CYPSC
CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE'S SERVICES COMMITTEES
Kerry

Pilot Project

Listening to Children through Play

December 2016

"...Human beings are open systems, permeated by other people as well as by plants and air and water. We are shaped by other people as well as by what we breathe and eat. Both our physiological systems and our mental systems are developed in relationship with other people - and this happens most intensely and leaves its biggest mark in infancy. We live in a social world, in which we depend on complex chains of social interaction to bring food to our table, put clothes on our bodies and a roof over our heads, as well as the cultural interactions we are stimulated by. We cannot survive alone". Sue Gerhardt (2004)

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Introduction

The Kerry Children and Young People's Services Committee has produced this report to help inform their 2017 Workplan for the county. The report was commissioned by the Committee's Youth Participation Working Group to provide it with feedback on the what is important to children in the county and what are the issues that concern them.. This report describes the background, methods and outcomes of this process in what was called the 'Listening to Children Through Play a Pilot Project'.

The Project team consisted of Deirdre Kavanagh, Director, Sandy Lane Institute and play therapists; Aisling McAuliffe, Brigeen Wrenn, Elizabeth Sheehan, Elizabeth Sherry, Emma Kennedy and Grace O'Connor.

Listening to Children through Play

CYPSC Vision

All children are given the best chance to achieve their full potential.

Rationale

The core objective of this project is to help Kerry Children & Young People's Services Committee (CYPSC), Youth Participation Working Group, include the voice of children aged 0-12 in its work and the work of its working groups. To ensure that what is important to children in the county and the issues that concern them are reflected upon and guide CYPSC's 2017 Work plan. The 'research question' needed to be positive so that it highlighted what is positive about being a child in Kerry and would also highlight some of the gaps in services and supports for children in the county.

Objectives

- Children to live in strong and supportive families and communities
- Children to achieve physical, cognitive, social ,emotional and spiritual wellbeing
- Children are valued members of the community.

The 3 elements of the Project include:

- The children to have fun, enjoy and receive something back from the experience
- To evidence and document the voice of children on '*What's great about being a child in Kerry?*
- To evaluate the project in order that it may inform Kerry CYPSC in future planning.

This project was conducted in 2016 so CYPSC may undertake a larger 'consultation' with children & young people in 2017 when they are developing the next Kerry CYPSC 3 year Work plan. In essence this project is a 'consultation infrastructure' which CYPSC may use to improve and replicate on a larger scale in 2017 across the county.

Projects Specifics:

The specifics of this project were to undertake 10 facilitated play projects in County Kerry. Each facilitated play project to consist of 3 workshops with children in a school or childcare setting and to illicit from the participating children in a fun way '*What's great about being a child?*

- 3 x facilitated play projects with children 0-4 years old
- 4 x facilitated play projects with children 5-8 years old
- 3 x facilitated play projects with children 9-12 years old

To ensure a good geographic spread of the project CYPSC included: Tralee, Killarney, Listowel, Castleisland, Killorglin, Dingle, Kenmare and Cahersiveen. The choice also included urban and rural as well as larger and smaller schools and early years settings.

Table 1- Participating Early Years Services

Age Cohorts	Area	Profile
0-4 Years	**Tralee** Stepping Stones **Killarney** Holy Cross Preschool **Castleisland** Gaelscoil Naionra	 Urban Mixed – Inc. Migrants Urban Mixed – inc. migrants Rural Mixed
5-8 Years	**Listowel** Lixnaw Girls NS **Tralee** Mercy Moyderwell **Killorglin** Glenbeigh NS **Dingle** Scoil Iongáid Rís, Boys NS,	Rural Girls Urban Mixed DEIS Rural Mixed DEIS Urban boys DEIS– Gaeltacht
9-12 Years	**Tralee** St John's **Kenmare** Tulloha NS, Bonane, **Cahersiveen** Filemore NS	Urban Mixed Rural mixed Rural mixed

Consulting with children

"… to fail to consult or involve …children and young people because of an assumed innocence is patronizing and it does not take into account their experiences or competence in making difficult decisions." (Willow, 1997, p. 12)

There is evidence that children's early experiences contribute to their later abilities and identities (Bowman, Donovan & Burns, 2001). This evidence asks that we reflect carefully on whether and how to enable young children to become active members of a democratic society. Adults develop policies and practices for and on behalf of children. However, there are increasingly strong calls (e.g. Christensen & James, 2000; National Youth Council of Ireland, 2001) to involve children – as a right - in developing policies that directly affect their lives.

The principles underpinning democratic societies require that everyone – regardless of age – should be able to participate in civic life and so listening to young children is a prerequisite of a democratic society. Listening to young children helps them to build the skills and knowledge they need to be active citizens and gives them experience in participating in decision-making.

When listening to children, adults can align their actions with children's rights. The 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that children have the right to participate in decision-making and to express their views about things that concern them.

Article 12 of the Convention states that the child has the right:

"to express an opinion and to have that opinion taken into account in any matter or procedure affecting the child".

When listening to children, adults can understand why certain environments are more child-friendly than others and, in the process, extend their experience of the social world. Young children can tell adults a lot about what works for them in their daily lives and what would make them feel that their needs and perspectives are valued. (MacNaughton 2001, Campbell et al, 2000)

Current knowledge about young children's competence, and about the impact of their early experiences on their future wellbeing strongly supports giving young children a voice in their life and policy-making. Giving young children a voice in policymaking can enhance children's sense of community and it can strengthen their communities by acknowledging them as people with rights - including the right to be heard.

Ireland's National Curriculum Framework, Aistear, speaks on the theme Well-being. Well-being focuses on developing as a person. It has two main elements: psychological well-being (including feeling and thinking) and physical well-being. Children's relationships and interactions with their families and communities contribute significantly to their sense of well-being. Children need to feel valued, respected, empowered, cared for, and included. They also need to respect themselves, others and their environment. They become positive about themselves and their learning when adults value them for who they are and when they promote warm and supportive relationships with them. Expressing themselves creatively and experiencing a spiritual dimension in life enhances children's sense of well-being.

How can we give children a voice?

New principles for seeking children's voices are emerging from early childhood pedagogy and policy making in response to the increasing interest in including children's voices in research. These principles centre on: ethical engagement with children; Listening carefully to children, using different cues to hear the voices of children of different ages and verbal abilities, using multi-method techniques to help children to express themselves, documenting children's voices to share them with others. Smith 2003 argues that to protect and enhance children's rights through consultation with them adults should ensure that children have: safe spaces in which to share their ideas without challenge or critique and privacy.

Who delivered the Project

Sandy Lane Institute's Director, Deirdre Kavanagh, oversaw the delivery of the project. Play Therapists delivered the project within the 10 settings over the eight areas. The

Play Therapists have extensive experience in working creatively with children and are fully insured, have Garda vetting and work within PTI's (Play Therapy International) and PTIrl's (Play Therapy Ireland) code of ethical standards and practice. Parental consent was obtained by CYPSC through the participating schools/centres for the project.

The SLI project team drew on current thinking within the literature reviewed on how to consult with young children in choosing the methodology for the Project. This thinking emphasised the child as a competent constructor of meaning, able to report and communicate valid views on the world and able to actively participate in decision-making. In overview, the literature emphasised the importance of: ethical engagement with children throughout the consultation process; best practices principles of listening carefully to children being closely attuned to different cues to hear the voices of children of different ages and verbal abilities using multi-method techniques to help children to express themselves and documenting children's voices to share them with others.

Methodology

The methodology employed was an active learning research piece. Multi-method techniques were used to help children to express themselves. These techniques are strongly supported by the work of researchers attempting to develop participatory approaches with young people. These can include clay, music, drawing, painting, drama, story-telling, puppets and child interviews. Multi-method techniques offer children with different languages, abilities and styles of expression more than one way to express themselves, helping them to find ways that suit them.

These techniques (sometimes adapted) can be used to document children's voices. They record children's voices and they enhance children's sense of wellbeing by exciting interest in their learning and by demonstrating that their work is taken seriously (Malaguzzi, 1993).

In this instance, drawings, questioning, observations, peer interviews, drama and movement were used to connect with the children to hear and make visible their experiences of living in Kerry as a child of today.

Table 2-Children who participated

Age (in years)	No of children	Female	Male
0-1			
1-2	11	8	3
2-3			
3-4	20	11	9
4-5	10	5	5
5-6	9	8	1
6-7	18	6	12
7-8	4	2	2
8-9	3	-	3
9-10	23	6	17
10-11	12	8	4
11-12	13	8	5
12-13	3	1	2
Total	126	63	63

Table 3 shows the age and gender of the children who participated in the project. The majority of children (35 of 126) were between 9 and 11 years; and a small minority (7 of 126) were between 7 and 9 years.

The Questions

1. **How do children see what they need for their well-being?**

   When, where do you feel good, happy, safe, okay, belonging, included, excited, sad, angry?

   What makes you feel good, happy, safe, okay, belonging, included, excited sad, angry?

   Show me.

2. **What do children value and wish for in their lives?**

   If you had your best day at preschool/school what would you be doing?

   Who would be there?

   If you had one wish what would it be?

   Show me.

3. **What makes them feel valued?**

   How do you know this place is for children?

   What do you like to do with your family in Kerry and why?

   What makes you feel special, important or needed?

   Show me.

These questions were expanded on in the sessions with the children to harness as much information as possible on how it feels to be a child in Kerry today.
Note with non-verbal children (up to 2years 4months) these questions are answered through observation of body language and social interactions. Opportunities were created for the children to move around and document the results. Where do they go? Where do they enjoy being?
Who decides where babies go - adults or babies?

Listening

This section summarises and discusses the data from the consultations with the 126 children aged birth to 12 years old who participated in the project. As discussed previously, the children were asked three questions derived from the broader consultations about CYPSC's objectives for the project. These questions were: 1.What

do the children think that they need for their wellbeing? (The play therapists who consulted with the children used several words for 'wellbeing', including good, happy, safe, okay, belonging, included, excited.) 2. What do the children value and wish for in their lives? 3. What makes the children feel valued?

Several age-appropriate techniques were used to gather children's responses to these questions. Verbal children were interviewed individually and in groups and were also invited to express their ideas in pictures. The Play Therapists analysed these notes and photographs to identify themes, such as children's likes and dislikes and what made them feel good, happy, safe and excited.

The findings harvested an abundance of data:

- Over 300 pieces of children's incidental dialogue - transcribed by play therapists.
- 2 audio-taped semi-structured group and individual conversations with children
- 54 examples of children's writing
- 105 children's drawings and paintings
- 18 photographs of children at play.

Table 3 summarises the key themes and issues in the children's responses to the three questions. The remainder of this section draws on the children's words and images to discuss these themes and issues.

Table 3 Key themes and issues in the children's responses to the three questions

Consultation question	Key themes	Issues within each theme
1. What do the children say they need for their wellbeing?	Family	• the importance to children of time and space with their family • how their family makes children feel special
	Home	• the importance of having somewhere to themselves • the need for a safe space at home
2. What do the children value and wish for in their lives?	Outdoor spaces	• being in parks and gardens • using and being at sporting facilities (e.g. swimming pools, football grounds).
	Friends	• being with friends in celebrations and outings • sleepovers with friends • going to the park and playing games with friends.
	Animals	• spending time with pets • visiting places with animals.
	Entertainment industries	• watching television, watching movies and using computers.
	Community safety	• an end to war • an end to bullying.
3. What makes the children feel valued?	Respecting ideas	• being listened to and being asked questions • being really seen
	Family members	• spending time with family
	Friends	• having good friends

Getting to Grips with Feelings!!

"Feelings" responses from

1. Holy Cross Mercy Pre-school, Killarney
2. Gaelscoil Naionra, Castleisland

1. **Sample from *Play Therapist's report on project* at Holy Cross Mercy Pre-school**

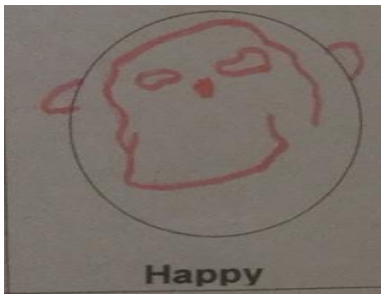
The session commenced with an introduction to the purpose of my visit

The children sat in a circle and I asked them if they could tell me what they knew about the word "feelings".

A full audio recording of their responses is available. For the purposes of this report I will list them.

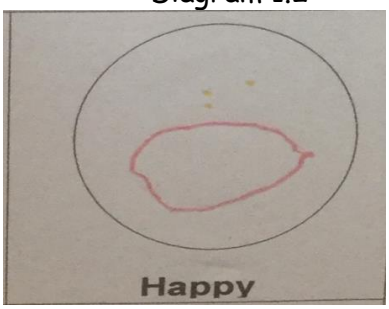
Children's Responses (Aged 3-4)

Diagram 1.1



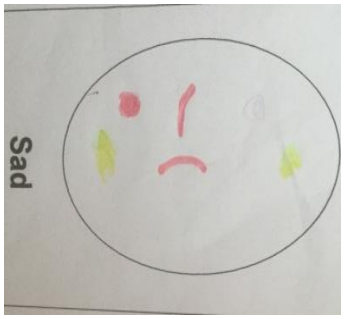
"My feelings are good, good, good"

Diagram 1.2



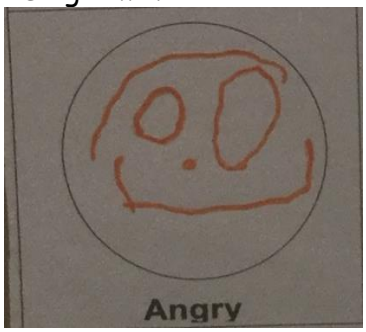
"I feel very happy".

Diagram 1.3



"I would feel sad if I didn't get a sticker"

Diagram 1.4



"I feel angry because I got poked in my side"

Body Outline

Another activity involved drawing around the body outline of each child. We talked about where and how we feel our feelings in our bodies.

The children varied in their responses to where they each felt their feelings:

"My heart, my head, my leg, all over me, in my toes".

One child said he had no feelings at all.

Diagram 1.5 (Girl aged 4)

"This is when I feel Happy all over"

Each child was then left free to decorate their body outline with art materials.

One child (the child who said he had no feelings) asked not to be drawn around. He was quite happy to wander between the other children and watch them decorate their outlines.

When the children had finished they sat beside their art to describe their feelings further".

2. Sample taken from *Play Therapist's report on project* at Gaelscoil Naionra

"The session began with an introduction to why I was in their school.

The children sat around and I asked them if they could tell me what they knew about the word "feelings".

Pages were divided into 4 sections with an emotion sticker on top to represent happy, sad, angry and loved. The children were asked to draw something in each segment.

1) Places we feel safe included-

"On land", "at school and in a house"

"In my house", "in a helicopter", "in the car a jeep", "on a cloud" *(the responses seem to indicate a sense of enclosure to be protected by something)*

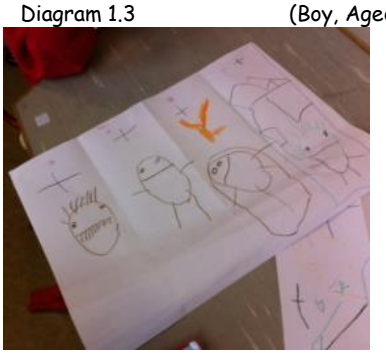
2) Places we feel happy included-

"Feeding the ducks", "in water", "going swimming" *(nature, being outside, nurturing by feeding something, having freedom)*

Diagram 1.2 (Girl, Aged 7)

"Spiders make me angry, my mom makes me happy"

Diagram 1.3 (Boy, Aged 7)



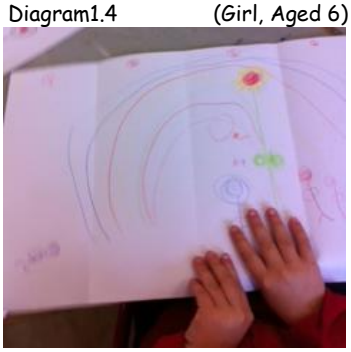
No Comment

3) If you felt sad what would make you feel better?

"My mom", "kittens", "a new dog", "playing outside", "new cat", "I don't know" *(family, pets, nature)*

Sweets, food, jelly, ice cream, my mom and shoot the alien *(responses seem to indicate some form of nourishment, nurture that is love from caregiver, or revenge).*

Diagram1.4 (Girl, Aged 6)



"Rainbows make me happy"

4) If you were crying what would make you feel better?

Mommy kissing me, a hug, medicine, a bath, playing, being outside, my cousins, my friends, my brother *(love and affection from caregiver, relationships)*

Consultation question 1:

What do the children think that they need for their wellbeing?

Overview

Aistear states that parents are the most important people in their children's early life. Children learn about the world and their place in it through their conversations, play activities and routines with parents and families.
Two broad themes emerged in the children's responses: children need a family around them and involved in their daily lives; and children need a home.

Theme 1: Family

In all of the 10 services that participated in the 'birth to twelve' project, the children said that family was key to their wellbeing. Family was the most frequent theme in children's statements about what made them feel good, happy, safe and excited.

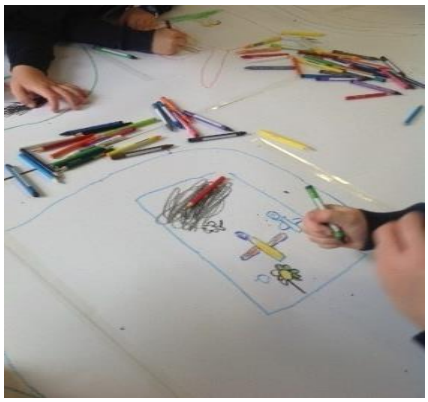
Of the 126 children who participated, over 80% identified family as key to their wellbeing in two ways:

- the importance to children of time and space with their family,
- how their family makes children feel special.

'Family' included parents, siblings, cousins and grandparents. Children discussed, wrote, and illustrated their families in different ways.

At Tulloha National School -

Diagram 1.1 (Girl, Aged 5)



"Me outside with my Mom"

Diagram1.2 (Girl, Aged 5)

"Happiness: Playing with sister outside"

The importance of time and space with their family Over 85% children talked of times with their family that made them happy, safe and cared for.
For example, some spoke of spending time with their parents because parents cared for them, looked after them, made them feel safe and did things for and with them. Children under three years old expressed this differently to children of three to twelve years old. Children under three years old looked to close family members for pleasure and security in their daily life.

The young children in day care settings expressed their views about their sense of wellbeing by actively choosing whom to spend time with within the centre and actively seeking out that person be it adult or child. For instance, in the 'Wobbler' room at Stepping Stones early childhood centre, a play therapist observed 11 children between 14 and 28 months old, noting with what and with whom they preferred to play, to understand how these children sought to achieve 'wellbeing'. She analysed these observations and found that time and space with adults was important to at least eight children: they actively sought out the adult in the room. The adult represented a safe place to be, a place to find comfort and a ready smile. It's hard being a 'wobbler' when you haven't yet grasped the concept of playing with another child.

The staff spoke of "Monday morning blues" and the difficulty experienced by some of the young children on leaving their parents and the powerful feelings of joy shown in moments of meeting and greeting family members at the end of the day. The children often carried a teddy, blanket or some other transitional object to help bridge the gap as they moved from one safe space to another. Children with siblings at the centre often found it easier than others to make the transition from home to the centre.
As the researcher sat with three children on her knees, she became conscious of being, if just for a few moments in time, a safe haven for the children, a place where they could rest and look out on the sea of activity around them and know they are held.

"It is as babies that we first learn what to do with our feelings, when we start to organise our experience in a way that will affect our later behaviour and thinking capacities" Gerhardt (p.10).

Making sense of paint at Stepping Stones Centre

Diagram:1.1

Diagram:1.2

Diagram: 1.3

Theme 2: Home

For many children, the importance of their family to their sense of wellbeing was linked to having a safe home and home-like space to be in. The children expressed their ideals about home in two issues: the need for a safe space at home, the importance of having somewhere to themselves.

Diagram 1.1 (Girl, Aged 7)

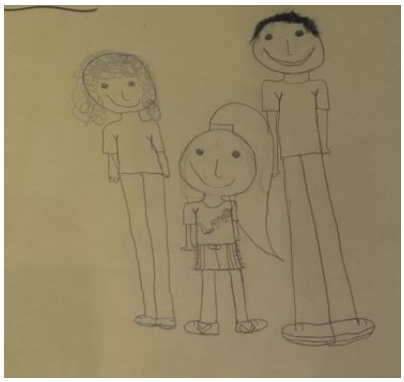
"Being at home with my family"

Diagram 1.2 (Boy, Aged 5)

"Being tucked up in bed at night"

The older children looked to family for feelings of wellbeing and security. Feelings of happiness, excitement and safety were connected to the everyday contacts children had with the people in their immediate family.

Diagram 1.3 *(Girl, Aged 8)*



"At Home with my Family"

Children from

Filemore National School and Glenbeigh National School

Informed us through their peer interviews and drawings what they needed for their well being.

(Diagram 1.3) (Girl aged 11)

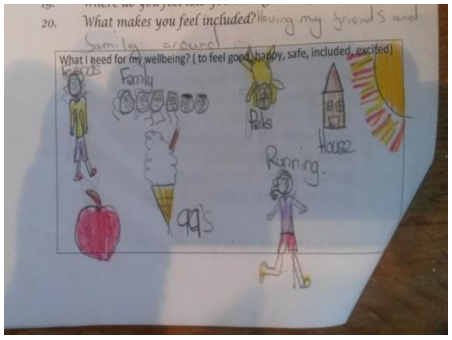
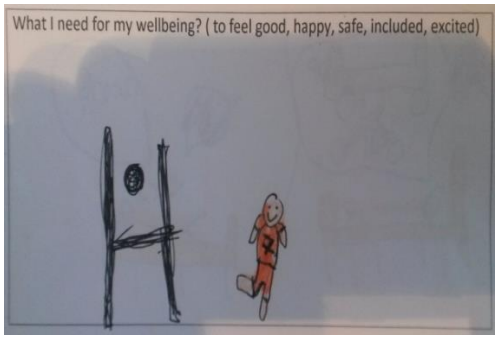


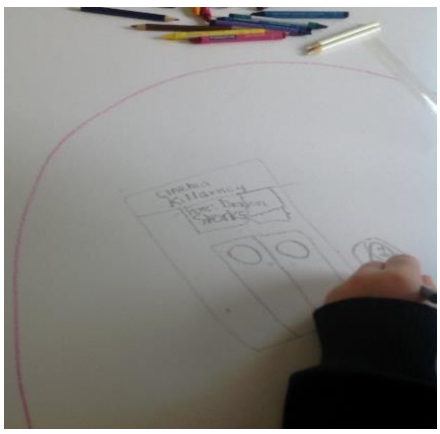
Diagram 1.4 (Boy aged 12)



As previously stated, children below three years of age, look to close family members for pleasure and security in their daily life. They express their views about the place of family in their sense of wellbeing by actively choosing whom to spend time with and/or by describing who they liked to spend time with; and in the ways in which they spent such time.

The older children linked feeling special with being with their immediate family. Again, for these children it was the everyday contact with specific members of their immediate family that made them feel valued.

Diagram:1.5 (Girl, Aged 7)



"Going to the cinema with my mom"

Diagram:1. 6 (Girl, Aged 8)

"Playing basketball outside my house"

Consultation question 2:

What do children value and wish for in their lives?

Overview

Six broad themes emerged from children's responses to this question:

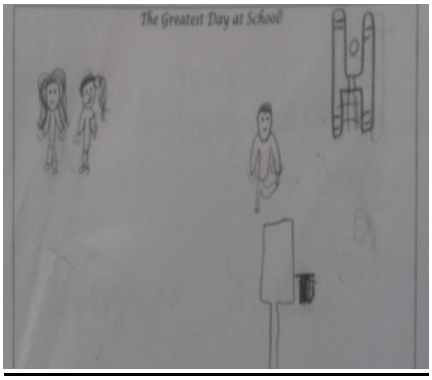
1. Outdoor spaces. 2. Friends. 3. Animals and pets. 4. Entertainment facilities. 5. Playing. 6. Community Safety

Theme 1: Outdoor spaces

Children's wish for time in outdoor spaces highlighted the importance to young children of public spaces and good physical community infrastructure. They talked and drew about how they valued and wished to go to: parks and gardens, sporting activities and facilities such as football fields and swimming pools. Children between three and twelve years of age identified parks and gardens as outdoor spaces that they valued or wished for. They talked about the importance of the natural environment such as trees, flowers, lakes, and of access to equipment such as slides, swings and climbing frames.

The children expressed their views on the greatest day at school through the peer interviews, and through their drawings.

Diagram 1.1 (Girl, Aged 11)



Siolta, National Quality Framework, states that the outdoor environment provides a range of developmentally appropriate, challenging, diverse, creative and enriching experience for all children. (Component 2.5 on environment)

Theme 2: Friends

The older children's wish to be part of a wider community and to have friends beyond their immediate family was graphically illustrated in their drawings and in their talk. Sleepovers with friends and participating in celebrations and outings such as birthday parties featured heavily in what they valued and wished to do.
Going to the park and playing games was also something they valued and enjoyed.

From Peer Interviews with Children at Filemore National School

Diagram 1.1 (Girl, Aged 11)

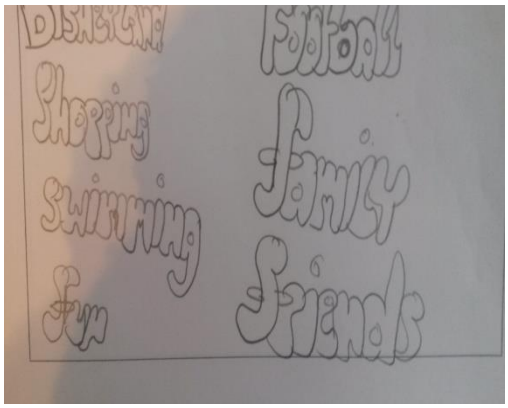
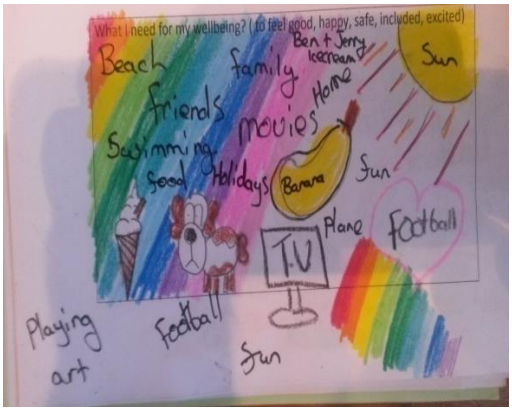


Diagram 1.2 (Girl, Aged 12)

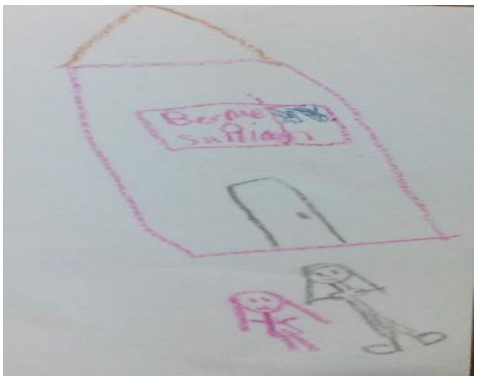


Glenbeigh National School

Diagram 1.3 (Girl aged 7)

"Friends"

Diagram 1.3 (Girl aged 7)



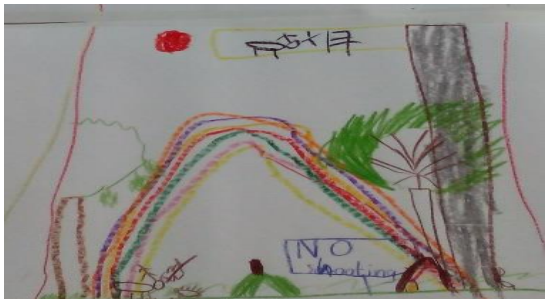
"Going to Irish Dancing"

Theme 3: Animals and Pets

The children (three to twelve years old) often included the natural world in their drawings of what they valued and wished for. The children's enjoyment of animals was apparent. A world with animals, some of which were pets, was important to the children.

The therapeutic value of having a pet, especially dogs, was evident in their responses to questions.

Diagram 1.1 (Boy, Aged 8)



"Stop shooting animals, care more about nature"

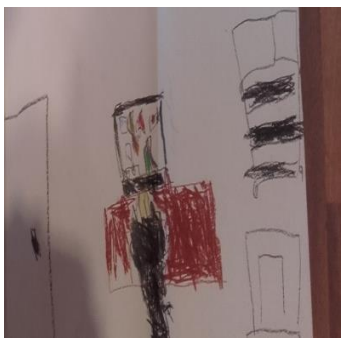
Diagram 1.2 (Boy, Aged 7)

"My dog makes me feel safe"

Theme 4: Media and Entertainment

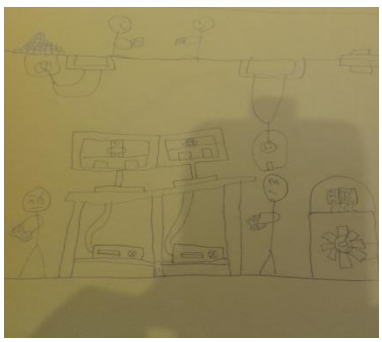
Again it was the older children who talked about valuing and/or wishing for the media and entertainment industries in their lives highlighting going to the movies, watching TV and using computers as things they liked to do. This was a much smaller number compared with the number of children who saw and wanted parks, gardens and other outdoor public facilities as a key part of their lives.

Diagram1.1 (Boy, Aged 11)



"The Internet"

Diagram:1.2 (Boy, Aged 11)



"Computer and Internet"

Children also spoke about wanting to have time and space to sit and watch television at home with their family and the part that computers and u tube played in their lives.

Theme 5: Playing

Aistear (pg.11) states that so much of children's early learning and development takes place through play and hands on experience. Through these children explore social, physical and imaginary worlds. These experiences help them to manage their feelings, development as thinkers and language users, develop socially, be creative and imaginative and lay the foundations for becoming effective communicators and learners.

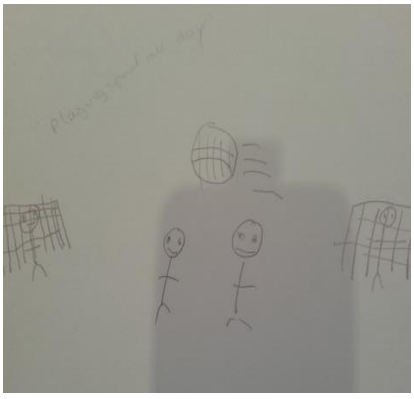
"Playing and growing are synonymous with life itself. Being playful speaks of the capacity for creativity and action, change and perhaps transformation. Playing reflects that part of us that exists both independently and interdependently, that can look on itself and be aware of its own existence". (Chazan,2002)

Diagram 1.1 (Girl, Aged 8)

7)

"Skipping"

Diagram 1.2 (Boy, Aged



"Playing sport all day"

When the children were asked: 'what would your best day be like and what would you be doing?' Their main interest was in playing. They talked of playing

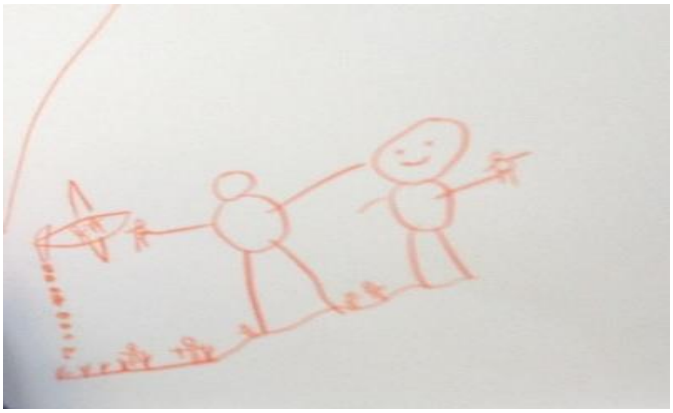
Diagram:1.3 (Boy, Aged 7)

"Playing hurling with my friends"

Diagram:1.4 (Boy, Aged 7)

"Playing football with my friends"

Diagram:1.5 (Boy, Aged 5)



"Playing war with my friends on the hill outside my house"

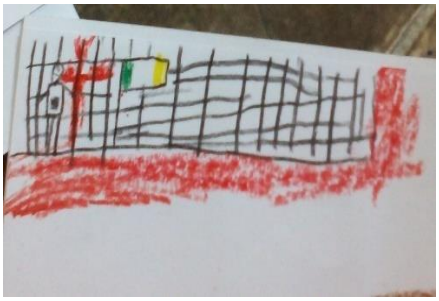
"In being playful the child attains a degree of autonomy sustained by representations of his inner and outer worlds". Chazan (2002)

Theme 6: Community Safety

Three children talked about their wish for greater safety and security in the broader community - specifically, their wish for an end to war and to bullying. Whilst it was a small number who expressed these wishes they again show the diversity of issues that

touch young children's lives and their capacity to have views about difficult and often complex community issues.

Diagram: 1.1 (Boy, Aged 6)

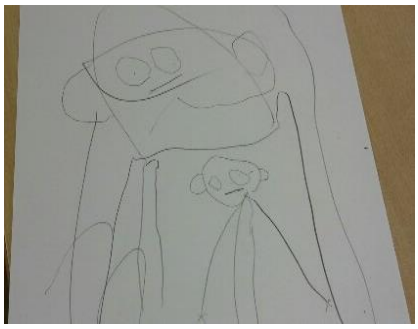


"Jail for the bad guys"

Diagram: 1.2 (Boy, Aged 7)

"where everyone would go around on horses and shoot people"

Diagram:1.3 (Boy , Aged 5)



"Big Guy pushing little guy"

Consultation question 3: What makes you feel valued?

The main theme that emerged from this question was that children feel valued when there is respect for them. Specifically, children aged three to twelve years of age

talked about having control over their environment or having a say in what happened in their lives and as it being meaningful.

The single most notable issue emerging from this theme is that children feel valued when they are being listened to or when their opinion is asked for, that is, children have a voice in deciding what happens in their lives.

Responses from children at St. John's School, Tralee on "who listens to you?"

'Mum', 'Parents', 'Brother', 'Sister', 'Nan,' 'Friends', 'Teacher', 'My dog listens to me' and 'God sees and listens to me'.

Responses from four year old children at Gaelscoil Naionra

'Friends', 'Mom', 'Dad', 'grown ups', 'my brother never listens to me'.

And from five year olds at Lyxnaw Girls NS

'Mom', 'Dad', 'Nana', 'Grandad', 'brother', 'sister', 'teacher'.

Comments from the children on adults in their life and not being listened to:

'My Dad is always on the computer and my Mum is always on the 'phone'.

'Work!!'

'They're watching TV and going out'.

'Texting for more than two hours'.

'On Facebook'.

'My Dad is really busy 24/7. Every time I want to talk to him the phone rings. It's really irritating'.

How do you know someone is listening?

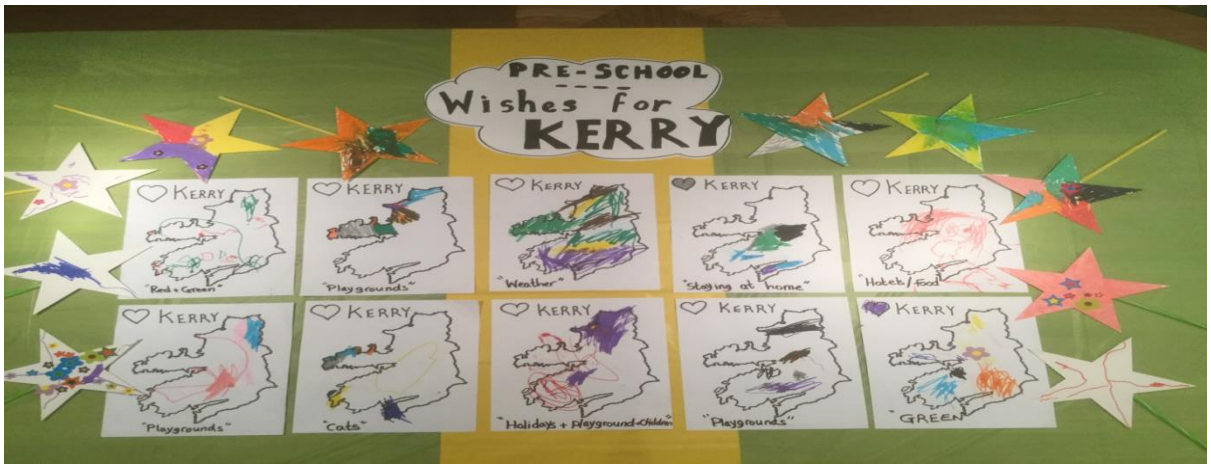
'They look at you'.

'When they're not doing something else at the same time'.

'They nod and say the right things at the right time'.

Wishes from Holy Cross Mercy Pre-school, Killarney

Diagram: 1.1



(Boys and Girls aged 3-4)

'The children were shown a map of Ireland and asked if they knew what it was. Responses included: "A dog; a grassy field; a dinosaur (lots of dinosaurs); a pterodactyl".

When I told them it was a map of Ireland they were all surprised. They took turns pointing on the map to where they thought in Ireland they lived. Pointed fingers ranged from Derry to Kerry, Donegal to Dublin!

I asked the children if they knew where they lived. Responses included; on earth; here; in my house; a full home address; half a home address. None of the children replied "Kerry". When I asked the question differently, "Do you know what County you live in?" about half of the children knew.

The over-riding response was that they wanted playgrounds, playgrounds and more playgrounds.

Except the children in this part of the poster wished for "Halloween cats, bright rainbows, sweets and a playground"

Diagram: 1.2

And in this part wishes were for

Diagram: 1.3

Diagram: 1.4

"Pizza's, playing with friends, a holiday" AND "to play with our friends"

From Tulloha National School

"If you had a magic wand, what would you change about living in Bonane in Kerry?"

Findings:

Group 1 – Junior and Senior Infants (ages 4-7)

"I would change all of the strangers into nice people"

"I would make the field at school into a playground so that we would have something to play with"

"I would return all of the people that died back so that no one would be sad"

Diagram: 1.5 (Boy, Aged 5)

"Return all the people who died"

"I would get a rocket so that we could go to see the moon"

"I would make a park for the children"

"I would make a football pitch so that we could have a team"

Group 2 – 1st and 2nd Class:

"I would build a school of dance in Bonane so that I could show everyone why I love dancing so much"

"I would build a hurling pitch in Bonane"

"I would be the king of Bonane so that all the children would be happy and the adults would have to do all the work"

"I would be the teacher at school and make it better for children" – less lessons, more playing ". This girl also said that she would catch a leprechaun and get his pot of gold "so that all the poor children in Ireland could have houses"

Diagram: 1.6

Being the teacher at school (Girl, Aged 7)

"Build a golf course in Bonane"

"Make a candy land so that there would never be a shortage of candy"
"I would make a ginger bread man "cause his arms and legs would just grow back if anyone tried to attack Bonane"

*Towards the end of the session the group came up with a collaborative idea that they would move Kerry to Spain. They would move everything over, except school so that they would always have good weather and *go out and play.*

Wishes from Mercy Moyderwell, Tralee

'I wish for a big wand'.

'Princess with a crown on her head'.

'To be really good at my work'.

'To be with my friends'.

'A Playstation'.

'I wish for a little kitten'.

'Football'.

'A magic star'.

'A little Jack Russell terrier'.

'A robot'.

'A kettle and blender'.

'A driving lawnmower'.

EVEN More Wishes this time from Scoil Iongáid Rís, Boys NS, Dingle

"More wishes"

"Getting scouted for Liverpool"

"Meet a famous U tuber"

"Make the world a better place"

"Play football for Man Utd."

"Play rugby for Ireland"

Findings and Summary

Listening to Children through Play

This project was designed to support the CYPSC consultation process and encourage children, families and early childhood staff and teachers to participate and enact the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in a practical way that other early childhood staff and families can emulate and thereby enhance the life of families and children by increasing their awareness of children's roles and perspectives in their everyday lives. The Project unfolded in several interconnected phases: a targeted literature review that addressed why is it important to give children a voice in planning and what it means in practice to give children a voice.

The project team drew on current thinking within the literature reviewed on how to consult with young children in designing the methodology of the Project. This thinking emphasises the child as a competent constructor of meaning, able to report and communicate valid views on the world and able to actively participate in decision-making. In overview, the literature emphasised the importance of: ethical engagement with children throughout the consultation process; best practices principles of listening carefully to children and being closely attuned to different cues to hear the voices of children of different ages and verbal abilities using multi-method techniques to help children to express themselves and documenting children's views to share them with others.

It also focused on the strategies and processes for designing and implementing a consultation project using the core consultation questions.

10 children's services and a total of 126 children participated in the project. Details of the cultural background of the children were only available for a small number of children, six, and of that six; the majority (4) had a Polish background. Types of services attended by the child participants included full day care centres, preschools and primary school.

The children were asked three questions derived from the broader consultations about the CYPSC's rationale and objectives.

These questions were: 1. What do the children think that they need for their wellbeing? (The Play Therapists who consulted with children used several words for 'wellbeing', including good, happy, safe, okay, belonging, included, excited.) 2. What do the children value and wish for in their lives? 3. What makes the children feel valued?

Children were invited to express their ideas and feelings in response to these questions using multi-media techniques. Data generated by the children in response to these questions included drawings, peer interviews, audio-tapes and text. The project team also gathered data from children in response to these questions through field notes of discussions with and observations of children, photographs and audio-recordings. To offer children who participated a voice through this project their artwork and texts have been included throughout the report to illustrate the different ways in which they represented their feelings and views.

Those children who participated in the project identified what they needed for their wellbeing, and what they wished for in relation to three areas of their life: family, home and being outdoors. The children highlighted the prime importance to them of families in their lives. They wanted time with their families and it was key people within their families that helped make them feel safe. A home in which members of the family have time together and time apart was also important for many of the children. These needs were expressed in different ways by the different groups of children.

The children appear to have valued and enjoyed the opportunity to have a say in the things that affect them. They also demonstrated their capacity to express their views on those things that affect their daily lives. This has direct implications for how early childhood staff and teachers make decisions about programmes for young children and the extent to which their voice is present in those programmes.

Through this Project children demonstrated their capacity to comment on a wide range of issues that affect their lives and the lives of their families at this point in time. In doing so, they offered us clear messages about what they value and wish for in their lives. Being listened to can be the first step in enacting the children's rights. Responding appropriately to what is offered is second.

Listening to children comes with responsibilities. Whilst not all of what children want will be consistent or achievable, once their views are sought adults have a responsibility to respond to them ethically and with respect. Core to honouring the children that shared their thoughts and feelings throughout this project is using the learning gained to inform CYPSC's 2017 Workplan.

The small-scale nature of this Project means that taking the work forward could usefully involve sharing the ideas generated within the Project with those children's services who could not participate in it. To support this work we suggest that the Kerry CYPSC consider identifying and implementing a set of specific strategies that will enable it to share the processes and outcomes of the Birth to Twelve Project with children's services throughout the County.

The nature of this project meant that a limited number of children were by necessity involved in the project. The children who participated in this project had many insightful views to offer on what was key to their wellbeing. Although they came from diverse backgrounds not all children were represented. It will be important in future consultations with young children that the services that are selected to participate in the process have children attending their services that represent a diverse range of family backgrounds. The experiences of this Project indicate that it will be necessary to specifically target specific services in areas where it is known that significant numbers of 'at risk' children live and go to school.

For these reasons we suggest that Kerry's CYPSC reflect on how they might devise appropriate and respectful strategies for including the voices of children from diverse backgrounds in any extension of this Project or future consultation process with young children. This would necessitate that sufficient time and resources are allocated to make this possible.

Responding

CYPSC should formally thank the children and adults who participated in the Project for the time that they spent sharing their ideas and inform them about what has been learnt from the children and indicate to them how CYPSC will be responding to their ideas in the short and long term.

There are several ways in which this could materialise. They include sending a letter to the children and families, forwarding them a copy of the Report and/or inviting them to an event at which their ideas are publicly displayed.

Children told us that policies that affect their lives range well beyond those services directly aimed at them. CYPSC could play a key role in promoting this understanding across government as well as in the broader public arena. This would be enhanced by the use of local media to increase and diversify the audience reached.

There are several small-scale strategies that the CYSPC could use to share the ideas generated within the Project. These strategies could include the development of a PowerPoint presentation that provides a Project overview, outcomes and future directions, a seminar on the Project structured to inform and support reflection on the implications for specific departments and agencies.

Possibilities that the CYSPC could consider include: A presentation of the Project, its processes and outcomes at Children's Services meetings and meetings of preschool/primary school staff. Have an article written for education and children's services sector newsletters. The organisation of a dedicated forum, to share outcomes of the Project and for ongoing work.

It would be important in any presentation of the outcomes from the Project that the words and images of the children are used to help capture the spirit of children's lives today. This suggestion is core to structurally embedding the voice of children into the policy making process. There is a danger that this Project could be seen to be a tokenistic gesture to involve young children in the policy consultation process unless there is a plan to take this work forward and structurally embed it in policy over time.

As the Child Rights Alliance and the National Youth Council of Ireland cautions: "Denying them [children] such opportunities risks trivialising the practice of consultation and discriminating against those most vulnerable to the impact of government decisions. A tokenistic approach would also deprive us of an opportunity to improve the policies and services that affect children and young people – the research supports the view that enabling children to be heard in connection with the development of these policies and services will enhance their effectiveness." (p 1-2)

Concluding Remarks:

This small-scale consultation project with children birth to twelve years of age conducted by the CYPSC project team as part of the consultation for their 2017 Work Plan cannot provide conclusive evidence of what young children in County Kerry want for their wellbeing and what they value in their lives. It was not designed to be representative of all children birth to twelve in the County as the resources were not available to undertake such a task. For this reason, the outcomes of this project can be indicative only.

However, for those adults involved in the project –children's services staff and members of the project team, the project generated memorable understanding about what the 126 children who participated in the project knew and understood about their wellbeing and what they valued. It indicated how possible it is to consult with young children and how much young children enjoy being consulted with.

In Ireland, policy consultation with the very youngest of our children is still in its infancy. In initiating and supporting the Birth to Twelve project Kerry's Children and Young Peoples Services Committee took an important step in beginning the process of seriously enacting children's right to participate in decision-making, enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of Child, with the youngest of our children. It also took a step in advancing knowledge about how best to do this. The next step could be to extend this knowledge by extending the work begun in this project. In doing so, the Kerry and Young People's Services Committee Youth Participation Working Group, can play a lead role in extending children's rights in and through its 2017 Workplan to all children, irrespective of age.

Final Words

One four year old when asked

"What *super power* would you have if you could?"

Replied

"to be a butterfly".

When then asked to "Draw your superpower" drew

"A Caterpillar"

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