

# Real engagement by children

Kathy Bartlett

*Kathy Bartlett has been involved for nearly 20 years in programmes for children during their early years. Initially she worked as a preschool to lower primary school teacher in California. From there she worked in Honduras for a local NGO which set up 'family centres' to provide preschool education for young children in rural Choluteca. Later, in Costa Rica, she undertook her PhD research exploring rural working women's strategies for childcare and also worked as a trainer for the US Peace Corps' Integrated ECD Programme which was run in cooperation with local health, education and social welfare departments. Since 1992, she has been working for the Aga Khan Foundation (AKF) as Programme Officer for Education with particular responsibility for the AKF's Young Children and the Family portfolio of projects.*

Young children are the key individuals – the direct beneficiaries – in ECD programmes, often alongside those who care for them, perhaps as part of the same family and community. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child includes participation as one of children's rights and, based on hundreds of project experiences from around the world, there is general agreement that ECD programmes are more likely to be effective and sustainable when participation by all the stakeholders – especially parents, other family and community members – is enabled and encouraged. By participation I mean a real

engagement, according to age/ability, in all stages and levels of a programme, from conceptualisation, through operation to evaluation. I also mean this engagement to include the confident expressions of views, perceptions, feelings, ideas, reactions and so on.

In this article, I want to share a few questions and ideas on whether and how we, as ECD workers, advocates, supervisors, researchers, donors, and so on, understand and take account of that real engagement; how this is defined by various stakeholders; and how these

concepts interact and influence what happens in a 'real life' ECD programme.

I have been thinking about these matters as a result of the project reports and evaluations from different countries I have read or written over the years. Such reports often include important information on changes in children including their growth and weight, cognitive and social development, and so on. But they tend to pay inadequate attention to what is happening within children and to their views – including feedback about how they experience programmes.

In addition, discussions with those most closely involved in ECD projects – such as caregivers or supervisors – show a wide range of responses regarding what they describe as children's participation. Many bring up the more 'conventional' kinds of participation such as attending, or taking part in activities. But it isn't clear that they are thinking about participation in the sense of real engagement.



Uganda: *watch and I'll show you what I mean*  
photo: Jean-Luc Ray  
© The Aga Khan Foundation



#### The problems ...

Part of the problem at present seems to be a lack of appropriate tools and/or methods for capturing a broader definition for participation by children that signifies real engagement. There is also the very real dilemma of the lack of many ECD workers' time to record and reflect observations as well as document discussions with parents and families related to the children's involvement and interest. Finally, there may be a need for additional skills (and follow-up encouragement and support) so that those who work directly with children become more confident in using a wider variety of methods for hearing and documenting children's views, feelings and voices. Those interested and concerned (children, parents, ECD workers, NGOs and others up to government,

donors, researchers, and so on) need a better picture and sense of what 'effective' ECD programmes accomplish and achieve. This means that there is also a need to find examples of methods and tools used to monitor children and the nature and quality of their participation; and a need to work towards documenting the process of children's participation in creative ways.

A further critical point to raise, for broader debate, is the degree to which value is placed on children's views and reactions being captured and set alongside adult views to try to gain a fuller understanding of whether a project is 'effective' or not.

There are also questions about different rules and accepted ways for interacting with adults or children across cultures. What happens when real engagement by children conflicts with the views of those (who may be outsiders) who promote ECD projects? What about parental or community aspirations for children that conflict with what NGOs might believe 'best' or 'right'. Some parents press for teachers or ECD workers or teachers to teach children to read and write at a very early age. They want this because they are keen for their children to enter and succeed in primary school. They also are aware that there may be 'entrance' exams that will test these skills. Those of us who advocate for appropriate early childhood programmes – those that promote learning by doing, trying, exploring and playing – can find ourselves on opposite sides from parents and/or those who set

primary entrance exams. But I would claim that there is growing evidence that formal and direct teaching for very young children can undermine their longer-term development and their confidence in themselves as learners.

“

*millions of children begin to work at early ages and therefore participate by bringing in income to households*

”

Related to the broader discourse on children's participation – although perhaps separate – is the reality that millions of children begin to work at early ages and therefore participate by bringing in income to households. Many are also expected to take on certain household responsibilities: gathering water or firewood, caring for younger siblings, cooking and cleaning, taking care of animals, and so on.

I have seen three or four year olds 'in charge' of their smaller brothers and sisters, including having the smaller one slung on their hips. The point for me is that in many communities young children do participate – often actively – yet when it comes to finding out how they view their responsibilities (or involvement in ECD programmes) many of us think it is not possible.



India: children have a different outlook ...  
photo: Jean-Luc Ray  
© The Aga Khan Foundation

### ... and some ways forward

Part of the challenge in ECD is that we are dealing with children under eight years of age. We might still learn some lessons from the growing numbers of examples used with older children and adolescents: for example, in recent years there has been increased attention to hearing the views of school children – a necessary part of that real engagement I discussed earlier.

Child-to-Child programmes have pioneered an approach that promotes reflection on experiences, active participation, and decision making by children. There is a tremendous amount of documentation showing children really engaged as leaders and as doers in the fight for health education and promotion at home, in communities and in schools.

Another example can be found in *I dreamed I had a girl in my pocket*, a recent publication describing the work of Wendy Ewald, a photographer who brought instant cameras to India and worked with children over the course of months on photography.<sup>1</sup> She asked children to take pictures that meant something to them. The publication is remarkable. Pictures of friends, family members of all ages and themselves at work, play and rest, celebrating marriage (including their own), in conversation. It also has landscapes and animals and their homes. Since each photo has an explanation by the child who took the photo, the rationale for selection provides an insight into their thinking and perception of their world.

CHETNA'S Child Resource Centre in India, provides further examples through their 'Children in Charge for Change' initiative.<sup>2</sup> This programme is documenting what different NGOs in India are already doing *vis-à-vis* children's participation, again in the sense of real engagement. CHETNA describes this as a 'child focused programme that builds on a realistic assessment of children's abilities and capacities, ensures participation of children in planning, implementing and evaluating programmes, emphasises a facilitating role for adults, deals with problems/issues in an inter-sectoral way and views the child in the context of his or her family and community.'

One enterprise that is documented in this initiative – Bal Sansad (Children's Parliaments) – is featured on page 37 of this edition of *Early Childhood Matters*.

The same source also reminds us that children's participation is dependent on adults' ability to provide opportunities and offers some suggestions for enabling participation:

- giving voice to children's feelings and concerns;
- children taking part in planning and implementation and assessment of programmes; and
- children taking decisions, according to their maturity and capacities.

This last point is highly pertinent for those of us in the field of ECD, since we work with infants, toddlers, preschoolers and those in lower primary school. Infants and very young toddlers and preschoolers are not able to describe their thoughts in ‘adult-speak’, although their emotional, physical and verbal reactions (giggles, cries, silent watching, rigid body/limbs, babbling, cooing, screaming) can be indicative, if not absolutely clear. When individual reactions repeat themselves in patterns, we have further clues.

Using photos and video cameras to record what happens could supplement and complement documentation and reports. In addition, methods such as Participatory Learning and Action (or Participatory Rapid Appraisals) may be useful to weave in children’s views on their participation<sup>3</sup>. We can also compare what young children convey to us with what we learn from primary caregivers, family members (including siblings), ECD workers and others, about their observations and interactions with children. This helps to build a mosaic of perspectives

“

*When individual reactions repeat themselves in patterns, we have further clues.*

”

on what children might experience in specific ECD programmes over time and across contexts.

Looking back with children can also be useful. I had a conversation with a preschool trainer in Kenya where AKF supports both a community based preschool programme and a separate primary school improvement programme. The trainer shared that she had visited the children who had ‘graduated’ the previous year and were now in grade one of primary school to see whether and how many were enrolled. She asked the children what they thought of their new school. Some of the children said they were getting on well. Others expressed longing for their old preschool and teacher – who did not hit them, who let them choose activities and play, and so on. How seriously do we take such statements as children make one of the many transitions that can come along in life? In this case, the information from the children was not necessarily fed back to the primary school, although to some extent it was discussed with preschool teachers. In retrospect, I see such feedback as useful for programme changes – on both sides – if there can be fuller discussions amongst the project teams, teachers and parents.

We should keep in mind one of the underlying principles of ECD programming: that young children are intimately joined to and depend on those who live around them. Therefore, how children experience their own involvement in ECD programmes might, at least in part, be linked to how and how well their



India: *hey Mum, tell me what your scribbles mean*  
photo: Jean-Luc Ray  
© The Aga Khan Foundation

main caregivers and family members are enabled and encouraged to participate in ECD programmes themselves. We will need to gain a better understanding of some of the dynamics involved here. But, if mothers and fathers feel involved, have opportunities to learn, develop and make decisions about their lives; and if sisters and brothers enjoy learning and know they can study as well as continue with their other economic or household responsibilities, what does this do for the infants and younger children in these homes and communities? Might it not change the way in which children experience whatever ECD effort is being implemented? If parents and siblings (or others) who care for them are supported, can a virtuous cycle be created – or is this unrealistic?

My hope is that by working with others involved in ECD work, it might be possible – over time – to develop, identify and fine-tune methods that illustrate and reflect a more holistic understanding of young children's participation in ECD programmes. It will be critical that these be diverse and flexible so that the various groups of individuals, with different experiential and educational background, might select and be able to use them. It will be useful to hear about work that is being done in this area and to begin to pull it together to share with others. For example, Save the Children (UK) has some interesting publications related to this area from its field experiences internationally. The Bernard van Leer Foundation, in collaboration with other members of

the Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development's consortium of partners, is in the early stages of a three-year 'Effectiveness Initiative' which may provide an opportunity to identify what others are already doing.

While I do not have complete responses to some of the points I have raised, I am becoming more and more conscious of how easily children, particularly any hint of their voice and opinion, can slip out of focus when we discuss effectiveness in ECD. But if we lose those, then we restrict their real engagement. I believe we can do more, especially if we share what has or hasn't worked in different contexts. To end, here are a few of the benefits CHETNA offers to encourage us to give space to children and their participation:

- 1 It empowers children. The greatest benefit to children is that it builds capacities and confidence, enriches them and makes them more responsible.
- 2 It is a process of socialisation. Children learn that, just as they have a voice, so do others and that differing views demand the same respect for all.
- 3 It gives children a voice and the freedom to express themselves. ○



1. Ewald, W and the children of Vichya village, *I dreamed I had a girl in my pocket*; (1996) Umbra Editions Inc/Double Take Books; New York/Durham, North Carolina. *This project was organised under the auspices of the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), Ahmedabad, India.*

2. Further information and materials on 'Children in Charge for Change' can be obtained from: CHETNA, The Centre for Health Education, Training and Nutrition Awareness: Lilavatiben Labhai's Bungalow, Civil camp Road, Shahibaug, Ahmedabad - 380 004, Gujarat, India. Excerpts taken from the pamphlet 'Children in Charge for Change': From Being to Becoming (1997).

3. For further information about how these methods have been adapted previously, see *the Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development's Notebook* no 20, 1997. See also the International Institute for Environmental Development's 'PLA Notes' series, published from London, England.

AKF and the Bernard van Leer Foundation, amongst other donors, contributed to CHETNA'S Children in Charge for Change project. AKF has also supported the Child-to-Child Trust and other Child-to-Child projects in South Asia and East Africa.

