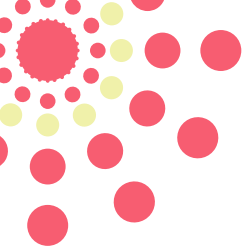


Listen Up

A Guide to Supporting Children's Voices & Strengthening Your Organisational Culture

By Kim Porter





Introduction

Children experience the world in a way that adults often miss. Their perspectives are not just valuable; they are essential for creating truly safe, responsive, and empowering environments.

When children feel heard and respected, they are more likely to thrive, and they become active participants in their own safety. However, many organisations struggle to move beyond tokenistic gestures and genuinely embed the voice of the child into their cultural fabric.

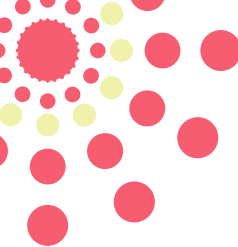
About this Guide

This guide provides practical strategies and actionable steps for organisations to effectively listen to children, understand their experiences, and use that invaluable feedback to identify and address cultural issues.

By intentionally amplifying children's voices, you can move from a culture of assumption to a culture of understanding, building a stronger, safer organisation for everyone. This resource is designed for leaders, staff, and volunteers in any sector that serves children, including education, care, community services, and healthcare.

Why Children's Voices Matter: The Foundation of a Safe Culture

Listening to children is more than a best-practice recommendation; it is a fundamental component of effective safeguarding. When an organisation's culture actively suppresses or ignores children's voices, it creates blind spots where risks can grow unchecked.



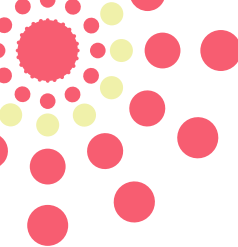
Benefits of a Child-Centred Listening Culture

- **Early Identification of Risks:** Children are often the first to know when something is wrong. Creating safe channels for them to speak up allows your organisation to identify and address issues, from bullying to unsafe practices, before they escalate.
- **Improved Service Delivery:** Understanding services from a child's point of view helps you design programs and spaces that truly meet their needs, increasing engagement and positive outcomes.
- **Empowerment and Resilience:** When children see that their opinions are valued and can lead to real change, it builds their confidence, self-worth, and resilience. They learn that their voice has power.
- **Strengthened Accountability:** A culture that prioritises children's feedback holds itself to a higher standard. It fosters transparency and drives a continuous cycle of improvement based on the experiences of those you serve.

Creating a Listening Environment: The Three Pillars

Before you can hear what children have to say, you must create an environment where they feel safe and comfortable enough to speak. This requires a foundation built on three key pillars:

- **Safety:** Children will not share their thoughts, worries, or ideas if they fear punishment, dismissal, or negative consequences. Psychological and physical safety is non-negotiable. This means building trusting relationships is the primary task.
- **Accessibility:** Communication channels must be tailored to different ages, abilities, and communication styles. Relying on a single method, like a formal survey, will exclude many voices.

- 
- **Consistency:** Listening cannot be a one-off event. It must be an ongoing, consistent practice embedded into daily routines. Consistency shows children that you are genuinely interested and that their voice matters every day, not just during a special initiative.

Practical Strategies and Tools for Amplifying Children's Voices

Effective listening requires a diverse toolkit. The goal is to provide multiple, accessible ways for children to express themselves, whether verbally or non-verbally.

Strategies for Different Age Groups:

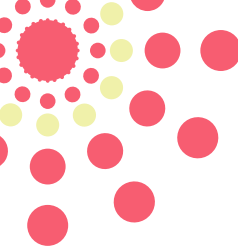
Early Years (Pre-Verbal & Early-Verbal)

Children communicate through behaviour long before they have the words to express complex feelings.

- **Observational Journalling:** Equip staff with simple journals to note patterns in a child's play, mood, and interactions. A sudden change in behaviour is a form of communication.
- **"Feelings Wall":** Create a visual chart with different emotions (e.g., happy, sad, angry, scared faces). Children can place their photo or a marker next to the face that shows how they are feeling that day.
- **Puppet Play:** Use puppets to act out scenarios or ask questions. Children are often more comfortable sharing their feelings with a puppet than directly with an adult.

Primary School Age

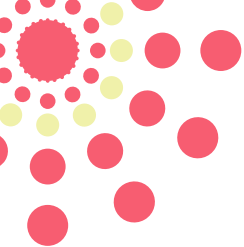
This age group can express more complex ideas but still benefits from creative and structured methods.

- 
- **"Wishes and Worries" Box:** A decorated, secure box where children can anonymously or with their name post notes about things they wish would change or things that worry them.
 - **Draw and Tell:** Ask children to draw a picture of their favourite part of the day, or a place where they feel safest. Then, ask them to tell you about their drawing. The details can reveal important insights into their experience of your organisation's environment.
 - **Child-Led Tours:** Ask a child to give you a tour of the facility, pointing out their favourite spots and the places they don't like. Ask "why" to understand their reasoning. A "scary" corner might be poorly lit or unsupervised.

Adolescents and Teens

Older children can engage in more direct feedback but value autonomy and respect for their opinions.

- **Youth Advisory Councils:** Form a small, representative group of young people to meet regularly with leadership. Task them with providing feedback on new policies, programmes, or facility changes.
- **Anonymous Digital Surveys:** Use simple, mobile-friendly tools like Google Forms or SurveyMonkey to gather feedback on specific topics. Ensure anonymity to encourage honest responses.
- **"Start, Stop, Continue" Sessions:** In a group setting, facilitate a discussion asking for feedback in three categories: What should our organisation start doing? What should we stop doing? What should we continue doing?



From Listening to Action: Turning Feedback into Cultural Change

Collecting feedback is only the first step. True cultural change happens when an organisation demonstrates that it has heard, valued, and acted upon what children have shared.

Actionable Steps for Organisations:

Analyse and Triage Feedback:

- Gather all feedback from your various tools into one place.
- Look for recurring themes. Are multiple children mentioning the same issue?
- Triage urgent safety concerns for immediate action, separating them from longer-term improvement suggestions.

Involve Children in Finding Solutions:

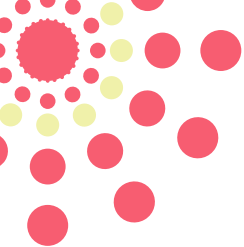
- Where appropriate, bring the themes back to the children. "We've heard that many of you feel the playground isn't fun. What are some ideas you have to make it better?"
- Co-designing solutions with children not only leads to better outcomes but also deepens their sense of agency and ownership.

Create an Action Plan:

- For each identified theme, create a clear, simple action plan.
- Assign responsibility to a specific person or team.
- Set a realistic timeline for implementation.

Close the Feedback Loop:

- This is the most critical step. Communicate back to the children what you heard and what you are doing about it.



- Use child-friendly language. For example, post a colourful sign saying: "You said the hallway was too dark. We listened! New lights have been installed. Thank you for helping us make our centre safer!"
- Closing the loop proves that speaking up leads to positive change, encouraging children to continue sharing their perspectives in the future.

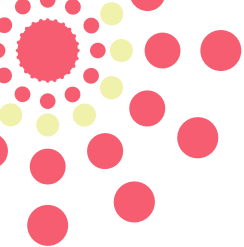
Review and Embed:

- Regularly review your listening processes. What's working? What's not?
- Embed successful strategies into your organisation's policies, procedures, and staff training. Make "hearing the voice of the child" a formal part of everyone's role.

Embedding a Culture of Listening

Supporting the voice of the child is not a project with an end date; it is an ongoing commitment to a different way of operating. It requires courage to hear things you might not want to hear and humility to accept that children often see your organisation more clearly than you do.

By building a culture of listening, you are not just ticking a compliance box. You are creating a dynamic, responsive, and genuinely safe community where children are protected, respected, and empowered. Start small, be consistent, and always close the loop. The children in your care will show you the way.



Checklist: Supporting Children's Voices and Addressing Cultural Issues

- Foster a safe and trusting environment where children feel comfortable to share.
- Use a variety of tailored communication tools (journals, feelings wall, surveys, etc.) appropriate for different ages and abilities.
- Encourage consistent, daily opportunities for children to express themselves.
- Observe and record changes in children's behaviour as potential communication.
- Provide anonymous and accessible channels for children's feedback.
- Actively involve children in problem-solving and decision making.
- Analyse patterns in feedback and triage urgent risks for immediate response.
- Create clear, actionable improvement plans with designated responsibility and timelines.
- Always communicate the outcomes of feedback to children in a way they understand.
- Regularly review and adapt methods and tools to ensure continuous improvement.
- Embed listening to and acting on children's voices in policy, training, and everyday practice.