



Summary of

Participation of children and young people in decisions made about their care: A literature review

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From July to September 2008, Peta Smith, Senior Policy Officer for the South Australian Office of the Guardian for Children and Young People reviewed the literature on the participation of children and young people in decisions that affect their lives.

This summary captures some of the major messages from the literature. In preparing it we have focussed on practical issues such as barriers and solutions.

Much background and explanatory material has, of necessity, been omitted from the summary and readers are recommended to read the full report which can be accessed from the Guardian's website.

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Introduction

Our notions of children and young people have changed greatly in recent years. They are no longer perceived as incomplete or inferior versions of adults but as active social beings, consumers of services and citizens with rights who are capable of participating meaningfully in matters that concern them.

Participation by children and young people has emerged as an important way to improve decision making in social work practice, promote their citizenship rights and develop their personal and citizenship skills.

This literature review is focussed on children and young people in out of home care and their participation in care decisions. However, much of the evidence and ideas are applicable to other service provision decisions.

Having legislation and policy that promotes participation is necessary but not sufficient in itself to ensure meaningful participation. Research shows that not all children and young people are invited to, or attend, decision making meetings. Some children and young people who do attend report positive experiences, but there is also evidence to suggest that many are excluded, have little power and that participation is tokenistic.

For participation to have real meaning for children and young people and for the adults involved in their care, it must be done well. This means:

Examining the practical and ideological barriers to including children and young people.

Developing a workplace culture that supports participation, including education and training on effective ways to include children and young people and communicate with them.

Being clear about what we understand participation to mean and about how children and young people will influence decisions.

Seeing participation as part of a broader process in which children and young people have the opportunity to be heard in a variety of ways, underpinned by sound relationships in which getting it right for children and young people in care is our priority.

Barriers to participation

Social policies and practices that granted adults authority over children and young people had roots in views about children as inherently 'less than' adults (Mason 2005).

In one study, children and young people who participated in case planning meetings listed their chief desire in participating as to 'have my say,' and listed 'to get what I want' near the bottom. When social workers in the same study were asked about children and young people's motivations for participating, many ranked 'to get what I want' at the top of the list (Thomas & O'Kane 1999).

The quality of children's participation is determined not by policies and standards alone but by the attitudes and beliefs of adults and the suitability of the practical arrangements.

Adults' attitudes and beliefs

For most of the 20th century, developmental theorists and social work practitioners thought children lacked the maturity, social awareness and rationality to participate in decisions about their own lives. They discounted the child's knowledge and experience. Other research, however, suggests that children are competent in similar ways to adults and they need only for their characteristics and strengths to be recognised and to receive extra help and support to enhance their confidence and proficiency.

Cultural views of children have over-emphasised their need to be protected. Some workers see children as dependent and vulnerable and thus minimise their views. Some believe that participation reduces children's freedom to be children, exposes them to inappropriate responsibilities and places an undue burden on them. These views became embedded in social work practice. However, scholars challenge assumptions that children's dependence on adults is a reason for depriving them of choice. They caution against generalising about vulnerability and show evidence that children and young people do want to be involved even when the proceedings are contentious.

Additionally, modern social work practice has been based around quantifiable, 'objective' knowledge gathered through standardised assessment tools and other devices. This contributes to the sense of the social worker as 'expert' but tends to devalue other perspectives including the child's. Participation implies working in partnership with children, accepting them as experts in their own lives and being prepared to make mistakes and get things wrong. This is not easy in a sensitive and risk-averse environment.

The reluctance of adults to relinquish power to children and young people is a consistent theme in research on participation. Adults fear giving away power and control but there is some evidence that children view participation as more about having a say than getting what they want.

Practical barriers

Participation requires conscious effort by adults to remove practical barriers to children's participation. Meetings might need to be re-structured, new techniques and activities for involving younger participants developed, language and cultural barriers addressed and adequate follow-up provided. The time and resources available might not be sufficient to support participative practice or it might seem too time consuming. It takes much less time to make a decision than to support the involvement of a young person with different skills who is unfamiliar with participation.

It has been argued that children and young people are capable of resilience and that adults 'cannot delete negative experiences simply by excluding children from discussions' (Thomas & O'Kane 1999, p. 229).

Achieving participation

The right to participate is not qualified by age, by whether children and young people choose to exercise it, or how they choose to exercise it (Hill *et al* 2004; Scutt 1995; Trinder 1997; Lansdown 2001).

Barriers faced by children

Children and young people also face barriers. They might be unfamiliar with how meetings work and have different communications skills from those commonly used in meetings. They might not be able to attend meetings that are held at inconvenient times, especially if they struggle with transportation and lack support. Some might hesitate to participate because of disability or cultural factors. Children and young people who are homeless, young offenders, young parents, those from racial and ethnic minority groups and those who have experienced abuse or neglect can be marginalised, lack confidence in communicating their views and might not trust adults.

Participation and protection

In some views the imperative to protect a child or young person can conflict with supporting their right to participate. It is tempting to adopt either a 'rights' or 'rescue' position, emphasising children and young people's rights to self-determination, or seeing participation within the broader context of children's welfare and protection needs and their limited power in society. However, children and young people often suffer power abuses, so participation can enhance the effectiveness of their care and protection. The two rights are not exclusive. Participation is inherently protective and accepting responsibility for someone does not mean taking responsibility away from them.

Meaningful participation does not simply happen. It is supported by a culture of participation that rests upon several principles.

Participation as a right

Seeing participation as a right helps establish a culture and practice that views children and young people as citizens and partners, not simply as recipients of adult protection or as adults in the making. The right to participate is not qualified by age, by whether children and young people choose to exercise it, or how they choose to exercise it

The need for clarity

Practitioners need to ask: 'Why do we want to do this?' 'What are we trying to achieve?' 'What do children and young people get out of participation?' Clarity of purpose involves developing goals for effective participation. We need to know how children and young people's views will be interpreted and acted upon and to assess the impact of their involvement.

Most important is an organisation's cultural commitment to participation as a process, 'not simply the application of isolated participation activities or events' (Department for Education and Skills 2003, p. 145).

Research has shown that children and young people who feel they do not have trusting relationships might be deliberately evasive or diversionary when interacting with adults – this is an effort to control information, rather than reluctance to participate (McLeod 2007; Bell 2002).

The right organisational and professional culture

Institutional structures, processes and culture underpin practice. Participative practice requires a long-term, institutionalised commitment based on a clear sense of the need for participation. It needs support within management, structural capacity, adequate resources, staff training and support to understand what participation means and how to work effectively with children and young people. Participation must be an organisational priority and all involved demonstrate commitment.

Placing the child at the centre

Child-centred practice means beginning from the position of each individual child or young person and working to ascertain his or her capability and desire to participate. This is the opposite to working from generalised views about children and young people as a group. It means letting go of expectations of the 'right' practice approach and entrenched organisational concerns, norms and values that position the social worker as the 'expert' rather than the child.

Relationships

A dependable relationship with a trusted adult promotes a child's participation. Children and young people who feel they do not have trusting relationships might be deliberately evasive or diversionary when interacting with adults. This can be an effort to control information, rather than reluctance to participate. Building trusting relationships requires time and ongoing commitment. It means that interactions between professionals and children move beyond being reactive, event-driven and time-limited. It involves adults and children reaching mutual expectations about participation.

Making it meaningful

Having a say as legitimate participants in decision making is the main concern for most children. Children and young people who do not understand the purpose of meetings and lack information about the process, or who are ignored or patronised during meetings, are likely to see participation as tokenistic. Children who do not see any change or action as a result of a meeting are likely to reach the same conclusion.

Participation in practice

Considerations for good practice are neatly summed up by a young person in the UK: 'we need real choices, we need time to think and we need people who are prepared to listen and help' (Leeson 2007, p. 276).

... many children and young people wished to attend meetings so they could hear what was being said about them, could ask questions and have a say (Sinclair 1998; Thomas & O'Kane 1999; Bell 2002).

Involvement day-to-day

Much goes on that can build children's participation outside of meetings. This can include discussion and decisions about placement and unplanned changes (such as in the case of a placement breakdown), participation in complaints processes, planning around transitioning from care and seeing and providing comments on reports written about them. Children and young people who experience genuine participation attribute it to regular contact and a good relationship with a worker as well as support in developing the skills and confidence to give their views and wishes.

Making meetings suit children

Planning and structuring of meetings to include children is essential. This means scheduling meetings at times and in places that are accessible to children and young people, without disruption to school or to the care routines of younger children or children and young people with disabilities. Organisers should ensure that an interpreter or support person are provided if required and that any food and drinks provided suit children and young people. Meetings should be timed to include sufficient breaks. Invitations should be issued in a format that suits the child or young person and mailed invitations should be addressed directly to the child or young person, perhaps with a photo of the meeting facilitator or chairperson.

Preparation

Before the meeting, a case worker should meet with the child to discuss the meeting's purpose, who will be there and what kinds of decisions will be made. The worker can also explain some of the terms associated with meetings, such as 'agenda,' minutes' and 'chairperson'. Preparation provides the opportunity to ask the child or young person whether and how they would like to participate, where they would like the meeting to be held and whether they would like a support person to attend. The child's input to the agenda is vital because their issues might be quite different to those of the adults present. Children and young people need time to prepare what they would like to say. Preparation allows for discussion of feelings about a meeting, for planning how to be calm and focussed and for practicing communication skills.

During the meeting

Let children and young people sit where they like. Explain the process so that children and young people understand why they might be asked certain questions and make sure that they know all the other participants. Ice-breakers and other activities can reduce formality. Meetings can be chaired in a manner that encourages feedback, questions and opinions. Use of a variety of media such as reading from a prepared text, using graphics, art or music, participating via

teleconference or videoconference, or having someone speak their views for them can be beneficial. Alternative communication methods can be used for children and young people with *Limited language skills*.

Use plain language and avoid acronyms or jargon. Avoid communication methods that reinforce power inequalities. Adults can unconsciously ask leading questions, signal that there is a 'correct' answer to a question, offer false choices and discuss children and young people as if they were not present. Questions can be asked simply and clearly and rephrased to provide additional context. It is important to consider a child's perspective when communicating, including differing concepts of time, use of slang and body language. Questions that assist the child to know what is being sought work better than vague questions such as 'is there anything you wanted to ask?'

Another view is that adults and children might interact with the world in different ways, but that this does not mean that adults are 'competent' and children 'incompetent' (Merleau-Ponty 1962; Fattore & Turnbull 2005).

Children and young people might be asked about their wishes and feelings on a specific issue as well as their 'views' as even very young children can usually communicate feelings. Adults should not always expect that communications will reflect 'rational' thinking and communicate a clear message of intent. Where children's meaning is ambiguous adults might be tempted to interpret or insert meanings into children's communications. Adults should understand that, for complex reasons, children might choose to act or speak and sometimes not.

Some children have little or no experience in discussing complex issues and meeting participants should not rush them. Children might be reluctant to be honest if they believe that doing so will hurt someone else and might need assistance to reconcile this. Children might be silent, avoid topics or change subject and it will be necessary to deal with adults' perception of evasion or that the meeting is failing. A child might change his or her mind about speaking or feel the need to leave the meeting and provision should be made for a support person to be available. Children and young people may not wish to elaborate on matters in a formal session so it might be useful to return to the subject in a different setting.

Children might be reluctant to be honest if they believe that doing so will hurt someone else and might need assistance to reconcile their need to be honest and their need not to hurt others (Kiely 2005).

Participation does not always mean being present and children might benefit from indirect and direct mechanisms of representation and the use of independent advocacy services.

Between meetings

What happens between meetings is as important as the meeting itself. Participation can become tokenistic if there is no follow-up. Children and young people want to see action resulting from participation, or at least to receive feedback on decisions. Children should have the opportunity to talk about their feelings about the meeting and the decisions made.