



# Early years children – seen and not heard?

To date I would argue that many in positions of power hide behind their inclusion of ‘children’ as a justification for facilitating child voice. More recent conceptualisation of the child as a social agent in their world still falls short of accessing and representing views of children under five years of age (Hogan, 2005; Waller, 2006; Birbeck and Drummond, 2007).

## What have two-year-olds got to be stressed about?

This was the view of several undergraduate education students and future practitioners I recently taught. Students provided some very honest opinions when asked about their views on a module reading that week ‘NHS Digital 2017 report on the Mental Health of Preschool Children’ (NHS Digital, 2017). Students were shocked that children as young as two-to four-years of age could be identified with diagnosable mental health conditions. This came in stark contrast to the other reports they had read across the module such as the annual 2021 Good Childhood Report (The Good Childhood report, 2021).

In the following seminar students raised the idea that such mental health diagnosis would not be made historically as the 30-year ChildLine review found that anxiety in children in 1986 was rarely mentioned (NSPCC, 2016). Students questioned why this was the case.

Coinciding with the introduction of ChildLine the UK completed ratification to the UNCRC (United Nations, 1989), it could be argued that this has led to a shift in our society’s views of children. The archaic view that ‘children should be seen and not heard’ within the UNCRC was not applicable, in fact quite the opposite in Article 12.

## So why are students confused by MH diagnosis in such young children?

I believe the answer lies at the heart of what we see as ‘children’, and what we see as early years.

The introduction of the UNCRC and ChildLine have challenged traditional views of young children previously described within developmental and socialisation theories where the focus was on the concept of childhood rather than how to gain the view of



the young child.

More recent interventions for supporting young children such as Trauma Informed practices and ongoing research into Adverse Childhood Experiences (Boullier & Blair, 2018) argue that the young child can be detrimentally harmed in the face of trauma at a very young age, with far-reaching consequences. It is encouraging to see the large number of reports presenting findings from the views of children, but that excitement must be curtailed when we realise they do not report the views for those under the age of six.

## Why do we apply the term ‘children’ to those we appear not to account for?

There appears to be confusion on what ‘children’ are when findings are presented in large scale studies. Generalisations can be made to ‘all’ children therefore leaving the researchers to believe that in the report, the voices of ‘children’ 0-17 are heard. Is there any differentiation, is there an acknowledgment that when referring to children, this does not include children aged

birth to five, or children who are not within compulsory education?

Reports such as the work of the Children’s Commissioner in the Big Ask and The Children’s Society’s annual Good Childhood Report, present findings on the important consultation work they undertake to gain the views of children and young people. The Big Ask in September 2021 gained feedback directly from 557,077 children in England (aged four to 17 years). The 11<sup>th</sup> Good Childhood report considers the voices of ‘2000 children aged ten to 17’ (Hancock, 2022).

Are we missing something important and are professionals neglecting to recognise all children despite referring to ‘children’? Should categories of children be more specific? Despite the Big Ask detailing they have listened to the voices of children ages four+, the discussed findings in the Big Ask make no reference to children under the age of six. The bigger concern is that there is a lack of awareness of children from birth to five.

Here lies the issue, the concept of childhood appears to encompass early childhood birth to five, yet the many research reports do not differentiate between early years children and children six+. To make recommendations for children should the voices of our youngest not be heard?

## Can we access young children’s views and represent them?

The biggest challenge for all early years practitioners, researchers and advocates today is to fight for the right of the younger child just to be seen, to be recognised independently of the all-encompassing definition of ‘children’. Once young children are recognised independent of all ‘children’, then we can begin to effectively support them in gaining a voice.

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