

# Listening to our youngest children: Children's Empowerment in Play (CEiP) - The Empowerment Framework

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CHILDREN'S  
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## Empowerment – Starting from the child

- What can the child already do?
- What are they interested in?
- Recognising children's lived experiences
- Layered approach to listening and hearing children's voices
  - Environment
  - Important people in children's lives
  - Nature of interactions



Observing *how*  
children are doing  
something through  
an empowerment  
lens rather than  
recording *what*  
they did or  
achieved



# Empowerment is a process

‘Play is a process that is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated. That is, children and young people determine and control the content and intent of their play, by following their own instincts, ideas and interests, in their own way for their own reasons’

(Playwork Principles Scrutiny Group, 2005 online)



- Children are empowered by the idea of ‘seeing what might happen if...’ causing a reaction (Loizou, 2005)
- In play children gain a sense of empowerment by being given the opportunity to make choices and take action (Bauman and May, 2001)

# Theoretical Framing

## Social phenomenology

- Exploring the subjective experiences of children and early childhood practitioners
- Observing children's play through an empowerment lens
- Focus on layered experiences and interactions in social and child-led spaces
- Meaning is given and judgements are made in situations (Schutz, 1970)

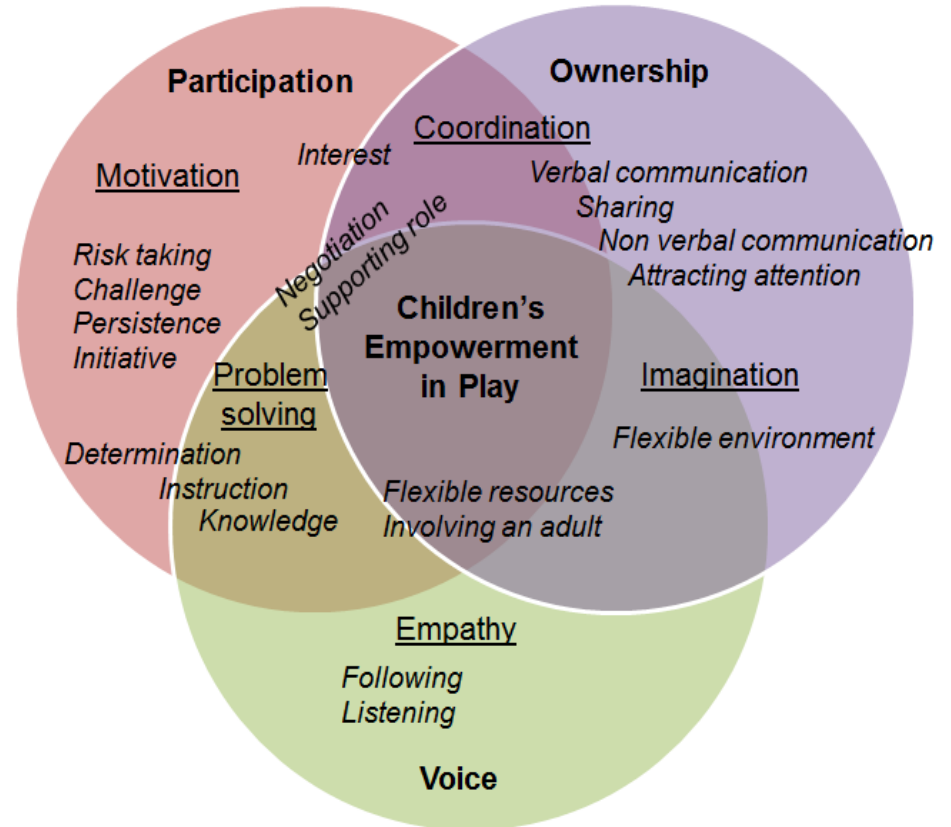


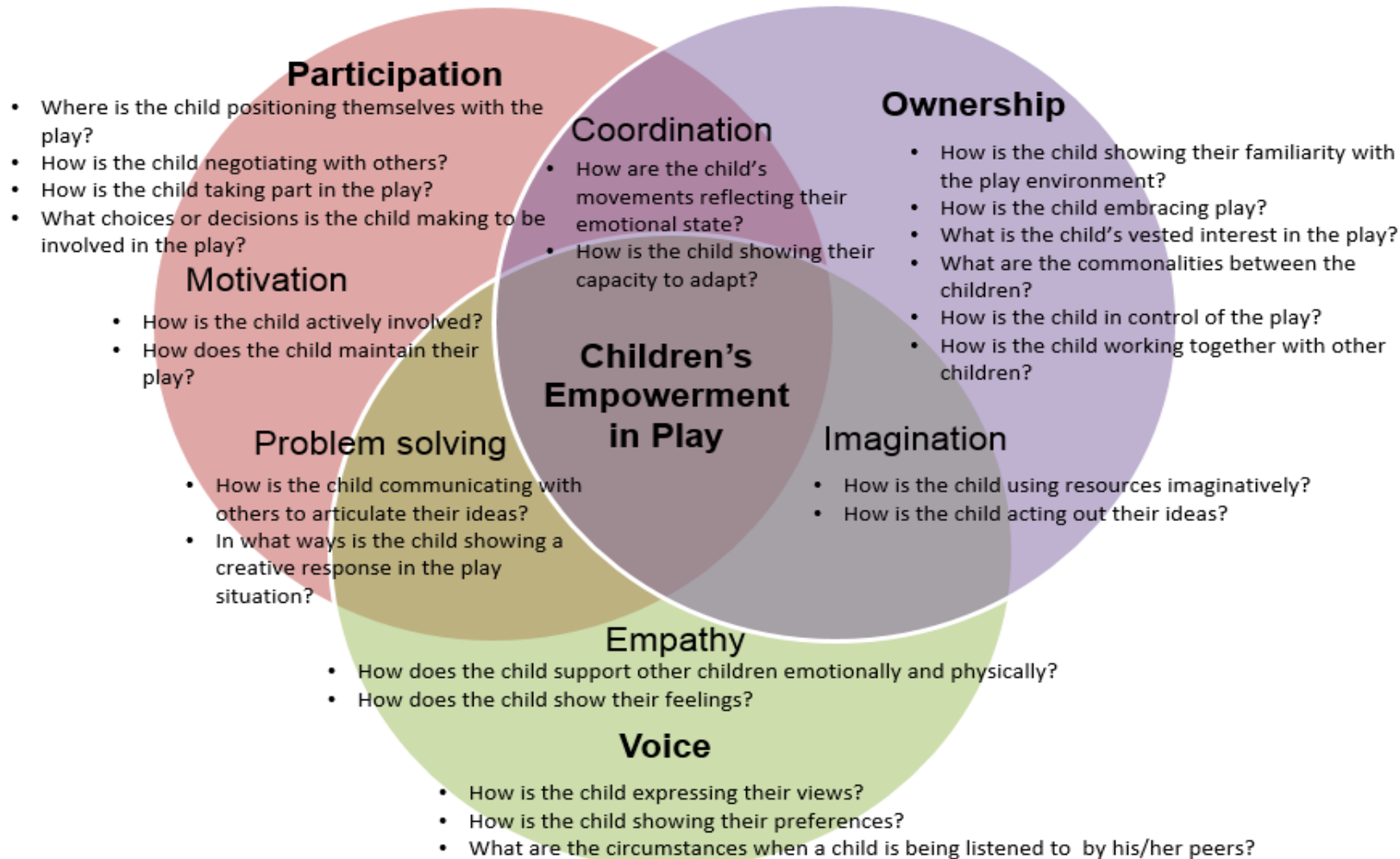
## Empowerment Framework

- Analytical yet subjective meaning making tool
- Sense is made through everyday happenings (observing children's play)
- Interpret children's play from an empowerment perspective
- Act as a critical facilitation for analysing approaches and professional judgements about play
- Professional discussions enable narratives around children's lived experiences to be recognised as more than casual events
- Inter-subjectivity that social phenomenology supports, creates discourse focused on the way in which play and the spaces that children occupy during play can support the process of empowerment

# Behavioural traits of Empowerment

- Risk taking
- Challenge
- Persistence
- Initiative
- Determination
- Instruction
- Knowledge
- Following
- Listening
- Negotiation
- Supporting
- Communication (verbal/non-verbal)
- Sharing





- Qualitative ethnographic case study
- Two case studies
  - A group of childminders (3) from the South West of England
  - Practitioners at a pre-school setting (2) located in the West Midlands.
- There was a total of 5 focus children:
  - 3 children in the childminder group
  - 2 children in pre-school.



- Induction induction to the empowerment framework
- Data generated by practitioners using the EF
- Interviews
- Focus groups

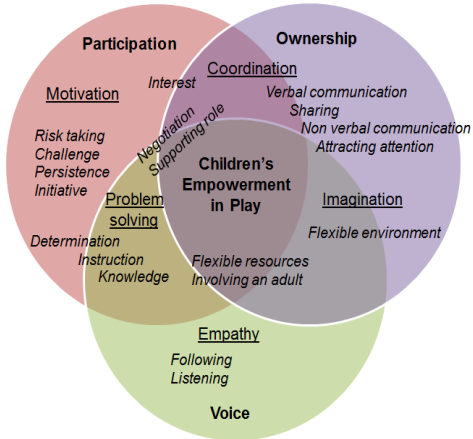
Case Studies	Nested Cases
<p><b>Case study A—Childminders</b></p>	<p>(1) Anya (childminder) and Bella (assistant childminder) observing George (4 years old) and Albie (6 years old).</p> <p>(2) Grace (childminder) observing Tilda (3 years old).</p>
<p><b>Case study B—Pre-school</b></p>	<p>(1) Debbie (practitioner) observing her focus child Josh (4 years old).</p> <p>(2) Mia (practitioner) observing her focus child Sasha (3 years old).</p>



# Observations over 3 weeks

Nested Case Studies	Setting	Number of Observations	Supporting Evidence	Attendance
George	Childminder Anya and Bella	3	Video (3)	One day per week
Albie	Childminder Anya and Bella	7	Video (3); Photos (3); things Albie made (1)	Every afternoon after school for 2 hours
Tilda	Childminder Grace	12	Video (4); Photos (5)	Every day until 3 p.m.
Josh	Pre-school Debbie	6	Video (2)	Mornings 5 days per week
Sasha	Pre-school Mia	12	Video (5); Photos (3); things Sasha made (4)	Full time pre-school

Childminders Anya and Bella are observing George (4 years old) and Albie (6 years old) in a home setting. The focus of the observation is Voice.



## Context of observation

George and Albie are sitting under a table in the playroom. They have covered the table with a blanket, so it has created a den-like space and they have put cushions on the floor to sit on. One of the corners of the blanket is folded back to enable us to see into the den space. It is quite dark inside and George is asking Albie if he is afraid of the dark. The boys are lying on the cushions, side by side looking up at the 'roof' of the den.

Extract from EF question answer:  
How is the child expressing their views?

Verbal communication but initially Albie is avoiding a direct question from George 'are you scared of the dark?' by shrugging and asking, 'are you?' George doesn't answer. George reaches up to try and touch the top of the 'den'. He says, 'not all the time, depends if you are here then 'no', but maybe if it is very black'. Proximity to Albie is very close, touching heads and George reaches down and holds Albie's hand.

How is the child showing their preferences?

Staying close together, lying down. Seem relaxed and talking quietly. The boys have created their own space so no other distractions. Feeling that they want to be hidden and alone.

Supporting evidence

None—it didn't seem appropriate to take photos or video

## Interview Reflection

I know these two children really well and although the way they are together in the 'den' is not new, I haven't heard them talk about such serious things before so that was interesting to hear them talk about being afraid of the dark. Albie is good at deflecting answers to questions, but after he has done this by asking the same question back, he does answer which shows he has thought about it. I hadn't recognised him as a reflective thinker before.

Debbie observing Josh (4 years old) outside in the pre-school woodland area. The focus of the observation is Ownership.

## Context of observation

A group of children are outside using up-turned logs as stepping stones. Most of the logs are fixed in place, but some can be moved around to create different levels of difficulty. They are taking turns to step across the logs, then running back to the beginning to do it all again. A practitioner is nearby but is looking after another child who is upset so she is not directly involved in the play.

**Extract from EF question answer:**  
**How is the child showing their familiarity with the play environment?**

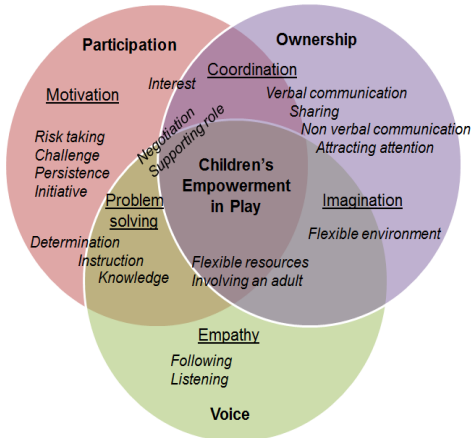
Confident behaviour—Purposeful steps across the logs—no hesitation. Knows which logs can be moved and asks a friend to help him roll it into place. When another child protests, Josh points to another log that can be moved but doesn't help. Concentrating hard on what he wants to do.

**How is the child in control of their play?**

Making own decisions and choices. Not being persuaded to do something else by other children. Focused/determined on what he wants to do.

**Supporting evidence**

Photographs



## Interview Reflection

Josh is not usually as decisive as he seemed to be when he was stepping on the logs. He tends to be a child that is happy to go along with everyone else, but in this play, he initiated moving the logs and he wasn't put off when another child protested. He seemed really motivated and that's something that I can now follow up on perhaps in other activities.

Mia, the practitioner from the pre-school, is observing Sacha (3 years old) in the structured outdoor area which contains swings and a slide. The focus for the observation is Participation.

### Context of observation

A group of three girls are playing on the swings. They are taking turns to push one another and talking at the same time. Sacha is on the outskirts of the swings. She is on her own and it feels like she wants to join in but doesn't quite know how to. She gets near and nearer to the group, hugs the pole that is the structure of the swing for a few minutes, and then moves away.

**Extract from EF question answer:**  
Where is the child positioning themselves within the play?

On the boundary of the play. Sasha wants to join in but doesn't want to ask directly. She keeps moving about, trying to get their attention, perhaps hoping one of the girls will invite her to join in. Hugging the pole is perhaps a way to get closer to the action with a way out, i.e., she can concentrate on playing around the pole if she feels rejected or threatened by the other children.

**What choices or decisions is the child making to be involved in the play?**

She is being indecisive. She wants to join in—her body language and the way she keeps looking over at the girls suggests that, but she doesn't want to risk them saying 'no', so she won't ask directly to play with them. She makes the decision to get closer and to have something to occupy her (swing pole) while she perhaps gains the courage or hopes someone will invite her into the game.

**Coordination**  
**How are the child's movements reflecting their emotional state?**

She is taking a risk—she badly wants to be part of the play but is scared of rejection. She is indicating her interest to the other girls in a 'please let me play' way, non-threatening, trying to make eye contact, smiling. She is moving around, trying to catch the attention of different girls.



## Interview reflection

“It was interesting to see Sasha use different tactics to try and enter the play. She was trying to work out the best strategy to be successful, but also to not ‘lose face’ if she was rejected. She sometimes plays with one of the girls and she was focusing her attention on her at the beginning in the hope of an invitation into the game, but when that didn’t work, she quickly moved on to try the others and act as if it didn’t matter if she joined in or not.”



“Using the framework for observations was interesting and certainly made me think deeper about what I was seeing the children do. The change of focus was initially quite challenging as I am used to writing about what a child has achieved and the next steps to encourage development” (Anya, Childminder).

## Reflections on using the Empowerment Framework



“Time is the biggest barrier for me using the EF at the moment. It takes longer to do the observations, but I recognise they are more meaningful. Perhaps I would get used to doing less observations, but more detailed ones, but it makes me anxious to stand back and just observe, I feel I always need to be in there, doing something” (Mia, Pre-school practitioner).

# Findings

- **Environment** — physical and emotional space affording children opportunities to engage in the space on their own terms
- **Subjectivity** — knowing children, defining narratives, layered approach
- **Time** — slow pedagogy (Carlson & Clark, 2022), stepping back, readjustment and reflection
- **Learning** — pedagogic approach, flexibility, values, reflective thinking to connect practice





## - Participation

## + Participation

## + Motivation

## + Participation - Coordination

## + Participation - Problem Solving

## - Ownership

## + Ownership

## + Ownership - Imagination

## + Ownership - Coordination

## - Voice

## + Voice

## + Empathy

## + Voice - Problem solving

## + Voice - Imagination

## + Participation

## + Ownership

## + Voice

## - Questions

Where is the child positioning themselves within the play?

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How are they negotiating with others?

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How are they taking part?

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What choices and decisions are they making to be involved in the play?

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# Interactive Learning Diary

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<https://www.interactivelearningdiary.co.uk/>

**Creating an empowerment record:**

<https://youtu.be/7ut6RlmJcrg>

**Including evidence:**

<https://youtu.be/6WhqMUpV77U>

# Conclusion

The empowerment framework enables practitioners to view children's play and engagement with their environment through an empowering lens.

- Emphasises what children can do
- Positive approach to children's everyday interactions

Recognises the learning, development and stimulus that is naturally evident when children can make choices and decisions.

- The EF changes the way in which children are observed
- Leads to new ways of working and re-evaluating practice

Recognising and nurturing children's empowerment is essential for children to believe in themselves, have confidence to voice their opinions, try out new ideas and engage with the world and others around them.

The EF highlights how those often subjective and abstract ideas be captured and stimulated through the environments children experience and the way in which practitioners value play.

# Would you like to use the empowerment framework in your practice and contribute to further research?

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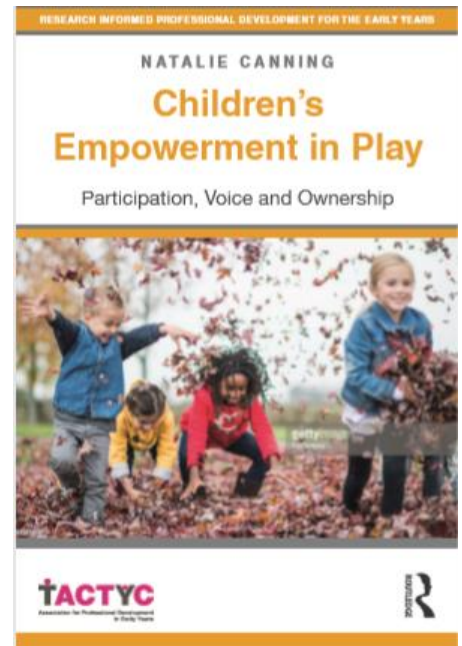
<https://www.interactivelearningdiary.co.uk/>  
[www.rightsinplay.co.uk](http://www.rightsinplay.co.uk)

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