

What the Children of Bristol Think about their Early Years & Childcare Provision

A consultation with children to inform
Bristol City Council's
Childcare Sufficiency Assessment - 2007



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Abstract

This consultation report endeavours to capture young children's thoughts and feelings about their early years provision in Bristol. The children consulted used a wide variety of early years settings and were chosen at random from across the city. The main criterion was that the settings should be equally representative of the three different areas – North Bristol, South Bristol and Central & East Bristol.

Learning Story observations were the main method of consulting young children. This involved making observations of groups and individual children and recording children's comments in relation to the Learning Story framework of Belonging, Well-Being, Exploration, Communication and Contribution. In addition limited groups of children responded to questions using expressive faces and stickers. The mainly qualitative data of this report is delivered in chapters relating to the Learning Story framework using snap shots of the observations and children's comments, followed by an analysis of the findings. Following this the question and response game provides limited information to support the consultation.

The outcome of this consultation is that the majority of children enjoy and benefit from their early years provision. Some recommendations are made at the end of the report for increasing young children's enjoyment of their provision in Bristol as well as capitalising on their positive dispositions for learning.

Acknowledgements

It would not have been possible to undertake this consultation without the full cooperation of the practitioners, parents and, of course, the children in the settings which were visited – grateful thanks to them all.

The photos in this report are from a range of early years settings in Bristol involved in the consultation and included with the kind permission of parents, children and practitioners.

The terms practitioner and setting are used throughout this document and refer to all adults who work with children and the different places in which they work.



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The purpose of the consultation

The Early Years and Childcare Service of Bristol City Council has been consulting with parents, employers, childcare providers and other key partners to determine the demand, and map the supply, of childcare provision in the city (DfES, 2007). The council is assessing whether the appropriate kind of childcare is in the right location for parents, either working or training, who have children from 0 to 14 years old (17 years old for disabled young people).

As part of the assessment the city council has also commissioned this report, to capture the thoughts and feelings of children and young people in Bristol about their childcare provision. This consultation began in mid-September 2007 and was carried out over a two month period.

Research has shown that even very young children are competent and capable in expressing their opinions and views about matters which affect their lives (Clark et al, 2003; Lancaster, 2003). This report endeavours to capture young children's thoughts and feelings about their early years provision through observation and listening to children's voices.



How the children told us what they think

Scope of the Consultation

Children participating in this consultation used many different types of provision, including pre-schools, playgroups, private nurseries and nursery classes in the statutory and independent sectors, children's centres and childminders. A two hour visit was allocated to each setting. Due to the difference in settings, children were observed in both indoor/outside environments or just indoors. As far as possible an equal number of settings were visited from the three different areas of the city (South Bristol, North Bristol and Central & East Bristol).

Methods used in the consultation

Three methods of consultation were used to find out what children think:

- Learning Story observations;
- Children's voices (included in Learning Stories); and
- Faces game.

Learning Story observations were undertaken in order to establish a sense of children's motivation to fully participate in their setting. The Learning Story framework of Belonging, Well-being, Exploration, Communication and Contribution is strongly linked with the five domains of learning dispositions (Carr, 2001). Carr likens positive learning dispositions with being 'ready, willing and able to learn' (p23). The domains of positive learning dispositions are:

- Taking an interest;
- Being involved;
- Persisting with difficulty;
- Communicating with others; and
- Taking responsibility.

Learning Stories also provide opportunities for children's and parent's voices to be heard and recorded. However, recording parent's voices was beyond the scope of this study.

The faces game involved children responding to very simple verbal questions about their early years provision by putting a sticker on the face that represented how they felt (Miller, 1996). The children were offered either 2 or 3 choices (happy, sad and grumpy faces) depending upon their age and the length of time they had been

attending the setting. It was not possible to undertake this game in all the settings visited.

Children involved in the consultation process

The range of settings visited meant that not all children, who may have been the subject of observations, were entitled to free pre-school provision. However, all children who participated in the faces game were 3 years old or over. Simple data was gathered in relation to the participating children's ethnicity and ability status.



Total number of children	Number of 3 & 4 year olds	Number of children from minority ethnic groups	Number of children with English as an Addition Language (EAL)	Number of children with a disability or learning need
232	215	21	6	9

Table 1

Limitations to the consultation

Any research undertaken must always be subject to scrutiny for imperfections that are both unavoidable and unintentional. The limitations of this consultation are listed here:

- Many children's experience of their provision began in September 2007;
- The limited experiences of the majority of children in relation to care away from home;
- Unable to facilitate Faces game in every setting;
- Influence of peers on some children's answers during the faces game;
- Children's desire to please adults by responding 'correctly'; and
- Time constraints - so observations are literally 'snapshots' of children's experiences.

It is hoped that, despite these limitations, this report captures the essence of children's feelings and thoughts about their care and education away from home.

Learning Story Observations - Belonging

‘Belonging’ identifies children’s interests and coping strategies as well as their enjoyment in participating in what is happening in their setting. Belonging is strongly related to the first learning disposition – taking an interest (Carr, 2001). Young children are learning all the time and it is crucial that learning and care become synonymous.

Observation Snap Shots

Evidence from the observations shows the numerous ways, mostly positive, that children demonstrate interest, recognition and coping.

- Able to make choices about what they do;
- Able to change their mind;
- Laughing and sharing jokes with each other and adults;
- Joining in with singing;
- Talking about family members;
- Talking about what they have done at home;
- Talking about what they will do next – both in and out of the setting;
- Joining in with a story;
- Noticing what is happening in the wider world i.e. pointing at a helicopter;
- Talking about familiar objects and finding familiar objects;
- Talking about their feelings, their health and their bodies;
- Taking turns with each other and playing games together;
- Watching what other children do and then having a go;
- Moving objects to support their play;
- Asking questions;
- Answering questions;
- Smiling;
- Knowing each others names;
- Moving seats constantly;
- Pushing other children;
- Lying down;
- Sharing stories about their families and things that happen at home;
- Not knowing other children’s names; and
- Crying.



Children's Voices

Some of the things children said relating to belonging:

'That's not my mummy (about a woman), my mummy's really beautiful';

'I'm not very well today - I've got a cold';

'It's an upside down 2' (about her drawing);

'I can smell it' (about PVA glue);

'I was on holiday yesterday' (about nursery trip to Ashton Court);

'He's trying to climb out' (about spider in a magnifying pot);

'No, it's water' (when asked if he was drinking milk);

'Look at that computer, it's not off - it went to sleep';

'It's a crisp day for me' (about lunch box);

'Why is your hair wet?';

'Are we going out?';

'I don't know - he's not my friend'
(about a child who's name she
didn't know);



'I'm a bit snotty!';

'I can hop in a circle';

'My name begins with that one' (pointing to a letter C);

'My mum's 45' (as a response to answer about age); and

'My dad said he's going to take me to the park - on my scooter'.

Learning Story Observations - Well-being

Well-being acknowledges how children engage with their environment and whether they appear both playful and secure. Children's well being is strongly related to their involvement with activities, each other and grown ups. Being involved is the second positive learning disposition and allows learning to be meaningful and pleasurable (Carr, 2001). Children who feel secure will usually be able to become deeply involved.

Observation Snap Shots

Some of the ways children showed their levels of well-being in their early years setting are listed below:

- Understanding routines;
- Able to choose to sit with a friend;
- Children's ideas are listened to;
- Making up imaginary games;
- Making up songs;
- Concentrating;
- Role-play & imaginary games;
- Building (train tracks, towers, puzzles, roads)
- Running races;
- Being confident speaking to adults;
- Painting and talking about their painting;
- Using their bodies to climb, jump and roll;
- Ability to listen;
- Asking to use camera;
- Practising new skills;
- Seeking comfort from adults or other children;
- Asking for help;
- Making music;
- Using a computer;
- Offering to help.
- Fidgeting;
- Not knowing what to do or say;
- Hiding face;
- Going away from the table;
- Pushing other children;
- Lying down; and
- Crying.



Children's Voices

Some of the things children said in relation to well-being:

'Where's our book about colours?';

'Look at my leaf picture - we made it with rolling marbles'

'I think she's a bit old so she'll die' (about a toy zebra in a pretend game);

'I think I want some quiet time now';

'Do you want to come and ride on my bike?' (to adult in setting);

'I've found a big coin and I'm going to buy bananas';

'I need to wash it' and 'What else needs washing?';

'I'm a taxi';



'It's boring' (about table activity that practitioner chose for key group);

'Can I wash it up please';

'I know what we can do - let's go and squirt them' (putting out pretend fire);

'I'm going to iron you a chicken bone' (pretend play in home corner);

'A wiggly snake - ssssssss';

'I'm a cricket batter';

'I've got a monkey on my back - we are going to the hospital'; and

'This is where the energy goes (pointing to back of bike). I need to put more energy in'.

Learning Story Observations - Exploration

Exploration looks at children's sensitivity to their play spaces and how they expand and develop their choices. It also relates to children's problem solving skills and their ability to persist when difficulties or uncertainties occur, the third positive learning disposition. Exploration allows children to make mistakes and learn from them, rather than leave them believing that they 'can't' do something (Carr, 2001).

Observation Snap Shots

Some of the ways that children demonstrated their exploration skills are shown below:

- Talking about what needs to happen;
- Being confident to have a go at something new (scooter);
- Turning puzzle pieces around to make them fit;
- Opening doors to look for toy food;
- Showing adult where things go;
- Using Sellotape instead of glue;
- Choosing where to play (inside or outside);
- Choosing what to play with;
- Being able to negotiate;
- Knowing to wash hands to remove glue or paint;
- Using a bigger container for the sand;
- Asking another child to help lift a heavy box – toy garage;
- Making suggestions;
- Using names to attract attention;
- Understanding the need for routines or rules;
- Finding a pencil sharpener/paper/pencil;
- Going to get a tissue;
- Holding a friend's hand;
- Starting again when a construction model falls over;
- Finding a bigger brick to put at the bottom;
- Putting a large book on the floor;
- Searching for the policeman's hat;
- Arguing;
- Taking a toy or bike when another child is not looking;
- Pushing another child; and
- Asking adult to hold a toy so that other children can't have it.

Children's Voices

Some of the things children said in relation to exploration:

'I'm going to start again' (when the floor puzzle didn't fit together);

'It doesn't fit' (about same puzzle);

'Move it away' (to make space for another object);

'That didn't work' (about jumping to where he wanted to go);

'That one goes there';

'I know how to get it over - like this - I've done it see' (about ball maze game);

'That's not the lid - this is';

'I need some help';

'You are in my way';

'I can open the straw myself. I peel that off (plastic cover). See that sharp bit - I put it in the milk';

'It's my go now';

'I'd like to speak'; and

'I dunned it!'



Learning Story Observations - Communication

Communication provides children with opportunities to have their say and be listened to and is the fourth positive learning disposition (Carr, 2001). Children are able to express their feelings and thoughts in a range of ways through communication and it aids positive interactions and socialization. It helps children to make sense of their world and of contexts which are both familiar and new (Carr, 2001).

Observation Snap Shots

Below are some of the different methods of communication evidenced from the observations:

- Shrugging shoulders;
- Nodding or shaking head;
- Waving;
- Holding onto to a toy;
- Dressing up;
- Smiling;
- Talking to each other;
- Talking to adults
- Talking to self;
- Laughing;
- Frowning;
- Crying;
- Shouting;
- Singing; and
- Pointing.



Children Voices

What children communicated about their setting and themselves:

'I like the bottom garden more - I just like to go down every day';

'I like being the helper; you get to shake the shaker at tidy up time;'

'I don't like cheese' (at snack time);

'I like playing with L' (lots of children cited a particular friend);

'This is my nursery - all my friends at nursery';

'I like playing on the slider';

'I really like our new garden room'
(about newly painted room);

'I don't like 'em' (about snails);

'I always choose milk';

'I like to go outside in the rain';

'I like bananas - we had them';

Like 'Doing a roly poly in the garden';

'It's my big school';

'I don't want this toast';

'I like climbing on the climbing frame';

'I don't want to do this anymore' (about table top activity that practitioner chose for child).

'It's colourful' (about the floor);

'I like being happy'; and 'You can do loads of things'.



Learning Story Observations - Contribution

Contribution, the fifth learning disposition, is how children learn to take responsibility. It has strong links with how children develop as citizens and whether they are able empathise with others and be fair (Carr, 2001). Children learn to develop positive views of themselves and others when they are given responsibility and share in decision making processes both with other children and with adults.

Observation Snap Shots

The observation snap shots show how children responded to others and contributed to their setting:

- Being helpful;
- Sharing;
- Problem solving with other children;
- Problem solving with adults;
- Offering to find a child's drawer;
- Listening to each other;
- Listening to adults;
- Being gentle;
- Being careful;
- Discussing ideas;
- Recollecting previous ideas;
- Noticing other people's feelings;
- Being welcoming to visitors;
- Knowing where things belong;
- Playing co-operatively;
- Asking if they can do something;
- Joining in with group discussions;
- Carrying out a task for adult;
- Waiting for a turn; and
- Doing a job well.



Children's Voices

How children contribute to the life of the setting

'I'll show you what you have to do';

'Maybe I'll find some vegetables for you';

'Monkey can help as well' (about tidying up);



'I will help you fix it' (about a knocked over tower);

'Watch out everybody' (then she waits until it is safe to ride down the hill on the bike);

'I'll go first - that way I can show you' (about game);

'You have this one' (offering toy);

'I'll miss D. It's his last day' (about child leaving setting);

'Shall we take it out now?' (about a bug in a pot);

'We have to put the things away';

'It goes in that one';

'Let's see your sad face';

'I still need to dry my whale' (about water play toys at tidy up time);

'Hello - my name's J';

'Why did you bring your camera?';

'Turn it around, turn it this way - it pops up there!'; and

'That belongs in the pirate ship'.

Analysis of Learning Story Observations

Belonging

The majority of children observed in their different settings showed a strong sense of belonging. They were energetic and enthusiastic and interested in the play opportunities available to them. This was evident in most children, despite some children having been in their setting for a matter of weeks or sometime days. Typically children who were very new to their setting chose to interact less with an unfamiliar adult, therefore, their voices are less likely to have been recorded. Most children showed a positive approach to their play and learning and there is evidence in the observations that many children recognise themselves as competent learners. There is also evidence in the observation snap shots and the children's voices that most children make connections with other children and adults in the setting but are especially connected with their families. Many of the children viewed themselves as interesting to other people as well as being interested in what other people do and asked questions to find out more. Knowing each others names added to many children's sense of belonging.

There was also evidence to suggest that some children were less interested and showed fewer effective coping strategies. It is important to acknowledge that external factors can affect children's behaviour such as being tired or unwell and for some children very new to their setting the concepts of sharing and turn taking might be quite alien. However, for a very few children, their negative responses appeared to be directly related to their limited choice of activity and resources.

Well-being

Overall there is evidence in the observations which suggests good and sustained levels of involvement for the majority of children. Many of the observations show that children were able to follow their own interests for much of the time, which allowed them to get deeply involved in their play. There were typically enough resources or activities available to stimulate children's interests in the majority of settings. The concentration level of many children was very good and they used a variety of strategies to start and stay involved in their play. Nearly all of the children appeared to be quite secure and when this was not evident, it was typically because they were very new to their setting.

Some children evidenced behaviours that showed that they were less involved. This was most evident in some large group times, possibly because children were new to their setting or found long periods of sitting and listening difficult. This happened less frequently with children in smaller groups but was apparent for a small minority.

Exploration

There were many incidences in the observations of children showing good problem solving skills and persisting with difficulty or uncertainty. When problems did occur many children were able to find their own solutions even if this was to ask an adult to help. In some settings there was a slightly higher level of immediate intervention by practitioners when problems occurred. Many children had experiences of making mistakes and needing to find different solutions to their problems which helped them to see themselves as good problem solvers. Children were usually very pleased and proud of their achievements.

Communication

The observations show that all of the children were powerful communicators, either through words or other means. All of the children used expressive body language whether they were happy, sad or cross. All of the children's voices sections show the strength of children's verbal communication while they were being observed. Some children were very good at expressing their ideas about both familiar and less familiar concepts. Most children also knew that listening was an important part of communication, both to be listened to and listening to other people. They used it as a tool to both show and tell people how they were feeling.

One area where some children appeared less confident with their communication skills was when they did not know other children's names in their setting. This again might be due to the limited time some children had spent in the setting together. Higher levels of confidence for children appeared to be linked to knowing each other's names.

Contribution

Most children showed a good awareness of their environment and understood the routines as well as the rules. Many understood the contribution they made to their setting by tidying up or being helpful. Many children were aware of their responsibilities to others in their setting as well as being gentle with animals and looking after younger or less able children. Some children, again this was more typical of children who were new to their setting and one particular child with a learning disability, were less aware of the impact of their actions on others. Most children understood the need for taking turns and sharing toys in their setting. Many children offered to help both each other and adults and usually responded positively to requests for help.

Key Findings

Some key issues arising from the Learning Story observations and children's voices:

- The children's ability to make informed judgements relating to their own interests and well-being;
- How often young children chose to talk about their life at home rather than their life at nursery despite the remit for this consultation;
- The importance of knowing other children's names in their setting.

Summary and recommendations

It is positive that the majority of the observational snap shots and the children's voices demonstrate children's enjoyment and happiness in their various early years settings. There are many comments by children in this report that clearly show what they like about their early years provision in Bristol.

It is also important to acknowledge that nearly all children will have moments of being frustrated, upset or unhappy during a session or day and this consultation may have captured some of those moments. However, it is also important to really listen to what children are thinking and feeling, using both their verbal and non-verbal clues. If children are showing or saying that an activity is boring or beyond their current level of understanding or that they don't want to do something anymore, it is likely that a wider variety of activities need to be made available or new strategies put in place to promote positive, rather than negative, learning dispositions.

Obviously children's home life and their family are very important to young children. It is interesting to reflect how much children talked about them during this consultation. It is perhaps an area that can become more integrated into the life of some settings, in relation to discussion, activities and resources, in order to establish really meaningful links for very young children between home and their early years setting.

Children's sense of identity is central to the development of self-esteem and confidence. It was interesting to observe the lack of self-assurance displayed by otherwise confident children when they did not know another child's name. Some children also linked knowing names directly with being friends or not. It is therefore essential that lots of name learning games are played with children, particularly when new groups are forming or individual children join a setting.



Faces Game

The Faces Game required children to listen to a question asked by an adult then put a sticker on the 'feeling' face that corresponded with their answer. After piloting five different 'feelings' faces with one group of children, it became evident that two or three feelings would be more workable. Children were asked two questions:

- How do you feel when you come to nursery (or other setting type)?
- How do you feel when you play with friends at nursery (or other setting type)?

Children often volunteered more information about what they liked to do as part of this process. The results are shown in Table 1 and 2 below.

The game was played effectively in six settings (27 children) and therefore forms a very small part of this consultation. Direct questioning of young children can be successful when children are confident and secure in their environment. However, it is a very time consuming process and really needs preliminary work with children about feelings, which was not possible within the scope of this consultation. In addition many factors affected children's choices when answering the questions including the following:

- The choice of their best friend;
- If there was a face without any stickers;
- If they thought a face needed a nose, ears etc;
- The length of time children had spent in a setting;
- Understanding different feelings;
- Ability to relate self to an abstract concept;

How I Feel When I Come to Nursery		
Feeling	Number of responses	Some responses to why
Happy	21	Friends are there I like to come I like the kitty Playing I like the home corner I like the bikes outside
Sad	4	Sad when I leave mummy
Fed-up	2	Just am Getting up

Table 2

How I Feel When I Play with my Friends		
Feeling	Number of responses	Some responses to why
Happy	24	We have fun I like to play outside It's fun with them I like being happy On the scooters Doing a roly poly
Sad	1	Don't know
Fed-up	3	When they (friends) don't play If I can't have the fast bike I am tired

Table 3

Overall the responses from the children were positive and confirmed the findings from the observations and children's voices. However, a much larger group of children needed to be consulted using this method for any real conclusions to be drawn.



Final Thoughts

It is very positive that the majority of children attending many different kinds of early years provision in Bristol are happy and playful in their settings. While actual questioning of children was minimal and this makes the data for this consultation very qualitative in nature, the Learning Story observations, along with the children's own voices, convincingly demonstrate that most children are having their care and learning needs well met. As such this should encourage them to develop positive learning dispositions, both now and in the future, thus helping them to achieve the five outcomes in Every Child Matters; the government's national strategy to maximise opportunities for all children and young people (DfES, 2005).

Three key areas were identified for consideration within this consultation which might improve children's experiences in their early years settings. The first of these is for children's voices about their experiences to be heard in every setting in Bristol, in order that all children's interests are met and nurtured. Secondly, that more opportunities are provided for children to discuss their experiences about their families and their life at home as this is what children most wanted to talk about during this consultation. The final consideration is for children to be given many different playful opportunities to share their names with each other in order to help increase self-esteem and confidence.

Happily, many of the young children consulted in Bristol are already recipients of some or all of the experiences identified above. However, some children could benefit further from small changes that different settings are willing to make in order that all children can fully enjoy their earliest experiences away from home.



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