

WORKING PAPERS IN

Early Childhood Development

36

*Can you hear me?*

*The right of young children to participate  
in decisions affecting them*

by Gerison Lansdown



## About the paper

*Can you hear me? The right of young children to participate in decisions affecting them* emphasises that participation enhances children's self-esteem and confidence, promotes their overall capacities, produces better outcomes, strengthens understanding of and commitment to democratic processes and protects children more effectively. Participation provides the opportunity for developing a sense of autonomy, independence, heightened social competence and resilience. The benefits are therefore significant, and adults with both direct and indirect responsibility for children need to acquire a greater humility in recognising that they have a great deal to learn from children. But the case for listening to young children goes beyond the beneficial outcomes. It is also a matter of social justice and human rights. All people, however young, are entitled to be participants in their own lives, to influence what happens to them, to be involved in creating their own environments, to exercise choices and to have their views respected and valued.

Creating environments where these entitlements are fulfilled for young children will necessitate profound change. In most countries throughout the world, there is a continued perception of young children as passive recipients of care and protection. Their capacities for participation are underestimated, their agency in their own lives is denied and the value of involving them is unrecognised. Yet there is a growing and persuasive body of evidence to challenge these barriers.

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May 2005

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## Introduction

In the 15 years since the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child by the UN General Assembly, a proliferation of activity and thinking has evolved on the subject of children's participation. Children have become visible in political arenas from the village development council at one end of the spectrum to the UN General Assembly at the other. They have been involved in research, consultations, campaigning and advocacy, peer education and support, programme design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation, media work, policy analysis and conferences, as well as the development and running of their own organisations. However, to date, the vast majority of this work has focused on older children. Relatively little emphasis has been given to children under 8 years of age. A number of factors may account for this.

Many of the key players spearheading the debate on the Convention on the Rights of the Child have been non-governmental organisations (NGOs), whose involvement is predominantly with older children. The approaches developed have therefore tended towards activities designed to provide new forums through which these older children can be heard, rather than on working within those institutions which have greatest impact on younger children's lives: family, school, health care, early years' provision. The lives of children under 8 are managed by parents and carers, and a range of professionals – teachers, nursery teachers, playgroup leaders,

health workers – who have, thus far, been less pro-active in the debates on children's rights; although clearly many such professionals do promote participatory practices with children. The active engagement in the promotion of child participation by NGOs has derived from a rights-based analysis of children's lives.

It is rooted in recognition that children are entitled to be involved in decisions that affect their lives. This differs significantly from the predominant approach in early years, which focuses on promoting children's development rather than respecting and protecting their rights. While the two are not intrinsically contradictory, they do result in profoundly different emphases, objectives and strategies for intervention. Finally, the lack of focus on young children's participation probably also reflects the challenges that it poses. While respecting the right of children of any age to participate in decision making necessitates fundamental change to the traditional attitudes towards them, this challenge is far greater with younger children who, in their day-to-day lives, have even less say in how those lives are managed.

However, the Convention on the Rights of the Child extends the right to be listened to and taken seriously to all children capable of expressing views – and that, of course, includes younger children. There is, therefore, an urgent imperative to begin to explore what this means in practice for children under the age of 8 and how it can be implemented.





## Chapter 1: The concept of participation

Central to a philosophy of respect for the rights of children to be listened to and taken seriously is a commitment to valuing children as people *now*. This philosophy challenges the view that the early years are merely a preparation for later childhood and adulthood, with early years' provision as a kind of antechamber to later stages of formal education. On the contrary, it insists on recognition that young children are (Clark and Moss 2001):

- **experts** in their own lives, with a competence to communicate a unique insight into their experiences and perspectives;
- **skilful communicators**, employing a huge range of languages with which to articulate their views and experience. Malaguzzi from the Reggio Emilia schools talks, for example, of the “hundred languages of children” (Edwards et al. 1993).
- **active agents**, influencing and interacting with the world around them;
- **meaning makers**, constructing and interpreting meaning in their lives.

Respect for children as participants is reflected throughout the Convention on the Rights of the Child, but is most clearly elaborated in Article 12, which 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 all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child”. It is a **substantive** right which entitles children

to be actors in their own lives, not merely passive recipients of adult care and protection. However, as for adults, democratic participation is not just an end in itself. It is also a **procedural** right through which to realise other rights, achieve justice, influence outcomes and expose abuses of power. It necessarily counters the power relations that are inherent in adult–child relations. What, then, are the implications of this for young children?

### ***All children are capable of expressing a view***

There is no lower age limit imposed on the exercise of the right to participate. It therefore extends to any child who has a view on a matter of concern to them, and babies and very young children are capable of both holding and expressing views, although the forms of expression will necessarily alter as the child grows older. For example:

- From birth, children express both needs and wants through crying, creating a range of sounds such as gurgling or babbling, laughing and communicating through gestures and body movement. Research has shown that right from the start babies have complex psychological lives. What appears to be random or confused behaviour is, in fact, highly organised. Most dramatic amongst babies' abilities, from the first few weeks, are their social responses (Murray and Andrews 2000). Babies are seeking to engage and

participate in social activity, and the fact that babies are so expressive to other people, means that it is possible to respond to their communication signals.

- From 18 months, children are beginning to express themselves through words, drawing and playing. They are learning to share, to engage and to play with other children and to understand a sense of partnership with others.
- From 4 years, children have begun to acquire a greater sense of self and independence along with cognitive and language skills. They increase their skills in playing with peers through the creation of their own sets of rules, relationships and decision-making processes (Infante 2004).

In other words, children, from birth, start to develop the skills and competences for participation. However, the responsiveness and respect they receive from caring adults and their surroundings will enhance and support the development of these competencies and characteristics.

### ***The right to express their views freely***

If children are to be able to express their views, it is necessary for adults to create the opportunities for children to do so. In other words, Article 12 imposes an obligation on adults, in their capacity as parents, professionals and politicians, to ensure that children are enabled and encouraged to contribute their views on all relevant matters, and to provide age-appropriate information with which to form their views. This does not, of course, imply that children should be required to give their views if they are not willing or interested in doing so. Article 12 embodies a right to express views, not a duty to do so.

Respecting the rights of young children to be heard necessitates a preparedness to create the space to listen to their views in ways appropriate to them – through music, movement, dance, story-telling, role play, drawing, painting and photography, as well as through more conventional dialogue. This requires the provision of time, adults willing to listen,

The capacity of children to share important perspectives through visual rather than verbal communication is highlighted in a project undertaken with 4–5-year olds in the UK designed to seek their perspectives on local public health issues.<sup>1</sup> The children produced a mural depicting the local environment both as it currently was and as they wanted it to be. In their desired environment, play areas were concrete rather than the grass assumed by adults to be the most appropriate surfacing. When questioned, they were able to explain that concrete was preferable because grass hid broken glass, dog excrement and discarded needles used by drug addicts. In this example, the power of the pictorial representation was more effective than words in confronting adults with the legitimacy and relevance of the children's perspectives. Through visual images, these very young children demonstrated that they were better able than adults to identify what was needed for their own protection.

<sup>1</sup> *Stepney and Wapping Community Child Health Project (1993-95), Stepney Community Nursing Development Unit Research and development Programme, London.*

and environments in which they feel safe and comfortable.

### ***The right to be heard in all matters affecting them***

The right to be heard extends to all actions and decisions that affect children's lives – in the family, in school, in health care, in local communities, and at the national political level. Many areas of public policy and legislation impact on children, including transport, housing, macro-economics, environment, as well as education, childcare and public health. This places obligations, not only on those individuals working directly with children, but also on politicians and policy makers with the power and resources to act on children's concerns in the wider public sphere.

### ***The right to have their views taken seriously***

It is not sufficient just to give children the right to be listened to. It is also important to take what they have to say seriously. There is little point in listening to children, if no account is subsequently taken of their views. Article 12

insists that children's views are given weight and should inform decisions that are made about them. Obviously, this does not mean that whatever children say must be complied with. However, it does mean that proper consideration must be given to children's views when decisions are being made. And the fact that young children express themselves differently from adults does not justify dismissing them. Too often, token efforts are made to listen to children, but little effort is subsequently made to take on board the views they express. Even where it is not possible to act on children's concerns, they are entitled to an explanation of what consideration was given to them and why they cannot be implemented.

It is also necessary to exercise care in interpreting what children are saying. Where children are expressing views through visual media, adults need to allow them to provide their own interpretations of their work and not pre-judge the meaning behind their representations (Lancaster 2003). Similarly, it is important to understand children's interpretation of words, which may, and indeed often do, differ from adults'. This problem was exemplified in a study of children's views

In an Indian village, the World Bank and local authorities funded a new primary school. But a year after its completion, the children were still not attending. When asked why, they explained that there was an 'invisible' boundary around the village which marked the limit of safe travel on foot from their homes and that the school was outside this boundary. Had the planners involved the children in the development of the new school, they would have been able to advise them and the school could have been more appropriately sited (Save the Children 1995).

A consultation exercise was commissioned by a local authority and undertaken by an NGO in the UK involving over 400 children under 8 years old to explore their experiences of early years' provision (Willow 2002). The children proposed numerous ideas for improving services, including being listened to, more play equipment and facilities, more safe places to meet friends, less vandalism and pollution, less racism and bullying, better toilet facilities in public settings such as nurseries and primary schools, less smoking and less dog mess. However, none of these concerns were given serious consideration by the local authority. Of course, the children were unable to question this neglect of their findings: their powerlessness and invisibility makes them very easy to dismiss or ignore.

on a UK Government proposal for improving outcomes for children (Sinclair et al. 2002). The document used the terms 'protection' and 'being safe' interchangeably. However, for the children, 'protection' implied overprotection and restrictions, and was viewed negatively, whereas they understood the concept of 'being safe' as freedom from bullying and crime and was therefore a desirable goal. In order to address these issues, it is necessary to create sufficient time to listen properly, to check back with children and avoid making assumptions on their behalf.

### ***The right to respect for views in accordance with their age and maturity***

The weight given to children's views needs to reflect their level of understanding of the issues involved. This does not mean that young children's views should automatically be given less weight. They are capable of understanding and contributing thoughtful opinions on many issues affecting them. There are, of course, important differences in capacities that are

linked with age. Studies of anthropological literature indicate clear similarities between societies with regard to understanding the human life cycle and the place of children within it. However, competence does not develop uniformly according to rigid developmental stages. A growing body of research highlights the limitations of using age as a proxy for assumptions of competence and the importance of avoiding pre-conceptions about what children can and cannot do at any given age (see for example, Rogoff et al. 1975; Bronfenbrenner 1979; Whiting and Edwards 1973; Alderson 1993; Blanchet 1996; Boyden et al. 1998).

The widely differing patterns of social and economic participation by children in different cultural environments confirm that children's capacities owe less to biological or psychological determinants than to expectations of their community, social and cultural contexts, the decisions involved, the life experience of the child, levels of adult support and goals associated with childhood (for a more detailed discussion of children's evolving capacities see Lansdown 2005). The Western perception of

Psychologists have traditionally taken the view that young children's thinking is inconsistent and confused because in tests devised by Piaget, and replicated around the world, children tended to vary their answers when asked the same question several times. In fact, the children assumed the researchers wanted a different answer each time and were trying to be helpful. The researchers interpreted these responses as evidence of the children's inability to think consistently. When, instead, the questions were asked by a 'teddy' the children laughed at his repetitions and repeated their original answers. They felt no need to be polite to the teddy or to pretend not to notice that he kept asking the same questions (Donaldson 1978).

the early years as a period of play, innocence and freedom from care and responsibility is far removed from the reality of many of the world's young children. Indeed, in regions and countries facing extreme crises, such as the HIV/AIDS pandemic in sub-Saharan Africa, many very young children have to take high levels of responsibility for the economic and social survival of their families following the death of their parents.

Furthermore, there are many areas where young children can demonstrate equal or superior competence to older children or adults. Look, for example, at their capacity to acquire IT skills, remember where things are,

use their imagination, express creativity, love and compassion, mediate between arguing parents, show willingness to forgive, and learn new languages. In order to respect these competencies, adults need to learn to hear and see what children are saying and doing without subjecting it to the filtering process that often diminishes their contribution simply because they are young. Unfortunately, too often, adults fail to recognise these capacities because they assess children from an adult perspective. And too often, children's capacities are underestimated because of an adult failure to create an environment in which children can articulate their views appropriately.

The importance of context rather than age was explored by a group of children in India who collaborated in a project to assess the ages at which children are capable of participating in different forms of work and what factors informed that capacity (Concerned for Working Children 2001). They argued that grazing cattle, for example, can be done safely by young children in areas where it can be undertaken within a child's own neighbourhood for a few hours at a time, but cannot be undertaken if it involves travelling long distances from home. They also observed that watering plants around the house and garden can be done by children as young as 3 years if water is already available. However, only children over 9 years can water plants if it involves fetching the water from further distances.

Child protection cases are often dropped because children are deemed to be incompetent witnesses. One of the key tests applied is to determine whether the child is capable of understanding the importance of telling the truth in the proceedings. This is ascertained by asking the child if they know what would happen to them if they lied in court. As many children are unwilling to identify themselves as liars, even hypothetically, they insist, instead, that they are not going to lie. Lyon and Sawitz undertook research in the US with 192 4–7-year olds, who had been allegedly mistreated, into their competence to act as child witnesses. They found that of those who clearly exhibited an understanding of the difference between the truth and a lie, 69% failed to explain it adequately using conventional approaches adopted by the courts. They developed an alternative test that helped children demonstrate their competence to understand the concept of truth. Based on simple picture identification tasks, it asks children to identify when story characters are telling the truth and the consequences of the characters' actions (Sawitz and Lyon 1999). In other words, when an appropriate environment was created, the children were able to demonstrate their actual capacities to participate in court hearings.

## Chapter 2: The case for participation

### ***It promotes children's development***

There is a growing body of evidence indicating that where children are given opportunities to participate, they acquire greater levels of competence, which in turn enhances the quality of participation (Rajani 2000). Children are not merely passive recipients of environmental stimulation, but actively engage with their surroundings in purposeful ways, even from babyhood (Gibson and Pick 2002). Rather than development taking place in orderly, predictable stages, children come to know and understand the world through their own activities in communication with others (Rogoff et al. 1996). And the experience of involvement in shared activities with both adults and peers, where there is a presumption of ability to complete a task successfully, encourages children's development. Within any given

culture, children's capacities to participate effectively are directly influenced by the level of adult support provided, the respect with which they are treated, the trust and confidence invested in them and the opportunity to take increasing levels of responsibility. Children will acquire competence in direct relation to the scope available to them to exercise agency over their own lives, and the most effective preparation for a sense of self-efficacy is to achieve a goal for oneself and not merely to observe someone else achieving that goal. Vygotsky, one of the most influential thinkers in this field, argued that there is a gap between what children can achieve with and without assistance (Vygotsky 1978). This is defined as the 'zone of proximal development' and it is within this zone that cognitive development takes place. Through a process known as scaffolding, where a person, adult or child,

Evidence of the effectiveness of participation in building children's capacities can be found in the Escuela Nueva programme in Colombia, which has developed structures enabling children to function as a democratic community (Hart 1997). One such school has made children's participation in managing the environment of the school and local community integral to the basic concept of the school as a community based centre for democratic learning. They have developed a forest conservation project in which the children are seeking to save the mountain slope by planting native species of trees. Part of the challenge is for the children to educate local villagers about the problem of using wood for firewood and for sale. The children collect seeds from existing trees to establish a nursery, which will ultimately result in replanting all the slopes with native trees. The strength of the programme lies in the wide range of competencies children acquire, backed up the opportunity to learn through practice. A key element of the educational process is that children learn by being respected to take responsibility for the project, with the support of committed adults. And when children's own rights are respected, they learn to respect the rights of others.

adjusts his or her help in response to the level of the child's performance, children can perform tasks they are incapable of completing on their own. In other words, the most effective model for developing competencies is one where children work collaboratively, each serving as a resource for others, and taking varying roles and responsibilities according to their understanding and expertise (Taylor et al. 1999).

### ***It protects children better***

It is sometimes argued that respecting children's rights will serve to place them outside adult protection – that if their views are listened to and taken seriously, they will make decisions and act in ways which place them at risk. This is to misunderstand the nature of the rights embodied in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Convention does not give children full adult rights. Rather, it gives children the right to be heard and to gradually take increasing responsibility for decisions as their competence evolves.

Children who are encouraged to express their views are less vulnerable to abuse and better able to contribute towards their own protection.

Access to information necessary for their protection, opportunities to participate in key decision-making processes, and encouragement in speaking out can empower children to challenge abusive behaviour. Conversely, an insistence on passive obedience renders children vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. The silence that has accompanied sexual abuse of children within families has served to protect only the abusers. Disabled children, many of whom are profoundly disempowered, find it even harder to challenge abusive behaviour. Too often, they experience life in terms of actions done to them, rather than as active participants with the capacity and power to influence their own lives. A number of factors render them less able than many other children to be able to challenge abuse:

- they are more likely to be socially isolated;
- they are less likely to be in nurseries or schools;
- they are more dependent on their carers who may also be perpetrators;
- they may need intimate care which makes it harder to differentiate the boundaries of acceptable and unacceptable contact;
- they may lack verbal communication or mobility;

Deaf girls in a residential school in a rural area in South Africa were sexually abused over a number of years by their headmaster. When one of the girls finally told her mother, the case came to court with a view to prosecuting the abuser. However, the only available signer for the girls was the headteacher himself. He told them that if they pursued the charges against him, their hands would drop off – a devastating threat to vulnerable girls totally dependent on their hands for communication. They withdrew their accusations, the case was dropped and the headteacher continued in post.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Account given to the author in 2002 during a visit to South Africa to study the rights of disabled children.



An initiative in Uganda involving 200 children was introduced to address child abuse in the community. The children were involved in identifying needs, and designing interventions and strategies for implementation. The children, all aged 10–14 years, created their own structure for implementing the project which involved a project steering committee of 18 children for overall planning, a management committee for handling the implementation of project activities, a child protection committee for investigating, hearing and handling cases of abuse and neglect and an advocacy committee responsible for community sensitisation of child rights and child abuse. Members of these committees were all elected by other children in the community (Lansdown 2003).

- they are widely discriminated against and often attract less interest and concern than non-disabled children (Lansdown 2001).

Where it is recognised that children are entitled to challenge what is happening to them and mechanisms through which to do so are established, such abuse and violations of rights are far more easily exposed. Children who are encouraged to talk are empowered to act to challenge abuses of their rights and are not simply reliant on adults to protect them. Furthermore, adults can only act to protect children if they are informed about what is happening in children's lives – and often it is only children who can provide that information. Violence against children in institutions, abuse by teachers, racism in schools, and misrepresentation of children in the media can only be tackled effectively if children themselves are enabled to tell their stories to those people with the authority to take appropriate action. Creating a safe environment for children can best be achieved by working with, rather than just for, them. There is, therefore, a need to question traditional assumptions of adults as sole providers and children as recipients of protection, and acknowledge and nurture the

contribution children themselves can play as a resource for their own protection. Allowing children to contribute to their own protection provides them with opportunities to explore and understand the nature of the risks they face, and take increasing levels of responsibility for avoiding harm.

The importance of creating a culture in which children feel confident to challenge any form of abuse is exemplified in the example set by Summerhill School in the UK. This small residential school, established in the early 20th century for children aged 4–18, is a democratic environment. All rules are made and decisions taken by the entire school body in weekly meetings. Every child and teacher has a vote on all matters. When the government inspectorate for education recently criticised the school for its failure to introduce formal child protection procedures, it argued that its philosophy and ethos of respect for children was its child protection policy. In an environment where children are empowered to influence all aspects of their day-to-day life and where all abuses or problems can be brought to the school meeting, the consequent transparency and trust ensures that children are fully protected.

### ***It produces better outcomes for children***

Young children have insights, perspectives, ideas and experiences that are unique to them. Indeed, they have a great deal to teach adults about their lives. For example, it is only in recent years, as children have begun to exercise their right to be heard, that the extent, nature and impact of violence on children's lives has begun to be understood. The violence children experience at home and in school has not, historically, been taken seriously by the adult community charged with responsibility for the protection of children. Yet study after study, including with young children, has revealed that it is one of children's greatest concerns.

Children in primary schools in Bangladesh cite the absence of physical punishment as one of the most important factors enabling them to learn and encouraging them to stay in school (Education for Change/Department of Primary and Mass Education 2002). And children in Nepal, when provided with opportunities to take action on issues of most importance to them, prioritised parental violence and

drunkenness (Lansdown 2004). It is clear from these and many other studies that children themselves have a significant contribution to make towards an understanding of their lives.

Most countries in the world are concerned to improve educational opportunities and standards for children. Yet very few adopt measures to find out from children themselves about what teaching methods work, whether the curriculum is relevant, what factors contribute to school drop-out rates and truancy, how to improve attendance rates, what is needed to promote better inclusion of girls, how to enhance good behaviour and promote effective discipline. Yet, there is a significant body of evidence which indicates that schools which do involve children and introduce more democratic structures are likely to be more harmonious, have better staff/pupil relationships and a more effective learning environment (see for example Davies and Kirkpatrick 2000).

Listening is equally important in helping adults understand and respond to babies' priorities, interests, concerns and rights. Babies are born already prepared to find other people interesting

One study with 6–7-year olds on their experiences of physical punishment reveals a very different reality to that offered by adults (Willow and Hyder 1998). In defending the continued right of parents to hit their children, it is widely argued that parents are able to exercise appropriate restraint and judgement in the use of such punishments. However, children observe that parents hit their children when they have lost their temper and their behaviour is out of control. Their graphic accounts of the humiliation, pain and rejection they experience when their parents hit them contrast starkly with the widely promulgated view from parents that such punishment is delivered with love, does not cause real hurt and is only applied *in extremis*.

and worth communicating with. Makin and Whitehead argue that they (Makin and Whitehead 2004):

- understand the people who look after them every day;
- think about what is going on around them;
- enjoy new things and experiences.

There is therefore a need for carers to respond to those capacities. By acknowledging and responding to babies' communications, adults are better able to meet their needs (Rich 2004).

### ***It strengthens democracy***

Children need opportunities to participate in democratic decision-making processes within school and their local community, and to learn to abide by subsequent decisions that are made. They need opportunities to learn what their rights and duties are, how their freedom is limited by the rights and freedoms of others, and how their actions can affect the rights of others. It is through experiencing respect for their views and discovering the importance of their respect for the views of others, that they acquire the capacity and willingness to listen to others and so begin to understand the processes and value of democracy. It is through learning to question, to express views and having opinions taken seriously, that children will acquire the skills and competence to develop their thinking and to exercise judgement in the myriad of issues that will confront them as they approach adulthood. Although there are now more democratic countries than in any previous period of history, democracy

remains fragile. In both well-established and newly formed democracies, there is a need for children, from the earliest ages, to experience the implications of democratic decision-making and to acquire the capacities for non-violent conflict resolution. In those countries facing internal conflict and tensions that threaten democracy, such experience takes on an even greater significance.

### ***It is a fundamental human right***

Everyone has a right to express their views when decisions that directly affect their lives are being made – and everyone includes young children. Of course, the types of decisions with which young children will be concerned and the ways in which they can articulate those concerns will be different from those of older children or adults. However, this does not invalidate their importance. Whether it is an individual decision about where a child will live following her parents' divorce, choosing friends, deciding what to wear, or issues of broader impact such as the rules imposed at school, curriculum activities or making communities safer, children have a right to articulate their concerns and be taken seriously.

## Chapter 3: Defining the practice of participation

### *Understanding participation*

In practice, the concept of participation does give rise to some misunderstanding, and it is important to clarify exactly what it does and does not mean.

While the Convention on the Rights of the Child does not use the word ‘participation’, this is the term that has become widely adopted as the language with which to describe the process of respecting the right of children to express their views and have them taken seriously. Because the word has a general meaning in common parlance, as well as this adopted meaning, there is often a lack of clarity about what is meant when the children’s rights community talk about participation. All children, of course, ‘participate’ in a range of activities in their daily lives. They take part, for example, in play, sports activities, conversations, lessons, religious activities and the arts. However, in the context of their human rights, participation means more than taking part. Taking part in a sporting activity organised by an adult is not participation. Being provided with the space to create a game, decide on respective roles, rules and focus is. Roger Hart summed the concept up succinctly when he argued that it is “the process of sharing decisions which affect one’s life and the life of the community in which one lives”.

Participation can encompass a huge range of activity, from the global level, by creating

opportunities for children to contribute their views to international institutions such as the UN, the Committee on the Rights of the Child, or the World Bank, to the day-to day level within children’s own families. Children’s participation can address decisions and actions affecting them:

- **in both private and public spheres** – in other words, within the family or between individuals on the one hand and in respect of public services or government legislation on the other;
- **as individuals** – for example, in respect of decisions affecting their day-to-day life – and **as a constituency**, for example, in respect of decisions about how a service is provided;
- **as an event**, such as a one-off consultation, or **as an ongoing process** in which they are engaged;
- **through advocacy** to claim their rights, **in service development** to help shape and inform the way services are run, **through shared decision-making** in daily aspects of their lives and **through research and evaluation** to assess the quality of services;
- in many different forms including **engagement in adult forums**, such as youth councils, boards or organisations, or advisory groups, **using the arts and media**, using drama, music, poetry, role play, painting, radio, magazines and the Internet, **creating child-led initiatives**, such as child clubs, and in **active engagement in their daily lives** in families, schools, nurseries and pre-school play groups.

To be meaningful and effective, children's participation requires four key ingredients:

1. an ongoing process of expression and active involvement in decision making at different levels in matters that concern them;
2. information sharing and dialogue between children and adults based on mutual respect and sharing;
3. power for children to shape both the process and outcome;

4. acknowledgement that children's evolving capacity, experience and interest play a key role in determining the nature of their participation (O'Kane 2003).

And for very young children, the most meaningful opportunities will be created closest to their immediate environments.

One framework adopted to help professionals translate the rhetoric of listening to young children into practice is RAMPS – a concept analogous with the ramps constructed to enable wheelchair users to access spaces previously denied them (Lancaster and Broadbent 2003):

**R**ecognising the many verbal and visual languages of children that allow children to express themselves in their own terms.

**A**ssigning space for documentation and feedback so that young children have tangible proof that their views have been valued.

**M**aking time to give children information that is relevant, makes sense and focuses on what they want to know.

**P**roviding children with choices to participate or not.

**S**ubscribing to a reflective practice to ensure that interpretations are checked and hearing becomes only the first step towards gaining understanding.

## Chapter 4: Degrees of participation

Young children can participate in matters that affect them to different degrees. The deeper the level of participation, the more they are able to influence what happens to them, and the greater the opportunities for personal development. The following categories provide a broad overview of three different degrees of participation. All are valid and necessitate a commitment to listening to children and taking them seriously but allow for differing degrees of actual engagement. However, it is important to recognise that the boundaries between them are rarely clear cut and many initiatives can span more than one level.

### ***Consultative processes***

Consultation takes place when adults recognise that children have views and experiences that can make a valuable contribution to matters that affect them. A preparedness to consult reflects an acknowledgement that adults do not have all the

necessary expertise through which to provide adequately for children. They therefore set up mechanisms through which to elicit children's perspectives and then use them to influence and inform legislation, policy and practice relevant to children's lives. Processes of consultation are generally characterised by being:

- adult initiated;
- adult led and managed;
- lacking any possibility for children to control outcomes.

Although limited in scope for real engagement, they do, nevertheless, play a valuable role in incorporating children's views into otherwise adult dominated agendas.

### ***Participatory processes***

Participatory processes provide opportunities for children to be actively involved in the development, implementation, monitoring and

#### **Consulting children on their experiences of smacking**

A consultative process was established to find out from groups of 6–7-year olds what they felt about children being smacked (Willow and Hyder 1998). The methodology employed was to create a cartoon character from outer space who had come to Earth to find out about children's lives. A series of laminated cards with pictures of the character were produced each asking different questions – what is a smack, why do adults smack children, how do children feel when they are smacked, etc. This approach was child-friendly, and encouraged the children to articulate their views without requiring them to describe their own individual experiences. The children were able to provide vivid evidence of their perspectives on the use of physical punishment and its impact. Their dimension adds an important contribution to a debate otherwise dominated by adult views and experiences.

evaluation of projects, programmes, research or activities. Such processes can be characterised as:

- adult initiated;
- involving partnership with children;
- empowering children to influence or challenge both process and outcomes;
- allowing for increasing levels of self-directed action by children over a period of time.

This degree of participation by children, while initiated by adults, does create opportunities for children to share power with adults and to play a significant role in shaping activities in which they are engaged. Participatory processes can be developed in early years and school settings, projects and families. They can also be applied to decisions or activities affecting individual children, such as medical treatment.

Consultative processes can be made participatory by, for example:

- enabling children to identify what the relevant questions are;
- giving children the opportunity to help develop the methodology for the research;
- allowing children to take on the role of researchers;
- involving children in discussions about the findings, their interpretation and their implications for future developments.

### ***Self-initiated processes***

Self-initiated processes are those where children themselves are empowered to take action, and are not merely responding to an adult-defined agenda. They can be characterised by:

In one nursery in Denmark, providing care for children aged 6 months to 3 years, the staff felt that they had become pre-occupied with rules, frequently regulating the behaviour of the children by prohibitions. They decided that even very young children had both the right and the capacity to take responsibility for controlling themselves in day-to-day life. They therefore decided to review the rules and start listening to the children. The outcome was that while some rules were preserved, many were discarded. For example, children had the right to say no to things they did not want. If a child did not want to eat and wanted to leave the table to go and play, that was acceptable, as long as they did not run back and forth constantly. One consequence was an improvement in the relationships between staff and children. It did lead to more conflicts between the children, but the staff found that the children developed the capacity to resolve many of these conflicts themselves. Interestingly, parents were initially unhappy with the proposed changes, fearing that it would lead to children behaving badly at home. However, they found that the children were capable of distinguishing between rules at home and at the nursery, and the parents gradually realised that the children were capable of deciding far more for themselves than they had previously thought (Larsen and Larsen 1992).

- the issues of concern being identified by children themselves;
- adults serving as facilitators rather than leaders;
- children controlling the process.

In these processes, adults respect children's capacities to define their own concerns and

priorities, as well as the strategies for responding to them. It involves a commitment to creating real partnerships with children, with adults fulfilling key roles, for example, as advisers, supporters, administrators, fund-raisers and counsellors.

In one community in Uganda, it was young children who identified the need for improved water and sanitation for the village. The 600 children at the primary school became concerned about animals using the village pond that was the main water supply. They spoke with the village leader who called a meeting where the children presented poems and dramas about the value of clean water. As a result, children and adults worked together to clean the pond and build a fence to keep the animals out (Save the Children 1995).



## Chapter 5: Opportunities for the participation of young children

### *In the family*

Recognition of children's right to participate necessitates a greater emphasis on negotiation, compromise and sharing of information within family life than has traditionally been the case in most cultures. It does challenge the power and authority of parents to exercise complete control over their children's lives. In families in many parts of the world, there is no tradition of involving children in decisions that affect them. Rather, children are expected to do as they are told and not ask questions. Suggestions that children, particularly younger children, have

a right to be involved give rise to a number of concerns:

- **It will make children disrespectful.** This fear rests on a misunderstanding of the concept of participation. Recognition that children are entitled to express their views and have them given respect does not mean that children are entitled to disregard the views of others, or to behave exactly as they want. On the contrary, learning that they will have their views taken seriously necessitates taking on board the lesson that other people's views must also be listened to and respected. In this way, children are given the opportunity

A series of case studies from South Asia documenting participatory initiatives provide convincing evidence that giving children responsibility strengthens rather than weakens family relationships (Lansdown 2004). They found that respecting what children say does not lead to lack of respect for parents. Indeed, many parents and children cited improved family relationships, greater respect for parents and contributions to the local community as positive outcomes. Parents value children's increased confidence and skills and expressed the view that participation had opened up new opportunities for their children. In some cases, children felt that parental attitudes had changed leading to less physical punishment, and that adults were less rigid and more friendly towards them as a result of the project.

The benefits are clearly illustrated in one UNICEF project developed in the Maldives to raise parental awareness of the value of listening to children, particularly in the context of growing levels of delinquency, drug misuse and family breakdown. The programme seeks to help parents become more responsive to children and to provide them with the necessary skills through which to respond effectively to their children. It also provides older siblings with ideas on how to communicate and stimulate smaller children to grow and develop through interaction: the aim is to enable them to see that children need more than simply being watched. As a consequence of this work, many fathers, as well as mothers, have come to realise the benefits of dialogue and communication with their young children, some regretting that they did not understand its importance when their other children were younger.

to understand the reciprocal and mutual responsibilities that arise with rights. Furthermore, Article 12 does not suggest that parents and other carers devolve decision-making responsibility to children. Rather, it requires a more democratic approach to the way those decisions are made, with parents retaining responsibility for all decisions which their children are not yet competent to make.

- **Children should not be burdened with inappropriate responsibility.** Of course children should not have to be involved in decisions beyond their capacities. But a growing body of evidence indicates that excluding children from decisions in families leads to greater, rather than less, anxiety and stress. For example, significant numbers of parents fail to talk to their children about impending marriage breakdowns. This is defended on grounds that it would upset the children. However, research with children reveals that they are highly sensitive to conflict between their parents, are often fully aware of the problems and feel hurt, worried and more vulnerable by the failure to include and inform them about what decisions are being made (for an overview of recent research see Hawthorne et al. 2003).
- **Involving children is time-consuming.** There is no doubt that in the short term, it is quicker to make decisions without involving children. However, without their views, it is harder for parents to make the right decisions on their behalf. And giving them the opportunity to contribute to decision-

making gives children experience in learning to balance differing perspectives and take increasing responsibility for their actions.

- **It may place children at risk.** Parents have responsibility to promote their children's best interests. In doing so, they need to balance consideration of children's wishes and feelings against their right to protection from harm. For example, a 2-year old cannot be left to decide to run into a busy road. The child would not have the competence to understand the nature of the risks involved, and the consequences of allowing the child to exercise choice would expose the child to potential harm. However, she or he can, with information about the weather and the anticipated activities of the day, take part in deciding what clothes to wear. A decision over whether to wear a coat to school will, for example, have to be based on a calculation of the harm caused by compelling the child to wear a garment that he or she sees as restrictive, compared with the chance of the child catching a cold (Miller 1999). Very young children can, with support and information take responsibility for many decisions where the risk threshold is low. Helping children weigh up options and look at the implications of different choices, is a means of strengthening children's capacities to make wise and informed decisions, and to accept responsibility for their actions. Children learn from making mistakes, coping with the consequences and learning the lessons for the future.

### ***In early years settings***

Adopting a commitment to listening to children and taking them seriously has wide-ranging implications at all levels of early years' provision. For example, it can and should impact on:

- the individual decisions and choices children wish to make;
- children's influence over the structure, culture, organisation and content of the setting;
- children's contribution to the development and planning of provision;
- children's involvement in the monitoring and evaluation of the provision.

In other words, the right to participate means an involvement in decision making in respect of all services provided for children or impacting on them, from the micro-level of choosing what to play, to the macro-level of helping design and develop the nature of the provision. Respectful environments require the introduction of a culture rooted in a presumption that children are entitled to be involved, are competent to make a valid and valuable contribution, can provide a unique contribution based on their own experience and operate as active agents influencing the world around them.

#### **Involving children at the micro-level**

The Children as Citizens Project in Denmark was established by the government to increase children's influence on issues relevant to them. In one initiative, 13–14-year olds undertook research in a kindergarten to find out how much say the children had in their lives. They concluded that staff trampled on the children's rights in a number of ways, including:

- it was unreasonable to assume that the children were all hungry, and should therefore have to eat, at the same time;
- it might be healthy to go out to play but only if children wanted to and it was not fair to insist that they all go out at the same time;
- it was not reasonable that the children could only drink tap water between meals when the staff could drink tea and coffee whenever they wanted.

The staff took these criticisms seriously and decided that the joint lunch would be dropped, the playground would be staffed all day so children could play out when they wanted and a jug of squash would be placed on the table for children to help themselves when they were thirsty (Hare 1993).

#### **Involving children at the macro-level**

When a children's discovery centre was being set up in London, a forum of children aged 2–13 years was established to contribute to its design and development. Through child-friendly, creative workshops with sculptors, poets, artists and story-tellers, their input has provided ideas for the logo, exhibits, garden design, accessibility, opening times, age limits, crèche facilities and costs; and, in so doing, has ensured the attraction of the centre for other children (Children's Discovery Centre/Save the Children 1999).

It is probably true to say that a significant majority of early years' providers throughout the world operate on a more conservative philosophical tradition in which children are not empowered to inform and construct their environments. However, models of holistic pedagogies of respect for young children are well established. They are perhaps best exemplified by the Reggio Emilia approach in Italy. Rather than seeing the child as an empty vessel to be filled with knowledge, Reggio educators believe strongly that each child has unlimited potential and is eager to interact with and contribute to the world. Children act as *protagonists* in their own learning, encouraged by teachers to develop projects and solve problems among themselves. The teacher is a resource who can 'lend' help, information and experience when necessary. Interestingly, even the name of the schools, *scuole dell'infanzia*, avoids the connotations of 'preparation' and 'pre-ness' inherent in the Anglo-American

term 'pre-school'. They recognise children's fundamental right to 'realise and expand their potential', and their Charter of Rights affirms an understanding of children consistent with this commitment:

Children have the right to be recognised as subjects of individual, legal, civil, and social rights; as both sources and constructors of their own experience, and thus active participants in the organisation of their identities, abilities and autonomy, through relationships and interaction with their peers, with adults, with ideas, with objects and with the real and imaginary events of intercommunicating worlds (Reggio Children 1995).

Additional approaches are needed if young children are to play a role in contributing to the long-term design and development of early years' provision. One framework that has been

#### **Te Whariki – a New Zealand approach to an early years' curriculum**

In New Zealand, a new curriculum was developed for children aged 0–7, which sought to be culturally, philosophically and developmentally meaningful (Carr and May 2000). It is based on four principles:

- *whakanana* – empowering children to learn and grow;
- *kotahitanga* – enabling children to learn and grow holistically;
- *whanau tangata* – the wider world of family and community is an integral part of children's learning;
- *nga hononga* – learning takes place through responsive and reciprocal relationships with people, places and things.

Through these principles, it adopts a very different approach to either the traditional subject-based framework of the school curriculum or the more traditional developmental curriculum map of physical, intellectual, emotional or social skills.

developed to listen to children in order to find out how they experience their day care is the 'Mosaic Approach' (Clark and Moss 2001). The aim of this approach is to apply a series of visual and verbal tools to build up a living picture of children's perspectives. These tools include:

- **observation** – watching is an important part of listening, and enables adults to gain insights into how young children respond to their environment, the choices they make and the relationships they establish. With pre-verbal children, observation involves listening to their body language, facial expressions, movements and different cries.
- **interviewing/child conferencing** – interviews provide a formal structure for talking to young children about their institution, using questions based on children's perceptions of their daily experiences. It can be undertaken either sitting down or moving around to enable the children to highlight the issues they are commenting on.
- **cameras** – for children to build visual pictures of their perceptions of the setting.
- **tours** – enabling children to take adults around the setting in order to talk to them about the environment. They can take responsibility for how the route is created and how it is recorded and documented.
- **map making** – children can create visual maps of the setting, providing scope for highlighting its most positive and negative aspects.

Together these listening tools create a detailed picture, combining narratives and images for discussion and interpretation.

### ***In schools***

The spirit of Article 12, and indeed the Convention on the Rights of the Child as a whole, suggests the creation of schools which are child-friendly and in which children are encouraged to be curious, to argue, to challenge, to be creative, to explore and find out, to be listened to and to be respected. The Committee on the Rights of the Child has consistently recommended that governments take further steps to encourage greater participation by children in schools (Hodgkin and Newell 1998). But this philosophy is significantly at odds with the cultural traditions of education in most countries throughout the world, where schools are characterised by authoritarianism, with the child constructed as the passive recipient of adult wisdom and expertise, rather than involved in an interactive dialogue (Lansdown 2002). Despite widespread acceptance within the child development field that children learn most effectively through participation, it is far from universally accepted or applied in practice. The educational experience described above in the Escuela Nueva is in sharp contrast with the enforced passivity associated with much schooling. It is still the case that in too many schools, children sit in rows, learning by rote, and are punished by beating or other forms of humiliation for minor misdemeanours or difficulties in learning.

Respect for children's right to participation requires a different approach. Facilitating and supporting children to express the meanings that they are searching for, encouraging them

to ask questions, giving them undivided attention and valuing their perspectives helps children make sense of their experiences, while helping the listener to gain an understanding of children's views (Bruner 1975; Tizard and Hughes 1984). This kind of interaction empowers children, giving rise to socially inclusive relationships, which, in turn, are the foundation from which to promote listening as the basis of work with and care for young children (Wells 1978). Indeed, the philosophy embodied in the Reggio Emilia has much

to offer formal schooling in its view that “participation is an educational strategy that characterises our way of being and teaching. Participation of the children, the teachers and the families, not only by taking part in something but by being part of it, its essence, part of a common identity, a ‘we’ that we give life to through participation” (Rinaldi 1998).

There are exciting and imaginative initiatives being developed throughout the world – school councils which give children a genuine say in

Highfield school is a junior school (7–11 years) in a particularly deprived area of the UK (Alderson 1997). It had been characterised by high levels of violence, disaffection, bullying and truancy. A new head teacher was appointed who decided to involve the whole school community in making the school a safe and effective educational environment. In order to achieve this goal, she consulted with all the children, as well as teachers and administrative staff on what changes were needed to make the school a safer place. The outcomes of the consultation included:

- the establishment of a school council in which the children had genuine power. They were involved, for example, in the development of all school policies and in the recruitment of staff;
  - the creation of a bullying box, where children could, in confidence, give information about having been bullied;
  - the appointment of ‘guardian angels’ – children who volunteered to befriend children who were without friends, being bullied, or simply in need of support;
  - child mediators, who would help children resolve conflicts in the playground;
- circle time, where children come together to raise and explore issues of current concern to them.

As a result of these changes, the school became very popular, the children were happier, achieved better educational results, and acquired considerable skills of negotiation, democratic decision-making and social responsibility.

The initiative demonstrates that very young children are capable of accepting considerable levels of responsibility when invested with trust and support. Children can act to protect themselves and others when their rights are respected. The provision of training and encouragement for the child mediation system enabled the children to act to help each other without having to turn to adults, although the adults were available if they were needed. By respecting the rights of the children, they were then able to understand the importance of respecting the rights of others and taking responsibility to ensure that this happened.

the running of the school, peer counselling where children are trained as mediators to help other children resolve problems, teaching styles rooted in respect for children and their abilities, curricula developed in collaboration with children and linked with local community needs (see for example, Davies and Kirkpatrick 2000; UNICEF 1999). However, these initiatives are far from widespread or mainstream. The process of ratification of the Convention has begun to open up debate internationally on these issues. It is increasingly recognised that it is not sufficient to discuss the **scope and uptake** of educational provision but that governments must also address the **nature** of that provision. Young children not only have a right to education, but the education provided must be rooted in respect for their rights.

### ***In health care***

Young children are entitled to, and have both the capacity and a contribution to make to, their own health care. Even very small children can, for example, describe what they like or dislike about being in hospital and why, and can produce ideas for making their stay less frightening and distressing, provided they are given appropriate support, adequate information and allowed to express themselves in ways that are meaningful to them – pictures, poems, drama, photographs, as well as more conventional discussions, interviews and group work. Alderson's research with 3–12-year olds with diabetes indicates that even very young children can demonstrate considerable levels of understanding and responsibility for their own

health care if they are appropriately informed and supported (Alderson 1997). Their levels of understanding developed according to their individual experience, coupled with the levels of expectation and encouragement available to them. For example, the study found one 4 and one 6-year old who were both taking responsibility for their injections. Levels of competence between the children obviously varied, but every child in the study showed some skills including being able to:

- take their own blood tests;
- inject insulin;
- understand the need to restrict their diet;
- understand their need for insulin injections;
- interpret their bodily sensations;
- explain the meaning of diabetes to other people;
- refuse sweet foods or limit the amount they eat;
- assess food values;
- choose appropriate food to suit their glycaemia and insulin levels and energy needs;
- cope with being different from their friends;
- cope with the clinics.

However, in practice, it is rare for parents and health professionals to take appropriate steps to involve young children in decisions relating to health care treatment, despite the powerful arguments for doing so (Lansdown and Goldhagen 2005):

- It enables them to get answers to any questions they may have and avoids misunderstanding.
- It relieves their anxieties and helps them cope with the treatment better.

- It gives them confidence – if they are involved in the process of treatment, they will not have fears that action will be taken without their knowledge or understanding.
- It encourages co-operation – if children lack information, they are likely to be more frightened and therefore less willing or able to co-operate in treatment. In turn, interventions will be more painful and distressing.
- It avoids unnecessary distress, as when information is withheld, children may worry unnecessarily about what is going to happen to them.
- It leads to better understanding of their own health care needs.
- They feel more respected.
- It encourages them to take a more active responsibility for their own health.

For example, many young children are frightened of injections. Giving children information about why the injection is necessary, the space to articulate their fears, perhaps to hold and examine the syringe, draw a picture of what would make them feel braver,

have the opportunity to have an important adult present when the injection takes place, can help the child overcome anxiety and participate in giving consent. Conversely, imposing the injection without consideration of the child's perspective is likely to exacerbate the terror.<sup>3</sup>

### ***In local communities***

Healthy democracies depend on citizens believing that they can influence outcomes and make a difference. The reality is, however, that too many young people feel both mistrustful of powerful political institutions and impotent to influence them. And in the world of adult politics, it is only too easy to treat children's, especially young children's, experiences and perspectives as trivial, uninformed and irrelevant. Yet young children are a key resource in creating child-friendly environments that reflect their needs, interests and safety. Furthermore, there is value in encouraging children from the earliest possible ages to recognise that they have both a shared responsibility and the skills and capacity to contribute towards the creation of sustainable

An initiative in the UK was instituted to enable children as young as 4–5 years old to take responsibility for their own pain relief (Lewellyn 1993). A unit containing the analgesic is attached to the child through an intravenous line. The child can then release the drug as and when it is needed. Provided the child has an ability to understand the relationship between the analgesic and their own pain, and the manual dexterity to operate the unit, they have proved perfectly able to administer it safely and sensibly. The outcome is not only less pain for the children, who can judge their own levels of need at the appropriate times, but less anxiety and stress for the children as they are freed from the fear of pain.

<sup>3</sup> Work done at the Birmingham Children's Hospital, UK



environments (Hart 1997). Examples throughout this paper provide powerful testimony to the invaluable contribution that young children can make to an understanding of their lives within local communities – for example, through undertaking research, helping design services and advocating for greater protection.

At present, however, political structures in most countries in the world offer little space for the views and concerns of young children. Meetings, conferences, seminars, boards, councils and

advisory groups where issues are commonly discussed and decisions taken are clearly inappropriate forums for young children. Effective implementation of Article 12 requires a radical review of the options for creating spaces for young children to be heard and taken seriously, involving a preparedness to explore child-centred structures for listening, to consider alternatives to the exclusive use of formal language as the medium for communication, and to give recognition to the wisdom and expertise of young children.

In a small primary school in Vermont, children aged 6–10 years were involved in an Atlas Project in which they drew maps and a three-dimensional model of their community in order to create a comprehensive atlas of their local environment. The children chose what maps they wanted to make and then worked in pairs and developed their own strategies for collecting information for the maps. They included maps of cemeteries, garden flowers, roads, waterways, the centre of the village, farms and houses and ponds. Parents were encouraged to get involved. The outcomes of this environmental research included the children acquiring an enhanced understanding of their community, as well as many social and practical skills, and also enabled both the children and the parents to understand the relationship between livelihoods and the environment (Hart 1997).

## Chapter 6: Measuring participation

To date, investment in monitoring and evaluating the nature, quality and impact of children's participation has been relatively limited. While there is considerable anecdotal evidence of the beneficial outcomes, relatively little sustained or independent research has been undertaken. Understanding of children's participation is still in its relative infancy, having only really begun to be widely explored in the early 1990s. The lack of significant progress is also a consequence of the very real practical and ethical difficulties inherent in constructing effective tools for measurement. A number of questions arise:

- Is it possible to construct universally applicable indicators of relevance to widely disparate initiatives in different cultural, social and economic contexts?
- To what extent should children themselves determine the indicators against which they wish to measure initiatives in which they are involved?
- Without universal indicators, how can initiatives be compared in terms of the outcomes and impact they achieve?
- How can effectiveness of participation be measured and what constitutes success when many of the outcomes will be qualitative not quantitative?
- How can the desired outcomes of participation be evaluated when many of them relate to long-term changes in children's lives?

No simple answers can be provided to address these questions. However, there is now a growing level of interest in the development of criteria or indicators against which to measure children's participation. Certainly, the case for doing so is powerful (Hart 2004):

- A focus on the objectives of an initiative or project will help children acquire a greater understanding of what they hope to achieve.
- It will help identify the strengths and weaknesses of the project.
- It will help to clarify which procedures and practices are helpful and which are redundant or obstructive.
- It will help to identify what support and resources are needed to strengthen the initiative.

Furthermore, if children's participation is to be sustained, replicated, resourced and institutionalised into the wider communities in which children live, it is necessary to begin to construct methods of measuring what is being done and how it is impacting on children's lives. Only by doing so, and demonstrating its efficacy, will it be possible to argue the case for continuing investment in strategies to promote participation, and indeed, to build and share understanding of what constitutes effective participation.

The following suggestions for measuring effective participation are proposed as a broad

framework within which to approach the process. They can be applied whether the process takes place in a school, a nursery, a playgroup, a project or any other form of wider programme. Here, the term 'programme' is used generically to include all these potential settings. There are three distinct dimensions to participation which require measurement if practice is to be monitored and evaluated effectively:

1. **scope** – what degree of participation has been achieved and at what stages of programme development? In other words – **what is being done?**
2. **quality** – to what extent have participatory processes complied with the agreed standards for effective practice? In other words – **how is it being done?**
3. **impact** – what has been the impact: on young people themselves, on families, on the supporting agency, and on the wider realisation of young people's rights within families, local communities and at local and national governmental level? In other words – **why is it being done?**

### ***Scope of participation throughout programme development***

In order to assess the scope of participation in which children are involved, it is necessary to address two perspectives:

1. Children can be involved at different stages in the process of developing a programme – from the initial concept through to

implementation and monitoring and evaluation. The earlier they are involved, the greater their degree of influence.

2. At each stage of developing a programme, as described earlier, there are three potential degrees of engagement for children:
  - consultation;
  - shared decision making;
  - self initiated processes.

The extent to which children are empowered to exercise agency within an initiative will be influenced by the degree to which they are participating. This perspective needs to be considered in respect of each potential stage of children's involvement.

The following benchmarks can be used to measure the extent to which children have been able to participate in each of these stages. (*Note:* The brackets indicate the level of participation that the statement implies.)

#### ***Identification of key issues***

Children have a contribution to make to an understanding of their lives and the issues that are of significance for them. Adults should not assume that they necessarily have the knowledge and insight into what is important for children. Before undertaking a programme therefore, it is important to ensure that it reflects the real concerns faced by children and deemed of relevance by them. Involving children in any situation analysis would require that:

- opportunities are created for children to articulate their own concerns, priorities, interests (all);
- child-friendly and age-appropriate strategies are used for consulting with children (all);
- a wide range of children are involved – for example, children already involved in programmes, consultations through schools, consultation through community groups, the media, etc. (all).

### *Programme planning*

Children can play a part in helping plan what programmes might be undertaken by an organisation or agency. If children have been involved in the identification of issues of significance to them it is obviously important to ensure that those views are taken seriously when plans are being drawn up. The extent to which children play a part in this process can vary considerably. However, it will need to involve one of the following options:

- planning takes account of the issues raised by children in the identification of key issues (consultative);
- children are involved in contributing what programmes are to be developed (participative);
- children are enabled to identify and determine what programmes they would like to see developed (self-initiated);
- child-friendly and age-appropriate strategies are used to enable children to contribute to the planning process (all).

### *Programme design*

Once a programme has been decided on,

children can play a significant part in helping to decide what it should try to achieve and how it should be designed. Children, for example, may have ideas about what will work, what questions to ask, who to involve and what forms they want to use to express themselves. Their degree of involvement can be measured by whether:

- children are consulted on ideas conceived by adults (consultative);
- children are involved in the programme design, for example, what activities will take place, who should be involved, what are the principles underpinning the programme (participative);
- space is created to enable children to develop their own ideas for the programme (self-initiated).

### *Implementation*

Once a programme is conceived, children can play a key role in its implementation. For example, they might play a part as researchers finding out about an aspect of children's lives, or run a school council or contribute ongoing ideas and feedback for developing a children's facility. Their involvement can be measured by assessing whether:

- children are consulted on how they would like to participate in the programme (consultative);
- children are involved in the implementation of the programme, for example, communicating what the programme is seeking to achieve, taking part in programme activities (participatory);
- children have responsibility for the management of some aspect of the

programme, for example, managing the budget, interviewing staff members, deciding on programme activities (self-managed).

### ***Monitoring and evaluation***

Children need to be involved in contributing to an understanding of how effective programmes are. This both provides them with a sense of ownership and interest in the outcomes and helps them to work towards their improvement. Programmes evaluated by adults alone will not necessarily take account of children's perspectives and experience. Children's involvement can be measured by assessing whether:

- children's views are elicited in evaluating programmes (consultative);
- children play a part in determining what should be evaluated (participatory);
- children determine what should be evaluated and how (self-initiated);
- criteria for monitoring are agreed with children at outset of programme (all);
- there is an ongoing process of monitoring throughout the programme (all);
- results of monitoring and evaluation are fed back to and discussed with children in child sensitive and accessible ways (all).

### ***Quality standards in promoting effective participation***

There is an emerging consensus on the standards that are required for effective participation, without compliance with which, participation is unlikely to be meaningful or fruitful for

children. It is important therefore that programmes are able to measure how far their practice complies with these standards.<sup>4</sup>

### ***An ethical approach***

There are differences in power and status between adults and children. It is necessary to have a clear ethical approach so as to prevent adult manipulation or control, and to create meaningful participation. This can be achieved by ensuring that:

- the process is transparent and honest: children understand what the programme is about and the boundaries of what they are able to influence;
- staff have a shared understanding of, and commitment to, the principles of participation underpinning the initiative;
- there are shared principles about how people behave towards each other;
- children have appropriate information about the proposed initiative with which to participate effectively;
- the barriers children might face in participating have been fully considered, for example, parental opposition;
- staff work towards creating space for children to develop their own ideas and activities.

### ***Child sensitive and enabling environment***

The quality of children's participation and their ability to benefit from it will be influenced by whether the environment in which it takes place is safe, welcoming, appropriate and supportive. This will require that:

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<sup>4</sup> The following quality standards are drawn from the *Practice Standards in Child Participation* produced by International Save the Children Alliance, 2004.

- the programme takes account of the evolving capacities of children;
- age appropriate methods of participation are created which allow for young children's preferred forms of expression;
- child-friendly spaces are used in which children can feel comfortable and relaxed; age appropriate information is provided to the children;
- children are encouraged to create their own forms of participation;
- sufficient time is made available for children to participate effectively;
- adults are sensitive to the value of and strategies for promoting children's participation;
- recognition is given to the need for participation to be fun and enjoyable.

#### *Voluntary and relevant participation*

Children's participation should enable them to get involved in issues that directly affect them and build on their personal knowledge. Recognition needs to be given to their right to choose whether or not to participate, and on what terms. This can be achieved by ensuring that:

- the issues are of real relevance to children;
- it is clear to all children that their participation is voluntary and that they can withdraw if they wish;
- children have the necessary information to give informed consent;
- the programme takes account of the context of children's lives and other demands on their time – for example, parental attitudes, school work, domestic work.

#### *Inclusive participation*

Children, like adults, are not a homogeneous group and opportunities for participation should extend to all groups of children irrespective of, for example, age, abilities, gender, class, ethnicity, nationality, social origin. Access to participation should challenge rather than reinforce existing patterns of social exclusion and discrimination. This requires that:

- children from all social groups are equally able to participate – for example, girls, disabled children, indigenous children, poor children;
- efforts are made to ensure equal participation of all groups of children, consistent with their evolving capacities;
- all children are equally treated and respected within the programme;
- the programme takes account of the different needs and capacities of all groups of children; and
- the programme is sensitive to the cultural context of all participating children within a framework of universal rights.

#### *Safe environment*

Any programme working with children has a responsibility to ensure that those children are not exposed to harm, abuse or exploitation within, or as a consequence of participation in, the programme. This requires that:

- the protection needs of children are paramount in the way children's participation is planned and organised;
- staff recognise the children's right to be protected from all forms of violence and abuse;

- child protection procedures are in place to minimise risk and prevent abuse and take account of the particular risks faced by some children and the barriers they face in obtaining help, for example, disabled children;
- children are aware of their right to be protected from all forms of violence and abuse and know where to go for help if needed;
- staff are trained in child protection procedures;
- consideration is given to addressing the potential risks to which children may be exposed in participative processes;
- children's consent is obtained when using any information provided by children;
- no photographs, videos, or digital images of children are taken or used without the children's consent.

#### *Trained, committed and sensitive staff*

Adults working with children's participation need to be committed to the principle of listening to children. They need the skills and understanding to enable them to work effectively and confidently. This requires that:

- staff are properly trained in children's rights, including child participation;
- staff are properly supported and supervised;
- staff have an understanding of participative monitoring and evaluation techniques;
- training is provided to all professionals working with children directly and indirectly as part of the programme – for example, paediatricians, nurses, teachers.

#### *Community, professional and family links*

Children do not live in isolation from their families and communities. Initiatives to promote their participation should, wherever possible, involve families and community members in order to avoid creating a dissonance between the treatment of the children within and outside the programme, and to support parents in promoting and protecting their children's rights.

It is important to ensure that:

- parents are fully aware of the aims and objectives of the programme;
- parents are sensitised to the rights and needs of children;
- ways of working with children incorporate and build on supportive local structures, traditions, knowledge and practice;
- members of the wider community are informed about and encouraged to participate in the programme, for example, local politicians, community leaders, religious leaders.

#### *Impact of participation*

The impact of child participation will need to be assessed in accordance with the objectives for involving them. For example, the objective might be to promote children's self-esteem and build skills and confidence. It might be to ensure that programmes reflect children's own expressed priorities. It might be to enable children to participate in challenging neglect or violations of their rights. Indeed, it may include

all these and other objectives. These different objectives need to be clear at the outset of the programme and will influence what indicators are constructed for measuring effectiveness. The following provides an overview of the range of dimensions that can be considered in seeking to measure outcomes and effectiveness. Across all these dimensions, the potential impact needs to be assessed by all relevant participants – children, parents, staff, community members. In undertaking any assessment, it is also important to find concrete evidence of any impact, rather than merely an assertion that the impact has been achieved – for example, how a child’s self esteem has been raised and with what effect.

#### *Impact on children themselves*

Children demonstrate or experience/parents or staff observe:

- greater self esteem and self confidence;
- access to more skills;
- access to wider opportunities;
- an awareness of rights;
- a sense of efficacy and empowerment.

“Before the project I didn’t know anything about self esteem. I was afraid that they wouldn’t listen to me. I didn’t know how to value myself, how to love myself. I ask myself who I am. In the project I learned who I am.”

*Young girl from a radio project, Aqui los Chicos, Ecuador (Hart 2004)*

#### *Impact on parents*

Parents identify/programme staff/children

observe:

- a higher level of awareness of children’s rights and needs;
- a greater level of sensitivity to children’s rights and needs;
- an improvement in the quality of relationships with children;
- a greater understanding of children’s capacities;
- a willingness to consult with and take account of children’s views.

“Prior to the establishment of the children’s club, only 5–6 parents came regularly to the Student Development Council, intended as a forum for the support of the school and their children’s education. However, as the club became active, attendance jumped and now around 150 parents are involved. A general mood of apathy has given way to concern about ways in which the village may be developed.”

*The principal of a school in Sivanthivu, Sri Lanka (Hart 2004)*

#### *Impact on staff*

Staff identify/children observe:

- changing practice towards respecting children’s rights and needs,
- a greater level of sensitivity to children’s rights and needs,
- an improvement in the quality of relationships with children,
- a greater understanding of children’s capacities.



After involving very young children in making choices for equipment for a play group, one staff member observed that “[i]t didn’t really take up much time. I wouldn’t have believed a child of 2 and a half could have been able to understand what was being asked of her so easily.”

*(Miller 2003)*

### ***Impact on community***

Staff/children/parents/community members observe:

- a greater awareness of children’s rights and attitudes towards children;
- an improvement in the status of children within the community;
- increased willingness to act in the best interests of children.

### ***Impact on institutions***

Staff/parents/other professionals/children observe:

- a change in organisational culture towards greater respect for children’s rights;
- a willingness of staff to reconsider power balances and relinquish control in favour of greater power sharing;
- children’s participation built in to all programme areas as a common underpinning approach;
- changes in programmes to reflect children’s concerns and priorities.

“The first time we talk to them they don’t listen. The second time we talk they start listening. The third time we talk they start to act.”

*A Dalit child from Nepal involved in a project to promote their access to primary education (Save the Children 2003)*

A Bilingual Teacher Training Programme in the Peruvian Amazon was built on children’s knowledge of their own community and lives using both their native language and Spanish. The result has been schooling that is more relevant with more motivated pupils, contributing in turn to the development of cultural integrity and sustainable improvements for the community.

*(Hart 1997)*

Adults described the numerous occasions when children had spontaneously decided to perform their songs, poems and drama about HIV/AIDS at village functions. It is through such initiatives that children begin the process of raising community awareness of the challenges they face. The adults noted that public performances by children have proven an extremely effective means by which to draw community attention to children’s problems.

*Adults from Thika in Kenya (Hart 2004)*

*Impact on the realisation of children's rights*

Children/parents/staff observe:

- a greater willingness to listen to children's views within all areas of their lives'
- implementation of changes to laws and policies, and resource allocation towards greater respect for children's rights – for example, access to play facilities, less violence towards children;
- opportunities for children's participation sustained within the child's environment – within the family, in early years settings, in school, in a project/programme, in the local community;
- that children feel safer in their families and local communities.

"Before I joined Bhima Sangha, a working children's union, I hardly spoke to others. I used to feel that it was wrong to talk to others, especially boys. Now I have learned to socialise easily and can speak up without hesitating. I have the ability and the confidence to determine what is right and wrong. For example, when my family decided to take me out of school at the age of 11, I didn't react at all to their decision. I used to think that whatever adults do is always right. But recently when my family and my community tried to make me marry against my will, I tried to convince them that this marriage was wrong. When discussions with my family failed, I protested against my proposed marriage with the help of the Bhima Sangha. Our protest was successful." The girl went on to become president of the children's village council and led a protest movement against child marriage in her village in Karnataka in India.

*(CRIN Newsletter 2002)*

## Chapter 7: Matrix for measuring child participation: An illustrative example

The following example provides an illustration of how the criteria can be applied to provide an overview of the scope, quality and impact of children's participation. Such a matrix could be created at the outset of a project or initiative and used to track progress and highlight where improvements or changes might be introduced. It could be produced in a more pictorial form in order to enable young children themselves to take part in the evaluation process.

A pre-school play service was developing an outdoor play space for the children (Clark and Moss 2004). They wanted to explore with the children their understandings and uses of the existing outdoor spaces in order to inform the changes. The methodology used was the Mosaic Approach described on page 9. The matrix assesses the approach's effectiveness in enabling the children's participation.

### *Measuring the scope of participation*

	Situation analysis*	Programme planning*	Programme design*	Implementation	Monitoring and evaluation
Self-initiated or managed					
Participatory				In implementing the project, the research methodology exploring what was needed gave considerable power to children. They acted as researchers and active participants using cameras, book making, tours, map making and a magic carpet. In addition they were interviewed by adults, using flexible approaches influenced by children's preferences.	Children were involved in evaluating the project. A large chart was made with windows for each tool used by the children. Behind each window were photos to illustrate the activities the children had taken part in. Children met with the researcher to talk about the chart. However, children were not involved in determining the criteria for evaluating the initiative.
Consultative					

\* The situation analysis, i.e. recognition of the need for better outdoor play space; the programme planning, i.e. the decision to undertake the project; and the programme design, using the Mosaic Approach, were all determined in advance by the professionals involved in the project.

**Measuring the quality of the participation**

	Poor	Adequate	Good	Excellent
<b>Ethical</b>			Children were fully informed about the process and clear about the boundaries of what they could and could not influence. The interpretation of the findings arising from the research were checked and discussed with the children.	
<b>Child sensitive</b>				The researcher applied a wide range of creative strategies to allow children to explore their ideas and committed sufficient time to allow children to express themselves fully. Parents were both informed and involved in the research. The children enjoyed the process and found many of the activities fun.
<b>Voluntary and relevant</b>			Although the initiative did not arise from children's own expressed concerns, the goal of improving outdoor play space was important to the children and valued by them. Furthermore, the project was based on the importance of gathering children's personal knowledge about their environment. Although the children were too young to provide written consent, the children were free to volunteer to participate each day. No child who was not interested was expected to participate.	
<b>Inclusive</b>				The playgroup includes a number of children with speech and language delay and other disabilities. These children were actively involved in the project and particularly enjoyed the photography. Girls and boys took an equal part. All children were treated with equal respect and were provided with opportunities to participate at levels appropriate to their capacities.

	Poor	Adequate	Good	Excellent
<b>Safe</b>			The project did not expose children to any additional risks.	
<b>Committed and sensitive staff</b>				The researcher was highly experienced and skilled in participatory techniques, and committed to respect for young children's rights.
<b>Family and community links</b>				Parents were consulted about whether their children could take part and were fully informed about the nature of the project. The project was undertaken in collaboration with a local Early Years Partnership as well as the staff at the playgroup. This meant that the findings from the children could be implemented effectively through community collaboration.

### ***Measuring the impact of the project***

The objectives for the project were to:

- expand understanding of how to listen to children;
- involve parents and practitioners;
- involve children in ongoing reviews.

However, a number of other outcomes arose from the project.

		No impact	Limited impact	Considerable impact
<b>On children</b>	Skills and knowledge			Children acquired a wide variety of skills as well as a greater understanding of their environment and their role in developing it
	Self esteem and confidence			The children gained confidence in themselves as the project developed, both as a consequence of their enhanced skills, and through the experience of having their views listened to and respected

		No impact	Limited impact	Considerable impact
<b>On children</b>	Rights awareness		An implicit outcome was that children realised that they were entitled to be taken seriously and respected	
<b>On parents and staff</b>	Awareness of children's capacities			Both staff and parents were impressed by the level of skill the children demonstrated. At the outset of the project, they would not have anticipated that the children could display those degrees of competence.
	Greater understanding of the importance of listening to children			Having observed the capacities of children to participate, and seen the value that followed in gaining insight into how children experienced the playgroup and what was important to them, they were convinced of the importance of listening to children .
	Greater respect for children's rights		The project was not explicitly focused on promoting understanding of children's rights. However, the right of children to be listened to and taken seriously emerged strongly as a project outcome.	
<b>On local community</b>	Improved status of children within the community			The findings will impact on the involvement of young children in other early years settings in the community. The Early Years Providers in the community have a better understanding of the benefits of consulting with children. The researcher has also been asked to present the findings at a meeting for the local Early Years Providers which will disseminate and take forward ideas for listening to children.
	Greater willingness to act in children's best interests			The findings from the research will inform early years provision in the locality, with an improved knowledge about what children want and need, promoting their best interests.

		No impact	Limited impact	Considerable impact
<b>On realisation of rights</b>	Improved access to Services			The findings from the research will be implemented to improve the quality of the outdoor play facilities for children
	Sustained commitment to respecting children's right to participate		Because the project involved staff, parents, the local authority and the early years providers, a wide range of key actors in young children's lives were influenced by the outcomes. The positive results will lead to a strengthening and broadening of the application of the right of young children to participate in decisions that affect them. Another project partner was a national NGO who will be building some of the ideas into their wider work in early years settings.	
	Greater respect for other rights, e.g. protection from violence, right to play, freedom from discrimination		The project did have impact on the children's right to play. Both through the quality of the provision developed, and the process of participation, there was an impact on the fulfilment of their evolving capacities.	

## Conclusion

Young children are instinctive communicators. Unfortunately, not all adults are instinctive listeners. But if adults working with and for young children are to fulfil their obligations under the Convention on the Rights of the Child, listening must become part of their role. Participation enhances children's self-esteem and confidence, promotes their overall capacities, produces better outcomes, strengthens understanding of and commitment to democratic processes and protects children more effectively. It provides the opportunity for developing a sense of autonomy, independence, heightened social competence and resilience. The benefits are therefore significant, and adults with both direct and indirect responsibility for children need to acquire a greater humility in recognising that they have a great deal to learn from children. However, the case for listening to young children goes beyond the beneficial outcomes. It is also a matter of social justice and human rights. All people, however young, are entitled to be participants in their own lives, to influence what happens to them, to be involved in creating their own environments, to exercise choices and to have their views respected and valued.

Creating environments where these entitlements are fulfilled for young children will necessitate profound change. In most countries throughout the world, there is a continued perception of young children as passive recipients of care and protection. Their capacities for participation are underestimated, their agency in their own lives is denied and the value of involving them is unrecognised. Yet there is a growing and persuasive body of evidence to challenge these barriers. This evidence needs to be promoted and shared. Understanding of participation needs to be re-constructed to incorporate and respect the forms of expression and communication used by young children. These forms are often different from those utilised by adults, but they are certainly as effective and powerful. As one 6-year-old boy from Bangladesh eloquently expressed it "I don't know about my rights, but you don't know about my life" (UNICEF 2003). He is right. And the only way to learn is to create the spaces in which young children can be heard and begin to inform and influence the world around them. Doing so will not jeopardise their right to care, protection and opportunities for optimum development: indeed, it is arguably the most effective way of achieving those goals.



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The Bernard van Leer Foundation, established in 1949, is based in the Netherlands. We actively engage in supporting early childhood development activities in around 40 countries. Our income is derived from the bequest of Bernard van Leer, a Dutch industrialist and philanthropist, who lived from 1883 to 1958.

Our mission is to improve opportunities for vulnerable children younger than eight years old, growing up in socially and economically difficult circumstances. The objective is to enable young children to develop their innate potential to the full. Early childhood development is crucial to creating opportunities for children and to shaping the prospects of society as a whole.

We fulfil our mission through two interdependent strategies:

- Making grants and supporting programmes for culturally and contextually appropriate approaches to early childhood development;
- Sharing knowledge and expertise in early childhood development, with the aim of informing and influencing policy and practice.

The Foundation currently supports about 150 major projects for young children in both developing and industrialised countries. Projects are implemented by local actors which may be public, private or community-based organisations. Documenting, learning and communicating are integral to all that we do. We are committed to systematically sharing the rich variety of knowledge, know-how and lessons

learned that emerge from the projects and networks we support. We facilitate and create a variety of products for different audiences about work in the field of early childhood development.

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*Working Papers in Early Childhood Development* is a 'work in progress' series that presents relevant findings and reflection on issues relating to early childhood care and development. The series acts primarily as a forum for the exchange of ideas, often arising out of field work, evaluations and training experiences.

The purpose of the *Young children and HIV/AIDS sub-series* is to share information, ideas and emerging lessons with readers who are concerned with young children affected by HIV/AIDS. As 'think pieces' we hope these papers will evoke responses and lead to further information sharing from among the readership.

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