

Tuning into Young Children-supporting children's voices in practice.

Michelle Hart, Siolta/Aistear Manager with the National Childhood Network (NCN) devised the Tuning into Children project in response to a request from Tusla staff working with the Cavan /Monaghan Children and Young Peoples Services Committee (CYPSC). The request arose from discussions within the group as to how the voice of young children within early year's settings could be heard in order to inform the CYPSC strategic plan for the area.

Ideas and conceptualisation of childhood is changing and is reflected in international policy and legislation, mostly notable in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Providing for the rights of children and enabling their voice to be better heard has a pivotal role in improving their lives and reconstructing their position within society from that of passive dependants to that of active citizens. The UN Convention, signed up to by the Irish Government, outlines the special rights of the child including ways for them to participate in democracy, in ways that reflect their age and maturity. Articles 3 and 12 have a special significance for early childhood educators and other sectors that support children's voice and participation.

Given the special significance of early year's settings and the fact that most children, between the ages of 3-5 years, now attend an early years setting, finding a mechanism to facilitate their voice being heard was considered essential.

The 'Tuning into Children' project forms part of a series of practices that supports the hearing of children's voices in early years and other settings. The framework to facilitate the dialogue with children is based on the five national outcomes from the Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures Framework which include:

- Active & healthy, physical & mental wellbeing
- Achieving full potential in all areas of learning & development
- Safe & protected from harm
- Economic security & opportunity
- Connected, respected & contributing to their world

A playset was developed by NCN to support pre-school children's thinking around the five national goals, some items in the set include, a set of feelings books, money, safety pictures, different play figures e.g. granny and grandad, pictures of the children's local schools, areas and community. The purpose of the play items, pictures and books was to contextualise the set so the project makes sense to children, and engages their thinking on the five national goals. The play set consists of questions for children under each goal and is structured to be carried out during the daily routine within circle time, story time and in small groups. The project is also set up so that children can draw/ or paint their meanings instead of relying on only verbal interaction. Supporting children in this ways ensures they can participate in a number of ways. Children are encouraged to talk, play and draw/paint about topics that can be difficult to comprehend. The pre-schools involved in Cavan and Monaghan were trained and supported by NCN to carry out the project.

A showcasing event of the project took place in Cavan and Monaghan libraries, to celebrate children's voice in a central shared community space. The services, children and parents were invited to attend, enabling children's visibility and engagement in the wider community. Actions such as these support learning on the importance of early childhood into wider society. Showcasing children's voices in this way also broadens children's experiences and expands the curriculum beyond the walls of the early years setting.

The data from the children will be collated and fed into the Cavan and Monaghan CYSPC plan going forward. We will also support other children from a range of settings to participate, ensuring a greater number of children have an opportunity to participate in this project.

Following on from this successful tuning in process, NCN have supported social work teams in Cavan and Monaghan to engage in tuning into older children within their own practices.