

Listening to the Voice of the Young Child

NIPPA – The Early Years Organisation

Belfast, Northern Ireland

NIPPA – The Early Years Organisation is the largest voluntary organisation in Northern Ireland working with children 0-12 and their families. Founded in 1965, the organisation is rooted in a strong value base which sees all young children as strong, competent, and visible in their communities. Embedded in the culture of the organisation is a philosophy of actively listening to young children. The work enshrines a children's rights based approach and endorses the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child as a core pedagogy.



Article 12 of the Convention proclaims that a child has a right to express an opinion and have that opinion taken into account in any matter of procedure affecting the child. Endorsing Article 12 has led to NIPPA adopting a ground-breaking project giving young children a voice in a range of policy and practice issues which affect them. Led by Isobel McClean, a NIPPA Early Years Specialist, the organisation has developed a number of methods and tools which have been used to allow very

young children to have a voice about significant policy developments in Northern Ireland such as the role of the new Children Commissioner, the priorities within the new 10 year

Strategy for Children, and the shape of a future Play Policy for children 0-12.

As a region emerging from conflict, NIPPA also believes that the voice of the young child needs to have a strong influence in terms of dealing with the legacy of the violent past and shaping a more positive future. NIPPA staff are currently supporting young children to break the silence on issues of sectarianism and racism and begin the process of building a culture of respecting and celebrating difference in early childhood communities. In such an approach the curriculum supported

by NIPPA sees peace, dignity, tolerance, equality, and solidarity as core business and the child's perspective as a central theme with the consequent shift in power relationships between adults and children.

Giving young children a voice challenges us to think about what it means for professionals whose main business is early childhood. Responding to this challenge will dominate the work of NIPPA and the support it gives the early childhood policy and practice community as Northern Ireland travels on a journey which begins to embrace young children as holders of rights and active participants as citizens in a more open inclusive society.

Article written by Siobhan Fitzpatrick, Chief Executive, NIPPA

Photographs by Bonnie Neugebauer

