

## Guidelines for Child Participation

### Child participation

Child participation is essential in **determining the best interests of children** in service planning and provision. Children and young people have many good ideas about what would improve their lives, and make help more effective. Child participation thus improves quality of care by **making services child-centred**. In contrast, failing to listen to children can lead to ineffective and even wrong interventions.

Child participation preserves not only the child's rights, but also their autonomy. When you find ways to adapt to the children's interests and capabilities, they will feel more responsible and empowered to improve their lives. Furthermore, **child participation activities will allow them to develop confidence, social, cognitive and emotional skills** to improve their daily functioning.

*"I was too nervous and very scared at the beginning when my friends pointed at me to read the speech. I was not confident that I would make it through as a girl. But after getting training and rehearsing for eight hours, I was able to deliver the speech to the best of my ability and attracted the attention of the audience and the media. Thanks to Help a Child and thanks to Boruboru, I am now a different person who can represent my fellow girls effectively and create an enabling environment for children and girls specifically." Girl, 16 years, South Sudan*

However, implementing **the child's right to be heard** and to be taken seriously is not easy. Engaging children can be challenging because the value of children taking part in decision-making processes is often not recognized. Creating awareness on the importance of children's active involvement is, therefore, the first step towards achieving meaningful child participation.

Another challenge is not only to talk about child participation but to actually take on board the ideas they have. Children will have their own views on what is relevant, and this may differ from adult priorities. Their voice must be listened to, and they need to experience that their views have been taken into account in following actions and planning interventions. Most children are not used to being consulted and to think about decision-making as a way by which they may exercise control over their lives. If a child has never been asked what he or she thinks about issues concerning their lives, it is likely that they will need encouragement in expressing their views. It is thus important to consider ways to make it comfortable and fun for them to join and to express their views.

### Child participation in development programs

The participation of children will help to address their needs and to develop sustainable interventions. They should thus be involved in the identification and prioritization of their needs (mapping process), as well as in the development, implementation and monitoring of the activities.

Involving children should pay attention to their perspectives, what decisions and choices they make in order to cope with hardship and child protection issues, how they mobilize and access resources, and what sources of resilience they define. Recognizing social relationships that are supportive to children is essential, as these can be further cultivated and nurtured.

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### The ladder of child participation

Hart (1997) developed the ladder of child participation to help us better understand child participation. It is a typology that can help us understand the way in which participation is a process rather than a product. It has turned out to be a powerful tool for the evaluation of child participation initiatives.

The upper levels express increasing degrees of initiation by children. However, they are not meant to imply that a child should always be attempting to operate at the highest level of their competence. The figure is rather meant for adults facilitators to establish the conditions that enable groups of children to work at whatever levels on different projects. An important principle is to avoid working at the three lowest levels, the rungs of non-participation (Hart, 1997, 410).

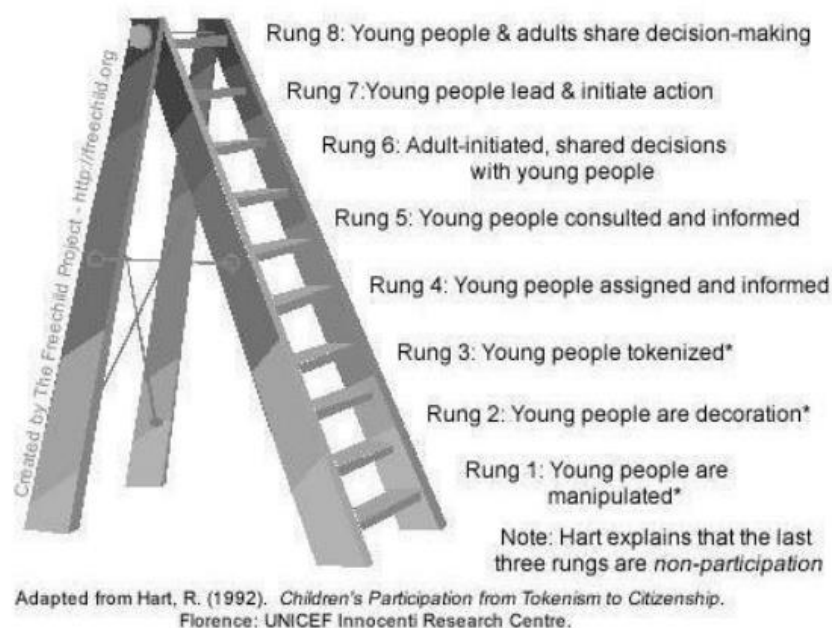


Figure 16: Ladder of children's participation (Origin: Hart, 1997)

The ladder of participation is often used to represent levels of children's participation. However, it is important to be aware of the fact that what it depicts are not levels of children's participation but the varying roles adults play in relation to children's participation.

### The Nine Basic Requirements for Meaningful and Ethical Children's Participation<sup>1</sup>

Save the Children developed the nine basic requirements for children's participation based on extensive experiences. These requirements are a helpful tool for ensuring safety, quality and meaningful participation and should function as starting point for all activities that involve participation of children.

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<sup>1</sup> Save the Children, 2021, The Nine Basic Requirements for Meaningful and Ethical Children's Participation

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According to these requirements children's participation should be:

- 1) Transparent and informative
  - ✓ Provide child-friendly information in appropriate and accessible languages/formats
  - ✓ Define roles and responsibilities, opportunities and limitations
- 2) Voluntary
  - ✓ Ensure children have time to make an informed decision about their involvement
  - ✓ Ensure children can withdraw at any time
  - ✓ Address adult/child power imbalances to ensure a truly voluntary process
- 3) Respectful
  - ✓ Take into account children's other commitments/rights (e.g. school/ work/play)
  - ✓ Ensure ways of working are culture and gender sensitive
  - ✓ Key adults (parents, teachers, etc.) are supportive and informed
- 4) Relevant
  - ✓ Ensure the issues are of real relevance to the children
  - ✓ Support child defined initiatives and topics
  - ✓ Ensure adults have not pressured children
- 5) Child-friendly
  - ✓ Use child friendly methods and approaches
  - ✓ Ensure meeting places are child friendly and accessible
- 6) Inclusive
  - ✓ Engage children of different genders, ages, backgrounds and abilities
  - ✓ Provide safe space for different groups of children to explore issues relevant to them (e.g. girls working separately from boys, if needed)
  - ✓ Ensure the process is nondiscriminatory and inclusive
  - ✓ Ensure those most impacted by discrimination and inequality have equal access
  - ✓ Ensure methods and tools are accessible and promote equal access
- 7) Supported by training
  - ✓ Ensure staff and partners have the knowledge and skills to facilitate child participation processes
- 8) Safe and sensitive to risk
  - ✓ Undertake conflict sensitivity and risk assessments
  - ✓ Develop a child safeguarding plan
  - ✓ Ensure all children know where to go for help if needed
- 9) Accountable
  - ✓ Develop a monitoring and evaluation (M&E) strategy
  - ✓ Engage children in M&E processes
  - ✓ Define communication and follow up mechanisms with children
  - ✓ Ensure children see the results of their participation

Some additional tips for effective child participation:

- Take enough time for children to participate and invest in building a relationship. Investing in establishing a nurturing and positive relationship contributes to them feeling safe and valued. Even very young children immediately feel if someone is genuinely interested and cares.

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- Children are more likely to participate when they feel valued and empowered. The environment should be child-friendly, welcoming/inclusive, fun/engaging and encouraging.
- The purpose of the activities/meetings is clear to children, as well as their expected roles and responsibilities.
- Children experience a sense of ownership.
- Activities should build on personal knowledge, skills, experience and issues that routinely affect, hence matter to children. Their own experience is the starting point for reflection on issues concerning their lives.
- Acknowledge children's other responsibilities (like school or assisting parents) in the planning of activities.
- Appeal to what children like and know by using pedagogical tools such as visual aids, games, stories, drawing, sports, music, peer interviews, group discussions, or children's meetings.
- Involve key adults in children's lives in the activities.

In conclusion, child participation should acknowledge both the child's autonomy and their potential vulnerability. It is, therefore, important to provide safety, care, support and structure throughout this process.

### *More information about child participation*

- ❖ Child to Child is an international child-rights agency with extensive experience in promoting children's participation and child-led approaches: [Child to Child](#)
- ❖ War Child has developed an overview of essential standards for child participation, which can be downloaded at:  
[https://www.warchildholland.org/sites/default/files/bijlagen/node\\_7346/22-2015/minimum\\_standards\\_for\\_child\\_participation\\_-\\_a4.pdf](https://www.warchildholland.org/sites/default/files/bijlagen/node_7346/22-2015/minimum_standards_for_child_participation_-_a4.pdf)
- ❖ Save the Children developed a toolkit for monitoring and evaluating children's participation at: <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/toolkit-monitoring-and-evaluating-childrens-participation-introduction-booklet-1>
- ❖ Other information about child participation and examples of participative activities developed by Unicef can be found at:  
[https://www.unicef.org/adolescence/cypguide/resourceguide\\_monitoring.html](https://www.unicef.org/adolescence/cypguide/resourceguide_monitoring.html)  
<https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/insight6.pdf>  
[https://www.unicef.org/adolescence/cypguide/files/Children\\_Participation\\_in\\_Programming\\_Cycle.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/adolescence/cypguide/files/Children_Participation_in_Programming_Cycle.pdf)  
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