People who work with children are in a good position to advocate for and act on the needs of children, families and communities, to promote children’s growth and wellbeing. One argument is that part of this advocacy lies in hearing and acting on the voices and opinions of the children. This article promotes the value of children’s voices in regards to their own wellbeing, and consequently potentially their mental health.

Children as competent social actors

An increasing number of government policies, pedagogical and curriculum frameworks, constructivist theories of developmental psychology and a large body of sociological literature promote the view of children as having rich potential, being strong, powerful, and competent (Malaguzzi, 1993). This view emphasises that young children actively construct meanings about the world and their place in it, offering alternative but equally valid understandings to adults. Alderson (2000) argues that children can speak ‘in their own right’ and have the ability to report valid views and experiences.

It could be argued that children ‘in their own right’ have only recently received attention in social research despite the fact that they are often the most affected by unfavourable circumstances in their family life, schooling or care, due to their relative immaturity and lack of social power (Boyden & Mann, 2005).

An example of research involving interviews with children in the UK (Ridge, 2007), revealed an unexpected and interesting perspective. The children reported that they saw their parents’ stable and secure employment as favourable and they felt the same when their parents were unemployed and at home. In fact they reported that partial employment (a current trend) caused them the most insecurity and instability and appeared to have the least beneficial outcome for them.

Some intervention programs for children in need can benefit from the inclusion of children’s voices. Listening to children and seeking their ideas on their welfare and wellbeing can help inform and guide such programs and potentially enhance the quality of these children’s lives.

Researchers and teachers are still exploring ways to hear children. We are still far from knowing the best avenues to gather a full account of children’s experiences from their own points of view. It is difficult to ask meaningful questions, to collaborate with children and to enact good practices that fully respect children as ‘experts in their own lives’ and therefore valid informers about their own social and emotional wellbeing.

Woodhead (1998) explains how in some countries working children are active in shaping their lives through understanding their experiences:

“With the possible exception of extreme cases of forced or bonded labour, children are not passive victims adversely affected by their work. They are social actors trying to make sense of their physical and social world, negotiating with parents and peers, employers and customers, and making the best of the difficult and oppressive circumstances in which they find themselves. They shape their working lives as well as being
shaped by it. Work does not simply affect young people. It is part of their activity and it becomes part of their identity.”

Consequently, when made available to the children, a potent source of information about young children’s understanding of their own wellbeing can be the children themselves. Moreover, accessing these ways of knowing is an alternative way of facilitating their wellbeing.

**Social and emotional understandings of children**

Children from infancy have observable social and emotional understandings. These understandings are thought to require ‘intersubjectivity’ which is described as the mutual understanding shared between two people during communication (Trevarthen, 1998). Infants, well before their first words, exhibit intersubjectivity when engaging in ‘joint attention’, where the infant and their carer share and coordinate their attention to something (Carpendale & Lewis, 2006). These complex interactions include pointing, gesturing and gaze-following. Infants also use ‘social referencing’ to understand a new situation by observing their carer’s reaction. By building on these skills children are soon able to express intricate understandings of social and emotional feelings and behaviours through ‘role play’ and ‘pretend play’ (Dunn, 1988).

A child develops social knowledge in close relationships that motivate the child to understand their world. Time for social interaction and opportunities for talking about feelings and emotions has been found to facilitate social understanding (Carpendale & Lewis, 2004).
Children begin to talk about their own and others’ feelings as they near the end of their second year. By their third year they grow to be increasingly more aware and verbal about their feelings. Children’s very early understanding of social situations is demonstrated by Dunn, Bretherton and Munn (1987) who found that young children become upset when they witness verbal arguments between adults.

Very young children also show an understanding of others’ beliefs, desires and intentions in home conversations (Bartsch & Wellman, 1995). Studies of sibling relationships by Dunn (1988) also provide insights into the ways in which siblings share moods, participate in disputes, conflict or cooperative behaviour, show empathy, tease and joke. Very young children’s understandings of how to annoy their siblings, for example, also suggest they have an understanding of their own and others’ feelings.

This body of research supports the claim that children are capable of understanding and communicating about their social and emotional wellbeing from very early on. Our task as teachers and significant adults is to find particular avenues to suit their communication needs and to be more sensitive to what they tell us and the methods they use.

**Practical recommendations**

While the language around children’s participation, citizenship, rights, and their image as being strong and competent, deeply penetrates the academic literature, policy field and teacher training, it could be seen as tokenistic until these ideas are translated into everyday practices. In order to tighten the connections between these ideas and practices, we offer a few ways in which professionals working with young children can consider children’s social and emotional wellbeing. It is also vitally important and our utmost ethical responsibility to act upon what we have discovered in children’s accounts.

During pretend play children acquire and express shared meanings with peers and adults. While participating in pretend play with children we can observe their understandings of social situations, ask questions, pretend certain emotions and actions, and observe the ways in which children interpret and respond to those. Reflecting and talking about their ideas and feelings however require particular competencies, such as the identification of one’s feelings and thoughts and the development of expressions in regards to emotions and relationships. Professionals can potentially facilitate these competencies through multiple techniques and at the same time utilise those to gain a picture about individual children’s wellbeing.

Reading a book to a child is a perfect avenue to engage in a discussion about the feelings of the characters by relating those to the child’s life, and to scaffold the development of expressions. This form of sharing, however, is only possible if an authentic and trusting relationship exists and the adult respects the child’s feelings and boundaries, maintaining confidentiality at all times. It is also important for the adult to have a genuine commitment to listening and to taking the child seriously, giving the child a chance to withdraw from the discussion if they so desire. By listening to the child’s understandings and by co-constructing meanings with the child about the story, the characters and the relationships, we have a chance to engage with and better understand children’s perspectives.

Children’s feelings and ideas can also be observed through their self-generated videos, photographs, diaries, drawings, sculptures and other forms of visual expressions (Freeman & Mathison, 2009).
Images provide a rich and non-verbal avenue to understand children’s social and emotional worlds. Artworks also serve as useful cues to discuss children’s ideas. The involvement in art can also take the focus off the child, allowing them to better express themselves.

Images are intuitive and represent implicit and subjective knowledge. Children use drawings to represent or to express emotions and experiences just as adults do in creative, playful and abstract ways that might have little to do with the ‘true representation of the world’. Cox (2005) argues that children use drawing to actively define reality in ways they construct and understand it, “rather than passively reflecting a ‘given’ reality”. Consequently, drawing has great potential to gain insights into the ways children create their subjective understandings of certain issues and situations they encounter.

Children can photograph or video things that are important to them. The focus of this can be quite general or more specific portraying spaces or activities where they feel happy or sad, anxious or relaxed (see for example Fasoli, 2003). They can also be asked to select photos (taken by themselves) to describe certain feelings and while looking at the photos we can develop a critical discussion and empowerment around these images. Child-created photographs or videos give children the flexibility and freedom to express what is important, and how it is depicted.

Forms of visual expression, pretend play, and stories all enable children to articulate their views and interpretations of their world. They can also reduce the adult-child power imbalance, giving control to the child, allowing them to set the agenda and to describe their own reality and their own wellbeing. It is however paramount to seriously consider children’s ideas, draw them into decisions and encourage their active participation in the processes that result in the changes required or requested by children.

Adopting strategies and developing practices that are informed by the thoughts and feelings of children and include their active participation assist educators in creating environments and experiences that are both supportive and protecting. A sense of autonomy, connectedness and value created, contribute to a child’s social and emotional wellbeing.

References: