



Participation

Providing opportunities for young people to express their views and ideas directly to government, industry and non-government agencies is very important. It can provide clarity and inspiration, provoke thought, or a revision of what was thought acceptable. It must be a vital part of the business of providing services to children and young people.

The Western Australian Parliament, in passing the *Commissioner for Children and Young People Act 2006* (WA), has highlighted the importance of government and non-government agencies involving children and young people in decision-making that affects their lives. In particular, the Parliament has provided the Commissioner with the functions of:

- promoting the participation of children and young people
- encouraging agencies to seek the participation of children and young people
- developing participation guidelines to be used by agencies.¹

What is participation?

'Participation' is the active involvement of children and young people in being informed, expressing their views, having their views listened to, and making decisions. Throughout Western Australia there are many positive examples of children and young people participating in their local community, for example, in schools and community groups.

Why is participation important?

We can make children more visible by involving them directly in decisions that impact on them and better outcomes will be reached when children and young people's views are taken into account and seriously considered. There are essentially three sound reasons for valuing the participation of children and young people.

1. Citizenship

Children are citizens. They have a role in building and sustaining communities. Participation increases the social inclusion of children and young people and gives us a more complete picture about how communities work.²

2. Developing capacity

Participation helps develop children and young people's level of responsibility and decision-making skills. It improves their relationships and ability to communicate with professionals and peers, and increases their sense of control and self-esteem.

3. Good business practice

Consultation with children and young people as users of a particular service or program is simply good business practice. Their involvement can make sure what is provided is what is needed, lead to an increased use of the service and improve their experience of a service. Further, children and young people are more likely to feel that the service is better or the process and outcome is fairer if they have been involved in its development.

What are the types of participation?

There are different forms of participation. Key techniques are:

Consultation: a short-term or one-off mechanism for children and young people to be involved in decision-making about a limited set of issues. Examples of this technique include focus groups or surveys.

Involvement: working together to ensure children and young people's views are considered in the decisions made by adults, for example a stakeholder meeting.

Collaboration: a partnership with children and young people where decision-making is shared, for example a youth advisory council.

Empowerment: placing the final decision-making in the hands of young people. An example of this includes a group or body run by children and young people.

Each technique requires a different strategy and allocation of resources and can be used to achieve different outcomes. It is important, however, that participation is meaningful for the children and young people involved.

'If consultation is to be meaningful, documents as well as processes need to be made accessible. But appearing to "listen" to children is relatively unchallenging; giving due weight to their views requires real change. Listening to children should not be seen as an end in itself, but rather as a means by which States make their interactions with children and their actions on behalf of children ever more sensitive to the implementation of children's rights.'³

Planning a participation strategy

Meaningful participation resulting in positive outcomes for children and young people and your organisation occurs with careful planning. Participation techniques and methods must be carefully tailored to the issue. In some circumstances, it would be too great a burden to expect children to make the decision. For example, in family law matters a child's *involvement* may be appropriate. On the other hand, a *collaboration* technique enabling children and young people to share the decision-making with adults could be suitable in town planning decisions or in making policy recommendations.

Improving current practices

It may be necessary to 'shake up' existing attitudes and practices if participation with children and young people is going to be meaningful for them and achieve benefits for your organisation.⁴

Poor participation practice	Good participation practice
Participation as an afterthought (a tick-a-box addition to decision making), a one-off, or a fad.	Embed participation as a valued organisational practice.
Focussing only on process rather than outcomes.	Look at what will be improved for children and young people as a result of their participation.
Negative adult attitudes – ‘it’s easier to do it myself’, ‘they don’t really want to be involved’, ‘we’ve made good decisions for years without kids’.	Value participation as a right, acknowledge the benefits of engagement, realise that young people and adults have different world views.
Becoming ‘stuck’ in rigid and imposed participation requirements.	Be flexible to develop participation methods best suited to the issue and the young people involved.
Participation being (or appearing to be) tokenistic or manipulative. Children and young people feeling frustrated with the process.	Be clear about what you are trying to achieve and the level of participation. Seek feedback during the process, show evidence of how views have influenced decision-making and explain why something different has happened.

Watch this space

The participation of children and young people can appear daunting, especially if it is something your organisation is unfamiliar with. The Commissioner will soon be releasing participation guidelines to assist organisations, researchers and practitioners to achieve the best outcomes. The guidelines will provide information on deciding to involve children and young people, preparations for their involvement, the practicalities of involving them and following up.

The participation guidelines will provide a great resource for any organisation wishing to have children and young people participate in their service or the development of a program or policy.

They will be available on the Commissioner’s website from mid October 2009.

¹ Sections 19(b) and 20(1)(d).

² Hoffman-Ekstein J, Michaux A, Bessell S, Mason J, Watson E' *Children's agency in communities: A review of literature and the policy and practice context*, Paddington NSW: Benevolent Society, 2008, p. 3.

³ Committee on the Rights of the Child General Comment No 5, 2003, p. 4-5

⁴ Adapted from Children's Rights Alliance for England *Listen and Change: A Guide to Children and Young People's Participation Rights*, 2008, p. 35; NSW Commissioner for Children and Young People *Research and Resources about Participation*. (http://www.kids.nsw.gov.au/uploads/documents/tps_resources.pdf).