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Understanding and Developing Children's Participation

A Short Guide

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CHILD & FAMILY RESEARCH AND POLICY UNIT
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Contents

Introduction

Participation is a term used to refer to the involvement of children and young people in decisions that affect them. The case for children's participation has been growing in recent years due to a greater emphasis on the rights of children as human beings, citizens and consumers. Fostering children's participation is considered central to good practice in working with children.

While children's right to participate is enshrined in law, (through the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, ratified by Ireland in 1992) children's right to participate is often ignored and overlooked in our society. Planning and action are required to translate the theory into practice. This booklet is designed to explain children's participation and show how children's services can introduce and develop participatory approaches with children in their work.

Who is this booklet for?

The booklet is designed for staff in child and family services who want to:

Gain an understanding of children's participation

Learn how to develop participatory approaches with children in their work

Reading this booklet should equip practitioners with the basic information needed to start working in a participatory way with children. Readers can refer to the bibliography for further materials in relation to participatory work.

Outline

In Part Two, the emphasis is on 'Developing Participation'. There are four key phases in developing a participatory approach or project – Planning, Engaging, Reflecting and Developing. Part Two also provides a checklist of ethical considerations in participatory work with children. A case study of the Barnardos Computer Characters Project is provided as a practical example of how a participatory approach was planned and implemented in the context of an IT project for children.

Part 1: Exploring Participation

What is Children's Participation?

Article 12.1 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states that a child who is capable of forming his or her own views has the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting them and that their views should be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity. The National Children's Strategy (2000) states that that 'children will have a voice in matters that affect them and their views will be given full weight in accordance with their age and maturity'.

'Children's participation' is a broad term, which means involving children in decisions that affect their lives, the lives of their community and the larger society in which they live. It involves supporting children and young people to think for themselves, to express their views effectively and to interact in a positive way with other people (Save the Children, 2003).

Where has the emphasis on Children's Participation come from?

"The empowerment of children as fully autonomous human beings with legal rights and with ability to participate fully in Irish society must .. be the new millennium challenge. Not only must lawmakers tackle the challenge but Irish society must begin to accept an evolving 'child liberation philosophy' which will improve the lives of children. ....this objective will require the empowering of children to live their lives with the maximum of equal opportunities."
Frank Martin (2000, p.5)

In the past number of years, both nationally and internationally, there has been a shift in thinking about children, leading to a greater emphasis on their rights as citizens. A number of trends have converged to place the spotlight on the roles and rights of children in families and society.

Firstly, legal and policy developments have greatly strengthened the case for children's participation. The UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1992) has promoted an

international emphasis on the rights of children to participate in society. The UNCRC was ratified by Ireland in 1992. The National Children's Strategy, a significant Irish policy document, was launched in 2000 and contains a ten year plan of action addressing the broad spectrum of rights of people under the age of 18.

Secondly, a growing body of work has criticised earlier thinking in sociology for rarely engaging with children as people in their own right, but instead subsuming them into 'the family'. The sociology of childhood takes the life of the child in its whole as a starting point and studies children as an independent social group with its own culture and characteristics and meaning (Torrance, 1998). This body of literature has helped to place greater emphasis on children's perspectives and adults' understanding of them.

Thirdly, the consumer movement, which emphasises the rights of consumers to exercise choice about the quality of the goods and services made available to them, has increasingly emphasised that children are consumers in their own right and have a right to be consulted.

Recommended Reading:

An excellent analysis of children's rights and how they can be promoted:

Lansdown, G. (2001) Promoting Children's Participation in Democratic Decision-Making, Unicef, Innocenti Research Centre.

Download from: http://www.unicef-icdc.org/publications/

What are the arguments for and against children's participation?

McDonald (2002) summarises the arguments in favour of greater participation for children as follows:

Human rights and democracy

- Children are citizens and service users and have the same rights to participate as adults.
- Under the UNCRC and the National Children's Strategy, they have the right to be consulted.
- Greater participation will lead towards a greater democratisation of Irish society. Leading children's rights theorists, Hart (1992) and Lansdown (1997) argue that democratic responsibility is not something that suddenly arises in adulthood but it is a condition that has to be nurtured and recognised at different stages of childhood.
- Embracing children's rights reflects a society's sense of justice and its desire to enhance the human condition for future generations.

- Failure to listen to children in the past has resulted in their abuse. Participation, therefore, is an aid to protection.

Encourages child development

- Children and young people want to be involved. Allowing them a voice shows respect and sets examples for them to respect themselves and others.
- Involving young people in the process of service design can enhance their skills of communication, negotiation, prioritisation and decision-making.
- Consulting children has been shown to increase their sense of ownership and belonging, self-esteem, empathy and responsibility and encourage their future participation in the community.

More effective and responsive service delivery

- The effectiveness of any service is enhanced by listening and responding to service users. Giving children and young people a voice in all areas of service design, including the evaluation process, will ensure that policies and services more genuinely meet their needs.

Arguments against children's participation

Adults are often opposed to the idea of children's participation, arguing that children are incapable of making decisions, their right to childhood should be protected and that participation can threaten the stability of family life. Advocates of children's participation counter argue that adults don't always know best or make the right decisions and that children are capable of making rational decisions.

Arguments AGAINST children's participation	***Arguments FOR children's participation***[1]
Giving children the right to a say threatens the harmony and stability of family life by questioning parents 'natural' authority to say what is in the best interest of the child.	Parents don't always act in the best interest of the child. Participation does not disempower parents.
Imposing responsibilities on children takes away from their right to childhood.	Children's lives are full of the concerns that are caused by social and economic factors and so they should have a right to make decisions about them.
Children cannot have rights until they are capable of taking responsibility.	Children have responsibilities at home and at school but they are not taken seriously by adults.
Children are incapable of reasonable and rational decision-making, due to their lack of experience.	Adults are not necessarily good decision-makers either, and children are capable of making good decisions

[1] Qvortup et al., 1994; Matthews el al., 1999

Models and Dimensions of Participation

Participation can take many forms in children's services, with each having the potential to be the most appropriate under a given set of circumstances. Some of the dimensions of participation are as follows[2]:

A) Children can be involved in making decisions that relate to them as individuals, or to children in general.

Personal decisions can be small – such as what activities to do, what to eat – or more significant, such as care arrangements or medical treatment.

Public decisions can relate to designs for a playground or community centre, or feeding into policy.

B) Children can be involved in decision-making formally or informally.

[2] Kirby et al, 2003

Formal mechanisms are set up to provide opportunities for children and young people to influence decisions, such as a youth parliament or consultation meetings.

Informal approaches enable children to express their views in an informal manner, but where they will be listened to.

Kirby et al (2003) make the point that there is much more in the children's participation literature about formal approaches than about informal approaches, yet the latter is essential to child-focused practice.

C) Decision-making can take place in a broad range of sectors. Kirby et al (2003) found that children are frequently involved in decision-making in community development and urban renewal, but not so much in other spheres, such as the juvenile justice system.

D) In general, a broad distinction can be made between initiatives that **consult** with children and those in which children **participate**.

Consultation: Adults consult with children to obtain information that they can use to improve policy, services or goods. These situations are generally adult directed and controlled and children have little influence over the outcome. While this approach is valuable in that it recognises the validity of children's perspectives, its key limitation is that it does not alter the power imbalance between adults and children.

Participation: Children are involved in and take an active role in the development of services or projects. While adult initiated, children have opportunities to influence the outcomes of the project and so some sharing of power takes place.

Recommended Reading:

A very useful resource in relation to consulting children in Ireland:

McAuley, Karen and Brattman, Marian (2002), *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.
Download from http://www.childrensrights.ie

E) Power relations are at the heart of participation. Adults must hand over some power to children and young people in order to 'empower' them. In the words of Kirby et al (2003):

> "Adults must take on a different role from simply being protectors and providers. They must work *with* children and young people rather than working *for* them. They can accept responsibility *for* someone, without taking responsibility away *from* them".

F) Participation may be one-off or ongoing. For example, formal consultations tend to be one off, whereas informal participative approaches may be ongoing. Children's power is affected by how often and for how long they are enabled to influence decisions.

G) Numerous models and approaches have been developed to enable children to express their views and influence decisions affecting them. The Treseder (1997) model, outlined below illustrates that participation can take many forms. Treseder urges that the five degrees of participation be regarded as different, but equal, forms of good practice. Practitioners should choose the one that would have the most benefit in a specific environment, taking account of the specific conditions that arise and the needs and capacities of the young people concerned.

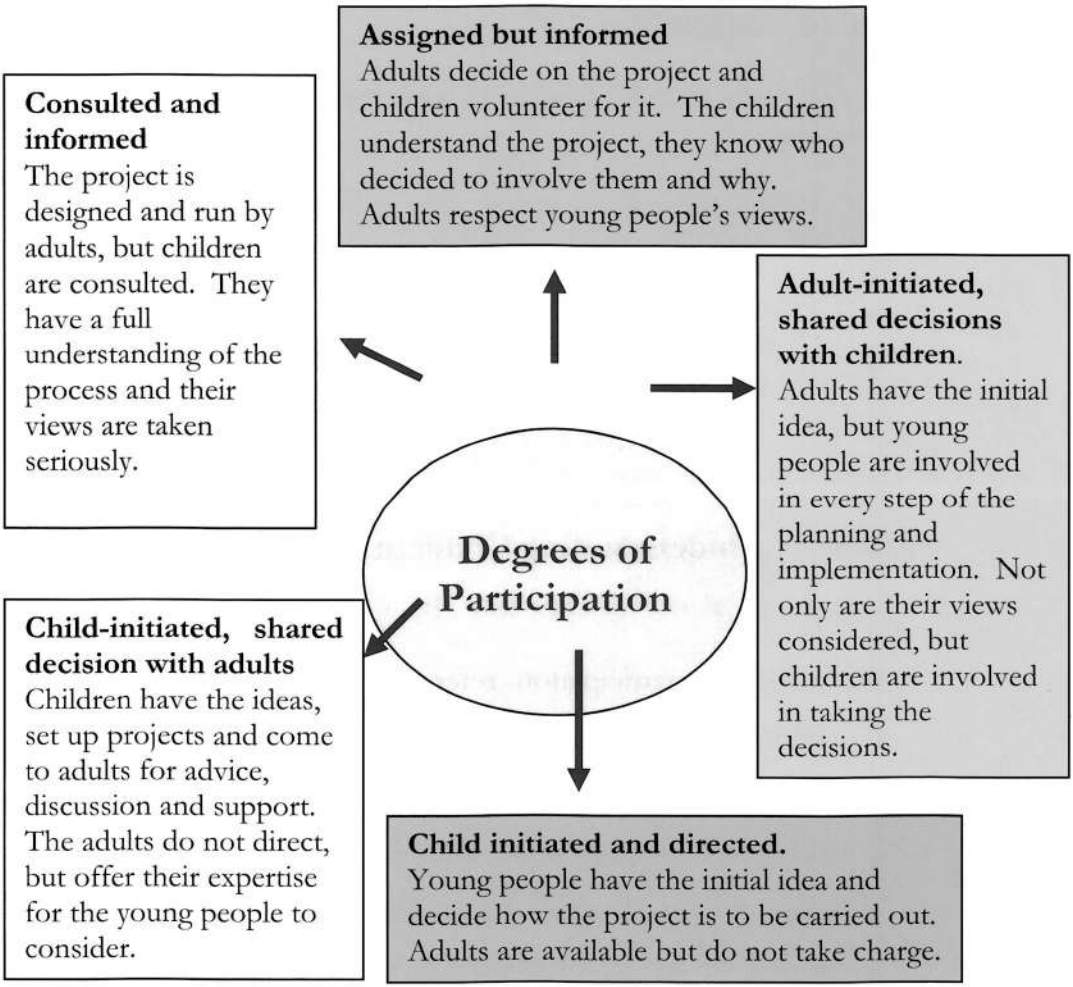


Figure 1: Degrees of Children's Participation (Treseder, 1997)

Recommended Reading:

Other very useful models of children's participation are outlined in the following:

Hart, R. (1992) *Children's Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship*, Innocenti Essays, 4. Florence: UNICEF.

Shier, H. (2001), "Pathways to Participation: A New Model for Enhancing Children's Participation in Decision Making", *Children and Society*, 15 (2) 107-117

Summary: Understanding Children's Participation

- Children's participation refers to the involvement of children in decisions that affect their lives. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the National Children's Strategy state that children should have a voice in matters which affect them and that their views should be taken seriously. A number of trends are promoting an increasing emphasis on children's rights. These include national and international legislation, the sociology of childhood, consumer movements and changes in society.

- Proponents of children's participation argue that it will lead to a greater democratisation of society, that it will foster skills and confidence in children and that it will make services more effective and responsive. Those opposed to children's participation fear that it will undermine the rights of the parents, children will lose their childhood and that children are incapable of taking responsibility.

- Participation of children can relate to personal or public decisions, it can be achieved on an informal or formal basis and it may be one-off or ongoing. A broad distinction can be made between consultation and participation. Participation requires adults to share power with young people. There are a number of degrees of participation that children can realise, each of which is valid, depending on the specific circumstances.

Part 2: Promoting Participation

As we saw in the previous section, children's participation can have many different guises. It is possible in many different sectors, in relation to public and private decisions; it can be one off or ongoing, formal or informal. Varying levels of power and responsibility can be given to children. For practitioners, the range of possibilities in relation to children's participation can be overwhelming. This section aims to provide advice for practitioners to enable them to start to work with children in a participatory way. The approach recommended is to start small and learn from your experience, before gradually expanding the opportunities for children's participation.

There are no blueprints for effective consultation and participation with children. Every project needs to develop a methodology appropriate to its aims. This section outlines guidelines for:

- ***Planning*** your approach
- ***Engaging*** directly with children
- ***Reflecting*** on your experience
- ***Developing*** into a child / youth focused organisation.

A) Planning

- Careful planning and clear boundaries are a pre-requisite to effective participatory work with children. The following steps are recommended before you undertake participatory work with children:

- Establish clear objectives:
  - What are you trying to achieve?
  - What decisions do you want the child to have an input into?
  - How will the child / children benefit?

- Do the necessary research:
  - What did other initiatives do?
  - What can you learn from others?

- Training and discussion are important to allow staff to 'surface' their attitudes to children's participation and explore concerns and prejudices about working in a participatory way.

- Establish clear methodology and boundaries:
  - What level of participation is desired or realistic (with reference to Treseder or other model)?
  - Will children's participation be ongoing, regular or one off?
  - Will decision-making involve personal or public decisions, or both?
  - Will mechanisms be formal or informal?
  - How many children will be involved?
  - How will the children be able to influence decisions being made?

- Remember that children are not a homogeneous group. What do you need to plan for in terms of diverse needs and cultures?

- Make the necessary time and resources available. Involving children takes time and may require extra resources.

- Be prepared to be challenged. Children may have their own ideas, which may mean that things go somewhat differently to how you had planned.

- Draw up an ethical statement - This should clarify issues around consent, confidentiality, anonymity and disclosure (see p.36 for an outline of ethical considerations).

- Develop performance indicators that help you to assess if you are achieving participation. Indicators could include the numbers of children involved, the level of attendance, decisions made on certain matters, growth in children's confidence and participation. Identify how you will monitor your performance.

Key Messages:

- *There is no one 'perfect' model of participation, and what is appropriate will vary from case to case.*

- *It is important to be realistic about the possibility of change and avoid being tokenistic in the use of participatory approaches. Genuine, meaningful forms of participation on a smaller scale are preferable to tokenistic grand plans.*

- *The child's agenda should be served in the adoption of a participatory approach. It should not be driven by the needs of an agency to be seen as progressive or inclusive.*

B) Engaging

Recommended Reading:

An excellent manual to help you explore the issues involved in adopting a participatory approach:

Treseder, P. (1997) *Empowering Children and Young People: Promoting Involvement in Decision Making. Training Manual.* CRO / Save the Children Fund.
Available from Barnardos NCRC.

On completion of the planning phase, staff should be clear regarding what they hope to achieve and how the project, service or initiative will facilitate children's participation. The following guidelines relate to how the service can actually engage with children and young people in a participatory way[3]:

- *Inform children and young people of the process* - Children should be informed on how they can be involved, the role of adults, how their feedback will or will not be used, and that the participation itself is voluntary. In planning, allow enough time to build up trust and rapport with participants. Before each meeting, inform the child regarding what will happen, who will be there, what is expected of them and other matters.

[3] McDonald (2002), McNeish (1999), Lansdown (2001) and Sinclair and Franklin (2000)

- *Create a child-friendly environment* - As much as possible, children should be encouraged to help plan; choosing a time, place and environment that is suitable for them.

- *Communicate in a child-centred way* - Children need to feel comfortable with the method of communication. Workers should be mindful of the child's alertness and enthusiasm, watch body language for signs of stress and allow the child to choose his or her method of engagement. The child should be reassured that there are no right or wrong answers.

- *Use creative techniques* - Creative techniques such as art, drawing and drama are useful ways to tap into children's individuality. Special needs of children should be considered. Ensure staff or facilitators have the necessary skills.

- *Give adequate feedback in a reasonable time frame* – if you consult children, provide feedback to them in relation to the nature of the data provided and what will be done with it.

- *Consider the age and maturity level of the child* - Regardless of the age or level of understanding, the best interests of all children should outweigh their right to participate. There is a delicate balance between protecting a child and letting them learn to make risky decisions.

- *Provide opportunities for feedback* – Children should have age-appropriate formal and informal mechanisms for providing feedback in relation to their feelings about the service or project. These could include comments sheets, suggestion

boxes, complaints boxes and oral feedback to the adults involved. The feedback should be taken seriously.

- *Allow for flexibility* - There should be room for flexibility. Not all children respond to the same method of communication, so it is best that workers approach each situation with a clear idea of what is to be achieved, and allow the young person to take the lead in how to get there.

- *Try to understand what children mean* – Children's words may have different meanings to them than they do to us. Genuinely understanding children's perspectives involves taking time to check back that you have understood them properly.

Characteristics of Effective and Genuine Participation (Lansdown, 2001)

The Project

Issue is of real relevance to the children themselves

It has the capacity to make a difference

It's linked to children's direct day-to-day experience

Adequate time and resources are made available

There are realistic expectations of the children

Clear goals and targets are agreed with the children

Addresses the promotion or protection of children's rights

Values

Honesty from adults about the project and the process

Inclusive – equal opportunity for participation by all groups of interested children

Equal respect for children of all ages, abilities, ethnicity and social background

Information is shared with children to enable them to make real choices

Children's views are taken seriously

Children's involvement is voluntary

Decision-making is shared

Methodology

Clarity of purpose

Child-friendly meeting places, language and structures

Involvement of children from the earliest possible stages

Training provided to help children acquire the necessary skills

Methods of involvement developed in collaboration with children

Adult support provided where necessary

Strategies developed for sustainability

C) *Reflecting*

As mentioned earlier, there is no blueprint for participation. Every case will be different, as every situation is different. It is important, therefore, to reflect on and learn from your experiences of participation. Use a formal or informal approach to ask the participants how they found the experience.

Some reflective questions for staff include:

- What worked well and what didn't?
- What can we learn from it?
- What would we do differently?
- Was it worth the effort?
- How can we move on from this experience in a way that further builds children's capacity to participate in decision-making?

D) Developing

While it is necessary to start small and develop genuine participation, the ideal scenario is that participation and the active listening to children becomes part and parcel of the formal and informal ways in which organisations make decisions (Kirby el al, 2003). The experience of a small or pilot project can act as a catalyst for a wider discussion within the organisation on participatory approaches.

Kirby et. al (2003) make a distinction between:

- *Consultation-focused organisations* – These organisations ask children their views to inform service development. Children's opinions may influence decisions but they have no power over what decisions are made.

- *Participation-focused organisations* – There is an emphasis on developing participation activities by which children and young people are able to influence decisions within the organisation. The participation activities are usually limited to specific issues or projects and do not generally challenge the status quo of adult-youth relationships.

- *Child/youth-focused organisations* – Children and young people are involved in making decisions on a daily basis. They are involved in many ways and have varying degrees of influence. The organisational culture assumes that children should be listened to about all decisions that affect them.

Organisations working directly with children and young people should aim to become child/youth-focused organisations. Kirby et al (2003) suggest the following actions can help to build a culture of participation in an organisation:

- Establish new champions – gain senior management support or designate a staff member with responsibility for 'championing' the cause of participation within the organisation.
- Develop an organisational vision and commitment.
- Engage in planning and set targets.
- Encourage all staff to have contact with young people and build staff capacity to work with children and young people.

Recommended Reading:

An excellent resource for organisations wishing to develop a culture of participation:

Kirby, P., 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,* Department for Education and Skills and National Children's Bureau, UK.

Download from:
http://www.cypu.gov.uk/corporate/publications.cfm

Ethical questions and considerations in participatory work with children

Once the broad aims and parameters of a participatory approach have been agreed, the following ethical considerations and questions are worthy of attention.

Consent

- It is considered good practice to seek consent from children/ young people and from parents/guardians in relation to children's participation in a project or initiative. But, particularly in the case of young children, are they competent to give informed consent? How and by whom might their competency be established?

- Should children be given opportunities to re-confirm or withdraw consent?

- What methods and mechanisms can be used to seek formal consent from parents/guardians and children?

Confidentiality

- It is desirable to arrive at consensus on:
  - The meaning of confidentiality
  - Where confidentiality is being practiced, who should be afforded access to the identity of participating children and their contributions
  - Should children and young people be afforded the choice of whether information provided by them is to be treated with confidence, and if it is not, what form of confidentiality their contributions should be subject to.

- If consensus is reached on its status, then awareness-raising on the importance of confidentiality is needed among all involved.

- It will be important to explain to children/young people the rules that have been agreed about confidentiality.

- In the context of *Children First* and *Our Duty to Care*, consensus is needed on whether mandatory reporting should be operational.

Transparency

- Discussion is needed on what information children and young people should be provided with, at what stages they should be provided with one or more pieces of information and the formats in which to provide information to children and young people.

Equality and Inclusion

- It will be necessary to identify and provide for ethical approaches to equality/inclusion at the levels of:
  - Access to consultative processes/events
  - Involvement in consultative processes/ events
  - Outcome of consultative processes/ events (treatment of children's views)

- Thought must be given to whether to consult with children at risk of or experiencing social exclusion in integrated or segregated settings. The findings of focus groups with children and young people suggest that it will be desirable to negotiate the setting with young people.

Respect and Integrity

- Ways of demonstrating respect to children need to be discussed.

- It is important to promote the importance of integrity and honesty at all stages of the project.

Case Study:

Barnardos 'Computer Characters' Project, Galway

Barnardos (West and Midlands Region) was one of a number of children's charities who received funding under the national 'Children's Hour' initiative in 2000. In recognition of the millennium as the 'information age' and the lack of equal access to technology by children who are disadvantaged, a decision was taken to develop an innovative new pilot project in Galway to address this identified need. The project aimed to improve the skills and access to IT for disadvantaged children and their families. A conscious decision was made to adopt a participatory approach, which would involve children taking the lead in deciding what and how they would like to learn.

The pilot project was of one year's duration initially. The project commenced training in October 2003 and finished in July 2004. Training was provided for six groups, with three to six children each. Participants varied in age, cultural background and location.

This short case study describes the experience of the project in terms of planning, engaging in and reflecting on a participatory pilot project. It concludes by highlighting the dimensions of participation evident in the project, using Kirby et al's (2003) framework.

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 and 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.

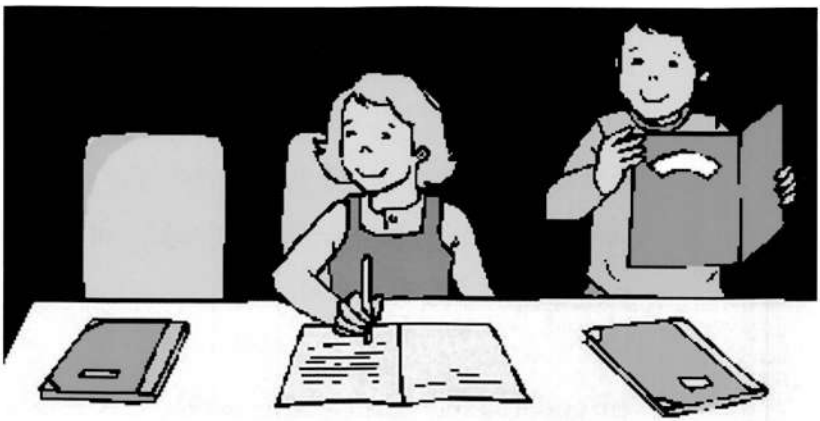
The dimensions of participatory approaches with children, identified by Kirby et al (2003) are used below to classify the dimensions of participation evident in this project.

Dimension of participation	Computer Characters Project
Informal or formal	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.
Personal or Public	Decision-making related to personal decisions about what the child would do in the session.
One-off or extended	The participation was for an extended period, but yet was for a set 10 week course.
Level of participation	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 Barnardos Computer Characters Project is a practical illustration of how an organisation 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.

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