

The voice of the child

All children have a right to have a voice in matters that concern them. Listening to 'the voice of the child' when thinking about special educational needs enables us to help children more effectively. Thinking about the ways in which children respond to what is offered helps us to recognise things that may need to be changed. This helps us to be more inclusive.

Ways of becoming aware of children's views:

- Observe children's own play and behaviour as well as their responses to adult led learning. This tells us about children's likes and dislikes, personal interests and preferred companions, and the skills they are using spontaneously in their play. Observations may be made in writing or by using photography, video recordings or audio tapes.
- Listen to children, encourage them to express their thoughts and feelings and make a genuine effort to see their point of view. This means being interested and attentive when children want to talk as well as at times when we plan for them to talk. It is important for all children to have individual attention, on a regular basis, from an interested adult who knows them well and understands their ways of communicating.
- Work in partnership with parents to learn more about what interests and motivates individual children, how they make choices and decisions and express their point of view.
- Notice and respond to children's non-verbal expressions of interest and preference, such as:
 - expressing interest by gazing intently, turning towards, reaching out and grasping, or approaching objects or people
 - expressing feelings through facial expressions, body language, gesture, noises, and responses such as tears or smiles
 - accepting or rejecting things which are offered to them
 - pointing to request things out of reach or to express interest
 - leading an adult by the hand to what s/he wants
 - nodding or shaking their head to indicate yes/no
- Offer a wide range of opportunities, activities and materials to encourage children to express their experiences, feelings and ideas. For example, imaginative play, painting, drawing, writing, using puppets, making music, movement and dance.

How to encourage children to make choices and decisions:

- Review daily routines and consider whether it is possible to offer children more opportunities to choose and make decisions for themselves. Children in the Foundation Stage can make decisions about what they eat, what they wear, who they choose to be with and their play activities. For example, make some picture menus and let children choose what they would like to eat/drink at snack time. Let them decide for

themselves when they have had enough. Encourage children to consider for themselves whether they need to wear a coat or an apron for particular activities (and discuss with them how their decisions turn out in practice).

- Provide opportunities for all children to choose their own play activities. Make equipment and resources easily available. Have a predictable daily routine. Allow plenty of uninterrupted time for play to enable children to develop their ideas and play skills. Many young children are much happier and learn better out of doors.
- Organise indoor and outdoor equipment so that children can easily see and reach all the things you are providing for them to use. Label everything clearly using the objects themselves, attractive photographs, pictures or silhouettes and simple words written in bold print.
- Teach children to use all the tools and equipment on offer so that they can then use them confidently and independently. Some children may need more help with this than others, but it is very important for children with special educational needs to learn skills of choice and independence.
- Let children know that you are there to help them and encourage them to decide for themselves when they want your help. Ask, "Would you like some help with that?" and then wait for the child's response rather than giving assistance straight away. Do this before the child is really struggling. If the child does accept your help, you will then need to check that you have understood exactly what s/he wants you to do.
- Ensure that Outcomes Plan targets reflect children's interests and preferred ways of learning. This can be done by observing children and through discussion with parents (see above). As far as possible, aim for targets which can be implemented through a range of learning experiences rather than in just one way.
- Make group times positive occasions and encourage all children to join in. At the same time they will develop skills of turn taking and listening to others. If you have enough adults in your setting, aim to have two or more smaller groups rather than gathering all the children together in one big group. This gives children with a range of needs more time and opportunity to develop confidence and communication skills.

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