



Involving children and young people – an introduction

There are so many opportunities for children and young people to take an active part in shaping where they live, the services they use and the running of local and national organisations. They have a right to be involved in the decisions that affect them. This is promoted in law, policy and guidance: the Convention on the Rights of the Child, *Every Child Matters*, the Children Act 2004, *Youth Matters*, Children's Trusts and inspections. Their participation is essential in order to achieve change: to improve policy and services and ensure the best outcomes for them as set out in *Every Child Matters: being healthy; staying safe; enjoying and achieving; making a positive contribution; and economic wellbeing*.

This briefing is written for adults working with, and responsible for, the involvement of children and young people and offers guidance to help make their participation as safe, sound and effective as possible. It is to be read alongside *Hear by Right, standards framework for the participation of children and young people*ⁱ, (The NYA/ LGA, revised 2008).

How children and young people take part can be considered by using Roger Hart's *Ladder of Participation*, adapted from Arnstein.ⁱⁱ The ladder has eight rungs. The first three represent non-participation through manipulation, decoration and tokenism. Above these come increasing degrees of participation - from being assigned but informed, through adults initiating but sharing decisions, to children and young people and adults initiating and sharing decisions together. The ladder highlights that participation can take various forms and to different degrees depending on a range of factors. It offers both a gauge to the nature of involvement and a guide to how its quality might be improved. It can be climbed as far up as fits the job, which is not always to the top.

What we do know is that unless involving children and young people is underpinned by a real commitment to attitudinal and organisational change and to improving services as a result, we will not get far up the ladder. Attempts will be ineffectual, frustrating and damaging.

Benefits

There are many benefits to involving children and young people. These include:

- A voice and an influence for children and young people, which is their right to have.
- More accountable and improved structures, policies and decision making.
- Better responses to the issues and concerns faced by the children and young people.
- Opportunities for personal development among those who are often excluded.
- Promoting children and young people as creators not consumers, as active participants.
- Enabling children and young people's participation in wider society.

Shared values

Effective involvement of children and young people must be rooted in their right to influence the policy and services that affect them and the right to do so safely (Articles 12 and 19 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child). It must be based on shared values. These are taken from *Hear by Right*ⁱ and are at the heart of the Government's Learning to Listen frameworkⁱⁱⁱ.

- Children and young people's involvement is a visible commitment that is properly resourced.
- Children and young people's involvement is valued.
- Children and young people have equal opportunity to participate.
- Children and young people's participation is supported in the organisation by effective policies and systems.

Are we really serious? – Some tough questions

Shared values are the necessary foundation, but searching questions must also be answered to ensure children and young people's participation is safe, sound and effective.

Twelve tough questions for the adults^{iv}

1. What are we aiming to achieve?
2. Where have we got to so far?
3. What will children and young people get out of it?
4. Are we prepared to resource it properly?
5. Why have we not done it before?
6. Are we prepared to involve children and young people from the start?
7. Are we being honest with the children and young people?
8. What are our expectations?
9. Are we prepared to give up some power?
10. Are we prepared to take some criticism?
11. Do we recognise this as a long-term commitment?
12. Are we prepared to build in changes long term and not just have a one-off event?

Traps

The more it is the fashion to involve children and young people, the more we need to watch out for the traps. Here are some of the nastiest ones and ideas on how to avoid them:

- jumping on the bandwagon;
- rushing in and running out of real commitment;
- getting into ruts where promoting participation is rigid and imposed;
- seeing it as a one off without sustaining the culture and processes of participation; and
- conflict with organisational culture and procedures.

Avoiding the traps

- involve children and young people in the earliest stages of planning;
- start slowly, proceed carefully and draw on pilot projects;
- take time and ensure there are the relevant resources;
- recognise and enable the wider changes in attitudes, behaviour and power required; and
- provide consistent support and staff development for steady progress to spread.

Approaches to the involvement of children and young people

A few approaches are set out below, showing some of their potential strengths and limitations. The approaches all depend on the extent of ownership and relevance, their representative nature and the quality of partnership between the children and young people and adults concerned. They are not mutually exclusive, though one may be the building block for another. They are not in a particular order, but they all require careful thought, commitment and resources. They are all in use by a range of organisations, including large ones in the public and voluntary sector. Look at the companion guidance *Involving children and young people - where to find out more*^v, for more information and examples of these approaches in action.

1. Consultations

These are one-off, or short-term pieces of work that focus on a particular issue or planning proposal. Examples include gaining children and young people's views on their main concerns and priorities, a topical issue, checking draft plans or policies with them. Consultations can happen through meetings, e-mail or via the web. They can be supported by young people friendly summaries of consultation documents aimed principally at adults.

Strengths

- Targeted and focused
- Time limited
- Cost effective
- Immediate relevance
- Results

Limitations

- Exclusive or unrepresentative
- Lack of follow up
- Lack of ownership
- No momentum
- Seen as a quick fix

2. Practice initiatives (task focused and time limited)

You might commission a task, develop a joint initiative, or create a partnership to undertake an agreed piece of work. Examples include children and young people undertaking research, training, allocating budgets, commissioning or reviewing plans.

Strengths

- Direct impact
- Working with adults as equals
- Payment, vocational relevance
- Use of knowledge and skills
- Task focused and time limited

Limitations

- Patronised or dismissed by adults
- Adults take over the results
- Not rewarded properly
- Opportunity to the few
- Limited follow through

3. Website for children and young people

Websites can help children and young people access information about specific projects and plans, resources and funding, programmes and organisations and they can be used to pose questions and issues for debate and discussion, giving a means for direct, immediate feedback.

Strengths

- Potential numbers involved
- Multi-purpose
- Building on existing resources
- Fun and engaging
- Children and young people involved in the web design
- Used through schools and youth clubs

Limitations

- Needs dedicated and skilled input
- Specific and adequate budget
- Extensive publicity to make it known
- Exclusive
- Needs commitment to use information and give feedback
- Adults' views gained unintentionally

4. Large scale event

Rather than only drawing on the interest of the few, involvement of children and young people may include a larger event for a wider range of groups. This may give more freedom and flexibility in influencing and shaping ideas, priorities and direction. The event can also be used for the children and young people to elect representatives to be on smaller advisory or committee structures.

Strengths

- More inclusive
- Shared identity and purpose
- Fun and energy
- Accountability
- A lot of work quickly

Limitations

- Preparation and planning
- Time and money
- Raises the stakes; higher risk
- Needs good follow up
- Needs commitment to action

5. Advisory or reference groups

A group of children and young people (perhaps with adults) advise and inform those planning, delivering or reviewing a piece of work, or who manage a team or organisation. There is a series of meetings over a period of time during the lifetime of the project or programme.

Strengths

- Influencing development
- Ownership
- Representative
- Established and ongoing

Limitations

- Time consuming and drawn out
- Rubber stamp
- Irregular meetings and attendance
- No authority

6. Network of groups

There is a network of strategically linked groups of children and young people meeting regularly with a support worker. Operating from their own territory and on their terms, the children and young people are helped to give their views on policies and services or to raise their own issues and these are taken forward by the support worker.

Strengths

- Link and support hard-to-reach groups
- Regular, consistent involvement
- Safe, familiar environment
- Ongoing for reviewing change

Limitations

- Heavy on staff support time
- No direct authority
- Must keep short chain of communication
- Change may seem remote

7. Parallel structures

A youth body is set up to run alongside the adult-led decision-making processes to provide advice, or act as a sounding board. Examples include a shadow committee at any level in an organisation.

Strengths

- Elected membership and mandate
- Confidence and authority
- Influencing organisational policy
- Reserved places on committees

Limitations

- What real authority and power?
- Divisive
- Poor range of representation
- Fractures from adult organisations

8. Committee places

Children and young people are elected or selected to be part of committees. There may be specific spaces reserved for them. Young people may be trustees of the organisation.

Strengths

- Direct access to governance
- Long term influence
- Knowledge and expertise
- Continuous input
- Overcoming misunderstandings
- Required change in attitudes, representing significant cultural shift for an organisation

Limitations

- Not treated as equals
- Tokenism
- Used to represent views of all young people, rather than in own right
- Demanding of skills and commitment
- Pressure to be seen to be successful
- Lose touch with peers
- Significant resources, staff support

There is no ideal way to go about involving children and young people in the issues of concern to them; a combination of approaches may increase the chances of meaningful, effective, representative and accessible engagement. Always go back to the 12 tough questions to make sure you know what you want and why and whether there are the resources and commitment to make it work for the children and young people and for the organisation. Make sure there is a person to lead on the work who has the right skills, support and backing. Whatever the preferred approaches, make sure practice is safe and sound. Some important aspects to think through at an early stage are set out below.

1. Consent

Everyone should have the right to contribute as much or as little as they choose. Make sure you have the permission of the children and young people, but also think who else you need to check out. It may be parents and carers, teacher or youth worker. If you are planning to take photos, take particular care to have the right permissions, which may need to be in writing.

2. Protection

What are the risks of involving children and young people and how can these be reduced? Have you done a risk assessment? Are workers police checked? Have you the right insurance? Do you have a clear child protection policy and do all those involved know of it? Is the venue safe? Has transport to and from the venue been arranged? Do any of the children and young people need to be accompanied, because, for example, of age or disability? If using the web, does access need to be supervised or is the site secure?

3. Access

Who is likely to be affected by the work you do and do those you want to involve reflect this wider group? Who is likely to get missed out and what steps can you take to reduce this risk? Have you considered age, race, gender, sexuality, ability and geography? Access is about buildings, but also time, place, style of meetings, language, interpreters and access to computers.

4. Rewards and feedback

How are children and young people being thanked and rewarded for their involvement? How will they know their participation has led to influence, action and change? Who is going to tell them, when and how? What ways are there to reward their contribution? Certificates and letters of thanks, payment, remuneration, gifts and accreditation all have their place.

How are we doing?

Make sure you develop a plan and check progress regularly with children and young people themselves. Hear by Rightⁱ offers a tried and tested framework to map and plan for effective participation. Its seven standards cover **Shared values, Strategies, Structures, Systems, Staff, Skills and knowledge and Style of leadership**. Visit www.nya.org.uk/hearbyright for examples of its use and shared learning. Get hold of resources like Spice it Up!^{vi} and Act by Right^{vii} to help make your vision a reality.

References

- i Badham, B., Wade, H., (2008) *Hear by Right: Standards framework for the participation of children and young people*, The NYA/LGA
- ii Hart, R. (1992), *Children's Participation: from Tokenism to Citizenship*, UNICEF
- iii Children and Young People's Unit, (2002) *Learning to Listen: core principles for the involvement of children and young people*, DfES
- iv Treseder, P. (1997), *Empowering Children and Young People*, Children's Rights Office and SCF
- v The NYA, (2006) *Involving children and young people - where to find out more*
- vi Dynamix and Save the Children, (2002) *Participation: Spice it Up!*
- vii Badham, B., (2004) *Act by Right: skills for the active involvement of children and young people in making change happen*, The NYA.

Top ten resources

It can be baffling just thinking about where to start! These top ten resources include a general introduction to children and young people's participation as well as some practical resources to get going and some specialised resources to help respond to those most often excluded.

Introduction to the field

Kirby, P. et al (2003), *Building a Culture of Participation*, DfES. Tel: 0845 6022260. Report available at: www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/participation/buildingonculture

Willow, C. (2002), *Participation in Practice: children and young people as partners in change*. The Children's Society, ISBN 1899783407, £11.95. Tel: 020 7841 4415. www.childrenssociety.org.uk

Book includes detailed examination of the policy context for consultation and participation with children and young people. See Amazon.com

Skills and toolkits

Badham, B. (2004), *Act by Right: skills for the active involvement of children and young people in making change happen*. The National Youth Agency. ISBN 0861553179. £25.00. Tel: 0116 242 7427. An accredited skills workbook to equip young people to speak out and achieve change on issues of concern to them.

Children's Alliance for England. (2005), *Ready Steady Change participation training materials, Children's Rights Alliance*, £75.00. Tel: 020 7278 8222 ext. 26. A training resource that includes a handbook for use with adults who make public decisions that affect children and young people, a handbook for use with children and young people, a DVD including snapshots of participation in practice and 2 ready steady change newspapers. The handbooks contain a number of activities, handouts and guide to rights and the law.

Shepherd, C. and Treseder, P. (2003), *Participation - Spice it up! Save the Children*, ISBN 1841870625, £18.95. Available from NBN International. Tel: 01752 202301. E-mail: orders@plymbridge.com

Young Researcher Toolkit (2008), The NYA. An online resource for adults and young people to develop knowledge and skills in evaluation and research. Free download at www.nya.org.uk/youngresearchernetwork

Inclusion

Ask Us 1 & 2 (2001 and 2003), £5.50. *How to Ask Us*, (2005). The Children's Society, Tel: 020 7841 4415. Outline of project available at www.jrf.org.uk/knowledge/findings/socialcare/741.asp

CD-Rom resulting from a multi-media consultation through which over 200 disabled children and young people aged 4 to 24 from across England addressed issues that concern them.

Miller, J. (2003), *Never too Young: how young children can take responsibility and make decisions*, Save the Children/National Early Years Network, ISBN 1841870757, £10.00. Available from NBN International, as above.

Ward, L. (1997), *Seen and Heard: involving disabled children and young people in research and development projects*. YPS, York, £6.50. Available on 01904 431213. Report covering the context, the law, practicalities of involving children, ethical issues and equal opportunities.

Standards

Keeping it Safe: a young person-centred approach to safety and child protection, standards and guidelines (2002), National Council for Voluntary Youth Services, £35.00. Tel: 020 7253 1010.

Pack covering child protection, safe recruitment and selection, managing staff and providing safe activities - including risk assessment, insurance, transport and internet access.

Standards only available at www.ncvys.org.uk/

Badham, B. and Wade, H. (2008), *Hear by Right: Standards framework for the participation of children and young people*, The National Youth Agency/Local Government Association. £10.00. Tel: 0116 242 7427. Tried and tested standards across the statutory and voluntary sector to assess and improve practice and policy on the active involvement of children and young people. Available at www.nya.org.uk/hearbyright/downloads