

Findings, Foodbank and Fun: Our Experience of Child-Led Research Engagement!

At the Innovation Observatory, we identify unmet needs that need more research and innovation. We believe that a vital aspect of identifying these needs is listening to people and their everyday experiences.

Historically, the perspectives of young children and their families have not been well included in research and innovation, so to change this, we recently co-designed a family engagement event with Newcastle West End's Foodbank community. Our hopes were to:

- Learn about new ways for involving young children and their families in our research.
- Provide space and an opportunity to listen to their perspectives.
- Have children themselves lead this research activity.

Doing research in this way is pretty new, so here we share with you what we did, and what we learnt along the way!

Our journey began a few years back, when we had come to hold a substantial stock of lovely, new children's toys that we wanted to donate. We reached out to local Foodbanks, offered them the toys, and from there and over time, a relationship developed. Fast-forward to Spring 2022 - when we began to look for partners for our early years work, these Foodbanks were an obvious choice. Over several weeks we met up with the West End foodbank community in particular - the co-ordinators, staff, volunteers, and families that use it's services. We spent time together, and listened to their ideas and views about whether children might want to engage with us, and if so, how?

At the same time, back in the office, our NIHR-IO horizon scanning colleagues were beavering away on an analysis of over 10,000 social media posts, posted online by parents, on forums like 'Mumsnet' and 'Reddit'. Through this, they were hoping to

gain insights into young children's family experiences and questions, and provide us with a springboard project for engaging children face to face. We were curious whether the topics they found, instigated by parents, would resonate with children, and whether the concerns raised had relevance with families outside of the self-selected posts online.

So, together with Foodbank, we decided to host an event day to explore this. Together, we had to figure out what this would look like. We visited the centre more regularly, and Foodbank volunteers, as trustworthy figures within the community, welcomed us, sitting down with us to chat, talked us through the workings of the community centre, and introducing us to specific families, and wider staff. This really helped us to fit in, feel welcome, and provided unrivalled insight - this also included the volunteer's children challenging our assumptions and sometimes misplaced enthusiasm!

We later chose to specifically spend days at the Foodbank on voucher distribution days, the busiest of their days, to better understand the flow of people and observe potential opportunities to engage with young families. We made up activity packs of crayons, colouring and sticker sheets and set up stall, giving them to families, which offered focus points for natural openings of discussions with parents and their children. From this, we learnt what might or might not work - for example, we learnt that parents did NOT want us doing engagement events on these very busy errand days, and which locations were suitable for walking, for pushchairs, and what would fit in around school. We began to better understand where, when and how to host our event, plus how to spread the word about it to others, where they gave a lot of great ideas that we would not have thought of. Once the logistics were decided, volunteers and foodbank users assisted us in distributing flyers, and adding them to noticeboards.

We found that all these exchanges were hugely valuable - the Foodbank is a hub for people from a range of backgrounds and cultures, with people holding a wealth of knowledge and experience that we were lacking, or about topics we didn't understand. Over time we could see how our work could possibly fit in. We also considered what might be interesting or useful to families, from their perspective - from points they raised, our horizon scanning colleagues could provide evidence about, and working with us meant that those interested could experience pro-active involvement from us. The event itself was pivotal in this too, so for us it was important to deliver a positive event that benefitted the attendees, and provided space where they can connect in new ways too. We all agree that this element of reciprocity is vital - life, and particularly at the Foodbank, is extremely busy with a variety of pressures - so mutual benefit and activity is key.

While all of this was going on, additional leadership emerged, as two child co-leads expressed their desire to input to the work! As our team's own children heard about

the event at home, they grew increasingly interested, offering activity suggestions, and naturally making improvements to our plans. Sibling conversations led to the enthusiasm of a third co-lead. We soon realised the huge added expertise they had in understanding how to make the event and activities more interesting “for children, by children!” We seized the opportunity, and they excitingly took up our offer of event leadership.

Preparing for the event day included spontaneous, pen conversations, idea brainstorms, and scanning the internet for fun crafts. We continuously asked our co-leads what they thought was going to be important for children. What would children like to see? What kinds of props and activities might we use to discuss the topics with children? All three provided continuous evaluation of our activity plans, what to change and where. We used videos and photos of the centre as prompts to chat about the space, and to familiarise them with an unknown environment. We also talked about what might happen on the day, what it could be like in terms of sounds, activity, and the behaviour of others. Stories were made up to discuss, for example, what could be done if space and quiet was needed on the day.

Our social media scan results had provided us with broad overarching topics of concern, or unmet need. The most prominent themes were bedtime, sleep, self-care, food and relationships. For the day, we narrowed these into three themes for activity stations.

The event itself was hosted in the gardens of one of the Foodbank distribution centres from 10am to 2pm. This was a green area, surrounded by trees that provided a welcome shade on the hot summer’s day. Nearby was a plethora of vegetable patches and planting. This peaceful green space with in the busy West End of Newcastle – combined with the planned activities - helped us create a welcoming and relaxing environment. Tables and chairs were brought outside, healthy foods prepared, and gazebos installed and placed.

We had ourselves, members of the Innovation Observatory, spotted around the zones, to facilitate activity, and engage with the children and their families, listening and observing wherever possible. We had volunteers and their children and grandchildren, who made introductions between families and assisted with language differences. We’d put up a sign, balloons and bunting to the garden entrance, where our child leads welcomed the other children coming to join the event. They were the first contact with families, inviting the arriving children to come and play – offering a show-around to the activities. This set the tone from the entrance, and indicated that this was a child-led, safe space, where children had power and agency, and where children were respected and taken seriously!

The activity stations, or zones of the garden, were themed from the results of the social media scans. We narrowed them down into the most prominent themes, with

an overarching question for each. We will delve into these topics and each station further in future blog posts, but on this day, there was:

- Bedtime and Sleep: What makes a good bedtime?
- Self-care: How can children be supported in taking care of themselves?
- Play: What stops children from playing?

The stations were deliberately kept simple and flexible so that children could lead the activities, demonstrate their areas of interest or ignore them if they were not interested, and engage with the stations in their own, individual way. Although our focus was on young children (preschool), from the discussions at the Foodbank we knew to expect children from a variety of age groups. We therefore designed the activities to include materials that were accessible and potentially appealing to children of multiple ages and abilities. While one of our aims was to share and discuss the findings from the social media horizon scan, our main focus was listening to, observing and learning from the children – allowing them to lead and show us what they were and were not interested in, what matters to them, and what they liked doing.

Food and eating was also hugely popular on social media posts. Our food station had healthy foods and drinks, where children and parents could assemble or ‘make their own’ lunch. We were able to observe behaviours, approaches and conversations around food, but importantly this was a respite zone, where parents could sit back, connect with each other and enjoy the occasion too.

We were hugely pleased how the day went, and we learnt so much throughout the process. We will share more about the topic themes, but if you are thinking about doing something similar, here are some brief learning points:

- **Pay careful attention to the practicalities!**

Using a location that is accessible and known worked well. We’d also selected a broad event timing ‘drop in’ between 10am and 2pm deliberately to gauge popular attendance times and interest in staying. The first hour was quiet, but the flexible timing that allowed families to come and go worked really well, and most people ended up staying 2-3 hours.

- **Language matters!**

Across all communication, think about levels of literacy, and talking to those with different languages. Make sure flyers are clear and include infographics, and share key information like the time, location and directions to get there verbally too. On the day, members of the community worked with us as translators, too.

- **Trust the experts!**

The children, parents and volunteers definitely have the best insight. Work hard to encourage and gain their input, and most importantly, listen to it and implement their suggestions. It helps the event, but it also builds trust and allows the children and families see we are genuine in our intentions.

- **Give the power to the children!**

Allowing the child leads to create an environment that said “this is a child-led event” set the tone that really enabled children to engage and be involved in their own terms. They chose what they did, what they said, and what they shared. Parents could sit back and children were able to direct, choose and navigate the space, activities and rhythm in a way that suited them. The children’s ideas were ones that landed really well, and made sense to the other children. Elliot (our child director) later reported he loved seeing what he had suggested in place and in play, and Alfie talked about the event afterwards from his perspective plus the perspective of friends he made on the day.

- **It takes time!**

Building continued familiarity and on-going relationship over time with the staff and the wider community was crucial. Our most important take home was that effective involvement of young children and their families, especially those who do not usually get a say in setting national research strategy, is really about learning together. Doing this requires real relationships, and continued commitment – and this takes time.

We have so much to consider and reflect on, and exciting new ideas and projects currently underway, so we look forward to sharing more of our endeavours, thoughts, and reflections as we progress. We love to chat about our research and involvement with children, so please do reach out or look out for our next blog.