



# A Brief Report on Empowering Children and Young People through Participation: Giving Space and Voice to Childhood Experiences of Domestic Violence and Abuse

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## Abstract

**Purpose** Understanding children’s experiences of living with domestic violence and abuse (DVA) is central to a child-centered, rights-based approach to working with children and young people. However, the tension between children’s right to be heard and their need to be protected from harm can often mean that those opportunities are experienced as tokenistic. In response to this concern about the reality of children’s participation in the context of DVA, the Empower Kids Project (EKP) was initiated by Barnardos [Ireland] in 2020. The EKP collaborates with partner agencies who collectively come together to provide children with a supported environment to give voice to their experiences of domestic violence and abuse. The children participate in this work within the safe and trusted relationship of their keyworker, through one to one or group work or through their support group in their local area service.

**Methods** Located primarily within Lundy’s (British Educ Res J 33:927–942, 2007) model of participation, this brief report charts the journey of the EKP over the last four years across Lundy’s four quadrants of Voice, Space, Audience and Influence.

**Results** Beginning with just 12 children in 2020, the EKP has to date included the voices of 74 children in its work. Analysis of the children’s journey of participation illustrates poignantly how meaningful participation is possible when scaffolded space is provided to elevate the voices of young survivors of childhood DVA. Employing child friendly multi-modal methodologies resulted in a potent sense of ownership and impact, encapsulated by one child articulating that she felt she was part of a ‘movement’.

**Conclusions** The testimonies of the children and young people participating in the EKP challenge any concern that children who have experienced an adversity such as DVA may be too vulnerable to participate. Rather, the EKP participants felt part of a ‘movement’ that was influencing and creating change. Importantly, participating in the EKP has provided an otherwise marginalized and silenced group, a platform to share their experiences of living with such abuse.

**Keywords** Children · Domestic violence and abuse · Participation and empowerment

## Introduction and Background

Recent decades have witnessed a profound shift in the conceptualization of children as rights bearers and as active agentic individuals who can both make sense of and provide

unique insights into their individual experiences. This shift and keen interest in children’s experiences is reflective of the core ethos of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC 1989). A substantive theme within the UNCRC concerns children’s participatory rights, including the freedom to express an opinion, to have a say in matters affecting their lives and a right to make their voices heard in matters that concern them. This reflects a commitment to honoring the principle of ‘listening to the voice of the child’ as demanded by nation states across Europe. Specifically, Article 12 of the UNCRC states that “States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in

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all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child”<sup>1</sup>. Published by the UNCRC in 2009, General Comment No. 12 specifically links Article 12 (the right to be heard) to the idea of participation as “ongoing processes which include information sharing and dialogue between children and adults based on mutual respect, and in which children can learn how their views and those of adults are taken into account and shape the outcome of such processes” (p. 5). Garcia-Quiroga and Agoglia surmise from this that participation can be considered the ‘right of rights’ as operationalizing its actualization enables the realization of other related rights (2020, p. 1). Similarly, Warrington and Larkins (2019, p. 133) argue that Article 12 should be ‘considered in the interpretation and implementation of all other rights’.

Despite growing acceptance of and evidence as to a clear and robust rationale for children’s participation (Bakhtiar et al., 2023), in addition to models of participation that provide structures and frameworks of support, the concept of participation however is itself contested, with uncertainty about how to effectively involve children (McCafferty, 2017). This uncertainty can be amplified where children are viewed as vulnerable, such as where children have experienced living with domestic violence and abuse (DVA) (Øverlien & Holt, 2021) or are otherwise considered ‘hard to reach’ (Poppe & Abela, 2023). Subsequent tensions between the child’s right to be heard and to participate and a perceived need to protect them from the harm that might arise from such participation, can lead to an ‘adult-centric model of decision making’ (Garcia-Quiroga & Agoglia, 2020, p. 2) that asks about ‘adult-defined children’s issues’ (Houghton, 2018, p. 80). This can result in the marginalization of children’s views. Opportunities to participate in this regard can be experienced by children as tokenistic, leading van Bijleveld et al. (2015, p. 136) to assert that participation is ‘not happening enough’. Responding to this assertion, Poppe and Abela (2023) argue that both services and researchers have a responsibility to ensure that children and families deemed hard to reach or indeed vulnerable, are engaged in innovative ways to ensure their right to be heard and to participate is realized. Indeed, a sharp focus on participation, Bracewell et al. (2022: 316) argue ‘could challenge the invisibility’ of children and young people in the context of DVA.

Focusing specifically on the reality of children’s participation in the context of DVA, this brief report reflects on the development of one such innovative program focused on children’s participation in this context: the EKP which was initiated by Barnardos in 2020 in Ireland, beginning with a group of 12 children. Located primarily within Lundy’s

(2007) model of participation, these children and young people were asked ‘what domestic violence and abuse looked like to them’. Adhering to Lundy’s (2007) advice to allow children and young people to define for themselves what impacts on them, so began the journey of children’s participation with supportive space provided to elevate the voices of young survivors of childhood DVA, and safe opportunities created for them to influence. The EKP provides direct specialist DVA support to children and also works in partnership with other service providers (both DVA specialist and generalist child and family services services) Through these interventions and services, the participating children were engaged in both one to one and group work programs within established safe and trusted keyworker relationships.

From the outset, understanding children’s experiences of living with DVA has been considered central to a child-centered, rights-based approach to working with children and young people in this context, as a critical part of an evidence-based practice and policy approach to service delivery, evaluation and development. This very much echoes Bracewell et al.’s (2022: 301) assertion that a ‘rights-based approach may offer potential to challenge dominant practice’ with young people who have lived with DVA. This dominant practice, Callaghan et al. (2018: 1551) argue have positioned children as passive witnesses with their experiences and voices ‘underrepresented’ in professional practice in DVA work.

Commencing with an overview of the research evidence on the benefits and challenges associated with children’s participation, this brief report will also consider methodologies and models that support such engagement. Against the backdrop of the ethos and principles of the UNCRC as considered in this introduction, and the evidence base on children’s participation in the next section, this brief report will then chart the developmental journey of the PROJECT.

## Rationale, Benefits and Challenges for Children’s Participation

Across the literature focused on children’s participation, a clear and consistent rationale for such participation is grounded firmly in their rights under the UNCRC (1989) as outlined above and as applied locally in domestic legislation and policy. With children’s participation correlating directly with positive outcomes, a systematic literature review of 25 peer-reviewed papers relating to children as researchers, specifically identified the importance of ‘children having voice and influence over matters that affect them, including giving marginalized children a voice’ (Bakhtiar et al., 2023, p. 12). Additional rationale provided by the review includes the opportunities that participation provide to build

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CRC.aspx>.

relationships and partnerships between adults and children; to generate ‘insider’ knowledge and perspectives while supporting children’s sense of empowerment; and to develop children’s well-being, agency and skills. Indeed, the most cited benefits in terms of children’s well-being include increased confidence and sense of achievement. Challenging the concern that children may be too vulnerable to participate – particularly where they have lived with DVA for example – Saracosti et al. (2015) argue that opportunities for participation in these debates, have positive impacts on self-esteem, empowerment and adaptive skills. Reflecting on the particular importance of participatory opportunities for young people who have experienced abuse and trauma, Hamilton et al. (2019) argue that excluding marginalized young people from decision-making amplifies their experience of powerlessness and insignificance. From a DVA perspective, participation provides a platform for children to share their experiences of living with such abuse. This validation of their experiences supports them process and make sense of their feelings in a supportive environment, particularly when we consider the secrecy, stigma and shame that often accompanies such abuse. One of the authors in the Hamilton et al. (2019) study – a young researcher – asserted that participation not only builds self-worth, but also crucially builds self-efficacy or the belief that you can effect change. McCafferty and Mercado (2023) further suggest that participation in decision-making by children and young people potentially improves decision-making processes and leads to better outcomes (Heimer et al., 2018). Not only are the decisions informed by the child’s perspective and experiences, but those same decisions are also more likely to be accepted by the child if they feel they have been heard as part of the decision-making process. Holt et al., (2023, p. 94) qualitative study with children focused on their experience of participation in Irish child protection and welfare services, found that children ‘did not necessarily expect adults to follow their wishes, but they certainly wanted to have their wishes heard and respected’.

McCafferty (2017) however cautions that despite growing acceptance of the principle of children’s participation, the concept of participation is itself contested and there remains uncertainty about how to effectively involve children. As such while there is broad agreement regarding the need for participation, there is less consensus on what participation actually looks like or involves. For example, van Bijleveld and colleagues’ (2015) study of Dutch child protection practice identified differing perspectives between case managers and young people on participation. While the former understood participation as strategic and as a way of ensuring a child’s cooperation, young people understood participation as a mechanism for being heard, informed and ‘taken seriously’ (van Bijleveld et al., 2015, p. 257).

Echoing perhaps the young people in van Bijleveld et al.’s study, Bouma et al. (2018) asserted that ‘meaningful participation’ involves three critical components: (1) the child is informed; (2) the child is provided with opportunity to express their views; (3) their views have impact on the decisions made. Participation is therefore linked to the right to information (Article 12) – but that information needs to be accessible - with the methods of communicating with children carefully tailored to their age and developmental stage. Concurring with this, Davey (2010, p. 6) describes participation as ‘a process where someone influences decisions about their lives and this leads to change’. Davey’s (2010) reflections on participation as influence and impact mirror to a degree Arnstein’s (1969) concept of citizen participation, which underlined the significance of supporting influence and promoting the redistribution of power. In agreement, Race and Frost (2022, p. 2) surmise that unless participation involves or results in impact, the participation experience may end up being frustrating, disempowering and marginalizing ‘for the least powerful’. Indeed, the evidence points to many challenges emerging in the realization of participatory rights when children are, for a variety of reasons, considered ‘vulnerable’ or ‘marginalized’. In contexts such as child protection or indeed DVA, where children are considered both vulnerable and agentic, tensions may emerge between the need to protect children from harm whilst also wanting to realize their participatory rights. This, Garcia-Quiroga and Agoglia (2020, p. 2) suggest may result in an ‘adult centric model of decision making that has excluded children’s views’.

Heimer et al. (2018, p. 316) surmise that this tension between child protection and child participation results in decreasing opportunities for child participation concurrent with increasing concerns about perceived vulnerability. The authors caution therefore that concerns about vulnerability risks those children either not being heard or being heard selectively. Selective listening can occur when children’s views and wishes do not converge with adult perspectives on their best interests (Woodman et al., 2022, p. 126). In agreement, Warrington and Larkins (2019, p. 139) similarly caution that well intentioned adult instincts to protect children can have unintended consequences in silencing them – this is particularly important in the field of DVA where children are often not seen and not heard (Elliffe et al., 2020). Garcia-Quiroga and Agoglia (2020) remind us, as asserted earlier in this paper, that participation can itself be protective for vulnerable children, with positive outcomes for self-confidence, self-efficacy, and self-worth. Warrington and Larkins (2019) further suggest that practitioners should firstly question reflectively whether the silencing of children is justifiable in any context and secondly who gets to decide what is in the child’s best interests regarding participation?

In part answer to those questions, children position themselves as already involved in the vulnerability and complexity of their family situation, seeking not protection from involvement but scaffolding and support to be involved in professional interventions and decision making (Race & Frost, 2022, p. 7). To that end, a number of models of children's participation have emerged over the last half a century or so, providing frameworks intended to signpost different levels of participation for children in different contexts, and indeed provide scaffolding for that participation. Arnstein's (1969) Ladder of Citizenship Partnership, which referred only to adult participation, was nonetheless adapted by numerous subsequent theorists for children's participation. One of the earliest and most notable of those later models included Hart's (1992, 1997) eight level model of participation and Shier's (2001) five-level model of participation for enhancing children's participation. All of these models have been influential in providing a continuum of participation (Woodman et al., 2022) in order to clearly identify the actual extent to which children's participation can be realized across three key criteria: 'being informed', 'expressing a view' and 'influencing a decision' (Franklin & Sloper, 2005, p. 15). However, maintaining a child's rights-based approach, Lundy's (2007) model of research participation is considered in more detail now. Specifically, while the other models considered levels of participation, Lundy (2007, p. 933) emphasized four core features as critical to realizing this rights-based approach, as follows:

- Space: Children must be given the opportunity to express a view;
- Voice: Children must be facilitated to express their views:
- Audience: The view must be listened to; and.
- Influence: The view must be acted upon, as appropriate.

Following an overview of the evolution of the PROJECT, the journey of children's participation is tracked here through the four quadrants of Lundy's model: SPACE; VOICE; AUDIENCE and INFLUENCE.

## The Evolution of the Empower Kids Project

With a long history and culture of children's participation, the Lundy model (2007) is embedded across all functions within Barnardos (Ireland) and is reflected in all children's and parent's participation policies and practice. As a trauma informed organization (Barnardos, 2022, p. 9), establishing the Empower Kids Project (EKP) in 2020 and locating it within the National Childhood Domestic Abuse Project, was a natural step to better understand the lived experience

of childhood DVA and to increase the visibility of children and young people as victims in their own right. From its inception, the EKP has been grounded in and driven by a belief that children and young people with experience of DVA are both entitled and able to have a loud and powerful voice. With a stated commitment is to elevate their voices in order to better understand their unique lived experiences and provide service user informed responses to those experiences, 74 children and young people, aged 6 to 19 years from across Ireland have engaged with the project.

In delivering this project, a national multiagency committee of professionals who work directly with children and young people living with DVA, was established across the domains of early intervention, crisis and recovery<sup>2</sup>. All of our partner organizations on this committee who share a common passion to advocate for and hear children's voices in their day-to-day work, have become important allies with experience in this space. Our initial task as a multi-agency committee was to develop a co working agreement in line with child protection guidelines and the principles of children's participation. Reflective of the central tenets of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), and specifically Article 12, the Lundy model of participation is embedded in this co-working agreement which outlines our commitment to have children and young people who live with DVA feel heard, included, have their experiences validated and their expertise recognized.

Over the four years of participation – the following resources were developed by the EKP and will be referenced in this brief report:

- Year 1: Children's definition and animation.
- Year 2: Hear me see me keep me safe animation and 'Our Rights Your Responsibilities' poster.
- Year 3: Me2U what you should know – poster and leaflets.
- Year 4: The Kids Coercive Control Web.

Given that this is a participatory project and not a research project, and the participating children are considered contributors and not research participants, ethical approval was not required. Nonetheless, the key tenets of sound ethical practice were adhered to, including ensuring informed voluntary consent – both about what was involved in participation and the project emphasis on giving children their voice. As such, an integral element of the project and as deemed critically important by and for the children, is that their quotes are used publicly to ensure their collective and individual voice is heard.

<sup>2</sup> \*Partner Services for the Empower Kids project: Not given for blind review purposes.

**Link to all EKP resources: <https://www.barnardos.ie/our-services/work-with-families/childhood-domestic-violence-abuse/cdva-practioners-resources/cdva-what-children-young-people-have-to-say/>**

### **SPACE: ‘Keep us Safe, We have No Control Over What Happens in the Family’**

This first quote above from a young participant in the EKP echoes Lundy’s (2007) earlier argument that meaningful child participation has to begin with the provision of a safe and inclusive **Space** where children are fully informed and have the right to express their views. Indeed, the initial planning meetings with our multi-agency committee, focused on promoting both physical and emotional safety for the children and young people at all times. To this end we adopted some key practice principles, such as giving time to build trust, operating in a safe environment and supporting the children to understand that their opinions matter, are valued and will be acted upon. This mirrors to a degree a key finding in Holt et al.’s (2023) research on children’s experience of participation in child protection processes in Ireland. Highlighting the need for scaffolding and support to be able to participate meaningfully, this included their understanding of what was happening and why. Echoing this finding, in creating the ‘Our Rights: Your Responsibilities’ poster, the children and young people reinforced the importance of these guiding principles by naming these key practice principles:

Listen to us, we may be young, but our voices and opinions matter.

Identifying children and young people who were ready to begin participation work, was another challenge that we approached with care. Beginning with the premise embedded in the UNCRC, that the child is competent and capable of forming his/her own views, children were initially identified by the professionals working therapeutically with them. This pre-existing relationship provided a safe space and opportunity for children and young people to engage in participation work.

For the children and young people who have participated in the project, their active participation has been fully informed and voluntary and their decision-making and agency respected throughout their journey. Families were provided with information sheets, consent and assent form and were fully informed of what the process would involve for their child. All children then made a fully informed decision to participate (or not). This latter point on children’s understandings is grounded in Article 12 of the UNCRC as

outlined earlier and as reflected in Bouma et al.’s (2018) assertion above that ‘meaningful participation’ requires the child is informed and the child is provided with opportunity to express their views. Again we listened to the wisdom of their lived experience:

Take time to get to know us. Don’t rush and don’t start with the hard stuff.

Lundy (2007) argues that an inclusive space needs to ensure that participation includes those who cannot articulate their views. This point is picked up by Ranta (2023) who argues the need for information to be delivered in a child friendly, child sensitive and accessible manner. One young participant advised:

Do things to help us keep calm – and comfort us.

Finally, assuring children and young people and their families that their anonymity would be protected at all times was key to creating that safe space.

### **VOICE: ‘We Should be Asked to Give an Opinion About What’s Going to Happen Next.’**

**Space** and **Voice** are connected in many ways, with Lundy (2007, p. 935) cautioning against a positioning of children’s right to express their views being ‘dependent upon their capacity to express a mature view’. Echoing the core principle of Article 12, Lundy argues that their right to express their view is dependent only on their ability to form a view, mature or not. Lundy also advises that at times, children may need the help of others to form a view. While this may involve adults in that process, it may also include the help and support of other children and indeed through fun activities and non-verbal modes of expression and communication. Responding to Lundy’s advice, taking a developmental approach was an important consideration to maximize participation for children and young people. This approach echoes to a degree El Gemayel and Salema’s (2023, p. 1) research process of co-reflexivity with young children in disadvantaged communities. The authors asserted that even the voices of very young children can be ‘heard’ when the right methods are employed – including methods that capture non-verbal cues and effective listening. With similar views and reflecting on participatory action research (PAR) methods to research with children, Henderson-Dekort et al. (2022) assert that PAR is ‘transformative’ in utilizing drawing, narrative and play to facilitate children’s participation. The authors highlight that non-verbal methods including art and play provide expanded opportunities for children to describe their experiences and provide their perspectives.

Similarly, the EKP has utilized mixed methods of gathering feedback, with children responding through written formats, voice notes, artwork and photography. We asked simple open-ended questions that were applicable to all ages, and used a series of engagement tools, such as vignettes, placemat exercises and lifelines. Similar to research with children (Pope & Abela, 2023; Tatham-Fashanu, 2022), our engagement with these exciting creative methods has given us opportunities to ensure that the children's voice is heard without verbal capacity being relied on as the sole method of communication.

Key learning at this time, was how willing and ready the children and young people were to name their experiences, knowing that it was going into the public sphere. For the *Children's Definition and Animation* resource, children were asked *What does domestic violence and abuse/fighting and hurting look like to you?* Clearly evident in the children's engagement with the question *'How would you describe this to other children?'* was a clear motivation to help other children and young people living with DVA. The feeling of safety and security that was set by each individual key worker may have been a contributing factor, but what surprised us, was that children and young people were ready, willing and able to articulate their own unique life experiences. This again was echoed by the children and young people in their 'Our Rights – Your Responsibilities' poster when they told us:

Always ask us how we feel, even if we look happy: sometimes we can look happy but really we are hurting.

Responding to concerns expressed earlier in this paper about the need to protect children from talking about traumatic events for fear of re-traumatizing them (Øverlien & Holt, 2021), the EKP participants instead challenged the adults working with them to 'talk about the fighting and hurting with us – don't shy away from it.'

Echoing to some degree certain contexts where tensions may emerge between the need to protect children from harm whilst also wanting to realize their participatory rights, some professionals involved in the EKP named early feelings of apprehension with the biggest fear of retraumatizing children. Mindful of Garcia-Quiroga and Agoglia's (2020, p.2) caution that the perceived need to protect may result in an 'adult centric model of decision making that has excluded children's views', the EKP keyworkers were transparent about the scope, purpose and potential impact of the work, with a freedom to stop the work at any stage opening up real opportunities for children and young people to express their views and draw on their own expertise, knowledge and abilities. Located safely in the EKP **Space** and provided

with multi-model opportunities to activate their **Voice**, the young people advised professionals to respect their individual experiences by allowing 'us our independence'. We take that 'independence' to also reflect their individual capacity to deal with and respond to information in their own way, with the following advice from two participants:

Allow us to process this information in our own time and then come back to us.

Don't put us under pressure by asking one question after another really quickly.

Connecting **Space, Voice and Influence**, another interesting development in this work is how the children and young people in the project, naturally and inadvertently set the agenda for the subsequent years ahead. When we asked the simple question 'What matters for children and young people', what began to emerge in their feedback was advice for other children and young people living in the same situation, such as:

You are not alone. There are other children feeling this way and going through the same.

Motivated by the desire to help other children living with DVA, the EKP developed a poster resource called "Me2U – What you should know". Developed as a poster for services and a leaflet for children and young people, the leaflet also comes in a black and white version, so that children can colour in and process the key messages – in essence containing the basics of a child safety plan.

Elements of coercive control began to emerge as the work progressed which naturally led to the next participation project: The Kids Coercive Control Web. This children's version of the Power and Control Wheel originally developed by Ellen Pence and colleagues (Pence et al., 1982) is a powerful resource which illustrates coercive control in the lives of children and young people. Examples of coercive control that the children and young people shared in making this web include examples of the perpetrator 'making themselves bigger'; 'forcing us to get involved'; with 'wide eyes staring at you'; and 'threatening to kill themselves'. This very much reflects existing literature and research with children in this space, where a range of tactics are employed by perpetrators designed to intimidate, degrade, exploit and control children (Katz, 2022).

**AUDIENCE: 'If It Is Safe, Keep Talking Until Someone Does Something – Be Heard.'**

Taking as a starting point that 'voice is not enough' (Lundy, 2007, p. 927) and listening alone is not an end in itself in the

participation journey, the EKP consider the third element of the Lundy (2007) model - **Audience** - as critical for children to have their views considered *and* taken seriously. Indeed, focusing on **Audience**, Lundy (2007, p. 936) reverts to Article 12 which requires children's views to be afforded 'due weight', moreover that children have the right to have their views listened to and not just heard. **Audience** then in part is experiencing being listened to, something that Lundy (2007) argues demands that the audience is capable of 'active listening'. Similar to the multi-model approaches to voice as outlined above, active listening demands that firstly there is an audience and secondly that the audience has the capacity to interpret both verbal and non-verbal cues, as expressed by children who are capable of forming a view. Ensuring there was a process for communicating the children's views to an audience or audiences, has been a central component of the EKP. This is where the National remit of Barnardos plays a key role. The work of the EKP is communicated through the networks of the Barnardos Childhood Domestic Abuse projects and through multi-agency partners and their channels of communication.

Responding to the underlying rhetoric of the opening quote in this section, to 'keep talking until someone does something – be heard', the emphasis on steadily raising the profile of the EKP through multi-model communication methods over the last number of years, has created and sustained audience engagement where views of the animations, downloads and requests for their resources have increased year on year.

There is clear research evidence of children's ability to disseminate research findings (Bakhtiar et al., 2023), illustrating meaningful opportunities for those children to have access to audience, including speaking at public events, at conferences and to the media. The EKP has also embraced public opportunities for audience engagement with a view to creating influence, confirming children's capacity to operate within 'adult-centred socially constructed meanings of citizenship' and to influence them as well (Bacon, 2014, p. 22).

### **INFLUENCE 'I Would Like to Give Ideas For Ireland'**

Finally, reflecting on **Influence**, Lundy (2007, p. 938) cautions against tokenistic or 'decorative' participation which involves some semblance of consultation but ultimately ignores children's views and wishes. Linking 'influence' to adult capacity, Cassidy et al. (2022) assert that for children's views to have influence, adults need to be listening. Echoing the frustrations of the young people in 'Voice Against Violence' (VAV) (Houghton, 2018, p. 87) who asserted that they were not 'here just to make it real', identifying and involving decision makers in supporting the EKP to have influence, has been more challenging. While professionals

show a keen interest to be involved and use the resources generated, harnessing the time and commitment from more senior decision makers has been harder to achieve. This last element in the Lundy model is really important so that we give influence to the work of the children and young people and not get stuck in the process of just doing. To this end we are motivated by the call for action taken by the young people in Mason and Danby's (2011, p. 188) research, who asserted that 'actions speak louder than words so get out there and make change'.

Another key learning has been providing children with opportunities to operate within what are generally considered 'adult-centred socially constructed meanings of citizenship' (Bacon, 2014, p. 22), like public consultations and public presentation. Engaging in these events, the children and young people began to see the potential for influence. Similar to VAV (Houghton, 2018) whose primary purpose was to change children's lives, the EKP has been motivated by an ultimate desire to help other children and young people in the same situation. This was clearly evident at the first in person launch event in 2022, where one of the young people described the work of the project as a 'movement' creating real change that she was part of. Having the children and young people calling it a 'movement', inspires us to reach out to key decision makers, to front line services and to politicians to keep the position of children and young people on the agenda.

Responding to Houghton's (2006) call to 'Listen Louder' we have had some wins to date on this. The EKP was contacted by the Department of Justice in Ireland in January 2022, to make a submission on the draft proposal of the 3rd national strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender Based Violence. This involved creating a child friendly infographic that explained the top level aims and objectives of the strategy and asked the children and young people to give opinion and voice their top priorities. As the quote heading this section reflects, the children took this very seriously, with one of the children naming the submission- 'I would like to give ideas for Ireland'.

Keeping the EKP participants fully informed of the process has become an important feature of this work. Due to the national geographical spread of the EKP membership, regular video communications are created that include updates on their reach/influence. These update videos connect the children, to each other and to their successes.

### **Where are We at Now?**

Four years into this work, we felt that we were ready to build a Youth Advisory Panel. Six young EKP people aged between 15 and 18 years, were identified by their individual key workers to embark on the next phase of this journey.

The Youth Advisory Panel, self-titled ‘The Yappers’, have become the spokespersons for the project and gatekeepers of the work of the wider EKP. Their role is best articulated by this young person:

I am here to use my voice to advocate for those who cannot – I am using my voice to raise awareness and bring about change by breaking the silent stigma surrounding domestic abuse and violence.

Through coming together for monthly meetings, the Yappers have built their group identity by writing their mission statement and designing their group logo. Their ‘Mission Statement’ advocates that all children and young people in Ireland who experience domestic violence and abuse:

- Are acknowledged and seen;
- Are listened to and have their voices and opinions taken seriously;
- Get the help and support they need and can talk about it without feeling embarrassed;
- Are asked their opinion on decisions that impact them.

Their ownership of this ‘movement’ was evidenced at our 16 days event in 2023 when three ‘Yappers’ delivered speeches (written by themselves) with confidence and ease to an audience including other children, professionals and members of government. Launching the Kids Coercive Control Web and calling on professionals attending to make a pledge to support their work, the children and young people clearly demonstrated not only their capacity to use their **Voice** and operate within ‘adult-centred socially constructed meanings of citizenship’, but also their capacity to influence them as well (Bacon, 2014, p. 22). Holding **Audience** and demanding **Influence**, this was the culmination of four years of creating a safe **Space**, building trust, working slowly at the pace of the children and young people and collaborating with dedicated services.

This amazing journey has not been without its challenges, and we still have much work to do. While some children are involved in the EKP year on year, others find that they may need to step away and take a break or they may need to leave altogether. Mindful of the fact that the EKP members are all living in some way with the legacy of DVA, which for many continues long after separation and can be compounded by unwanted and unsafe post-separation contact arrangements, being flexible to facilitating children opting in and out of PROJECT has been key in facilitating their journey of participation. Cognizant that there is no ‘single voice of childhood’ we are mindful that all of the resources created with the EKP may not be every child’s story. This echoes to a degree Houghton’s (2018)

reflections on the work of the young expert’s group -Voice Against Violence. Choosing the singular word ‘voice’ for their group name was deliberate, representing that they were ‘*a* voice, not *the* voice or *all* voices’ (Houghton, 2018, p. 85) (emphasis added). Similarly, for the EKP, understanding their individual story and what individual needs arise from that story, is considered critical in terms of their healing. Finally, there are many areas we have not progressed but are important for the EKP, including the invisibility of children in family law processes. These are firmly on our agenda going forward. Given the evidence on the silencing of children in family law at the intersection of DVA and child contact (James-Hanman & Holt, 2021) - providing a safe space and time for the EKP to be heard on this issue is not without its challenges.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The conclusion to this brief report begins by returning to where we started – with children’s right to participate as a substantive theme within the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC 1989) – including the freedom to express an opinion, to have a say in matters affecting their lives and to have a right to make their voices heard. Heeding Schofield’s (1998) caution (albeit in a research context) that skillful and competent engagement with children’s ‘voice’ is more complicated than simply obtaining their views, this paper is grounded in Bouma et al.’s (2018) argument that ‘meaningful participation’ demands that the child is informed; the child is provided with opportunity to express their views; the child’s views have impact on the decisions made. With the critical elements of Bouma’s argument corresponding with the four quadrants of Lundy’s (2007) model as the foundations of the EKP project, this brief report has illustrated evidence of those critical elements of participation.

The testimonies of the participants in the EKP challenges concerns that children who have experienced an adversity such as DVA may be too vulnerable to participate. Rather, the EKP participants who felt part of a ‘movement’ that was influencing and creating change, provide clear evidence of the positive impacts of such participation (Saracostti et al., 2015). Simply stated, the EKP has provided an otherwise marginalized and silenced group with a platform to share their experiences of living with such abuse. To that end, we also concur with Heimer et al.’s (2018, p. 316) conclusion that the concern that children may need to be protected from participating is perhaps ‘misguided’, with participation in the EKP building belief for these young people that they can effect change. Reflecting with the benefit of hindsight on the journey of empowering children and young people through



meaningful participation, we confidently reject notions or assumptions of children's capacity. Rather when questions of children's competence to participate are raised, we encourage counter questioning of firstly whether the methods used by adults to elicit their views were appropriate, and secondly whether those methods were 'competently' administered by those adults (Overlien & Holt, 2018).

Placing the responsibility back on adults to create and open up a safe and scaffolded 'space', we see the EKP providing opportunities for the validation of children's experiences of violence whilst also supporting their recovery. Utilizing child friendly multi-modal methodologies, the EKP demonstrates the possibilities of meaningful participation opening up when that safe space facilitates both individual and collective voice. Providing children with the appropriate tools to share their perspectives (Henderson-Dekort et al., 2022), we also see new interpretations and understandings of those experiences emerging, as with the insights generated by the 'Kids Coercive Control Web'. Those insights lead us to concur with Mason and Danby's (2011, p. 186) question: 'who better to inquire about the capacities, rights, and participation of children, then children themselves?' In this process we are also validating children's own lived experience and positioning their knowledge as 'superior to adults' (Mason & Danby, 2011, p. 186). This validation we argue is an integral element to meaningful participation, with children and young people positioning themselves as already involved in complex family situations, earning them the right, as they see it, to express opinions and be listened to and to receive support and scaffolding to enable that participation. Positioning themselves as 'legitimate players in the process' (Holt et al., 2023, p. 94), they want their wishes heard and respected.

Reflecting on the journey of the EKP, we conclude this paper with a reiteration of Houghton's (2006) call to 'listen louder' to children and young people who have lived with DVA, affording them the respect they have earned as young experts in the unfolding story of their own unique individual lives. 'Listening Louder' also demands that the relevant adults have the capacity to listen and are opening to listening to what children have to say. To this end we acknowledge the challenges we have experienced in the fourth and final quadrant of Lundy's (2007) model - **Influence** – which will be a concerted focus of the EKP going forward. Notwithstanding those challenges, we concur with Overlien and Holt's (2021, p. 667) assertion that the life stories of children should be considered a gift, one which supports our understanding of what it is like to be a child and to live with DVA, and one that should be handled with care. To date, the EKP has provided the scaffolding for handling that gift with care and for realizing children's right to participation in processes which are after all about them. In the true spirit

of prioritizing children's voice, the final word is provided by this young participant, one of the Yappers who spoke at the 16 days of action in November 2023, aged 18 years of age:

*I have been active within Empower Kids Projects since I was 15 ... this is the first project I have witnessed that is children and young people led. It is incredible in this day and age that our voices are finally being heard ....*

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## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The authors have no conflict of interest to declare that are relevant to this article.

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