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How parents can involve babies, toddlers and young children in decision-making

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How parents can involve babies, toddlers and young children in decision-making through the support of Tusla Family Support Baby and Toddler Groups

Tusla Family Support practitioners in Cherry Orchard set up baby and toddler groups for children under the age of five years in Ballyfermot, Cherry Orchard and Clondalkin. These groups are drop-in, and parents can come whenever they like during the first five years of their child's life. They are attended by mothers or fathers and their very young children, and each session is for two to three hours.

Purpose of the baby and toddler groups

The purpose of the groups is to support parents to enable children to become confident communicators and learners and to have a voice in decisions that affect their lives. The Family Support workers hold the sessions in big spaces to enable children to be involved in decision-making about their play and activity choices.



What happens at each group session?

Workers play and interact with babies and children as a way of modelling positive behaviours to parents to support them to listen to their children and act on children's views.

How the Family Support workers prioritise listening to children and acting on their views

- The family support workers offer massage to babies during which they observe, listen and attend to the babies' cues by stopping the massage if a baby is upset or indicates distress and model this for the parents. They encourage parents to observe and listen to the baby's cues, such as smiling, crying, stretching and wriggling, pointing out that these cues are how the baby expresses what she/he wants and likes.
- Toddlers and young children can choose to do whatever they like from a variety of play-based activities around the room, such as arts and crafts, sensory play, using different textures, playing with toys and other activities.

- Family support workers constantly observe the children's body language, expressions, behaviour and wishes and encourage parents to do the same.
- Family support workers model open communication and engagement with children at the child's level, including listening to and talking to children and encouraging parents to do this.
- Workers support children to learn and understand turn-taking with toys and activities and encourage parents to adopt this approach.
- Workers ask children for their views or observe their preferences in sourcing things like markers, pencils, pictures, stickers, chalk and other materials.
- Workers use observation to listen to the views of children with additional needs. For example, one little boy loves two specific jigsaws, and workers make sure to have those jigsaws available for him.
- To ensure that the groups are inclusive, workers make sure that sensory play is available and have spaces for children to enjoy quiet time. Here is a picture of their summer sensory corner beach theme:



How the babies and children are given Space, Voice, Audience and Influence

Space

- The children are heard in a safe and familiar space because they are with a parent, and most children attend on a regular basis.
- Family support workers make sure that all babies and children are heard by having a variety of ways for them to communicate, observing all children's wishes and needs and making the space inclusive for children of different ages and those with additional needs.
- Family Support workers model to parents the importance of a safe and inclusive space for children to be heard and support them to create this in their own lives.

Voice

- Family support workers provide support for all babies and children to be heard.
- Children can ask for or indicate things they want. Workers also observe the things they like or want and act on children's wishes where possible and appropriate.
- Family support workers offer babies and children many ways of giving their views, such as workers' observations of their actions, reactions and behaviour, children being able to choose activities to do or toys to play with, and children saying what they like or want.
- Family Support workers model to parents the importance of observing babies and children pick up cues and of offering them different ways to communicate their views.

Audience

- Family support workers show they are ready and willing to listen to children's views by attending to their body language, engaging with children at their own level and using open communication.
- Family support workers make sure that children are told or shown what can be done with their views, such as changing the snack time or creating quiet spaces.
- Family support workers model to parents the importance of body language, open communication and going down to the child's level to talk to or comfort them.

Influence

- Children know that they are having an influence in the group sessions because workers listen to and act on their views, such as ensuring that the little boy with additional needs can always play with his favourite jigsaws.
- The children are given feedback by workers all the time, such as acting on a baby's cues and stopping a massage when she/he seems upset or uncomfortable.
- Workers share with children the impact of their views by making changes to the group sessions or sourcing the arts and crafts materials they request or like.
- Family support workers regularly explain the reasons for decisions taken, such as encouraging and teaching children how to take turns so all children have their views respected and acted on.
- Family support workers model to parents the importance of respecting babies and children by listening to them and acting on their views when possible.

