



Government of South Australia

Office of the Guardian  
for Children and Young People

## Programs for young people should be evaluated – by them

*An interview with Isabella Daziani from the Department for Child Protection Evaluation Unit*

‘In evaluating programs for young people, we think it is fundamental to start with the young people themselves’, says Isabella Daziani from the Department for Child Protection Evaluation Unit,<sup>1</sup>

‘If we really want to improve services for young people we must recognise they are the foremost experts in their lives – they know what is working for them and what isn’t.

‘And it must be done genuinely, more than a quick tick and flick to check off the “young people consulted” box.

‘But achieving a genuine, respectful and useful dialogue with young people is not always easy and can be made difficult by the circumstances of the young people. They have a lot of adults coming in and out of their lives and some are understandably reluctant and distrustful of yet another nosey adult. Others may have psychological, intellectual or physical disabilities that we need to acknowledge, and provide them with opportunity to contribute.

‘Some young people may be suspicious of the motives of adults or jaded by consultations that take up their time but produce no follow-up and no change.

‘To talk to young people, you may also need to navigate the attitudes of the adults who care for them. Some adults genuinely believe that young people should be protected from discussing challenging issues. Some believe that only adults can understand and legitimately speak on issues for young people.

‘We have found that many young people are very aware of their circumstances and capable of expressing their insights to a degree that would surprise many adults. They are the experts in their own lives. The young people we have spoken to always surprise and delight us with their insights and their directness.

‘Sometimes in evaluations there is fear on the part of workers and carers that it is *them* who are being evaluated. Some may be concerned about what young people may say about them. There is no easy way to address this other than to anticipate it and work openly and clearly to build understanding of the work and trust.

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<sup>1</sup> The Department for Child Protection Evaluation Unit has the job of reinvigorating and undertaking system and service evaluations across the agency. It works with and seeks feedback from children, families, staff and the community using practitioner and client-led processes to improve and evolve practice and policy.

‘Young people can be blunt and occasionally scathing but mostly, when you are genuine and let them know how their responses will be used, we find they are fair and reasonable to an extent that surprises many adults.

‘As a means of evaluation, just surveying people does not work. Personal contact is the key. We like to meet workers for the first time with a clear explanation of who we are and what we are about. Building trust takes time. By carefully explaining our purpose and our methods and getting alongside field staff they come to see us, not as a threat, but as useful partners who can contribute something of value to their work.

‘Getting groups of young people together in a place where they can feel safe and supported is a major challenge. Working with existing groups of young people can be an advantage. Existing groups know each other and the internal dynamics have already been worked out. Also, stable groups of young people are already surrounded by adults who have built up trust and who can support them and vouch for us when we come in as strangers.

‘Even so, your best made plans are likely to be blown apart when you meet a group of young people for the first time. You still need to be clear and focussed on what you want to find out and at the same time, relaxed and ready to go wherever the young people lead. It can be scary and hard work but also a lot of fun.

‘We’ve found that the best preparation is to have a collection of different ideas and techniques in your toolkit and then be prepared to improvise.

‘It’s so important at the start to be clear with the young people what the purpose of your work with them is going to be. The idea that their thoughts might be able to help others is very appealing to many young people.

‘We are careful not to raise expectations or make promises but it is very important to get back to young people after the fact to let them know the results of their work and how it is going to be used. They might like to see, for example, a version of your research report tailored for their use with graphics and simplified language.’

‘Young people must get something out of these experiences too. When we evaluated the Mt Barker Young People’s Council we found that genuine engagement empowers young people to have a voice within the department. Here are some of their comments.’

*learning different things (for example to speak your thoughts, have your ideas heard, speaking in front of people*

*getting opportunities to change the system and change it for the better*

*have an understanding of what other young people older than us have gone through*

*offers a great opportunity to have your say about things that are going on in our lives*

*free dinner and money is a good motivator and seeing and meeting friends*

*what makes it fun are the people who run it and how they run it*

*help change things for the community<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>2</sup> Thanks to Greg Dart from the Mt Barker office of the Department for Child Protection and the Young People’s Council.

Isabella's top tips for engaging young people in an evaluation:

- Be very clear and open about the purpose of your evaluation activity to the young people and the adults around them.
- Prepare well but have lots of options and techniques up your sleeve.
- Keep your purpose in mind but be ready to improvise and go where the young people lead on the day.
- Have some trusted supports on hand in case the consultation takes a young person to a difficult place.
- Listen carefully and genuinely take on board what you hear without applying your own values or judgements.
- When the consultations are finished go back to say thanks, to share the results and to tell your participants where the results of their work have gone.

**For further reading Isabella recommends...**

Hutchfield, J. and Coren, E. (2011) 'The child's voice in service evaluation: Ethical and methodological issues', *Child Abuse Review*, pp. 173-186. Doi: 10. 1002/car.1142

O'Reilly, M. and Dogra, N. (2017) 'Interviewing Children and Young People for Research'.

Salveron, M. Finan, S. Bromfield, L. (2013). 'Why Wait?': Engaging with children and young people in child protection research to inform practice' *Developing Practice Issue 37*.

Save the Children (2014) 'A Toolkit for Monitoring and Evaluating Children's Participation'.

Save the Children (2000) 'Children and Participation: Research, monitoring and evaluation with children and young people'.

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