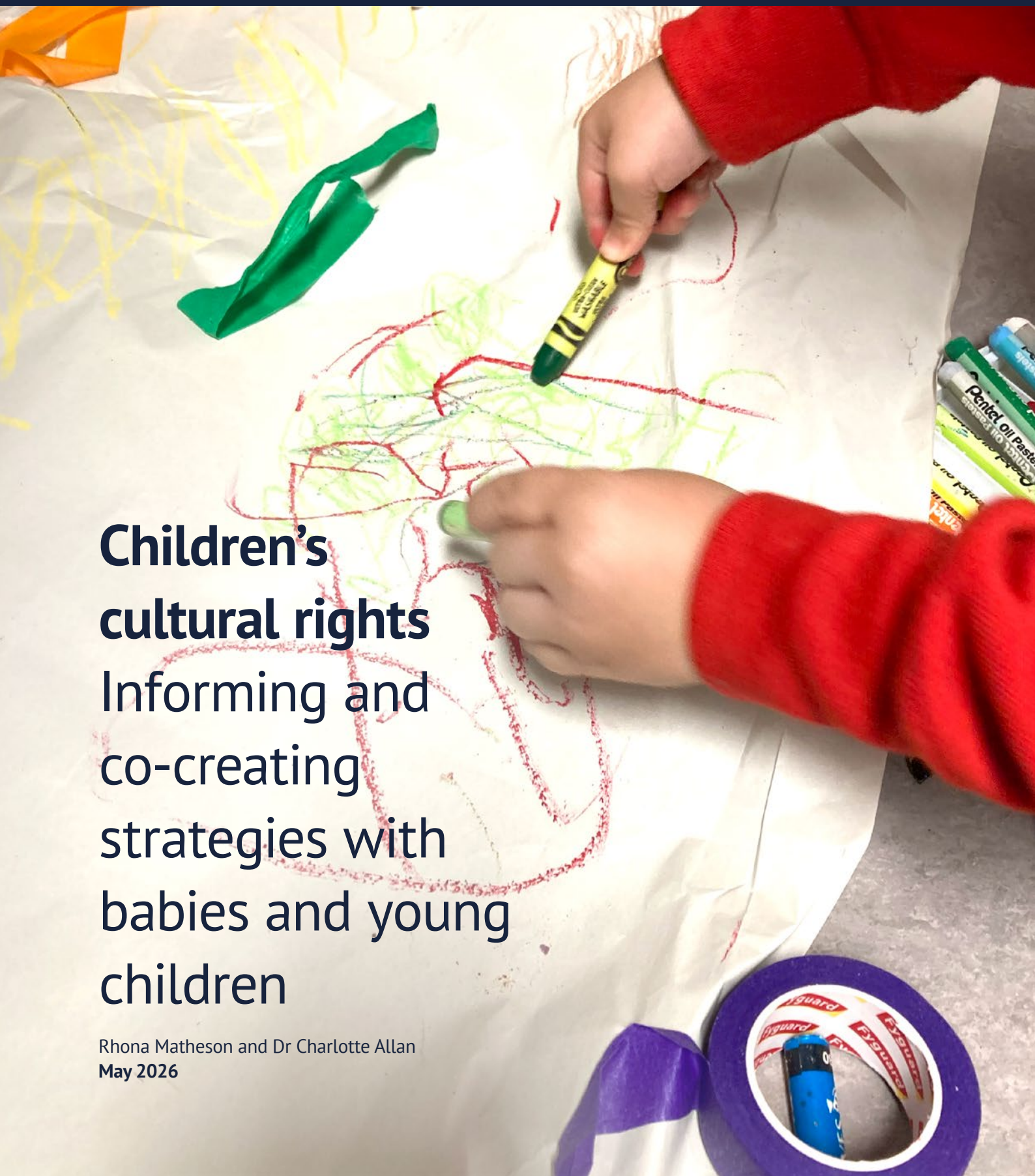
STARCATCHERS




# Children's cultural rights

## Informing and co-creating strategies with babies and young children

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# 1. Executive summary

## Purpose

This report forms part of a project commissioned by Children and Youth Arts Advocacy (CYAA) and Creative Scotland. This work aims to interrogate ways in which babies and children (birth to 12) can inform the development of arts strategies in Scotland. The evaluation of Time to Shine, the Youth Arts Strategy (2013–2023) (Creative Scotland, 2024) identified that babies and children under the age of 12 were underrepresented or overlooked in both the strategy and in the work that was delivered and has been the driver in initiating this project.

Starcatchers and Imaginate have been co-commissioned by Children and Youth Arts Advocacy (CYAA) to carry out this project with Starcatchers focusing on birth to 5 years and Imaginate on 5–12 years.

The project has been framed around five key outcomes:

1. **Identifying participatory approaches** for engaging younger children and those often underrepresented.
2. **Exploring key research questions** with children (0–12) including those often underrepresented:
   - What would it look like if the process to create a babies, children, and young people's arts strategy was shaped by babies and children?
   - How can we create space for input and influence that does not rely on children participating / consulting within adult frameworks?
3. **Reviewing and critiquing different rights-based consultation methods** for engaging young children, including those often underrepresented, in Scotland.
4. **Examining international examples** of rights-based, participatory approaches in arts policy and planning with young children, including those often underrepresented.
5. **Providing data, approaches and current examples** for Creative Scotland to inform current practice and future strategy development.

Babies and young children, those under three years, are a group who are most often overlooked in respect of their rights (UN 2005, Murray et. al 2019). Their lack of verbal language, reliance on adults and perceptions of immaturity are contributing factors to this exclusion (Tobin 2015). Unsurprisingly, therefore, babies and young children are often invisible in policy and practice, particularly in relation to their participation rights (Matheson 2023), despite the evolution of the new sociology of childhood which views children as social actors with agency who have contributions to make at home, in childcare settings and in their communities.

The UN General Comment (No. 5) on the implementation of rights in early childhood (UN 2005), was developed to support understanding of children's rights in early years (identified in the General Comment as babies and children aged from 0–8 years). The General Comment emphasises that the views of babies and young children should be included in *"the development of policies and services, including through research and consultations"* (UN, 2005, p. 7). This report draws on examples of practice and new consultation with very young children to offer recommendations for how this inclusion could be implemented.

## Method

Our work took place across two strands:

- Desk research, led by Rhona Matheson, which explored rights-based consultation methods and examples of Scottish and International approaches to participation with babies and young children.
- A creative consultation, led by Charlotte Allan, with babies and young children (birth to 5 years) in two childcare settings.

The desk research was led by the existing knowledge and experience of the writers and included examples of projects and approaches developed and executed by Starcatchers. As Scotland's Arts and Early Years organisation, Starcatchers is uniquely placed and has been at the forefront of the explorations of participatory approaches this report describes. Work commissioned or produced by the organisation is therefore included alongside that of other organisations, including arts companies, higher education institutions and government.

The five-point approach in *Voice of the Baby: A Reflective Guide for the Arts* (Drury & Blaisdell, 2023) was used as a framework for the consultation element of this report. As an approach it informed the planning of artist-led sessions within nursery settings and a structure for describing the actions, interactions, choices and vocalisations of the babies and young children we met. We also drew on the *Kite Model* of participation (Drury et. al 2025), which emphasises the importance of relationships and other adults present in arts engagement with very young children.

## Findings

The desk research was collated into four areas, reflected in the four sections of the main report:

**Influences on how babies are understood** summarised aspects of the multi-disciplinary research that has made important contributions to how we understand the 'voice' of the very young child. **Models and Approaches to Participation** covers the most important frameworks and methods that have informed participatory work with children (if not always very young children). **Examples of Rights-based Consultation in Scotland** details some of the projects which hold relevance to the aims of this current work, though few include the youngest children. **International Examples of Rights-based Participatory Approaches in Arts Policy and Planning** describes how in Ireland, the proposed action of including our youngest citizens in the consultation process of developing policy has been instigated.

The key findings from the desk research were:

- Despite wide acceptance that babies and young children have, and are entitled to, opinions, they are not being included in consultations.
- The absence of the voices of very young children is connected to a reliance on consultation methods which continue to focus on verbal feedback
- There is a tendency to focus on adult voice, either parent or professional, to 'speak for' babies and young children
- The approach taken by Starcatchers does include both verbal and non-verbal approaches, though its application is still in its infancy.
- The Irish Model is a valuable example of cross-sectoral/cross departmental working.

In reporting on the findings of the creative consultation, selected moments of observations and interactions with young children are described, using the Five Areas of the reflective guide as a framework.

**Key findings:**

- Babies have personal preferences as participants and audience members, or 'taste'.
- Children aged 2–5 highly value opportunities to express themselves non-verbally alongside their development of language.
- Babies and young children respond most creatively when allowed the space and time to do so at their own pace.
- Positive relationships with peers and adults support confidence and agentic engagement.



## Conclusions and recommendations

The gaps found in the incorporation of the voices of babies and young children into policy planning present an opportunity for Creative Scotland to take a leading role in an emergent practice. **There exists the need and potential to develop a standalone strategy for babies, children and young people that genuinely includes and responds to their needs, interests and rights, enabling Creative Scotland to fulfil their requirements as a duty bearer under UNCRC.**

We recommend that in doing so the following should be considered:

- Doing this work takes time and resource, particularly when considering pre- and non-verbal children. Investing time and resource in this however, is invaluable.
- Reflection will be needed on steps taken to ensure diversity
- The skills and experience around rights and babies and children needed by those undertaking this work
- The wider time factor when developing policy, strategy, and funding goals with this age group – by the time it comes into effect they can have 'aged-out' of the bracket and have different needs.
- Consultation needs to be built in to projects that babies, children and young people are involved in so as to meet their rights to sharing views in decision-making
- The development of a Children's Rights Impact Assessment to help inform strategy and/or policy development.

The *Voice of the Baby* methodology (Drury & Blaisdell, 2023) which compliments *Lundy's* (2007) model of participation has good potential to push forward consultation and participatory approaches. In applying the reflective methodology for this report, we developed the following recommendations:

- Respecting and serving the varied needs of very young children within cultural provision requires a responsive, collaborative approach.
- The age range of 0–5 is very broad in terms of how babies and children meet the arts both as participants and as spectators, therefore targeted and specific approaches are beneficial.
- Including those who care for babies and young children is part of including child voice. Arts policy for the very youngest should reflect this.
- Including babies in our national conversation around the perception of child rights will include some shifting and expanding of mindsets. Culture and the arts have a role to play in moving this conversation forward.

# 2. Background

Scotland incorporated the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) into domestic law in 2024. This was a landmark moment for babies, children and young people in Scotland and places additional responsibilities on public authorities as duty bearers to ensure that the rights of babies, children and young people are respected, protected and fulfilled. One aspect of upholding their rights is that babies, children and young people are enabled to express their views and that their views are given weight and consideration in decision-making. This includes in the development of policies and strategies that affect babies, children and young people. The incorporation of the UNCRC is the latest stage in Scotland's children's human rights journey. Much of the policy and practice developed over the last 30 years can be seen to rooted in the principles of the UNCRC, fostering understanding of children's rights including their right to be heard (Scottish Government, 2022). At the same time, there are still challenges to developing children's rights-based policy that also involves children meaningfully in the process (Byrne & Lundy 2019).

Children's rights to access and participate in arts and cultural life are enshrined under Article 31 of the Convention (1989). This Article, which also enshrines children's rights to rest, play and leisure is often considered to be a 'forgotten right' (Lansdown & Tobin, 2019). While for some, the idea that the right to play, rest or to participate in the arts and cultural life may be seen to be a luxury, others recognise these as essential components of modern childhood. Cultural rights are also enshrined within the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UHDR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) (Lansdown & Tobin 2019). These are rights that all humans, regardless of age, are entitled to. Furthermore, engagement with and participation in arts and culture provide a means for babies, children and young people to access the depth and breadth of all the rights they are entitled to (Todre & Kilkelly, 2022) including their right to be heard (Article 12), their right to freedom of expression and information (Article 13), and the right to an education that develops a child's personality, talents and abilities (Article 29).

Children's rights under the UNCRC can be seen to be divided into three interconnected areas: protection rights covering harm, neglect and exploitation; provision rights to ensure the support and services that children need to develop and thrive; and participation rights which support the expression and inclusion of the views, needs and interests of children at home, in childcare or school settings and in their communities (Alderson, 2000, Cassidy & Robinson, 2022). Participation rights include a range of Articles within the UNCRC including Article 13 – the right to self-expression, Article 15 – freedom of assembly, Article 17 – the right to information, and Article 31 – the right to play and to access the arts and cultural life. The focus however, for children's participation rights falls on Article 12 of the convention which states that:

***"States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child."***

Article 12, UN, 1989

This cements children's right to participate in decision-making confirming the requirement to reflect the views, needs and interests of all children and young people, including babies in the development of policy and strategies that affect them.



Article 12 is often referred to as the 'right to be heard' with 'voice of the child' also used when describing children's participation. For babies and young children who are pre- or non-verbal, this terminology has contributed to their exclusion from participation processes, despite the wider understanding that there is a need to interpret 'voice' as the many ways in which children communicate: through gesture, vocalisation, movement, interaction, play etc (GC7, 2005).

Alongside the challenge created using the term 'voice of the child', there is also a tension between what is meant by participation and consultation. The right outlined in Article 12, means that children have the right for their views to be heard at any moment. This can be at home, in a childcare or school context, or in their community. This can ensure that their needs and interests are consistently informing the experiences they have growing up. Consultations are often more formal processes, designed by adults to gather information in response to a specific need or question. There is however a danger that participation is solely seen as involvement in consultations and therefore a rights-based approach to consulting with babies, children and young people should consider how their views are heard and included meaningfully.

***"...there is a thin line between consultation (seeking children's views but not necessarily including the children in subsequent decision-making) and participation (seeking children's views and enabling and encouraging the children to participate in decision-making)"***

MacNaughton et al 2007

There is increasing interest both in Scotland and internationally about including the voices of babies and young children in decision-making (Scottish Government 2023, MacNaughton et. al 2007). This belief that young children have a contribution to make responds to a new conceptualisation of the young child, respecting their rights as citizens and the importance of early years and early experiences. Despite this growing interest including the voices of babies and young children in policy-making this is an emergent area of practice and there is still scepticism that babies and young children can meaningfully participate in policy making (MacNaughton et al 2007). As such, there is a noticeable lack of evidence to draw from to provide examples, not only in terms of cultural policy development but in policy development as a whole.

# 3. Methodology

The desk research strand of the work was conducted largely through online searches, employing snowballing methods of finding connected research articles and reports. These were initiated and enhanced by existing knowledge of participation activity with young children in Starcatchers' work and that of connected organisations.

The approach taken in the creative consultation was informed by *The Kite Model* of participation, which illustrates the significance of the people and relationships when participating or consulting with babies (*Figure 1*). It is offered as a supplement to the well-established *Lundy* model of participation, inviting those working with the youngest children to consider how to most effectively include their voices. (Drury et al., 2025)

The five-point approach in *Voice of the Baby: A Reflective Guide for the Arts* (Drury & Blaisdell, 2023) was used as a framework for the consultation element of this report (*Figure 2*). As an approach it informed the planning of artist-led sessions within nursery settings and a structure for describing the actions, interactions, choices and vocalisations of the babies and young children we met.

The five areas are:

1. **Curating the space:** This area relates to the nature of the space itself, and the materials and experiences curated within it.
2. **Building sensitive, informed relationships:** This area relates to an affectionate 'hosting' approach to babies, young children and families, warm relationships, and navigating tensions around expectations.
3. **Navigating identity:** This area relates to questions about gender stereotypes, supporting the diverse identities of babies and families, maintaining the space for babies, and artists helping with care routines.
4. **Respecting and validating the complex communication of babies:** This area relates to artists tuning in, interpreting, and validating babies' verbal and non-verbal communication.
5. **Making time:** This area relates to babies' development and the period of time that artists work with them. For some artists, this might be over a number of weeks or months, for others, it might be for the duration of a performance.

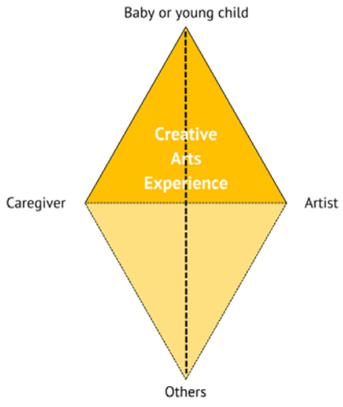



***Figure 1:*** *Kite Model of Participation*




***Figure 2:*** *Five Areas of Reflective Practice*



*Appendix 1* tables some short examples of how the areas informed planning and reflection during the consultation process.

We used the question, "what do I need to be creative?" to guide our planning. Considering how a baby or young child might answer this question we developed creative play sessions that contained a variety of offers for them to engage with and which included opportunities to encounter performance work as spectators. Sessions lasted 60-90 minutes and were flexible in response to the needs of the children and the settings. We sought to make time for high focus, high energy moments, quiet, contemplative moments, group and one-on-one interactions, and plenty of room for unexpected directions to emerge. We held 6 sessions with babies, and 4 sessions with young children (3–5 years).

At Drumfork Nursery, Helensburgh, we met 10 babies (aged 7–24 months), 4 toddlers (aged 24–36 months) and 7 staff members. Charlotte collaborated with musician Hannah Lee and visual artist Pearl Kinnear for three sessions each. Music was brought as an offer in three different ways: flute and penny whistle recitals where the babies and adults were positioned as spectators; led songs with actions where the nursery staff were invited to join and support the babies; free play where songs, sounds, rhythms and movement was explored responsively with the babies, often one on one. These different approaches were offered in different durations and at different times, with repetitions and developments. Puppets and drama were offered through responsive, interactive play and the sharing of books where non-verbal vocalisations and movements were used to explore roles and sounds. Visual art engagement was invited through open-ended materials with opportunities for mark-making and exploration of texture and colour. Creative movement was woven through both the music and visual art focused sessions as physicality and gesture was an essential component of communication and expression.

Movement and visual artist Brian Hartley joined Charlotte for four sessions at Dunlop Early Childhood Centre where we met 20 children aged 3–5 and 4 staff members. We included storytelling and story-making as opportunities for spectatorship and participation, exploring different spaces within the setting across the sessions including outdoors. As there was continuity in the children we met, we were able to respond to their interests when planning the next session. Mark-making and materials based creative play were offered, including puppet and costume building in connection to the story-making and role play.

# 4. Findings from desk research

## Influences on how babies are understood

The wider research context for recognising and describing voice in the youngest children is rich and multifaceted as questions around agency and intent hold interest across many disciplines. The neuropsychological research of Trevarthen, Delafield-Butt and others played a key role at the turn of the century in highlighting how intentionality and connection are present and meaningful to all of us from birth (Seligman, 2009). Inspiring responses from the scientific and artistic communities, the notion of an innate connectivity best understood through reference to dance, storytelling, and music was described by Malloch and Trevarthen (2010) as Communicative Musicality. Innate properties are often of interest to philosophers or evolutionary psychologists as markers of the essential or universal (e.g. De Jaegher, 2018; Dissanayake, 2015), their drive however is broadly to further knowledge about adult experience. For those whose interest remains with the experience of babies, the detailed observations made by developmental scientists add weight to our assumptions of agency in the very youngest children. It is now well established that "every movement made by children holds a degree of intentionality that demonstrates their motivations and feelings in expressions of body and (non-verbal) voice" (Wall & Arnott, 2021, p. 116).

Early Years pedagogy has also been influenced by the neuroscience of agency and relationship. Pedagogies of play build on the importance of intentionality, as in Susan Isaac's often referenced definition of play as freely chosen, personally directed, and intrinsically motivated (Broadhead & Burt, 2012). Warm, attentive companionship is also held as a fundamental requirement for starting children in life; National Practice Guidance in Scotland recognises the rights of babies to express their voices, and the duty of adults to listen and respond (Scottish Government, 2023). Another important concept, connected to that of innate agency, is intersubjectivity. The 'problem of other minds' (Gangopadhyay & Miyahara, 2015) is an issue of concern to philosophy, psychology, and the arts, as well as developmental science in early children. When we acknowledge the self-in-other and other-in-self as the basis for not just dialogue, but how we move through the world the concept of 'voice' is similarly expanded (Delafield-Butt & Reddy, 2025). Researching and/or making art with babies requires an approach that can challenge some of our assumed knowledge around power, attention, and time (Arculus, 2020).

The arts have played and continue to play an important role in increasing the available languages for communicating both with and about babies. Reggio Emilia is a pedagogic approach that has inspired many in how the arts and artists can be embedded within learning environments with the intention of enabling the *'hundred languages of children'* (Edwards et al., 2011). For those researching with the youngest children, arts-based methodologies are also valued for how they support ethical research by maintaining ongoing, relational awareness and consent and/or assent within the process (Blaisdell et al., 2018).

With its emphasis on dyadic communication, developmental research speaks to participatory arts experiences where the artist may have a direct and responsive interaction with a young child. Many arts encounters however take place in group contexts, and some where the artist-baby relationship is one of performer-spectator. The research undertaken looking specifically at infant audience members at live performances brings an additional perspective to locating the voice of the baby. Morley (2022) described the precocious attention demonstrated by babies attending live performance, and Allan (2025) explored the networked nature of the very young audience, finding that engaging with live performance together can have a positive impact on the parent-child relationship through enhancing empathy.



## Models and approaches to participation

Over the last 30 years a range of models have been developed to support the participation of children and young people ensuring that their voices are heard and included in ways that are genuine, appropriate and foster rights-based practice.

### Hart's Ladder (1992)

The first model to conceptualise participation with children and young people. It highlights the distinction between participation activity where children are actively engaged and involved and other processes which are adult-driven and where the inclusion of children's views can be seen to be decorative or tokenistic.

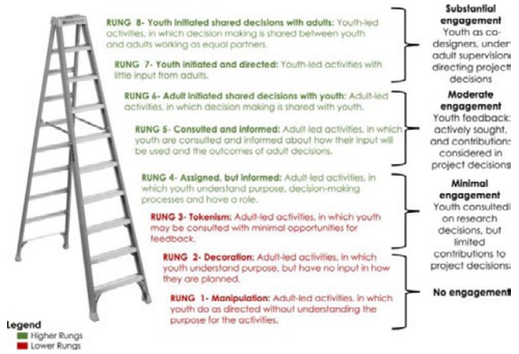



***Figure 3:*** *Hart's Ladder*

### Shier's Pathways to Participation (2001)

Shier's Pathway builds on the work developed by Roger Hart and offers an approach to support professionals working with children to consider the ways in which they include children in participation and consultation processes. Usefully, it highlights a point at which a process meets a minimum child-rights based approach in line with the UNCRC.

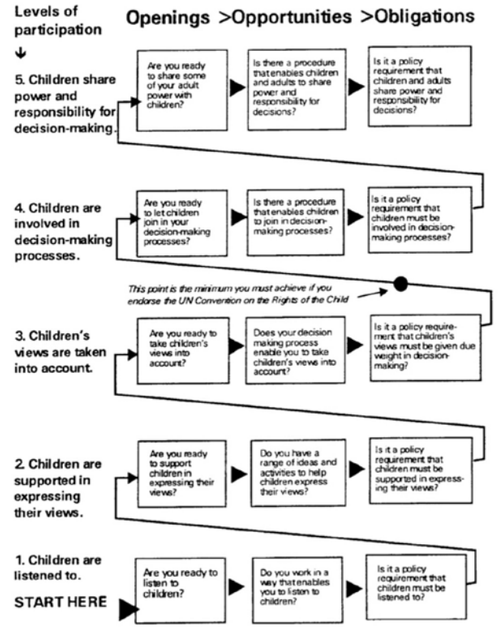



***Figure 4:*** *Shier's Pathway*

### The Lundy Model of Participation (2007)

The Lundy Model developed by Professor Laura Lundy in 2007 has become internationally recognised as the gold-standard for rights-based participation with children and young people. Governments, including the Scottish Government have embraced the framework to inform the development of legislation, policy and practice.

The model breaks down the key aspects of Article 12 with two key stages – expressing a view and that view being given due weight – at its core. The four areas of the model encourage practitioners to develop appropriate approaches to participation that respect the needs and rights of the children involved. Although centred on Article 12, the model is underpinned by a number of other Articles of the UNCRC. (Lundy 2007).

These models all offer useful support to consider how to include children in participation and consultation processes. At the same time, when considering babies and very young children, it is useful to be aware that none of these models were developed with this age group, either actively or in mind. The *Lundy Model* for example was developed with a group of eight-year-olds (Lundy 2007).

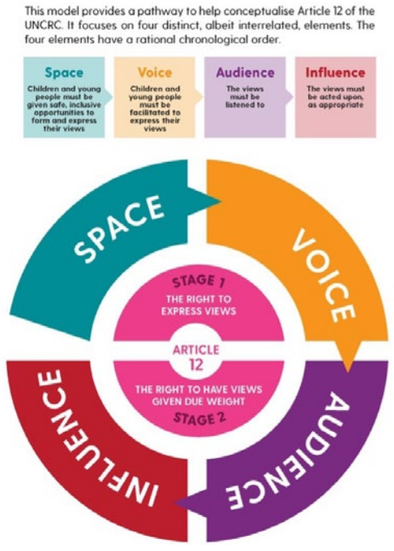



***Figure 5:*** *The Lundy Model*

### Look Who's Talking – University of Strathclyde

https://pure.strath.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/133421084/Wall_etal_TS_2019_Looks_whos_talking_eliciting_the_voices_of_children.pdf

The Look Who's Talking project was developed by researchers at the University of Strathclyde as a means of starting to address the gap that exists in terms of inclusion of the voices of babies and young children, in this instance 0-7. The model identifies eight concepts for professionals undertaking participation with babies and young children to consider when planning and implementation participation: Definition; Power; Inclusivity; Listening; Time and Place; Approaches; Processes; and Purposes. The concepts exist individually but are interconnected and interdependent and foster an approach of active enquiry from professionals in their implementation.

Models guide participatory approaches, methods and approaches are the tools used by those leading the research, consultation, or ongoing participation. The following are examples adopted by professionals engaging in participatory work with very young children in Scotland:

### The Mosaic Approach

The Mosaic Approach (Clark & Moss 2011) is a popular method in researching with young children, particularly in education and care settings and is a well-used method in practitioner enquiries. It invites the inclusion of arts engagement and has been used to include child voice in decision making, for example in the planning and use of rooms within a nursery. The 'mosaic' of the title refers to the approach consisting of including a variety of methods, which are not considered hierarchical but help to build a composite picture. These methods could include observation, interviews, photography, mark-making, and audio recordings. Children are positioned as experts in their worlds and are offered a range of ways in which to share their knowledge and views with researchers. In this way it has the potential to include pre-verbal voices, though relies on the openness and interests of the researchers applying it to do so.



### Consulting With Our Youngest Children Toolkit – Care and Learning Alliance

https://new.careandlearningalliance.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/Consulting-our-Youngest-Children-Toolkit-2.pdf

This toolkit, produced in 2025 builds on an earlier 2021 resource to enable the voices of under 5s to be heard and included in consultation and decision-making. Developed by the Care and Learning Alliance and Highland Council, the toolkit seeks to support professionals to embed a rights-based approach to consultation with very young children across the region. It promotes the use of creative activities to enable babies and young children to share their views meaningfully and in response to their needs and interests.

### The Scottish Model of Infant Participation – Scottish Government

https://www.gov.scot/publications/voice-infant-best-practice-guidelines-infant-pledge/documents/

The Voice of the Infant Best Practice Guidance and Infant Pledge were developed by a working group of the Scottish Government's Perinatal Infant Mental Health Programme Board in 2023. The Guidance is designed to support professionals to centre the voices of babies and young children in practice. To support a rights-based approach, the Guidance uses the Lundy Model framed to specifically consider the needs of babies and young children from (pre)birth to three years. The Guidance has been widely disseminated across Health, Early Learning and Childcare and Children's sector and has also garnered interest internationally.

### Starcatchers Engagement Signals

https://starcatchers.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Engagment-Signals-Resource.pdf

Starcatchers (2024) Engagement Signals, initiated by Young and Powers (2008) and expanded by Martlew and Grogan (2013), are a list of observable behaviours children commonly exhibit when engaging with arts experiences. Seven observable signals, they are: Attuned, Absorbed, Mirroring, Responsive, Interactive, Instigative, Experimental. They have been used by researchers, artists, and educators to help observe and name the responses of children. They also serve as a reminder that the responses of young children are varied both within and across individuals and that noticing subtle signals requires careful observation.

### Starcatchers – Voice of the Baby

https://starcatchers.org.uk/work/the-voice-of-the-baby/

In 2022 Starcatchers commissioned a research project to explore the development of an arts-based methodology for participation with pre- and non-verbal children from birth to 3 years. This was in response to identified needs from the Early Years sector and the wider children's arts sector. Over two phases of research which included a literature review, questionnaire for artists and arts organisations, interviews with Starcatchers' Artists and observations during delivery of Starcatchers Community Engagement activities across Scotland, a Reflective Guide for the Arts was developed that identified the Kite Model of participation alongside five identified areas for consideration when undertaking participation and consultation with babies and young children. The tool has been applied in a range of contexts and is supporting opportunities for the voices of babies and young children to inform policy and practice locally and nationally. Prior to this consultation, Starcatchers work provides examples of how voice of the baby principles and methodology have been applied in practice.

### Wee People, Big Feelings

A year-long project, Wee People Big Feelings had a focus on supporting emotional literacy in pre-school children through arts activities in nursery and the mentoring of nursery staff in the delivery of creative experiences. Skye Reynolds became a resident artist at Scot's Corner nursery, a setting with a high percentage of children who were part of families employed by the armed forces. Forces families are known to experience frequent and sometimes unpredictable separation from one another due to the nature of their work, an experience which can be difficult for very young children (Normile, 2024). The creative arts engagement helped children to develop emotional literacy skills "including, but not limited to, identifying and processing emotions, empathy and self-regulation". (Armstrong, 2023)

Skye is a movement and dance artist, and her play-based, child-led practice enabled collaborative and meaningful creative work with both children and staff. Loose parts, big movement, rough and tumble, object play, and transitional objects were some of the areas observed by staff as enabling communication and expression of emotions. In addition to Skye's year-long residency, month long residencies with musician Dave Trouton and drama artist Amy Hall Gibson also took place.

The project included practitioner enquiry, reflective observations made by nursery staff on their practice with the children (Wall et al., 2021). These were supported by project partners from the University of Strathclyde and found to benefit the staff who took part, both through what they discovered and the process of enquiry itself. The creative activities initiated by Skye and others gave staff opportunities to understand themselves and the children they cared for in new ways.

## Examples of rights-based consultation in Scotland

There are limited consultations that have included the voices of early years children, particularly those under the age of 5. Where they have taken place, often with 3-5s or 4-6s, the emphasis is placed on children being able to use language to express their views meaning that babies and younger children have been overlooked.

What is valuable to note that in many cases, creative arts-based approaches are used by facilitators or researchers to support the children to express their views.

**The Children's Parliament** is a key organisation in Scotland supporting rights-based participation and consultation with children. They have undertaken some consultation work in early years, however this tends to be with verbal children aged from 3–4 years and above. Creative methods are utilised to enable the children to express and share their views and Children's Parliament has an established reputation for high-quality rights-based practice.

- Wee Ones We Circle: Consultation with children aged 4–6 to explore gender stereotypes for the First Minister's National Advisory Council on Women and Girls. This consultation demonstrates young children's ability to reflect on their own experience and that of others around them.
- A 'Better Start in Life' Consultation on the Best Start Grant: This consultation took place with 8–12-year-olds although it relates to policy that impacts on babies and very young children. While the children articulate nuanced and relevant perspectives on the importance of the support that the Best Start Grant provides, the majority of children impacted by this support are in the first years of life and it would be valuable for their views to have been included as well.
- Learning for Sustainability: A consultation to explore outdoor learning and sustainable development from Early Years to S2. Engagement took place in two Early Years Settings, however the emphasis on the investigative work was with older children.
- To support Rights-Based Practice in Early Years a resource has been developed through consultation with parents and carers. While a valuable tool to support rights-based participation, the voices of young children were not included in the development of this resource.

**Together (Scottish Alliance for Children's Rights)** – Tiny Rights Detectives: A consultation with babies and their parents and carers exploring pathways to justice

Together had previously worked with older children as 'Rights Detectives' to interrogate particular issues where children were struggling to have their rights realised. The Tiny Rights Detectives builds on their existing practice and worked alongside four voluntary sector organisations who work with babies to explore ways in which babies and their parents access the justice system. Like other consultations, creative and play-based methods were utilised in the groups and the important role of the parents and carers as interpreters of the voices of babies as well as providing additional context was apparent.

**Young Audiences Group** – Embedding the Voices and Rights of Babies, Children and Young People into the Young Audience Sector: This report was developed from consultation led by Victoria Beesley as part of a longer term consultation process to inform the development of a Young Audiences Network in Scotland to support artists, freelancers and organisations who make work for and with babies, children and young people. Through a series of workshops with children from 11months to 18 years Victoria explored the needs and interests of the children in relation to theatre and dance work that is made for and with them. There are a number of reflections of how babies and young children are able to express the views and desires and these are complemented by quotes from parents and carers reflecting Starcatchers' Kite Model of Participation and the important role that adults have in interpreting and triangulating the information babies and young children share.

It is important to be mindful that these adult voices do not overshadow what babies and young children share in these kinds of contexts.

### Starcatchers – Consultation projects

Starcatchers has been invited by stakeholders including Scottish Government and Creative Scotland to undertake consultations within Early Years contexts. With artists leading these project, babies, young children, their parents and carers have been encouraged to express their views and concerns. Key examples include:

Out of School Care: Consultation with 4-6 year olds in Glasgow to inform Scottish Government Out of School Care policy development

Today Museum – Play: Consultation with young children and families in Glasgow to understand what young children need coming out of COVID-19 restrictions

POM POM! What did you make?: This short video created by artists Rebecca Fraser, Matt Addicott and Geraldine Heaney with local children in Glasgow and their families in late 2020 exploring the impact of COVID-19 on their creativity. It highlighted the need to approach consultation with younger children differently, reinterpreting the adult-centred core questions and exploring themes and ideas that can provide information to support understanding of young children's experiences, their needs and interests.

Voice of the Baby: Since 2022, Starcatchers has been pioneering arts-based approaches to eliciting the 'voice' of babies and young children in decision-making. A research project delivered by the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland and Queen Margaret University has established a model and framework to support artists, arts organisations and other practitioners to ensure that the voices of babies and young children can be heard and included.

As part of the evolution of this work, Starcatchers has used the Voice of the Baby methodology in consultations including the Love Letham project looking at wellbeing budgeting and most recently for Glasgow City Council, where the approach is enabling the views, needs and interests of babies and young children under the age of two who attend statutory childcare are being included in the development of policy locally and nationally. (REPORT FORTHCOMING – MARCH/APRIL 2026).

### Love Letham

Drama artist Amy Hall Gibson, and musician Rachel Drury were the lead artists for a project which included babies and young children in a consultation on the creation of a shared local vision for Letham, in Perth and Kinross. How the voice of babies and very young children were included in the project was considered across three timescales: short term, in the moment, responsive planning; medium term, reflective intentional planning of the next creative session to be delivered; and long term, feeding into strategic planning for Letham through the consultation project.

The Starcatchers' Reflective Guide was used in planning and reflection with both the *Kite Model*, and the *Five Areas* being practically applied. In reflecting and reporting on the artist-led family sessions delivered, a framework was developed to share examples and case studies: They Said, How We Know, What We Did.

Consulting with babies added their voices to strategic planning for Letham, key findings included how limitations in housing impacted the daily lives of babies and young children, and a desire for safe and inclusive play opportunities.

**RESPECTING AND VALIDATING THE COMPLEX COMMUNICATION OF BABIES**

**They said:** I want a large, safe space to play

**How We Know:** Large sheets of paper were placed on the floor for mark making, for the first 20 minutes of the session wee ones were vigorously jumping on the paper to explore the noises it made, and throwing materials in the air in excitement before they settled into calmer activities. ELC staff explained we needed to keep the door secure as they had a few "runners".

**What we did:** Ensured space and time for little ones to engage in the play they needed to burn off energy, looked for a secure outdoor space, added yoga balls and resistance bands to future sessions to provide opportunities for gross motor play.

Starcatchers, 2025



## International examples of rights-based participatory approaches in arts policy and planning

As noted earlier in this report, there is a scarcity of examples where babies and young children aged birth to 5 years have been involved in the development of arts policy and planning. While there is a developing discourse regarding theatre performance, arts and creativity for this age group and while arts-based approaches in research and consultation support rich opportunities for involvement, there is a lack of voices of babies and young children directly informing this area of policy. It would be fair to say that there are limited examples of young children's, particularly babies' voices informing policy more broadly with the voices of parents and professionals being used as an alternative means of understanding their needs and interests. Arts Council England have commissioned research to explore Early Years arts and cultural provision to help inform strategic planning but this research is positioned to include the voices of parents, carers and a range of professionals and not those of babies and young children.

### England

Things of the Least: Lively Exhibition-Making Through the Material Encounters of Under-3s

This project at Manchester Art Gallery in collaboration with local artists, Sure Start Centres, Manchester Metropolitan University and Birmingham City University has created an exhibition made for and with babies and young children under 3. The project *"…celebrates things that are often forgotten or considered least in gallery practices and society – like the ideas of babies and toddlers".*

Inspired by the Mary Greg collection of curious objects connected to childhood. The artists responded to the material engagement that babies and young children had with materials and objects which informed the development of the exhibition. Centring the voices of the youngest children at its' heart, this approach demonstrates how engagement with and participation by babies and young children can influence exhibition making and curation and seeks to decolonise museology making the Gallery more accessible to all.

### Ireland

An exception in this space is the development of policy and practice in Ireland. The Irish Government have adopted a rights-based approach to the development of policy and practice utilising the Lundy Model across Government and across public bodies as a means of ensuring that the voices of babies, children and young people are being included in decision-making. Hub na nÓg is the national agency set up to champion the participation of babies, children and young people across the country providing resources, training and information to support the development of robust participation.

Ireland has also developed a considered approach to Early Years with the development of First Five, their national policy framework covering the first years of life. Aistear is the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework that covers babies and young children from birth to 6 years with a focus on Wellbeing, Identity and Belonging, Communicating and Exploring and Thinking. The strategy was refreshed in 2024 following a consultation process that included the voices of babies and young children from 6 months to 6 years with their contributions influencing what was included in the updated strategy (O'Toole et al 2023). This consultation utilised the Mosaic Approach (Moss & Clark 2017), underpinned by the Lundy Model to ensure a rights-based approach to consultation with babies and young children took place. This is a useful example of how the voices of our youngest children can have influence at national levels.

**Principles for Arts in Early Childhood, Ireland (Government of Ireland 2025)**

The Principles for Arts in Early Childhood was introduced by the Government of Ireland through a partnership between the Department for Children, Disability and Equality (DCDE), Creative Ireland – a national programme placing creativity at the heart of public policy, Arts Council Ireland and the National Council for Curriculum Assessment. This initiative was designed to develop and approach to support Early Learning and Childcare staff to promote arts experiences within early childhood settings as well as support artists and arts organisations to develop their practice with the birth to five age group. There was an overarching aim to create shared language between the arts and education sectors (Government of Ireland 2025).

The development of the Arts Principles supports the evolution and fulfilment of First 5 which is rooted in Article 31 of the UNCRC and states that the *"…significance of play, exploration and discovery for early childhood development is acknowledged and the strategy recognises that 'arts and cultural activities considerably improve the quality of children's day-to-day lives'. An action to advance the inclusion and participation of babies and young children in cultural life and the arts was added to the First 5 Implementation Plan 2023–2025."* (Government of Ireland 2025 p3).

The process for creating the Principles (See *Figure 6*) can be seen to be rooted in rights-based practice, including the voices of Artists, Arts Organisations, Early Years Practitioners, Policy Makers, Parents, and crucially, babies and young children themselves. The approach was informed by an iterative action research project that saw the delivery of an Artists' Bursary Programme which supported artists and arts organisations to work directly with babies and young children in childcare settings to explore creative projects and processes. Findings from the Bursary Programme alongside those from a first consultation stage supported the creation of the Draft Principles for Arts in Early Childhood in 2022 which were then tested in a further public consultation and through the delivery of a pilot Artist in Residence Project.

Noted updates to the Principles include ensuring the opportunity for babies and young children to 'experience the arts as "audience"' (Government of Ireland 2025 p8) and the provision of training and support for the workforce to reinforce the creative experiences that babies and young children have and that the value of the arts to support learning and wellbeing was better understood. The Principles have also been expanded to include School-Aged Childcare as well as Early Years, bringing opportunities to children aged 7+.

The Programme has now been developed and expanded and is in its second year. The programme has received increased funding and collaboration across local and national bodies has evolved with learning being shared to inform wider practice.

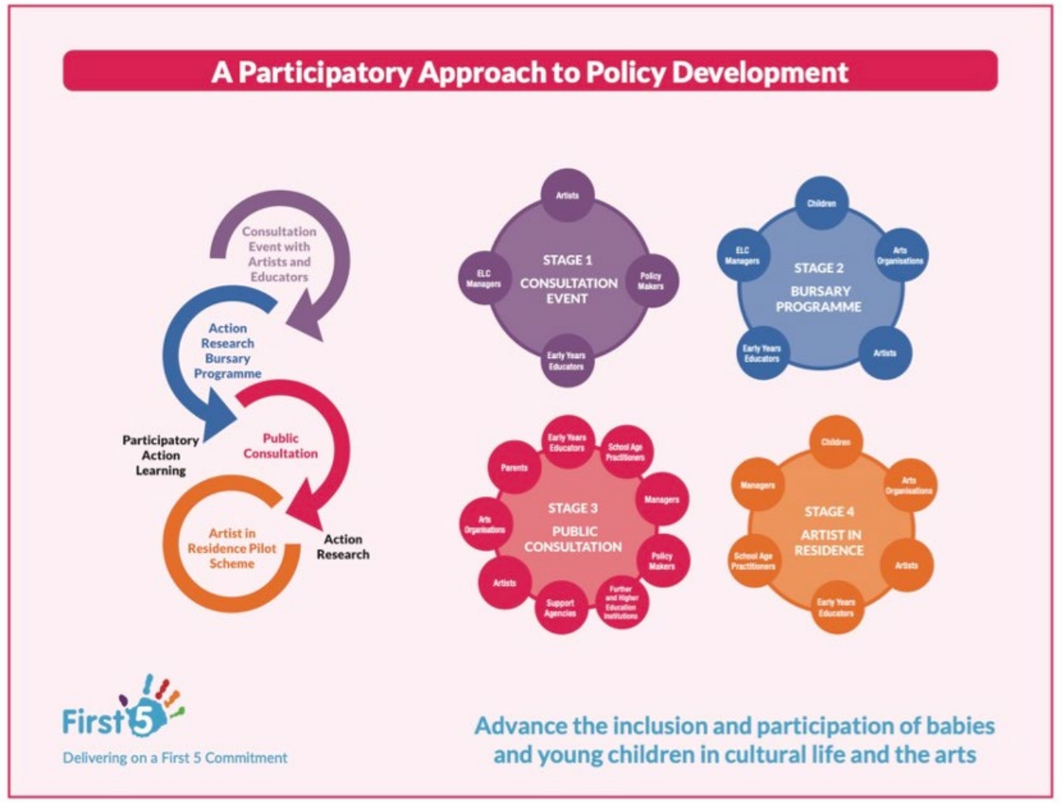



***Figure 6:*** *Participatory Approach to Policy Development*

# 5. Findings from the arts-based consultation

Consultation with babies and children under five was led by Dr Charlotte Allan utilising the Voice of the Baby Reflective Guide (Drury & Blaisdell 2023) as a methodological approach. Drawing on her work in embodied, qualitative research she used the guide to plan artist-led creative play sessions held in nursery settings and frame the reflections made from these encounters. This report describes the activities undertaken, the people and places involved, and examples from each of the five reflective areas.

## Key findings:

- Babies have personal preferences as participants and audience members, or 'taste'.
- Children aged 2-5 highly value opportunities to express themselves non-verbally alongside their development of language.
- Babies and young children respond most creatively when allowed the space and time to do so at their own pace.
- Positive relationships with peers and adults support confidence and agentic engagement.

## Reflections from the five areas: 1. Curating the space

***Creating permission for play and creativity. This area relates to the nature of the space itself, and the materials and experiences curated within it.***

Drury & Blaisdell 2023

The baby room of the nursery is somewhere that the mobility, vulnerabilities, and interests of babies has been considered. Lighting and furnishings contributed to a calm atmosphere, and it was safe for both babies and artists to move about at floor level. As detailed in this extract, the size of the space supported engagement through providing the room needed for babies to engage at a distance which felt right for them:

*The flute was quite loud in comparison to the ambient noise of the room, and having space to create distance supported the children in being able to tolerate its intensity. Adam could only listen from far away, holding close to a staff member, which she noticed and enabled. Later, he had quite a long conversation with a puppet crocodile, where "ma ma ba ba" vocalisations were echoed back.*

Reflective journal, 8/8/25

That Adam developed a game of conversational 'serve and return' with a puppet, though hadn't responded similarly to the artist alone making the offer, provides a different example of distance. In this case the puppet was a bridge to a new, unfamiliar adult, with whom direct interaction was too challenging. Finding and supporting the appropriate distance was a collaboration between baby, artist, and carers.

Bringing intentional materials into the space offered the babies opportunities to explore forces, colour, texture and mark-making. Sometimes the whole space could be transformed, such as looking through colourful acetate, giving opportunities for new views. Opportunities were made for discovery through combining and comparing materials. There was joy at the edge of discovery, when the familiar gives rise to the new. This was supported by access to a variety of materials and the group context, for example a baby found it easier to strum ukulele strings when holding a ball of tape that had been made by another baby.

At Dunlop ECC we intentionally used different spaces within the setting across the four sessions: the garden, the 'creative area', the mezzanine, and a low 'stage' in a central point. Free flow movement was the norm in the setting, with children choosing which areas, materials, and adults to engage with. The exception to this was use of the mezzanine area, where numbers of children and time spent needed to be bounded for safety (it was noted by staff that child voice had not been included in the design of this area which included railings that created a drop hazard limiting resource use there). We found no benefit to separating a small, contained group in this way, with similar or stronger engagement found from a more open, 'street performer' approach.

The area of the setting that carried the label 'creative' contained art materials that the children were free to access. Creativity however was an observable behaviour throughout the nursery. The affordances of a given space can be stronger than ideas carried by adults for its intended use.

*The staff were interested in how we could encourage use of the 'stage' space, that was mostly used by the children for jumping up on or running around. However, it was the outdoor area that was possibly the most successful as a performance area as for some children, listening to the story was more accessible when they were able to move their bodies. Outdoors this was possible, without presenting noise or distraction for other children. Children spontaneously took up the location I had used to tell the story from to tell their own, something which did not happen on the 'stage' space indoors.*

Reflective journal, 2/10/25

Aligning with play-based pedagogies, materials that offered open possibilities and variety of use supported creative engagement. For example, coloured masking tape and lightweight paper was used for (amongst other discoveries): 2D mark-making; incorporation into 3D junk modelling begun before our arrival; puppet-led hide and seek; and taping a long line of chairs together.

## Reflections from the five areas: 2. Building sensitive, informed relationships

***Non-judgemental, warm, affectionate interpersonal interactions. This area relates to an affectionate 'hosting' approach to babies, young children and families, warm relationships, and navigating tensions around expectations.***

Drury & Blaisdell 2023

There was time during the sessions to enable warmness to grow between the artists and the children and this supported the offer of exploratory free play. Puppets were a way to support communication, as with the example of Adam and the crocodile above, but also to model relational action. The puppets in this example were three soft toy bears, two large and one small:

*Brodie initiated hugs between the bears, a bigger bear cuddling the smaller one. She then gave the big bears to different adults in the room, to replay the hugging moment, which they did.*

Reflective journal, 12/9/25

Brodie created an opportunity for other people in the room to share in the social play she initiated whilst communicating some of her interests and values.

Sometimes refusal can be the only voice accorded to young children and is often relational. An example of this occurred when an artist made an offer of a proffered object, when Hannah placed an egg shaker next to a child rather than insisting she take it, this gave agency in not only the child's engagement with the object but in how she managed her relationship with Hannah. Children were also sensitive to each other. Babies responded to others' cries, and older toddlers actively cared for younger babies, for example giving them toys they couldn't reach. They were interested in each other, and when the room was busy, younger babies tried out ideas of engaging with the materials that had been initiated by older toddlers.

In both settings, as the sessions took place over weeks, we developed familiar and friendly relationships with many of the children. We also began to be able to chat well with the staff, gathering observations on children, or on how they felt about the kinds of activities we were engaging in. Some children in the 3–5 nursery approached us immediately, telling us their names and giving hugs whereas others took longer to build a confidence in engaging with us. Part of our challenge as interesting visitors was in making space for quieter children as well as those with clear and confidently expressed ideas for play. The quantity and variety of physical space available in the 3–5 setting supported harmonious relationships between children. Children were observed negotiating use of materials, touch, and space in positive ways. Creativity flourished in small groups of children where they achieved collaborative relationships, with space for different personalities and approaches to engagement. One child might offer an idea for role play for example, with others enthusiastic in joining in and building on this.

## Reflections from the five areas: 3. Navigating identity

***Of yourself as the artist, the space, and the people within it. This area relates to questions about gender stereotypes, supporting the diverse identities of babies and families, maintaining the space for babies, and artists helping with care routines.***

Drury & Blaisdell 2023

The artists were available to help reassure and soothe unhappy babies alongside the staff, though the staff were responsible for care such as feeding and nappy changes. The role of nursery staff during extended free play tended towards that of observer of interaction between the artists and children. In music focused sessions with the babies, carers found a place to join in most easily when following led instruction in songs and rhymes. In other projects a similar dynamic has been observed with staff stepping into the role of observer and supporter whilst the artists fill a position of unusual, playful, perhaps even mischievous visitor. Depending on the aims and length of the project these roles can be shifted, though targeted effort is needed to do so. In a short observational project, it should not be assumed however that this quiet, passive stance is representative of usual behaviour. A reminder of this came from a staff member commenting to a baby about a song, "we were singing that in your nappy change weren't we". This provided an example of how babies are exposed to music during routine care, and though carers may not sing in the presence of a professional musician, they happily do so in their day-to-day life.

Within the sessions the artists shifted between identities when moving between interactive to more performative work, change which the babies and children responded to. This invited consideration for how very young children discern performance and play:



*Hannah returned to playing their flute, I introduced rhythmic movement that accompanied it and babies who had previously been conversational in their play with me took a 'step back', watching me from a more audience-like identity. This shift in identity for me was also applied to the puppet crocodile, who was observed with a new wariness after having previously been touched and played with.*

Reflective journal, 15/8/25

Identity formation was connected to the notion of preferences. Musical preferences were a component of how adults sharing in the care of babies discussed their interests and personality. We observed in the babies we met individual differences in their preferences for rhythm, tone, and musical jokes and surprises.

*Two pre-walking babies who both engaged well were interested in different rhythms explored, one found a build and release hilarious, and another got very into steady beats when they got going. Another baby found exploring a rattle on their own fascinating and rewarding.*

Reflective journal, 8/8/25

Older children brought their own interests and knowledge into creative play with verbally articulate children keen to tell us autobiographical details. Identity could also be seen in a child's 'signature mark' which was observable across mediums, for example one child's interest in accumulation transferred from making a stack of stickers, to then making a picture with closely packed shapes. Another child did not want to engage with the materials we brought but was eager to show us his elaborately detailed Lego fish knife.

Brian observed that his status as a man had often given tacit permission for more boys to engage in drawing (or other arts activity), and it wasn't unusual in his practice for nursery or school staff to comment on a boy drawing more or for longer than usual, as happened in our first session. As well as the visitor creating a new opportunity, this session also took place in an area not usually used for drawing, helping break typical or expected use of materials and space, which can sometimes be influenced by gender stereotypes.

## Reflections from the five areas: 4. Respecting and validating the complex communication of babies

***This area relates to artists tuning in, interpreting, and validating babies' verbal and non-verbal communication.***

Drury & Blaisdell 2023

Babies used pointing and moving their whole bodies to express interests and desires, including disapproval and discomfort. Laughter in play was an indication that the safe balance of 'strange, but not in a bad way' had been found. One baby, who had been communicating effectively without using words, responded after a while to the flute by singing long, extended 'oooooo' notes. Whilst developing language, babies were keen to explore vocal sound and rhythm, with those who had some words using them with meaning.

*Danny had crawled to the door so I picked him up for his safety and sang songs of what we could see out in the garden, and also in the room. He would point to an area or toy and I would sing what I could see, one of this was 'circles' as we looked at a suspended hoop and spherical lanterns hanging from the ceiling. Looking at the lanterns he took his dummy out of his mouth to say 'ball'. It mattered to him that he shared this knowledge with me, verbally.*

Reflective journal, 12/9/25

Being unable to get a meaning to land whilst developing language could be frustrating, it could also be overwhelming to be asked too many yes/no questions in search of the answer to 'what is it you want?' Time to play and make gentle physical offers helped with this barrier. Staff were supportive in some communications, bringing their existing knowledge of children to help translate when there was a barrier to understanding.

While some of the older children were very confidently verbal, others engaged in extended non-verbal communication before speaking, and some did not speak to us at all, though they did engage and communicate. It was useful to have tangible shared points of play, such as the art materials or the puppet toys in which to develop non-verbal stories and games. Music also added an ease to communication, where words were not demanded and space made for alternative sounds as well as movement.

*In a game where I played the penny whistle as a response to children jumping, the three children playing showed sophisticated understanding of how the game developed, and took turns in their jumps, sharing the playing and the initiating of music – all without words.*

Reflective journal, 7/10/25

When loud requests for attention and materials dominate the space around an artist, it can be difficult to make the time and space for the close attention needed to enable quieter interactions. When the space is made however, and the offer framed in a way that is accessible and meaningful to the individual child, the tiniest movements can be forms of agentic creative engagement:

*Eilidh, who had chosen to put on a witch's hat stood near me and looked at me quietly with little expression. I suggested making her a wand with the paper, then initiated a game where she could use magic to make a (paper puppet) cat fly. She made a slight move of the wand, and a small smile when the cat flew. We had some more of these interactions, including the witch's magic being useful in the game of some other children. Though she made no sound, and her movements and expressions were very slight, she actively participated in the imaginative play.*

Reflective journal, 9/10/25

Working with 2–3-year-olds as part of the Wee People Big Feelings project, we met children who joined in songs, with words, though didn't use verbal language to talk to us. Something which staff confirmed was common. One girl to whom this applied only sang when the intention behind the singing was to do so very, very quietly, at a whisper. As with the example of Eilidh above, when the conditions were met to allow her to contribute her voice, she was delighted to be able to do so.

## Reflections from the five areas: 5. Making time for young children to be heard

***This area relates to babies' development and the period of time that artists work with them. For some artists, this might be over a number of weeks or months, for others, it might be for the duration of a performance.***

Drury & Blaisdell 2023

Within the time we had some babies and children took longer to engage than others, and perhaps we did not have enough time for some to find their comfort with us. Time within an individual session for repetition was useful.

*When Hannah played their flute early on Frida created distance between her and the sound and sought reassurance from staff. Later, Hannah played the flute again, this time Frida responded by moving towards the nursery's shelf of percussion instruments to unpack, hold and shake.*

Reflective journal, 15/8/25



Being present for a longer session was beneficial to allowing a relaxed, joining in form of relationship building. We were not only the special visitors who came and went, but adults who were present while the children came and went, within and out of the room or to nap and wake. The babies often engaged with us, and the materials, at a gentle pace. For example, Pearl brought an exciting wrapped up box with blackboard doors that was filled with materials for sticking, tearing, and mark-making. This big reveal happened slowly as the babies explored what was possible with each element as the box was unwrapped and unfolded, some of them leaving and returning within the time we were there.

Within the open-ended creative play (in mark-making, story, and music) with the 3–5-year-olds there developed an internal timeframe to an encounter, or exploration. It was interesting to notice how encounters were concluded, and who initiated this conclusion. The co-creation between artist and child was found in co-concluding, sometimes shared easily and at others revealing challenges to maintaining equity of power. Sometimes conclusion or change was enforced from the outside, by another child asking for a new direction, or the rhythm of the nursery day.

Breaking out of their expected activity associated with a space, alongside the new people, with new ideas, enhanced the creative experience. One boy for example, drew with Brian for an extended time (and would have continued if time allowed), engagement which surprised the practitioners.

## Conclusions

Our time with the babies and children who took part in this project was characterised by curiosity and joy. We brought materials, ideas, and performances based on our existing practice and experience and in response to the babies and children we met. In being open to how our activities landed with our young collaborators we were able to invite a range of individual responses as children brought their whole selves into their play. One of our key takeaways, particularly important with the youngest participants, was that very young children, including babies, have individual preferences and taste not connected to their age or development. Crucially however, it takes time and supportive adults to enable them to communicate these.

We observed movement and gesture as being important modes of communication in babies and young children, which in an artistic context could be connected to their mark-making, musical response, or imaginative role-play. Children with few words use them meaningfully, connecting themselves to other people and their environment. As it can be frustrating to not be understood, intentional materials can offer bridges, or ways into new forms of understanding and connection. Though we focused on different art forms at different points, according to the experience and impulses of the artists, we found that the mixing of forms worked well. We found for example that babies enjoyed making sound with the mark-making materials, and that story could grow from sculptural crafting.

Many young children place a high value on story, and by extension storytellers. The performance of oral story brought a very willing audience, with any objects used within it attaining a higher status within the setting afterwards. For some children, their journey towards being an absorbed spectator was supported by the freedom to leave and arrive, or to manage their distance.

Finally, we found across our encounters the importance of non-verbal and multi-modal communication. The value of these avenues for connection did not diminish with the arrival of language. Creative practices allowed for shared discovery of communication modes that was pleasurable, and meaningful, to very young children and the adults working with them. Arts engagement supports, and is supported by, positive trusting relationships.

# 6. Summary and recommendations

We are at a point now where the UNCRC has been incorporated into law and the established view of early child development is that there is no age before which intentionality is present. Babies are afforded personhood legally, and also conceptually within many fields. Participation approaches which overtly include space for the voices of babies and young children however are still in their early stages.

The gaps found in this report in the incorporation of the voices of babies and young children into policy planning present an opportunity for Creative Scotland to take a leading role in an emergent practice. There exists the need and potential to develop a standalone strategy for babies, children and young people that genuinely includes and responds to their needs, interests and rights, enabling Creative Scotland to fulfil their requirements as a duty bearer under UNCRC.

We recommend that in doing so the following should be considered:

- Doing this work takes time and resource, particularly when considering pre- and non-verbal children. Investing time and resource in this however, is invaluable.
- Reflection will be needed on steps taken to ensure diversity
- The skills and experience around rights and young people needed by those undertaking this work
- The wider time factor when developing policy, strategy, and funding goals with this age group – by the time it comes into effect they can have 'aged-out' of the bracket and have different needs.
- Consultation needs to be built in to projects that babies, children and young people are involved in so as to meet their rights to sharing views in decision-making
- The development of a Children's Rights Impact Assessment to help inform strategy and/or policy development.

The *Voice of the Baby* methodology (Drury & Blaisdell, 2023) which compliments Lundy's (2007) model of participation has good potential to push forward consultation and participatory approaches. In applying the reflective methodology for this report, we developed the following recommendations:

- Respecting and serving the varied needs of very young children within cultural provision requires a responsive, collaborative approach.
- The age range of 0-5 is very broad in terms of how babies and children meet the arts both as participants and as spectators, therefore targeted and specific approaches are beneficial.
- Including those who care for babies and young children is part of including child voice. Arts policy for the very youngest should reflect this.
- Including babies in our national conversation around the perception of child rights will include some shifting and expanding of mindsets. Culture and the arts have a role to play in moving this conversation forward.



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## Examples of how the five areas informed planning and reflection

| Area | Planning example 0–2 | Planning example 3–5 | Reflection example 0–2 | Reflection example 3–5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Curating the Space** | Thinking about how the materials we bring will interact with the floor, and how the floor itself can become changed. | Open-ended materials, such as the sculptable paper. Planning which areas of the nursery we will use, such as trying out the separated mezzanine area. | Musical instruments, which were already sat in the corner, were brought into play to join with the musician. Sound leading the use of objects. | The shed creating a natural 'stage' outside, which was brought into play after the conclusion of planned storytelling. |
| **Building Sensitive, Informed Relationships** | Planning time to build a friendly relationship with staff | How characters in the story interact with one another, their behaviour, emotions and how I, the storyteller, model a response to them. | The importance of specific staff members for some children. | Inclusive and positive play. Some children took pride and enjoyment in leading positive social interactions with other children. |
| **Navigating Identity** | Choosing a visibly interesting, consistent costume to help children identify me and my role. | How we arrive and introduce ourselves, what we ask of staff. | Shift in babies' behaviour when artists move between play and performance modes. | A staff member who found it difficult not to 'police' the children, at times interrupting their engagement in creative activity. |
| **Respecting and Validating the Complex Communication of Babies** | Bringing many possible offers, knowing only some may be used | Making space for non-verbal communication, e.g. material and musical play offers. | A moment of 'question fatigue' in a toddler, emphasised importance of calming this impulse in adults. | Requests made through pointing, e.g. could I have a cat puppet too? |
| **Making Time** | Babies having 6 of the 10 sessions. Respecting babies need for additional time from outset. | Communication with the setting in advance around how best to work with their existing timing. | Rhythms of naps, food, and moods meaning a long time needed to get to know some of the babies. | Child who circled the nursery floor many times, watching, then eventually stopping to join in with ukulele and playdoh play |

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