Listening to Children:
Theories and Ethics of Listening

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Abstract

In many societal contexts, the importance of listening to children is underscored, not seldom with reference to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and especially Article 12 on the right to be heard. But what does it mean to listen to children? A plethora of books on listening to children aimed at professionals and others who meet children in their daily lives are published on a regular basis. However, we miss a critical discussion of listening as such, and more specifically about (good) listening to children, framed within a larger theoretical context. The aim of this article is to discuss listening in relation to monological and dialogical perspectives on communication, as well as in relation to different notions of children as similar to or different from adults. Also discussed is how different theoretical perspectives on listening and listening to children tends to lead to different ethical conclusions regarded what constitutes good listening and listening to children.

Keywords: listening, dialogism, monologism, notions of children, ethics

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**Introduction**

In this article, we discuss the overall question of what it means to listen specifically to children. Our starting point is the observation that listening to children does not automatically result in something positive just because it happens, but a deeper understanding of what it is and what it can be is required. Therefore, we draw on theoretical perspectives from two areas: theories of listening and different theoretical understandings of “what a child is”.

When it comes to theories of listening, we make use of a dialogical perspective (Linell, 2009; 2020) and the division into monological and dialogical theories of communication. These theories are well established and have a long history. However, they have surprisingly rarely addressed listening, and to an even lesser extent they have addressed the issue of listening to children. When it comes to theoretical understandings of the child, we mainly address the aspect of children as similar to or different from adults. We argue that these two distinctions – between monologism and dialogism and between children as similar to or different from adults – are useful in understanding central aspects of why different ways of approaching listening result in different conclusions about what can be said to constitute good listening to children. Any discussion of how and in what way good listening is defined involves the consideration of ethical perspectives. What is considered good listening varies depending on what sort of theoretical position that is (explicitly or implicitly) adopted. To make the discussion of theoretical and ethical perspectives tangible, we have chosen to discuss four examples drawn from both research-based literature and literature aimed at practitioners (specialist publications) concerning preschool activities and social work. The examples are chosen to illustrate how different theoretical assumptions regarding listening and different understandings of the concept of “a child” are expressed in practical terms, and to show how these assumptions in turn result in different ways of defining what is ethically valued as good listening. Thus, we do not intend to give a systematic review of all literature on listening to children. We have rather sought to create a theoretical map of the “listening terrain”.

The subject of the article is important given that the call to listen to children recurs in many contexts. This is often justified with reference to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child; in particular Article 12 of the Convention, which codifies a right for the child to have the opportunity to form and express their views, as well as the right to be heard in contexts where the child’s views are to be taken into account in decision-making. This has led to increased demand for knowledge on how to listen to children and what it means in practice, particularly among professional groups in different sectors (health care, social care, education, civil society, etc.), at different levels (state, regional and municipal) and in voluntary organisations working with children and young people.

Theoretical literature on listening rarely focuses on children (see e.g. Lipari, 2014; Parks, 2019), and literature about listening to children mainly has professional practitioners as its

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2 The word “child” refers here to people under the age of 18, i.e. those who are sometimes referred to as “children and young people.”

3 We have chosen not to discuss in any detail “child perspective” and “children’s perspective” (Halldén, 2009) in this article. These concepts are highly relevant in relation to listening to children but would make the article too comprehensive and require a separate article.

4 In Sweden, this became particularly relevant after the Convention on the Rights of the Child became law on 1 January 2020.
target group (see e.g. Lancaster and Broadbent, 2003; Redsell and Hastings, 2010; Markström and Münger, 2020). The latter type of literature tends to be more applied and less often deepens the theoretical perspectives, irrespectively of whether they concern listening in general or listening to children more specifically. Furthermore, in all literature on listening, both theoretically and professionally oriented, there are terms that signal different kinds of listening, such as “didactic listening” (Adelmann, 2002), “inter-listening” (Lipari, 2014), “emergent listening” (Davies, 2014) and “‘true’ listening” (McLeod, 2008), to name just a few. How are we to understand these different concepts, and adjectives and adverbs, that are used to describe different ways of listening? Intuitively, it can be sensed that they concern different perspectives and definitions, but if so, which ones? These are questions we will address in the following sections.

What is listening?

Before discussing what it may mean to listen to children, we first consider perspectives on listening in general. We will focus on perspectives on listening from the humanities, which over the past 20 to 30 years have been promoted by sociologists, linguists, pedagogues and researchers from interdisciplinary contexts. Common to these perspectives is that they position listening in a context that emphasizes both human social interactions as well as the cultural and historical context. This implies a clear distinction from naturalistic-oriented research in, for example, cognitive psychology and neuroscience, which treats listening as a delimited ability that is part of human cognitive processing and processing of incoming information through the hearing organs. In relation to this, a distinction is often made between listening and hearing (see e.g. Lipari, 2014, p. 50), where hearing is defined as perceptual and bodily, and thus related to the individual and their hearing ability. Purdy (2010) argues that experimental psychological research has been predominantly focused on hearing, and therefore calls for perspectives on listening that situate it in the social interaction and relational dynamics between individuals. In this article, we are therefore interested in listening, not hearing.

Much of what has been written about listening from a humanistic perspective has been based on a criticism that research on language and social interaction has focused on utterances and sentences, and has paid much less attention to listening. Communication researcher Lisbeth Lipari points out that “studies of both rhetoric and dialogue have tended, by and large, to pass over listening in favour of speaking” (Lipari, 2012, p. 227; see also Corrada Fiumara, 1995; Back, 2007; Dobson, 2012; Lipari, 2014). Spoken utterances tend to stand out as notable events or actions, while listening instead appears as a kind of “invisible” non-event that is not as noticeable. Listening then appears primarily as something that hides in the void or silence when the listener is not talking. A kind of communicative antimatter.

A common way to deal with this is to expand the concept of listening by also including the listener’s responses in what is considered listening (Adelmann, 2002). Listening then becomes no longer just a matter of non-events, but also something substantial and manifest that takes the form of visible and noticeable events and actions. It is a fact that in social interaction, active feedback from listener to speaker through different kinds of responses is continuously present (Yngve, 1970; Bavelas, Coates and Johnson, 2002). This ranges from subtle nods or hums, to responses that are utterances in their own right. Such responsive feedback from the listener serves at least as proof that the previous utterance has been perceived at all, but can also give indications – to a lesser or greater extent – of how the previous speaker has been understood (Sacks, Schlegloff and Jefferson, 1974, p. 728). From
this point of view, listening in dialogue takes the form of manifest responses (Adelmann, 2002), both for the participants themselves and for researchers who study social interaction.

The above reasoning points to something significant in how listening works in practice, as an integral part of social interaction where the listener role and the speaker role come together in a mutual interaction (Adelmann, 2002, p. 121). At the same time, there is a possible problem with thinking of listening exclusively in terms of manifest behaviour (events rather than non-events), as it may lead to the somewhat paradoxical conclusion that one could, at least in terms of research methodology, only deal with listening in so far as it is manifested in responses and utterances. Was it not the listening we wanted to capture, rather than the utterance?

As if to confirm this dilemma, Adelmann (2002, p. 120) makes the important point that in linguistic research there has been a tendency to regard listening as either a skill more or less separate from speech OR as a conversational aspect of speech itself. To understand this, one can refer to Lisbeth Lipari (2014), who provides a philosophical discussion of atomistic and holistic approaches to listening, as she calls it.

**Monologism, dialogism and listening**

We have just mentioned that Lipari (2014) discusses atomistic and holistic approaches to listening. The terms atomism and holism overlap in many ways with what communication researcher Per Linell (2009; 2020) calls monologism (atomism) and dialogism (holism), with inspiration from the literary scholar Mikhail Bakhtin. Linell’s theoretical framework is not focused on listening, but is more extensive in its scope and deals with human communication, language, and sense-making more broadly. We have therefore chosen to mainly use Linell’s conceptual apparatus. Lipari’s reasoning, however, becomes central at times, because she focuses on listening. Thus, her perspective is an important complement to theories of communication that tend to focus mostly on “speech” and “voice”.

Dialogism in Linell’s work is likened to a metatheory regarding language, humans and communication (Linell, 2020, p. 426). A metatheory is a theory about theories, which in this case means that various other theories about listening and communication can be described and understood as being more or less dialogical or monological in character. In monological theories, the phenomena under scrutiny tend to be understood as consisting of separate parts, and each part is defined primarily by its own inherent characteristics. This is also what makes monologism atomistic in character. Understanding the whole – a communicative situation for example – thus becomes a matter of first understanding its parts, which can then be put together into an understanding of the whole.\(^5\) Monological approaches to communication are based on a sender-receiver model,\(^6\) which clearly separates speakers from listeners, and where communication is valued based on how “error-free” the sending of the information is, from the sender to the receiver (Linell, 2009, p. 39). For example, monological thinking characterises how safety-critical conversations between different professions in the Swedish railway network tend to be thought about (Andrén, Sanne and Linell, 2010). Monological views also permeate certain types of research that has contributed to the development of technical aids for individuals with disabilities and for aging individuals (Lipari, 2014).

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\(^5\) When asking what an utterance means from a monological perspective, there are two main authorities to turn to, either the intentions of individual speakers or the language system as such (Linell, 2009, p. 35).

\(^6\) This is synonymous with what has been called the conduit metaphor for communication (Reddy, 1979).
Methodologically, monological perspectives rest on a positivist approach, which in research on listening places demands on reliable and precise methods that seek to identify and establish regularities and principles that govern communication and especially listening (Linell, 2009; 2020).

How, then, do we think about listening from a monological perspective? From a monological point of view, listening is regarded as an essentially individual ability which is presumed to be improvable in the sense that individuals can “become more effective and better listeners” (Lipari, 2014, p. 98). However, as Lipari argues, an implicit ideal in the sender-receiver model is that a total understanding between the two parties can be achieved provided that the parties find the “right wavelength”. In other words, misunderstandings that arise as a result of obstacles and difficulties in communication are a kind of “error” that can and should be overcome. This normative ideal, according to Lipari, is useful in technology development but prevents a deeper understanding of the humanistic philosophy of listening. Therefore, Lipari (2014) instead advocates a holistic (dialogical) school of thought in language and communication research.

A dialogical perspective is characterised by the view that, by and large, things become meaningful through their relationship to other things, rather than being primarily defined by inherent qualities. This means that they need to be understood in and through their relation to each other and in relation to the whole (context) in which they are embedded. This is what makes dialogism holistic in character, rather than atomistic. A dialogical view of communication regards conversation as something co-created by the participants and the conversation must be understood in relation to the context in which it occurs. That is, communication is inter-active and embedded in context. Instead of sharply distinguishing listeners from speakers, dialogism tend to talk about interlocutors or participants in interaction, who simultaneously initiate and respond in their conversational actions. Unlike the monological ideal of achieving perfect understanding, dialogism is more about the unfolding and practical process of achieving sufficient understanding for the moment, in the context of communication (Garfinkel, 1967). Rather than thinking monologically of misunderstandings merely as a kind of “error”, from a dialogical perspective partial understanding and misunderstandings in communication are considered to be normal, expected, and a central driving force in dialogue, and even an essential part of what communication is about in the first place (Lipari, 2014, p. 139). Thus, Linell (2009, p. 36) contends that listeners also construct meaning and are not just passive “recipients” of communication. Similarly, Lipari (2014, p. 157) introduces the concept of inter-listening, where “inter-“ draws attention to the relational and co-created dimension of listening.

Against this background, it follows that dialogical and monological perspectives include different views of humans and of communication. From the point of view of theory of knowledge (epistemology), dialogical and monological perspectives can be compared with the difference between scientific causal explanations and humanistic forms of understanding (Linell, 2020, p. 419). Dialogism is fundamentally a social constructivist epistemological approach, with its particular emphasis on the importance of context, which in practice also means that qualitative research methods tend to be used (Linell, 2009; 2020). On an ontological level, dialogism can be interpreted as compatible with both certain forms of critical realism (which Linell himself advocates) and with different forms of relativism. A monological perspective rests on an understanding of humanity that focuses on the individual and their perception of the world around them, which means that listening is defined in relation to “the individual human being [who] experiences and understands the world –
objects as well as other persons” (Linell, 2009, p. 13). In this context, attention is directed to the individual’s ability (or inability) to communicate, unlike dialogism where the view of humanity is based on the assumption that “human nature and human life are constituted in interrelations with ‘the other’, that is, in other-orientation” (Linell, 2009, p. 13). In a dialogical perspective, persons are defined as essentially relational, which is why “the other” plays a central role.

*Understanding of the other*

How are we to understand “the other” in communication and listening? We cannot do justice to everything that has been written about this, so we will limit ourselves to a few examples that we see as important in a discussion about listening to children.

Linell (2009, pp. 80–85) discusses the concepts of *intersubjectivity* and *alterity*. The term intersubjectivity is used in somewhat different ways by different theorists, but many times it refers to consensus and mutual understanding. The term alterity (derived from Bakhtin, 1986) is then often used for the opposite: to that which is alien, to misunderstanding, to differences in perspective and opinions, etc. A central idea in the dialogical perspective is, as has been pointed out earlier, that dialogue is driven forward, not only by consensus, but also in many respects by alterity and partial understanding, as this creates dynamism in dialogue. The response to alterity is a cornerstone around which the interlocutors move.

A first example of how different theoretical approaches to “the other” lead to different understandings of what listening is, can be found in Lipari (2014). She advocates a type of listening that, as far as possible, overrides the self in favour of accepting and opening up to the other and its dissimilitude, a radical acceptance. This she terms “listening otherwise” (Lipari, 2014, p. 177), and draws inspiration from Eastern traditions such as Buddhism and Taoism. Lipari argues that allowing compassion to precede understanding also opens up the opportunity to listen to the alien – the alterity – which can sometimes be frightening, not least because it can affect and change us. Her approach is similar to that of the philosopher and theologian Martin Buber (2013), who also emphasises presence in the moment, and of being receptive and empathetically open to the other. In both Lipari and Buber, a view of the other emerges, based on a kind of fundamentally shared humanity, with the power to overcome differences and misunderstandings, even in cases where the participants in the dialogue do not share experiences, culture and language. Previous experiences are conceptualised by Lipari primarily as an obstacle to consensus, as preconceived notions that, like the Tower of Babel, stand in the way of truly unconditional interpersonal listening.

A different approach to “the other”, which paints a different picture of what listening can be, takes the opposite view: that previous experiences enable understanding of the other. This tends to be described in more positive terms as “shared frames of reference” rather than the more negative “preconceived notions” of Lipari. An example of this can be found in Schutz (1944; 1953), who contends that the possibility of understanding other people to a large extent hinges on previously established experiences, common habits and knowledge of other people and various specific activities in which they engage. In this perspective, past experiences of conventional life serve as mutually recognisable building blocks that the interlocutors use to piece together an understanding of both utterances and actions, that is strengthened the more they get to know each other and share frames of reference.
However, the fact that past experiences can also support, rather than simply hinder, common understanding does not contradict Lipari’s and Buber’s point that listening may be said to require a certain unprejudiced willingness to open up to the alterity of the other, to meet that which is beyond the already familiar. Schutz (1953, p. 13) also argues that it is in face-to-face encounters, in social interaction, that we can meet each other most unconditionally, as unique persons. It is worth noting, however, that previous experience may also include professional competence, and that listening in different professions and different institutional contexts may require previous experience in the form of specific competence, skills and abilities to recognise and handle recurrent challenges. This may involve competence regarding how to listen to someone who applies for a job at a job interview, or a doctor’s competent ability to listen for certain things — that an untrained ear might not have noticed — when patients describe their troubles. In both cases, listening is an important tool for reaching institutionally established types of conclusions (who to hire, what diagnosis to make). If we reconnect to the question of children, listening can be about a professional ability, such as that of a social worker who listen to a child in a custody dispute, or of a teacher who listen to a student in crisis. Listening can thus somewhat paradoxically be seen both as (a) a kind of openness *that seeks to suppress preconceived notions* (prejudices and unfounded expectations) and (b) a kind of competence *that is partly built on preconceived notions* (experientially grounded competence and shared frames of reference).

**Notions of children and what it may mean to listen specifically to children**

Before addressing the question of what it means to listen specifically to children, we face an ontological question: what is a child? In *The Convention on the Rights of the Child* children are defined as persons under the age of 18, which is a clear boundary. But as we know, different understandings of “age” are context bound and an age limit of 18 years tells us very little about a specific child in a specific situation. Furthermore, there are large intra-group differences that become very evident if we compare, for example, listening to a teenager and an infant. To explore theories about listening to children on a deeper level, we need to take a closer look at how these theories answer the question of what a child is. What understandings about what a child is underpin the theory? We believe that there is reason to clarify how theories about listening to children rest on different understandings of what a child is, and it is especially important to clarify how the relationship between children and adults is understood. Or, more simply, are children considered to be similar to or different from adults?

Is the child understood, by adults, as an “alien other” characterised by difference and alterity? And can these differences be overcome in the encounter and in the relational dynamics? Or does the adult see themselves in the child as a “similar other”, through a relationship built on similarity? And is there room for difference? From a monological perspective, can the transmission and reception of messages between children and adults take place painlessly or is there a risk of problems arising from differences between children and adults? Is specific expertise required to listen to children? We will return to this in our discussion of examples of literature on listening to children. Before that, we will look in more detail at some aspects of

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7 A parallel discussion about the importance of clarifying notions of children and childhood has been presented in literature on research design and methodology in child research. Alderson (2005, pp. 29-30) writes that researchers’ own conceptions of childhood affect how the relational dynamics between researchers and children take shape in the research process and should therefore be subject to ethical reflection and critical review.
how different perspectives on listening promote an understanding of children as similar to or different from adults.

In general, children are rarely touched upon in the philosophical and theoretically oriented literature about listening. When children are mentioned at all, it is usually from the point of view of a developmental perspective on children. One clear example is Lipari herself, who, when writing about children and listening, does so with reference to infants’ early social development or children’s early language development (Lipari, 2014, pp. 21, 130–131). The general dominance of the developmental perspective in research on children, whether in linguistics, psychology or sociology, has been noted and analysed from various quarters, often with a criticism of developmental thinking as ideologically governing in the understanding of what a child is (Qvortrup, 1985; Walkerdine, 1994; Wong, 2004).

For our discussion, we want to highlight how the critique of developmental psychological thinking came to be of importance for the emergence of a new direction in research on children’s lives and conditions, namely “the new social studies of children and childhood” (Qvortrup, Corsaro and Honig, 2009). It was an orientation that emerged during the 1970s and 80s with ambitions to clarify the changing conceptions of childhood in time and place, in response to the idea of a universal and homogeneous ‘normal’ development, where each child is understood as essentially similar to every other child – at least of the same age. Furthermore, children’s agency and social interactions were emphasised as worth studying in their own right, and not just as a stage in their development to cognitive and emotional maturity or as part of their socialisation into an upcoming adult role. The sociologist Jens Qvortrup argued in 1985 that “[c]hildren are not human ‘beings’ in sociological literature, but only human ‘becomings’” (Qvortrup, 1985, p. 132). The alternative notion of children that Qvortrup mentions – children as beings – was a central element of the new social child and childhood research (see e.g. Prout and James, 1997; James and James, 2004). According to this perspective, children should be approached and treated as fully persons here and now – beings in their own right – and not only as yet-to-be adults whose lives are primarily defined as a matter of development and change (becomings). Later on, as the new field of research was established, the discussion shifted further toward an understanding of being and becoming as two related and inevitable elements of all human relationships and processes – for both children and adults – that are weighted differently depending on the demands and circumstances of the situation (Halldén, 2007, pp. 31-40; see also Lee, 2001; Prout, 2005; Uprichard, 2008; Tisdall and Punch, 2012; Davies, 2014). This means that if our understanding of adults’ listening to children is to be interpreted in terms of beings who are similar to, or becomings who are different from, adults, it requires an understanding of how being-becoming is weighted in the notion of the child (e.g. being emphasised at the expense of development) and, of course, an insight into the context in which the adult is expected to listen.

In our discussion of four concrete examples of literature further below in this text, each example is based on different theories of communication and listening to children, and we highlight how they are based on monological or dialogical understandings of listening, what sort of relationship (similar to or different from) between child and adult that is in focus.

What could be considered good listening to children?

It is often taken for granted that it is good to listen to children, and listening itself is often assumed to be positive by definition. The philosopher Nietzsche (2019) has pointed out that...
even moral philosophers have often been guilty of the same mistake – to take for granted what is to be seen as good – even though they, if anyone, could be expected to have thought these things through in depth. Consequently, it is important to think about what one really means.

What, then, could be considered good listening to children from an ethical perspective? What do theories of good listening to children say? In the upcoming discussion of four examples of literature on listening to children, we use the concepts that we have introduced above, both in terms of monological and dialogical perspectives on listening and different understandings of children as similar to or different from adults. We have chosen to highlight four texts about listening to children based in research and aimed at researchers and/or practitioners. This is a strategic selection of literature aimed at providing concrete examples of how monological and dialogical perspectives on listening, and different understandings of children as similar to or different from adults, can be discerned in these texts. Importantly, we also discuss how this has ethical implications for what appears to be good listening to children, from the various perspectives. Common to the four texts is that both titles and content indicate that they are concerned with listening to children.

Monological perspectives on good listening

We begin by discussing two texts that exemplify monological perspectives on listening to children, based in the sender-receiver communication model. The two texts differ when it comes to whether they treat children as similar to or different from adults. The first is the book Listening to Children: A Practitioners Guide by Allison McLeod (2008). McLeod has studied British children’s experiences of meeting with social work professionals (see McLeod, 2010, for an overview). Based on her research, she has developed a guide for social welfare professionals. McLeod emphasises from the start that her definition of good listening is that the children receive confirmation of their utterances in the form of tangible and concrete changes in practice. McLeod thinks listening is ideally about listening to the child’s opinion, understanding it, and acting accordingly: “‘true’ listening implies action” (McLeod, 2008, p. 21).

How is this a monological perspective on listening? A clear indication is found in the introduction to the book where McLeod quotes a child she interviewed, who expresses dissatisfaction with social welfare professionals: “Half the time they are not listening […] look like she was listening, but she never was. She used to just look and nod and do nothing.” (McLeod, 2008, p. 21). When McLeod discusses the meaning of what the child says, it is clear that she interprets the child’s utterances literally as “true” in the sense of being accurate depictions of events and situations. Problematisation of the context and especially the other party’s, in this case the professional’s, involvement in the conversation is missing. This is particularly apparent when McLeod chooses to reinforce the child’s claim about a specific person, whom McLeod also knew of, by commenting in her book that the person in question resembles “those nodding dogs people keep on the parcel shelves of their cars!” (McLeod, 2008, p. 21). In our reading of McLeod’s book, this and other similar claims point to a

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8 Nietzsche (2019) thought that moral philosophers before him had often proceeded from the values which they intuitively considered right and then formulated a philosophy that would legitimise them, but in practice they often failed to ask the question of why those values should be adopted in the first place.

9 Our intention is not to contribute to a systematic review of all literature on listening to children, but rather we want to exemplify our discussion of different models for listening and different notions of children with the support of these four texts.
monological conception of communication as a sender-receiver matter. Social welfare professionals, according to McLeod, have the responsibility to “take in” the child’s opinions. This is a skill that includes showing a respectful attitude toward the child and also, as McLeod emphasises, showing in action that the child has been listened to (McLeod, 2008, pp. 24-28). This means that McLeod relies on a sender-receiver model in terms of communication, which focuses on whether the interlocutors reach across with their messages rather than how the parties’ messages are co-constructed in and through the social interaction and its relational quality.

What understandings of what a child is visible in McLeod’s reasoning about listening and good listening? McLeod explicitly states that she sees children as rights bearers – individuals in their own right – whose lives matter here-and-now (being). This notion of children is combined with a developmental perspective – children as becomings (McLeod, 2008, p. 28). Ideally, in McLeod’s version, children develop into independent individuals if adults through their listening show that children’s messages lead to action and change. In this way, McLeod’s book on listening encompasses a notion of the child as both similar to the adult: similar by virtue of being a rights bearer (being), and as different in the sense that the child as a yet-to-be adults is to develop into an independent being (becoming). Further, the underlying ideal of good listening is linked to the professional practitioner’s responsibility, which consists in exercising their professionalism in a way that shows the child that their opinion has been recognised and acted on, which in turn creates a sense of participation (empowerment) for the child. This is something that according to McLeod’s model is favourable for the child both in the here-and-now and in the long run. The ethical rationale of McLeod’s model is that the professional practitioner is assessed based on their ability to accommodate the child’s wishes and requirements, which means that professional scope for freedom of action and interpretation may be limited. Furthermore, it means that the child, whose opinions and wishes expressed in the meeting with the professional are assigned crucial importance, is given a role that – at least in one way of looking at it – involves responsibility for the outcome of the conversation.

Our second example of a monological perspective on listening to children is a model developed for listening to children in foster families. The purpose of the model is to ensure children’s opportunities to make their voices heard (Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare, 2021; see also 2015; 2016). The model is based on systematic research reviews regarding conversations with children in investigative situations, with particular emphasis on the adult’s listening. The model is based on a clear monological perspective, and communication is defined using a conduit metaphor (with sender and receiver), which in relation to the emphasis on adult listening means that the attention is directed at the adult's skill and competence as the recipient of the “messages” sent by the child. However, this does not preclude that substantial attention is also devoted to the child’s communicative ability, which, according to the theory, affects the adult’s ability to listen and capture what the child expresses. When it comes to children’s ability to communicate messages, aspects such as age, cognitive and emotional maturity and psychosocial health are seen as central.

The model is based on results from experimental studies on what characterises good listening to children, or expressed differently, scientific evidence for good listening. Such an evidence-based approach does not exclude an awareness of the complexity of listening to children. On the contrary, the monological ideal of “perfect transmission” is justified by the creators of the model, with reference to the importance of identifying tools to try to master this complexity rather than embracing it in other ways. Listening to children in this context is tantamount to
creating a *pre-established method* of conversing with children, based on the child’s age and maturity.

The understanding of what a child is that underpins the model is partly a view of children as rights bearers, with reference to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and thus fully persons in their own right (children as *beings*), and partly a pronounced developmental perspective on children (children as *becomings*). This understanding underpins the reasoning on the importance of defining children based on age as well as emotional and cognitive maturity. The idea of children as vulnerable is also highlighted: children in general and children in foster care in particular are seen as a particularly vulnerable and defenceless group (Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare, 2015, p. 7). This means that good listening to children becomes an issue that essentially focuses on the professionalism and competence of the person listening to the children.

Our two examples are taken from social welfare and professional groups in social work and their work with children. Both emphasise, on partly different grounds, that good listening in meetings with children is a matter of the methods and competence of the adult listening party. Ethics, “good listening”, is thus defined in relation to pre-established methods designed on the basis of an ambition to listen in the “right” way. In McLeod’s case, good listening is defined as following up on and acting in response to the opinions and wishes that are “transmitted” by the child. We believe that this can contribute to limiting the professional practitioner, because for various reasons it is not always possible to accommodate the child. In the example from the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare, good listening is linked to robust (in the sense of scientifically tested) methods for talking (and listening) to children. In relation to the two examples discussed so far, we also pointed out how children are understood as similar to, or different from, adults. We return to that discussion in the concluding discussion of this article.

**Dialogical perspectives on good listening**

In the previous paragraph, we discussed texts that are based on a monological perspective on listening to children, including claims to formulate what could be considered good listening to children. We will continue our discussion of texts, but now focusing on examples of dialogical perspectives. Such perspectives involve a partly different approach to ethics, which Elizabeth Parks summarises well:

> Instead of prescribing a ‘right’ ethical path for all time in its initial formation, [a dialogical perspective] grounds the creation of normative claims in the description of a particular social context through discursive and narrative analysis, identifying public and private social problems through description of ethical values being co-constructed in the between of interpersonal relationships, and intentional consideration of communicative processes that best promote dialogue (Parks, 2019, p. 8).

In this approach, both listening and related ethical issues are considered as *a part of what one has to deal with* in each situation. Ethics are linked to the relationship (Noddings, 2003) and to an ongoing co-creation, or, in Lipari’s words, “inter-listening” (Lipari, 2014, p. 157), which means listening to both the well-known and the unknown: “to otherness – to alterity – while maintaining a commitment to proximity” (2014, p. 188). Therein lies the difference to a monological focus on listening in a pre-established “right” way. Both of the two texts we
want to discuss are linked to what is called a “pedagogy of listening”, with roots in the *Reggio Emilia* approach (see also Rinaldi, 2006; Åberg and Lenz Taguchi, 2018), but their purposes and contexts differ.

The first text is a book called *Listening to Young Children* by Alison Clark (2017) and is about the Mosaic approach, a research method based on a theory of listening to children in the preschool and in the early years of compulsory school. The Mosaic approach does not just encompass *one* method but many (Clark, 2017, p. 17). The book defines listening dialogically: “an active process of communication involving hearing, interpreting and constructing meanings” (Clark, 2017, p. 23). In other words, listening is described as an interwoven part of everyday interaction, participation and learning, between children and adults and children and children (Clark, 2017, p. 22).

The book also includes extensive sections on children’s language development (children as becomings) that emphasise that language and communication are *more than* words and language. The word mosaic symbolises the importance of giving children the opportunity to express themselves in different ways: “in a variety of ways, calling on their hundred languages” (Clark, 2017, p. 34), and refers to the importance of listening to the child’s diversity of expressions: linguistic, visual, motor, etc.

Clark explicitly refers to an understanding of children as (i) experts on their own lives, (ii) skilled communicators, (iii) rights bearers, and (iv) “meaning-makers” (Clark, 2017, pp. 20-23). The understanding of what a child is outlined thus emphasises children as rights bearers and experts on their own lives, which underpins a notion of children as similar to adults (*beings*). In parallel, but more implicitly, a notion of children as special is presented in the sense that children have “100 languages” and thus are different from adults. The child’s many languages motivate the need for specific competence in and education of the adult (so it is rather the adult who has to “change”, according to the perspective). And the Mosaic approach is described as providing exactly that: a method for adults to use in meetings with children.¹⁰ So, while this method starts out from a dialogical conception of listening to children, it also has some attributes of monological thinking. The monological thinking is visible in the emphasis on children as a homogeneous group with distinctive inherent characteristics, in terms of how language and communication places a demand on the adult party to use the pre-established Mosaic approach to listen in “the right way”. At the same time, the dialogical starting point of the model includes an emphasis on the adult listener meeting and adapting to the other.

Our second example includes another example of a dialogical perspective on listening, which is more “purely” dialogic in its character. Bronwyn Davies’ book, *Listening to Children: Being and Becoming* (2014) is based on the author’s observations of a preschool with a Reggio Emilia profile. The target audience of the book is researchers and Davies emphasises that listening “is about being open to being affected” (Davies, 2014, p. 1). Davies anchors her reasoning in post-humanist theory which is also based on an understanding of what a child is that is presented in detail (Davies, 2014, p. 15). Instead of focusing on “children” as a special and homogeneous category with pre-established inherent characteristics, Davies draws attention to a common social space consisting of both children and adults who are all –

¹⁰ The emphasis on the child as unique and as different from adults becomes even more evident when the Mosaic approach for children with disabilities is discussed (Rix and Malibha-Pinchbeck, 2020).
children and adults alike – defined as beings in a here-and-now who simultaneously are also becomings involved in a complex network of relationships that continually changes and transforms the actors involved. The pair of concepts being-becoming is used by Davies in a complementary rather than mutually exclusive way, and she applies the concepts to both children and adults. This contributes to an understanding of children and adults as similar to each other in the sense that children and adults both are and become in relational encounters (Davies, 2014, pp. 9–10). Against this background, Davies also chooses to develop the concept of listening by distinguishing “emergent listening” from “listening-as-usual”, where the latter refers to listening to the predictable and ordinary and the former to the possibility of opening up to what in the social process includes what may become (Davies, 2014, pp. 21–25).

Compared with the Mosaic approach (Clark, 2017), Davies’ contribution is less focused on children as special and different to adults. Davies’ dialogical alternative is less concrete; it appears rather as a starting point for professional reflection and more general approaches. Les Back (2007) argues that dialogical listening is by definition open, which at the same time causes uncertainty in terms of results and outcomes: “Taking dialogic methods seriously can sometimes lead to uncertain outcomes” (2007, p. 18).

**Concluding discussion**

We have highlighted that in theories of communication, listening has often ended up in the shadow of spoken language, voice and utterance. A closer look at listening, however, reveals that listening is not just “one thing”, but multifaceted and contextual. That is not to say that listening is “anything whatsoever”. There are certain clear traditions and recurrent themes in the literature on communication, with roots that go back many centuries, that are relevant to understanding listening. These traditions and themes have been highlighted here in a general way, with the help of the distinction between dialogism and monologism as well as in relation to a theorised understanding of children as similar to or different from adults.

An important conclusion of our discussion is that monological and dialogical perspectives tend to yield different conceptions of what constitutes “good listening”. In a monological theory of listening, the assessment of what constitutes ethical good listening is tied to the way the parties communicate and receive messages. In our two examples, McLeod’s (2008) guide for professionals in British social care and the model for listening to children placed in foster homes, developed at the initiative of the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare (2021; see also 2015; 2016), two different ways of promoting good listening emerged. The former advocated that the adult listener should show children that they have been listened to by acting on the wishes communicated by the children. This approach requires that the professional has the tools necessary to act according to the child’s opinions, and also places high demands on children to express and take responsibility for their opinions. Nuances relating to the social interaction and the context of the conversation, and the specifics of the relationship between the two parties, are given less consideration. Instead, the utterances – seen from a monological view of language – are assumed to simply represent an actual social reality. The model of the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare focuses more on the two parties’ conversational skills and ability to send and receive messages; the professional was expected to have knowledge of and take into account the child’s maturity and emotional status in their listening.
The understanding of what a child is, in both examples, consisted of a combination of understanding the child as *being* in the sense of being a subject in their own right and in the sense of being a rights bearer with the right to be heard, and understanding the child as *becoming* – in a state of development and age-related immaturity. In our analysis, we see a difference between the two examples in the way development is defined. The Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare emphasised the child’s cognitive and emotional maturity, or rather lack of maturity, which was associated with the child’s social vulnerability and thus crucial for the adult’s ability to practise good listening. The Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare model required professional methodological knowledge to achieve good listening. In contrast, McLeod advocated a view of child development as linked to experiencing of being a rights bearer, when the social worker acts on the child’s requests. A child who experiences that their own opinions are taken seriously and give rise to tangible change, which according to McLeod is tantamount to participation (empowerment), also takes important steps toward increased maturity. In other words, ethical good listening in theories underpinned by monological perspectives on communication is closely related to the individual parties (sender and receiver) in the conversation and their way of communicating and listening. The ethics of listening in these two examples is tied to normative and pre-established assumptions about the professionals’ methods and competence.

This stands in contrast to dialogical theory where ethics is located in the interaction itself rather than in the parties as individuals and, as Lipari (2014) argues, where listening is the very foundation of the ethical relationship. A dialogical ethic places demands on listening, both in the face of what we understand and do not understand, as well as in leaving room for reflexivity in the dialogue and in being open to the unexpected. There is less emphasis on predetermined right or wrong in the dialogue, and ethical matters are instead linked to the process of the evolving dialogue in particular contexts. Which parties interact and for what purpose? What are the time frames? Where does the interaction take place? For the adult in dialogue with a child, it is a matter of finding an approach that allows listening both to what the child expresses in their speech and to what is “said” beyond the words and that manifests itself in the emotional and bodily expression of the interaction. We have discussed two examples of dialogical models for listening: Clark (2017) who has developed the Mosaic approach, and Davies (2014) who writes about his research at a Swedish preschool with a Reggio Emilia profile. Davies draws on post-humanist theory which encompasses a definition of listening that means that adults and children are not differentiated but regarded as essentially the same: both *beings* and *becomings*. Davies assumes that both children and adults continuously find themselves in a process of change which exists in parallel with a state of stability and predictability in everyday social practices. Davies calls for listening that is able to “hear” both the change that potentially exists in social relationships and the predictable and ordinary. Ethical listening is thus defined in line with an ambition to remain open and reflective in listening and not to shy away from the unknown and the unexpected. In the Mosaic approach developed by Clark (2017), the dialogue is also emphasised, and the child is defined as being as much a meaning-creating being as the adult. But Clark also chooses to highlight the specific characteristics of children, which place special demands on the adult to learn and be able to listen to the child’s difference. Good ethical listening is associated both with the ongoing dialogue and the adult’s competence to listen to and understand the child’s specificity and linguistic expressions.

We have tried to show how understandings of children as *beings* and/or as *becomings* are useful for reasoning about how different models combine and weigh them in relation to each other in ways that result in thinking about children as similar to and/or different from adults.
In addition, there is always an element of alterity – not just that you are listening to “a child”, but to another person. Just as we wrote above, that dialogical and monological listening can be good, although in different ways, we also think that good listening can be based both on understandings of children as similar to and different from adults. In the first case, it may be a question of recognising the competence and autonomy of children (*beings*), with the rights and obligations that follow. In the second case, it may involve as an adult taking responsibility for children who are not yet adults (*becomings*), and who may therefore sometimes be (justly) defined as more vulnerable and fragile. Both when it comes to monologism/dialogism, and when it comes to understandings of children as similar to or different from adults, we mean to say that one alternative does not necessarily exclude the other. Listening to children can include both a kind of unconditional openness to the other – the child as fully a person – and demands for pre-established competence and methods of various kinds. This raises new questions about what professionalism can be in relation to listening: is it pre-specified methods for reducing and mastering complexity, or is it rather (or also) about accepting and embracing complexity?

In every situation, one has to ask oneself: what does listening mean in this situation? What is *good* listening in this situation? Hopefully, some of the theories, concepts, and distinctions that we have presented can then be of use, as a map of the terrain. There is often something to be gained by looking at the same situation from several different perspectives. The perspectives we have presented all have different advantages and disadvantages, and they highlight different aspects of listening, of listening to children, and of what can be seen as good listening to children.
Reference list


