life and make sure they have the skills, confidence and support they need to nurture their children.
- PEDAL researchers worked with Home-Start Richmond, Kingston and Hounslow (RKH) to help them to embed the perspectives of babies, children and young people into their work. Using online workshops and facilitated co-production workshops, we supported Home-Start RKH to identify possible actions to support volunteers to centre children's perspectives in their work. We are now providing advisory support as they develop and test new resources and ways of working.
- Work has begun on updating Home-Start RKH's volunteer preparation course. The Home-Start team are also testing a new diary sheet and prompt cards for volunteers, and new supervision records for Coordinators to keep babies' and young children's perspectives front of mind.
- The project has already had a positive impact on staff and volunteers' attitudes and behaviours. Home-Start RKH's Family Support Manager reflected that babies' and young children's

perspectives and experiences are the subject of more conversations in supervisions and meetings since the project began.

- Our team used this project to learn about how our commitment to, and experience of, capturing and using babies' and young children's perspectives might be useful to practitioners and services beyond the research context. We identified three important lessons which would be transferable to future projects on this topic:

1. Mindset over methods

We learned that it is valuable to help practitioners to adopt a curious, baby- and child-centred mindset, rather than focusing on teaching specific methods for them to use to elicit children's perspectives. We believe that embedding a change in mindset and supporting practitioners with training, resources and supervision to reinforce this approach will have more sustained and widespread benefits than if we had trained volunteers on particular methods or tools to be used directly with children.

2. Co-design is key

The success of this project to-date has come from harnessing the knowledge, passion and expertise of staff and volunteers and working with them to co-design, test and implement solutions. Understanding the strengths already in the service and supporting the Home-Start RKH team to design their own solutions has been essential to finding solutions that will work within the organisation's process and culture, and ensuring the acceptability and ownership that is vital to scaling up and sustaining these solutions.

3. Acknowledge the emotional nature of this work

The content that we covered in this work was emotionally difficult for some participants. Acknowledging the potential challenges of attending to young children's perspectives, and the thoughts and feelings this work might generate for people, and providing reflective space and support is important in work on this topic.

Full Report

Background: PEDAL

If we want to understand children's lives, it is important to understand their subjective perspectives, priorities, views and values. Children's own perspectives give us new insights about their lives and how to improve the services and support that we provide. This is true for children of all ages, including babies.

At PEDAL, we value children's unique perspectives and the insights they give us. Our researchers have expertise eliciting children's perspectives using a mosaic of approaches^a including techniques such as talking to children, observing their behaviours, and eliciting views through drawing, storytelling and play. With these techniques, we've investigated topics such as children's experience of the pandemic, what children need to have a good start in school, and what it is like to play in hospital.

^a Clark, A., & Moss, P. (2011). Listening to young children: The mosaic approach. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Our experience in PEDAL centres around conducting research, but we felt that our expertise might also be useful to support practitioners and organisations who wanted to do more to elicit and use babies' and young children's perspectives in their own practice, and to support improvements within services. We were keen to understand more about what was already done in practice, and if and how we might be able to support those wanting to do more.

What are babies' and young children's perspectives?

Children's perspectives include their lived experiences, beliefs, preferences, concerns and interests. Understanding children's perspectives involves tuning-in to how they understand and feel about the world and what they want from it. We do this because we recognise children as people with their own individual rights and unique experiences and feelings, which we value and want to consider in our work.

When we refer to "babies and young children", we are referring to children from birth to the age of seven. We talk about babies' and young children's "perspectives" rather than their "voices" because children can be pre-verbal, non-verbal, or might be more comfortable or confident expressing themselves with other forms of communication.

"...young children are acutely sensitive to their surroundings and very rapidly acquire understanding of the people, places and routines in their lives, along with awareness of their own unique identity. They make choices and communicate their feelings, ideas and wishes in numerous ways, long before they are able to communicate through the conventions of spoken or written language."^b

We can start listening to children long before they start talking. We might need to make additional efforts to try to understand babies' perspectives by noticing and being curious about their behaviours, non-verbal cues and communications. We might not always get this right – that does not mean we should not try.

Children's perspectives can inform our work at different levels. As practitioners, valuing children's perspectives can be as simple as noticing what they want and need when we are working with them and responding to this in the moment. As individual practitioners, we can also use individual children's perspectives to shape our longer-term plans for how we support them. As organisations, we can elicit and use the perspectives of groups of children to consider how our services work and make more strategic decisions.

In the diagram on the next page, we give some examples of ways of gathering babies and children's perspectives. On the left are approaches that can be incorporated into regular contacts with families – they involve adopting a curious stance and noticing a child's perspectives and needs. On the right are ways of eliciting children's perspectives that might require additional time, effort and resources.

^b United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child. (2005). General Comment No. 7, Implementing child rights in early childhood. Section 14.



Why tune-in to babies' and young children's perspectives?

There are several reasons why we might want to be attuned and responsive to babies' and young children's perspectives: it enables us to uphold their rights, value them as people and do what is best for and with them. With input from children, we can better understand how to support and improve their lives.

Tuning-in to, valuing and acting on children's perspectives has direct benefits for children. The evidence is clear that children learn and develop better in sensitive and attuned relationships. Children are more likely to thrive in a world where adults value and respond to their preferences and give them some agency in their lives. Noticing how babies and young children are experiencing and responding to the world can also give us clues about what is happening in their lives and if they need extra help or intervention.

Services like Home-Start support parents^c to develop positive relationships and have nurturing interactions with their children. When practitioners tune-in to babies and young children and value their perspectives, it can help parents to be curious about, and responsive to, their babies too.

Understanding and reflecting on babies' and young children's experiences also benefits our work. It helps us to find ways to support children and families that are more likely to be engaging, enjoyable and effective, as the hypothetical examples in the box below illustrate.

An early year's practitioner in a pre-school notices that the toddlers she works with absolutely love bubbles. When she talks to them, they tell her the bubble machine is one of their favourite things in pre-school. The pre-school team are considering how to make the start of the day easier. The children find it hard to say goodbye to their parents and come into pre-school. Based on the practitioners' observations, they get out the bubble machine so that there are bubbles every morning when children arrive. This helps them to have a better start to their day. More children go on to engage positively in the morning learning and play activities.

^c Throughout this document we use the term parent to mean any adult who is the primary caregiver for a baby or young child. We recognise this is not always their biological parent.

A Home-Start volunteer is supporting a mum with a young baby. The mum is struggling and needs to talk. The volunteer notices that, while she is talking to a mum, her baby is restless and uncomfortable. She knows from previous visits that this baby loves her chewy giraffe toy, and so hands the baby the toy to hold and suck. The baby calms and her mum relaxes and is more comfortable talking about the challenges she is facing and the help she needs.

Babies' and young children's needs and perspectives can often be overshadowed by those of adults or older, more vocal and visible children. Taking explicit action in our organisations to help everyone to keep babies and young children at the forefront of their minds can be important if there are competing pressures that might make it harder to attend to babies' needs and experiences.

National legislation and international conventions encourage us to attend to children's perspectives. Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child gives all children, even the youngest, a right to express their views and have them taken into account^d. In England, the Childcare Act 2006 also places a statutory duty on local authorities who are securing early years services to *"have regard to information about the views of such children"*^e.

The perspectives of babies and young children are often overlooked in traditional children's voices and participatory activities. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child noted in 2005 that the youngest children's rights are often overlooked as they have *"been regarded as undeveloped, lacking even basic capacities for understanding, communicating and making choices. They have been powerless within their families, and often voiceless and invisible within society."*^f Whilst a lot has changed in the 20 years since these comments were published, sadly this outlook is still widespread. This is why we are particularly keen to work alongside organisations who are eager to give prominence to the youngest in our communities.

Background: Home-Start Richmond, Kingston and Hounslow

Home-Start Richmond, Kingston and Hounslow works across three boroughs in West London, offering support to families with at least one child under five. The charity is one of around 180 local, independent Home-Start branches around the UK. Each one has a network of trained volunteers who help families with young children through challenging times. Home-Start volunteers work alongside parents in their own homes to help them cope with the stresses and strains of life and make sure they have the skills, confidence and strength they need to nurture their children. In 2022/23 Home-Start RKH supported nearly 300 local families through volunteer home visiting, telephone and "walk and talk" support, and family play-and-support groups.

Background: Home-Start's Children's Voices project

We were approached by Home-Start Richmond, Kingston and Hounslow to help them to embed the perspectives of babies, children and young people into their work. The project was driven by a desire to improve the experiences and outcomes of babies and young children in families were supported by

^d Convention on the rights of the child (1989) Treaty no. 27531. United Nations Treaty Series, 1577

^e Childcare Act 2006, Section 3 clause 5 available at <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2006/21/section/3>

^f United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child. (2005). General Comment No. 7, Implementing child rights in early childhood. Section 14.

Home-Start RKH. Leaders were also aware of a greater focus on surveying children's voices within their local system, which tended to disadvantage babies and young children who could not express their views or participate in decisions in the same way as older children. As champions for the youngest children, this Home-Start wanted to be able to bring their perspectives into local discussions.

Home-Start RKH wished to develop a more baby- and child-centred approach, where staff and volunteers are supported to routinely seek out, capture and reflect on babies' and young children's perspectives and experiences to inform their work and understand their impact. They requested that we use our expertise and experience in PEDAL to support them in this work.

Our work together

The project consisted of two stages:

1. Training and co-production led by PEDAL

The project began with a three-hour **online workshop** in April 2024 led by members of the PEDAL team and a clinical psychologist specialising in work with babies and young children. The training introduced the project, reflected on current practice and strengths within Home-Start, shared PEDAL's research and experience, and supported attendees to tune-in and reflect on babies' and young children's cues and communications. Whilst we shared specific research methods that we have used to elicit children's perspectives, our focus was on explaining and promoting a curious mindset, rather than pre-empting any specific methods that Home-Start could employ.

The online workshop was followed by a **face-to-face co-production workshop** in June 2024 to identify possible actions that Home-Start RKH might take to support volunteers to centre children's perspectives more in their work. In the workshop, we facilitated discussions among volunteers and coordinators about how babies and young children's perspectives currently feature in their work, and where there might be more opportunities to spread and build on good practice at each stage of families' and volunteers' journeys. At the workshop we generated many ideas for potential action. These were prioritised according to ease of implementation and potential impact to identify areas for future development.

At the end of the workshop, we identified two areas which the Home-Start team would prioritise for further development, alongside other activities which could be implemented later or taken forward by individuals. The two areas for immediate action were:

- Integrating more information about babies and young children's perspectives in volunteer training.
- Developing the volunteer diary sheet to include space to capture babies and young children's perspectives and prompts to encourage volunteers to consider children's perspectives in their visits with families, providing a basis for discussion in supervision.

2. Further co-design, testing, and interaction led by Home-Start RKH

Having identified areas for improvement, the Home-Start team took over leadership of the project. Staff and volunteers worked together to co-design and test prototype solutions. Our PEDAL team took on an advisory role, both in considering babies' and young children's perspectives, and in the co-design, rapid-cycle design and testing methods that Home-Start are using to develop solutions.

The team of volunteers and staff have updated their volunteer diary sheet, created a prompt card for volunteers to refer to throughout their work, and revised their supervision records to help keep babies' and young children's perspectives from of mind. Prototype solutions are now being tested.

Impact

Although the new resources are still being developed, the project has already had a very positive impact on staff and volunteers' attitudes and behaviours. During a meeting in July 2024, Home-Start's Family Support Manager reflected that, even without the introduction of any specific changes to resources or processes, there has been a notable change in mindset across the organisation, with babies' and young children's perspectives and experiences being the subject of more conversations in supervisions and meetings.

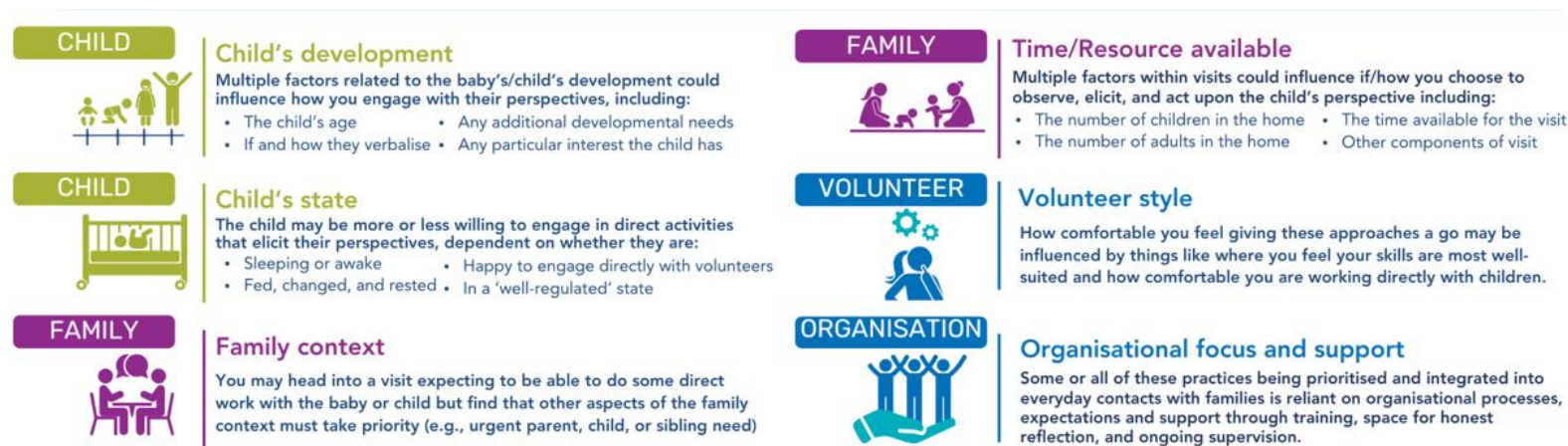
Reflections

This project was enjoyable and rewarding, and also had challenges. In this section, we reflect on these aspects of the work and what we learned.

Individual differences

Levels of enthusiasm and confidence in the project varied hugely, even across the self-selected group of staff and volunteers involved. Some wanted in-depth training, resources, models of practice and reflective space to consider children's perspectives. Others wanted to be more responsive to babies and young children in their practice, but worried about whether they had time for additional activities or how these would fit with competing pressures. It was therefore important to think about flexible solutions which could be used differently by different volunteers: Light touch prompts for some, and opportunities for more in-depth learning and reflection for others.

Volunteers were worried about how they could listen to babies' and young children's perspectives in family homes, where there might be competing voices, different priorities and cultural nuances to consider. The Home-Start team were concerned that approaches that work in research might not work in sometimes chaotic and constantly changing environments that volunteers might find in a family's home. In response, we created the diagram below, which was used as a prompt to talk about the



different factors which might influence the nature and depth of engagement with babies and children during a volunteer visit, and why it was important to have a flexible approach.

As our work prompted fruitful conversations with volunteers, it became clear that there were significant differences in the extent to which they already engaged with children. Some volunteers talked of doing lots of activities with children during their visits, such as playing, reading and crafts. Others focussed much more on providing practical and emotional support to parents. Some volunteers reflected that they wanted to work primarily with parents and did not feel as confident and comfortable doing work directly with children, although they were still open to being more curious and tuned-in to children's experiences. This also showed the importance of our flexible approach: all volunteers could adopt a more child-focussed mindset, but the extent to which volunteers would engage in new activities to elicit children's perspectives varied. Our solutions had to reflect this.

Volunteers were concerned about how activities to elicit babies' perspectives might come across to parents. They spoke about the need to build and retain parents' trust, and expressed concerns that there might be tension between this priority and increasingly valuing children's perspectives. We emphasised that our goal was not that babies' or young children's needs should be prioritised over parents, but to ensure that they were understood, reflected upon, and considered as part of the family unit. We also suggested that even if the focus was on parents' needs, attending to babies would create a context in which parents might be better able to engage with Home-Start's support. We also talked about how volunteers might work alongside parents to observe and reflect on babies' cues and communications, rather than eliciting children's perspectives as an activity done separately from the parent.

Impact on Volunteers

Discussions about babies' and young children's perspectives proved difficult for some people. This reaction could arise for various reasons: some might feel their views were not recognised when they were young, while others might have regrets about their own parenting or past volunteering practice. Some volunteers also found it upsetting to talk about babies experiencing stress and distress. In future work on this topic, we would want to pre-empt this by acknowledging the potential difficulties of these topics at the start of any activities and providing ample reflective space and support.

We encountered some resistance from a few staff and volunteers who were concerned that they could not take on any new activities due to the pressures they already faced when working with families. Some felt they were doing a lot of work using children's perspectives already. Conversely, others felt that discussions might imply that their existing work was not good enough and that they had done something wrong. It was therefore critical to recognise the strengths in what volunteers and staff already do and to build on these strengths. In our co-production workshop, we used the model of identifying "what works well" and how it might be "even better if...". Emphasising that volunteers would be able to test and shape solutions was important as they could have agency and could develop solutions that fitted with their ways of working and resource constraints.

Our discussions generated a debate about whether babies and children were direct recipients of Home-Start services, or whether the service was primarily for parents, with the hope that this would have positive knock-on consequences for their children (what one volunteer described as "happy mum, happy baby"). It was useful to air and discuss these different conceptions of the service, and to highlight that they were issues worthy of a deeper discussion outside this project. These concerns prompted us to talk about how tuning-in to babies' perspectives could be valuable for parents, as well

as for children; for example, parents might benefit from seeing volunteers model attuned behaviour. Or, if volunteers could be better at meeting children's needs, it could create more opportunities for the parent to engage with the volunteer and their support.

Transferable lessons learned

PEDAL embarked on this project with Home-Start RKH not only to support the team to improve their work with families, but also to learn ourselves about how our commitment to, and experience of, capturing and using babies' and young children's perspectives might be useful to practitioners and services beyond the research context. We have learned a lot, particularly about the importance of working with staff and volunteers to find solutions that fit within organisational culture and context.

We identified three important lessons which would be transferable to future projects on this topic:

1. Mindset over methods

We learned that it can be valuable to focus on **mindset over methods**. Helping practitioners to adopt a **curious, baby- and child-centred mindset**, rather than purely focusing on specific methods or resources to engage children, can have more widespread and sustained benefits. Adopting a mindset where they routinely seek out, capture and reflect children's perspectives will enable practitioners to have meaningful interactions, gain a deeper understanding of babies and children, to be reflective, and use insights from babies and children to inform their work.

2. Co-design is key

The successes of this project to-date have come through **harnessing the knowledge and expertise of staff and volunteers, and working with them to co-design, test and implement solutions**.

Home-Start staff and volunteers were the experts about their systems, processes, culture and ways of working. As PEDAL researchers, it was our role to leverage this expertise and facilitate broader group discussions about babies' and young children's perspectives in their specific contexts.

Home-Start's direct involvement in designing their own solutions has been essential to identifying new approaches that will work within their organisation, ensuring the acceptability and ownership required to scale up and sustain these solutions in practice.

Understanding Home-Start's values and culture was vital. The Home-Start model is a flexible one, in which volunteers work with families in different ways that reflect the family's needs, the volunteer's strengths, and the wider context. It was therefore vital that we supported **volunteers to develop a curious mindset and skills which they could apply in different ways to fit with their work with families**. It was evident that a one-size-fits-all set of activities would likely not apply to all families' needs or situations, and if we suggested any particular methods or activities, it would need to be as part of a toolbox of activities and resources that volunteers might be able to draw on if they wished to do so.

Co-design also enabled us to recognise and respond to the practicalities of doing this work, and to discuss about when it might be hard to elicit children's perspectives, such as when families have a high level of complexity and conflict.

3. Acknowledge the emotional nature of this work.

The content that we covered in this work was emotionally difficult for some participants. As we reflected on the project, we wished we had done more to recognise this in advance and build more support into the training. **Acknowledging the potential difficulties of these topics, and providing reflective space and support is important.**

This project has been a hugely valuable learning experience for us. We are very grateful to Home-Start Richmond, Kingston and Hounslow for inviting us to partner with them on this journey, and we look forward to seeing where it goes.

This paper was written in September 2024 by Sally Hogg, Dr Beth Barker and Dr Kelsey Graber from PEDAL and clinical psychologist Dr Hannah Guzinska, with valued input from Cristiana Camisotti and Erin Laybourne in Home-Start Richmond, Kingston and Hounslow.