

# “ Listen – Act – Change

## Council of Europe Handbook on children’s participation

For professionals working for and with children



[www.coe.int/children](http://www.coe.int/children)

Building a Europe  
for and with children





# **” Listen – Act – Change**

## Council of Europe Handbook on children’s participation

For professionals working for and with children

Handbook prepared by:

Dr Anne Crowley

Prof. Cath Larkins

Luís Manuel Pinto

Council of Europe

French edition:  
*« Ecouter – Agir – Changer » Manuel du  
Conseil de l'Europe sur la participation  
des enfants. Pour les professionnels  
travaillant pour et avec les enfants*

The opinions expressed in  
this Handbook are the  
responsibility of the authors  
and do not necessarily  
reflect the official policy of  
the Council of Europe.

All requests concerning the reproduction  
or translation of all or part of this  
document should be addressed to the  
Directorate of Communication (F-67075  
Strasbourg Cedex or publishing@coe.  
int). All other correspondence concerning  
this document should be addressed to  
Directorate General of Democracy.

This publication was produced thanks  
to the special support provided by a  
number of Council of Europe member  
states through voluntary contributions.

Cover photo: ©shutterstock

Cover and layout: Documents and  
Publications Production Department  
(SPDP), Council of Europe

© Council of Europe, October 2020  
Printed at the Council of Europe

# CONTENT

<b>PREFACE</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>HOW TO USE THE HANDBOOK</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>SECTION 1: UNDERSTANDING CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION IN THEORY AND PRACTICE</b>	<b>13</b>
1.1 CHILDREN'S RIGHT TO BE HEARD IN MATTERS THAT AFFECT THEM	13
1.2 WHY IS CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION SO IMPORTANT?	15
1.3 THE PROCESS OF CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION – WHAT'S INVOLVED?	15
1.4 INFLUENCE IN PARTICIPATION PROCESSES	17
1.5 DOING IT WELL – SAFE, ETHICAL, INCLUSIVE AND IMPACTFUL PARTICIPATION	18
1.6 ENABLING ENVIRONMENTS	20
<b>SECTION 2: DEVELOPING PARTICIPATORY ORGANISATIONS AND ENVIRONMENTS</b>	<b>23</b>
2.1 ENSURING OWNERSHIP AT THE HIGHEST LEVEL	23
2.2 UNDERTAKING AN ASSESSMENT OF THE CURRENT STATE OF PLAY	24
2.3 DEVELOPING AN ORGANISATIONAL POLICY AND PROCEDURES	25
2.4 BUILDING STAFF CAPACITY	27
2.5 SAFE AND CHILD FRIENDLY COMPLAINTS MECHANISMS	28
2.6 MONITORING AND REVIEWING IMPLEMENTATION	29
<b>SECTION 3: SUPPORTING PARTICIPATION OF INDIVIDUAL CHILDREN</b>	<b>33</b>
3.1 PREPARATION AND PLANNING	34
3.2 CONNECTING WITH CHILDREN	35
3.3 IDENTIFYING ISSUES AND PRIORITIES	35
3.4 INVESTIGATING CHILDREN'S VIEWS	36
3.5 TAKING ACTION	38
3.6 FOLLOWING UP ACTIONS	39
3.7 REVIEWING, REFLECTING AND STARTING AGAIN	40
<b>SECTION 4: COLLECTIVE PARTICIPATION</b>	<b>43</b>
4.1 PREPARATION AND PLANNING	43
4.2 CONNECTING WITH CHILDREN	44
4.3 IDENTIFYING ISSUES AND PRIORITIES	47
4.4 INVESTIGATING CHILDREN'S VIEWS	48
4.5 TAKING ACTION	50
4.6 FOLLOWING UP ACTION	52
4.7 REVIEWING, REFLECTING AND STARTING AGAIN	53

<b>SECTION 5: RESOURCES</b>	<b>57</b>
5.1 LEGAL STANDARDS	57
5.2 GUIDANCE ON AND EXAMPLES FOR CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION IN DIFFERENT SETTINGS OR WITH DIFFERENT GROUPS	57
5.3 ACTIVITIES (COLLECTIVE PARTICIPATION)	58
5.4 ADVOCACY AND CHILD ACTIVISM	59
5.5 FURTHER TRAINING	59
5.6 PARTICIPATORY INSTITUTIONS	59
5.7 MONITORING AND EVALUATION	60
5.8 UNDERPINNING THEORY	60
5.9 OTHER	60
<b>ANNEX 1: THE NINE BASIC REQUIREMENTS FOR EFFECTIVE AND ETHICAL PARTICIPATION: THE IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE</b>	<b>63</b>
<b>ANNEX 2: PRODUCING ACCESSIBLE INFORMATION: GUIDANCE</b>	<b>67</b>
<b>ANNEX 3: ENSURING SAFETY AND WELL-BEING: A CHECKLIST</b>	<b>68</b>
<b>ANNEX 4: CHALLENGING DISCRIMINATION: IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE</b>	<b>70</b>
<b>ANNEX 5 EXPLAINING CHILDREN'S ROLE IN MEETINGS AND PROCEEDINGS: A CHECKLIST</b>	<b>71</b>
<b>ANNEX 6: COMMUNICATING WITH CHILDREN: A CHECKLIST</b>	<b>72</b>
<b>ANNEX 7: PREPARING FOR COLLECTIVE PARTICIPATION: KEY QUESTIONS CONSIDER</b>	<b>73</b>
<b>ANNEX 8: SUPPORTING FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND ASSOCIATION: A CHECKLIST</b>	<b>74</b>

## PREFACE

---

**T**he old expression “*children should be seen and not heard*” suggests that, not that long ago, children’s opinions and wishes were not welcomed or valued. Important discussions had to be left to adults. Today, thanks to the amazing work of children and their advocates and efforts by many organisations supporting child participation, we know that children are not only capable of understanding complex situations, they are also able to trigger important actions and movements to improve the world. In 2014, Malala Yousafzai became the first child to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize recognising her unique contribution to the girls’ education cause against all odds. Although children’s participation is not new, this milestone in the recognition of the value of child participation and Malala’s story must inspire us to work harder to embed meaningful and safe child participation in our work and decisions, in particular if they directly affect children.

■ As readers of this Handbook and professionals working with or for children, you certainly already know the high value of listening to children and acting on their ideas. Children’s participation brings many benefits to individuals and society. But beyond that, it is important to acknowledge that hearing children’s voices and taking their views into account is not optional. It is both a child’s human right and an expression of democracy. It is therefore high time to step up the implementation of children’s participation rights.

■ Since coming into force over 30 years ago, Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child has affirmed children’s right to express their views on all matters that affect them, and to have these properly taken into account. The Council of Europe’s Recommendation CM/ Rec(2012)2 on the participation of children and young people under the age of 18 sought to make this right real and concrete in the member states of the Council of Europe. Our Organisation has also made major strides in embedding child participation in its work by ensuring that children can influence its standard-setting, monitoring and capacity building work and by bringing their impactful voices and powerful messages at its international events. The consecutive Council of Europe Strategies for the Rights of the Child have thrust forward actions to promote the participation of children in all settings. This Handbook therefore represents a substantive contribution to the current Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2016 to 2021).

■ This Handbook is for you: professionals of various backgrounds and training, working with or/and for children and directly or indirectly impacting their lives, in different settings. I trust you will feel inspired and will join the movement by taking bold steps to promote and practice child participation. Our aging society must make room for a committed and dynamic youth. The best way to make this happen is to safeguard children’s rights and start shaping the future for and with children.

**Snežana SAMARDŽIĆ-MARKOVIĆ**

Director General of Democracy, Council of Europe





## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

---

**T**his Handbook was produced by the Children's Rights Division of the Council of Europe and was written by Anne Crowley, Cath Larkins and Luis Manuel Pinto of the Centre for Children and Young People's Participation at the University of Central Lancashire. Extended thanks go to the 120 children, young people and adults who contributed their ideas to creating this Handbook in a very short timescale. Our gratitude also goes to the thousands of children, young people, family and community members, and professionals across Europe who have contributed to our learning over the past 30 years of participatory practice with children. We have tried to do justice to everything you have taught us.



## HOW TO USE THE HANDBOOK

---

**T**his Handbook is for people who work with children in a professional capacity in schools and other education settings, hospitals and other health care settings, alternative care settings, child protection services, immigration and asylum, family support and pre-school services. It is for social workers, teachers, judges, lawyers, immigration officers, psychologists, civil servants, youth workers and day care workers. The aim of the Handbook is to assist these – and other – professionals in understanding and supporting children's right to be heard. It offers practical approaches to support professionals to “do” children's participation and make it work. It explains what the term “children's participation” means and demonstrates how professionals can support the children they work with – both as individuals and as groups – to participate in decisions that affect them. The Handbook promotes an approach which has at its core a process that establishes dialogue between the adult professionals and children, an approach which enhances accessibility for all children including, amongst others, young children, children with disabilities, Roma and migrant children.

■ Ideally this Handbook should be read as a whole. However, sections may also be read and used independently. Understanding Section 1 makes it easier to apply the practical advice that comes in the remainder of the Handbook. This is the focus of different sections:

- ▶ Section 1: Understanding children's participation as a process: exploring this in theory and in practice contexts.
- ▶ Section 2: Creating enabling environments and listening institutions or systems in health, education, criminal justice, immigration and all other public services that impact on children's lives.
- ▶ Section 3: Supporting the participation of children as individuals.
- ▶ Section 4: Supporting the participation of children in groups.
- ▶ Section 5: List of useful resources

■ Sections contain selected illustrative ‘examples’ from practice and a number of ‘practice notes’ which provide advice for professionals navigating the practicalities of children's participation. ‘Checklists’ for professionals working with children are presented, both in the body of the Handbook and in the Annexes (for ease of copying and downloading). These checklists are designed to give professionals a quick overview of the most important considerations, for example when they are developing a culture of listening in an ‘alternative care’ institution or explaining to children their role in meetings or proceedings. Each section concludes with a set of ‘Hints and Tips’. The Handbook also regularly refers to the results of a survey specifically carried out for its preparation; in total, 120 replies were collected, including those of more than 50 children, but also from young people and adults.



## SECTION 1

# UNDERSTANDING CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

**T**his section of the Handbook will help professionals who work in education, health, alternative care, child protection, immigration and asylum, family support and pre-school services to understand what is meant by the term “children’s participation” and the important role they can play in taking children’s views into account in decisions. The section explains the principles and concepts that inform the practice, process, quality and forms of meaningful, ethical and sustainable participation. Read about:

- ▶ 1.1 Children’s right to be heard in matters that affect them
- ▶ 1.2 Why is children’s participation so important?
- ▶ 1.3 The process of children’s participation – what’s involved?
- ▶ 1.4 Influence in the children’s participation process
- ▶ 1.5 Doing it well – safe, ethical, inclusive and impactful participation
- ▶ 1.6 Enabling environments

## 1.1 CHILDREN’S RIGHT TO BE HEARD IN MATTERS THAT AFFECT THEM

— The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1989, includes the right for children to have their opinions taken into account in matters that affect them. The provision, outlined in Article 12 of the Convention, states that:

- 1. States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.*
- 2. For this purpose the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law.*

— Article 12 introduced into international human rights law for the first time, recognition of children’s entitlement and capacity to influence actions and decisions that affect him or her. It introduces an obligation to transform the status of children in relation to adults both at the individual and the collective levels. It challenges the idea that children are simply objects of adult protection. Children are citizens of the present and the future, with rights and capacities to influence decisions about their lives and concerns.

— The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) conceptualises participation as related to Article 12 and rights to information (Article 17) and freedom of expression, religion, conscience, assembly and association (Article 13 and Article 15). The term participation is very widely used as shorthand to describe children’s right to involvement in decisions and actions that affect them and to have their views taken into account by decision makers. These articles, particularly Article 13, also provide support for children’s participation in activism. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child guidance on children’s participation (known as *UN General Comment 12*) states:

*Freedom of expression [Article 13] relates to the right to hold and express opinions, and to seek and receive information through any media. It asserts the right of the child not to be restricted by the State party in the opinions she or he holds or expresses. As such, the obligation it imposes on States Parties is to refrain from interference in the expression of those views, or in access to information, while protecting the right of access to means of communication and public dialogue.*

■ The Council of Europe Committee of Ministers adopted Recommendation CM/Rec (2012)2 on the participation of children and young people under the age of 18 (referred to hereon as *The Recommendation on Participation*). The Committee of Ministers elaborates recommendations which provide guidance for policies that governments are encouraged to implement on the national level. The existence of this recommendation indicates the significance member states attach to children's participation, and points to the need for action to promote greater awareness and improved practice. *The Recommendation on Participation* defines participation as:

*Individuals or groups of children having the right, the means, the space, the opportunity and, where necessary, the support to freely express their views, to be heard and to contribute to decision making on matters affecting them, their views being given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity.*

■ *The Recommendation on Participation* was developed following comprehensive reviews of the practice of children's participation in a number of member states and with the direct involvement of children in the work of the drafting Committee. It covers the rights of children and young people to be heard in all settings, including in schools, in communities and in the family as well as at the national and European level. The present Handbook is also meant to contribute, in a very practical manner, to closing remaining gaps between *The Recommendation on Participation* and levels of implementation in different Council of Europe member states.

■ The Council of Europe standards in other relevant areas such as child-friendly justice and child-friendly social services contain guidelines for member states and for the many different professionals working with children on implementing the rights of individual children to be heard in judicial and administrative proceedings. These standards are further considered in *Section 3* of the Handbook focused on the rights of individual children.

■ The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has emphasised that a number of different dimensions are essential to understanding the meaning and scope of Article 12. These are summarised in Figure 1 below:

**Figure 1: Dimensions of children's participation**

DIMENSION	EXPLANATION
<b>Universal dimension of participation</b>	
It applies to all children without discrimination of any kind	Participation is a right for all children. Efforts must be made to include more marginalised children including, for example, children who are girls, disabled, from indigenous or minority ethnic groups, on the move, working or LGBTQI.
It is both an end and a means	All individuals are entitled to be involved in decisions that affect them as a matter of human dignity and respect. Participation is also a means of realising other rights. For example, rights to justice require that children are heard.
It applies to children as individuals and as a group	Children are entitled to have their views taken into account in individual matters, for example in schools or care proceedings, and in decisions affecting them collectively, such as local or national policies or use of resources.
It applies to all matters affecting children	Participation rights apply not only to issues often linked to childhood, such as education or health, but also to wider issues, such as the environment, transport, or immigration.
<b>Multiple dimensions of participation</b>	
It requires different forms for different contexts	Participation rights apply equally to all ages. The way in which children participate will differ according to things like their interests, ages and abilities, and will require different environments, levels of support, and forms of information.
It encompasses different approaches and means	Participation can take place online or offline, directly and indirectly. Participation can span consultation, adolescent or child-led movements, and all activities in between.

## Power and responsibility dimensions of participation

It does not contradict the right to protection	Children are entitled to all the protections in the CRC. The right to participation must be realised in accordance with those protections. Protection benefits from participation.
It differs from adult participation	Children have different legal statuses to most adults and do not have freedom to take all decisions on their own. Support by adults is often required, depending on age, competencies and context. Adults must promote children's best interests.
It promotes empowerment	Participation provides opportunities to acquire additional knowledge, skills, confidence and experiences. Participation promotes children's rights and increases civic engagement. To remove the barriers to children's empowerment necessitates a change in adult attitudes and control of resources.
It is a right not an obligation	Children are entitled to choose whether or not to express their views or participate in decision making on issues that affect them or their communities. Some children, like many adults, will not choose to participate. They should never be compelled or pressured to do so against their will.

Adapted from: UNICEF (2018) [Conceptual Framework for Measuring Outcomes of Adolescent Participation](#).

## 1.2 WHY IS CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION SO IMPORTANT?

— The right to participate is important not only as a right and a general principle but also because taking children's views into account in decisions and actions that affect them brings significant immediate and long-term benefits for children and communities, including:

- ▶ **Improved lives, services and policies:** Children have unique knowledge about their lives, needs and concerns. Using this knowledge, their ideas and views can lead to more effective, relevant and sustainable public services, improved individual decisions for children, and enhanced fulfilment of children's individual and collective rights.
- ▶ **Enhanced protection:** Having both the right and the space to be heard in safety acts as a powerful means through which to challenge situations of violence, abuse, threat, injustice or discrimination. Building a culture and mechanisms that promote and enable speaking out will enable children to challenge and expose violations of their rights. Adults can only act to protect children if they know what is happening in their lives – and often, it is only children who can provide that information.
- ▶ **Capacity development:** Meaningful participation enables children and professionals to acquire skills, build competencies and extend aspirations. Participation promotes children's capacities for civic engagement and respect for others and professionals' capacity to understand concerns of the people they are working with and for.
- ▶ **Contributing to communities:** Children make major contributions to the communities in which they live. Their energies, skills, aspirations, creativity and passion can strengthen democratic discourse, challenge injustice, build civil society, peace and non-violent conflict resolution, and develop innovative solutions to long standing inequalities.
- ▶ **Greater accountability:** Participation strengthens accountability. Creating institutions and systems where children's views have to be taken into account contributes to creating systems where people in power can be held to account if they fail to meet their commitments. This enhances children's confidence in the system.

## 1.3 THE PROCESS OF CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION – WHAT'S INVOLVED?

— *The Recommendation on Participation* states that 'If participation is to be effective, meaningful and sustainable, it needs to be understood as a process and not a one-off event and requires ongoing commitment in terms of time and resources'.

— *The Recommendation on Participation* and *UN General Comment 12* make it clear that it is not enough simply to listen to children. It is also necessary to seriously consider their views and take what they say into account in any subsequent action. Different models have been developed to put this idea into practice.

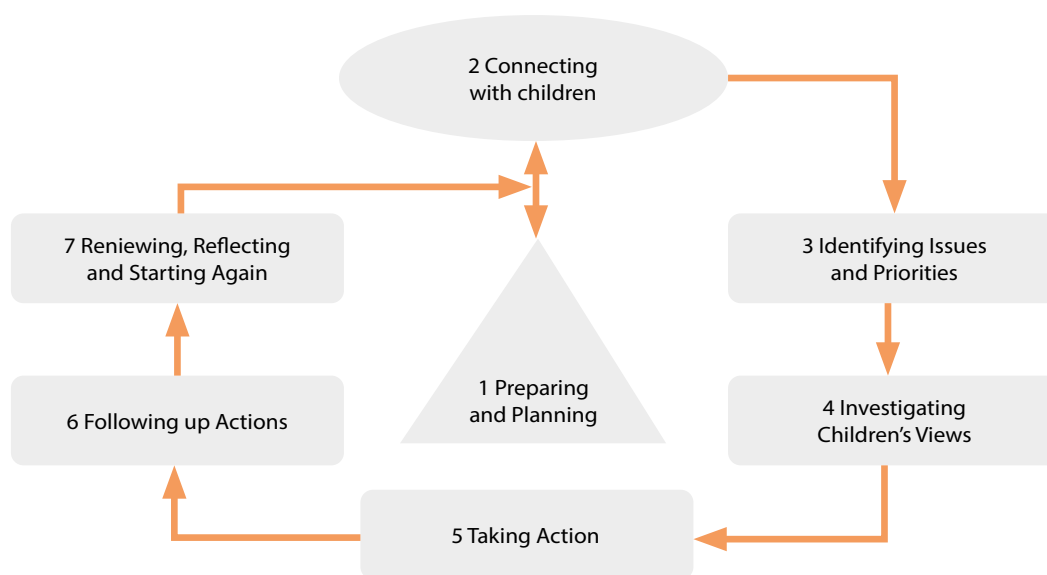


— Meaningful participation has been usefully conceptualised in the ‘Lundy model of child participation’ as including aspects of **Space, Voice, Audience and Influence** (see reference [Section 5.8, underpinning theory](#)):

<p><b>Space:</b> In order to become increasingly active in influencing matters affecting them, children need to be able to form and express views and they must be afforded the space and time to do so. They must be given the opportunity to gain the confidence, the time and a “safe and inclusive space” to contribute their views.</p>	<p><b>Voice:</b> Appropriate and accessible information is an important pre-requisite for the ability to speak out and express views and negotiate decisions. Adults have a responsibility to find ways in which to enable children to communicate their views, concerns or ideas.</p>
<p><b>Audience:</b> Central to the right to participate is that adults listen respectfully to what children have to say. The right to express views and have them given due weight can only be realised if children’s views are heard by those people with the power and authority to act on those views.</p>	<p><b>Influence:</b> The right to participate does not automatically lead to children’s views being followed, in all circumstances and in every respect. However, it requires that their views are given proper consideration and that any subsequent decision is reported back to children with an explanation of how their views had an influence, and why the decision was made.</p>

— *The Recommendation on Participation* and *UN General Comment 12* also makes it clear that children’s participation is not a one-off event. Participation is a rolling process and does not stop with children’s views being expressed and then passed on to the right audiences, it involves adults and children co-producing influence and change at every level. Understanding participation in this way encourages children and adults to work together to put ideas of Space, Voice, Audience and Influence into action. Child participation involves repeated cycles of: planning and preparing, connecting with children; identifying goals and priorities; investigating ideas; taking action; following up action; reviewing and sharing outcomes (see Figure 2; and [Larkins, C. \(2019\)](#)).

**Figure 2: Participation as a rolling process that produces change**



— In each of these seven stages it is important to think about the quality of participation on offer and the forms of influence that children can achieve.



## 1.4 INFLUENCE IN PARTICIPATION PROCESSES

— In each stage of rolling participation processes (preparation, connecting, identifying priorities, investigating, taking action, following up, reviewing and starting again) different forms of influence can be available to children. The achievable influence will depend on context, goals, time, resources and children's own wishes for the process. In some stages, children may be consulted whereas in others they may take the lead.

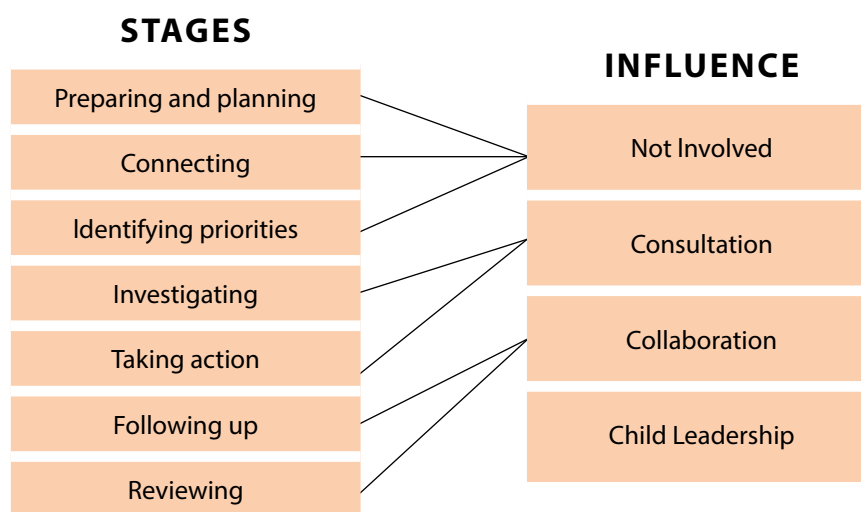
— Thinking about the following levels of influence, can help identify the extent to which children are being involved or taking a lead in participation processes:

- ▶ **Consultative participation:** with this approach adults seek the views of a group of children, then work with these results in a way that is being made transparent to the children.
- ▶ **Collaborative participation:** this approach offers a greater degree of partnership between adults and children. It arises when adults, having identified an issue that needs to be addressed, involve children in helping to work out what needs to be done and how.
- ▶ **Child-led participation:** with this approach children are provided with the space and opportunity to pursue their own agendas, initiate their own activities and carry out advocacy.

— Participation processes that begin as consultative can become more collaborative as both children and adults gain in confidence and understanding. Rather than thinking about participation as a ladder, it is therefore helpful to think about participation as a lattice. Opportunities to increase influence can occur in each stage and cycle of participation processes. Over time the tendency should be towards greater direct decision making by children.

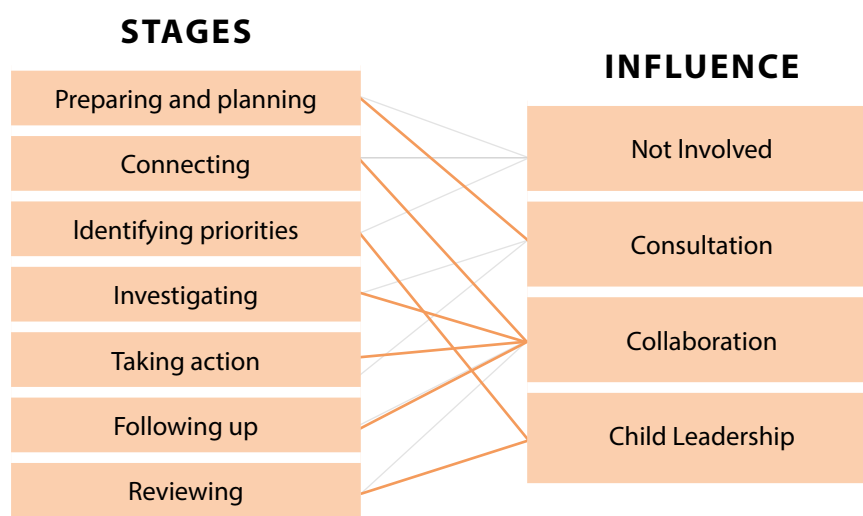
— For example, Figure 3 shows typical progress from non-involvement to collaboration through a practical example. Without involving children, a head teacher decided children should be consulted on improving school transport. To investigate, she asked staff to write a survey asking children in the school for ideas. The head presented these ideas to the school governors and children's school council. In a more collaborative step, the governors then took follow-up action to change the bus company asking for the children's school council to support their decision. Together, they fed back to all children in the school and, when reviewing the process, they agreed for more leadership for children in the next cycle.

**Figure 3: A first Lattice of Children's Participation**



— Taking this example through a second phase (see Figure 4 in green), the school council were asked how children should be involved in choosing the new bus company. The school councillors collaborated with staff to design an invitation for new bus companies to tender for the work, they identified the priority skills that bus drivers should have and some children were part of a panel interviewing possible providers. The head teacher then wrote about the decision in the school newsletter, to feedback to all children (and parents). Separately, the school councillors discussed the two phases of this participation process and decided that children's influence within the school was increasing.

Figure 4: A second phase Lattice of Children's Participation



Professionals should explore the opportunities for and benefits of different approaches at different times. A genuinely participatory environment requires far more than the establishment of a formal school council or a service-user group. It involves creating safe, ethical and inclusive participatory environments and supporting wider opportunities for children's leadership, influence and impact.

## 1.5 DOING IT WELL – SAFE, ETHICAL, INCLUSIVE AND IMPACTFUL PARTICIPATION

To ensure that children's participation is safe, ethical, inclusive and impactful, *UN General Comment 12* identifies nine basic requirements, according to which participation needs to be:

- ▶ **Transparent and informative:** children must be provided with full, accessible, diversity-sensitive and age-appropriate information about their right to express their views freely and for their views to be given due weight, and about how this participation will take place, its scope, purpose and potential impact.
- ▶ **Voluntary:** children should never be coerced into expressing views against their wishes and they should be informed that they can cease involvement at any stage. For example, a decision to join a school council must be the choice of the child (see *practice note below*).
- ▶ **Respectful:** children must be listened to, taken seriously and their views treated with respect.
- ▶ **Relevant:** opportunities must be available for children to express their views on issues of real relevance to their lives and enable them to draw on their knowledge, skills and abilities, and children should be provided with opportunities to initiate ideas and activities.
- ▶ **Child-friendly environments and working methods:** approaches to working with children should be adapted to their capacities. Adequate time and resources should be made available to ensure that children are adequately prepared and have the confidence and opportunity to contribute their views. Consideration needs to be given to the fact that children will need differing levels of support and forms of involvement according to their age and evolving capacities.
- ▶ **Inclusive:** participation must be inclusive, avoid existing patterns of discrimination, and encourage opportunities for all children, including both girls and boys, to be involved. No assumptions should be made about what specific groups of children can and cannot do. Children must have an equal opportunity to voice their opinions and have their contributions reflected (*Annex 4* contains advice for professionals on inclusive practice).
- ▶ **Supported by training:** teachers and other adults need preparation, skills and support to facilitate children's participation effectively, to provide them, for example, with skills in listening, working jointly with children and engaging them effectively in accordance with their evolving capacities.

- ▶ **Safe and sensitive to risk:** in certain situations, expression of views may involve risks. Children should feel confident that they can criticise or challenge any aspect of the services they receive without incurring punishment or retribution. Adults have a responsibility towards the children with whom they work. They must take every precaution to minimise, for children participants, the risk of violence, exploitation or any other negative consequence of their participation. Staff need to recognise their legal and ethical obligations and responsibilities, for example, in respect of their own behaviour or what to do if they are told about the inappropriate behaviour of others and there needs to be a system for reporting any incidents of abuse. Activities will need to be risk assessed and steps taken to minimise any identified risks to children, as far as possible (see [Annex 3](#) – safeguarding checklist for organising events and activities).
- ▶ **Accountable:** following up and acting on any proposals by children is essential. It increases the impact of children's participation and respect for their rights. Children are entitled to be provided with clear feedback on how their participation has influenced any outcomes. Wherever appropriate, children should be given the opportunity to participate in follow-up processes or activities. Mechanisms are needed to enable children to make complaints and seek redress. Monitoring and evaluation of participation needs to be undertaken, where possible with children themselves.

■ A more detailed description on what each of these nine requirements means for practice is included in [Annex 1](#) of this Handbook.



#### PRACTICE NOTE

### Consent and child protection

Participation is voluntary. It is important that children know that they have the right to choose not to participate or to make an active choice to get involved. Children should be invited to sign a consent form and have time to discuss what this means before the participation starts. They should be advised that they can withdraw their consent at any time.

In some circumstances (for example for children under 16 years of age) you may also need to gain permission from parents or legal guardians who will need similar information. When inviting children to participate you should make sure that they get good information on:

- the subject
- what you are doing and why - the background
- what you will do with the information you receive
- confidentiality and anonymity
- when and how they will get feedback on how their views have been taken into account.

Sometimes children, when meeting in a group or in a safe place, use the opportunity to talk about concerns they have about themselves or others. To protect children there may be times when confidentiality will need to be broken for example, if someone's life is in immediate danger. Organisational child protection procedures and fully integrated child safeguarding policies must provide the framework for these circumstances, identifying roles for reporting concerns and supporting children, and providing clear information about this to adults and children. Children should be given clear information about who they can talk to about any concerns and be encouraged to get support from someone they trust. Professionals should tell children about the circumstances in which confidentiality could be broken, what sort of information would have to be passed on and how they might be able to make choices about how this is done.

## 1.6 ENABLING ENVIRONMENTS

Key measures for enabling participatory environments are described in the *The Recommendation on Participation*:

### A. Establishing the legal and policy environment

Legal standards and practices are needed to ensure a conducive and protective environment, enabling children to participate in an atmosphere of mutual respect, trust and understanding. Establishing legal rights, incorporating them into policies and providing the necessary budgetary support will contribute to the creation of an environment in which participation becomes institutionalised and culturally embedded for all children, rather than simply a series of short-term, one-off activities. Head teachers may want to consider establishing policies and procedures in their school ensuring that children have a right to be heard in any exclusion hearings. Social workers in many countries will be required by national laws to listen to the child's wishes and feelings before making decisions such as where a child will live or go to school. In some member states children affected by divorce have a right in law to have their interests represented by an independent person appointed by the family court.

### B. Promoting awareness of the right to participate

Children have to be made aware of their participation rights and how they might be used in the particular institution, process or system. Child rights education should be embedded in the school curricula. Children should be supported by all professionals to build their skills and confidence in speaking out. Schools, hospitals, health care clinics, day care centres, courts and refugee centres should provide information about participation opportunities to children in a language and format they can understand. For example, children on the move (see example below) will need various elements of information at different times.

All professionals working with children also need training on children's participation rights at pre- and in-service levels. This should enable them to understand the implications for their individual practice, the institutions or systems within which they work, as well as the public policies that impact on the lives of children with whom they work. For example, when a court is bringing in new organisational policies to improve children's participation in proceedings, provide training on the competences required to all relevant court professionals (judges, prosecutors, barristers etc.) and court users. Professionals working with children should advise parents and children that children have rights, including the right to be heard, and help them think through the implications. Health visitors, teachers, day care workers, doctors - for example - can take on this role in their regular interactions with parents and children.



#### EXAMPLE

### Increasing awareness of rights for children on the move

In the Balkans, Save the Children established mobile teams to work with refugee and migrant children and families at different entry and exits points between countries and in transit centres. One of the roles of these teams was to provide them with verbal information, in their own languages, about how they could voice concerns and to support opportunities for girls and boys on the move to express their views. This highlights how children on the move can be supported to participate through:

- 'Listening points' that provide opportunities for children on the move, to help them build on their positive coping strategies and support them in accessing services, care and protection.
- Consultations with girls and boys of different ages (in camps, transit centres, street settings), that seek their views to inform programme design, monitoring, evaluation and learning.
- Hearing individual children's views and carefully considering these in decisions affecting them, especially in child protection case management.
- Strengthening children's informal social networks and supporting children's groups and associations in refugee and IDP camps, in street settings, and in other transit communities.
- Sharing information and training girls and boys (in different age groups) about child rights, protection, gender equality, life skills in drop-in centres, child- and youth-friendly spaces, and other settings.

- Supporting girls and boys to organise their own child-led awareness, action and advocacy initiatives, to participate in community-based child protection mechanisms, to conduct participatory action research and to take part in sub-national, national, regional, and global policy and practice processes affecting them.

For more information: [Save the Children \(2018\) Children on the Move Programme Guide](#) and [The Council of Europe Handbook on access to rights, child-friendly information and procedures for children in migration](#)

### C. Creating opportunities for participation

Children must be provided with time and opportunities for their opinions to be heard and to be able to influence decisions and actions affecting them. This requires more than one-off consultations. It necessitates the ‘institutionalising’ of opportunities for individual and groups of children to be heard in, for example, their home, schools, local communities, health care, child protection, workplaces, and judicial systems and national processes. It also requires support for the children to organise, identify issues of concern to them and gain access to relevant policy makers. Opportunities to undertake research, develop strategies for action, provide mutual support and campaign and advocate for change, both online and through more traditional routes are also needed.

Schools, hospitals, police stations and all public services should create feedback mechanisms through which children can share their concerns, experiences and ideas for improving the service and access. This could, for example, be done with a simple website or App on a smart phone (see the following example) but should also involve more traditional paths.



#### EXAMPLE

#### Government youth portal for children

In Germany, the federal government has created a youth portal with child-friendly information enabling direct dialogue between children and politicians. Founded in 2005, it gives children from age 12 opportunities to know what the current political issues are, undertake research, develop strategies for action, provide mutual support and campaign and advocate for change. For more information: [www.mitmischen.de](http://www.mitmischen.de)



#### HINTS AND TIPS

#### Getting started

In writing this Handbook we consulted with over 120 children and adults from across Europe, and they gave advice on how to step up to some of the challenges that we all face when trying to make children's participation impactful and inclusive. Reflecting on participation to identify the challenges we face and seeking advice from other experienced people (including children) is always an essential part of the process. Here are some hints and tips to get you started:

- Build networks and links and encourage partner organisations to be supportive of children's efforts to influence decision making.
- Start with smaller scale efforts and build up the evidence base, refine approaches and plan the next stage.
- Resources are required to practice effective, quality and ethical participation but with skilled facilitators much can be achieved on a small budget. Learn from experience, developing participatory practice as and when resources and confidence allow.
- Ensure sufficient time is available to prepare and support children to engage.
- Reach out to children from a range of different backgrounds and remove barriers. Children, like adults are all very different and like to take part in things in a variety of ways. Trialling and reviewing a number of different methods and approaches and working with children themselves is the best advice.
- Use a variety of methods to reach out to children and invite them to participate.
- Take advice from children about how to contact their peers and involve them in the process.
- Review your practice at regular intervals with children and with co-workers and learn as you go along.





## SECTION 2

# DEVELOPING PARTICIPATORY ORGANISATIONS AND ENVIRONMENTS

**T**his section focuses on the organisations or systems within which professionals work – for example, schools, early childhood education centres, hospitals, health clinics, offices, justice and child protection systems. It explores how organisations and systems can be adapted or changed to create more respectful spaces for children to be able to express their views with trust and confidence and how to strengthen capacity for participation. The aim is to integrate children's participation into everyday decision making for individual children and into the functioning and management of organisations or systems. This is achieved through establishing high-quality, rolling, rights-based participation processes throughout the organisation including representative structures such as school councils, patient and service user forums.

Professionals can take a series of steps to help co-create with children, an environment where meaningful, ethical and effective participation can thrive:

- ▶ 2.1 Ensuring ownership at the highest level
- ▶ 2.2 Undertaking an assessment of current play
- ▶ 2.3 Developing organisational policy and procedures
- ▶ 2.4 Building staff capacity
- ▶ 2.5 Establishing safe and accessible complaints mechanisms
- ▶ 2.6 Monitoring and reviewing implementation

## 2.1 ENSURING OWNERSHIP AT THE HIGHEST LEVEL

The first step of each participatory process is to secure a commitment to designing policies and services around the needs and rights of children and young people, giving them a real say and real choices about the institution or agencies policies and services that affect them. Teachers, social workers, health care workers, psychologists, court welfare officers, lawyers, judges, and politicians who want to improve the scope and practice of children's participation in their organisation or agency should seek allies (including wherever possible children and senior professionals) and build networks. Professionals should involve these allies in re-examining how resources for children's participation can be reallocated so that participation processes that cater for the needs of all children can be supported. Developing the infrastructure and building organisational capacity needs time, commitment, sufficient staff support and an undertaking to adopt an organisational learning approach. For the most part, change of culture is needed as much as resources and it is important that senior managers feel part of this and lead by example. Conversations and dialogue (see example below) between children and senior managers or ministers can create understanding and impetus for this kind of change.

Professionals wanting to drive children's participation within their agency or institution, the so-called 'champions' of children's participation (see example overleaf) should prepare information that illustrates the benefits of children's participation and highlights the legal and policy obligations to enable it. They should provide senior managers with advice on some easy first steps to be taken and then follow up this progress with further advice as set out in this section of the handbook. The *checklists* at the end of section 2 illustrate in two different settings, the key elements of a child-friendly and participatory institution.



### EXAMPLE

#### Conversations and dialogue with government ministers

In Finland, a hundred children (aged 5-17) from across the country took over the Government Palace on 20 November 2019 and worked with 15 ministers and 40 officials for three hours. They attended workshops about social media, global warming, good living standards and prepared a statement called "Children's Will". The statement was given to the Chancellor of Justice and Deputy Chancellor of Justice and it was discussed in a government meeting called "evening school" which is a non-formal working meeting organised once per week.

The issues raised by the children were taken into consideration in several places afterwards. For example, the Minister of Family Affairs and Social Services raised the children's wish for a low threshold for access to mental health services. The issues raised by the children were promoted in development of the upcoming National Child Strategy. The event also helped a lot of decision makers realize they can actually work with children and young people and that children have important perspectives and considerations. This may act as an incentive to take children's inclusion into account more in the future.

See <https://www.lskl.fi/blogi/lasten-tahto-politiikan-tulisi-olla-vuorovaikutusta-ja-kuuntelua/>

## 2.2 UNDERTAKING AN ASSESSMENT OF THE CURRENT STATE OF PLAY

Creating participatory environments requires a strategic approach responsive to the local factors such as the political environment, administrative structures, population size and available resources. The current situation of children's participation needs to be assessed to identify good practice and areas for improvement. Children should be involved in such an assessment. The *Council of Europe's Children's Participation Assessment Tool (CPAT)* provides governments with advice on guidance on how to undertake a self-assessment of policy and practice against provision in *The Recommendation on Participation*.

Professionals leading the change should work with all stakeholders (including the affected children) to define specific objectives for the different participation activities to be undertaken (for example, service user forums, designing complaints procedures). These should cover objectives for the inclusion of diverse groups of children, and objectives for outcomes (for example, the impact on children's lives, on professional understanding and practice, on policy, planning and law, and on public attitudes). This will help clarify thinking and ensure a shared understanding between children, staff and partner organisations. Anticipate that children's priorities may differ to professionals.



### EXAMPLE

#### Child participation assessment tool (CPAT)

The Council of Europe's [Child Participation Assessment Tool](#) provides a framework for 10 indicators against which member states assess policy and practice in respect of *The Recommendation on Participation*. Member states gather information from children, professionals working with children and government departments. The assessment highlights areas requiring attention and plans further action. Feedback on assessments using the Tool, undertaken by around 10 member States (as of May 2020), indicates that the process itself contributes to greater awareness of the meaning and significance of children's participation; increases interest in strengthening participation opportunities; and highlights gaps in current law, policy and implementation. Elements of the Tool can help frame assessments of practice at an organisational level or in a specific context. For example, Indicator 7 describes information measures that should be in place in children's homes, schools, hospitals and other places working with children.

#### **Indicator 7: Children are provided with information about their right to participate in decision making**

Government departments and those delivering key services to children are required to produce information on children and young people's rights to participate including, for example, information on complaints mechanisms, legal processes and opportunities to participate in their own organisations and in decision-making or planning processes. Information available in child friendly formats, including through social media networks, should be accessible to children of different ages and abilities. It should be made available in arenas that are accessed by children such as specialised websites or helplines. Education on children's rights, including the right to participate, is a mandatory component of school curricula. Public information and education programmes (ideally as part of a national strategy) are in place to raise awareness among the general public, children, young people, parents and professionals, of children's right to participate, including the right to form or be part of children or young people's organisations.



## 2.3 DEVELOPING AN ORGANISATIONAL POLICY AND PROCEDURES

Participatory ways of working need to be informed by organisational policies and procedures, developed in partnership with children. The policies and procedures will need to enshrine practice which enables and ensures that children can share their views, professionals can take these into account, and that inclusion is promoted. The comprehensive policy developed by Eurochild on children's participation within their own network provides a useful model to consider.



### EXAMPLE

#### Eurochild children's participation strategy

Eurochild have developed an exemplary policy on children's participation contained within their [children's participation strategy](#). It was co-created with children. The strategy sets out an overall mission and policy for involving children in different aspects of Eurochild's work and supporting child-led activities, including influencing activities, campaigns, strategic planning and events. It describes the role of Eurochild's Children's Council (ECC), and National Eurochild Forums (NEFs) as well as operational rules and arrangements for recognition and evaluation. Children continue to be involved in development of the policy through regular monitoring and reviews.

Participation requires the development of relationships with children that are rooted in mutual trust and respect. Policies and procedures that organisations adopt should therefore promote the conditions which make positive interpersonal relationships with children possible. Children's involvement is then integral to daily practice, rather than an after-thought or an occasional tick box exercise and them making decisions about their own care, education or other aspects of their life is a rolling process.

Because creating participatory environments for children will challenge prevailing attitudes towards children, children's participation strategies need to contain mechanisms that check and review that legal obligations are being followed. Participation strategies should therefore explicitly require that the organisations demonstrate how they have taken children's views into account, that children can access complaints mechanisms if their rights to influence decisions are not implemented, and that monitoring, evaluation and review are written in, with provision for children to be involved in this.

Policies and procedures should enable the co-creation of a range of spaces and processes through which children can influence and take part in decision making and receive feedback. Professionals will need to think about how any children's structures (such as forums and advisory groups) can be best positioned within organisations in a sustainable manner, so they can influence adult decision-making arenas (such as management boards and tribunals). Those driving change should work to put in place mechanisms that ensure, within all settings, that children's views are presented in the relevant places and that they result in action. Professionals should consider how they can build clear and direct links between any new children's structures and corresponding adult ones, ensuring adults and children in the parallel structures know each other and work together.

### Spaces and processes

The ultimate aim is to develop good practice across the whole setting - a school, a health care clinic, an educational psychology service, or an alternative care home - and to institutionalise participation. In schools, for example, cultures of respect for children's views can be created by following a [Rights Respecting School](#) or [Reggio Emilia](#) style, child-centred learning approach. These movements start from a professional and institutional commitment to personalised learning with children understanding, through explanations and experience, that they can influence their own learning programmes. Using a variety of informal and formal spaces and activities at different steps of collective participation processes can increase the feeling of inclusion of everyone, in ways that suit their needs. For example, children in formal spaces can identify issues and views can be investigated by involving children in informal spaces. This can help formal spaces become more inclusive (see [Annex 4](#) on challenging unintended organisational discrimination). Figure 5 below lists some of the more common formal and informal spaces that could be part of participation processes.

Figure 5: Formal and informal participation spaces and activities

<p><b>Formal</b> spaces provide designated opportunities to involve children in governance and decision making:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▶ Dedicated mechanisms, including school councils, patient or service user fora</li><li>▶ One-off consultations and inquiries</li><li>▶ Regular group meetings</li><li>▶ Suggestion boxes</li><li>▶ Web-platforms</li><li>▶ Online feedback portals</li></ul>	<p><b>Informal</b> spaces are part of day-to-day child centred practice: they enable children to be listened to, as and when they feel it is appropriate. They inform decisions about personal care and services as a whole, and may include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▶ Spending time alongside children</li><li>▶ On-going dialogue</li><li>▶ Observation</li><li>▶ Listening to spontaneous communication</li></ul>
---	---

When creating and improving spaces and activities for children's participation think about the nine basic requirements for a safe, secure, inclusive and enjoyable experience for children (see [Annex 1](#), nine principles for effective and ethical participation and [Annex 3](#), checklist on safety and well-being).

Other organisational policies and procedures that professionals should consider as important for institutionalising participation practice across their organisation include:

- ▶ A set of quality standards or charters for services (developed in participation with children) to help ensure the participatory approach scales out to the whole organisation, establishing participation as the accepted way of working.
- ▶ Building participation into job description and including work on participation as part of staff induction and appraisals.
- ▶ Establishing *safe and accessible complaints mechanisms* (see 2.5).

Of course, policy is insufficient without also providing support and building the commitment and skills amongst staff to the new ways of working.



#### EXAMPLE

### Child-friendly Health Care

The Council of Europe [Recommendation on Child-Friendly Healthcare](#) contain standards in many areas, including children's participation, for example:

- Facilitating the implementation of the principle in Article 6 of the Oviedo Convention which states that as children's age or maturity evolve, their views should be increasingly taken into account in decisions about their own health.
- Founding all decisions regarding children's health on their best interests, in a process involving the children themselves and their families.
- Improving health education to empower children to make informed choices about healthy lifestyles.
- Consulting and involving children and, where appropriate, their families, in the planning, assessment and improvement of health care services.
- Facilitating the development of appropriate practical tools for health practitioners to implement the child-friendly health care approach.

In [some member states](#), this Recommendation is now being implemented. There are also national level standards, for example in Spain, a "[Child Friendly Hospitals](#)" status is awarded to settings which ensure that children have accessible information about their medical conditions. Having this information helps children take part in decisions about their day to day care and management of their conditions, as well as about medical procedures.

## 2.4 BUILDING STAFF CAPACITY

Staff in any organisation should be at the heart of any participation strategy and professionals will need to plan processes to build their capacity to work in new ways. To develop the knowledge, attitudes, skills and confidence of any team, identify and support mechanisms for:

- ▶ Providing training on child rights and children's participation.
- ▶ Ensuring all staff have sufficient time to actively listen to children.
- ▶ Involving staff in undertaking direct sessions/projects with children.
- ▶ Ensuring senior management take part in some participation activities.
- ▶ Organising shadowing opportunities for children within the institution/ organisation.
- ▶ Building links with parents and families.
- ▶ Identifying existing, and recruiting new, children's participation "champions" (see below).
- ▶ Involving children in delivering training and recruiting staff (see below).

### Training

---

*The Recommendation on Participation* urges member states to:

*enhance professional capacity concerning children and young people's participation among teachers, lawyers, judges, police, social workers, community workers, psychologists, caregivers, officials of community homes and prisons, health-care professionals, civil servants, immigration officials, religious leaders and members of the media as well as for leaders of children's and youth organisations.*

Where possible, children and young people themselves should be involved in this capacity building as trainers and experts. So, plan for how to involve children and young people in training, using [Section 4](#) as a guide for how to make this a participatory process and [Section 5](#) for useful resources.

Training for children and professionals should be developed on the basis of a training needs analysis. Organisations or institutions will have strengths in some areas and weaknesses in others. Professionals should consider all of the staff within the team or organisation and ask the following questions:

1. Do they have understanding of the concept of children's participation as set out in this Handbook and in the Council of Europe's *Recommendation on Participation* and the UN *General Comment 12*?
2. Does the training provided equip and assess staff in respect of attitudes as well as competencies and knowledge?
3. Which aspects of participatory processes have relevance for their role?
4. Is there new knowledge and skills that some staff need in order to fulfil their responsibilities?
5. Are there staff and children in contact with the organisation who could help provide relevant information and deliver training?
6. What is the necessary timescale for rolling out this training programme?
7. How will you know that the training has been successful?

### Champions of children's participation

---

'Champions' of children's participation can be adults or children who believe children's participation is and should be a powerful tool for improving practice, usually based on their own experiences, values and an understanding of how it works. These people can be real catalysts for change and any capacity building programme developed should aim to engage existing champions within the organisation and recruit new ones. Champions can be the "conscience" within an organisation, reminding others of the importance of involving children and providing support and confidence on how best to do it. They can bring new ways of thinking and working and help to create spaces to be innovative. They support change across the organisation, rather than being the only ones working in a participatory way. Key questions to consider include:

- ▶ Are there existing champions of children's participation in this organisation?
- ▶ What are their positions?
- ▶ How are they supported to network and promote their visions and knowledge?
- ▶ What are the best ways to create new champions within your organisation?

## Involving children in the recruitment and selection of staff

There are many examples of children participating in the recruitment and selection of staff or volunteers in health care, child protection, education and alternative care settings. Children can be involved at any stage - drawing up job descriptions and person specifications, shortlisting, as a member of a formal interview panel or other assessment centres. There are tried and tested methods and models, including the following:

- ▶ **A parallel children and young people's panel.** This creates unique opportunities for children and young people to plan, organise and facilitate their own involvement. They can have a lot of control over the format of the interview and their role within it.
- ▶ **A guided group discussion.** This brings together all of the candidates and asks them to either answer in turn or openly discuss a number of topics or statements relevant to the post or the children and young people they would be working with.
- ▶ **Mixed adult and young people panel.** This involves children sitting alongside adults, usually on a formal interview panel. Candidates should be made aware of the different roles of the panel members.

When involved in recruitment, children, like adults require training and support. Be clear about children's role, what specific aspects of the work or the person specification they will assess and the weighting their views will carry in the final selection. Weighting for different aspects of the person specification (for example, strategic planning and financial management or knowledge of young people's issues and skills in working with children) can vary between members of the recruitment panels.



### EXAMPLE

#### Child participation in the recruitment of an ombudsman

In Ireland, children were involved in the process aimed at recruiting the Ombudsman for Children in 2014/2015. After having been selected via school networks and with the support of civil society organisations, on the basis of a number of diversity criteria (gender, race, ability and socio-economic mix, including seldom heard children and young people), they were consulted according to two different age groups (primary school and older young people). The process was run by the competent ministerial service and involved age-appropriate methodologies. Children were not only consulted on the "ideal qualities" for the new Ombudsman, but some of them were actually selected to take part in the adult interview panel of the Ombudsman candidates. The process was judged to have been a satisfactory experience by most stakeholders and to represent an important collective learning experience.

Source: Department of Children and Youth Affairs, Ireland, August 2020.

## 2.5 SAFE AND CHILD FRIENDLY COMPLAINTS MECHANISMS

Children have the right to make a formal or informal complaint or challenge a decision of a court or other administrative proceeding. Support to make a complaint should be provided to children in all settings such as schools, day care centres, children's homes, hospitals or penal institutions. Children should have good access to relevant information and independent advocacy to help them use the procedures effectively. Children should be able to contact an ombudsman or a person in a comparable position in order to ensure complaints are heard outside of the setting which is causing a concern when necessary.

Having in place child-friendly complaints procedures prescribed by law is one of the 10 indicators the Council of Europe has developed in the [Child Participation Assessment Tool \(CPAT\)](#), to assist member states in assessing their progress towards full implementation of *The Recommendation on Participation*.

Child-friendly complaints procedures have the following elements:

- ▶ **They are safe and accessible.** For example, children are protected from any retribution. Experience illustrates how children need to feel safe and confident in the arrangements for dealing with their concerns and complaints before they will use them. There are positive examples of the pro-active approach required with children coming into alternative care, being advised that any complaint or concern will be heard and taken seriously and that it will be dealt with by an independent person.

- ▶ **Information and assistance are provided to children to enable them to lodge and pursue a complaint.** Many public services have procedures for dealing with customer complaints, but the information is often very technical. The survey undertaken for this Handbook highlighted examples of hospitals and schools producing accessible information about how to raise a concern and who can provide support with this.
- ▶ **Information is made available in age and disability appropriate formats.** Accessible information can be leaflets, brochures, posters for schools, and dedicated websites spread across locations where children are able to find them. One manager of a children's home explained that a poster explaining how the complaints procedure works was on the notice board at the home at all times with telephone numbers for children to contact in confidence. (See [Annex 2](#) of the Handbook for some advice on producing accessible information).
- ▶ **Follow-up, referral and response mechanisms are well-established.** To be effective these must demonstrate changes implemented in response to legitimate complaints.
- ▶ **Timely feedback is communicated directly to children.** Feedback should be in an accessible format. If deadlines are not adhered to, support children to challenge the delay and help get things moving (or find someone else who can).

UNICEF (2019) have developed a tool with detailed guidance on [Child-friendly complaint mechanisms](#), the principles to abide by, the key elements to be considered, the common issues and ways to overcome challenges, which also contains a number of examples from different countries.

## 2.6 MONITORING AND REVIEWING IMPLEMENTATION

Building participatory environments requires regular opportunities to reflect on practice, to review progress and to capture and share the learning and successes. On-going reflection and self-evaluation by staff and children can help increase access to the relevant *Spaces* and *Audience* as well as ensuring that children experience inclusive opportunities to *Voice* their views and *Influence* decisions ([see page 16](#), Section 1). Busy practitioners often find it difficult to stop and reflect on what they do. A participatory organisation or environment will have policies and practices that encourage and support staff to take time out to reflect and learn.

Developing a more participatory environment for children can be a big step for some organisations. For other organisations it may just mean a series of small steps forward from their existing practice. Whether the steps taken are to be big or small the staff and children involved need to know that it is safe to name any challenges that they have faced in changing institutional environments.

In addition to time, creating environments in which it is safe to name and reflect on challenges and successes requires a combination of reassurance, protection and anonymity. Protection and anonymity can be provided by ensuring that there are ways of passing on learning that are de-personalised, perhaps through suggestion boxes and group discussions without the presence of managers. But most importantly, reassurance must be provided by giving clear messages to children, their advocates and associated professionals, that this is a learning organisation. As we hope the Handbook makes clear, learning and finding effective ways of securing inclusive and impactful children's participation is an on-going process.



### CHECKLIST

#### A listening 'alternative care' institution

It is particularly important for alternative care settings to become "listening institutions". It can be hard to replicate positive and family style conversation and listening in more formal living institutions. Deliberate steps must be taken to ensure that the staff hear and take proper account of the children's views and respect their civil rights.

Useful advice on those deliberate steps for professionals working with children include:

- Listen to children, their wishes and the messages that they give about the way in which they take in any information.
- Ask children to comment, it helps them and the adults to evaluate if they have understood what has been discussed.
- Give children the chance to ask questions.
- Leave room for them to express their feelings and create opportunities for this.

- Show children positive reinforcement with encouragement and praise when they speak out.
- Communicate with children in simple language that is clear and comprehensible for them, depending upon their age and level of maturity.
- Use for this purpose tools such as drawings, photographs, the child's personal objects, toys including little dolls (or simple pieces of wood that stand for the key people in the child's life: mother, father, brother, sister, grandparents, themselves).

Children should participate in deciding layout and the decoration of rooms, including their own room and shared spaces. This should be done in a warm way that encourages living together. Space should be made for every child to have objects around them and space, however small it may be (a shelf, cupboard or part of a cupboard) for their personal use. Children should be involved in decisions about the food they eat, for example, children should help plan weekly menus. Children feel more able to express their views freely where there is not a sharp division between living space and offices, this can be achieved by workers spending most of their time in living spaces and taking part in shared activities with children.

[Securing Children's Rights: A guide to professionals working in alternative care](#)



## CHECKLIST

### A child-friendly and participatory classroom

No two classrooms will be exactly the same. However, the following list illustrates features associated with a classroom where children's right to be heard is fully respected:

- Students and teachers negotiate and agree a classroom code of conduct, agreement or charter expressed in terms of rights from the UN Convention.
- Students have regular opportunities to give their teachers feedback on what helps them learn, what they enjoy most and what hinders their learning.
- Students are fully involved in the assessment of their own learning and the evaluation of their own work; there is supportive evaluation of their peer's work.
- Students have responsibility for aspects of classroom organisation
- Students have opportunities to make choices in their learning
- There is a strong emphasis on mutual support and collaboration.
- Teachers make use of a wide variety of teaching strategies and routes to learning, recognising that students may differ in their preferences for how they learn.
- Behaviour is good or improving as everyone listens to each other and recognises and respects the rights of all to their education.

Teachers and teaching assistants listen positively to students' views and show respect for their opinions; they avoid put downs and sarcasm; they give clear reasons for use of sanctions; teachers avoid use of 'blanket' sanctions of the whole class when only individual students have misbehaved; teachers show respect for teaching assistants and all other adults.

- Students respect and value each other's similarities and differences and support each other; there are few incidences of negative behaviour, name calling, racist or sexist comments.
- High status and adequate time is given to listening and acting on students' views, individually and collectively, for example through the school council.

Adapted from: [Every child's right to be heard: A resource guide on the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child General Comment no.12 \(2011\)](#) published by UNICEF and Save the Children.



## HINTS AND TIPS

### **Making child participation work in the long term**

Developing a participatory environment is a long-term project, here are some hints and tips to get you started:

- Get senior managers involved as soon as possible.
- Establish objectives for inclusion and outcomes and review progress regularly.
- Take your colleagues along on this journey.
- Involve children in training on children's participation and staff development.
- Be creative in co-designing participatory spaces and processes with children and ensure children have more than just one way to get involved.
- Find and nurture other champions of children's participation.
- Take time to reflect on personal and organisational practice. Be open to making and learning from mistakes as well as successes.

Once participation is underway, the challenge is to sustain enthusiasm and momentum. Here are some ideas on motivating commitment within your organisation:

- Provide on-going training and discussion opportunities.
- Highlight benefits and gains to staff and the organisation.
- Celebrate achievements with staff and children.
- Provide professional rewards and incentives for people who demonstrate changed attitudes and practice: profiling their work, bonuses and promotion.
- Celebrate outside recognition (e.g. visitors, references, good project reputation, positive inspection or evaluation).
- Enter award schemes that recognise high standards of participation.







## SECTION 3

# SUPPORTING PARTICIPATION OF INDIVIDUAL CHILDREN

---

**T**his section of the Handbook focuses on the rights of **individual** children to have their views taken into account in day-to-day decision making, meetings, interviews, hearings and proceedings, for example in schools, early years centres, hospitals, health clinics, offices and justice or child protection systems. It includes guidance for professionals working with children on different approaches, methods and tools they can use. The advice is structured on the seven stages set out in the rolling process (see [Figure 2](#)):

- ▶ 3.1 Preparation and planning
- ▶ 3.2 Connecting with children
- ▶ 3.3 Identifying issues and priorities
- ▶ 3.4 Investigating children's views
- ▶ 3.5 Taking action
- ▶ 3.6 Following up actions
- ▶ 3.7 Reviewing, reflecting and starting again

■ The Council of Europe standards encourage member states to incorporate legal requirements into their own frameworks thereby mandating relevant agencies and institutions such as social services, health care providers, courts and schools to establish mechanisms for hearing the views of individual children on matters that affect them and giving due weight to these views in matters that affect them. The Council of Europe's [Mid-term evaluation of its Strategy for the Rights of the Child](#) (November 2019) identified that in the majority of Council of Europe member states, this commitment is included in national laws directly affecting children in a variety of settings, including:

- ▶ homes;
- ▶ schools and education services;
- ▶ community centres and parks;
- ▶ child welfare, child protection and alternative care services and placements;
- ▶ family proceedings, including divorce, separation, adoption, custody and access;
- ▶ health care and medical treatment;
- ▶ immigration and asylum;
- ▶ criminal justice services and settings.

■ The Council of Europe has created various standards and guidelines on the rights of individual children to be heard in judicial and administrative proceedings. While national legal and policy frameworks will vary, these European standards are universal. They include:

- ▶ Guidelines of the Committee of Ministers on child-friendly justice
- ▶ The Council of Europe guidelines on child-friendly health care
- ▶ Recommendation CM/ Rec(2011) 12 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on children's rights and social services friendly to children and families
- ▶ Council of Europe's Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (The Lanzarote Convention).

■ Case Law in the European Court of Human Rights has also emphasised the child's right to express their views in judicial proceedings. Article 3 of the European Convention on the Exercise of Children's Rights (ETS No. 160) combines the right to be heard with the right to be informed. It states that in judicial proceedings, children should receive all relevant information, be consulted and express their views, and be informed of the possible consequences of compliance with these views or any other decision. Professionals should look at these standards and guidance alongside the laws in countries and contexts where they are working. This will give an overview of their responsibilities and those of other professionals as well as children's specific rights in the setting – be that in education, health care, social care, immigration or in civil or criminal justice.



## EXAMPLE

### The right to be heard

In Andorra, in the event of annulment of marriage, separation or divorce, the judge must, wherever possible, seek the opinion of the minor child, when taking measures relating to his or her education and to custody. Similarly, in case of adoption, the judge must hear the opinion of the minor, this being mandatory from the age of 10 and optional before that age. Once the minor attains the age of 12, his or her consent is necessary for agreement to adoption.

Committee on the Rights of the Child, States Party Report, Andorra, [CRC/C/61/Add.3](#)

## 3.1 PREPARATION AND PLANNING

— The professionals who have the responsibility to listen and take children's views into account include social workers, lawyers, judges, teachers, health care workers, psychologists, court welfare officers and politicians. Research on individual children's participation from across Europe and beyond shows that professionals' attitudes can be the biggest barrier to, or facilitator of, children's participation. So, professionals should reflect on their attitude towards children's participation and possible barriers that might come from the attitudes of other professionals. [Section 2](#) of the Handbook provides guidance on creating enabling participatory environments.

— Children may feel very confused and vulnerable when facing a court hearing, discussing a medical decision or even in more informal meetings, for example about their education. Being less powerful than the adults in control, and without knowledge and experience of how things work, increases feelings of being threatened and intimidated. Clear practical information for children can help children feel more comfortable and express their views. This includes in advance information about their rights to participate, what will happen and how decisions are made. So, professionals should prepare accessible information for children about any decision-making process that might affect them as individuals. This includes in conversations, meetings, interviews, hearings and proceedings. Make sure it covers:

- ▶ The situation under discussion and who will be involved in decision making.
- ▶ The child's role in the decision-making process, including: their rights, support they can ask for and receive, options for how they can choose to participate or not, how their views will be considered, potential limitations on how their views will affect decision making and ways of reviewing decisions.
- ▶ The practical arrangements, including when and where any hearing will take place, how long it will last, who will be there, what representation and protection will be provided, when and how decisions will be made, and how they can influence any practical arrangements.

— Information can be provided face to face, in printed form and through digital media (see [Annex 2](#) which provides guidance on producing accessible information). Providing information in multiple forms increases children's opportunities to fully understand. To plan for and respond to these information needs, work through the checklist in [Annex 5](#) on the detail of things to cover when explaining to children their role in the proceedings.

— Professionals will need to protect children's rights to respect for privacy and confidentiality. The Council of Europe's Guidelines on child-friendly justice, for example, specify that a child's privacy should be protected, including from the media. In particular, no one without consent should print a child's name, picture or personal information about them and their family in the newspaper or on the internet. Laws govern what information must be shared between organisations, and that which must remain private. So, professionals should become familiar with their organisational policies on privacy and confidentiality and amend them if necessary.

— Children cannot be heard effectively where the environment is intimidating, hostile, insensitive or inappropriate so it is important to create child-rights friendly environments (see example below). It helps if physical spaces are made as informal as possible, and if children feel ownership of these, for example by being in the room before adults enter and by showing adults where they should sit. If children are being heard in court or other official settings only the concerned people should be present. The guidelines on child-friendly justice cite the example of judges omitting certain formalities, such as wearing a wig or a gown, to help the child feel at ease. Thinking about the time when meetings will be held is also important – children are more likely to participate in their own meetings if they do not have to miss school activities in order to be there. So, professionals should prepare for children's participation by thinking through how they can provide the space and time to build comfortable relationships in which communication is possible.



## EXAMPLE

### Child-rights friendly environment

In England, children involved in an advisory group for the Ministry of Justice's [Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service](#) have a role in advising family courts on how to create child-friendly environments. The children from the advisory group visit the court buildings and assessment settings and conduct audits. Their views are then fed back to the authorities. Based on the feedback, changes have been made to court buildings in some locations to provide for more appropriate, child-friendly spaces. Changes include the provision of more spaces to protect privacy and the provision of things for children and young people to play with or occupy themselves with.

## 3.2 CONNECTING WITH CHILDREN

Participation depends on both adults and children believing in each other and in the process. Children need to know that professionals are interested in their opinion and want to find a solution which takes their views into account. Where professionals involved in decision making are doctors, nurses, teachers, social workers, early years workers or managers who already know the child or children involved, children will use past experiences of those individuals as the basis for decisions about whether to trust them. For example, children who feel their teachers listen to and take seriously their idea during day-to-day classroom activities are more likely to talk to that teacher about serious concerns when they arise, such as bullying or sexual violence. Known professionals can build trusting connections with children through respecting their views.

Professionals should provide information about themselves, their role, the limits of confidentiality that will apply and the length of time they are likely to be involved in a child's life. This can be done with the support of accessible information (e.g. leaflets or videos) prepared as described in the subsection above. But it is also important that this is provided to children in a personalised way. Sometimes known professionals will need to provide this kind of information because the decision-making process is new to the child. When the meeting is with a new person, and is not an emergency, children should be given information beforehand about what will happen. Where possible, professionals meeting children for the first time should be introduced by someone a child knows. For example, a parent or foster carer might introduce a new social worker to their child and stay with them until the child feels confident to meet with the social worker alone. Information is often best provided through a personalised conversation, so that children are encouraged to speak and feel listened to at the very start.

Even in the shortest encounter and in difficult circumstances, research evidence shows that effective communication can be established when professionals, such as immigration workers, share a little of themselves. With one question, about for example hobbies, doctors can create an atmosphere in which it is easier for a child to speak. One of the goals of this interaction is to ensure that children feel comfortable in stating or showing their preferences, and that they feel their wishes will be taken into account. Professionals should consider how they can build at least one moment of human connection into their first encounters with children.

The extent of time taken to build effective connections will depend on each child's circumstances and on the skills of the professional. Investing the necessary time in this phase will help improve the quality of the process for everyone concerned. There may also be times throughout the participation processes where returning to this phase of building a connection and rapport becomes necessary. This is particularly likely in circumstances where a child has lost trust in adults who are meant to be responsible for them or their care. Professionals can promote sustained meaningful connections with children by being honest and available.

## 3.3 IDENTIFYING ISSUES AND PRIORITIES

Each participation situation is different, they are more or less formal, and some have strict or less strict limits on the issues that are relevant. Often children can shape the issues adults discuss and express their views about matters that adults have identified as of concern. For example, in situations of family separation, children affected by divorce may suggest to the family judge (or equivalent professional) that custody arrangements for the household pet should be on the agenda. Professionals should be clear about their own objectives and the opportunities for children to put their own issues on the agenda of any discussions.

Those practitioners facilitating children's participation can use informal and creative activities to enable children to put their agenda ideas forward. In structured discussions, for example, one technique for ensuring that information about and content of agendas are shared and agreed is to use cards (containing words and pictures if possible and including blank cards). Giving these cards to children, professionals can then discuss which issues have to be on the agenda, whether add more onto this agenda, and if so to encourage children to write additional issues on the blank cards.

Children may raise more issues than there is time to cover, especially if adult agendas are already very full. Practitioners therefore need to have clear understanding of timescales for addressing any issues, and providing opportunities for issues to be discussed wherever needed. For example, in a meeting with a child, an asylum support worker may find that the child has concerns for their health, their education, their contact with family and friends, and their current living situation. Arranging a health assessment may be a priority for the service provider but contact with family may be the child's priority. Responding to children's priorities as soon as possible is part of ensuring their meaningful involvement in any process. At a minimum, ensure that children have information about when their priority issues will be addressed. Professionals should discuss children's priorities for what issues should be addressed first, and respect these whenever possible.

In some instances, a child may raise an issue which is outside of the field of the professional they are meeting with or beyond the current process under discussion. For example, a child talking to their teacher may raise an issue about difficulties in friendships, when they have been asked to discuss their education subject choices. In these circumstances, professionals should provide children with information about and connections to relevant services or professionals who can help take forward concerns which are beyond their area of competence.

### 3.4 INVESTIGATING CHILDREN'S VIEWS

Once the agenda for discussion has been agreed children can express their views in many ways. Some children will be happy to just talk, taking one issue at a time. Other children prefer to use more creative means. This can include talking about their wishes using the framework of time (an ideal day, an ideal week, an ideal special event) or using arts-based materials to convey these experiences and preferences. Communication methods should be adapted to each individual child. Some children communicate their wishes through their behaviour, so spending time together to observe this may be important. Professionals should provide a variety of means through which children can be supported to express their views. See [Annex 6](#), for advice on communicating with children.

Identifying or creating specific safe spaces and times to investigate views can be particularly useful in situations where children may feel nervous about the implications of sharing their experiences or ideas (see "Barnahus" example below). Professionals should ask children themselves to advise about where they would feel safe to discuss personal matters. Offer places that may provide safety and explain why. Where time allows, taking part in shared activities can help create safe space, whether that is having a conversation while playing, going for a walk together or making/choosing food or drink. This may happen naturally in some situations, where professionals and children regularly share a same space preparing meals or cleaning up classrooms. In these spaces, for example shared car or train journeys, children often feel more able to name their concerns as there is less intense focus on them. Children may, of course, choose to not comment on some or all of the issues that are on the agenda and it is important here to respect the principle that participation is voluntary (see [Annex 1](#), a checklist for professionals on the implications of the nine basic requirements for safe, meaningful and ethical children's participation).



#### EXAMPLE

##### **"BARNAHUS" (Children's House) special safe settings**

In Iceland, Norway and Sweden, cases of sexual or other forms of violence and abuse can be dealt with in so-called "Children's Houses" (i.e. "Barnahus" following the original, Icelandic name), where children suspected of having been exposed to sexual or other forms of violence are being heard in safe settings.

The central goals of this response model are:

- to coordinate the parallel criminal and child welfare investigations, gathering all relevant services under one roof, and
- to ensure that children are listened to in a child-friendly and positive environment responding to their needs.

Professionals from social services, forensic medical experts, paediatricians, the police and the judiciary work together within Barnahus to provide the child support and assistance. Interviews are carried out by specialised staff, and the number of interviews is limited to the minimum required for the criminal investigation and judicial process. All interviews are audio-visually recorded, with the possibility for interaction with observers in adjacent rooms, and there are child-friendly rooms for medical examination and counselling.

The Barnahus model was adopted in order to create a specific mechanism that responds to the special needs of suspected child victims of sexual violence and abuse, which are different from adults' needs in similar situations. The Council of Europe promotes the model as a good practice example and supports the development of "Children's Houses" in different European countries.

For further information see:

<https://www.coe.int/en/web/children/barnahus-project-in-slovenia>

<https://childhub.org/en/promising-child-protection-practices/what-barnahus-and-how-it-works>

<https://www.childrenatrisk.eu/promise/>

— In some situations, children would rather talk to someone who is not directly involved in decision making. This might be a legal representative, appointed guardian or advocate. These people, who can be professionals or peers, can support children to voice their views and represent views on children's behalf, if they do not wish to speak in person. Unlike many professionals working directly with children, advocates do not have a responsibility to advise on what action is in a child's best interests, they have a formal responsibility to ensure that children's wishes are heard, regardless of what these wishes are. When directly involved in decision making, professionals should make sure that children have information about where to get independent help in order to express their views. Children may need additional information in order to form a clear decision about specific options or risks. Professionals should therefore, where possible, facilitate children's access to independent support.



#### EXAMPLE

### Accessing independent support to express views

In some Council of Europe member states, independent services are available for children and young people where they can either get information on children's rights in general, as well as legal advice on their own specific issue or situation.

In Belgium and the Netherlands there are 'Children's rights shops' ([Kinderrechtswinkels](#) or KRWs) in some areas. In Bruges and in Ghent there has been a '[children's rights shop](#)' in place since 1987. The KRWs provide information services and advice to children and young people. In a weekly drop in session in Ghent, children and adults (including youth workers) can come and ask questions related to children's rights (including the rights of minors in conflict with the law) and receive free information and advice. Questions can also be asked by e-mail and on a forum on the association's website. The KRWs also develop teaching materials for children and professionals and deliver training.

The KRWs in Belgium also provide an anonymous helpline for children and young people called [Aweel](#). Volunteers can provide children and young people with advice and information – answering their questions and addressing their concerns. Advice is provided via a free phone number, by e-mail, chat or in a forum – all accessible through their website.



## PRACTICE NOTE

### Respect for evolving capacities

When investigating children's views, professionals are required to take them seriously and to recognise the diverse and evolving capacities of each individual child. Children can form and express views from the earliest age, but the nature of their participation, and the range of decisions in which they are involved, will necessarily increase in accordance with their age and evolving capacities. This requires professionals to recognise the diverse capacities of each individual child and tailor their interactions with them in a way that neither overestimates nor underestimates their capacity. For some this may be a fundamental shift from the way they view children, by not seeing age as a barrier. Clearly, very young children and some children with disabilities cannot do certain things just as some adults have limited capabilities. This should not bring into question their capacities.

Children can make or contribute to complex decisions. Research reveals that adults frequently underestimate children's capacities and deny them these opportunities. Paragraph 20 of UN *General Comment 12* states that the phrase 'the right to be heard' of every child 'capable of forming his or her own views' should be seen as an obligation, not a limitation. It continues:

*States Parties should presume that a child has the capacity to form her or his own views and recognize that she or he has the right to express them; it is not up to the child to first prove her or his capacity.*

UN *General Comment 12* also states that there can be no assessment of a child's best interest without an understanding of their views. Professionals must take care to facilitate opportunities for children to express their views, supporting children's evolving capacity in decision making.



## EXAMPLE

### Presuming capacity

In Slovenia, the Law for Children with Special Needs (2011) states that a child with special needs, i.e. with physical or learning disabilities, must be involved in preparing and monitoring their Individualised Programme in Education, depending on their age and maturity. This provision is felt to be bringing about a cultural change in how children with disabilities are perceived, as it sets out an obligation, and also a legal presumption, for the first time, that children with disabilities are capable of making decisions about their education.

## 3.5 TAKING ACTION

Alongside developing a clear understanding of a child's view on the matters that are on the agenda, professionals will also need to develop an understanding of how children wish to input their views into these decision-making arenas and what actions decision makers might be asked to take. Different settings involve opportunities and limits regarding how children's views can be expressed to an 'audience' of decision makers. In consultative decision making, such as in criminal proceedings which are highly formal, children have little control over decisions or about how they might express their views. In almost every other situation, a collaborative approach is possible. For example, children may choose to speak for themselves, or through an intermediary (such as an advocate). They may wish to be physically present when their views are shared, or they may wish to join via live or pre-recorded video.

They may choose to be present at all times and take part in the decision making themselves. In child-led decision making, children decide for themselves on all aspects of the action taken with their views.

When children share their views outside of formal processes, there are a variety of ways these can be taken forward, such as in conversations with peers or professionals, in meetings, in case notes or emails. All professionals, not just those involved in investigating children's views, should follow children's preferences, wherever possible, regarding how their views are expressed in decision making. Professionals then have a responsibility to take action in response to hearing children's views.



For example, a child in an early years setting may express discomfort with a particular worker, the worker and their team leader may investigate with the child to see if a change in worker or activity helps increase their comfort. The worker, team leader and their manager have a responsibility to act on the child's wishes.

Action that gives children's views "due weight" in decisions can include following children's wishes to the letter and considering which aspects of children's views can be implemented instantly and which cannot. Professionals giving children's views due weight in decisions should identify the relationships, resources and services that can be brought together, to enable the action children request. For example, disabled children, their families and professionals working with them, might need information about the available community and specialist services and more personal assistance in order to fulfil children's wishes to, for example, engage in more leisure activities.



#### PRACTICE NOTE

### Best interests of the child

When determining decisions in proceedings affecting children, a number of factors must be taken into account in addition to the child's wishes and feelings. The best interests of the child are paramount. The state has to do whatever they think is best for the children's protection, development and well-being. The child's views on what is 'best' is also very important and their views must be taken seriously. Professionals cannot assess the child's best interests without taking their views into account. In any decision made by adults as to the best interests of the child, the weight given to children's expressed wishes increases with their age and maturity. The best interests' principle does not override other rights in the UNCRC and so should not be used to dismiss a child's views. Judgements have to be made, for example, about whether to exclude a child from a court hearing that they wish to participate in because of concerns about possible harm. Rather, the decision as to whether to grant the child's wish to attend court should be considered and weighed up in accordance with the child's age and maturity.

## 3.6 FOLLOWING UP ACTIONS

Feedback about action taken and further follow-up is a crucial element of children's participation since it demonstrates that the views of children are being heard and respected. Professionals should feedback regularly and as soon as possible what has happened as a result of listening to children's views (see [Annex 2](#) for ideas on how to provide accessible feedback). Whether or not children are present during decision making, they should have opportunities to discuss any decisions as soon as possible. Professionals should provide information and opportunities for children to discuss any decisions they have tried to influence. For example, if a child is trying to challenge a decision to exclude them from school, teachers should let the child know whether their challenge has been accepted, and if not why not.

Decisions are not set in stone, and information is needed about possibilities to review and challenge these. Children should be provided with advice and information about how they make a complaint or seek redress if they feel that their rights have not been upheld (see [Section 2.5](#) on complaints mechanisms). To enable children to take follow-up action they should receive continued support from the adult who has been hearing their views, or from another organisation if this is not possible. One option for children to challenge decisions may be through collective participation activities (see [Section 4](#) on collective participation).

Relationships with children (and their families) need to be maintained so that children can continue to express their views and feed these into further decision-making opportunities. The process through which a child is heard and has influence on decisions that affect their own everyday life can be very emotionally charged. When things go well, regardless of whether children get the outcome they seek, they may build a positive relationship with person who helps them express their views. To promote children's well-being and their confidence in future participation processes it is important to ensure that the ending, or transformation, of these relationships are well managed. As already stated, this involves informing children of timescales from the very beginning. It also involves, wherever possible, meeting with the child to say goodbye in person. A physical marking of such a process ending can be useful, particularly in longer or more intense processes.

### 3.7 REVIEWING, REFLECTING AND STARTING AGAIN

Participation is a process, not a one-off event or meeting. To maximise the learning, it will be useful to reflect on individual experiences and organisational or contextual factors that have affected any process. This learning can then feed into plans about how to facilitate individual children's participation in the future, as well as how to create participatory environments (see Section 2). Prevailing social attitudes and organisational practices may limit the space for children to voice their views, the ways in which these are heard by different audiences and the influence that their views have. It is therefore important to reflect on personal and organisational practices. These questions can help guide such reflections.

**What do I or my organisation need to change to:**

- ▶ Ensure children are clear about who I am and my role?
- ▶ Know what personal information am I comfortable sharing about myself?
- ▶ Ensure children have the information they need about this process?
- ▶ Make space for children's priority concerns alongside my own?
- ▶ Be sure that I/my organisation hear everything that children are telling us and do not dismiss things because they do not seem serious to the adults involved?
- ▶ Ensure that children's views are represented as clearly and safely as possible in any decision making?
- ▶ Ensure that more of children's wishes can be put into action through any decision-making processes?
- ▶ Give children a clear account of how their views can or have influenced decision making?

In addition to opportunities for self-reflection, those working with children should create spaces for reflective dialogues with children, colleagues, families and wider community members. Through such processes all stakeholders can review achievements and shared goals. These people may then also become allies involved in collective participatory processes to bring about these goals or changes.



#### CHECKLIST

#### Reflecting on discrimination

As attitudes towards children are one of the major barriers to their views being taken into account in decisions use the checklist below to reflect on discrimination in your practice and context. Ask yourself:

1. Is there any evidence of internalised adultism, where children are questioning the legitimacy of their own views? If so, what can you do to reassure them and encourage their expression of views?
2. Is there any evidence of institutionalised adultism, where age is used to include or exclude children from particular rights? What can be done to challenge any age-based limits and assumptions about children's competence?
3. Is there any evidence of cultural adultism affecting the people and processes you have contact with? What can be done to raise people's awareness of this phenomenon?

Finally, reviewing and sharing what has gone well is an important part of preparing for further children's participation processes, and will inspire others. Ask yourself, and the children you are working with:

1. What are we proud of in terms of how we share information with children?
2. What are we proud of in terms of how we make space for children's priority concerns alongside my own?
3. What are we proud of in terms of how we make sure that I/my organisation hear everything that children are telling us?



4. What are we proud of in terms of how we ensure that children's views are represented as clearly and safely as possible in any decision making?
5. What are we proud of in terms of how we ensure that children's wishes can increasingly be put into action through any decision-making processes?
6. What are we proud of in terms of how we give children a clear account of how their views can or have influenced decision making?



#### HINTS AND TIPS

### Connecting with children

Trusting connections with individual children are enabled when:

- Children are involved throughout any process.
- Children receive the information about the process, in a form they can understand, and with time to discuss it.
- Children's questions are listened to and they are encouraged to express concerns.
- Children see clear evidence of their preferences and needs being taken into account in relevant decisions.
- Children are kept informed about what is happening and why things are happening in this way.

Individual child participation processes can become more child-led when children are:

- Supported to chair their own meetings.
- Decide when and where meetings are held.
- Decide who is present.
- Given opportunities to pause the meeting and ensure discussion cease while they temporarily leave the room (perhaps to seek advice or to revise their views on the options available).
- The meeting celebrates successes as well as discussing challenges.

Remember:

- Children have rights to information, advice and support.
- Children have a right to express their opinion on every matter which affects them.
- Adults have a duty to listen to children and take their opinions into account.
- The impact children's view has on decisions will depend on the age and maturity of the child and on the particular decision. Always explain to the child why their wishes have or have not been followed in any particular situation.



## SECTION 4

# COLLECTIVE PARTICIPATION

---

**T**his section of the Handbook focuses on the rights of groups of children to express their views and for these to be given due weight in decisions that affect them, for example regarding professional practice, services and facilities, planning, policy, law and research. It includes advice on issues to consider, guidance on approaches and examples from practice to help professionals deliver collective participation activities, examining each of the seven stages in turn:

- ▶ 4.1 Preparation and planning
- ▶ 4.2 Connecting with children
- ▶ 4.3 Identifying issues and priorities
- ▶ 4.4 Investigating children's views
- ▶ 4.5 Taking action
- ▶ 4.6 Following up actions
- ▶ 4.7 Reviewing, reflecting and starting again

■ The Council of Europe's standards make it clear that the views of groups of children should be heard and given due weight by professionals in all settings, including in schools, hospitals, prisons, child protection systems and education services. *The Recommendation on Participation* calls for all public services to have mechanisms in place to consult with, and receive feedback from children. There are very few public services, policies or issues that do not affect children as either direct or indirect users. As well as services that are targeted at children such as schools, education, early years, children's units in hospitals and alternative care institutions, other services and policies such as transport, housing, planning, immigration, health care and environmental, have a huge impact on children.

■ In some countries, national law and policy will provide additional guidance and legal requirements regarding how collective participation should be delivered. For example, Section 6 of Finland's constitution includes provision that children should be allowed to influence matters pertaining to them.

■ Some settings (for example, schools, healthcare providers, social and welfare services, and local governments) will have written strategies describing how children's participation will be supported and they have created spaces for direct dialogue between children and decision makers. See *Section 2* for ideas on how to create a participatory organisation and environments.

■ Professionals should look at these standards and guidance alongside the laws in countries and contexts where they are working. This will give an overview of professional responsibilities and children's collective rights in their areas of work, whether that be in a school, a health care setting, a court, immigration proceedings or in child welfare.

### 4.1 PREPARATION AND PLANNING

■ Professionals have a responsibility to prepare and plan for collective participation, who they will work with to achieve what aims and the resources they can secure to facilitate this work. From the very start, children can be involved in setting aims, preparing and planning activities, or advising professionals on activities that are more collaborative or consultative. See *Annex Z*, a checklist for making preparations for collective participation.

■ Children's participation processes are more successful when they are supported by groups of children, professionals and community members who work together on the chosen issues. Professionals are often in contact with groups of children affected by their area of professional practice (e.g. patients, children in contact with legal systems, children in alternative care, students, all children living in a particular area) and may need to reach out to be more inclusive of all children (e.g. children with disabilities, Roma children, asylum seeking children). Particular adults (e.g. family and community members, young people with prior experience of participation, advocates, service providers, policy makers and politicians) are important potential allies in contacting children, supporting their involvement and ensuring their views result in action.

■ Professionals should reflect on who could and should be involved to maximise the potential for impactful and inclusive participation processes. They should think about the level of influence within the process – for example:

- ▶ Are students to be involved in the governing board of a school? Is there opportunity for more of a collaborative approach, working with children to co-design the format for the governing board? Or a space for children themselves to set agenda items for governing board discussions?
- ▶ Professionals should also think about the opportunities to increase children's influence: Are there particular moments (for example, when planning new services, consulting on changes in policy) when feeding children's views about a particular issue into a governing board meeting will have more of an impact?
- ▶ Or are there other opportunities for direct dialogue with head teachers and parents' associations that may be useful, to help amplify the weight given to children's views?

■ Professionals should identify all arenas and avenues in their organisation where children's views can be taken forward and where possible, get organisational commitments to actively consider views arising from children's participation activities.

## 4.2 CONNECTING WITH CHILDREN

■ Professionals will have choices about how and where to connect with children. There may be relevant collective structures and networks already established by organisations or institutions, for example schools' councils, advisory groups or care networks. There may be places where groups of children affected by the issues are meeting or living, for example a youth club, playground or children's home. There may be a need to create a new group by contacting children who have previously only been involved with a service as individuals, for example patients, children of divorcing parents or children affected by migration.

■ When connecting with children professionals should provide information on:

- ▶ The likely issues to be discussed and the planned activities.
- ▶ Practical matters such as where and when to connect or meet.
- ▶ How and to what extent they can influence the process and the outcomes.
- ▶ What is expected of them.
- ▶ Confidentiality and safety.
- ▶ How to consent to taking part.

■ In some situations, parents will also need to be informed, particularly if they are required to give consent as well as children themselves. See *Annex 2*, a checklist for producing accessible information for children. Information is more accessible when children themselves are involved in its design and development.

■ Invitations to participate can be shared with children in a variety of ways. For example, children can be approached in person, through contacts and networks, through services, through existing forums and councils, and online. Professionals can make these contacts themselves, or children may make direct contact with other children. Different approaches are suitable in different situations. In one example encountered in the preparation of this Handbook, some asylum-seeking children decided to set up a group to explore the problems they were encountering at their institution. They went to classrooms in their language support unit and used a presentation to share information about the participation process they were organising. In another example, Roma children supported by an NGO, set up a Facebook page which invited children to share their ideas about community safety and hate crime. Professionals should aim to use a variety of approaches in order to be inclusive.

■ A new group may need to be established, so that more children have on-going opportunities to be involved. *The Recommendation on Participation* encourages member states to establish consultative bodies and advisory groups for children and young people at local, regional or national levels. It also states that children should be given adequate support for self-advocacy.

- ▶ **Consultative bodies** are forums or networks set up for groups of children to meet regularly, for the main purpose of influencing decision making. They often involve wider groups of children choosing representatives. For example, school councils, service user forums and children's parliaments (see examples from Cyprus and Lithuania below).

- **Advisory groups** of children and young people can be supported to meet on a regular basis, to help manage or steer a service or policy. The children comment on service provision, approve policies, suggest developments in the service and monitor implementation of their ideas in practice (see examples below).
- **Collective self-advocacy** involves children standing up for their own rights and ideas through child-led groups, campaigning and activism. Children may take on roles as human rights defenders, take part in campaigns or set up unions (see examples below).

Forums and networks for specific groups of children who tend to be left out of formal structures may be needed. Over time these can enable children to take part in more mainstream participation processes. For example, Roma NGOs can be supported to run local groups and national networks for children from Roma communities, and these children may eventually develop their own participation strategies or build alliances with and join youth councils.

Children who face particular discrimination such as asylum and refugee children, children from Roma and other minority communities and children who engage in campaigns and other self-advocacy may be particularly vulnerable because their ideas may challenge accepted norms. It is worth remembering that the Council of Europe recommendation asserts that:

*'Children and young people who exercise their right to freely express their views must be protected from harm including intimidation, reprisals, victimisation and violation of their right to privacy.'*



#### EXAMPLE

### Intergenerational support for activism

In France, in late 2018, some students opposed the government's recent education reforms of the upper secondary school which orientated students toward specific degrees sooner, and therefore removed the three broad subject choices of science, literature or social sciences. Students also opposed tightening of university entrance procedures which they considered too selective. In response, children, teachers and parents became engaged in activism. A high school [student's union](#) has been in place in France since 1994. This has supported students to demonstrate and stand up for their rights. Alliances of teachers' unions, parents and lawyers have also organised to show their support for demonstrating students by publishing letters in papers, asking for children to be given the right to strike and demanding protection from retribution, in support of children's rights to freedom of expression. The French Ministry of Education [website](#) provides guidance on high school students' rights to put up posters, set up groups, meet and publish.

Professionals should set up or support children's forums, advisory groups and self-advocacy networks to enable and protect the participation of children in vulnerable situations. Teachers and other professionals can support children's rights to express their views by ensuring that children know their rights, communicating their support for children's views and their rights to expression, protesting against any unfair treatment, and by providing access to space and other resources. Children and young people may wish to set up unions for school children in order to protect their rights, as they have in for example France and Norway (See [Annex 8](#), a checklist for supporting children's right to freedom of expression and association).

In all groups, facilitators should create a safe and relaxed environment in which children can choose to speak or not and which supports their well-being. Icebreakers, games and informal activities are helpful for this. [Section 5](#) of this Handbook provides links to a number of activity manuals, the majority of which are available online.



#### EXAMPLE

### Youth advisory group in child-friendly cities conference

In Spain, the 5<sup>th</sup> Congress of Child Friendly Cities held in November 2019 invited a Young Advisory Group composed of 12 young people (aged 12 to 18 years old) representing local youth councils from six different Spanish communities. The group advised the organisers on the programme of the Congress, participated as speakers in a panel and conducted their own workshop exclusively dedicated to children and young people. The workshop involved four discussion tables dedicated to themes identified by the group: equality, leisure and free time, environment and education.



The workshops gathered 40 children and young people in the discussions (aged 12 to 18 years old). During the workshop, the members of the advisory group and the other young participants reflected on different issues that concern children and youth. Ideas and slogans emerged from the discussions, and the conclusions were presented to the whole congress on the following day. Young people made clear they were concerned by issues such as climate change, gender inequality, and education. They also stated they feel engaged in promoting inclusion and considered that considered that being listened to was still a challenge.



#### EXAMPLE

### Collaborative priority setting

In Cyprus, the Children's Parliament was set up in 2001 as a development of a recurring event called "Children's Week", during which children "took over" seats in the country's Parliament. The Parliament was set up as standing body where trained volunteers facilitate the children's parliament sessions and discussions. The Children's Parliament is composed of 80 child representatives (aged 13 to 18 years old) of Cyprus social groups, including the three constitutionally recognized Cypriot minorities. Children themselves identify issues and introduce measures for implementing the Convention for the Rights of the Child. They are also asked about issues that are on the government agenda. In 2017, the Children's Parliament was invited by the Cyprus government to influence the National Strategy on Sexual and Reproductive Health of Children and Young people. In this session, children were given information about existing policies in Cyprus and other countries. Their suggestions were included in an early draft of the strategy, and were then taken by the Committees responsible for planning action (including budget) and monitoring.



#### EXAMPLE

### 2getherLAND Camp Advisory Group

Groups of children and young people can be supported to meet on a regular basis, to manage or steer a service. The children and young people comment on service provision, approve policies and suggest developments in the service. In Germany, [2getherLAND Camp](#) was a gathering organised by the Bertelsmann Foundation and partners in October 2019. In total, 220 adults and children (8-18 years old) discussed the topic of inequality in Germany. They left the event with 14 projects to address local inequalities through intergenerational partnerships. One year before the event, an advisory group of young people had been selected to participate in defining the priority themes, decide the branding, the programme offerings and support other young people's integration in the event. The young advisory group members also led some of the camp workshops, and were key in evaluating the camp's impact and follow-up actions. As a result of the event, the partners committed to supporting children's participation in ongoing local action.



#### EXAMPLE

### Lithuanian School Students' Union

The Lithuanian School Students' Union (LMS) is a voluntary, non-profit association, uniting Lithuanian school students' councils. LMS is an umbrella structure representing secondary school students in autonomous secondary school students' councils, cities/district students' councils and student's council information centres.



In March 2020, the Youth Policy Committee of the Lithuanian Students' Union focused on the COVID-19 pandemic situation and participated in meetings with the Interdepartmental Child Welfare Commission, the Lithuanian Education Council, the Ministry of Education, Science and Sports. They shared thoughts on issues related to distance learning, exams and emotional environments. They also participated in a press conference with the Government and created a student questionnaire. The existence of this network enabled the government to rapidly get information that could improve policy.

<https://www.moksleiviai.lt/naujienos/ka-geguzes-menesi-veike-jaunimo-politikos-komitetas/>

### 4.3 IDENTIFYING ISSUES AND PRIORITIES

Issues and priorities for children's participation processes can be identified in consultative, collaborative or child-led ways. When priority setting is consultative, adults seek the views of groups of children on issues they have already chosen. For example, a care home manager might draft a policy and then ask children to make choices between options about elements to include. Identifying priority issues can become increasingly collaborative when children and adults gain in confidence and understanding. In a more collaborative approach, adults may suggest issues, because they know about matters that may affect children or because they are seeking advice, but children will also have space to put forward their own priorities. In other words, it involves a degree of partnership between adults and children. In a child-led approach the role of adults is to act as facilitators to enable children to identify their own objectives, by providing opportunities or support and by following children's agendas. Professionals should consider the extent to which they can enable children to select their own issues and priorities (see the following example from Wales).



#### EXAMPLE

##### Child-led priority setting

The National Assembly for Wales asked 2,700 children (aged 8 to 18 years old) in Wales what concerned them. Respondents included children living in poverty, disabled, asylum seeking and children from Roma and other minority ethnic backgrounds. Results revealed that children lacked safe places to play and hang out, which led the Committee to investigate the issue. The Committee held a public consultation with both professionals and children. Children said they wanted safe places to play, with adult supervision. Their views were passed on by adults, but children also had an opportunity to engage directly with decision makers on the topic. A report containing children's views was published in 2010 and this influenced the development of the statutory guidance for the [Play Sufficiency Duties](#) within the Children and Families (Wales) Measure 2010. This initiative was started and led by adults. Children and adults decided on the question to explore – safe places to play – and children gave their views. Adults then decided on the goals, recommendations and action plans.

An activity that enables a child-led or collaborative approach to identifying priority issues is community mapping (see example below). This has worked well across Europe with groups of children of all ages and a variety of communication styles. Participants work in small groups to put the places that are important in their everyday lives on a large piece of paper, using drawing, words, objects or photographs. This produces a 'map' of their community, a service or even a building. Children then use pens, post it notes, stickers or objects to show where things are going well and where they would like to change something. This can be given a rights' focus by saying 'Show the places where your rights are respected and where they are not'. Groups show each other the important places on their maps, discuss difficulties and solutions, share ideas about changes they want to work towards and may then vote on priority issues for their participation process.



#### EXAMPLE

### Roma Children Map Community strengths and needs

In nine countries across Europe, 550 Roma children and young people, supported by Roma NGOs and academics, took part in community mapping. This identified concerns which they then investigated and followed up with further action to bring change for themselves and their communities. See [www.peeryouth.eu](http://www.peeryouth.eu)

This mapping activity can be used in many ways. For example, Roma teenagers can produce a map of the road to a health clinic and show the barriers and enablers to entering the clinic. They can also view each other's maps and choose priorities to investigate and follow up, to create more successful services (such as health clinic outreach) or positive attitudes that have helped. In a collaborative approach, adults will then provide ideas about their concerns and the opportunities for change they may be able to offer.

■ In many situations it is not possible to instantly take forward all the children's priorities for change. Professionals and children facilitating participation processes should therefore provide opportunities for children to prioritise which issues to investigate further.

## 4.4 INVESTIGATING CHILDREN'S VIEWS

■ Children can communicate their ideas through a variety of methods and mechanisms, both online and offline. The approach required will depend on the group of children and the issues being considered. Being inclusive demands that professionals provide a variety of opportunities, catering for a range of interests and needs. Activities designed to facilitate children's participation should aim to involve all children who are affected including children who are vulnerable or seldom heard. Even very young children are able to participate if care is taken to choose appropriate methods. Children themselves are the best people to advise on what will work with them. Some of the most common ways of investigating children's views are:

■ **Conversations and Surveys:** These can be face to face or online and formal or informal. They can obtain simple or detailed information depending on the questions used and how answers are recorded. Surveys can be simple tick box questionnaires or complex written responses. Remember to use colour and graphics in all written material (see following example).



#### EXAMPLE

### Online surveys for children

In Serbia, in 2020, 1,571 children (aged 5 to 18 years) took part in an online anonymous questionnaire. The children were from urban and less urban areas. They answered questions about the COVID-19 crisis, and how emergency measures had affected them. They were asked about how they accessed information about the virus, how they spend their free time, how they access support and the support they were receiving with education. They also gave their views on what they cared about most and what they missed.

The [survey results](#) showed that what children missed most was their social life and freedom. What worried them most was uncertainty. They reported extensive problems with access to computers, and the challenges of the move to online teaching. Some children identified the need for more information about whether families will have enough money and food. Their concerns were fed into advocacy work and policy papers at national and European levels.

■ **Group activities:** A small group can be brought together to focus on a particular subject or an issue. Alternatively, a larger group could be split into smaller groups. Think of the different questions that you want children's views on. Choose a few open questions to guide the discussion or provide creative activities through which children can express their ideas. Ensure the event is enjoyable. This means plenty of breaks and some time spent doing fun activities.



#### EXAMPLE

### Using photovoice as a method to listen

Photovoice is a term used to describe a range of methods in which children use photography to capture and reflect on different aspects of their life. In the Netherlands, the health care professionals in a new paediatric ward wondered what children thought of the new space. Children were asked to take pictures of the things they liked, and the ones they liked less. They were requested to explain why each picture was taken. The children received a copy of all pictures, a small book and some hobby supplies.

For instance, a child (girl, aged 12) took a picture of the glass door and explained she had trouble sleeping because of the light. In a later discussion with the parents about the photos, they said they liked to see their daughter from the hall. This shows how children's perspectives are important, and how they might differ from those around them. The photo project produced valuable information for the ward. Children's concerns about privacy and light have been solved by darkening and covering the windows.

See Lorenz, L. S., & Kolb, B. (2009). Involving the public through participatory visual research methods. *Health Expectations*, 12(3), 262-274.

■ **Consultation events:** These can involve gathering large numbers of children together in one physical or online place to engage them in a variety of types of consultation and other activities. Consultation activities can also be taken out to children and young people in their communities. There are a huge variety of techniques and models for consultation. Take a look at one of the books in the resources section for ideas on the kinds of activities to use. Involve children in the design and planning of the events to encourage fuller participation of other children.



#### EXAMPLE

### Consulting young children on the quality of services

In Ireland, throughout 2017, the [Children and Young People's Services Committee of Roscommon](#) ran consultation sessions with groups of children aged 3 ½ - 4 years in the county as a means to improve their services. The theme of the consultation was 'What do young children in Roscommon think would help them to live healthier, happier and more active lives?' The consultation involved preparation with children, families and professionals and was carried out through games and interactive activities. Some of children's demands included opportunities to play outside, 'hugs and cuddles' from important adults, enough sleep and water, and they are reminded and helped to brush their teeth. The results were synthesized through the metaphor of a volcano representing the things children said they needed every day, often, and sometimes. The 'Happy & Healthy Volcano' was used to inform the Early Years' Health and Well-being Plan for Roscommon and was shared with all the county's early childhood services.

■ **Expert Witnesses:** These involve conversations or meetings with people who can advise on how children's views can be transformed into action.

■ When organising investigation activities in order to maintain children's interest as well as enable them to express views it can help to be creative and make the group activities fun. This is about the attitude of the facilitator(s), the activities and meeting places. Facilitators should show a sense of humour, be relaxed, creative and participate. They can use cameras, recorders, computers, webcams, and art material. They can involve children as co-facilitators, invite them to design and run sessions.

■ Resources listed in [Section 5](#) give details of activities, methods and tools to use when working with groups of children. Organisers should think about the venues, ideally involving children in identifying suitable online and offline venues and make sure they are accessible and easy for children to get to. Facilitators of collective participation opportunities should ensure they allow time to establish ground rules or a group contract with all participants (see practice note below). See also [Annex 1](#), a checklist for professionals on the implications of the nine basic requirements for safe, meaningful and ethical children's participation and [Annex 3](#), a checklist for professionals on promoting the safety and well-being of children at collective participatory events and activities.



## PRACTICE NOTE

### Ground rules or group contracts

It is recommended that facilitators involve adults and children in establishing ground rules for participation activities at the beginning of the process and keeping them under review to ensure that activities are experienced as positive and safe for everyone involved. Sometimes it is better to call this a 'how we agree to work together' as the word 'rules' can be off putting.

Points to cover include:

- Health and safety considerations – for example, fire, access, numbers.
- Listening to and valuing what is said.
- Respecting everyone.
- Discriminatory or bullying language and actions.
- Confidentiality and child protection.
- Use of jargon.
- Support available for raising any concerns.
- Social media use.

## 4.5 TAKING ACTION

Helping children express their views is only part of the process as emphasised throughout the Handbook. Children's participation needs *Space* and *Voice* but it also involves children having an *Audience* and some *Influence*. Children's views need to be considered and due weight given to them when decisions are made. Ideally, in the preparation stage there will have been some planning for how children's views and ideas can best be presented and used as evidence to help bring about change. For example, a school may want to consult with children about a policy it is developing on the use of gender-neutral toilets. At the planning stage, the head teacher and governing body should agree to meet with child representatives and facilitators, and make time to listen and properly consider the children's views and suggestions. A date should be set for children to receive feedback on how their views have been taken into account, and the way for communicating this feedback and follow-up action to all the children involved should be agreed. At the stage of taking action, children can lead or be involved in reviewing these plans and what other children have said and making further recommendations for action.



## EXAMPLE

### Identifying people who can be asked to act

From 2012 to 2020, young researchers from across the UK supported by [The Centre for Children and Young People's Participation](#), directed and conducted research on the rights of disabled children. They were able to consider interview transcripts, pictures and summary stories of other disabled children's experiences and used the graphic below to identify what other children were asking for and to think about who would help them achieve these goals. They then used this information to write recommendations for community, service and governmental action. They presented these recommendations to the ombudsperson, who funded the first year of work, and also took action at the UK parliament, in local municipalities, with family and friends and reporting to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. They then spread this model internationally, and worked with disabled young people and communities in Japan to conduct similar research there, again contributing to an alternative report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. In both countries, the UN Committee's Concluding Observations support implementation of some of the young researchers' recommendations.

Worksheet: **Who can we ask to help achieve our goals and what do we want them to do?**

Children asking for:	
How can these people help?	Fill in idea about they should do:
Children	
Families	
Children's services	
Local Communities	
Governments	
Companies	

Children may also want professionals' support with self-advocacy – taking steps to raise awareness of their concerns and the changes they would like to see through training, campaigns, petitions, writing to politicians, giving evidence to formal inquiries, or strikes and demonstrations. Wherever possible, they should be empowered to act as human rights defenders; the Geneva-based organisation [Child Rights Connect](#) published an Implementation Guide on the Rights of Child Human Rights Defenders in 2021.



**EXAMPLE**

**Self-advocacy – banning the use of garbage bags**

Children in alternative care in one municipality in the UK complained about the fact that when they moved from one placement to another, they had to pack their belongings into garbage bags. They didn't own suitcases and the moves were taking place at short notice. When the municipality refused to act, the young people supported by their social workers and foster carers spoke to the local newspaper and explained just how awful carrying your possessions in a garbage bag felt. In 2015, in response to the children's representation, a new policy was introduced which banned the use of garbage bags and ensured the availability of storage and luggage solutions in the event of an emergency placement move.

## 4.6 FOLLOWING UP ACTION

Professionals and facilitators should feedback to children regularly, and as soon as possible, on what has happened as a result of listening to children's views. Sometimes, waiting for an official document can take too long and it's hard to keep participants motivated if it takes months (or years!) for feedback to be given. All the children involved should be given prompt feedback on their involvement, the impact, outcomes and next steps. As UN *General Comment 12* explains:

*Since the child enjoys the right that her or his views are given due weight, the decision maker has to inform the child of the outcome of the process and explain how her or his views were considered. The feedback is a guarantee that the views of the child are not only heard as a formality, but are taken seriously.*

Where possible, children should be invited and supported to participate in follow-up processes, to take further action and to share their experiences of participation with peer groups, their local communities and other organisations.



### EXAMPLE

#### Follow-up actions after consulting with children

In Milan, Italy on the occasion of a special session of the City Council open to children, many children had expressed the desire to intervene on their school gardens. This led the Municipality of Milan to involve the city's children in a participatory path of planning, transforming and co-managing the renewal of nine school gardens in different areas of Milan. The [School Garden Project](#) involved 16 kindergartens and primary schools, the referred communities, the local councils and the technical sector, and aimed at improving the city's green resources by listening to children's priorities and promoting their sense of belonging.

The process lasted over three years, and children were involved in investigating the needs of their communities, formulating and choosing ideas, testing the chosen ideas in the field, and preparing the gardens with painting and planting. Once the gardens were open, children and families defined the rules of the garden's co-management and created the instruction panels that were placed in the different gardens.

Reports from participation activities can take many different forms. For maximum impact it is important to select formats that can speak to the 'audience' of the decision makers as well as involving children directly in their production. *Annex 2* provides advice on designing accessible information for children. As well as traditional written reports, there could be posters, stories, audio or video footage, drama, visual diagrams and summaries, exhibitions and maps. Feedback should contain the following information:

- ▶ A summary of children's views and recommendations.
- ▶ The action that has been planned and taken.
- ▶ Any response from decision makers and their agreed next steps.
- ▶ Plans for more follow-up action with decision makers.
- ▶ How children can be involved further follow up action.

Further follow-up actions that maintain momentum behind children's demands include children lobbying and doing social media campaigning to make sure that people are aware of the commitments that any decision makers have or have not made. The ongoing climate strike movement is an example of this.





## EXAMPLE

### Follow-up actions after children make demands

Globally children have been asking for action to reduce climate change, and the student strikes are an ongoing example of stating and restating demands using different actions and communication strategies at different times. For example, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, young climate activists organised virtual strikes in Poland on 3 April 2020, using the mobilising slogan: Wash your hands, but don't wash your hands of responsibility for the climate. This involved six actions:

- Take a photo with a banner / card containing hashtags. Post a photo on your social media and tag us!
- Hang the climate banner from the window or balcony, take a picture and put it on your social media.
- Check in to our event on Facebook! Follow us on our social media.
- Put our overlay on your FB profile picture! Share our posts on Instagram to how many people heard about our strike!
- Wash your hands, but do not give politicians wash their hands of responsibility for the climate!
- Join the protest group in your city!

See in Poland <https://www.msk.earth/strajk>

See also in Germany <https://fridaysforfuture.org/digital-strike-24th-april/>

Children may also become involved in the next stages of implementing decisions by taking part in groups or committees that use the evidence they have received from children to inform new policies or services. If possible, professionals should support children if they wish to follow up on the feedback and continue to press for improved services, greater respect for their rights, or reforms to legislation and policy. But professional engagement may be time limited. Windows of opportunity for change take time to be revealed. Creating large scale change is a long process and there are greater opportunities for change in some moments compared with others.

## 4.7 REVIEWING, REFLECTING AND STARTING AGAIN

The Handbook has emphasised the importance of reviewing, reflecting and learning from practice. Facilitators should consider how children are engaging in activities, whether future activities should be modified to be more inclusive, and which communication styles are being effective. Participating children should be encouraged to contribute. Professionals should ask children about their satisfaction with participatory processes and their views on how they could be improved. Here are some simple questions for professionals to reflect on with everyone involved:

- What did we want to achieve?
- What have we achieved so far?
- What are the challenges?
- What have we learned about what works?
- What else could we do?
- What are we proud of?
- What could be improved next time?

To evaluate group participation contexts in more detail, Save the Children's [Toolkit for monitoring and evaluating children's participation](#) provides useful guidance to those working with children on how to undertake participatory monitoring and evaluation and practical tools that can help gather the information needed at an organisational level.



## HINTS AND TIPS

### Practitioner's priorities for collective participation

Learning from other people's experience is beneficial. In the survey to prepare this Handbook, practitioners from across Europe, working in health, education, justice, and children and youth services, reflected on their own experiences of facilitating participation and identified the fellow practitioners who are working to ensure that children's participation is effective, inclusive and leads to change:

- Create supportive contexts: Children need to be seen as rights holders, and recognised as active and activist citizens.
- Aim to represent all children: Reflect, monitor and try to understand how representative those who are participating are and how more inclusive practice can be promoted.
- Think about time: Be aware that changes to policy may happen months or even years after the children participated.
- Create 'interpersonal processes of influence': Success is more likely when influence happens through liaison and co-ordination. If children do not have dialogue with decision makers, or contact is confrontational and adversarial, their views are less likely to have influence.
- Have a clear message for what changes the children are seeking and communicate this clearly to decision makers: Change is harder to achieve if goals are unclear or if nobody understands the organisational or policy landscape. It is helpful if decision makers provide information about possibilities for discussion and change.
- Increase awareness and understanding: Awareness raising helps create support for children's messages and this may lead to getting their concerns higher up the agenda. If dialogue does not bring about change, using mainstream and social media can help to raise awareness. Demonstrations and strikes combined with media publicity can ensure that at least people are aware of children's concerns.





## SECTION 5

# RESOURCES

**T**his final section of the Handbook contains information on additional resources to assist professionals working with children to implement children's right to be heard. The selection is organised thematically. All resources are available online and in English. Some publications are available in additional languages and this is noted where applicable.

### 5.1 LEGAL STANDARDS

#### Council of Europe

- ▶ [Recommendation CM/Rec \(2012\)2 on the participation of children and young people under the age of 18](#)
- ▶ [Recommendation CM/Rec \(2011\)12 on children's rights and social services friendly to children and families \(2011\)](#)
- ▶ [Guidelines of the Committee of Ministers on child-friendly health care \(2011\)](#)
- ▶ [Guidelines of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on child-friendly justice \(2010\)](#). Further resources [on child-friendly justice](#).
- ▶ [Recommendation CM/Rec \(2010\)7 on the Council of Europe Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education](#)
- ▶ [Recommendation 128 \(2003\) on the revised European Charter on the participation of the young people in local and regional life](#)

#### United Nations

- ▶ [General Comment No. 24 on Children's Rights in the Child Justice System \(2019\)](#). UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. Provides a contemporary consideration of the Convention to guide States towards a holistic implementation of child justice systems that promote and protect children's rights. Available in English, French, Spanish, Russian, as well as Chinese and Arabic.
- ▶ [General Comment No. 20 on the Implementation of the Rights of the Child during Adolescence \(2016\)](#). UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. Provides a contemporary consideration of the Convention to guide States on the legislation, policies and services needed to promote comprehensive adolescent development consistent with the realization of their rights. Available in English, French, Spanish, Russian, as well as Chinese and Arabic.
- ▶ [General Comment No. 14 on the Right of the Child to have his or her Best Interests taken as a primary consideration \(2013\)](#). UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. The main objective of this General Comment is to strengthen the understanding and application of the right of children to have their best interests assessed and taken as a primary consideration or, in some cases, the paramount consideration. Available in English, French, Spanish, Russian, as well as Chinese and Arabic.
- ▶ [General Comment No. 12 on The Rights of the Child to be Heard \(2009\)](#). UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. The General Comment provides more detailed interpretation and advice on the implementation of Article 12 for individual children and for groups of children. Available in English, French, Spanish and Arabic.

### 5.2 GUIDANCE ON AND EXAMPLES FOR CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION IN DIFFERENT SETTINGS OR WITH DIFFERENT GROUPS

- ▶ [When children take the lead: 10 child participation approaches to tackle violence \(2020\)](#) produced by the UN Special Representative on Violence Against Children, explores 10 examples of child participation practice that address violence against children in some way including online and offline consultations and opinion polls, research and data collection, mobilisation and advocacy. The review plays special attention to children's roles in the overall 'participation' experience and concludes that the most successful practice examples give children significant roles as designers and leaders and use peer-to-peer approaches.
- ▶ [Compendium on political participation of young people \(2019\)](#) prepared by the EU – Council of Europe Youth Partnership.

- ▶ [New and innovative forms of youth participation in decision-making processes](#) (2017) published by the Council of Europe. This publication includes a discussion on topical debates and developments around young people's participation in decision making at a European, national, regional and municipal level. It provides information on a selection of innovative youth participation projects in Europe including reviews on the impact of the initiatives and the lessons learned. Some of the case studies engage with children as well as youth.
- ▶ [Child and Youth Participation Toolkit](#) published by Tusla (Child and Family Agency), Ireland (2016). This toolkit offers a framework, and ways for professionals working in child protection and family support to support children's participation in decision making. It contains many examples of activities that can support participatory practice.
- ▶ [The Magic 6: Participatory action and learning experiences with Roma Youth](#) (2016). This is a co-created training manual funded by the European Commission and published by Babes-Boylai University. It provides examples of participatory activities and participatory projects with and by Roma children and young people.
- ▶ ["Why children's protection from violence must be at the heart of the Post-2015 Development Agenda"](#). Office of the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children (UN SRSG), New York (2014). A review of Consultations with Children on the Post-2015 Development Agenda.
- ▶ [The Right to be heard and participation of unaccompanied children: A tool to support the collection of children's views on protection and reception services](#) (2014). Published by CONNECT and funded by the European Commission.
- ▶ [Securing Children's Rights: A guide to professionals working in alternative care, \(2014\)](#) Published by the Council of Europe and SOS Children's Villages.
- ▶ [Children's Participation in Hospitals: a short introduction to the theory and practice of involving children in improving the quality of care](#) (2012). Commissioned by the Dutch Child and Hospital Foundation/ZorgBelang the Netherlands. The handbook explores children's participation in a hospital setting and outlines a number of methods for gathering children's views tested in Dutch Hospitals. It includes advice on data analysis and translating results to action.
- ▶ [Every child's right to be heard: A resource guide on the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child General Comment no.12](#) (2011) published by UNICEF and Save the Children. This guide provides detailed analysis on the implementation of article 12 in different settings including the state's obligations relating to judicial and administrative proceedings (including in public and private law and immigration and asylum proceedings). It provides practical help on implementation through examples of legislation and policy, guidelines for practitioners, evidence from research, and examples of meaningful participation in practice.
- ▶ [Valuing Children's Potential - How children's participation contributes to fighting poverty and social exclusion](#) (2010) published by Eurochild. This publication describes a selection of case studies modelling good practice around children's involvement in public decision making and contributing to the fight against child poverty and social exclusion. Models include children's national and regional parliaments and local level projects working with marginalised children and young people.

### 5.3 ACTIVITIES (COLLECTIVE PARTICIPATION)

- ▶ [We Are Here: A Child Participation Toolbox](#) (2020) co-produced by Eurochild and the Learning for Well-being Foundation. This publication offers a practical set of tools for those working with children to implement meaningful children's participation and encourage collaboration between generations. Throughout the six modules, the user is guided on how to run sessions and activities with children and adults on topics including participation, representation, facilitation and evaluation, whilst also giving explanations of different aspects of children's participation.
- ▶ [Children's Participation in Development Co-operation](#) (2019) published by the German Kindernothilfe. This booklet encourages 'taking off' on the journey of children's participation. Its chapters have been adapted to a child-friendly situation analysis tool – the Hot Air Balloon. This visual tool is usually used with children to analyse a challenge, set a goal, and explore strengths, risks and their mitigation. This publication can serve as an introduction to children's participation, and an adjustable guideline on children's participation in planning processes.
- ▶ [Partnerships for Participation: Handbook on child participation](#) (2015) published by International Falcon Movement-Socialist Educational International. This publication raises awareness of the importance of child participation and support educators to empower children to participate in decision making with tips and activities for children aged 13-18 years old. Available in English, French, Spanish and German.



- ▶ [ARC Foundation Module: Participation and Inclusion](#) (2014) published by Save the Children. This publication provides practical information, guidelines, training materials, inspiring case studies and participatory tools to support organisations and professionals working with children to engage with children as rights holders and social actors, supporting their participation in decision-making processes.
- ▶ [Participation Young Spice](#) (2010) published by Dynamix. This publication contains many tried and tested activities and tools for engaging children and young people and running creative and collaborative sessions.

## 5.4 ADVOCACY AND CHILD ACTIVISM

- ▶ [Youth Advocacy Toolkit](#) (2019) published by UNICEF UK. This toolkit is for any young person who wants to start their own advocacy campaign. If you are a teacher or a facilitator, you can also use this toolkit with your group to inspire them to work out which children's rights issues they care about and how to go about creating the change they want to see.
- ▶ [Advocacy Toolkit: Training Tool on engaging children in advocacy work on their right to participate in decision-making processes](#) (2018) published by Eurochild. This toolkit aims to support those working with children and young people and to engage them in advocating for children's right to participate in decision-making processes. It includes tools and methods to empower children to contribute to change in public decision making.
- ▶ [Children Human Rights Defenders: The views, perspectives and recommendations of children across the world](#) (2018). Child Rights Connect. This report was created in the frame of the project "Protecting and Empowering Children as Human Rights Defenders". It aims to present the direct voices of the 2,695 children who participated in the world-wide consultations.
- ▶ [Council of Europe resources on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education](#) (until 2017).
- ▶ [Compass](#) (2015) published by the Council of Europe. A resource of information, tools, tips and experiential learning activities for Human Rights Education with children and young people. Available in English and 10 other languages.
- ▶ [Have your say](#) (2015). Published by the Council of Europe to support local and regional authorities, youth organisations and young people who want to give young people a real say for a meaningful democratic youth participation.
- ▶ [Advocacy Toolkit](#) (2010) published by UNICEF. The Toolkit provides detailed steps, guidance and tools for developing and implementing a rights-based advocacy strategy. It includes a section on working with children and young people.

## 5.5 FURTHER TRAINING

- ▶ [SALTO Participation & Information's Resource Hub](#) is a resources pool hosted by SALTO Participation and Information Resource Centre (SALTO PI) The Participation Resource Pool provides trainers, youth workers, youth leaders and educators with access to online tools on media literacy training and innovative practice.
- ▶ [Supporting the Participation and Empowerment of Young Roma](#) (2016) is funded by the European Commission and published by Babes-Boylai University. This training resource for professionals who want to increase their skills in working with Roma communities. It provides top tips and reflective exercises.
- ▶ [Blast Off! Guide: Training on Children and Young People's participation](#) (2010), published by Save the Children. This guide has been developed to support organisations and individuals who want to deliver, or commission training intended to increase the participation of children and young people in decision making. It provides the agreed core elements of a training programme, key points for delivery and references to resources and support materials.

## 5.6 PARTICIPATORY INSTITUTIONS

- ▶ [Child-Friendly Cities](#), web resource published by UNICEF. UNICEF's Child Friendly Cities initiative (CFCI) promotes cities where the voices, needs, priorities and rights of children are an integral part of public policies, programmes and decisions. The website includes information on child-friendly city frameworks and schools, toolkits and directories of partner organisations and a bibliography.
- ▶ [Rights Respecting Schools Award](#), web resource administered by UNICEF UK supports schools to embed children's human rights in their ethos and culture. The award is based on principles of equality, dignity, respect, non-discrimination and participation. The initiative started in 2006 and schools involved in the Award have reported a positive impact on relationships and wellbeing, leading to better learning and behaviour, improved academic standards and less bullying.

- ▶ [Reggio Emilia approach](#), web resource promoting a child-centred and rights-based educational philosophy. The Reggio Emilia approach is an educational philosophy focused on pre-school and primary education. It uses self-directed and experiential learning. The program is based on the principles of respect, responsibility, and community.

## 5.7 MONITORING AND EVALUATION

- ▶ [Council of Europe Self-Assessment Tool for Youth Policy](#) (2018). Developed to help member states self-assess their compliance with the Council of Europe's standards for youth policy, and to serve as a basis for self-paced youth policy development.
- ▶ [Child Participation Assessment Tool](#) (2016) Council of Europe. The Assessment Tool offers a method, to facilitate and support the implementation of the child's right to participate. The Assessment Tool provides 10 basic indicators enabling states to: undertake a baseline assessment of current implementation of *The Recommendation on Participation*; help identify measures needed to achieve further compliance by states; and measure progress over time.
- ▶ [Toolkit for Monitoring and Evaluation](#) (2014). Published by Save the Children, UNICEF, Concerned for Working Children and Plan International. The toolkit provides a conceptual framework for measuring children's participation, together with guidance on how to undertake monitoring and evaluation and practical tools that can help you gather the information you need. It can be used by organisations working directly with children, by child- and youth-led organisations, and by governments that are committed to fulfilling their obligations to respect children's right to participate.

## 5.8 UNDERPINNING THEORY

- ▶ Larkins C. (2019) Excursions as Corporate Agents: A Critical Realist Account of Children's Agency. *Childhood* 26(4) 414–429. Cath Larkins conceptualises participation as a rolling process which produces change when children have opportunities to reflect on their experiences, set agendas and direct the use of resources. [See article here](#) and The Magic Six Training Manual above.
- ▶ Larkins, C., Kiili, J., & Palsanen, K. (2014). A lattice of participation: reflecting on examples of children's and young people's collective engagement in influencing social welfare policies and practices. *European Journal of Social Work*, 17(5), 718–736. Larkins et al lattice model shows how children's influence goes up and down within a participatory process, and that different children have different forms of influence at different times. [See summary here](#).
- ▶ Lansdown, G. (2009). The realisation of children's participation rights: Critical reflections. In Thomas, N. and Percy Smith, B. *A handbook of children and young people's participation* (pp. 33–45). London: Routledge. Gerison Lansdown describes three levels of influence in more detail here: [Chapter 1](#).
- ▶ Lundy, L. (2007). 'Voice' is not enough: conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. *British Educational Research Journal*, 33(6), 927–942. Laura Lundy conceptualises participation as Space, Voice, Audience and Influence, this has influenced the development of the [National strategy on children and young people's participation in decision-making](#) (see page 20/21 for a summary of the Lundy Model).

## 5.9 OTHER

- ▶ [Conceptual Framework for Measuring Outcomes of Adolescent Participation](#) (2018). Published by UNICEF elaborates what is meant by participation, what it comprises, the enabling conditions for its realisation and criteria for quality participation, before seeking to identify the critical outcomes against which participation can be measured from the perspective of an adolescent. This paper, which is the result of a process involving global consultations with adult experts in the field of participation, proposes a framework to facilitate that goal.
- ▶ [National strategy on children and young people's participation in decision-making](#) (2015–2020) Department of Children and Youth Affairs, Ireland. Example of a national child participation strategy primarily aimed at children and young people under the age of 18, but also including the voice of young people in transition to adulthood up to the age of 24.

- ▶ [National children and young people's participation standards self-assessment pack](#) (2008), developed in Wales, provides guidance for managers and practitioners on how to go about a self-assessment against a set of national standards. It includes advice on involving children as 'young inspectors'.
- ▶ [UNICEF Child and Youth Participation Resource Guide](#) (2007) provides a catalogue of publications with detailed guidance on the practicalities of promoting children's participation.
- ▶ [The Evolving Capacities of the Child](#) (2005) published by UNICEF. This classic publication explores the principle of a child's 'evolving capacities' and the implications for practice in children's participation. Traditional assumptions about child development are challenged and different approaches to assessing children's capacities are described.



## Annex 1

# THE NINE BASIC REQUIREMENTS FOR EFFECTIVE AND ETHICAL PARTICIPATION: THE IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

---

### 1. Requirement One: Participation is transparent and informative

Children must be given information about their right to participate in a child-friendly and accessible format.

**This means in practice that:**

- ▶ Children's participation has a clear purpose.
- ▶ Children understand how much impact they are able to have on decision making.
- ▶ The roles and responsibilities of those involved are clear and well understood.
- ▶ Children agree with the goals and targets associated with their participation.

### 2. Requirement Two: Participation is voluntary

Children must be able to choose whether or not they would like to participate and must be informed and able to withdraw from activities at any time.

**This means in practice that:**

- ▶ Children are given time to consider their involvement and are able to provide informed consent.
- ▶ Children are aware and are able to withdraw at any time they wish.
- ▶ Children's other commitments are respected and accommodated (e.g. work and school).

### 3. Requirement Three: Participation is respectful

Children should be treated with respect and provided with opportunities to express their views freely and initiate ideas. Staff should also respect, and gain an understanding of, the family, school and cultural context of children's lives.

**This means in practice that:**

- ▶ Children are able to freely express their views and are treated with respect.
- ▶ Where children are selected as representatives, the process will be based on principles of democracy and avoid discrimination.
- ▶ Ways of working build self-esteem and confidence, enabling children to feel that they have valid experience and views to contribute.
- ▶ Support from staff should be utilised to gain respect for children by other key duty bearers.

#### 4. Requirement Four: Participation is relevant

Participation should build on children's own knowledge and focus on issues which are relevant to their lives and the local context.

**This means in practice that:**

- ▶ Activities that children are involved in are of real relevance to their experiences, knowledge and abilities.
- ▶ Participation approaches and methods build on local knowledge and practices.
- ▶ Children are involved in setting the criteria for selection and representation for participation.
- ▶ Children are involved in ways, at levels and at a pace appropriate to their capacities and interests.

#### 5. Requirement Five: Participation is child-friendly

Child-friendly approaches should be used to ensure children are well prepared for their participation and are able to contribute meaningfully to activities. Participation approaches and methods should be designed or adapted based on children's ages and abilities.

**This means in practice that:**

- ▶ Time and resources are made available for quality participation and children are properly supported to prepare for it.
- ▶ Methods of involvement are developed in partnership or in consultation with children.
- ▶ Adults have the capacity to support and ensure child-friendly approaches and ways of working.
- ▶ Meeting places and activity locations are child-friendly.
- ▶ Children are given accessible information in child-friendly formats.

#### 6. Requirement Six: Participation is inclusive

Children's participation must provide opportunities for children in vulnerable situations to be involved and should challenge existing patterns of discrimination.

**This means in practice that:**

- ▶ Children are not discriminated against because of age, race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status.
- ▶ Children's involvement aims to include children from all backgrounds, which could mean reaching out to children in their local community.
- ▶ Participation is flexible enough to respond to the needs, expectations and situations of different groups of children.
- ▶ The age range, gender and abilities of children are taken into account.
- ▶ Staff must be sensitive to the cultures of all children participating.



## 7. Requirement Seven: Participation is supported by training for adults

Staff must have the knowledge and capacity to facilitate meaningful children's participation.

### **This means in practice that:**

- ▶ All staff and managers are sensitised to children's participation, understand its importance and the need for commitment to it.
- ▶ Staff are provided with appropriate training, tools and other opportunities in participatory practice.
- ▶ Staff are effectively supported and supervised, and participatory practice is evaluated.
- ▶ Staff are able to express any views or anxieties about involving children, with the expectation that these will be addressed in a constructive way.
- ▶ Specific technical skills or expertise is built up through a combination of recruitment, selection, staff development and practice exchange.
- ▶ Relations between individual staff, and between staff and management, model appropriate behaviour, treating each other with respect and honesty.

## 8. Requirement Eight: Safe and sensitive to risk

Adults working with children have a duty of care. Staff must take every precaution to minimise the risks to children of abuse and exploitation and any other negative consequences of participation.

### **This means in practice that:**

- ▶ The protection rights of children are paramount in the way children's participation is planned and organised.
- ▶ Children involved in participation work are aware of their right to be safe from abuse and know where to go for help if needed.
- ▶ Skilled, knowledgeable staff are delegated to address and coordinate child protection issues during participatory processes.
- ▶ Safeguards are in place to minimise risks and prevent abuse.
- ▶ Staff organising a participatory process have a child protection strategy that is specific to each process. The strategy must be well communicated and understood by staff.
- ▶ Staff recognise their legal and ethical responsibilities in line with their agency's Code of Conduct and Child Safeguarding Policy.
- ▶ Child protection procedures recognise the particular risks faced by some children and extra barriers they face in obtaining help.
- ▶ Consent is obtained for the use of all information provided by children and information identified as confidential is safeguarded at all times.
- ▶ A formal complaints procedure is set up to allow children involved in participatory activities to make complaints in confidence. Information about the procedure is available in relevant languages and formats.
- ▶ No photographs, videos or digital images of a child can be taken or published without that child's explicit consent for a specific use.
- ▶ Responsibilities relating to liability, safety, travel and medical insurance are clearly delegated and effectively planned for.

## 9. Requirement Nine: Participation is accountable

Following their participation, children must be provided with feedback and/or follow up regarding: how their views have been interpreted and used; how they have influenced any outcomes; and where appropriate the opportunity for them to be involved in follow-up processes and activities.

### **This means in practice that:**

- ▶ Children are involved in the work of relevant organisations at the earliest possible stage.
- ▶ Staff and partners are accountable to children for their commitments.
- ▶ Children are supported to participate in follow-up and evaluation processes.
- ▶ Children are supported to share their experiences of participation with peer groups, their local communities and other organisations.
- ▶ Children are given rapid and clear feedback on their involvement, impact, outcomes and next steps.
- ▶ Feedback reaches all children involved.
- ▶ Children are asked about their satisfaction with participatory processes and their views on how they could be improved.
- ▶ Mistakes identified through evaluations are acknowledged and commitments given about how lessons learnt will be used to improve participatory processes in the future.

## Annex 2

## PRODUCING ACCESSIBLE INFORMATION: GUIDANCE

**T**hroughout children's participation processes communication has to be accessible and understandable. The best way to make sure your information materials will be understood by children is to involve them in designing, writing and testing it out on others. There are a range of ways of providing accessible information (including feedback) to children.

Written documents are one way (as long as they are written in age-appropriate language). If you write things remember to add pictures and colour. But also think about other ways of communicating such as:

- ▶ Posters.
- ▶ Power point presentations.
- ▶ Comic books/cartoons.
- ▶ Audio and Video and online content including Blogs and Vlogs.
- ▶ Music.
- ▶ Digital storytelling (using photographs & voiceovers).
- ▶ Drama.
- ▶ Workshops and events.

In many cases the best solution may be a combination of products. Consider, for example: a leaflet and a film, or a poster, comic book and blog. The best solution will depend on different factors. Those working with children should consider these key questions when preparing information:

Question	Considerations
What is your overall aim?	For example, is the aim to inform, inspire, generate ideas, raise questions or feedback to children about how their views were considered and taken into account in the decision-making process?
Who are your target audience(s)?	Which age group? Is it all children within an age group or is it a particular group?
What is your budget? What resources are required?	Consider initial and ongoing costs. What staff resources do you have?
Time constraints?	What is realistic and practical in the time scale you have?
What information?	What information do children say they need? What do you want to find out? What feedback do children expect?
How can children be involved?	How can children and young people be involved in the design and creation of the product?
If advised - can you use the technology and online spaces that children use to communicate?	For example, subtitles or extra voiceovers for DVDs for those with visual or hearing impairments are possible, though with an additional cost. The combination of visual images and speech can improve understanding for those with learning disabilities.
How can you use technology to improve inclusion?	

## Annex 3

## ENSURING SAFETY AND WELL-BEING: A CHECKLIST

**O**ne of the nine basic requirements for effective and ethical children's participation is that it is safe and sensitive to risk (see Annex 1 for information on all of the nine basic requirements contained in the *UN General Comment 12*). Adults working with children have a duty of care. Staff must take every precaution to minimise the risks to children of abuse and exploitation and any other negative consequences of participation. Children should enjoy the experience and feel that they benefit in some way.

Making sure that the activities are safe for everyone requires forethought in the preparation and planning stage, this checklist can help organisers think through what should be in place:

### As you prepare your organisation

- ▶ Does your organisation have:
  - a child safeguarding policy
  - risk assessment process
  - contacts with organisations or staff that can provide practical and emotional support to children on any arising issues
  - a code of conduct for how staff and accompanying adults are expected to behave when working with children?
  - a formal complaints procedure that allows children involved in participatory activities to make complaints in confidence?
  - media (including photography and social media) use with and by children?
- ▶ Do these cover the sort of activity you are planning?
- ▶ Are there accessible versions of information about safeguarding, support, conduct and complaints?
- ▶ Do staff have relevant safeguarding training?

### Before you start an activity

- ▶ Have you conducted a risk assessment and put in place a plan to minimise risks to children?
- ▶ Have you identified the skilled, knowledgeable staff who are delegated to address and coordinate child protection and wellbeing issues during this participatory process? Are they clear of their roles and responsibilities?
- ▶ Are responsibilities relating to liability and comfort - safety, travel and medical insurance, food and catering - clearly delegated and effectively planned for?
- ▶ Have you communicated information about the activity, safeguarding and support to all who will be involved?
- ▶ Have you obtained consent from all relevant parties?

### At the start and during the activity

With children and the adults involved, have you gone over and made sure you all have a shared understanding of:

- The way you will be working together or 'ground rules' and any expectations?
- Consent to take part and how confidentiality will be protected?
- Rights to be safe and how to raise concerns and who too?
- When concerns about a child will have to be shared with other professionals?
- Who can offer support with practical and emotional issues?
- How children can take time out or decide to withdraw their participation?
- How photographs, videos or digital images can be taken or published, including for professional and personal purposes?
- The implication of media and social media coverage for any children involved, including from accidental inclusion of the event or livestreaming.

### At the end of the activity

- ▶ Have you reminded everyone of how to raise concerns and who can offer on-going support with practical and emotional issues?
- ▶ Have you explained how children can review any of the ways in which they might be represented in outputs from the event?
- ▶ Have you communicated any concerns to the relevant people?
- ▶ Have you evaluated how you can learn from the activity to improve safeguarding in the future?

## Annex 4

## CHALLENGING DISCRIMINATION: IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

**T**he principle of non-discrimination, which is a cross cutting principle of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Children and a key element of the Council of Europe Recommendation on Participation, has two important implications for professionals working with children.

- ▶ Children should not be treated differently just because of one or more of their characteristics.
- ▶ Some children may require a different approach because of their needs or abilities so that they can benefit from the same opportunities as other children.

Both aspects are important in ensuring that children are able to access the same rights, opportunities and privileges. Special efforts are therefore required to ensure that all children are supported to participate in public decision making. Discrimination can be challenged by reaching out and making participation processes more accessible and inclusive to children in vulnerable situations. Here are a few suggestions of successful strategies identified by practitioners across Europe:

- ▶ Use clear and accessible language that children can understand and a range of communication methods that they use and can relate to.
- ▶ Publicise the ways that children can get engaged, including in places that they frequent (online and offline).
- ▶ Audit participation activities to remove barriers and ensure they are accessible to children from a range of different circumstances. For example, whether transport costs can be reimbursed promptly, whether buildings are physically accessible to wheelchairs, whether interpreters are available to support children who have newly arrived in the country.
- ▶ Use multiple methods to engage and support children's participation not just 'one' way.
- ▶ Be strategic. Monitor who is coming and who is not and work at encouraging or finding ways to engage others.
- ▶ Get advice from children and young people.
- ▶ Create opportunities for reflection and evaluation to build an evidence base of what approaches work best with particular populations in particular contexts.
- ▶ Experiment with a range of methods. Explore how best to deploy capacity building programmes to enhance engagement with children from under-represented groups. For example, training for staff and volunteers working with children; training for children; establishing quality mentoring programmes. Work with children should be delivered in spaces that they find safe and accessible with the longer term aim of establishing an integrated approach.



## Annex 5

## EXPLAINING CHILDREN'S ROLE IN MEETINGS AND PROCEEDINGS: A CHECKLIST

**W**hen children are involved in decision making: in their day-to-day lives in meetings, interviews, hearings and proceedings. They need to have good information to help them understand and support their engagement with the process. Check that you have ways (both written and by talking), consistent with their age and maturity, to enable children to know and understand the following:

- ▶ Children's rights in your setting, and rights specific to any proceedings or hearings?
- ▶ How children's rights to be heard will be implemented?
- ▶ How your setting or system works, and the roles of all the different professionals?
- ▶ What children may be involved in at different times and different procedural steps?
- ▶ What options children have about this involvement, and possible consequences of these options inside or outside your setting, meeting or hearing?
- ▶ What representation is available for children (for example, advocates who will speak on their behalf)?
- ▶ What protection is available to for children (for example, possibilities for anonymity)?
- ▶ What practical arrangements are and how they can be influenced:
  - how, when and where any meetings or hearings will take place
  - who will be present
  - how long it will last
  - the format of the meeting
  - what information will be discussed or any charges or allegations made
  - what degree of privacy and confidentiality will apply
  - who will be allowed to speak
  - how children's views will be taken into account
  - when any decisions will be made and by whom
  - how decisions will be communicated to children.
- ▶ What services are available (for example, health, psychological or social, or organisations that can provide support), and how to access them?
- ▶ How and when decisions will be reviewed and how to request a reviewed decision?
- ▶ How to make and follow up a complaint and how complaints will be dealt with?

Providing the parents or legal guardians with the information is not an alternative to communicating the information to a child. In many circumstances, both the child and the parents or legal guardians should receive the information.

*Adapted from a checklist in UNICEF/Save the Children (2011) [Every child's right to be heard: A resource guide on the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child General Comment no.12](#)*

## Annex 6

## COMMUNICATING WITH CHILDREN: A CHECKLIST

**H**earing a child's views on matters that are important to them and involving children in decision making means talking and listening; it involves getting to know the child and earning their trust. It is a process. To be understood by children, professionals have to be careful about language and how they present information. The three best ways of promoting understanding are to:

- ▶ Make things simple. Be careful about the words you use. Avoid jargon and long sentences.
- ▶ Use a variety of communication techniques.
- ▶ Regularly check with the child, or children on their (and your) understandings of what's going on.

Use this checklist to guide reflections on your practice when communicating with children in your setting:

### Do you ensure that?

- ▶ The child understands who you are, what you are trying to say or what you are trying to ask.
- ▶ You demonstrate respect for the child.
- ▶ You are listening to them and taking them seriously.
- ▶ You are ensuring that decision makers get to hear and understand the child's wishes and feelings.
- ▶ You do what you say you will do.
- ▶ You continue the dialogue with the child and tell them what happens next and how their wishes have been taken into account.

### Connecting with children is enabled when:

- ▶ Children are involved throughout any process, and understand it.
- ▶ Children receive the information you have prepared, in a form they can understand and with time to discuss it.
- ▶ Children's questions are listened to and they are encouraged to express concerns.
- ▶ Children see clear evidence of their preferences and needs being taken into account in any final decisions.
- ▶ Children remain informed about what is happening and why things are happening in this way.

## Annex 7

# PREPARING FOR COLLECTIVE PARTICIPATION: KEY QUESTIONS CONSIDER

---

### What are your aims and objectives?

- ▶ Do you want to facilitate children's involvement in order to improve specific practices, services or policies or as an end in itself?
- ▶ Can you also allow space for children to discuss matters that concern them?
- ▶ Are you and your organisation making a commitment to taking action in response to children's participation?

### Who could be involved?

- ▶ Who are the children who should be given opportunities to be involved in collective participation activities in your setting?
- ▶ Who are the other adults who could be involved to help support your collective participation activity?
- ▶ How can you ensure that everyone involved has a good understanding of, and commitment to, the principles and nine basic requirements of effective and ethical children's participation (See [Annex 1](#) for information on all of the nine basic requirements contained in the UN General Comment No 12)?

### How can you ensure children's views result in action:

- ▶ Do you have the high-level support of your organisation, as well as of colleagues, managers, partner organisations, community members, policy makers?
- ▶ Are there ongoing processes within your organisation that you can use to help children's views influence decision making?
- ▶ If you are supporting children's activism, consider how your organisation can help amplify children's concerns, for example, by giving them access to your networks and making statements of support.

### What resources can you secure?

- ▶ What time is required and how much time have you got? Are timescales long enough to enable children to express informed views and to include children who are seldom heard?
- ▶ What practical resources can be made available in kind (for example: space, refreshments, technology and/or creative materials)?
- ▶ What funding can you access to cover additional costs (for example, refreshments, administration, and communication activities)?

## Annex 8

## SUPPORTING FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND ASSOCIATION: A CHECKLIST

**T**he Council of Europe Recommendation on children's participation clearly states that,

*Children and young people who exercise their right to freely express their views must be protected from harm including intimidation, reprisals, victimisation and violation of their right to privacy.*

Think through how to support this aspect of children's participation, and how to promote protection for children and their rights, by working through this checklist:

- ▶ Does your organisation have a public statement or policy on children's rights to expression, association and self-advocacy?
- ▶ Does this public statement or policy on children's rights to expression, association and self-advocacy:
  - Provide rights to set up groups, meet, express concerns, publish ideas and engage in other types of campaigns and activism?
  - Cover protection of children from harm including intimidation, reprisals, victimisation and violation of their right to privacy?
  - Explain any limits on children's right to freedom of expression, including the obligation to respect the rights of other children and adults and their freedom of expression?
  - Outline how children can be protected from and complain about any unfair treatment received when exercising their rights?
- ▶ Does your organisation effectively communicate its public statement or policy on children's rights to expression, association and self-advocacy – to children, parents and other professionals?

If you answer 'no' or 'don't know' to any part of these questions, consider how you and your organisation can help establish or improve this situation, to promote and protect children's rights.

In any case, consider how to connect with children in contact with your organisation to find out whether they feel they have your support for their rights, their concerns and their protection when expressing their views. There may be additional spaces, networks and resources that you could provide to promote their rights and protect their interests.

For an example of a school children's union see an example from [Norway](#). For a public statement of freedoms, limitations and resources for high school students' rights, see the French Government [website](#).



Since coming into force over 30 years ago, Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child has affirmed children's right to express their views on all matters that affect them. The Council of Europe has sought to make this right real and concrete in the member states through its Recommendation CM/Rec(2012)2 on the participation of children and young people under the age of 18, and has also embedded child participation in its own standard-setting, monitoring and capacity building work as well as at its international events. This Handbook represents a substantive contribution to the Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2016 to 2021) promoting child participation under its second priority area.

The Handbook was produced by the Children's Rights Division of the Council of Europe in collaboration with international child participation experts and following the consultation of more than 50 children and young people on the challenges to be addressed.

It is meant to be a hands-on tool for people who work with children in a professional capacity, for example in schools, hospitals, alternative care settings, child protection services, and other social services. It is designed for social workers, teachers, judges, lawyers, immigration officers, psychologists, civil servants, youth workers and day care workers, offering them practical approaches to "do" children's participation and make it work for all children, including those in vulnerable situations, both at an individual and a collective level.

Professionals using this Handbook are invited to improve their capacities and skills to "listen" to children, to "act" upon the lessons learned and to "change" any decision making involving or concerning children. They are also invited to spread the good practice promoted through this tool and thus, in the end, to make a life-changing impact for children in those contexts where decisions are made without truly listening to them.

**[www.coe.int](http://www.coe.int)**

The Council of Europe is the continent's leading human rights organisation. It comprises 47 member states, including all members of the European Union. All Council of Europe member states have signed up to the European Convention on Human Rights, a treaty designed to protect human rights, democracy and the rule of law. The European Court of Human Rights oversees the implementation of the Convention in the member states.