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An overview of child participation

Key issues for organisations and practitioners

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This paper is part of a suite of resources focusing on children's participation in decisions that affect them. [See all resources.](#)

What is this resource about?

This paper provides an overview of children's participation in decision-making processes. It highlights the benefits of participation for children, organisations, practitioners and the community, and provides an overview of key factors that practitioners and organisations should consider when consulting children.

Who is this resource for?

This resource is designed to increase the knowledge of child and family service professionals to support the inclusion of children in decision making. Other professionals who may benefit from this resource include service managers, practitioners, policy makers, program developers and program evaluators.

Key messages

- Children's participation in decision making can have a positive impact for children, practitioners, organisations and the wider community. Benefits can include:
 - enhanced self-esteem and problem-solving skills for children
 - more accurate and effective decision making for organisations
 - improved quality of service for practitioners



- for the wider community, greater community cohesion and availability of programs that meet the needs of children.
- To be successful, meaningful inclusion of children should be championed at all levels of an organisation, from overarching organisational policies to the skills and knowledge of individual practitioners.
- Organisations can support practitioners to include children in decision making by providing an authorising environment, allocating appropriate resources, and ensuring power imbalances are considered and participation is meaningful.
- Practitioners can support and promote meaningful participation by ensuring they have the skills and knowledge to build positive relationships with children, and that their engagement strategies and communication style are age and developmentally appropriate.

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Introduction

A child's ability to contribute to decisions that affect them and to have an influence over their own life is a human right (Convention on the Rights of the Child, United Nations General Assembly, 1989). Children are important and active members of our community, and hearing their voices is an essential part of building a strong and supportive society (Bessell, 2014). As experts in their own lives, children have unique and valuable insights, knowledge and skills to contribute. As such, their participation in the development, implementation and evaluation of services is likely to lead to more effective services and better outcomes for children and families. Children's participation, therefore, offers benefits not only to children and families but also to practitioners and service providers.

Children can participate in a variety of circumstances, from contributing to decisions that affect them as individuals (e.g. service delivery), to decisions that impact children more broadly (e.g. service design or evaluation). When done well, involving children can help organisations to gain insights into their needs and concerns, and improve the organisation's service offerings. More importantly, it can empower children to view themselves as active and capable members of the community (NSW Advocate for Children and Young People [NSW ACYP], 2015; Bessell, 2014). Although the benefits may be self-evident, enabling children to meaningfully participate can be a complex task for both practitioners and organisations.

This paper provides a high-level overview of children's participation, including definitions and examples, and outlines the wide-reaching benefits that genuine child participation can have. It also outlines the critical factors (i.e. facilitators and barriers) organisations and practitioners should consider when involving children in decision making. This information is designed to be applicable across a broad range of scenarios where children's participation may occur.

What is child participation?

For the purposes of this paper:

Child participation is defined as the meaningful (i.e. active, safe and informed) involvement of children in decisions that affect their lives. This can be in the context of:

- **Service delivery:** Including children in decisions that affect their individual lives, such as their own treatment or care. Examples include case management and care planning (e.g. in child protection services), shared decision making (e.g. in child mental health services), or education planning

(e.g. for children with special needs). Critical to this definition is the opportunity for a child's voice to influence the direction of their own care (Kirby, Lanyon, Cronin & Sinclair, 2003).

- **Service design:** Involving children in decision making at an organisational level, such as consulting with children on processes and decisions in the design of services. This includes involving children in decisions that affect young people collectively. Involving children in public decisions is likely to increase the effectiveness of services that are responsive to children. Examples of participation in service design could include consulting with children when planning local play or leisure facilities (Cavet & Sloper, 2001).
- **Evaluation:** Including children in the evaluation of service delivery and design can contribute to improvements in service responsiveness. Child participation in evaluation can also refer to consulting with children and young people for their views on policy proposals or broader frameworks for children's services (Kirby et al., 2003).

Terms such as **engagement**, **consultation** and **involvement** are used interchangeably with participation. A **child** is defined as a young person aged 0–18 years old.

The benefits of child participation

Children are the experts in their own lives. Research shows that their participation in decision making is likely to have a positive impact; not only for children, but also for practitioners, organisations and communities more broadly. Organisations can empower children as active citizens and learners through the process of child participation. Children have both the right and the capacity to express their views, and to participate in decision making that affects their lives and their wellbeing.



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Benefits for children

Children have the desire and the capacity to express their views about the world and the issues that affect their lives (Harris & Manatakis, 2013). More importantly, the participation process can be a positive developmental experience for children, with potential benefits including:

- enhanced self-esteem
- increased feelings of mastery and control
- increased feelings of connectedness
- increased skills in problem solving
- increased capacity for decision making
- improved relationships with adults and other young people (Powell & Smith, 2009; NSW ACYP, 2015; van Bijleveld, Dedding & Bunders-Aelen, 2015).

Benefits for organisations

Organisations are more likely to succeed when children and young people are involved in the planning, development, implementation and evaluation phases of service delivery, in an ongoing capacity (NSW Advocate for Children and Young People (NSW ACYP), 2015; van Bijleveld, et al., 2013). By including children's knowledge, organisations can:

- gain new insights into a variety of issues
- develop better and more effective policies and practices
- make more accurate decisions
- build better child engagement into services
- strengthen relationships between children and adults (NSW ACYP, 2015).

Benefits for practitioners

While there is limited research on the benefits of child participation for individual practitioners, engaging with children can be a positive experience. Through facilitating children's engagement in these processes, a practitioner may feel a sense of contributing to:

- 'the quality of service provision
- 'increasing children's sense of ownership and belonging
- 'increasing self-esteem
- 'increasing empathy and responsibility
- 'laying the groundwork for citizenship and democratic participation and thus helping to safeguard and strengthen democracy' (Shier, 2001, p.114).

Benefits for the wider community and society

Lastly, there is research suggesting that the wider community benefits from the meaningful inclusion of children's voices. This can be in the form of:

- greater community cohesion
- more vibrant local democracy
- an empowering environment that inspires and motivates children
- better policies and programs to meet the needs of children
- contributing to a better future community (Badham & Wade, 2010; CCYP WA, 2009).

Key considerations

There are a number of considerations for organisations and practitioners when thinking about children's participation. While the research is clear about potential benefits, child participation can be difficult to implement. To be successful, meaningful inclusion of children should be championed at all levels of an organisation, from overarching organisational policies to the skills and knowledge of individual practitioners.

The following section outlines the key factors for both organisations and practitioners to consider in order to ensure that child participation is purposeful and genuine. Key messages for organisations to consider when engaging children in services are followed by practitioner-specific considerations when working with children for decision-making purposes.



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Information for organisations

Organisations play a critical role in championing child participation. While it is important that individual practitioners know how and when to engage children in decision-making processes, organisations need to provide the overall framework for them to do so. To foster an environment that supports the meaningful inclusion of children, it is important that organisations consider the following:

- Is there an authorising environment?
- What is the organisational approach to balancing risk and protection?
- Has the child/adult power imbalance been considered?
- Have steps been taken to ensure participation is meaningful?
- Are resources allocated to allow for proper planning and preparation?

An authorising environment

Practice considerations:

- Create a supportive organisational framework.
- Assess the appropriate involvement of children at different stages of the decision-making process.
- Develop policies and guidelines to guide best practice.
- Invest in staff training and support.

Organisations need to provide the overall supportive framework for meaningful child participation to occur. This includes assessing where, and to what extent, it is appropriate for children to be involved in decision-making processes.

Historically, child participation has largely focused on children aged 12 years and older, excluding those who are very young and may be non-verbal. All children have the right to participate, and can participate, when they are supported by the right organisational environment (Shier, 2001). Provisions need to be made for children of all ages and developmental stages to contribute, including children from different backgrounds, genders, and abilities. (See [*Practical strategies for engaging children in a practice setting*](#) for guidance on including young children).

Policies should also be developed to support staff to involve children (Shier, 2001). If participation processes are not embedded in everyday practice, it may be more appropriate to develop practice guidelines for staff instead.

These policies should guide staff on issues of participation and may include: how to assess the appropriate level of children's involvement in decision-making processes; what consultations with children might look like; or, how to address confidentiality with children. For more information on the levels of participation that children may engage in, see [*Levels of participation*](#).

Staffing resources need to be adequately invested in and given ongoing support. Organisations should ensure that practitioners have training opportunities to build the necessary skills and confidence to engage children in decision making (Cavet & Sloper, 2001). Investing in a supportive environment includes generating a listening culture among staff, and creating space for practitioners to be flexible in their approaches (Cavet & Sloper, 2001).

Lastly, it helps to be mindful of potential barriers to creating a supportive environment for both practitioners and children. This can include organisational factors such as short-term funding or staff turnover, as well as conventions such as lengthy meetings, being overly formal, and using jargon (NSW ACYP, 2019; Tisdall, 2013). It is important that child participation frameworks are underpinned by rights-based principles; for example, participation should always be voluntary, and children should be treated fairly and respectfully. For more information on suggested principles of child participation, see [*Principles of child participation*](#).



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Levels of participation

Children may participate in a range of decision-making activities across a number of levels of involvement. The level of participation will depend upon the capacity of the child, the requirements of the project and the available time and organisational resources.

There are several well-known models of participation, such as Hart's (1992) *Ladder of Participation*, which moves up the 'rungs' from three non-participatory stages (manipulation, decoration, tokenism) to the five 'rungs' of participatory engagement, with the top rung being 'Child initiated, shared decisions with adults'.

Building on Hart's work, Shier's (2001) *Pathways to Participation* model is based on five levels of participation alongside individuals' and organisations' levels of commitment to engaging children (known as 'openings', 'opportunities' and 'obligations').

The five levels are:

- Children are listened to.
- Children are supported in expressing their views.
- Children's views are taken into account.
- Children are involved in decision-making processes.
- Children share power and responsibility for decision making.

Treseder (1997) created a 'flattened' hierarchical structure, suggesting that all levels of participation are equal but that they will be more or less appropriate based on the purpose of the engagement.

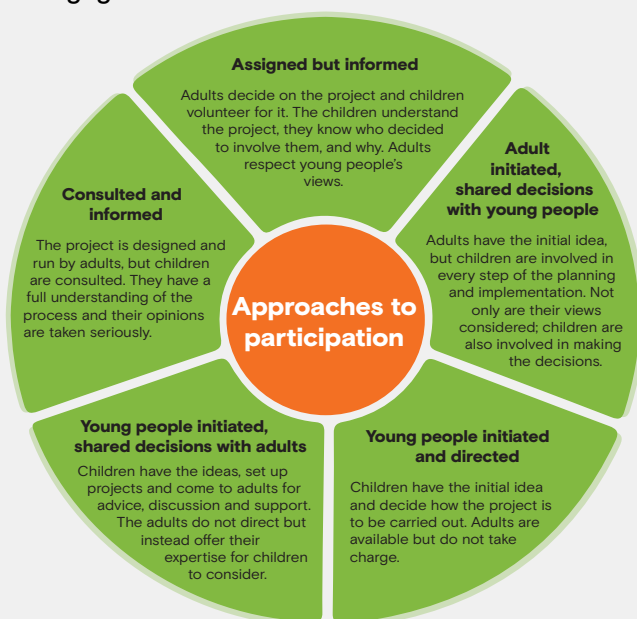


FIGURE 1: Approaches to child participation

Principles of child participation

It is essential that organisations' work with children is based on a set of guiding principles that hold children's best interests at their centre. Although there is no single agreed set of principles for engaging children in decision-making processes, many organisations who work with children and young people have undertaken projects to create their own. For example, the NSW Advocate for Children and Young People (NSW ACYP, 2019, p. 16) has released a guide that contains a set of eight principles (such as: participation must be voluntary and informed; take into account any ethical considerations; and recognise that children and young people are a diverse group) underpinned by the following assumptions:

- All children and young people have the capacity to participate.
- All children and young people have the right to participate.
- All children and young people have critical and unique perspectives on their lives (NSW ACYP, 2019, p. 15).

Alternatively, in their report *Children's voices: A principled framework for children and young people's participation as valued citizens and learners*, Harris and Manatakis (2013) suggested six key principles to guide child participation (with a focus on younger children):

- Viewing the child as a valued citizen and social actor.
- Appropriateness.
- Respect for the child.
- Shared understanding.
- Handing the agenda to the child.
- Being mindful of power.
- Ethical considerations.

Both sets of principles have been tailored to suit the context and needs of the children involved. Organisations intending to involve children in decision-making processes should ensure that their work is also underpinned by a set of clearly articulated guiding principles, ideally created in consultation with children.

See 'Further resources' for details of other guidance documents.

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An organisational approach to balancing risk and protection

Practice considerations:

- Clarify the purpose and method for engaging children to reduce any risks associated with participation.
- Ensure that practitioners are across this purpose and method.
- Inform children of their choices in participating, including that it is voluntary.

Organisations have a duty of care to protect children. As excessive or inappropriate levels of engagement may be harmful, the right to protection must be balanced with the right to participate (Lansdown, 2001). Practitioners can struggle to make this call without organisational guidance. Organisations should be clear on the purpose and methods for engaging children, and make sure practitioners are aware of these through the provision of clear guidance documentation.

It is important for organisations to consider their approach to balancing risk and protection when engaging with children. When thinking about risk, organisations should consider: 'the capacity of the child, the level of risk involved, the degree of support available, the child's level of understanding of the risks involved, and the child's own views' (Lansdown, 2001, p. 19).

When engaging in child participation, organisations also have an ethical obligation to protect children, and these protections should have a built-in monitoring mechanism overseen by children (Lansdown, 2001). (For further information on effective professional practice with children, see *'Give children a bigger voice, more of the time': Findings from the Children and Young People in Separated Families Project*).

Organisations should already have general child safety processes and policies in place, as per the National Principles for Child Safe Organisations. These principles provide organisations with high-level guidance on creating a child safe culture, while keeping the best interests of children and adolescents at the forefront. (See *Child safe organisations: Information for organisations on how to keep children safe* for more details).

Critically, child participation should always be voluntary, and children should be informed of their choices (Harris & Manatakis, 2013; Edbrooke-Childs et al., 2016).



The power imbalance between children and adults

Practice considerations:

- Ensure information is age and developmentally appropriate.
- Consider children's access to and navigation of services.
- Allow time and support for children's expression.

Organisations need to create an environment for children to contribute to decisions, and really listen to what they have to say. There are inherent power differences between organisations and their users, particularly when users are children. Information provided to children should be age and developmentally appropriate, and care should be taken to avoid complicated access pathways to inclusion in services.

Consider if a child might feel intimidated in your building, or vulnerable when asked to tell their story. Avoid settings that amplify an adult's physical power (e.g. height and strength) and ensure children are given enough time and support to adequately express themselves (NSW ACYP, 2015). Some examples of support could include the use of translators to include culturally and linguistically diverse children; or having practitioners share small details about themselves to encourage a more equal power relationship (See *Practical strategies for practitioners wishing to engage children in service delivery* for further practical ideas).

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Developmentally, children can be vulnerable to adult pressures of exploitation, coercion or manipulation (Kellett, 2011, Lansdown, 2001). They may struggle to challenge adult accounts of 'knowledge' when the power difference is not addressed (Kellett, 2011). It is crucial that organisations address this at a policy level as well as at a practice level. Organisations should consider discussing power-minimising protocols at staff meetings for solutions that may be unique to them; for example, the location of consultations, and language or staff used for engaging with children (Kellett, 2011).

Meaningful participation

Practice considerations:

- Clarify the purpose of participation.
- Avoid tokenism through adequate staffing, resources and knowledge.
- Provide genuine feedback to children, including limitations of involvement.

It is crucial that the views of children are captured authentically through child-friendly methods and are truthfully represented by adults. Care must be taken not to misrepresent children's voices for adult purposes (e.g. using them to highlight only positive things about a service) (Johnson, Hart, & Colwell, 2014).

When inviting children's perspectives on the design and delivery of services, it is important that this is also acted upon – even when that means explaining to children that a decision has been reached despite their feedback (NSW ACYP, 2019). Children need to be provided with genuine feedback about their input, and organisations should have clear processes and procedures for doing so.

Organisations need a clear rationale for the inclusion of children, and a plan for minimising tokenistic engagement (Cavet & Sloper, 2001). Tokenistic engagement refers to situations where it *seems* like children have a voice, but realistically they have minimal opportunity to genuinely contribute their opinions (Hart, 1992). Tokenism can occur when organisations are under pressure to engage children without adequate staff, resources and knowledge, or when participation is conducted as a 'box-ticking' procedure with no clear purpose identified (Sinclair, 2004).

Plan and prepare

Finally, the key aspect of integrating child participation processes into organisations is planning and preparation. As outlined above, there are critical steps

that organisations must consider before engaging with children, to ensure that children's participation is genuine. This needs to happen at an organisational level before individual practitioners can be expected to engage with children in a meaningful way.

Organisations must first *understand* and then support child participation. Mechanisms need to be planned and developed, in support of children's engagement with the service. Important amongst this is to implement sustained engagement processes, rather than one-off incidents of consultation (Harris & Manatakis, 2013). It is crucial that when consultations occur, children's input is documented authentically, and their intended meaning is captured. As a final part of the process, organisations must plan to keep children informed about their participation; a feedback loop needs to be set up to let children know the consequences of their feedback – even when decisions are made in spite of their input.

Lastly, planning and preparation includes organisations and practitioners being prepared to look at what children can do, and being prepared to learn new and unexpected information from the voices of children (Harris & Manatakis, 2013).



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Information for practitioners

Practitioners are an integral part of meaningful child participation. Once the organisational environment is set, practitioners play a critical role in helping children to have their say. Practitioners who are engaging with children for participation purposes should consider:

- What skills and knowledge are necessary to meaningfully engage with children?
- Are there any limiting perceptions of children that need to be challenged?
- What can help to build positive relationships with children?
- When working with children, how can we ensure we meet children where they are currently at?

Skills and knowledge

Practice considerations:

- Understand why and how to engage children in a supportive and meaningful manner.
- Be creative and flexible in your approach.
- Seek support for engagement strategies.

Meaningful child participation relies on practitioners having the skills and confidence to engage children in this process (Gondek et al., 2017). Practitioners need to be knowledgeable about how to effectively engage children, and about the intended purpose of the engagement. They also need the ability to be creative in response to the unique needs of children, and flexible in their approach (Gondek et al., 2017). This could include giving a child options for when or where a meeting will take place, maximising their ability to successfully engage with the process. (See [*Practical strategies for practitioners wishing to engage children in service delivery*](#) for further practical ideas).

Practitioners may need training to learn the specific skillset required to facilitate meaningful engagement with children (NSW ACYP, 2019). This is particularly important when engaging with younger children and those who are non-verbal.

Perceptions of children

Practice considerations:

- Identify limiting beliefs of children as innocent, vulnerable or lacking capacity.
- Challenge own beliefs of children's capacity where necessary.
- Recognise the valuable insights, knowledge and skills children have to offer.



While it is crucial that children are protected from the harmful consequences that could come from participating in decision-making processes, it is important not to deny children access to this right (Powell & Smith, 2009). With the right knowledge and skills, practitioners can help children to achieve this balance.

Practitioners need to be aware of any limiting beliefs they hold, leading them to see children as innocent, vulnerable or lacking the capacity to engage. Adults may underestimate a child's ability to express their views, particularly when they are not expressed in a typically adult way (Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2010; Gondek et al., 2017).

Acknowledging the unique skills and perspectives of children will increase their likelihood of engagement in decision-making processes. It is important to challenge the belief that adults have superior knowledge to children and are therefore more capable of assessing the interests and needs of a child (Cavet & Sloper, 2001; Phillips & Coppock, 2014; Lansdown, 1994). Children and young people are an untapped resource of skills and knowledge, particularly when they have experienced disadvantage and have had to adapt (Oliver, 2016). It is important to be aware of unrecognised strengths a child may have; for example, having innovative and informed ideas about decision-making and leadership (this may be more relevant to adolescent-aged children) (Oliver, 2016).

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Practitioners may limit engagement if they see children as being vulnerable, as children with lived experience of serious adversity may be viewed (Powell & Smith, 2009). Similarly, infants, very young children and children with disability are often overlooked due to the perceived difficulties in engaging with them. Practitioners need to be aware of any limiting predispositions they have, and aim to engage in creative strategies to include all children's perspectives.

For further information on the inclusion of vulnerable children, see:

- [*Children's participation in decision-making processes in the child protection system*](#)
- [*Practical strategies for engaging children in a practice setting*](#)

Positive relationships with children

Practice considerations:

- Be proactive in listening to children and genuinely listen.
- Organise participation settings that are comfortable, safe and child-friendly.
- Avoid leading or misinterpreting children's responses.

Child participation relies on the ability of adults to build positive relationships with children (G-Force; Mannion, 2007). Children are more likely to express their views if they feel safe and trust the practitioner (McDowall, 2016). It is important that practitioners foster mutual respect with children: letting them know that participation is voluntary and taking a genuine interest in what they say (Harris & Manatakis, 2013).

Further, it is important to create child-friendly settings for children that foster a sense of safety and comfort (Hervatin, 2020; NSW ACYP, 2015). Creating a space where children feel comfortable and safe can help to maximise the potential for engagement (Clark, 2011). Practitioners might consider strategies such as allowing children to explore the room prior to a formal participation session or starting the session with child-friendly activities to make them feel more at ease.

Be aware that children may be influenced by the adults in the room when expressing their thoughts. Children are more likely to respond with what they think you want to hear when potential power imbalances are not addressed (Harris & Manatakis, 2013; NSW ACYP, 2015). Think about ways to deal with these power imbalances when working with children; for example, by using plain language to talk with children or sharing a few small personal details. Practitioners should use clarifying and prompting questions but avoid unduly leading

children's responses. Genuine participation requires that adults do not put words in children's mouths (Harris & Manatakis, 2013).

Power dynamics can also exist within a group of children, particularly when mixing ages and capacities. Practitioners should be mindful of this when facilitating group participation settings. Some research suggests that small group settings may work best for children, and that a social element should be introduced to the group (Harris & Manatakis, 2013). Keep an eye on children who are struggling to express themselves and make an effort to include them.

Meet children where they are at

Practice considerations:

- Understand children's developmental stage and capacity.
- Be creative with engagement strategies
- Be mindful of children's evolving capacities.
- Use age-appropriate communication.

Practitioners need to understand where children are at, in terms of their age, development and capacity. This can require some flexibility and creativity on behalf of the practitioner. The views of all children must be given due weight, in accordance with the age and maturity of the child. Therefore, practitioners should give children a safe space to express their views, and ensure they are given age-appropriate time, information, encouragement, and support (Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2010).

Children's voices can be expressed in many ways, some of which do not involve words. Practitioners need to be proactive rather than passive in the inclusion of children, especially when interpreting non-verbal communication. Practitioners might need to think of creative solutions for children who struggle to express their thoughts and feelings. Key strategies may include:

- storytelling
- visual arts
- technology
- creative play.

(For further information, see: [*Practical strategies for practitioners wishing to engage with children in service delivery*](#)).

As well as this, to state the obvious: children grow up. Sustainable child participation processes must be mindful of the evolving capacities of children and continue meeting them in developmentally-appropriate ways.

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Clear communication is a critical aspect of meaningful child participation. Children need to feel that they understand and trust the practitioners and the process. Practitioners should support children to be informed about how they can participate, and what will be expected of them (NSW ACYP, 2015). Age-appropriate communication using informal, jargon-free language is best (NSW ACYP, 2015). This can help to build a child's confidence in sharing their opinions and help them to feel less intimidated (Gondek et al., 2017). It is crucial that children feel that they can express themselves safely (Kellett, 2011).

Conclusion

Child participation is part of a child-centered approach to service delivery. It treats each child as an individual in their own right and accords them full human rights to participate in a jointly negotiated process. While it is important to balance a child's need for protection, it is crucial not to deny them the right to participate and be heard, particularly in relation to decisions that affect them. Genuine child participation contributes to a society where everyone is recognised equally for their inherent value and unique perspectives.

Research shows that engaging children in decision-making processes, when done successfully, can benefit all involved. Children should be empowered and supported to express their views and contribute to decision making in services that involve them. Organisations can create space to listen to children; and practitioners, when supported, can build the skills to facilitate and sustain children's engagement. Doing so will benefit children through skill-building and empowerment, while practitioners and organisations will benefit from gaining access to children's insights that, as part of continuous improvement processes, will aid improved service delivery and better outcomes for families and communities.



More from Emerging Minds

- [Children's participation in decision-making processes in the child protection system](#) (practice paper)
- [Supporting children's participation in shared decision-making in child mental health care](#) (practice paper)
- [Practical strategies for engaging children in a practice setting](#) (practice paper)
- [What is effective professional practice from the perspective of children and young people?](#) (short article)
- [Engaging with Children: A Foundation](#) (e-learning course)
- [Engaging children as partners in practice to support their mental health and wellbeing](#) (webinar)

Further reading

Practical guides for engaging with children

- [Engaging children in decision making: A guide for consulting children](#) (Ballarat, Brimbank, Maribyrnong, Melton & Wyndham City Councils, the Western Metro Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and Kurunjang Primary School)
- [Engaging children and young people in your organisation](#) (New South Wales Advocate for Children and Young People)
- [Involving children and young people: Participation guidelines](#) (Commissioner for Children and Young People, Western Australia)
- [Involving children in decision making: Your quick, practical guide](#) (Commissioner for Children, Tasmania)
- [Empowerment and participation of children](#) (Commission for Children and Young People, Victoria)
- [Guide to good practice: Participation of children and young people in decisions made about their care](#) (Guardian for Children and Young People, South Australia)
- [Children's voices: A principled framework for children and young people's participation as valued citizens and learners](#) (Harris & Manatakis)
- [Youth participation strategy](#) (Queensland Family and Child Commission)

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