
Listening to experts: Children and young people's participation

By Kathleen Manion and Paul Nixon

The most important thing the social worker did was listen to us and not go overboard about caring (young person).

Social workers who want their practice to be more child centred must learn to find new and better ways to listen to children and young people and involve them in decision making. This is important not only because it will create better decisions and practice, but also because children have a fundamental right to participate in matters that affect their lives.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC), ratified by New Zealand in 1993, provides us with a clear imperative to listen to children. Article 12 says children have “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” (UNICEF, 1989, Article 12).

Although UNCROC and associated national legislation gives children the legal right to participate, social, cultural and economic barriers to children's involvement in decision-making persist. As we increasingly hear the vernacular of the rights and voices of children within international child welfare and youth justice arenas (Coad & Lewis, 2004) more evidence that suggests some of the barriers may be shifting. However, we must push harder and go further to give life to the rights of children.

At the heart of this transformation is our ability to change the way we think about children. Participative methodologies are diverse and scattered across the spectrum of interventions with

children and young people. This article argues for embedding changes that support appropriate and effective means of including children in decision-making processes and supporting children to be future advocates, activists, leaders and decision-makers. This paper also recognises that respecting, eliciting and utilising the views of children requires a culture shift that repositions children as active agents rather than passive recipients of policy, programmes or research. The first section of the article focuses on theory. The second part advocates ways to ensure their voices are heard and acted upon and provides practical hints for implementation.

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Part I – The role of children

Although Article 12 is arguably one of the core articles in UNCROC, it is also one of the most controversial (Lundy, 2007). Children's participation is central to a democratic notion recognising children and young people as individual human beings with inherent rights, irrespective of intellectual or developmental abilities. Although UNCROC clearly places responsibility for children's care with parents or legal guardians, it also challenges traditional concepts of adult power, advancing the idea of children having a say in their own right (Dalrymple, 2002; Smith, Gallop & Taylor, 2000). Article 12 assumes children have rights as autonomous citizens, which contravenes some long held notions of children's place in society. Unpicking this assumption requires an examination of the attitudes about children and the political, economic, cultural, legal and social factors that shape these beliefs.

The way in which adults have defined and understood childhood throughout history has profoundly shaped the way we listen to the view of children. Social constructions of 'children' and 'childhood' generally refer to dichotomous perceptions of innocent or evil children who are either nurtured or corrupted by society (Rock, Karabanow & Manion, 2012). This matrix may not reverberate as strongly today, but a similar arrangement occurs where adults find themselves somewhere between two ideological positions, either seeing children as naive and vulnerable subjects who should be protected in a benign and paternalistic way or people in their own right with their own choices, whose rights must be asserted or upheld. Similarly social welfare texts often focusing on either children's needs or children's rights, belies the complexity and interrelationship between the two. Inattention to children's needs may make it hard to uphold their rights and vice versa.

Understanding children's multidimensional role in society, with both needs and rights provides a better foundation for recognising and advocating for the rights of children to participate. As such Corsaro's (1997) more sophisticated theorisation may provide a better platform for children's participation. He suggests children are not passive agents onto which societal norms are attached, but rather active citizens who shape the world around them.

The legal and societal framework

Within the international setting, UNCROC requires that children have "freedom of expression, to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas" (UNICEF, 1989, Article 13) and demands that children have a "right to active participation in the community" (UNICEF, 1989, Article 23). The central weakness of UNCROC is that it has no robust mechanism to ensure that governments uphold or implement these rights, particularly as children lack economic power or the right to vote.

The legal mandate is ineffectual (Freeman, 2000) and as a result children's participation is rarely high on the political agenda. King & Trowell (1992, p. 113) suggest "the rights rhetoric is covering up vast areas of human experience which the law is ill equipped to tackle."

Within Aotearoa New Zealand the Children, Young Persons and their Families Act (1989) was created to respond to local needs, acknowledge and tackle institutional racism and honour Māori

culture pertaining to family and cultural decision making. At its core this methodology was based on a fundamentally different approach and was centred on the use of family group conferences (FGCs). While the Act (1989) promotes family centred decision making, it also advocates child centred practice. For Child, Youth and Family this is further articulated

in the Practice Frameworks as child or young person centred and family/whanau led practice (see <http://www.practicecentre.cyf.govt.nz/knowledge-base-practice-frameworks/index.html#OurPracticeFrameworks1>).

A pivotal argument is that child participation should not be conducted at the expense of family involvement in decision making. Any version of child participation which envisions the individual child as more important than their whānau or iwi is at odds with a Māori approach (Pitama et al, 2002) and undermine the potential outcome of good participative methodologies. Embracing concepts of 'child participation' in New Zealand necessitates ensuring that it adheres to the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi and respects the child's place within his whakapapa. Realising the child's voice within this context means ensuring that participation (and negotiation) also occurs with wider groups i.e. whānau, hapu and iwi (Matahaere-Atariki, 2000). Regardless of the ethnicity or cultural heritage of the child, participation needs to be mindful of the cultural context of each participant, their family and their community.

A more challenging continuum to tackle in the context of child participation is between family led and professionally led decision making. At the global level the last twenty years have seen increasing rhetoric around child centred practice, but it could be argued that in reality this has further entrenched professionally-led practice. Within child protection, agencies have traditionally been hesitant to include children in decision making because they tend to be the most marginalised children in society. The fear of further exploitation through participation often blocks the implementation of participative methodologies, but the most traumatised children are, paradoxically, also the most invisible (Atwool, 2000). While gatekeepers may wish to protect children they may also be inadvertently furthering their disempowerment. As a result, initiatives to involve children have been almost exclusively professionally led and children ostensibly have their “participation” managed. The increasing bureaucratisation of practice has meant social workers and children have their relationship governed by factors beyond their control. Attesting to this Oliver, Knight & Candappa (2006) found that there has been an overreliance on proceduralisation and a concurrent professional resistance to children’s participation.

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advocacy, lobbying, design of information, services, policy, the use of resources and budgets, staff selection, training, quality assurance, supervision, inspection, research development and evaluation (Nixon, 2007).

Adding slightly more detail Townsend (2000) discusses the different levels of participation

in terms of where participation can happen:

1. At the systems level (state) – e.g. informing government policy and legislative decisions.
2. At the local level (regional) – e.g. influencing regional strategies and initiatives addressing regional issues.
3. At the service level – e.g. affecting programme and policy developments and service evaluations.
4. At the individual level – e.g. impacting on decision making affecting their own lives.

Texts often distinguish between listening to and acting on children’s views. For instance Boyden & Ennew (1997) suggest there are two types of participation: a passive participation where a participant is included but it is unclear to what end and active participation where it is clear that the participant is being heard and that their contributions are acted upon. Atwool suggests adults, including professionals, have a poor record of listening to children and are often blinded by ‘appearing to be the expert’. She also argues that adults often overlook the multidimensional aspects of a child’s experience or action and instead focus on a one-dimensional interpretation of their trauma. Adults interpret the child’s responses based on adult perspectives, thereby losing their specific expertise.

Hierarchical structures are commonly cited in relation to participation typologies. One of the most commonly cited schemas is Hart’s ladder of child and youth participation (MYD, 2009) which is represented by the following hierarchy starting from most collaborative to least:

Conceptualisations of participation

Historically there have been a number of conceptualisations of child’s participation. Little consensus exists about what participation of children and young people is (Adams, 2003) and this has complicated implementation. At its most basic child participation in social work entails two levels:

- ⋮ The individual level; where children directly inform referrals, assessments, decisions, services, reviews and/or evaluations.
- ⋮ The collective level; where children impact services or organisations more widely through

8. Child-initiated, shared decisions with Adults
7. Child-initiated and directed
6. Adult-initiated, shared decisions with children
5. Consulted and informed
4. Assigned but informed
3. Tokenism
2. Decoration
1. Manipulation

Similarly Lansdown (2009) looks at the point and level of engagement, suggesting that there is a continuum which includes adult consultative participation, collaborative participation and child-led participation.

Lundy (2007) provides a more holistic and pragmatic conceptualisation. She argues that being heard is not enough to give effect to Article 12, but rather effective participation requires four key components:

- ⋮ a safe space for their voice to be heard,
- ⋮ support to have their voice heard,
- ⋮ someone to actively hear (or see) their opinions and ideas, and
- ⋮ have their ideas acted upon and influence change.

Recognition of children and young people's rights can also better utilise their knowledge and skills, create a sense of belonging, promote democracy and bolster self esteem.

Considerations

Benefits

Children are citizens with an innate stake in the policies, programmes and research that surround them. Although work with children and young people requires special deliberation and increased ethical scrutiny (particularly for vulnerable children and young people), the value of seeking their views and experiences is reciprocally beneficial. Listening to and utilising children's voices, requires considerable investment.

The potential benefits include hearing the perspectives from the experts and preparing them for adulthood (Hart et al, 2004). Recognition of children and young people's rights can also better utilise their knowledge and skills, create a sense of belonging, promote democracy and bolster self esteem (MYD, 2009). Whitfield (2002) also argues that participation is a driver of connectedness and resiliency.

Lansdown (2009) articulates the benefits thusly:

- ⋮ it provides information and insights to inform legislation, policies, budgets,
- ⋮ children can be active advocates to realise their own rights,
- ⋮ children acquire skills, knowledge, competencies and confidence,
- ⋮ it leads to better protection, and
- ⋮ it promotes civic engagement, active citizenship and good governance.

When children have a say, individually or collectively, in the services they use, they are more likely to get the services that they want and need. The services are also more likely to be relevant, open and accountable. Children and young people often want greater say and influence, but they are frequently underestimated. When they are provided the opportunity they can make significant contributions (Lansdown, 2009).

Hart et al's experience of programmes in various countries, (2004) suggests that where participative processes have been implemented, children and young people (particularly girls) gain self confidence, positive outlook and increased sociability. They also found that participants were more likely to have a greater understanding of the issues facing their families, modify their behaviour accordingly and advocate for their families to become more involved. More fundamentally they found that it leads to more effective and efficient decision making.

Barriers

Projects that are poorly planned and implemented can reinforce a child's sense of powerlessness. The risks to children's participation must be identified, justified, minimised and weighed with the potential benefits of the work. If not managed well, some participants may develop a false sense of security and be placed in a position opposing their parents, family or community. Children suggest some of the barriers to sharing their opinions include feeling inhibited to speak up in front of family, lacking confidence to get their views across, being worried about repercussions from the meeting, and lacking an understanding about the discussions (Clarkson & Frank, 2000). Involving children and young people in policy, programme, research and evaluation design must not cause harm and must be done in a way that is respectful and ensures their dignity. This requires putting in support mechanisms where sensitive topics are being discussed.

There are also significant risks if children's views are heard but not taken into consideration or misunderstood. Adults often have poor perceptions of children and young people's capacity and capability (Calvert, Zeldin, & Weisenbach, 2002). The paternalistic model assumes that adults know what is best for children, especially if those adults are trained professionals, and those children are classified as "at risk," "dependent," or even "dangerous." These assumptions have the effect of undermining concepts of children's strengths, abilities, and rights which can lead to objectification of children (Nixon, 2002). Mayall (2000, p137) argues children's behaviour (including wheedling, lying, demanding and refusing) often stems from a reaction to adults perceptions of them, but it also reinforces adult prejudices and further marginalises their voices.

Many stigmatizing and devaluing assumptions about children's abilities can restrict children's participation. Disabled children, for example, may not be considered as able to participate because of negative assumptions about disability, or because

of the inability of professionals to engage or work effectively with them.

While there is an increasing rhetoric within social work about listening to children, young people often say that social workers fail to do this (Morgan, 2005, 2006). Children coming into contact with social workers do not know the criteria social workers use to make decisions, or how they can influence those decisions. They do know, however, that social workers have the power to fundamentally change their lives and, through the courts, even restrict their liberty (Nixon, 2007).

Professional practice aspires toward partnerships with citizens, but the parameters of this are set by agencies and professionals (Braye & Preston-Shoot, 1995). The delegation of power to service users is even less common and often limited. The 'right level' of children's participation is nearly always determined by adults – professionals, organizations, and parents – rather than by the children themselves.

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Part II – Key practice questions

Family decision making models, particularly family group conferences have the potential to both enhance and diminish children's voices, but the level of participation is variable. While some international research suggests children feel they are involved and have their say (eg Crow, 2000; Lupton & Stevens, 1997; Merkel-Holguin, Nixon, & Burford, 2003), others have found that children's contributions are overlooked (e.g. Sieppert and Unrau, 2003) or they remain invisible (Heino, 2003). Rasmussen (2003) even indicated that children and young people felt increasingly vulnerable. This suggests a strong organisational mandate is needed to support child participation for it to succeed.

Good participation requires flexibility and adherence to democratic principles, as well as clarity of purpose and definition of participation.

The key areas to avoid include:

- ⋮ building unrealistic hopes
- ⋮ overburdening participants
- ⋮ disrupting family and community relations
- ⋮ ignoring risks to security and well being.

In mitigating the risks of participation there are a number of areas that should be considered, including the following:

Informed consent and confidentiality

Participation should always be by choice. The purpose and nature of the activity must be explained to the child and their guardian in a way that is understandable to them and it should be made clear that they can opt out at any time. Informed consent must be given by the child and/or their guardian and the issue of confidentiality must be clearly set out to the participant and adhered to. Even if the participant gives permission to be identified, the researcher should carefully consider the implications and ensure their safety in doing so.

Diversity and age

At what age children are able to participate is contentious. Many authors argue that given the right methodology all children can participate, but others are more conservative. Clark et al (2003) found few studies have taken the views of children under five years old into account and fewer still have done so with children with disabilities. When participation occurs it is generally more heavily weighted to older young people who are able to articulate their ideas easily. However, children and young people constitute a diverse range of the population and good participation needs to take into account this diversity. For some groups, for instance younger children, or those most vulnerable, involving them in participative activities may require more forethought and greater skill in making them comfortable and eliciting their views (Chapman, 2010). This suggests that the barrier to participation for younger children largely lies in the skill level of the facilitator.

Using advocates

Listening to the choices of children can happen in a number of ways, including indirectly, through child advocates, support people or materials. Child advocacy is underpinned by a “belief that children and young people should be recognised as citizens in society” (Dalrymple & Hough, 1995). Children interviewed suggested that: “It helps if someone stays with me during the meeting”; “I would like someone there who will tell my family the difficult things I need to say about them” (children quoted in Clarkson & Frank, 2000).

How to achieve good participation

Policy

Non-tokenistic participation and consultation requires a culture shift. In order to do it well the system, skills, culture and environment needs to be built to support it. Child participation should always be voluntary, informed, meaningful, respectful and safe (Steinitz, 2009). It requires organisations and personnel to respect the opinions and rights of children and young people and believe in their wisdom on matters that are important to them. Listening to the voices of children should not be a single occurrence but rather systemically embedded. Jenkins (1995) suggests adherence to the guidelines set out in the UNCROC requires P.R.A.I.S.E.:

- ⋮ Political will
- ⋮ Resources
- ⋮ Agencies with power base
- ⋮ Investment in information and education
- ⋮ Support networks
- ⋮ Engagement with key issues.

Activities that can be initiated to foster children and young people's participation can sit anywhere on the continuum between designing child friendly, understandable, and useful information, through to child or youth led projects. Children could even be involved in the design of the former and the latter could easily be supported through advice, financial assistance or other resources (eg information technology or

meeting space). Consideration should be given to how sustainability can be encouraged and how the successes can be disseminated and publicised more widely (MYD, 2009). When designing child participation there are a number of questions that should be considered:

- ⋮ Do children want to play an active role?
- ⋮ How can they be involved in the design of the service?
- ⋮ How can children best be supported to participate, and how is diversity of experience represented?
- ⋮ How could children select and train staff?
- ⋮ How might children manage budgets or oversee the use of resources?
- ⋮ How prepared are we to put this into action?
- ⋮ What do we want to achieve and how will we know when we have been successful?

Further it is important to consider if participation can pass the following tests outlined by Lansdown (2009). Is the participation:

- ⋮ transparent and informative
- ⋮ voluntary
- ⋮ respectful
- ⋮ relevant
- ⋮ child-friendly
- ⋮ inclusive
- ⋮ supported by training for adult
- ⋮ safe and sensitive to risk
- ⋮ accountable?

Some of the ways we can begin to better integrate children's participation methodologies into our everyday practice might include:

- ⋮ funding/resourcing children's consultation
- ⋮ articulating the purpose of participation

- ⋮ promoting standards of practice, a good practice guide, and a participation policy and organisational framework
- ⋮ examining attitudes and values about children's involvement
- ⋮ allowing for diversity of voices
- ⋮ working with children to improve practice and children's rights
- ⋮ exploring various methodologies for participation, including the use of information technology
- ⋮ producing a good practice guide for staff
- ⋮ involving children in: research, evaluation, monitoring, design and implementation, staff recruitment, appraisal and training
- ⋮ developing political forums for children to have collective action and lobby politicians (Nixon, 2007).

Practice

Working with children requires flexible methods of communication, excellent listening skills and imaginative ways of involving children in the process. This requires time, skill, effort, openness, honesty, respect and good communication and listening skills. Good communication requires a willingness to use jargon-free, child-friendly language and the assurance that everyone has a shared understanding of what has been said. Maintaining trust means not raising unrealistic or false expectations.

Creativity and innovation are needed to foster good will and support good participation. Some ideas for helping children to express themselves in

different ways include:

- ⋮ using a "spider-gram" chart to depict family networks,
- ⋮ using the Three Houses (see Weld & Greening, 2005), Words and Pictures (developed by Susie

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Essex, John Gumbleton & Colin Luger) and the Safety House (developed by Sonja Parker) (see Brennan & Robson, 2010),

- ⋮ involving them in drawing, role play and drama,
- ⋮ having them design invitations,
- ⋮ digitally recording their messages for their conferences if they do not feel comfortable attending, and
- ⋮ having them write letters about how they feel.

A robust participation methodology should ensure it includes elements of the following:

- ⋮ giving information
- ⋮ consulting—have a continuous dialogue
- ⋮ preparing
- ⋮ taking account of child's agenda
- ⋮ considering child's needs
- ⋮ facilitating independent support
- ⋮ treating children with respect
- ⋮ giving feedback (Lansdown, 2009)

Research, Monitoring and Evaluation

Participative research has been developed with disempowered populations, but they are largely adaptable to children and young people (Laws & Mann, 2004). These methodologies predominantly use visual exercises, such as mapping, ranking, scoring, model building and role playing exercises, but they are also flexible enough for children to set the agenda, provide the context for analysis and act as co-researchers/evaluators (O'Kane, 2000).

When planning children's participation methodologies, time needs to be allocated to eliciting and receiving feedback on achievements. To date measurement of the success of participation methods have been relatively poor. There are no agreed indicators and outcomes tend to be qualitative, with few quantitative examples (Lansdown, 2009).

One simple way to measure progress may be to set out a simple evaluative form to track progress and measure feedback. The example below is adult-centred, but explores the achievements of a participation project, but it could be adapted to suit a variety of projects.

Evaluation of Children's Participation		
Part A	Describe the project:	
	What was the project trying to achieve?:	
	What has happened as a result of the project? (include any impact on the child):	
Part B	On a scale of 1-10 rank how well each of the areas below were achieved (1 = not achieved and 10= fully achieved)	
	We consulted with children and young people	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
	Participants understood the purpose of their participation	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
	We took what their opinions into account in our plans/ implementation Provide Examples and Children's Quotes:	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
	We act on the advice provided? Provide Examples and Children's Quotes: :	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
	We followed up and let participants know how their information was used?	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
	We shared decision making with participants?	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Conclusion

Ultimately we are looking for behaviour change, where adults start to see children as partners, change makers and future leaders. Children are experts on childhood and the effect of the services they receive. Their unique perspective places them in a valuable position to provide feedback and engage in decision making and design. Wouldn't it be great if in future children and young people were able to be fully involved in consultation, advocacy, programme design and delivery, staff recruitment and evaluative feedback in a way that was respectful, timely, meaningful, consistent, reciprocal, and integrated into general approaches.

The next article sets out Child, Youth and Family's strategy for embracing child and young person's participation. We know we need to push further and harder to reach our vision. We also know participation will change in the years to come and we need to ensure that we are well equipped to embrace these changes. ■

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