

# Hearing Children's Voices



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OUR VIEW OF CHILDREN informs our practice. The recent literature on working with children promotes an image of children as competent, strong and capable individuals who have their own understanding of the world around them. In practice this means that staff:

- respect children and value their contributions to the lives of their communities
- create authentic relationships with children based on trust, openness and acceptance.

Building strong and healthy relationships creates the foundations for raising happy and healthy children. These relationships can engage with children's mental health and wellbeing in ways that offer children opportunities to discuss issues or concerns and at the same time offer trustworthy relations to support them in times of need.

A body of literature maintains that children's experiences of their wellbeing can be quite different to what adults think, or notice. By listening to a child's views about their own wellbeing we can understand what is needed to create a better environment for this child in this moment.

In doing so we ensure that the changes we introduce are meaningful and that these actions also respect the child's autonomy and support resilience. Gaining an understanding of children's views on their own wellbeing is not as easy as asking them: 'How are you?'

## How might we explore and understand children's feelings and ideas better?

Children begin to develop an understanding of their social world and social experiences not long after their birth. As infants they use 'joint attention' as a way to communicate their meaning.

In the following example Max's message is clear when time is taken to 'listen' to his cues: *One day shortly after his first birthday Max was being picked up by his father from his babysitter. Max pointed out the door, next to his red boots which were up on the shelf, then to two bags for his clothes and finally to his coat which was hanging on the doorknob* (Carpendale & Lewis 2006, p. 80).



By toddlerhood children understand that others have needs and desires, but may not always realise that these desires are different from their own. Through pretend play, children begin to achieve shared meanings with peers and adults. Play presents an opportunity for us to observe children's early understandings of social situations. We might ask questions, pretend emotions and actions, and observe the ways in which children interpret and respond to situations.

By three, most children understand that others have different emotions, knowledge and beliefs to their own. Research shows that children achieve social understanding of relationships at a young age through interactions within their family context. They learn to manage their feelings and develop an understanding of the emotions of others. Talking to children about feelings and helping to identify, name and understand them is an important role for children's services staff.

### For Reflection

In trusting relationships with children, adults relate with humility, with no expectations that children speak about their feelings (Sumsion, 2003). If feelings are shared, children's confidence is respected at all times. Adults have a genuine commitment to listen and to reciprocate sharing, to take children seriously, to give children a chance to withdraw from discussion if they choose.

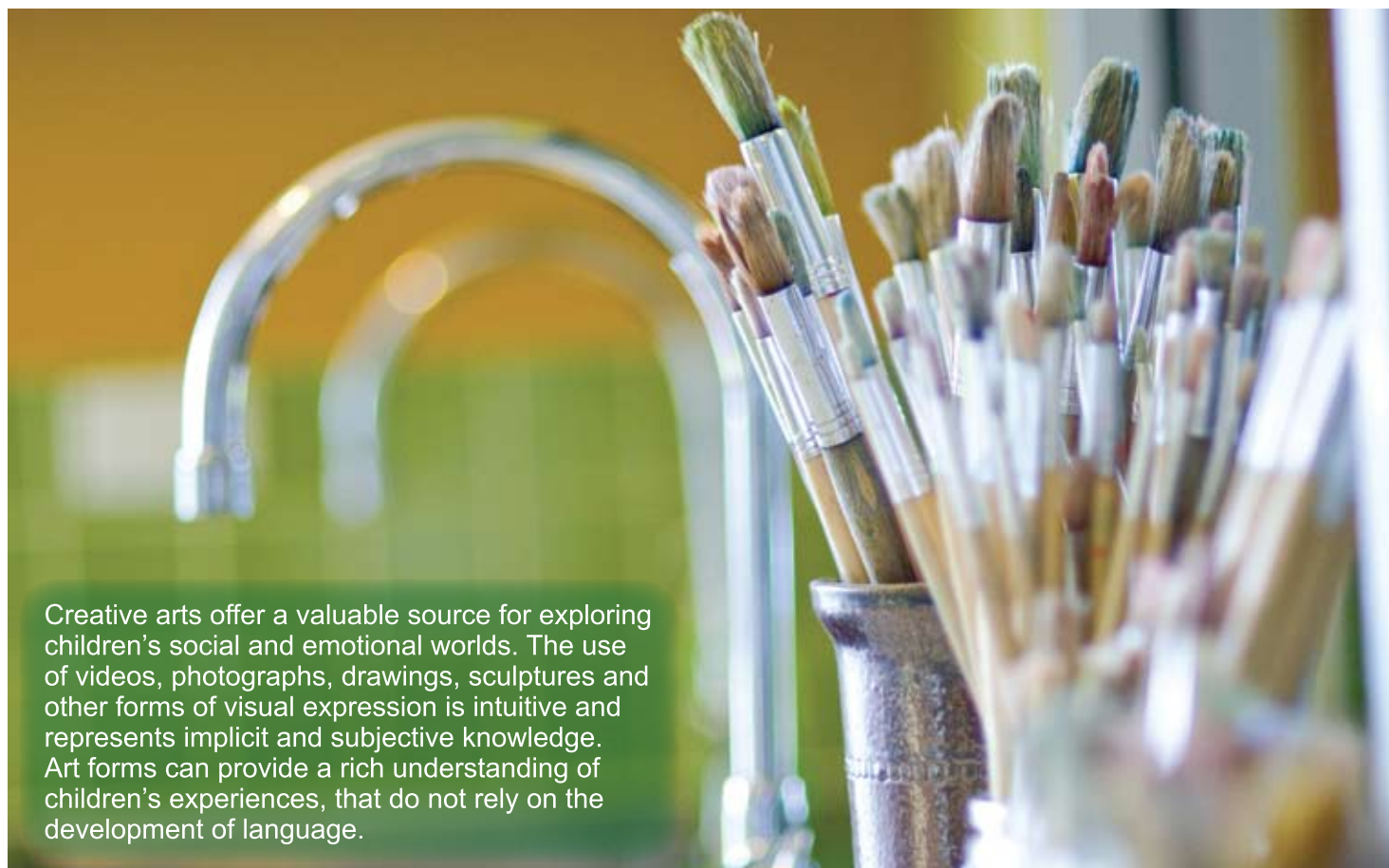
There is evidence to suggest that as adults we are not very good at this. Some researchers have argued that we do not have a culture of listening to children. Listening to their words and understanding children's non-verbal communication requires time, patience and an appropriate space. The rewards however, include a much better chance to facilitate children's wellbeing.

### Creating opportunities to share feelings

Here are some ideas to try:

- Read a book with a group of children, then share interpretations of the feelings experienced by the characters. Really listen to the responses as a way to understand children's own experiences.
- Observe children's drawings and paintings for clues to their experiences. Children can represent or express emotions just as adults do in creative, playful and abstract ways.
- Give children opportunities to express themselves through photography or video, allowing them to record what is important to them. The focus of the exercise can be quite general or more specific, such as asking them to show spaces where they are happy, sad, anxious or relaxed.





Creative arts offer a valuable source for exploring children's social and emotional worlds. The use of videos, photographs, drawings, sculptures and other forms of visual expression is intuitive and represents implicit and subjective knowledge. Art forms can provide a rich understanding of children's experiences, that do not rely on the development of language.

As Cox (2005), an expert on children's drawings claims: the "*drawing activity is actively defining reality [the ways in which it is constructed and understood by the child] rather than passively reflecting a 'given' reality*" (p. 14).

Both stories and creative arts provide useful tools through which to discuss children's views and ideas. They shift the focus from the child onto the story or art work, allowing them to better express themselves. Children might also offer selected photos or artworks to describe certain feelings. Through stories, dramatic play and creative expression, we can empower children to discuss what is important to them and why.

'Listening' to children's views and interpretations of their world with humility, and reciprocating those, will help to reduce the adult-child power imbalance, giving control to the child and allowing them to set the agenda and to describe their own reality, including their own wellbeing.

Children have a view of their own emotions and mental health. Our challenge is to find practices that will help us to listen to their voices, and to do it in meaningful ways for them. ●



## References:

- Carpendale & Lewis (2006). *How children develop social understanding*. Malden, MA; Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Cox, S. (2005). Intention and meaning in young children's drawing. *Journal of Art and Design Education*, 24(2), 115-125.
- Sumsion, J. (2003). Researching with children: Lessons in humility, reciprocity, and community. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*. 28(1), 18-23.

## Resources:

- PhotoVoice projects – offer visual literacy and powerful universal language to express their ideas and represent their realities: <http://www.photovoice.org/html/projects/photovoiceprojects/>
- Pat Milner and Birgit Carolin (Ed.) (1999) *Time to listen to children: personal and professional communication*. London/New York: Routledge

