Children and Young People’s Views on Participation and Principles for Practice

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Scotland’s Commissioner for Children and Young People promotes and safeguards the rights of children and young people in Scotland under the age of 18 (and those under 21 if they have ever been in the care of, or looked after by, a local authority).

The current Commissioner is Tam Baillie (appointed by the Queen on the nomination of the Scottish Parliament in May 2009). He is independent of Parliament and Government but is accountable for the work done. The responsibilities and powers of the Commissioner are laid out in the Commissioner for Children and Young People (Scotland) Act (2003).

The Commissioner has a responsibility to:

- promote and safeguard the rights of children and young people
- have regard to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), and act in a manner that encourages equal opportunities; and
- encourage the involvement of children and young people in the work of the Commissioner, and consult relevant organisations.

The Commissioner has the power to:

- carry out an investigation into whether a service provider has regard to the rights, interests and views of children and young people generally, or to particular groups of children and young people.

As part of the Commissioner’s general function, the Commissioner also promotes, commissions, undertakes and publishes research on issues relating to the rights of children and young people.
2. Foreword

A core principle of the UNCRC is a commitment to giving children and young people the opportunity to participate in the decisions that affect them, and to be agents in their own lives.

This is reflected in the Act that established the post of Commissioner; it requires me to consult with children and young people on the issues that I should be working on, and to involve them in my work.

I believe that participation is about more than taking part. It is about listening, sharing experiences and learning from each other. I think that if we want our children to take an active part in society, we must value their voices and hear their views.

I also believe opportunities to participate in making decisions can and should take place at all levels of a child's life. These opportunities can include daily personal decisions, developing ideas, informing policies and becoming involved in wider dialogues about community planning and legislation.

The participation of children and young people in my work is crucial to the delivery of my duties and responsibilities. Given this, I wanted to explore what children and young people understand ‘participation’ to mean.

In 2012 I commissioned Dr Gregory Mannion (Stirling University) to undertake a scoping study with adults into the role of frameworks, standards and principles for practice with regards to children and young people’s participation.

In parallel to this, a series of workshops were undertaken by my office with children and young people. These workshops aimed to complement the scoping study and find out directly from them their views and experiences of participation.

The goal was to explore, from their perspective, the key elements that make good quality, successful, participative experiences; as well as identifying the possible barriers.

This report presents the key findings from these workshops; summarises what adults could think about to make sure children and young people participate in decision making in a meaningful way; and highlights what positive experiences of participation can look like.

Tam Baillie
3. What does participation mean?

Participation can mean different things to different people. Adults may want to refer to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child to help them understand.

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child’s 2009 General Comment on the child’s right to be heard considers the meaning of participation:

Since the adoption of the Convention in 1989, considerable progress has been achieved at the local, national, regional and global levels in the development of legislation, policies and methodologies to promote the implementation of article 12. A widespread practice has emerged in recent years, which has been broadly conceptualized as “participation”, although this term does not appear in the text of article 12.

This term has evolved and is now widely used to describe ongoing processes, which include information-sharing and dialogue between children and adults based on mutual respect, and in which children can learn how their views and those of adults are taken into account and shape the outcome of such processes.

3.1 Children and young people’s understanding of participation

In total 76 children and young people between the ages of five and 18 years participated in the workshops.

The four groups involved were:

**Fife Short Breaks Disability Respite Service**
Glenrothes, Fife: Aberlour Child Care Trust:
Six young people aged between 12 and 18 years.

**Sandwick Junior High School**
Shetland Islands, Shetland:
30 children aged between seven and 16 years.

**Cumbernauld YMCA Out of School Service**
North Lanarkshire:
20 children aged between five and seven years.

**HYPPE (Helping Young People Participate and Educate) Panel**
Scottish Borders: Scottish Borders Council:
20 young people aged between 12 and 18 years.
Throughout all the workshops some key recurring themes were identified by the children and young people:

- Understanding of rights
- Honesty and respect
- Being valued and listened to
- Being supported
- Children and adults working together
- Making assumptions
- Feedback and communication

This report aims to summarise:

- What children and young people said about these key themes
- What adults should think about in their practice
- What positive experiences of participation can look like.
4. Understanding of rights

Most of the children and young people who took part in the workshops said that they have a reasonable understanding of their rights and have heard of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The rights they could best articulate and describe were those they felt they could directly relate to:

- Article 12 (having a say in decisions that affect you)
- Article 19 (protection from abuse)
- Article 28 (the right to an education)
- Article 31 (the right to play)

However, some felt there were times that their rights were not fully promoted by adults who work with them.

Therefore, it appears that for the children and young people in the workshops, awareness of their rights does not always translate into greater access for them. Access is still largely dependent on adults’ willingness to acknowledge and put them into practice.

Understanding of rights: When it works well

Some of the children and young people spoke about having a good understanding of how their views had influenced changes to a programme or service, and this was displayed in a way that was easily accessible to them.
4.2. **Honesty and respect**

Throughout all the workshops, there were some key factors that children and young people emphasised as being fundamental to a culture of respect.

*These included:*

- The environment they are in – ie school, youth group
- Openness about decisions made
- Being treated fairly by adults and other children and young people
- Being trusted to make decisions

The children and young people expressed a good understanding of how decision-making processes are not always straightforward. They talked about their need to be told what the complexities might be, so that they can give an informed contribution and have a better understanding of why particular decisions might be made. The children and young people described how honesty, openness and compromise can create good relationships with decision-making adults, leading to them feeling valued and listened to.

*The staff here help us to get involved. It is so much fun and I love it. They listen to us and help us understand what it all means so that we can make changes to things. They really care about us and tell us all the time that it is important that we say what we think and that they will listen.*

*Young person aged 15*

*Adults, children and young people should feel confident to have mutual respect for each other’s views. We don’t always agree, but to be heard and find a solution that is good for everyone is important.*

*Young person aged 15*
Most of the children and young people gave examples of good participatory experiences they had been involved in, but at times the discussions focused on their less positive experiences. They talked about their contributions sometimes being “tokenistic” and “not taken seriously”. Some children and young people talked about feeling “left out” and “ignored” in key decisions that affect them directly.

When considering the possible reasons for this, some said they felt that there could be a general lack of understanding from adults as to why it is important for children to express themselves; and the different ways that they may choose to do this. They also talked about how some of the complex language used by adults can be confusing and feel without clear purpose. This can make it even more difficult for children and young people to understand the information they are given, and can ultimately restrict them making a valuable contribution.

However, some children and young people also spoke of the lack of consideration their views are sometimes given. This made them feel wary of taking time to say what they think, especially when it was the same adults asking them repeatedly for their views.

QUESTION FOR ADULTS:
Why do adults find it difficult to trust the judgement of children and young people, and be honest with them?
**Honesty and respect: When it works well**

The children and young people had many positive experiences to reflect upon and gave examples of these. They spoke of key adults who gained their trust and listened to them, which helped establish feelings of mutual respect and create a positive environment.

There was discussion about children and young peoples’ heavy reliance on trusted adults. Adults who are consistent in listening to them and taking action when necessary, ensuring that their views are given value and taken forward. The names of these adults were mentioned repeatedly within specific workshops, and there was a genuine sense of trust and respect for them.

*We get lots of opportunities to give our views and we know that we are listened to and taken seriously. Respect is a two-way thing and when it is given a chance it really works.*

*Young person aged 14*
4.3. Valued and listened to

The majority of children and young people in the workshops said that they were given opportunities to give their views on things that affect them in their daily lives; including at school, and in local youth services. However, they also said that they felt they have very little influence over more important decisions, particularly those made about their community facilities. Many felt their views were not valued by senior decision makers, and that children are rarely asked what they think about changes to local services.

During discussions the children and young people expressed the belief that for them to feel they are valued and listened to by adults in their communities there should be more openness about what is being planned and then agreed. They also felt children and young people’s involvement at the very initial discussion stage should be planned better.

They also talked about how adults have an expectation that their opinions will be heard and taken seriously, but that this is very different for children and young people. The children and young people felt that there are few opportunities for them to challenge decision makers who are giving their views little respect and value, and that they are conscious of the power adults hold.

**QUESTION FOR ADULTS:**
Do community planning processes ensure that children and young people’s views are sought and listened to? Are children and young people then told why decisions are made?
Valued and listened to: When it works well

Younger children talked about having regular meetings with key workers to evaluate different areas of the services they attended. They described the range of ways that they were communicated with, and how various communication styles were regularly reviewed and evaluated with them.

We get to talk about what kind of snacks we like to eat and what things we want to do. There is a big book that we all work on together to make changes to things. We add to it everyday.

Child aged 7

Having help to find ways to say what is important to me and how I am feeling.

Young person aged 16

It is really important that teachers get to know us, and know that things are not always easy.

Young person aged 13
4.4. Support

Support was considered to be a very important theme in all the workshops.

The children and young people talked about often being worried that they won’t be listened to or taken seriously, and how this can sometimes stop them from saying what they really think. Many children and young people also said they have anxieties about having the confidence to speak up and at times may need additional support to do so; adults need to find creative ways to do this.

Some of the children and young people talked about the importance of adults taking time to speak to them directly and understanding difficulties that may be affecting their ability to give their views.

They explained how they can sometimes feel uncomfortable speaking up in large groups and may need a more intimate space to talk. The children and young people with limited communication skills described how more intensive and considered support is needed. They explained how this would provide them with the tools to communicate their views in ways that are more comfortable for them.

During the workshops there was also a strong agreement from the children and young people who accessed disability services, that their inability to express themselves as others would does not mean that they have nothing to say. It does not reduce their need and right to communicate.

We all give our views differently. Sometimes it is hard to explain what we want to say and need help to get our words out, but we still have a right to be heard.

Young person aged 14

It was good doing all the different drawings, and having the pictures to help me say what I wanted to. I really enjoyed doing that.

Young person aged 14

**QUESTION FOR ADULTS:**

Do adults always use plain language and alternative communication styles to suit as wide a range of children and young people as possible?
Support: When it works well

A young person talked about her experience of Person Centred Planning (PCP), and how it helped her to speak up in her planning meetings. She also talked about a 'Wish Box' that was used by adults who support her to write down the wishes they had for her. She then made her own wishes and placed them in the box. These wishes were used to begin a discussion about planning for her future.

Being supported by someone, or people, to say what you think.

Young person aged 14

QUESTION FOR ADULTS:
Why do adults often leave it until the end of the decision making process (when there is little opportunity to inform change), before considering the involvement of children and young people?
4.5. Children and adults working together

There was agreement throughout most of the workshops about how important it is to children and young people to have opportunities to speak directly to influential decision makers. They talked about places where they could go, feel comfortable and safe, and be genuinely listened to; to have the chance to say what is really important to them, and describe what some of their concerns are.

Some of the groups who participated in the workshops felt that they had very little say in decisions made about their lives and in their own communities. They talked about councillors and local authority policy officers holding one-off surveys (that quite often they didn’t understand the purpose of) in schools, and said they rarely hear anything else after these initial consultations.

It’s our community too. Why shouldn’t we get to say what things we might want where we live, and what we think about schools that are closing? We are the ones who feel it most when adults make decisions that are going to mean changes for young people. Why don’t they just listen instead of nodding their heads and then totally ignoring us? We don’t find anything out until it has already happened, and they say that it is the best decision for us. How can they know that?

Child aged 11

I think it is just for the adults to be able to say “hey, we’ve consulted with children, aren’t we great?” But then they forget to come back to us and tell us what has happened next. We are not really important after all.

Child aged 11
Many of the children and young people said they felt there is a growing problem about how they are perceived by adults, and in turn the value that is given to their views. They talked about the importance of adults listening to them, hearing what they have to say, and finding out what is really important to them.

Throughout the workshops children also talked about how their views are sometimes misinterpreted by adults, and gave examples where adults made judgments and decisions without checking their understanding.

The council aren’t listening to us. They pretend to but then don’t tell you what they are planning about the schools. Someone must know something, but we will be the last to find out. Our teachers probably don’t know either.

Young person aged 12

Adults then use it to say “we have listened to the voices of young people and now we are going to do this”...When it isn’t what we said at all.

Young person aged 17

**QUESTION FOR ADULTS:**
What is the most effective way to keep children and young people informed of developments and decisions during the process of consultation?
Children and adults working together: When it works well

The children and young people explained how they can experience a positive effect when they have had good opportunities to be listened to in their communities and feel as though they were real partners in the planning stages.

They also talked about the confidence it gave them to speak out in front of many different professionals and key decision makers, and feeling that they had a real sense of power over change.

During the workshops, children and young people said that when they believe they are having a real say within their communities, and are being listened to, it helps to build their confidence and gives them the feeling that they are influential in their community and have an important role to play.

One 18-year-old said that young people knew their ideas were being taken seriously when there was good communication between them and adults, and when they knew their views had “gone to the right place”. Adults should check that their understanding of young people’s views was correct, they said. Any changes could then be negotiated between adults and young people. The priority should be “good communication, feedback and partnership”.

QUESTION FOR ADULTS:
How can adult perceptions change so that children and young people are recognised as experts in being young today, and their views are given real value?
4.6. Not making assumptions
Some of the children and young people spoke about how adults can often assume that they know what is best for children and young people, without asking them. They were concerned that as society has changed enormously over the years, what children and young people want and need today is very different to what children and young people wanted and needed in the past. During the workshops there was a plea for adults to find out and understand what is really important to children and young people, and not to make assumptions based on what adults think they already know.

QUESTION FOR ADULTS:
How can adult perceptions change so that children and young people are recognised as experts in being young today, and their views are given real value?

How can they make all the decisions about me? They don’t know me, I do.  
Child aged 10
4.7. Feedback and communication

In some of the workshops changes in funding requirements and inspection processes were discussed. Some of the children and young people said that they are aware of how the impact of this leads to them increasingly being asked their views on different aspects of their lives. However, the children and young people also reported that they often do not get any feedback about decisions and changes that are made.

During the workshops the children and young people said that when they are kept in regular communication and given good feedback, they recognise and welcome this. They said that they want to be part of discussions as they progress so that they have a better understanding of why decisions are made. When they have a good experience and are part of the decision making journey, they feel like they have made a valuable contribution.

However, some of the children and young people did not have such positive experiences of being given feedback. They talked about a lack of opportunities to speak directly to adults, ask questions, and challenge decisions. They also talked about this creating a feeling of uncertainty and, in particular, issues getting out of control.

How do young people know that not all of our views will be made into a reality? Professionals are there for a reason and sometimes they might disagree with some of our ideas for a good reason. That is alright as long as they explain those reasons to us and help us feel part of the process.

Young person aged 10

**QUESTION FOR ADULTS:**
How can adults make it easier for children and young people to ask questions and challenge decisions?

Young person aged 10
Feedback and communication: 
When it works well

One 18-year-old who took part said that feedback and communication could only be successful when young people found out about the changes that were made as a result of being asked for their views. They felt that, although the changes made might not be exactly what they had asked for, at least they would know that they had been listened to. “It makes you feel that your opinions are really important,” they said.

Another young person, also aged 18, said that successful communication depended on feedback always being given, and adults ensuring that young people are “never forgotten”.

QUESTION FOR ADULTS:
How can adults make it easier for children and young people to ask questions and challenge decisions?
5. Summary

Children and young people have a right to be listened to, taken seriously, and have their views respected. Adults working with children and young people must ensure this happens consistently. They have the responsibility to do so under the United Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

The workshops gave the children and young people who took part an opportunity to explore what they considered to be the key elements of good quality, successful, participative experiences, as well as the possible barriers. They highlighted inconsistencies in their experiences of ongoing decision making processes, as well as the varying levels of dialogue between children, young people and adults, in particular senior decision makers.

These are the main messages that were given by the children and young people who participated in the workshops:

5.1. Children’s rights

- More information to be provided, and a better understanding, of children’s rights and the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), for both children and young people and adults
- For everyone to understand from the very start why it is important that children and young people are listened to and have their views taken into account.

5.2. A chance to be involved

- Extra support to participate, with fun and creative activities to suit their abilities and interests

5.3. Given a choice

- Option to participate and to take part in a way that is right for them, not adults

5.4. Support along the way

- Opportunities to say what they think in ways that suit them best, considering the most appropriate communication methods to use. Having an advocate, or someone to support them to give their views, if and when needed.
5.5. Working together
• Celebration of the value of children, young people, and adults working together to make decisions, while respecting the difference in views they may have

5.6. Being valued
• Being involved and having a chance to contribute right from the start. Taking children and young people seriously and telling them how important their voice is, while explaining what decisions or changes have been made and why. Being honest about what difference their voice will make

5.7. Keeping in touch
• Keep in touch, explain what will happen next and provide contact details where possible

The messages echoed by children and young people in the workshops should be reflected upon and used to improve the way adults listen to and involve children and young people in all decisions that affect them. It is the responsibility of adults working with, and for, children and young people to ensure that these messages are taken forward and real change is made.
6. What happens next

In 2012 Scotland’s Commissioner for Children & Young People commissioned a scoping study with adults into the role of frameworks, standards and principles for practice with regards to children and young people’s participation.

The information from the workshops with children and young people will be used alongside the scoping study to inform the development of Scotland’s Commissioner for Children and Young People’s own Participation Statement and Golden Rules for Participation.

The Participation Statement and Golden Rules for Participation will aim to encourage adults to work more closely with children and young people so that they can better express their opinions and views, and so that their views will be taken into account.
7. Things to think about...

As an adult who wants to make sure children and young people can participate in decision making in my organisation in a meaningful way, I will...

Think about

If it is more important to raise awareness of children’s rights and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) with adults or with children and young people?

So that I

Will make sure that children, young people and adults in this organisation have a shared understanding of children’s rights.

Think about

Why I – or other adults who work in this organisation – might find it difficult to trust the judgement of children and young people.

So that I

Will actively create opportunities for children, young people and adults in this organisation to practice listening to each other and make decisions together, and celebrate our achievements when this brings improvement.

Think about

Do I work hard at using plain language and alternative communication styles to suit as wide a range of children and young people as possible?

So that I

Will learn about and develop confidence in using different tools, methods and approaches to communicate with children and young people I and other adults here work with – and have fun!
As an adult who wants to make sure children and young people can participate in decision making in my organisation in a meaningful way, I will...

Think about
If it is more important to raise awareness of children’s rights and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) with adults or with children and young people?

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Think about
Do I work hard at using plain language and alternative communication styles to suit as wide a range of children and young people as possible?

So that I
Will learn about and develop confidence in using different tools, methods and approaches to communicate with children and young people I and other adults here work with – and have fun!
Think about
Why do adults often leave it until the end of the decision making process before considering the involvement of children and young people?

So that I
Will think about the involvement of children and young people from the very beginning of any idea or project, to the very end.

Think about
How do I keep children and young people informed of developments and decisions during the process of consultation?

So that I
Will build in providing feedback to children and young people at lots of different stages along the way

Think about
How can adult perceptions change so that children and young people are recognised as experts about being young today and their views are given real value?

So that I
Will make sure all adults who work here value the views of the children and young people we work with in an equal way to the value I place on adults views about children and young people
Appendix 1: Setting up the workshops

When setting up the workshops with children and young people, the main considerations were:

1. Age range
The workshops were delivered to groups which included:
   a. Children aged between five-11 years
   b. Young people aged 12-18 years

2. Settings
The groups were chosen from a range of geographical settings across Scotland, including a rural community as well as a large urban local authority. They were also undertaken within formal and informal learning environments.

3. Experience of good practice
The participants were self-selected by previously sharing with the Commissioner occasions when they felt they had been involved in a positive participatory experience.

4. Format of workshops
A range of fun and interactive methods were used within the workshops, whilst allowing time for discussion and reflection. The format was adapted to be appropriate to the age and understanding of the participants, and in agreement with the people working with the children and young people. These methods included:
   • Icebreakers
   • Boardmaker symbols and simplified use of language
   • Puppet discussions
   • Talking mats
   • Using craft materials
   • Drawing
   • Playing games
   • Graffiti walls
   • Thumbs up, thumbs down activity
   • Head, heart, hands activity
   • Sun, cloud, question mark activity
   • Button voting activity
   • Dot voting activity
   • Freeze frame activity
Appendix 2: Questions children and young people were asked

During the four workshops, the children and young people were asked a range of questions. The responses that were recorded will help provide information about what children and young people consider to be the key elements of their positive participatory experiences. The questions were devised for their suitability to the age range and understanding of the children and young people within each setting.

The main questions were based on the following headings (although not every workshop covered all of these):

**Active involvement:**
- When have you been listened to, and had a say in decisions that are about you?

**Accessibility:**
- Was it easy to get involved?

**Motivation:**
- Why did you want to take part?

**Planning:**
- What were the different stages to the work?

**Responsibility and skills:**
- What was your job (what did you do)?

**Outcomes:**
- What part of being involved was the most important to you?

**Support:**
- What support did adults/staff/teachers give you?

**Methods:**
- What different ways did adults/staff/teachers gather your views and listen to you?

**Improvement:**
- What changes do you think were made because you were involved?

**Feedback:**
- How were you given feedback?

**Monitoring and evaluation:**
- How was the project/activity evaluated?

**Acknowledgement and remuneration:**
- How were you thanked for your involvement?
1. UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2009) General Comment Number 12, the child’s right to be heard

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