



This issue of *ChildLinks* is devoted to the theme of children's participation. The concept of children's participation is firmly accepted in the minds of practitioners and policy-makers alike. Hopefully the sharing of insights into the theory and practice of children's participation will be of use to *ChildLinks* readers and I want to thank all our contributors for sharing their learning and experience on this important issue.

Children's participation is closely related to the issue of children's rights which at a macro level is enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Ireland ratified the 1989 UNCRC without reservation in 1992 but what many people do not realise is that the UNCRC has not yet been implemented into Irish legislation.

This is particularly important to ensure that vulnerable children are fully protected. Barnardos works with a number of extremely vulnerable children from a very young age through to their teens who are suffering distress and anxiety because of precarious situations they have been placed in. The Irish Constitution fails to recognise the child as an individual in their own right and child welfare and child protection can be compromised as a result. A change in the Constitution would help to change the culture and practice in child protection cases and ensure the best protection for extremely vulnerable children.

Barnardos also recommends that the terms of the UNCRC, should be strongly reflected in the Constitution. Article 3.1 of the Convention states that in "in all actions

# Editorial

Recently the Joint Oireachtas Committee on the Constitution called for submissions on the question of children's rights. Barnardos' submission focused on the need for the Constitution to be amended to include an article which expressly guarantees and secures the protection of children's rights and which reflects the terms of the UNCRC. As far back as 1993, the report of the Kilkenny Incest Investigation stated that "the Constitution should contain a specific and overt declaration to the rights of born children."

Subsequently in 1996 the Constitution Review Group urged that children be given new explicit rights and that the Constitution should expressly require that in law the best interests of the child should be the paramount consideration.

concerning children...the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration."

It is encouraging to note that the submission to the Oireachtas Committee from the Ombudsman for Children as well as many NGOs involved in working with children and in the family law arena were in agreement in regard to this area of constitutional reform. Children's needs and children's rights must be made paramount. The importance of this constitutional review and the opportunity to effect positive change in the lives of children cannot be over estimated. The Oireachtas and the Government must take action to safeguard children's rights.

**Anne Conroy** Editor



# EMBEDDING CHILDREN'S

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# PARTICIPATION

The principle of involving children<sup>1</sup> in matters that affect them has, over the past two decades, become accepted across Europe and many other parts of the world. This, in turn, has led to changing practice so that children and young people are increasingly involved in a wide array of decision and public policy making. But there is still work to be done. The case for children's participation still has to be made if the principle of involving children is to become fully embedded across society and if involving children is actually to change the way in which agencies engage with children. This paper seeks to summarise some of those arguments.

<sup>1</sup> In this paper the term children is used to refer to anyone under the age of 18 and includes young people.



## REASONS FOR INVOLVING CHILDREN

There have been both global and more local factors that have helped change attitudes towards children. For example, within the general growth of the consumer movement there has been a gradual recognition that children are users of services too and that just as adult service users now expect to exercise more choice in the services available to them, so too should children. Further, consulting with and taking account of the views of children as users of a service is an effective way to ensure the service is relevant to their needs. Equally important among these global influences has been the growing recognition of the human rights of children as individuals and citizens in their own right. The most universal manifestation of this is the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), passed by the United Nations in November 1989, signed by the Irish Government in 1990 and ratified by them in 1992.

Within Ireland other factors have been influential in changing attitudes to children's involvement, not least the many child abuse scandals that served to illustrate the powerlessness of children in a world that didn't acknowledge them as people with rights and didn't take their accounts seriously. The Child Care Act, 1991 can be seen as part of the movement within Ireland that was beginning to recognise the child as a separate entity with rights distinct from those of the family. This movement received further impetus with the monitoring and report back on the implementation of the UNCRC within Ireland. This process is thought to have had significant impact on government policy with the result that Ireland was the first of the countries within the British Isles to place an acceptance of the UNCRC within an overarching National Children's Strategy (Hayes, 2004). The National Children's Strategy proclaims as its vision, 'An Ireland where children are respected as young citizens with a valued contribution to make and a voice of their own...' and includes a set of 3 National Goals, the first of which is 'Children will have a voice in matters which affect them and their views will be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity.'

Adherence to the UNCRC is only one of several reasons why children should be involved in matters that effect them. These may be for legal, political or social reasons and may relate to benefits to services, agencies or to children. Set out below is a list of reasons for involving children as summarised by Sinclair and Franklin (2000).

- **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 and many national and local policy directives.
- **To improve services:** Consulting with children as users of services indicates how these can be more relevant to children's needs as perceived by them; participation gives children 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 hence more likely to be implemented.
- **To enhance democratic processes:** Representative democracy can be strengthened as children gain new opportunities to become active members of their community, whether in schools, local authorities or organisations.
- **To promote children's protection:** A recurring theme of successive inquiries into abuse has been the failure to listen to children. Participation is an important aid to protection.
- **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.

## THE MEANING OF PARTICIPATION

Although the term children's participation is now in everyday use, its actual meaning has considerable complexity.

Participation can simply mean "taking part". Or it can have a more active meaning – one which implies having some influence on decisions and hence on empowerment (McNeish and Newman, 2002). In this article we shall be assuming the more active definition – that through their active involvement children believe, and have reason to believe, that their participation makes a difference to the quality of decision-making. But even adopting this positive starting point, there are many layers in understanding what is meant by participation. Giving consideration to some of these complexities when planning to involve children can help ensure that participation is more meaningful to children and more likely to be sustainable.

Elsewhere I have set out what I see as 7 different dimensions that can be used to describe participation (Kirby and others, 2003; Sinclair 2004). These are:

- Level of participation
- Focus of decisions
- Content of decisions
- The nature of participation activity
- Frequency & duration of participation
- Children & young people involved
- Purpose of participation

## LEVEL OF PARTICIPATION

The level of participation is often used to describe the way in which power is shared between adults and children, in effect the extent to which adults afford to children some control within decision-making processes. Several writers have developed models to depict the varying levels of children's engagement in participation in different contexts (Hart, 1997; Shier, 2000). This is often shown as a ladder with the steps describing the degree to which children initiate or are in control of the process. For example, Hart suggests a ladder with 8 rungs, ranging from 3 negative forms of participation – manipulation, decoration, tokenism – to more positive forms such as consulted and informed, up to a topmost rung where decisions are child-initiated and shared with adults (Hart, 1997).



Others prefer not to use the concept of a ladder, as this suggests that one should always be seeking to reach the topmost rung (Franklin, 1995; Treseder, 1997). In a recent report by NCB and PK consultancy the authors adopt a different format, as set out below (Kirby, Lanyon, Cronin and Sinclair, 2003). This model only includes positive participation and is set out in a non-hierarchical way, indicating that we cannot assume that any one level of participation is necessary always better than others. Rather each of these levels of participation may be appropriate in certain circumstances. Nor can we assume that a particular participation activity will afford the same level of participation. For example, the way in which Schools Councils operate varies significantly depending on the level of control passed to children by staff (HDA, 2004).

### **FOCUS OF DECISIONS: PUBLIC OR PERSONAL**

It is important to distinguish between involvement in decisions that are about children as individuals (such as care planning for children in public care, decisions relating to health care or family contact) and decisions that relate to children as a group, often referred to as public decision-making, and which are about the collective interest of children as a whole. This will include involvement in policy development, in service planning and often service delivery.

Effective participation in these two types of decisions will require different forms of involvement. The activities and tools appropriate to work with a child on a personal decision will not be the same as when working with a group designing a new play scheme.

### **CONTENT OF DECISIONS**

Decisions may be about policy making, service planning, delivery or evaluation. Or they may involve different content: health, social care, education, community development, play. Research suggests that the form of activity most successful in each of these contexts is likely to vary. So when planning participation activity it is necessary to think about the context in which children's participation takes place and what objectives it is hoped the participation will achieve.

### **PARTICIPATION ACTIVITY**

There is now documentation on an enormous range of participation activities – from one-off consultation exercises or longer term consultation processes such as young people's forums or advisory groups; or involvement in governance structures such as Boards, committees, councils; or focus groups; to access to interactive websites (Willow et al, 2004). Each activity has different characteristics which present different strengths and weaknesses depending on the purpose of the participation. For example, involvement in policy making may suggest some form of on-going group; involvement in service planning may be through a survey of young people's views; evaluation may involve young people going out and acting as researchers to ask others what they think about a service.

So far we have been considering participation activity which can be classed as formal participation. An equally valuable way to involve children and to understand their perspective is through informal participation – engaging in conversations, joining in, being with and listening to them. Informal participation is just as important, if not more important, in creating a climate where children feel respected and their views valued.

### **FREQUENCY AND DURATION OF PARTICIPATION**

Participation may be a one-off activity, as many consultation exercises; or it may be regular activity such as advisory groups or reference groups; or it may be on-going as with schools councils or children's panels.

Depending on the purpose, it may be more appropriate to think of a programme of complementary participation activities. This

#### **A MODEL OF LEVEL OF PARTICIPATION**



*(From Building a Culture of Participation: Involving Children and Young People in Policy, Service Planning, Delivery and Evaluation, DfES, 2003)*



may have the advantage of reaching a wider range of children or giving children more choice about how they want to be involved. This was very much the strategy used in the large scale consultation undertaken in Ireland around the development of the National Children's Strategy (Government of Ireland, 2000; Pinkerton, 2004).

## THE CHILDREN INVOLVED

The term children (following the UNCRC definition as all those under 18 years) covers a very diverse group, who are not only different in their personal circumstances, (age, sex, ethnicity, culture, disability, social and economic circumstances) but also in terms of their changing interests and capacities as they grow older. What is appropriate for one group may not suit another; it is necessary to design forms of dialogue and engagement that starts from the position of the child, whatever their age or ability.

Some participation activities may be directed at all children; others to children in particular circumstances, such as "in care" groups. Some will seek to engage a large number of children, such as large scale consultation exercises, perhaps through schools or websites. Others will focus on smaller numbers for on-going work.

Thinking about who is involved suggests several questions that need to be asked by those hoping to involve children in a meaningful way.

- Who is it relevant to involve in order to achieve the objectives or purpose of the participation?
- How do you ensure that all those affected by a decision are given the opportunity to express a view?
- Do your participation processes enable all children, including young children or those with a disability, to take part?
- What impact does the recruitment process have on who gets involved – for example, different children are likely to be included depending on whether they are selected by adults, self-selected or elected by peers.
- Does the venue or the nature of the activity exclude people – for example do the activities require an ability to write and in English; does the venue mean those without access to private transport cannot get there?

What about representation? Does this matter, beyond issues of equal opportunity? Again this depends on the purpose of the activity. If it is to give generalised representation to the views of children as whole then it is vitally important. If it is to broaden the range of perspectives that are informing decision-making, say in an on-going forum, then statistical representation may be of less relevance. Here it may be more important to focus on openness and inclusiveness, particularly the inclusion of more marginalised groups.

## THE PURPOSE OF PARTICIPATION

These different dimensions to participation provide a framework for thinking about what form of participation is right for what situation. And that requires clarity about its purpose. Practitioners need to ask:

- Are we clear about why are we doing this?
- What are we seeking to achieve?
- What are our intended outcomes – in the short term and long term?
- What is in it for the children who get involved?

Is the purpose to gather information or data on children's views? If so this requires consideration be given to the manner in which evidence is gathered and hence its qualities. Is it to inform policy or service development? Is it to encourage social inclusion or enhance citizenship? Is it about enhancing the skills and experiences of young people?

The answers to such questions should guide the choice of participation activity. For example, the evaluation of children's participation in the Children Fund in English local authorities describes the range of participation activities undertaken according to a threefold classification of purpose: programme development; citizenship and rights; resilience, capacity and empowerment (Morris, 2004).

## BUILDING A CULTURE OF PARTICIPATION

In taking on board new thinking around children's involvement it is natural that there should be a focus around the process, with adults anxious to allay their anxieties about "how to do it". While the process of participation is important in itself and can have significant impact on the children who

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are involved, it is an unnecessarily limiting perspective to view participation as an end in itself. Rather, participation is a means to an end – to enable children to influence decision-making and thereby bring about change in the decisions that are made. This suggests the need to move beyond a view of participation as isolated, fragmented pieces of activity, often undertaken at the margins and instead to think about the way in which participation fits within the overall culture of an organisation.

A recent review of effective participation practice across a wide range of agencies in England pointed to the culture of the organisation as a crucial factor in the development of effective participation (Kirby, Lanyon, Cronin and Sinclair, 2003). Children's participation was more likely to be meaningful to them and effective in influencing change in those agencies that had worked to embed participation across all sections and levels. In effect this means changing the culture of the organisation to one that embraces participatory practice, such that the involvement of children in matters that affect them becomes standard practice, rather than a specialist activity.

How can an organisation work to develop a participatory culture so that the involvement of children becomes embedded in their everyday practice? The literature on organisational change suggests there are four stages to the process of cultural change:

- Unfreezing existing attitudes
- Establishing catalysts for change;
- Internalising new ways of working
- Institutionalising new ways of working

How might this be applied to the building of a culture of participation? A few possible suggestions are:

**Highlight the need to change:**

Use research evidence of impact of participation; point out the requirements of legislation or funders.

**Build senior management support:**

To develop and communicate a vision of children's participation and what this can achieve; to mobilise resources.

**Identify champions of participation:**

Both children and adults who have the dynamism and the clout to inspire change.

**Build staff capacity:**

Develop the skills, knowledge, attitudes, and approaches necessary to engage children.

**Involve children early on:**

Use their ideas to help guide and drive the process.

**Celebrate and reward achievement:**

Publicly acknowledge and value the work of both children and staff.

**Recognise and address conflict:**

Any change will bring some resistance, which

needs to be openly addressed – for example, use the arguments of why participation is important to influence others.

**Develop policies and standards:**

If new practice is to spread and has to become the recognised standard, to be built into the policy and procedures of the organisation.

**Reflect and evaluate:**

As with any process of change, there is a need for constant reflection on what works and what is less helpful, making adaptations as necessary.

**CONCLUSION**

The past decade or so has seen a major shift in both thinking and practice around children's participation. As well as an explosion of activity, a body of evidence is slowly building which points to some of the impacts of this activity. This still focuses more on the process of participation than on the outcomes. It is time now to use this evidence to ensure that participation is effective in bringing about really significant changes, not only for children and the adults who work with them, but also for services, agencies and communities. And if children's participation is to have a lasting impact then it must become more firmly embedded in the everyday practice of all agencies which impact on children. This suggests the need to focus on overall organisational culture, building a culture of participation so that children's participation is not seen as some isolated, marginal activity but part and parcel of the working of society.

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# CHILDREN & PARTICIPATION

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*The legal authority for the Ombudsman for Children began on April 25th 2004, just over one year ago. The office is a one of a growing number of international offices dedicated to the promotion and safeguarding of children's rights.*

*The Ombudsman for Children, established under the Ombudsman for Children Act, 2002 has two main functions; to promote the rights and welfare of children and to investigate complaints made against public services for children.*

*I have received considerable advice since taking up office – of course some of it conflicting. Some have advised that I should be careful of becoming an idealog or zealot in the pursuit of children's rights. Others caution about pragmatism, because pragmatism will restrict the pursuit of children's rights. Whatever the advice, those offering it are well intentioned. Far from the descriptions of zealot or idealog is the term I am most commonly called – particularly in Dublin – the "Omnibus"!*

*The most surprising question I am asked regularly is about lawless teenagers and can't I do anything to sort them out? It is difficult to respond to this and I generally refer to the concept of active citizenship and some of the examples I have seen where young people are encouraged by adults to take responsibility and enjoy being part of their communities. Central to the shift in thinking about young people is the most fundamental right that children have – the right to participate.*





## THE RIGHT TO PARTICIPATE

Ireland ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1992. Article 12 of the Convention states that children have a right to have their views heard in relation to all decisions and actions affecting them and that due weight must be afforded to those views in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

In its implementation document the committee states that there are no boundaries on the obligation of State parties to assure the child the right to express views freely. In particular, the committee emphasises that there is no area of traditional parental or adult authority – the home or school for example – in which children's views have no place. It should also be emphasised that Article 12 implies no obligation on the child to express views.

The ratification of the UNCRC unreservedly in 1992 signalled the growth of involving young people in public decision-making, particularly article 12 which emphasises young people's right to have a say in decisions that affect their lives. Parallel to this has been a shifting view that children and young people are social actors in their own right, and agents of change rather than passive recipients of the intervention of others.

## LITERATURE

There is a growth of literature about how and why to involve young people in making public decisions but very little evaluative research on how best to do so and what impacts can be achieved (Kirby). Only a minority get involved in public decision-making and these generally are not always representative groups. Kirby suggests that older young people and girls have been found to participate more. Less is known about why young people do not want to get involved, although there is evidence that this includes cynicism about how much adults will listen (Kirby).

## DO WE LISTEN TO CHILDREN?

We do not have a strong history of listening to children in Ireland. In 1993 the Kilkenny Incest Investigation Committee clearly stated that the voice of the child was not heard. They also recommended a review of the Irish Constitution with a call for express rights for children.

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in their concluding remarks (Ireland) of 1998 stated specifically in relation to Article 12 'that the views of the child are not generally taken into account, including within the family, at schools and in society. The Committee is also concerned that procedures for hearing children are not fully considered in the legislation.'

Among the recommendations was the establishment of an independent monitoring body such as the Ombudsman for Children and the adoption of a National Strategy for Children incorporating the principles and provisions of the convention. Goal 1 of the National Children's Strategy is the fundamental principle of the Convention. The right to participate was a welcome change in terms of a statement of public policy in the national children's strategy.

I have met many children in this job. Yesterday I met a group in Darndale and asked them if they thought they could change things. They described feeling powerless, 'They don't care what we think', and 'They never listen to us because we are kids' is repeated with all

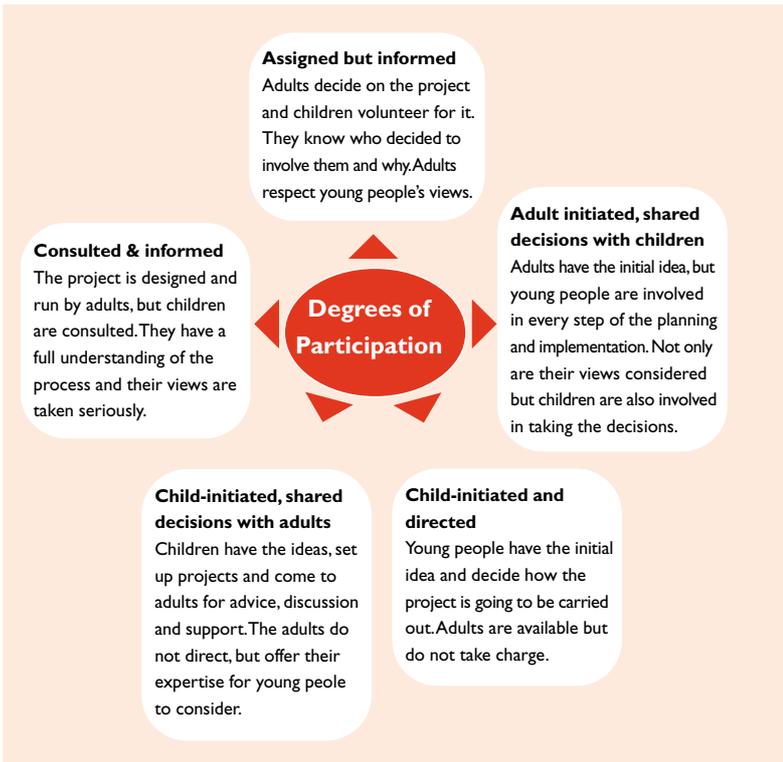
groups I have met. However, this is not unique to Ireland. Peter Clarke, the Children's Commissioner in Wales in his first annual report spoke about children not feeling listened to. Nigel Williams, Children's Commissioner in Northern Ireland in an extensive review with children living in Northern Ireland heard the same message.

Across Europe it seems that the Scandinavians are ahead when it comes to empowerment of children and taking them seriously. It is also one of the few countries where the UNCRC is part of domestic law.

## MODELS OF PARTICIPATION

Hart provides a model that incorporates consultation as one of the many methods of participation. Hart's well known "ladder" has seven levels of participation ranging from manipulative and decorative at the bottom of the ladder to child initiated projects and sharing decision-making with adults at the top.

More recently there has been considerable debate about the ladder, questioning the use of a ladder as a concept that implies a hierarchy of value. I am aware that work is going on in the UK on other conceptual models but at the moment I personally favour the model put forward by Treseder (1997) suggesting that there are different degrees of participation. This model recognises that different approaches may be applied in different circumstances.



Those of you who have worked directly with children I'm sure would acknowledge that their ability to participate varies. In the group I met yesterday some of them simply nodded or shrugged their shoulders and that was as much as they could do.

I would favour a model that works towards encouraging a child to participate in whatever way they can. This is child centred and gives the power to the child rather than a session being determined by the adult's willingness to "let them" be involved. I would be cautious



about offering training to young people to enable them to function in adult environments. I think we as adults need to learn to listen to them and work in ways that accommodates and encourages their capacities and values them as children and young people.

Someone said to me recently that they had set up a committee and had a place for a young person at a table of twenty adults and was questioning me about why they could not get young people to participate. I think this apparent unwillingness to get involved can often be borne out of a lack of empowerment. What is also interesting is the notion that we expect adults to build the capacity of children when they themselves have not been empowered to allow this to happen. We therefore need to challenge the culture in which we as adults function if we are to genuinely expect the participation of children and young people. We probably all recognise that we have at times worked in undemocratic environments, environments that do not allow us as adults to think or participate freely.

Whatever model you choose to guide your work I think it is important to consider supporting the young people you want to participate. I was interviewed by young people for this job and six of them then sat on our interview panels for staff in the office. I had to stop and think and ask myself, why am I doing this, will it make a difference and are my intentions genuine?

## INTERNATIONAL VIEW

Children remain politically vulnerable as long as they don't vote. There is a shift across Europe to reduce the age of voting to 16. Apparently Charles Kennedy from the Liberal Democrats in the UK was the first to include the notion in their manifesto; Labour have since included it.

A welcome development across Europe is that young people's participation is becoming widely valued and respected as a right rather than a gift from adults. Whilst young people are increasingly being involved in participatory projects, the evidence from existing evaluations is that they are still having little impact on public decision-making, although this varies across contexts and between different types of organisations.

To date evaluations have focused more on the process, or on impacts for young people, than on how much young people have influenced public decisions.

Adults involved in supporting young people are sometimes reported to be "surprised" and "impressed" by what the young people are capable of doing and achieving. There is some evidence of perceived changes in attitudes towards young people. For example, Shenton (1999) found a 'great deal of evidence of changes in attitudes', including both personal and professional attitudes towards young people's involvement and participation.

This included beginning to see young people as part of the solution and not part of the problem, a gradual recognition of the need for adults to change and of the need for dialogue. Most of the success reported is based on a principle of equality.

## CREATING AN ENVIRONMENT OF PARTICIPATION

According to the participation consortium in Wales there are three key conditions which must be satisfied to ensure children and young people are included in the decision-making process:

- Cultural attitudes must be such as to encourage participation.
- Political, legal and administrative structures must be in place in order to ensure rights to participation.
- Economic and social conditions must be such as to enable people to exercise their rights.

Much of the concern expressed to me relates to adults' apprehension about child participation, for example a fear that things will get out of control, a fear of handing over power. For participation to develop we need to challenge our own assertions and assumptions about what participation might mean and we need to support adults in allowing this to happen.

Some of the comments expressed by young people include the issues of sincerity and feedback. They are not convinced that all participation is genuine. Because they are very action orientated they are keen to receive feedback on how their input connects with the outcome or if in fact it does at all. On a recent visit to a youth group in Donegal they asked me how "exactly" I was going to communicate with them.

One of the biggest challenges is the participation of those who have had bad experiences with authority and who do not trust authority. Working with and through those in the community who already have established a trusting relationship with them seems to be the most appropriate approach.

## CONCLUSION

Ireland ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1992. Article 12 of the Convention states that children have a right to have their views heard in relation to all decisions and actions affecting them. The National Children's Strategy commits to giving children a voice in Ireland. It should be reiterated that Article 12 implies no obligation on the child to express views. Adults need to respond if the right to participation is to be realised.

There are many people involved in projects where participation is working in Ireland. In truth, participation here is really in its infancy. While it happens in pockets, it is fragmented and often not replicated. I know that some groups are working to develop principles and standards of participation. While this is a welcome change we might also consider a tool that supports the growth of an environment that creates a culture of participation where both adults and children feel safe

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The work of the National Children's Office on

# CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE'S

# PARTICIPATION



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## **NATIONAL CHILDREN'S STRATEGY**

Ireland is one of the few countries in the world with a ten year plan to improve the lives of all children. The National Children's Strategy (2000), which is rooted in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, is a cross-government response to improving children's lives and was developed with the assistance of NGOs and academics. The National Children's Office (NCO) is a Government agency, set up to support the Minister for Children, Brian Lenihan TD, drive implementation of the Strategy and ensure better co-ordination of services for children.

The vision of the National Children's Strategy is: 'An Ireland where children are respected as young citizens with a valued contribution to make and a voice of their own; where all children are cherished and supported by family and the wider society; where they enjoy a fulfilling childhood and realise their potential.'

## **The three goals of the Strategy are:**

- **Goal 1:** Children will have a voice in matters which affect them and their views will be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity.
- **Goal 2:** Children's lives will be better understood; their lives will benefit from evaluation, research and information on their needs, rights and the effectiveness of services.
- **Goal 3:** Children will receive quality supports and services to promote all aspects of their development.

The NCO has the lead role for children and young people's participation and children's research. The NCO has a co-ordinating and problem solving role under goal 3, particularly on "cross-cutting" issues. The focus of this article is on children's participation.



## **PARTICIPATION BY CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN DECISION-MAKING**

Under Goal 1, the National Children's Strategy acknowledges children as citizens, with a contribution to make to social and political life. The Government recognises its duty to care for children, but also its duty to empower children and young people to participate in issues that affect their lives. The NCO Communications Team takes the lead role in managing delivery of Goal 1 of the Strategy and is involved in ensuring the development and improvement of structures to enable participation by children and young people, such as Dáil na nÓg and Comhairle na nÓg. It also undertakes specific participation projects in partnership with statutory bodies, government departments and non-government organisations.

At an international conference in Washington DC, USA (2004) and WHO/European Environmental Health Committee Meetings in Budapest and Paris (2004 and 2005), Ireland emerged as a leading country in approaching child and youth participation as a right and an essential component in devising and delivering effective and relevant service and policies. However, the NCO recognises that participation by children and young people in decision-making is just beginning and that we have much to learn, especially from young people.

### **WHAT IS PARTICIPATION?**

'Effective participation is the involvement of children that actually leads to an outcome or change.' (*Building a Culture of Participation, Department for Education and Skills, UK, 2003*). According to the National Children's Strategy, participation is the appropriate and meaningful involvement of children and young people in matters that affect their lives. It is widely accepted that consultation is only one aspect of participation and should never be an end in itself. 'Citizenship practice is learned through the lived experience of belonging and participating, of listening and speaking, of being valued and included'. (*Maurice Devlin, Background Paper, Youth Ministers' Conference, Dromoland Castle, March 2004*). The benefits of participation are manifold and young people involved with the NCO in participative structures and activities report that their confidence and self-esteem are enhanced. Research conducted in the UK concluded that participation by children and young people:

- Improves relevance and quality of policies and services.
- Gives young people a sense of civic responsibility.
- Makes them more interested in national and local politics.
- Increases the likelihood that they will vote in elections.

(*Young People and Politics, Children and Young People's Unit, 2002*)

### **STRUCTURES FOR PARTICIPATION**

#### **Comhairle na nÓg**

The 34 City and County Development Boards (CDBs) were established in 2000, the same year as the publication of the National Children's Strategy. CDBs have a key role in implementing the National Children's Strategy at local level and in establishing

local Comhairle na nÓg. The purpose of the Comhairle na nÓg (youth council) is to give children and young people a voice at local level and an opportunity to influence local policy and planning. Some CDBs have established regular sessions of Comhairle na nÓg, which link with the adult county council. The NCO provides a small annual grant to CDBs to support the Comhairle and works closely with staff in CDBs on children and young people's participation.

As the involvement of children and young people in decision-making is still very new in Ireland, the NCO is committed to continuously evaluating participation opportunities and structures and working towards their improvement. To this end, for the last two years the NCO has hosted annual meetings of Community and Enterprise Development Officers (CEDOs), who are employed by CDBs and are responsible for organising Comhairle na nÓg. These meetings provide an opportunity for CEDOs and NCO staff to meet and build relationships and also for good practice and difficulties to be shared.

The NCO also works with the Department of Environment and Local Government, as this is the Department with overall responsibility for the operation of CDBs.

The NCO commissioned an independent review of the Comhairle na nÓg process in November 2004, as a result of issues raised at the CEDO meetings, feedback from young people and evaluations of Dáil na nÓg. This review will be completed in June 2005.

#### **Dáil na nÓg**

Dáil na nÓg is the national youth parliament and is overseen and funded by the NCO. Dáil na nÓg provides young people with an opportunity to feed their concerns into public policy and meets once a year. Young people are elected to the Dáil through their local Comhairle na nÓg. The first Dáil na nÓg took place in September 2001.

#### **Dáil na nÓg 2005**

The National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI), Foróige and the National Youth Federation were awarded the contract to run Dáil na nÓg 2005 on behalf of the NCO. The Dáil took place on 19 March in Croke Park Dublin. The NYCI also organised the previous Dáil in November 2003. One of the strengths of the NYCI approach is its identification of social partnership as the framework for implementing the recommendations from the Dáil.

200 delegates, aged 12-18 years, elected through their local Comhairle na nÓg attended Dáil na nÓg 2005. The Dáil was opened by Brian Lenihan TD, Minister for Children. The two themes, selected in advance by delegates were drug and alcohol abuse and facilities for young people. For the first time, electronic voting was used by delegates to vote on statements, which yielded much more accurate and precise outcomes than in previous years. Below are the results of the voting on the top four statements under the two themes.



### Alcohol and Drug Misuse

1. Gardaí need specialised training in young people's issues (Agree: 74% / Disagree: 26%)
2. More funding for youth related activities (youth clubs, advertising etc.) (Agree: 78% / Disagree: 22%)
3. There should be compulsory education on harmful effects of alcohol and drugs for students and parents in schools and youth clubs (Agree: 74% / Disagree: 26%)
4. There should be more alcohol free facilities in addition to sport facilities for young people, e.g. youth cafés, drama, music venues, swimming pools, etc. (Agree: 82% / Disagree: 18%)

### Facilities for Young People

1. Child fares on transport should apply to U18s and admission charges to facilities/events should be subsidised/reduced (Agree: 93% / Disagree: 7%)
2. Opening hours of youth facilities should be extended (Agree: 88% / Disagree: 12%)
3. The voting age should be reduced to sixteen (Agree: 69% / Disagree: 31%)
4. Facilities should be co-run by young people and youth workers (Agree: 82% / Disagree: 18%)

Officials from the Departments of the Taoiseach, Health and Children, Education and Science, An Garda Síochána and the National Drugs Strategy Team, as well as the Ombudsman for Children were part of a panel which listened to the views and recommendations of delegates and responded to questions from delegates.

### Coiste na dTeachtaí

22 delegates were elected to the Coiste na dTeachtaí (Representatives Committee), to follow-up the recommendations from the Dáil. The Coiste will be supported in its work by the NCO and NYCI. The first meeting of the 2005 Coiste na dTeachtaí took place on Saturday 30 April 2005, organised by the NYCI and supported by NCO. It has been agreed that the Coiste will meet on a monthly basis and that appropriate training will be provided for its members.

Members of the 2003 Coiste na dTeachtaí received facilitation training by the NYCI and were supported by NCO and NYCI in co-facilitating at several events for children and young people, including a national consultation on developing a children's code of advertising, Dáil na bPáistí and other events around the country. Members of the Coiste also attended and spoke at international conferences on young people's participation in Dublin, Budapest, Paris and Washington DC, supported by NCO staff.

During 2004, the Coiste attended a number of meetings with officials from government departments in the Department of the Taoiseach to follow-up the recommendations from the Dáil. Meetings with the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and the National Parents Council (Primary) were also attended. Coiste members spoke at national conferences on alcohol and health service planning.

### Dáil na nÓg Steering Committee

The NCO chairs a Steering Committee, which drives the policy direction and oversees the planning of Dáil na nÓg. This committee comprises youth representatives from the Coiste na dTeachtaí, Comhairle na nÓg, representatives from City and County Development Boards and representatives of the organisations who are running the Dáil. Based on the feedback from Dáil na nÓg 2002, it was decided by the Steering Committee that future sessions of Dáil na nÓg would be for young people aged 12-18 years. It was also agreed that regional Dáil na bPáistí would be organised for children age 8-12 during 2004 on a pilot basis.

### Dáil na bPáistí

Dáil na bPáistí is the national children's parliament for children aged 8-12 years and was held for the first time, on a pilot basis, in 2004. Four regional sessions of Dáil na bPáistí took place in Dublin, Cork, Galway and Sligo and were organised on behalf of the NCO by the ISPCC. Approximately 150 children from all over the country were elected, through their Comhairle na nÓg, to attend the Dáil na bPáistí most convenient to them. The children discussed the issues of education and drug/alcohol misuse. These events were very successful and confirm the value of participation by children of this age. In the discussions on education in particular, the children had very worthwhile recommendations. The main recommendations were:

#### EDUCATION

- Learning should be more practical and fun.
- More funding/support/counselling should be provided for those with disabilities, learning difficulties and other problems.
- Bullying is not being dealt with.
- The teaching of Irish needs to be made more interesting.
- Uniforms, books and other school costs are too expensive.
- There should be more ICT training for students and teachers.
- There should be improved funding for inner-city schools.
- There should be more education through sport.



## ALCOHOL/DRUG MISUSE

- More education on drugs and alcohol.
- Stricter enforcement of the law on selling alcohol to minors.
- Effective advertising campaigns aimed at young people.
- Community-based support and treatment for users.
- More Government expenditure on sports and recreational facilities in communities.

At each event, 8-10 children were elected to be part of a national follow-up committee, to attend a meeting with the Minister for Education and Science, Mary Hanafin TD, to present her with the outcomes on education from Dáil na bPáistí. This meeting took place in January 2005 and involved 35 children from all over the country. The Minister welcomed their recommendations and committed to taking their ideas on board. She said that their voice was important and that when they saw bullying they should be strong enough not to turn a blind eye. She promised that if she introduced any action arising from the day's proceedings she would acknowledge that they had told her to do it.

## The Student Council Working Group

Student councils give young people a voice in school and the opportunity to work in partnership with school management, staff and parents. The NCO set up the Government Student Council Working Group in June 2003, in co-operation with the Department of Education and Science, to promote the establishment of democratic student councils in second-level schools, in accordance with the Education Act 1998. Eleven second-level students, aged 13-17 years and all the partners in education (teachers unions, management bodies, parents' associations) are members of this group and its ethos is one of partnership and equality. The students were nominated through Comhairle na nÓg throughout the country and the Union of Secondary Students (USS). There are 26 members of the group, which is chaired by the NCO and meets quarterly. The involvement of young people in this process is proving to be very successful.

At an early stage, the Working Group agreed a definition of a student council: 'A Student Council is a representative structure for students only, through which they can become involved in the affairs of the school, working in partnership with school management, staff and parents for the benefit of the school and its students'. The Working Group launched a leaflet, poster and website aimed at students, promoting the establishment of student councils, which were distributed to all second level schools in April/May 2004. Information on establishing and running student councils is posted on [www.studentcouncil.ie](http://www.studentcouncil.ie).

To ensure that the young people on the Working Group are fully and equally involved, an independent observer/evaluator was appointed. It is hoped that the final evaluator's report will act as a good practice guide for government departments/other agencies on involving children and young people in decision-making. Appropriate participation by children and young people in the work of government departments and public bodies is a commitment in the National Children's Strategy.

The NCO commissioned the Children's Research Centre at Trinity College, Dublin, to carry out research on the enablers and barriers to student councils. This research has been completed and was launched in April 2005. The research is assisting the Working Group in developing a support pack for students, teachers and schools. This support pack will be launched and circulated to schools in September 2005. The Working Group will submit a final report to the Minister for Children in July 2005, with wide-ranging recommendations for strengthening student councils.

## Participation Guidelines

In partnership with the Children's Rights Alliance and the National Youth Council of Ireland, the NCO is currently developing a set of national guidelines on participation by children and young people entitled *Young Voices: How to Involve Children and Young People in Your Work*. The guidelines will be aimed at Government Departments, state agencies, youth organisations and other organisations whose work is relevant to children and young people. They encourage adults in key positions in organisations to provide opportunities for children and young people to become involved in decision-making. The guidelines build on *Hearing Young Voices* – a research study undertaken by the Children's Rights Alliance and the National Youth Council of Ireland on behalf of the *Open Your Eyes to Child Poverty Initiative*, which examined the theory and practice of consultation with children. The new guidelines will be launched in May 2005.

## NCO Children and Young People's Forum (CYPF)

In November 2004, the NCO set up a Children and Young People's Forum (CYPF), to provide advice to the NCO on its work programme in the context of the National Children's Strategy. Members of the Forum are aged 8-17 years and are from all parts of the country, nominated through Comhairle na nÓg. The NCO considers it essential to have the expertise and views of children and young people in important aspects of its work. The first Forum project is working with the NCO staff on creating child and youth-friendly areas on the NCO website.



### **NCO Participation Projects**

Other projects and initiatives managed by the NCO in 2003–2004 included:

- Involving children and young people in the recruitment and selection process for the appointment of Ireland's first Ombudsman for Children.
- Involving children and young people in the development of a children's code of advertising with the Broadcasting Commission of Ireland.
- Providing seed funding for RTE News2Day, a daily (week-day) children's news programme.
- Involving young people in health service planning (with the Programme of Action for Children of the Health Boards Executive) and the 2004 Annual Conference of the PAC.
- Involving children/young people in the mid-term review of the national drugs strategy (with the Department of Community, Rural and Gaelatacht Affairs).
- Involving children/young people in a national consultative process being conducted by the Department of Education and Science on the Irish education system.
- Involving children/young people in tender evaluations, design of publications, steering committees and other NCO work.

### **CONCLUSION**

The involvement of children and young people in decision-making is still at a very early stage of development, but as provided for in the National Children's Strategy and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, steady progress is being made. All the available evidence indicates that citizenship is learned through practice and that both society and children themselves benefit from appropriate participation. Participation does not simply happen, but requires champions at national, local and organisation level. The National Children's Strategy provides the strategic focus and template from which participation by children and young people can be developed.

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*According to the National Children's Strategy, participation is the appropriate and meaningful involvement of children and young people in matters that affect their lives. It is widely accepted that consultation is only one aspect of participation and should never be an end in itself. 'Citizenship practice is learned through the lived experience of belonging and participating, of listening and speaking, of being valued and included'.*

*Devlin, Background Paper, Youth Ministers' Conference, Dromoland Castle, March 2004*



# CONSULTING WITH VERY YOUNG CHILDREN

**Michelle Hart**

Quality Officer

Border Counties Childcare Network



A programme of consultation with very young children was developed by Border Counties Childcare Network. The aim of the programme was to listen to children in all matters that concern them within the early childhood settings they have been placed.

The context in which this consultation process was carried out was in the belief that children are active participants in their own learning and know much about their own lives. It is important to point out that children are seen as competent learners, primed from pre-birth and not as empty vessels waiting to be filled with knowledge.



The programme of consultation with children was carried out over six months from January until July 2004. The consultation process was rolled out as a whole with all the age groups, broken down into 0-3, 3-5 and 5-14 age-groups. It was not the intention to break up the development of children as categorically as this, but practically it had to begin somewhere and this is how the development of the tools began.

The search for a tool in which to work with younger children began and one could not be found. Enquiries were made to other organisations and to academic institutions all over Ireland without any result.

What do early year's specialists do when faced with difficulty? Consult theory, dig deep and develop your own tool and that's exactly what happened.

Denmark has a long and distinguished history of working with young children in this way and it was to this country that inspiration was sought. After much deliberation it was thought the best way forward would be to look at an early year's setting through a child's eyes (as much as could be perceived to be so).

Observation as a tool for learning about children is one that is well respected among practitioners as we use this tool everyday to help evaluate all aspects of children's lives. Observing children is extremely worthwhile and helps us to strip away the surface of things to look more closely at what may be underneath.

The entire consultation process involved children from eight months to fourteen years and had to be rolled out in different ways for each age group; this was to prove the most challenging yet as the time span for the project was very short. The success of the project would rely heavily on the tools and how they were to be used and implemented. The questions to be answered needed to reflect the learning that it was hoped would be obtained.

The principles for consulting with each group are the same, but how this project was implemented was very different for each age group, taking into account how children think and learn at different stages.

A series of questions were set to determine the information wanted and needed, over a course of a full day. The questions were to be based around emotional responses and reactions to people, places and objects. An example of this would be, what children liked and didn't like, who they like to play with, how they were handled, what the children could already do now, how other children engaged with them and how equality was developed in their environments. The youngest children were in mind here given their emergence of language acquisition and our understanding of this, and the role that emotion plays in children's overall development. The notion from a research point of view was, the younger the children the more indirect the tool should be. With all this in mind it was decided to carry out consulting with very young children through observation.

Through the observational tool, interpretation was made as to what the children might be saying. Through pointing with their eyes as well as their finger, choosing, handling and learning about various materials, what they might be saying about their surroundings, using their voices and other forms of communication – verbal and non-verbal – to convey messages to their key worker and other children.

The consultation process with the 3-5 year olds was carried out first, mainly because six pre-school groups were already developing the BCCN Quality Development and Accreditation programme. The consultation with the 3-5 year olds lasted over two days and in hindsight was not enough, more time was not available and we were on a very tight schedule. However, much learning was obtained and more will hopefully come in prolonged sessions.

School age children were interviewed over an afternoon session in their settings, using a range of interview techniques, in small and large groups.

The child was met at the beginning of the session, the hand-over period with the parent. The process continued right throughout the day so that a good picture could be reflected of the child's time in the setting.

Parental permission had already been sought and it was made clear to the participants that if the child showed any discomfort to the researcher's presence that the process would stop. Although we cannot ask the child's permission to consult with them, time was spent watching and learning in order to be sure that the children were not uncomfortable in any way.

It is most difficult to observe a child intensely for a long period of time and the only occasion they were not observed was when they were sleeping. Not being easily distracted by other children is a must and could be problematic for a key worker with a number of children to care and educate.

Many photographs were taken during the day and were then used as a focal point in helping to illustrate the questions asked and the learning obtained. A portfolio of the day's observations and the learning was given to the parent following the consultation process.

Parents were delighted with this interesting record of their child's life in a very detailed way. The portfolio also helped parents to see how their children were being cared for and educated while in the setting.

Unfortunately, due to time only two children have been observed in the full consultation process, new ideas are being developed and more of the consultation is to be carried out very soon.

#### **Why is it important to consult with children?**

Listening to children gives practitioners ideas of what children may be thinking and feeling and with this can come the knowledge of what they may need from their early year's experience.



There are many reasons for consulting with children. It can:

- Be central to the learning process.
- Be vital in relation of emotional development in very young children.
- Be healthy for the development and retention of positive self-esteem.
- Be important in evaluating how society views early childhood and children.
- Provide important continuity from home.
- Be a fantastic way to reflect on your setting from the child's perspective.

It is important to listen to children within early childhood settings because it can help children to feel more valued as individual people. Given that children have to share time and space with others, and have little control over their lives, it is really important they are listened to by the people who care for and educate them.

Really listening to children means taking their ideas, feelings and opinions to heart and acting on what you are learning from them in a continuous way. The challenge for practitioners is to look upon children as the experts in their own lives and not upon practitioners as all powerful and always knowing what's best. Imagine the wonderful feeling given to children – I am respected and listened to therefore I can do the same for others. Would this not be a fantastic way to empower children, creating a setting of democracy – very powerful feelings to evoke in the psyche of children. How could this fail to raise the level of any child's self-esteem no matter what age group, creating an atmosphere of respect, trust and negotiation within the spirit of enquiry?

According to Neaum and Tallack (1997) 'Self-esteem is established at a young age and research evidence shows that it remains stable throughout life, so it is vital that positive self-esteem is established when children are young'.

As children we respond to interactions and reactions through the emotions shown to us by others and in turn we build an image from within. These emotional cues help us to shape our behaviour and help us to learn.

How well do we show our respect for children? Listening to children and interpreting what is going on helps us to negotiate with them throughout the day taking into account the child's viewpoint. Negotiation would seem to be one way of making a child feel more like they do at home, empowered capable individuals who can take on many challenges if it's offered in the right context and in ways that are meaningful to the children.

How many opportunities for learning may be lost because we are

not really listening to what children are telling us? Powerful learning can and does occur when children's interests are taken into account and they are exposed to real and valid daily choices within their environment, this is the core of real consultation.

Nutbrown (1996) suggests 'It appears that children who are given choices and genuine opportunities to take responsibilities for their own action are more likely to use the adult as a point of resource, rather than rely on them for approval, and to persevere in tackling difficulties rather than give up in the face of challenge'.

Enhancing children's learning in this way gives them a feeling of control over what they are doing and more choices of how they could do it.

As practitioners we are always evaluating our work with children and this cycle is not complete without children having their say.

Under Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 'Children have the right to express a view on all matters that concern them and to have that view taken seriously'. Consulting with young children part should become part and parcel of the fabric of our everyday lives and made an element of good practice within our settings. A truly unique and bottom up view of our services and practices could be gained. Given the right tools for listening, new insights will develop, new skills and knowledge will be formed and reformed but more importantly, we may develop a shift in our attitude and thinking on how we as a society should view and work with children in the future. According to Clarke and Moss (2001) a framework for listening such as this has the potential to be both used as an evaluative tool and to become embedded in early year's practice.

***It is important to listen to children within early childhood settings because it can help children to feel more valued as individual people. Given that children have to share time and space with others, and have little control over their lives, it is really important they are listened to by the people who care for and educate them.***



How children think and learn is a particularly interesting topic, especially when practitioners are faced with the analysis of this. Scratching below the surface and asking other questions can enhance our everyday practice, deepen our knowledge and can help practitioners to learn to respond to what children are saying in a different way.

In consulting with children in this way a message was aimed at practitioners, that being the starting point for children's learning is what they can do and nearly do and not only to concentrate on the developmental milestones. Gopnik, Meltzoff and Kuhl (2002) describe these as areas of fine learning in between milestones and this can tell more about a child than we realise.

### **What learning occurred during the process?**

The learning from the process in a personal and organisational perspective was far reaching, enough so that it will use this to inform all work in the BCCN with young children in the future. All of the learning accrued cannot be reflected in this article but some examples are as follows;

- Children involved in the process demonstrated short and long watching times with objects and people. Longer watching times occurred mostly when new people or material was presented to the children.

- Repetition and the fine tuning of skills to consolidate learning were very much evident and the children spent much time doing this.
- Children had clear ideas about what they wanted and didn't want and made this known through body language, facial expression and language.
- Forms of idiosyncratic speech were heard over the length of the day and build upon by the adult many times.
- Adults labelled the emotions they believed the children to be feeling throughout the course of the day.
- Children loved to engage with other children and used different strategies in order to do so.

The consultation tool for young children has been revised and will include more questions based around the immediate here and now, and possibly on positive dispositions of learning like creativity, curiosity, motivation and persistence. How these are modelled and built upon by the adult in a variety of settings is of extreme importance. When we look more closely at how children think and learn it is a natural progression to reflect on our role and how children are being supported. Using the process in this way enables practitioners to enhance working with children in a very non-critical way.



In including these additional questions we must be extremely careful not to interfere with the balance of the whole framework. Any alterations to be made to the process are to be carefully discussed, examined and reflected upon before any amendments are made.

Changes may also include **(1)** how children approach learning situations, **(2)** how they choose and handle materials (more closely) **(3)** what learning may be occurring at this point in time **(4)** how children may transfer these skills from one area of learning to another.

There are of course limitations in observing children in this way, other people may not see what you see and have other interpretations of what is happening. The validity of the tools and the research could be called into question since there is no comparison in which to measure the findings against, the same process on a different day could yield different results. However this does not mean that children should not be asked in this way.

The fact that no two consultation processes will be the same add to the uniqueness of this project and that children will express their thoughts and feelings depending on the mood, environment and the interactions of the particular adult and children on that day.

The reflexive aspect of the make-up of the framework, within the mosaic approach helps to balance out and validate the interpretation of observation. Children are not being observed to measure against any form of criteria, but to be used as Moss says as 'another platform for other forms of communication'.

Some time was also spent questioning the key worker, who has direct contact with the child to help to build up a truer reflective picture. The revised version of the consultation process will include what parents say about the children's time in the settings and also involves older sibling for their ideas on what the priorities might be for the child. Looking at the process in this way gives a better overall holistic viewpoint as well as involving many stakeholders who play

a key role in the life of the child and is in keeping with the principals behind the approach. We could have some more surprising results next time round from the older siblings point of view of what is really important for the younger child, this perspective could bring us a whole new outlook.

The consultation process is intended to be incorporated into good practice within settings and not as a once off in one session. In this way a truer, more meaningful reflection can be sought in the child's best interests and is more manageable for practitioners.

## Conclusion

There is a real need to shift our thinking away from the welfare model of "minding" children and move towards the need to empower children by really listening to what they have to say. All those who work for and with children, should seek to change the cultural climate, given the trend of the last century, which has been described as 'the century of the child' (Moss and Pence, 1994).

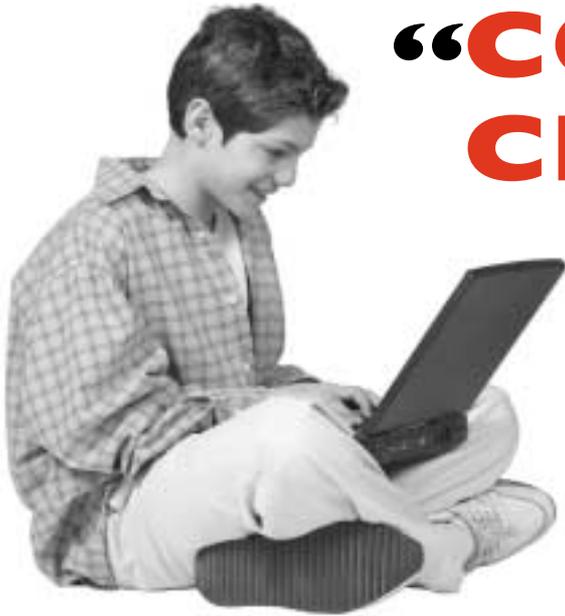
Valuable insights can be gained into children's feelings and their thinking through this process, helping to develop a very unique approach by practitioners.

The National Children's Nurseries Association have kindly agreed to test out the re-evaluated tool using a small number of willing practitioners. Another full round of consultation with children is planned for the near future for all children nought to fourteen in early year's settings. It is also hoped that this will be inclusive of other childcare professionals such as childminders.

Many thanks must go to Bright Horizons full day care in Trim Co Meath and to Charlie, his family and the staff who helped in the process a great deal. Consultation also took place at the Holy Family Crèche Muirhavnamor, Dundalk. Again many thanks to Doireann and to her family, not forgetting the staff that were very kind and accommodating on my visits there.

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# LESSONS FROM THE “COMPUTER CHARACTERS” PROJECT

## Developing Children’s Participation:

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*Edited by Barbara Stewart*, Project Co-ordinator, Computer Characters Project, Galway

Barnardos (West and Midlands Region) received funding for a children’s IT project from the national “Children’s Hour” initiative in 2000. The project was initiated out of concern at an emerging “digital divide” between those children who are benefiting and those who are being left behind by the information society (Becker, 2000). The “Computer Characters” project aimed to increase and improve the access to and usage of information technology as a tool for learning by disadvantaged children and their families. The project was also designed as a “participatory” project – children and their families would have an input into the design, operation and evaluation of the project. The pilot project was of one year’s duration. The project commenced training in October 2003 and finished in July 2004. The second phase of the project was possible, due to the cost-effectiveness of the pilot phase, and ran from October 2004 until March 2005. Long-term funding continues to be sought.

*Children were asked to list their interests and training was designed to fit in with these interests as much as possible. Learning to use the Internet to look up information about their favourite team or singer, using a scanner to scan photos of their favourite people and things and using a word document to paste photos and write about their lives are examples of how learning IT was made relevant to the children.*

This project was based on a number of assumptions: there are disadvantaged children and families in Galway City who don’t have access to IT skills and equipment; community and voluntary organisations, such as Barnardos and other stakeholders in the project, are well placed to develop initiatives that are tailor made to the needs and interests of these groups; a participatory, child-centred approach was likely to be effective in tailoring interventions to the unique circumstances and needs of each group; tailored training for children and families would help IT to become integrated into the daily life of the family.

A Project Co-ordinator, an employee of Barnardos, oversaw the running of the project, with the support of the Barnardos Regional Manager. An advisory group, consisting of representatives of local agencies and groups was formed to advise Barnardos on issues such as siting of training groups, contacts for suitable sites, ethical issues and other general issues

relating to the project. A local community or youth group in each community assisted the project in sourcing participants, negotiating premises, co-ordinating training times, liaising with parents and dealing with any issues emerging. Training took place in local youth projects, community centres or at the Barnardos Resource Centre. A range of educational and recreational software was purchased by the project.

33 children participated in the project, ranging in age from 3 years to 13 years, and including specific groups for Travellers, refugees and asylum seekers. Training sessions took place for each of the 6 groups once a week, for approximately 2 hours. Between 3 and 6 students took part in each group. Each group received 10 weeks’ training. Follow up sessions were planned for during the summer holidays.

A conscious decision was made at the outset that the Computer Characters Project would be a “participatory” project. The steps involved in translating participation theory into practice involved the following:

- Increasing knowledge and understanding of participatory approaches among stakeholders. Research was undertaken into participatory approaches and training on “consulting children” was provided for staff and advisory group members.
- Deciding on the level of participation that is most feasible within the parameters of the project. The Treseder model of participation (1997) was used as a guide. The level of participation thought to be most feasible in the project was ‘adult initiated – shared decisions with children’



- Gaining access to and securing the participation of children and families. The expertise and knowledge of the advisory group and local community and voluntary groups was drawn upon to source participants that would meet the project's target criteria.
- Maintaining the ongoing attendance of selected participants. Attention was paid to group dynamics to facilitate children to maintain attendance.
- Encouraging active participation and shared decision-making during sessions. The techniques used to encourage "shared decisions with adults" conformed to good practice guidelines in children's participation and included ground rules, clarity in information provision, feedback and child-led activities. Children were asked to list their interests and training was designed to fit in with these interests as much as possible. Learning to use the Internet to look up information about their favourite team or singer; using a scanner to scan photos of their favourite people and things and using a word document to paste photos and write about their lives are examples of how learning IT was made relevant to the children.

Feedback from children, parents, trainers and local link groups highlights that the project was a success. Children were facilitated to use IT in a way that interested them and was of relevance to their lives. In doing this, many outcomes were realised, including technical skills development, social skills development and growth in confidence. The children also derived great enjoyment from the training. The evaluation concludes that the success of the project can be attributed to a variety of factors in the training model and in the project environment.

## CRITICAL FACTORS IN THE TRAINING MODEL

Participants were shown how to tailor IT to their own needs and interests and become "content creators", thus seeing computers as relevant in their lives. This approach to children's IT training is in line with recommendations from research (Facer et al, 2001), which emphasises that children are motivated to acquire computer skills by non-technological objectives, such as personal communication and peer group interests, and that training should be based on its relevance to children at the present time. Some of the specific factors in the training model that helped to create positive outcomes include the following:

- Children and parents consented to their participation and were shown respect at all times.
- Information about the project was clearly outlined, both verbally and in written format. Children received clear instructions throughout the project.
- Ground rules were agreed by the participants and trainers.
- Formal and informal feedback mechanisms were provided. Feedback from children was received and acted upon on an ongoing basis.
- Children were given choice regarding the content of the course and the activities were child-led.
- Achievements were celebrated.

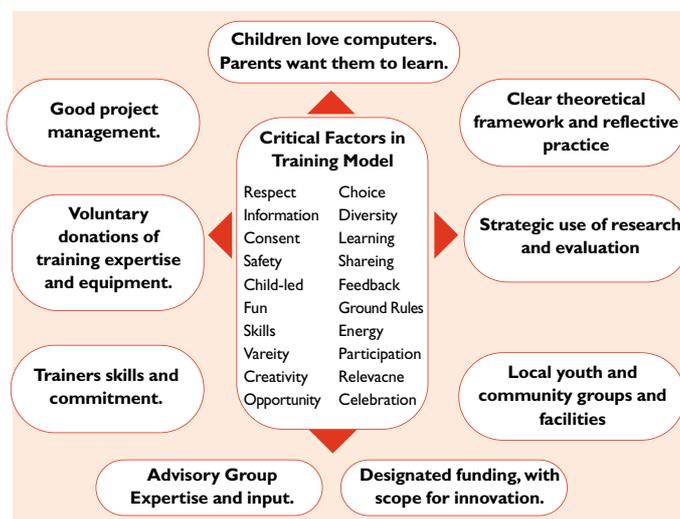
## CRITICAL FACTORS IN THE PROJECT ENVIRONMENT

In addition to the factors in the training model outlined above, some of the factors in the wider project environment that helped this project to achieve success were as follows:

- **Children love computers:** The "Computer Characters" project tapped into children's natural interest in IT and provided a creative and fun learning environment.

- **Parent's support:** Parents are generally keen for their children to be computer literate and support their children's participation in IT training. This project made the parents feel welcome and involved them in their child's learning.
- **Clear theoretical framework and reflective practice:** The project worked from a clearly defined theoretical framework (participatory approach) and developed and refined it through review and reflection. The experience of the project is that choosing a level and model of participation at the outset and regularly reflecting on how it is working can lead to better outcomes for children.
- **Strategic use of research and evaluation:** Research was undertaken at the outset to inform the theoretical framework developed and a process of formative evaluation helped to draw out the learning and shape how the project developed.
- **Staff skills and commitment:** Staff skills, energy, personal approach and commitment to the children were vital in the success of the project. Trainers all made great efforts to ensure that children were comfortable, having fun and learning.
- **Good management:** Good management, interested and able staff and adherence to good practice in child protection were crucial in facilitating the smooth running of the project and dealing with any issues that arose.
- **Youth and community groups and facilities:** Working through local community development and youth organisations was very valuable in terms of providing access to participants and community based facilities.
- **Advisory group expertise and commitment:** A range of statutory and voluntary organisations was represented on the advisory group. Their expertise was harnessed to provide essential information, contacts and advice for the project implementation.
- **Voluntary support:** Voluntary support, in terms of trainers' time and skills and donations of equipment, added greatly to the project's ability to achieve its objectives within a limited budget.

The "Computer Characters" Project was independently evaluated by the Child and Family Research and Policy Unit of NUI Galway/Health Service Executive. A toolkit on Children's Participation was published and is available from all Barnardos' National Children's Resource Centres. The following suggestions and findings on Children's Participation from the project were outlined:





### PLANNING FOR PARTICIPATION: KEY ACTIONS

- The Project aimed to adopt a participatory approach, but one that would be feasible and realistic within the parameters under which it had to work. A basic literature review into participatory approaches with children provided valuable guidelines regarding how the project could work.
- The Treseder model of participation (1997) was used to guide how the project could or would secure the participation of children. Given that the project had a short time-scale, it was not considered feasible to involve children and families in devising the wider project structure. The model of participation thought to be most feasible was one that would involve children and families in shared decisions about their own learning. The level of participation thought most appropriate for direct project work was 'adult initiated, shared decisions with children'.
- An ethical statement was developed by the advisory group to guide the project's interaction with children.
- Training on children's participation was provided to the project staff and advisory group.
- The methodology for children's participation was thought through and developed.

### ENGAGING: KEY ACTIONS

Directly engaging with children in a participatory way consisted of the following features:

- **Information:**
  - An open day or meeting was held for children and parents at each training site to explain the project and its potential, introduce the staff, brainstorm possible activities and enable children and parents to ask questions about it. Participants were given the option of participating or not and could make suggestions regarding what they would like to learn. The project evaluator was present and introduced to the children and families.
- **Consent:**
  - Parents and children signed consent forms to agree to their participation in the project and the evaluation.
  - Ground rules were developed at the outset by the trainers in conjunction with the participants.
- **Feedback:**
  - Children had numerous opportunities to express their feelings, opinions, satisfaction or unhappiness about any aspect of the course – including feedback forms, suggestion box and a complaints box.
  - Parents were asked for written and verbal feedback about their child's learning and enjoyment.
- **Relevance:**
  - Trainers set general objectives in relation to skills development for the overall group, which provided a structure and format for sessions. Participants could mould the session to their own interests within this framework, which ensured that skills acquisition took place while satisfying personal interests and curiosity.
  - Children identified their own personal interests and their objectives in relation to IT. Trainers followed their lead and guided them to use technology in a way that enabled them to acquire skills while pursuing their personal interests. For example, children with an interest in Manchester Utd. were assisted to access their website, download images and graphics and use them to make cards, letters and posters.

- Training was made as relevant to the children as possible. For example, in one group, children took photos of their family and things they were interested in, scanned these and made booklets. Another group made a web page about themselves and their lives. A pre-school group took photos of their families, which were developed into a "greetings project", with maps and information about their native country and greetings in their native language.

- **Participation:**

- Attention was paid to group dynamics. At the outset, name games and group games were played to introduce everybody and put people at ease. Group work was also included in the course to add a social, interactive and creative dimension.
- Parents were encouraged to get involved and were kept informed regarding the progress of the course.
- Where a child dropped out or did not attend for some sessions, an effort was made to find out why and encourage re-attendance if possible.

- **Child-led:**

- While children had choices, they also had to participate in learning activities. In cases where children had a strong preference for one game, to the exclusion of other learning, the trainers negotiated with them to encourage them to vary their learning.
- Children took part in self-directed learning, but could ask for assistance if required. Parents attending sessions were encouraged to allow their child to take the lead and not direct them in their choices.

- **Flexibility:**

- Training was flexible, it was adapted to suit the needs and dynamic of each group. Issues such as socio-economic factors, age-group, technology, location, gender, parental attitudes and timing of the course could influence the dynamic. Trainers adapted to these dynamics as much as possible, while retaining a focus on broad learning objectives

- **Enjoyment & Celebration**

- A general atmosphere of fun and enjoyment was encouraged. Parties were held at the beginning and end of the training course, participants were presented with certificates, their photographs were taken and their learning and participation was acknowledged.

### REFLECTION: KEY EXPERIENCES

The project evaluation found that some of the benefits of the participatory approach to learning were:

- Children respond well and participate well if enabled to pursue their own interests in a training context. The children grew in confidence throughout the training as their skills developed.
- Learning to use the Internet to look up information about their favourite team or singer; using a scanner to scan photos of their favourite people and things and using a word document to paste photos and write about their lives are examples of how learning IT can be made relevant to children.
- Trainers observed that, for children with literacy or behavioural problems, a participatory approach appears to offer them an opportunity to develop their skills and interests in a way that conventional forms of learning may not.
- Factors such as training for staff, a clear methodology and regular reflection were crucial in terms of developing and adapting the approach.



Some of the factors that made the participatory approach challenging were:

- Children come from a school environment to a training environment so it may not be easy for them to automatically switch into a participatory mode of learning.
- Children don't always know what they want to do. In some cases, information and experience has to be provided before they can identify the possibilities. In this project, the Co-ordinator brainstormed with the children all the things they could possibly do and showed them additional options before they chose what they themselves wanted to do.
- Participatory does not automatically mean that children get to do what they want. Staff had to get the message across that children had choices, but that there was also a need to learn, share and negotiate.

The project met children for just 10 weeks of training. It would not have been feasible to develop a more child-led model within this timeframe. If the project had been of a longer duration, it could offer the potential to move from an adult initiated to a child initiated approach.

The dimensions of participatory approaches with children, identified by Kirby *et al* (2003) are used below to classify the dimensions of participation evident in this project.

DIMENSION OF PARTICIPATION	COMPUTER CHARACTERS PROJECT
<b>Informal or formal</b>	the project adopted a formal methodology in relation to participation, including clearly outlined aims and objectives and feedback mechanisms.  Participation was also encouraged in informal ways, by encouraging children to take the lead and make decisions about what they wanted to do.
<b>Personal or public</b>	Decision-making related to personal decisions about what the child would do in the session.
<b>One-off or extended</b>	The participation was for an extended period, but yet was for a set 10 week course.
<b>Level of participation</b>	The level of participation within the training sessions was 'adult-initiated – shared decisions with children'. Trainers set the parameters within which children could make decisions about content. In the timeframe available, this was considered most feasible.  The wider project structure was not participatory, but was informed to some extent by feedback from children at training sessions.

## DEVELOPING: KEY ACTIONS

As this particular project develops, an increased level of children's participation will be sought.

The learning from this project will also be taken on board by Barnardos to plan for greater participation of children across the organisation.

## SUMMARY: DEVELOPING CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION

- Planning a participatory approach involves setting clear aims and objectives, undertaking research, training staff and developing a clear methodology and boundaries. Developing an ethical statement and performance indicators are also important. When directly engaging with children, it is important to inform children of the process, create a child friendly environment, communicate in a child-centred way, provide opportunities for feedback and allow for flexibility.
- In undertaking participatory work, it is important to regularly review and reflect on the work, with children and with staff. This facilitates learning and development of new ideas and approaches. It is better to start small and expand the possibilities for children's participation in an organisation. Kirby *et al* (2003) make the distinction between consultation-focused organisations, participation-focused organisations and child/youth focused organisations, depending on the degree to which children's participation is part of their overall approach.
- Ethical issues, including consent, confidentiality, transparency, equality and inclusion and respect are important considerations in participatory work.
- The case study of the "Computer Characters" Project is a practical illustration of how Barnardos planned a pilot participatory project, engaged with children, reviewed and reflected on their experience and are using the experience to develop greater opportunities for children's participation in the organisation.

Elements for planning for sustainability – including training models, use of volunteer resources, utilising 'used' computers and home based training and follow-up have been identified in this project. Structures, models and relationships have been developed that can be put to further use for the benefit of children and families that are Barnardos' service users.

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- 3 Kirby, Perpetua, Lanyon, C., Cronin, K and Sinclair, R. (2003) *Building a Culture of Participation: Involving Children and Young People in Policy, Service Planning, Delivery and Evaluation – Research Report and Handbook*. London: Department for Education and Skills
- 4 Treseder, P. (1997) *Empowering Children and Young People: Promoting Involvement in Decision Making – Training Manual*. London: Save the Children and Children's Rights Office



# Useful Resources on Children & Creativity

The following resources are available from the NCRC:

## **Action for a Change: An Activity Pack on Young People and Social Change**

National Youth Agency; Trust for the Study of Adolescence; Citizenship Foundation, 2004

## **Are Equalities an Issue? Finding Out What Young Children Think**

National Children's Bureau (NCB) 2004

## **Challenging the Image: Young People as Volunteers and Campaigners**

National Youth Agency, 1999

## **Children as Partners in Planning: A Training Resource to Support Consultation with Children**

Save the Children, 2000

## **Children's Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship**

United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) 1992

## **Children's Rights & Participation in Residential Care**

National Children's Bureau, 1996

## **Doing Something: Young People as Social Actors**

National Youth Agency, 2002

## **Empowering Children and Young People: Promoting Involvement in Decision-Making**

Save the Children; Children's Rights Office, 1997

## **Having a Say!: Disabled Children and Effective Partnership in Decision Making**

National Children's Bureau, 1998

## **Hearing Young Voices: Consulting Children and Young People, Including Those Experiencing Poverty or Other Forms of Social Exclusion, in Relation to Public Policy Development in Ireland: Key Issues For Consideration**

Open Your Eyes to Child Poverty Initiative, 2002

## **Involving Young People in the Recruitment of Staff, Volunteers and Mentors**

National Children's Bureau, 2002

## **Involving Young Researchers: How to Enable Young People to Design and Conduct Research**

Joseph Rowntree Foundation; Save the Children, 1999

## **A Journey of Discovery: Children's Creative Participation in Planning**

Save the Children, 1999

## **Listening to Young Children: The Mosaic Approach**

National Children's Bureau, 2001

## **Listening to Young Disabled Children**

National Children's Bureau, 2004

## **Never Too Young: How Young Children Can Take Responsibility and Make Decisions: A Handbook For Early Years Workers**

National Early Years Network, 1996

## **Participation in Practice: Children and Young People as Partners in Change**

The Children's Society, 2002

## **Participation – Spice It Up!**

Save the Children, 2002

## **A Real Part to Play: A Resource Pack for Involving Young People in Community Regeneration**

National Children's Bureau, 2005

## **Taking the Initiative: Promoting Young People's Involvement in Public Decision Making in Ireland**

Young People Initiative, 2001

## **Understanding and Developing Children's Participation: A Short Guide**

Child & Family Research and Policy Unit; Barnardos, 2004

## **Voices and Choices: Young People Participating in Inspections: Learning from the Listening and Responding Component of Social Services Inspectorate (SSI) Inspections of Local Authority Children's Services**

Barnardo's, 2002

## **Why and How We Listen to Young Children**

National Children's Bureau, 2004

## **Young Dubliners Speak Out: Civic Participation Pack for Schools and Youth Organisations**

Comhairle na nOg, 2002

## **Young Opinions, Great Ideas**

National Children's Bureau, 1998

## **Young People's Voices: Citizenship Education**

National Youth Agency, 2001