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Young people's participation

Participation is a process; children will only be able to participate actively in a climate that encourages their on-going involvement and empowerment.

Children have a right to participate. Professionals have a responsibility to facilitate this. However, especially if it is to involve all children, participation can be challenging, in both principle and in practice. Children can participate in many ways - in matters that affect them personally or those that relate to children in need or to all young citizens. This briefing refers to research on all these aspects, drawing particularly on the views of children themselves.

The QP Objectives refer to all users, carers, children and families requiring support from social services. While this paper focuses on children, many of the principles and practices promoting their participation are equally applicable to participation by families and other service users. For the sake of brevity, we use the term children throughout.

WHY IS PARTICIPATION IMPORTANT?

The reasons for encouraging children's participation have been presented in various ways and can be summarised as:

- to uphold children's rights: children are citizens and service users and share the same fundamental rights to participate as others
- to fulfil legal responsibilities: the right of children to be consulted is included in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Children Act 1989, Best Value Framework, Children's Service's Plans Guidance
- to improve services: consulting with children enables services to be improved and adapted to meet changing needs, that children can help define; participation gives them a level of influence and an element of choice about the provision offered and can help them understand their own wants and needs
- to improve decision-making: participation leads to more accurate, relevant decisions, which are better informed and more likely to be implemented
- to enhance democratic processes: representative democracy can be strengthened as children gain new opportunities and are helped to become active members of their community
- to promote children's protection: participation is an important aid to protection; a recurring theme of successive inquiries into abuse has been the failure to listen to children
- to enhance children's skills: participation helps in developing skills useful for debate, communication, negotiation, prioritisation and decision-making
- to empower and enhance self-esteem: effective participation can provide a sense of self-efficacy and raise self-esteem.

Objective 8: actively to involve users and carers in planning services and in tailoring individual packages of care; and to ensure

effective mechanisms are in place to handle complaints.

sub-objective 8.1: to demonstrate that the views of children and families are actively sought and used in the planning, delivery and review of services.

WHAT IS MEANT BY PARTICIPATION?

First, we need to distinguish between participation in matters that affect children as individuals and those that relate to them as a group.

Children’s participation in decisions that affect them as individuals requires a child-centred approach. This implies taking account of their wishes and feelings and including the child’s perspective in all matters. This is on-going and requires continuous dialogue but may also be exercised around procedures such as assessment, care planning and reviews, child protection conferences, care or adoption proceedings, Family Group Conferences and complaints.

Participation in matters that relate to children as a group can be through the identification, development, provision, monitoring and evaluation of services and policy. They may be involved in consultation exercises, in research, as respondents, advisers or as young researchers, as part of a management committee, advisory group or community initiative or in delivering services by acting as mentors, counsellors, volunteers or workers.

Second, the level and nature of participation varies. Participation can mean taking part in or being present at or it can mean knowing that one’s actions and views are being noted and may be acted upon - leading to empowerment. Several typologies of participation have been developed that illustrate this. These ‘ladders of participation’ are adapted from Arnstein and relate to situations specific to children. They highlight the level of involvement and hence empowerment achieved by different styles of participation.

Arnstein (1969)	Thoburn, Lewis Shemmings (1995)	Hart (1997)	Shier (2000)
Citizen control	Delegated power Involvement in service design	Child-initiated, shared decisions with adults	Children share power and responsibility for decision making
Delegated power		Child-initiated and directed	
Partnership	Partnership Participation	Adult-initiated, shared decisions with adults	Children are involved in decision making processes
Placation	Involvement Consultation	Consulted and informed	Children’s views are taken into account
Consultation	Keeping fully informed	Assigned but informed	Children are supported in expressing their views
		Tokenism	Children are listened to
Therapy	Placation	Decoration	
Manipulation	Manipulation	Manipulation	

Evaluation of the second round of Quality Protects Management Action Plans (MAPs) shows increasing social services department activity. However, this is patchy; much remains to be done, particularly to involve children in their own care. Fewer than a third of first MAPs made specific reference to involving children with disabilities; initial analysis of second MAPs indicates a marked improvement.

PARTICIPATION IN MATTERS AFFECTING INDIVIDUAL CHILDREN

Children's contact with social services occurs in a variety of circumstances: through support in the community, through assessment of their needs, through being looked after, in court proceedings, or in pre- and post adoption work. Much of the research evidence relates to their participation in specific meeting or forums.

Assessment

The child's perspective is crucial to assessment of their needs, their wishes and feelings, their understanding of past events, their ideas about what should happen in the future. This view is clearly expressed in the Department of Health Guidance on the Assessment Framework. There is a growing body of research highlighting the validity of the child's contribution. Crucial to the child's effective participation is the professional's skill in communication. Children in contact with social services are vulnerable; expressing opinions, talking about their families can raise emotional difficulties. Effective participation requires this to be acknowledged.

Care planning and reviews

The Children Act 1989 requires local authorities to draw up care plans for each child looked after and to review them regularly. It also requires that the views of the child are sought before any decision is made. There is evidence that children are increasingly involved in the process although less so in the case of children with disabilities and younger children.

Consulting children on their wishes and feelings Most children are consulted about their care plan, although range and depth are limited. This is less likely to happen for children with disabilities, especially learning difficulties; very few children under five are consulted. The quality of consultation is improved by the use of good consultation forms or other tools and by support in using them.

Attendance at review meetings Overall a majority of children are invited to and do attend their review (55% of all children); this varies significantly by age - in one study, 37% of children aged eight or younger were invited, compared to 84% of children aged twelve or older.

Active participation While the level of active participation varies, there is evidence that it was achieved at some point in around half of all meetings. However children with severe communications difficulties were often excluded from participating as professionals lacked skills, training and confidence to elicit their wishes and feelings.

Supporters While the guidance encourages enabling children to bring supporters or independent advocates, it very rarely happens.

Feedback There is evidence that only about a third of children receive a copy of their care plan.

Child protection case conferences

Children are rarely involved in early decisions around child protection and are given little information about the process; invitations to children to attend child protection conferences are increasing but it is not yet common practice. Where local authorities actively encourage attendance, children responded positively. In one study 80% of children, mostly aged twelve or over, attended.

Family Group Conferences

FGCs have been introduced as a model of decision-making that empowers children and families and reduces the role of the state. Research suggests

that FGCs have increased empowerment through participation (measured as ‘contribution to planning’ and ‘influence over outcome’) and provides some evidence that the least powerful members of the family group, especially children, do feel able to participate and to influence decisions. Evaluation of FGC pilots indicates that the rate of attendance by children is very similar to that at review meetings; 81% of those aged ten and over. Current evidence suggests that FGCs are as likely as other methods of decision making to protect the child in the short term, but less evidence is available about the long term impact on the child’s well being.

CHILDREN’S EXPERIENCE OF PARTICIPATION IN PLANNING

The views of children on their participation in any of these forms of planning tell a similar story.

- Children see their participation as important. They consider it their right to see and be seen, to hear and be heard.
- They often find the experience uncomfortable and are sceptical about its value.
- They feel ill prepared for participation at meetings: not knowing who will be present; what will be discussed; what will happen afterwards; when and how to speak; how to say what they really feel, especially when it concerns other people who are present in the room.
- Children report that by and large, they feel they are listened to, but that what they say has little effect on the outcome.

COMPLAINTS

The *Children Act 1989* for the first time gave children the right to make complaints about the service they receive from social services. Complaints procedures can offer children protection, demonstrate their right to be consulted, enable them to participate in problem solving and decision-making and contribute to improved service provision. The DH Guidance details the stages of the process and suggests that complaints procedures should satisfy certain principles: they should be accessible to users and carers; be understood by staff; they should guarantee a prompt and considered response and provide a strong problem-solving element. There is evidence that while social services departments are improving in all these aspects there is still a considerable way to go.

Accessibility There is an increase in the proportion of children who report knowing about complaints procedure but many are still unaware (one study reports that 38% of children are unaware); this is greater among those in foster rather than in residential care, among those with disabilities and for younger children.

Staff understanding Inspections, as well as research, have identified a continuing need for staff training and support, especially in dealing with complaints at the ‘informal’ stage.

Prompt response Only a minority of complaints are dealt with within the required 28 days (various studies suggest between 8% and 27%). Staff think the time scale unrealistic; for users the length of time taken is a major source of dissatisfaction.

Problem-solving The Guidance supports the resolution of problems early, informally and at the point of service delivery. Research suggests this can inhibit access to formal procedures, is poorly monitored, and lacks clarity for staff and users.

what helps

WHAT HELPS IN PARTICIPATION BY CHILDREN AS INDIVIDUALS?

Actively involving children is a continuous process facilitated by a participatory culture. Children will only be able to participate in formal processes in a climate that encourages involvement when they participate in the small as well as the big decisions and when they feel empowered. Empowering children may require adults to rethink how they share their power. It does not mean that children must carry responsibility for decision-making that properly belongs to professionals.

Children's participation will be enhanced when adults:

- **Inform the child** To be active participants children need to know about systems and processes and to have information in a form that is relevant to them.
- **Consult the child** At its best, consultation is continuous dialogue. Children are able to express their views more fully when they are given appropriate tools and supported in their use and when adults exercise good communication skills, for example express themselves simply and clearly and use familiar concepts. Many children in contact with social services are vulnerable through their past, possibly traumatic, experiences. They may have strong emotions or ambivalent feelings they find difficult to express. Useful resources include those produced by NSPCC and The Children's Society.
- **Prepare the child** One of the strongest messages from children is the need to be better prepared. They want to be told the purpose of the meeting beforehand: what is going to happen, what will be discussed, what the social worker or carer will say and who will be attending. A training pack designed for young people aged ten and over is available. Adults also need to be prepared; see, for example, the resource pack by Children in Wales aimed at staff working with children in middle years.
- **Take account of the child's agenda** Consultation must be flexible enough to address the issues most pertinent to the child - which may be very different from those that most concern the professional. The child's agenda may also include opinions on the best time and place to meet - for example not in school hours, or at a foster home where their own parents may feel uncomfortable.
- **Consider the child's needs** Children with disabilities or for whom English is not the first language may have special language needs and require a translator. Disabled children can experience difficulties with physical access and/or have problems communicating their views. Ensure there is someone who understands how they communicate and that they have access to a communication system that suits their needs, and to independent facilitators.
- **Facilitate use of independent support** Many children would benefit from support from friends, advocates or independent supporters. This requires active encouragement by both caseworkers and managers. Independent advocates or Children's Rights Officers are an important source of support to children individually and as a group. Standards

for advocacy services will be published this year. Similarly, children may gain support from local or national groups, such as 'in care' groups, National Voice in England or Voices From Care in Wales.

- **Rethink the style and nature of meetings** Given the strong evidence that children take their role in decision making seriously but find current practice unhelpful, promoting active participation means rethinking the style and nature of meetings. Are they trying to serve too many purposes? Can they be broken down into smaller, more focused occasions? Ensure that children's ideas contribute to this rethinking.
- **Treat children with respect** Children say they feel ignored, bored, put on the spot or talked about as if they were not there. They get irritated by ritualistic questions. They are intimidated by large meetings, especially when they don't know everyone there. Meeting Chairs need to act to address these worries.
- **Give feedback** Children express great anxiety about what happens after consultations or meetings; they need to have clear, speedy feedback in a concrete form. They need to be kept informed about the progress of a complaint or the implementation of a decision. Only through feedback and receipt of a record of what has happened are they empowered to monitor subsequent implementation.

WHAT HELPS IN PARTICIPATION IN MATTERS THAT RELATE TO CHILDREN AS A GROUP?

Increasingly, local authorities are involving children in service and policy development. A central issue is to find a balance between creating an attractive process that engages young people, and achieving valid and reliable data. Currently, a wide range of methods is being used, with different advantages and disadvantages. They include interviewing, focus groups, questionnaires, 'talk-shops', young citizen's panels, ongoing group work, peer-led research, websites, art and drama work. Many factors have been identified as assisting creative, useful and enjoyable participation.

Prepare thoroughly

- Clarify the purpose, aims and objectives - taking into account resources available.
- Have clear parameters about how much power and decision-making will (or can) be shared with children. Be honest.
- Be clear and realistic about the extent and possibility of change.
- Consider who should take part. Is a representative sample of service users required? How can you include non-users of services? Have you included children not traditionally involved: those in foster care, those placed outside the local authority, those in residential special schools, black and minority ethnic children, children with disabilities.
- Which method(s) would most suit the purpose and participants? A variety of methods usually guarantees better information. Involve children in deciding this.
- Draw up an ethical statement, clarifying issues around consent (by children/parents), confidentiality, anonymity and disclosure.

what helps

- Should you consider developing a contract of participation? Will it include rewards?
- In planning, allow enough time to build up trust and rapport.
- Ensure staff or facilitators have necessary skills.
- Consider the long-term. This type of participation tends to be one-off exercises dealing with specific issues. Think how to establish more permanent channels for consultation and communication.

Think about recruitment

- Have accessible information available about what is going to happen, what will be discussed, and who will be taking part. First impressions will affect decisions about whether to participate.
- Consider factors such as gender, ethnic and religious background, sexuality, disability, age and ability as these may play an important part in children's experiences.
- Consider whether participants have the necessary skills, knowledge, confidence, commitment and time to do what is being asked. Can you offer enough support?
- Preconceptions about your organisation might affect commitment. Do you need to give more encouragement to take part, reassurances that participation will not affect the services they receive?

Plan for participants' special needs

- Consider the needs of disabled children. Difficulties with physical access, written text, communication, or lack of suitable equipment and support may inhibit their full participation.
- Provision may be needed to develop materials and mechanisms to enable the participation by children with English as a second language, sensory impairments or with severe/complex communication needs. Consider the use of translators, visual images and symbols on forms, or qualified signers. Telephone interviews might be appropriate with young people who have visual or reading/writing difficulties.

Consider the practicalities

- Is the timing awkward or the venue intimidating for children? Do you need to make transport arrangements? Consider transport costs, accompanying adult support and the necessity for childcare.

Demonstrate respect

- Children will have their own agenda; be prepared to listen.
- Consider your choice of language, and avoid the use of jargon.
- Remember that children have busy lives, too.

Provide effective follow-up

- Are there suitable mechanisms for feeding back outcomes directly to participants involved within a sensible timescale?
- Children want some indication that their voices have been heard, and some explanation of the outcomes. Tell them what it is intended to achieve in the short, medium and longer-term.

KEY TEXTS

Lansdown, G (1995) *Taking Part. Children's Participation in Decision-Making*. Institute for Public Policy Research

Freeman, C, Henderson, P and Kettle, J (1999) *Planning with Children for Better Communities: The challenge to professionals*. The Policy Press

Hart, R (1992) *Children's Participation from Tokenism to Citizenship*. UNICEF

Butler, I and Williamson, H (1994) *Children Speak: Children, Trauma and Social Work*. Longman

Grimshaw, R and Sinclair, R (1997) *Planning to Care: Regulation, Procedure and Practice under the Children Act 1989*. NCB

Morris, J (1998) *Still Missing: Vols. 1 & 2: The experiences of disabled children and young people living away from their families and Disabled children and The Children Act*. The Who Cares? Trust

Thomas, N and O'Kane, C (1999) 'Children's participation in reviews and planning meetings when they are 'looked after' in middle childhood' in *Child and Family Social Work* Vol. 4, pp 221-230

Schofield, G and Thoburn, J (1996) *Child Protection: the Voice of the Child in Decision Making*. Institute of Policy Research

Lupton, C and Nixon, P (1999) *Empowering Practice? A critical appraisal of the family group conference approach*. University of Bristol

Sinclair, R (1998) 'Involving children in planning their care' in *Child and Family Social Work*, Vol. 3 pp 137-142

Thomas, C and Beckford, V (1999) *Adopted Children Speaking*. BAAF

Laws, S (1998) *Hear Me: Consulting with young people on mental health services*. Mental Health Foundation

USEFUL RESOURCES

Treseder, P (1997) *Empowering children and young people, Training Manual, Promoting involvement in decision-making*. Children's Rights Office and Save the Children

NSPCC (1997) *Turning Points: A Resource Pack for Communicating With Children*.

The Children's Society (1997) *I'll Go First: The planning and reviews toolkit for use with children with disabilities*

Wheal, A and Sinclair, R (1995) *It's Your Meeting. A guide to help young people get the most from their reviews*. NCB

Thomas, N and others (1999) *Children and Decision-Making: tool box and training pack*. Children in Wales

Cohen, J and Emanuel, J (1998) *Positive Participation: Consulting and involving young people in health-related work - a planning and training resource*. HEA

Children's Rights Officers Association (forthcoming, 2000) *A training manual for the participation of young people*

Ward, L (1997) *Seen and Heard: Involving disabled children and young people in research and development projects*. Joseph Rowntree Foundation

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