

Encouraging the Participation of Children and Young People in Decision making

BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATION

When children and young people are respected, listened to and valued within an organisational context, the benefits for children and young people include:

- an increased sense of belonging and connectedness
- greater confidence
- a sense of 'ownership'
- opportunities to develop skills in relation to being active citizens
- learning valuable skills e.g. public speaking, planning

Organisations that involve children and young people in decision-making also benefit by:

- creating an organisational ethos that communicates the value of children and young people
- providing programs, services and activities that better meet the needs of children and young people
- building a culture of trust through transparency.

EXAMPLE

A volunteer who runs a Children's Liturgy program spends the last part of every session talking with the children about what they thought of the session and the activities that they have just completed. The volunteer ensures that every child has an opportunity to speak, listens and notes the children's feedback on a piece of poster paper. The volunteer introduces the liturgy topic for next week, and involves the children in discussing and making decisions about what they might like to do. In doing so, she models to the children her willingness to listen and that she values their input by incorporating their feedback into the planning of future sessions. Initially, the children were tentative in offering their views, but over time have become more confident in sharing their views because they feel supported, valued and heard.

WAYS IN WHICH CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE CAN PARTICIPATE IN DECISION-MAKING

Kirby et al (2003) proposed a model of participation that reflects the different ways in which children and young people may participate in decision-making within an organisational context and influence change.

There may be situations where children and young people:

- provide feedback which is taken into account by adults
- are involved in the decision-making together with adults
- share power and responsibility for decision-making with adults
- make autonomous decisions.

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EXAMPLES

Provide feedback	Children attending the Catechist Program are asked what they would like to do for their end-of-year celebration. The children offer some options, then the volunteers consider the suggested options and make a decision.
Be involved in decision-making with adults	Children attending playgroup choose activities together with their parents by deciding which activities will be put out for play. The playgroup leader has put up photographs of the different play activities. The children with their parents look at the photographs and put a sticker on their favourite activities for the playgroup session. The children and their parents have selected playdough, home corner, the building blocks and painting.
Share power and responsibility	The youth advisory committee of a welfare agency has been involved in evaluating the youth outreach program with agency staff – together they plan and share responsibility for delivering the service. The youth advisory committee meets with agency staff four times a year.
Make autonomous decisions	The young people who attend the youth group have been talking about and praying for drought-affected farmers for a couple of weeks. As a group, they decide that they would like to raise some funds for the farmers. The young people gather information about each of the charities working with farmers and decide on a charity organisation that they will support. The young people brainstorm various fundraising ideas and decide that they will run a cake stall after mass on Sunday.

While the contributions of children and young people are integral to those decisions that affect them (NSW Commission for Children and Young People 2001, p. 6), organisations will need to select the most appropriate level of participation to suit the circumstances. The level of participation of children and young people and the degree to which the views of children and young people are incorporated will vary depending on the circumstances (e.g. nature of the program, relevance and importance of the issue) and what is most appropriate for the children and young people involved (e.g. given their age, capacity, interest).

While the importance of involving children and young people in decision-making cannot be overstated, it is important to set clear expectations about the involvement of children and young people, and to explain to children and young people how their input will be used and/or the scope of their involvement.

Shier (2001, p. 113) suggests that:

Taking children's views into account in decision-making does not imply that every decision must be made in accordance with children's views, or that adults are bound to implement whatever children ask for.

PARTICIPATION METHODS

Participation may be formal or informal and may include:

- informal discussions with children and young people
- questionnaires/surveys (hardcopy or online)

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- feedback forms
- group discussions
- interviews (e.g. with a small group of children or young people)
- brainstorming activities
- advisory groups or committees
- suggestion box
- social media
- art and drama interactive activities.

Different types of participation are appropriate to different situations and the age, developmental stage and capacity of children and young people involved. Shier (2001) emphasises the importance of using a range of approaches to enable children and young people of varying abilities to participate to express their views. We can tailor our approach to maximise participation in a variety of ways.

For example:

- Use different methods of engagement (e.g. schedule a group discussion in addition to sending out a survey to create an opportunity for young people for whom reading and writing is difficult to participate).
- Undertake consultations with an interpreter present to ensure that children and young people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are able to participate and contribute.
- Translate materials into relevant community languages (e.g. surveys, information sheets).
- Involve cultural or community leaders to engage with children and young people (e.g. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community elders).
- Provide additional assistance for children and young people with a disability if required to promote participation (e.g. read out survey questions and scribe the response).
- Use creative art activities to gather feedback and encourage the involvement of younger children (e.g. 'Can you draw what makes you feel safe here?')
- Provide information in child-friendly language.
- Use photography (e.g. encourage young people to take photographs of what they enjoy or like at youth group).
- Use technology (e.g. online surveys or apps).
- Encourage children and young people to make a video to capture their views.

EXAMPLE

An agency is involving children and young people in selecting a fundraising project for the upcoming year. The agency has decided to run two separate consultation groups. The group comprised of secondary school students is provided with written information about three possible projects and asked to read through the information before engaging in a group discussion and voting on the project they are most interested in. The primary school aged group is given a visual presentation (PowerPoint) with photographs and a brief summary of each project. This is followed by a group discussion. Three separate posters representing each of the fundraising projects are attached to a wall and the younger children vote on their preferred choice by attaching a sticker to their preferred project.

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When considering methods for involving children and young people in decision-making, it is important to consider possible barriers to participation and implement approaches that are likely to support and enable children and young people to be involved (Shier 2001).

Barriers to participation may be magnified for vulnerable children and young people as they may lack confidence and not expect to participate due to past experiences.

Department of Child Safety (Qld) 2006, p. 6

Generally, children and young people prefer approaches that 'fit with their way of doing business' (NSW Commission for Children and Young People 2001).

Most children and young people prefer approaches that are:

- welcoming (e.g. refreshments are provided)
- informal
- informative – that is, where information is provided to enable them to effectively provide feedback and/or participate in decision-making (e.g. issues are explained, goals of participation are clear)
- supportive
- respectful of privacy and confidentiality
- straightforward (i.e. not overly difficult or complex)
- not onerous in terms of time
- engaging and/or fun (e.g. a range of activities such as discussion, drawing, writing ideas up on Post-It notes)
- provide feedback to participants to demonstrate that the organisation is listening.

USEFUL RESOURCE

Australian Childhood Foundation July 18, *We want children and young people to tell us what they think – Poster.*

<https://professionals.childhood.org.au/app/uploads/2018/08/ACF354-SGC-Standards-Poster-2-8419.pdf>

CCYP [Commission for Children and Young People] n.d., *Empowerment and participation of children*, Tip Sheet: Child safe organisations.

<https://ccyp.vic.gov.au/assets/resources/tipsheet-empower-participation-children.pdf>

Encouraging the Participation of Children and Young People in Decision making

Office of the Advocate for Children and Young People (NSW) 2019, Engaging children and young people in your organisation.

<https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2019/01/apo-nid217741-1280776.pdf>

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Department of Child Safety (Qld) 2006, *Listening, hearing and acting: approaches to the participation of children and young people in decision making – a review of the literature.*

www.csyw.qld.gov.au/resources/dcsyw/child-family/foster-kinship-care/listen-hear-act.pdf

Kirby, P, Lanyon, C, Cronin, K & Sinclair, R 2013, *Building a culture of participation: involving children and young people in policy, service planning, delivery and evaluation*, Handbook, National Children's Bureau.

<https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/17522/1/Handbook%20-%20Building%20a%20Culture%20of%20Participation.pdf>

NSW Commission for Children and Young People 2001, 'Sharing the stage', Taking Participation Seriously, tool kit.

Shier, H 2001, 'Pathways to participation: Openings, opportunities and obligations', *Children & Society*, vol. 15, pp. 107–17.



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