

Laying the foundations

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The author is Regional Child Development Adviser (Asia) for Save the Children (USA and Norway). In this article she takes the long term view of bringing about child participation, showing how parents and communities can support greater participation by young children in many aspects of their everyday lives, even when cultural norms and local contexts pose challenges. The point is to start from where children, families and communities are, look for naturally occurring opportunities, and build towards what parents and communities decide is better. She shows how positive experiences in the early years both encourage and enable young children to participate during that time, and help to ensure that they will naturally and confidently grow into participatory roles in the future. She also considers how to work with some of the challenges.

In development, when we talk about children's participation most of us tend to have pictures of older children in a 'Child-to-Child' scene, some of which have developed into children's clubs where children define issues and create street theatre dramas. We may visualise 'bal melas' (children's fairs) where thousands of children get together and organise games, quizzes, cultural performances, dramas, health exhibitions etc. We may see a street children's council deciding on a programme of activities, or working

children presenting their recommendations in an International Conference. We may see their intense concentration as they participate in a Participatory Rural Appraisal session, or as they conduct their own research on a particular topic. We may see them behind a camera, capturing the image they want, telling the story they want to tell.

The connecting thread between much of the most inspiring child-focused work seems to be an emphasis on

children's active participation in defining the projects and making decisions at different stages. Adults play a facilitating role rather than being the traditional 'teacher'. The impact of this approach on children's confidence and self-esteem, their enthusiasm for learning and their problem solving abilities is clear.

But it is not always easy. A picture springs to mind of the first Participatory Rural Appraisal that Save the Children (USA) undertook with a

group of adolescent girls from a very conservative rural community in Bangladesh. Raised from birth to look after the needs of the men and boys of the family, it was hard for them to believe their opinions were valued. No one had ever sought their opinion on anything so it was hard for them to formulate their ideas and express them. While they were frustrated with many aspects of their lives, envisioning alternatives was very hard. Waiting until children are adolescents before seeking their participation denies children's right

Nepal: *Learning to participate must start early*
photo: Tom Kelly/Save the Children (USA)



to participate at all ages. If we are really serious about children's participation we have to give them opportunities to grow up in environments which, from birth, positively encourage this.

Starting early

A Save the Children Alliance paper on children's participation stresses that

participation should be thought of both early and very broadly: 'It could be a baby who communicates with her mother about food'. This is important because it is during the early years that attitudes critically influencing people's ability to participate effectively are laid down; it is during the earliest years that the seeds of participation are sown; and it is during our earliest interactions that

our sense of who we are and the confidence and skills to express ourselves and negotiate our rights are established.

It is children's earliest exchanges (usually with their mothers) where they indicate what they want through sounds and signals and then get what they want, which tell children they can influence their environment and those around them. Later, the degree to which children are encouraged to communicate with words by those around them profoundly influences the way they use language and expect to be able to participate. Picture a four year old girl talking with her father who listens carefully while she tells him all about how one of the chickens got lost and how she found it. He responds with interest and praise, wanting to know more about what happened. The girl feels happy and an important part of her family. It is during such day to day interactions that children develop self control and self confidence (or a sense of failure), learn how to relate to others and what behaviour is culturally

acceptable, and develop (or suppress) their curiosity. What really counts are the ways in which families encourage and discourage children to participate in their families and communities.

Similarly, children in centre-based childcare arrangements are affected by the nature of their interactions with adults and peers. Children need to be listened to and appreciated, encouraged to choose between a number of different activities which foster exploration and 'discovery', enabled to join in group activities involving taking turns and so on, and given responsibilities. This gets them off to a good start on the participation track.

Taking the long term, inclusive view

It is relatively easy to support children's participation in specific 'projects'. The longer term challenge lies in ensuring real changes in the ways children can participate throughout their everyday lives – in their families, with their peers, in schools, in their communities and in



Bangladesh: *Doing it together*

From *Urban Child Care in Bangladesh* published by Save the Children (USA)

Bangladesh: participation for mothers

In Bangladesh, parenting/caregiving programmes are springing up around the country with support from the Early Childhood Development Unit that is supported by Save the Children (USA) and Plan International. These programmes incorporate many traditional religious stories, rhymes and so on, and emphasise a very active participatory approach that respects, draws on and extends caregivers' own experiences and knowledge. The programmes also encourage sharing experiences and problem solving, and supporting mothers to effectively promote their children's development within the context of their everyday activities.

Sessions are lively and diverse – for example, there could be an intense discussion of the mothers' own childhood experiences from which the

facilitator helps them draw out a list of basic needs of children. This list bears strong similarities to that in any psychology textbook but is constructed from the mothers' own experiences. They could be roaring with laughter as they invent multiple games to play with a heap of leaves or a pile of seeds. In another group they might be lost in concentration, making toys from banana leaves, clay, old medicine boxes and match boxes. In another they may be discussing games children play at different ages and what they learn from these.

The telling time comes as one observes the mothers with their young children, listening to the way they now talk more with their children, see the value of their children's questions, and understand the usefulness of their play.

the workplace. But there are real contradictions being faced by the child who is encouraged to ask questions, analyse issues and solve problems in a particular group setting with peers, and who then has to keep quiet and not offer opinions once she goes home. Children's own recommendations from a 1997 Save the Children (Norway) workshop in Nepal emphasised this point. They stressed the importance of raising awareness regarding the benefits of children's participation with parents and teachers. We should listen and find ways to do this.

All children have the same basic needs but for programmes to work they must be rooted in the culture, recognise, understand and respect local childrearing practices, and build on existing strengths. This is perhaps the key: valuing diversity; a commitment to developing processes that allow different

voices to be heard; and an openness to creating new knowledge and new ideas with all involved in learning. No one group has a monopoly on understanding how to raise children: we all have much to share and learn.

However, societies vary greatly in their understanding of the importance of the early years. While there are a large number and huge variety of ways in which we can influence the contexts in which children are growing up, there are some basic principles that help to ensure that programmes benefit children. In reality, quite often these principles are in potential collision with the dominant ideas – either because of certain cultural beliefs or where communities are under pressure. Some cultural beliefs can be damaging and in direct contradiction to the rights of the child – for example, that girls

should not be educated or that children should be beaten. Programmes have to find ways to challenge such things but from within the culture or community. It is important to remember that culture is neither static nor homogenous and that there are many different beliefs within a given culture.

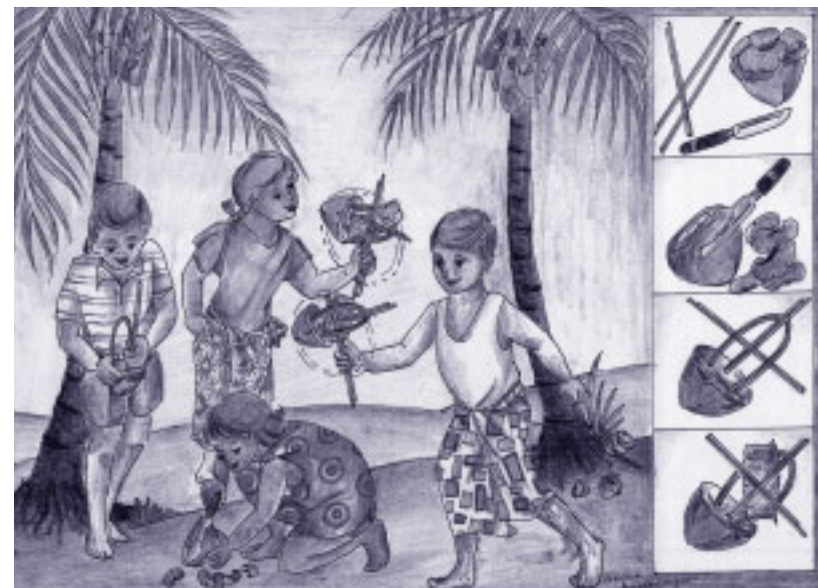
Another major challenge is to convince people that children learn more easily through active learning methods – that they should not be seen as passive recipients. While early childhood development (ECD) programmes may be pushed into preparing children for formal school, there is more openness within ECD programmes to accepting that children ‘learn by doing’ at this age than later on. However, the most vital ingredient is the caring responsive caregiver who takes an interest in what the child is doing, supports the child’s explorations, and guides and extends learning. It is how the caregiver interacts with children that really

matters most, in the home, in the community and in schools.

The two boxes that accompany this article focus on effective ways of working alongside parents, showing examples of how to support children’s participation by working with what is there. The whole approach is based on the premise that mothers/caregivers know and achieve a great deal, and on drawing this out from them, building their confidence, and providing important additional information. This type of approach is perhaps especially important in cultures where, from birth, a woman is made to feel of little value.

Yet, for all the diversity of ECD programmes, much of the best of what is happening includes common key elements. There is an explicit emphasis on promoting self-esteem, cooperation, enthusiasm for learning, problem solving and decision making. If such approaches can be used in concert with

some of the best of the traditional (for example, teaching dance, music, craft skills and spiritual development) that have been such an important part of transmitting culture, the results can be so very powerful in terms of supporting participation. ○



Drawing: Amara Amarasinghe
UNICEF Colombo and The Children’s Secretariat, Sri Lanka

Nepal: participation as a family and community responsibility

This section is taken from Childrearing in Nepal: supporting the strengths of different cultures' childrearing practices in the context of child rights and a changing world, a study by Save the Children USA/UK, Redd Barna, UNICEF, the Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Education, Seto Gurans, CERID and the Children's Environments Research Group from City University of New York (to be published in April 2000).

The study is an examination of different beliefs, values, patterns and practices in childrearing. It is an attempt to develop effective methodologies to facilitate collaborative dialogue with families, communities and partners around children's overall development and rights. A major aim of the study is to develop effective ways to initiate discussion and debate on key issues for children (including on participation). These will be the basis for practical joint planning for interventions that will help promote children's optimal

development and ensure their rights. In working with the results of the study, the communities decide what is important. Once they have set the agenda, discussions take account of the very real constraints people face because of economic difficulties, workloads, and so on, as communities search for what they can do to improve things.

Contextual factors

The study clarified some factors that have to be taken into account in this kind of work in this region. The first of these is to maintain positive traditional practices which are under threat from modernisation and outside influences. Not all cultural practices are good and the challenge is to hold a balance between keeping customary practices strong while at the same time enabling children to develop skills that will help to ensure that they can participate successfully in a rapidly changing world.

The second factor is the blurred boundary between work and play. Even very young children help families with daily chores. However – with the exception of childcare – much of this is in essentially play imitation rather than serious work.

The third factor is children's identity within the family and community. This is very much a function of their developing capacity for work. One mother of four felt that the small tasks that children begin to take on at five or six give them a strong sense of self-worth by proving their competence and gaining the respect of their parents, friends and older siblings. Her own children willingly helped to care for the plants in her nursery.

The fourth factor is that children's work is partly a practical response to necessity and partly regarded as essential for learning fundamental life skills and habits. Children become adept in a range of physical skills, in

the capacity to plan ahead, in making judgements and decisions and in taking responsibility. They also learn about the environment – for instance, Sher Bahadur (a father) describes teaching his children when the twigs of a plant can safely be cut for cattle fodder.

The fifth factor is that children's involvement in community work activities is encouraged and their efforts are respected from an early age: they watch parents and older siblings at work, learn from them, and become rapidly skilled enough to contribute themselves. They also feel useful, involved and competent. However, later on the burden of work, especially for girls, can quickly restrict opportunities rather than expand them.

The sixth factor is that parents have goals, hopes and expectations for their children. Ideally, boys are expected to be well educated and get good jobs so they can care for their parents in their old age. Girls are usually expected to



Bangladesh: *Shahinor* dressed as a bride
From *Urban Child Care in Bangladesh* published by Save the Children (USA)

become capable and disciplined so that they can marry well and bring prestige to their families. Taken at face value, these goals suggest that children's own well-being and happiness were immaterial, except as they contributed to parents' long term security and contentment. However, parents clearly show that children's satisfaction with their lives is a significant, almost overriding concern, especially with young children; while men and boys, interestingly, were more likely than women to suggest that girls, too, might become educated

people capable of holding down important jobs.

The seventh factor is that children's participation has risks. Rather than adapting the environment for their protection, the emphasis is on adapting children to the realities of the environment. That means increasing their awareness, competence and capacity to deal effectively with risk. For example, by the age of three or four, children may be able to use sickles adeptly. But accidents are an issue and a major concern for families.

The eighth factor is that parents are very aware that encouragement and support can stimulate learning and growth; and that guidance and support are especially important in the development of self-discipline and morality.

Being effective within this context

Within this context, our experience is that the following are key areas for development workers to concentrate on if children are to

become confident and competent agents in their own development.

Support families in building children's confidence and communication skills within the context of everyday activities (feeding, cooking, washing, household chores, work in the fields, and so on)

Recognise that what happens within the home is by far the most significant influence on the child and develop programmes accordingly.

- Build parents/caregivers' awareness and confidence in the huge role they already play in supporting their children's learning and overall development, in their everyday interactions with the children.
- Build parents/caregivers' understanding of the role of everyday activities in learning basic concepts.
- Emphasise that much of what families already do is really positive and gives their children

- a very deep sense of self-worth.
- Emphasise the importance of children continuing to participate in family discussions and decisions, and having their opinions listened to and valued. Show how to initiate discussions based on what they are doing.
- Encourage children to solve problems and make decisions.

Help to eliminate threats and fear

Discuss the fact that, although they love their children, many parents sometimes use threats and fear. Explain that this can undermine children's confidence and harm their development. Explain the importance of helping children to understand why they have to cooperate. Explain to parents that they should only make threats that they are willing to carry out.

Encourage more opportunities for girls and more responsibility in boys

Discuss with parents and the community the reasons why, in comparison with boys, girls may take on more and more household tasks

and be left with little opportunity for interaction and gaining the kinds of experiences that build their confidence and therefore help their participation. Work with the aspirations parents have for their daughters and enable discussions about the contradictions there are between those aspirations and the roles and opportunities that girls have.

Seizing opportunities

Showing an interest in what interests children

A group of girls aged six and under acted out a marriage ceremony. Some were carrying bundles on their backs to represent babies, some acted out being the bride. The mother joined the role play by putting red tika, representing married girls, on all of them: she showed her interest in the children's play by getting involved and acting in it.

Learning to dance with confidence

Children and adults often gathered in front of a house to dance and sing. On

one particular evening, a large group had gathered. A small girl of five to six years was asked to dance in the centre. At first she hesitated, but her mother encouraged her to go and others pulled her into the middle to dance. As she was dancing she was moving her hands, fingers and legs freely in time to the music. She was trying to sing the song along with the rest of the group. From time to time, she looked at her mother and smiled at her. Her mother was smiling back at her and this encouraged the girl to be able to face the crowd and continue dancing on her own. Researchers observed that the girl and her mother both had a sense of pride at the girl being able to dance in front of the crowd.

Bamboo umbrella weaving

It was the rainy season and Prem Bahadur was weaving shyagu (a typical umbrella made of bamboo). His four year old son was watching eagerly. Prem noticed this and asked 'Where have you put the shyagu you wove yesterday?' The boy brought the shyagu, hung it under the roof of the porch area and sat near to his father.

The father had already woven half of the shyagu and suggested that his son finish it. At first, the son hesitated so the father taught him: 'First catch the strip like this ... no, no ... like this, look here'. The son caught it as the father directed. The father again directed him 'Push it into that part like this' and the boy did what the father directed. The child laughed and repeated this. The father helped him again to do the job and he did well, although it took a long time and slowed the father down a lot. Both laughed and the father said 'Well done, if you repeat this again tomorrow, you will be perfect'. The boy looked very satisfied and went to the water tap carrying the shyagu which he had woven the day before. ○