

# Participation and young children

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*The author is an independent children's rights consultant. In this article she challenges widely held views about the need for young children to participate in matters that involve them, arguing that, beyond the fact that it is their right to do so, it is an important element in their development, helping to enhance their self-esteem, confidence and overall capacities, and to strengthen their independence, resilience and social competence. She also shows that they have contributions to make at all levels – from the family to the wider political arena – and these contributions deserve to be included, valued and respected.*

*I'm big - you're little. I'm right - you're wrong. I'm old - you're young, and there's nothing you can do about it.* Thus spoke the father to his 5-year-old daughter in the film version of Roald Dahl's 'Matilda'. His views encapsulate, albeit somewhat brutally, assumptions held throughout the world about the status and capacities of young children.

Although the treatment of children differs across societies, as do the ages at which levels of competence are deemed to occur, most cultures construct childhood as a period of 'becoming' rather than 'being' and attach little value to the way children construct meaning in their lives<sup>1</sup>. Adulthood is deemed to be the 'norm' with children in a state of immaturity characterised by irrationality, incompetence, amorality, passivity and dependence<sup>2</sup>. Children's actions and words are seen through a framework which attributes less value to their perspectives simply by virtue of their childhood status. These assumptions about childhood incapacity effectively silence children's voices, and result in persistent under-estimation of their potential for participation in competent and rational decision-making.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child poses a profound challenge to these traditional attitudes towards children, incorporating as it does, for the first time in international law, recognition that children are subjects of rights, entitled to be involved in decisions and actions that affect them.

And indeed, the 15 years since its adoption have borne witness to a proliferation of activity and thinking on the subject of children's participation. Children have been increasingly involved in research, consultations, campaigning and advocacy, peer education and support, programme design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation, media work, policy analysis, conferences as well as the development and running of their own organisations. To date, the primary emphasis in this work has involved older children in activities designed to provide new forums through which they 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. This focus, perhaps, reflects the fact that the key players spearheading these developments have been NGOs, who tend to have less contact with children under eight years. However, the Convention extends participation rights to all children capable of expressing a view. It embodies no age restrictions. There is a pressing need, therefore, to explore approaches which address the rights of younger children to participate, and in so doing, to review the culture, attitudes and practices prevailing in those environments where young children spend much of their time.

## The concept of participation

Respect for children as participants is reflected throughout the Convention, 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.* Article 12 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 realize other rights, achieve justice, influence outcomes and expose abuses of power.

Many adults misunderstand the meaning of participation and fear that it may give rise to inappropriate burdening of children, disrespect for parents and excessive freedom without corresponding responsibilities. However, Article 12 does not give children the right to take responsibility for all decisions irrespective of the implications or their own capacity. What it does do is require adults to hold a more inclusive and respectful dialogue with children. Participation means more than taking part. Taking part in a sporting activity organised by an adult is not participation. Creating a game, deciding on respective roles, rules and focus is. And there are different levels of participation. Consulting children on a range of play options predetermined by an adult worker provides a limited opportunity for participation. Creating the space for children to contribute their ideas on organising the day and working with them to implement their suggestions offers a deeper level of involvement and responsibility.

Children's participation is an ongoing process of children's expression of opinions and active involvement in decision-making at different levels in matters that concern them. It requires information-sharing and dialogue between children and adults based on mutual respect and power sharing. Genuine participation gives children the power to shape both the process and outcome, and acknowledges that their evolving capacity, experience and interest play a key role in determining the nature of their participation<sup>3</sup>.

## Applying the concept of participation to young children

*All children are capable of participation*  
Article 12 imposes no lower age limit on the exercise

of the right to participate. It extends to all children able to express views, and even very young children are capable of understanding and contributing thoughtful opinions on a range of issues affecting them. Indeed, there are many areas where young children can demonstrate equal or superior competence. Look, for example, at their capacity to acquire IT skills, remember where things are, use their imaginations, mediate between arguing parents, show willingness to forgive, learn new languages, or express creativity, love and compassion. 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 diminishes their contribution simply because they are young. Unfortunately, too often, adults fail to recognize these capacities because they assess children from an adult perspective. The consequent limitations are exemplified in a study with young children to explore capacity for consistent thinking. 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<sup>4</sup>.

Young children's views should not automatically be given less weight. Of course, consideration has to be given to their level of understanding of the issues involved whilst also protecting their best interests. Furthermore, the extent to which the child's views can be respected needs to reflect the risks associated with the decision involved. Obviously, a 2-year old cannot be left to decide to run into a busy road. However, she 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 her to wear a garment

she sees as restrictive, compared with the chance of her catching a cold<sup>5</sup>. And through participating in such choices, children learn to accept responsibility for their actions.

One of the difficulties faced by small children is that adult language is prioritised as the ideal form of rational communication. Because small children are unable to communicate on comparable terms, their perspectives tend to be ascribed less weight<sup>6</sup>. Indeed, they are often assumed to have no views worth listening to. Respecting the rights of young children to be heard necessitates a preparedness 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.

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>7</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 the 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. 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<sup>8</sup>. Another study involved 3–4-year olds in data collection to explore what they felt about the early childhood centre they attended<sup>9</sup>.

## Degrees of participation

Children can participate in matters that affect them at different levels. 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 to elicit children's perspectives and 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 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, whilst 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. And consultative processes can be made participatory by, for example:

- enabling children to identify what are the relevant questions
- 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:

- 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.

The researcher explored methodologies, such as observation and interview, that played to young children's strengths rather than their weaknesses and cast herself on the role of 'inexpert' so that she could listen to and learn from the children. She gave the children disposable cameras to take photos of things that were important to them and invited them to take her on a tour of the site so that they could describe it to her from their perspective. In all these examples, young children demonstrate their capacity to make significant contributions to decisions and actions that affect them.

### *Children are entitled to express views on all matters that concerns them*

The right to be heard extends to all actions and decisions which affect children's lives – in the family, school, health care, local communities, and at national political level. It applies both to issues which affect individual children, such as parental contact following divorce, and children as a constituency, such as the quality of child care or play facilities.

At a micro level, such participation is exemplified by nursery staff who decided that the children, aged four, could decide for themselves when they wanted fruit and water rather than having to wait for the adults to offer it. Initially, the children asked permission but gradually adjusted to the idea that they could help themselves. Some spilt water but helped to mop up and, with experience, learned to pour it more carefully. Through exercising choices for themselves, the children became more responsible and the staff were freed to do other things<sup>10</sup>. At a wider social level, 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<sup>11</sup>. 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<sup>12</sup>.

It is important to recognise that many areas of public policy and legislation impact on young children's lives – transport, housing, macro-economics, environment, as well as family law, education, childcare and public health. They therefore have a right to have their views considered in all these matters. 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.

*Experience and context influences competence to participate*

Competence does not develop uniformly according to rigid developmental stages. There are, of course, important differences in capacities which 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<sup>13</sup>. However, 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<sup>14</sup>.

This complexity 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<sup>15</sup>. 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. Alderson's work with 120 8–15-year olds on capacity to consent to surgery also highlights the importance of context on children's competence to participate in complex and profound levels of decision-making. It demonstrates that children who have experienced intensive levels of medical treatment can acquire the ability to understand their condition and any proposed treatments, and also to make wise decisions, often involving life or death implications, based on the information available to them<sup>16</sup>. Children's levels of understanding developed according to their individual experience coupled with the levels of expectation and support available to them.

***Children's participation requires information-sharing and dialogue between children and adults based on mutual respect and power sharing.***

Children who experience discrimination and social exclusion will often have lower self-esteem, poor self-confidence, and less opportunity for participation and the consequent development of their skills and strengths. They are trapped in a downward spiral in which they internalise the negative attitudes held within their community to define their own limits and capabilities. For example, in Romania there has for many years been a widespread practice of placing Roma children in special schools for children with learning disabilities. Cultural discrimination combined with the children's inability to speak fluent Romanian led to negative assumptions about their capacities and potential. Different gender and class assumptions in many cultures influence the behaviour and levels of responsibility exercised by children. In Bangladesh, girls from the ages of 4–5 years wait without complaining when they are hungry, whereas boys cry until food appears. Parents explain this as the inability of the boys to understand<sup>17</sup>. And poor girls employed as maidservants from the ages of 9–10 years will be expected to demonstrate a higher level of capacity than that displayed by their employers'



Some projects highlight the capacity of children to share important perspectives through visual rather than verbal communication

daughters. In other words, the criteria applying to the development and capacities of children are defined by gender, class and occupation rather than age.

Children from marginalized groups need support and encouragement to recognise that their views and perspectives are valued. The importance of creating such opportunities is vividly illustrated in the experience of a young girl in India. "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<sup>18</sup>.

The goals for development in different societies also influence the way in which parents will structure their children's environment, and the outcomes that children then achieve. For example, research with mothers in the USA and Japan reveals significant differences in the skills and behaviour they expect their children to have acquired by the age of 5. In Japan, the expectations focused on emotional control, respect for the status and authority of parents and certain areas of self-sufficiency. The US mothers expected earlier achievement of the social skills of empathy, negotiation, initiative,

assertiveness and persuasiveness<sup>19</sup>. In another study comparing perspectives from parents and teachers in Nigeria and the USA on the most important skills for a 4-year old to learn, the Americans emphasised language and social skills whereas much greater priority was attached to pre-academic skills by the Nigerians<sup>20</sup>. Hoffman found that whereas parents in the US emphasised goals of becoming a good person, being self-reliant and independent, parents in Turkey, Indonesia and the Philippines placed greater stress on deference to elders and obedience<sup>21</sup>.

This 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<sup>22</sup>.

#### *The process of participation enhances children's capacities*

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<sup>23</sup>. Children are not merely passive recipients of environmental stimulation, but actively engage with their surroundings in purposeful ways, even from babyhood<sup>24</sup>. 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<sup>25</sup>. 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. 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<sup>26</sup>. This is defined as the 'zone of proximal

development' and it is in this zone that cognitive development takes place. Through a process known as scaffolding, where a person, adult or child, 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.

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<sup>27</sup>. 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 by the opportunity to learn through practice. A key element of the educational process is that children learn by being respected enough to be allowed 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.

However, 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 in the Escuela Nueva is in sharp contrast with the enforced dependency associated with much schooling where children are denied opportunities to acquire competencies associated with taking responsibility, engaging with the adult world and experiencing a sense of social worth. Many early-years and education systems remain rooted in traditions of seeing learning as a transfer of knowledge and expertise from teachers with children as passive recipients. 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<sup>28</sup>. This kind of interaction empowers children, giving rise to socially inclusive relationships which, in turn, are the foundation from which to promote listening as basis of work with and care for young children<sup>29</sup>.

#### *Children need respectful, safe spaces in which to participate*

Children need the space in which to express their views. This requires the provision of time, adults willing to listen, and environments in which they feel safe and comfortable. They also need age-appropriate information with which to form those views. For example, many young children are frightened of injections. Giving children information about why the injection is necessary can help the children overcome anxiety and participate in giving consent, along with giving them the space to articulate their fears, perhaps to hold and examine the syringe, draw a picture of what would make them feel braver, and have the opportunity to have an important adult present when the injection takes place. Conversely, imposing the injection without consideration of children's perspectives is likely to exacerbate the terror<sup>30</sup>.

The failure to provide children with respectful environments in which to express their views, and the damaging consequences of that failure, are starkly illustrated in the experience of many young children who are deemed to be incompetent witnesses in child abuse cases. Many prosecutors fail to create a framework through which children are able to express themselves fully, with the result that cases get dropped because children are assumed to be incapable of understanding the importance of telling the truth. The normal procedure is to ask children 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 into the competence to act as witnesses of 192 4–7-year olds who had allegedly been mistreated. They found that of those children who clearly exhibited an understanding of the difference between the truth and a lie,

69 percent failed to explain it adequately using conventional approaches adopted by the courts. The researchers developed an alternative test which 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<sup>31</sup>. In other words, when an appropriate environment was created, the children were able to demonstrate their actual capacities to participate in court hearings.

#### *Adults can learn from listening to children*

Young children have insights, perspectives, ideas, and experiences which 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. One such study with 6–7-year olds on their experiences of physical punishment reveals a very different reality to that offered by adults<sup>32</sup>. 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*. 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<sup>33</sup>. And children in Nepal, when provided with opportunities to take action on issues of most importance to them, prioritised parental violence and drunkenness<sup>34</sup>. It is clear from these and other studies that children themselves have a significant contribution to make towards an understanding of their lives.

*Listening is not enough – children have the right to have their views taken seriously*

There is little point in listening to children if no account is subsequently taken of their views. And the fact that young children express themselves differently from adults does not justify dismissing them. Article 12 insists that children's views are given weight and 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. 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.

This problem is exemplified in a consultation exercise, commissioned by a local authority and undertaken by an NGO in the UK, involving over 400 children under 8 years to explore their experiences of early years' provision<sup>35</sup>. 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.

*Participation serves to protect children*

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. Creating a safe environment for children can best be achieved by working with rather than merely for them. For example, 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<sup>36</sup>.

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 experience of Highfield junior school in the UK demonstrates how effectively young children can collaborate in protecting each other<sup>37</sup>. The children, aged 7–11 years, run a school council that carries real responsibility, including the development of all school policy and recruitment of staff. Many are trained as mediators to help children resolve disputes in the playground and others can volunteer to become 'guardian angels' and befriend children being bullied, without friends or in need of support. What emerges from this experience is that, with adult support, young children can develop capacities to accept responsibility for protecting other children, provide care and engage in conflict resolution. This experience implies a need to question traditional assumptions of adults as providers and children as recipients of protection, and acknowledge and nurture the contribution children can play as a resource for other children.

**Conclusion**

So, does participation matter? Is engagement in decision-making really as important as direction and guidance? The answer has to be yes. Not only is it a fundamental human right for children to be listened to and taken seriously, but unless adults listen, children's lives are diminished. 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<sup>38</sup>. It provides the opportunity for developing a sense of autonomy, independence, heightened social competence and resilience<sup>39</sup>. Young children have a contribution to make at all levels – from the family to the wider political arena. 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"<sup>40</sup>. A partnership is needed. Adults must help children learn about their rights, and children can contribute towards their realisation through a process in which their perspectives are included, respected and valued.

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Children who are encouraged to express their views are better able to contribute towards their own protection

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## What does 'child development' tell us about early childhood programming and the participation of children?

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### The background to child development

Child development is a highly academic subject. Most of the work in the field is empirical and theoretical. It is conducted mainly by psychologists through experiments which investigate very specific aspects of children's social and cognitive functioning. For example, the most recent edition of the prestigious journal *Child Development* contains articles with titles like "Infant vocal-motor co-ordination: precursor to the gesture speech system" and "The development of symbol-infused joint engagement." There are no longer any overarching theories of child development – as Piaget, 70 years ago, seemed to promise. Piaget assumed that child development was in one sense a journey towards the acquisition of logic. Rational thought could only be achieved in adolescence or adulthood. Children had to pass through many stages – aided by adults – before being able to think logically. This assumption has been fairly conclusively rejected in the psychological literature. Children, even young children, are capable of reasoning and thinking

logically within the limits of their knowledge and experience, and there are many experiments that demonstrate children's ability to reason.

Instead of grand theories, there are many technical discussions about tiny and often peripheral aspects of children's behaviour. These do not add up to a coherent whole, and are certainly not intended as guidance to practitioners working with children.

The author of one best-selling contemporary textbook on child development, leading psychologist Michael Cole, says that it is best to think of child development as a series of useful – but probably, in the end, unanswerable – questions about childhood. Is nature more important than nurture? Does genetic inheritance matter more than good environments? Are the early years the most important, or can children – and adults – develop and change at any age if the circumstances are right? Does the development take place in identifiable stages, each stage building on the previous one, or is development a much more irregular and uneven process? Over the years, psychologists have come up with different slants to these questions and have given different answers to all of them.

Cole sums up by saying "the practice of developmental psychology cannot rely heavily on precise scientific formulas to explain and produce dependable solutions to problems the way the formulas of physics guide engineers". In his view there are no definitive answers. Child development offers some signposts to practice, which may be useful in some circumstances, but useless in others;

**This Commentary section is intended to contribute to the international debate on early childhood issues by presenting the views and observations of a noted practitioner or academic in the field. The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the policies or views of the Foundation. Join with us in stimulating dialogue on the topic under review by sending your thoughts on the article that follows or, indeed, any other section of this issue of *Early Childhood Matters*. All correspondence should be sent to: [ecm.epi@bvleerf.nl](mailto:ecm.epi@bvleerf.nl)**