

“ Listen – Act – Change

Council of Europe Handbook on children’s participation

For professionals working for and with children



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Building a Europe
for and with children



Annex 1

THE NINE BASIC REQUIREMENTS FOR EFFECTIVE AND ETHICAL PARTICIPATION: THE IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE



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1. Requirement One: Participation is transparent and informative

Children must be given information about their right to participate in a child-friendly and accessible format.

This means in practice that:

- ▶ Children's participation has a clear purpose.
- ▶ Children understand how much impact they are able to have on decision making.
- ▶ The roles and responsibilities of those involved are clear and well understood.
- ▶ Children agree with the goals and targets associated with their participation.

2. Requirement Two: Participation is voluntary

Children must be able to choose whether or not they would like to participate and must be informed and able to withdraw from activities at any time.

This means in practice that:

- ▶ Children are given time to consider their involvement and are able to provide informed consent.
- ▶ Children are aware and are able to withdraw at any time they wish.
- ▶ Children's other commitments are respected and accommodated (e.g. work and school).

3. Requirement Three: Participation is respectful

Children should be treated with respect and provided with opportunities to express their views freely and initiate ideas. Staff should also respect, and gain an understanding of, the family, school and cultural context of children's lives.

This means in practice that:

- ▶ Children are able to freely express their views and are treated with respect.
- ▶ Where children are selected as representatives, the process will be based on principles of democracy and avoid discrimination.
- ▶ Ways of working build self-esteem and confidence, enabling children to feel that they have valid experience and views to contribute.
- ▶ Support from staff should be utilised to gain respect for children by other key duty bearers.

4. Requirement Four: Participation is relevant

Participation should build on children's own knowledge and focus on issues which are relevant to their lives and the local context.

This means in practice that:

- ▶ Activities that children are involved in are of real relevance to their experiences, knowledge and abilities.
- ▶ Participation approaches and methods build on local knowledge and practices.
- ▶ Children are involved in setting the criteria for selection and representation for participation.
- ▶ Children are involved in ways, at levels and at a pace appropriate to their capacities and interests.

5. Requirement Five: Participation is child-friendly

Child-friendly approaches should be used to ensure children are well prepared for their participation and are able to contribute meaningfully to activities. Participation approaches and methods should be designed or adapted based on children's ages and abilities.

This means in practice that:

- ▶ Time and resources are made available for quality participation and children are properly supported to prepare for it.
- ▶ Methods of involvement are developed in partnership or in consultation with children.
- ▶ Adults have the capacity to support and ensure child-friendly approaches and ways of working.
- ▶ Meeting places and activity locations are child-friendly.
- ▶ Children are given accessible information in child-friendly formats.

6. Requirement Six: Participation is inclusive

Children's participation must provide opportunities for children in vulnerable situations to be involved and should challenge existing patterns of discrimination.

This means in practice that:

- ▶ Children are not discriminated against because of age, race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status.
- ▶ Children's involvement aims to include children from all backgrounds, which could mean reaching out to children in their local community.
- ▶ Participation is flexible enough to respond to the needs, expectations and situations of different groups of children.
- ▶ The age range, gender and abilities of children are taken into account.
- ▶ Staff must be sensitive to the cultures of all children participating.

7. Requirement Seven: Participation is supported by training for adults

Staff must have the knowledge and capacity to facilitate meaningful children's participation.

This means in practice that:

- ▶ All staff and managers are sensitised to children's participation, understand its importance and the need for commitment to it.
- ▶ Staff are provided with appropriate training, tools and other opportunities in participatory practice.
- ▶ Staff are effectively supported and supervised, and participatory practice is evaluated.
- ▶ Staff are able to express any views or anxieties about involving children, with the expectation that these will be addressed in a constructive way.
- ▶ Specific technical skills or expertise is built up through a combination of recruitment, selection, staff development and practice exchange.
- ▶ Relations between individual staff, and between staff and management, model appropriate behaviour, treating each other with respect and honesty.

8. Requirement Eight: Safe and sensitive to risk

Adults working with children have a duty of care. Staff must take every precaution to minimise the risks to children of abuse and exploitation and any other negative consequences of participation.

This means in practice that:

- ▶ The protection rights of children are paramount in the way children's participation is planned and organised.
- ▶ Children involved in participation work are aware of their right to be safe from abuse and know where to go for help if needed.
- ▶ Skilled, knowledgeable staff are delegated to address and coordinate child protection issues during participatory processes.
- ▶ Safeguards are in place to minimise risks and prevent abuse.
- ▶ Staff organising a participatory process have a child protection strategy that is specific to each process. The strategy must be well communicated and understood by staff.
- ▶ Safeguards are in place to minimise and prevent abuse.
- ▶ Staff recognise their legal and ethical responsibilities in line with their agency's Code of Conduct and Child Safeguarding Policy.
- ▶ Child protection procedures recognise the particular risks faced by some children and extra barriers they face in obtaining help.
- ▶ Consent is obtained for the use of all information provided by children and information identified as confidential is safeguarded at all times.
- ▶ A formal complaints procedure is set up to allow children involved in participatory activities to make complaints in confidence. Information about the procedure is available in relevant languages and formats.
- ▶ No photographs, videos or digital images of a child can be taken or published without that child's explicit consent for a specific use.
- ▶ Responsibilities relating to liability, safety, travel and medical insurance are clearly delegated and effectively planned for.

9. Requirement Nine: Participation is accountable

Following their participation, children must be provided with feedback and/or follow up regarding: how their views have been interpreted and used; how they have influenced any outcomes; and where appropriate the opportunity for them to be involved in follow-up processes and activities.

This means in practice that:

- ▶ Children are involved in the work of relevant organisations at the earliest possible stage.
- ▶ Staff and partners are accountable to children for their commitments.
- ▶ Children are supported to participate in follow-up and evaluation processes.
- ▶ Children are supported to share their experiences of participation with peer groups, their local communities and other organisations.
- ▶ Children are given rapid and clear feedback on their involvement, impact, outcomes and next steps.
- ▶ Feedback reaches all children involved.
- ▶ Children are asked about their satisfaction with participatory processes and their views on how they could be improved.
- ▶ Mistakes identified through evaluations are acknowledged and commitments given about how lessons learnt will be used to improve participatory processes in the future.

Since coming into force over 30 years ago, Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child has affirmed children's right to express their views on all matters that affect them. The Council of Europe has sought to make this right real and concrete in the member states through its Recommendation CM/Rec(2012)2 on the participation of children and young people under the age of 18, and has also embedded child participation in its own standard-setting, monitoring and capacity building work as well as at its international events. This Handbook represents a substantive contribution to the Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2016 to 2021) promoting child participation under its second priority area.

The Handbook was produced by the Children's Rights Division of the Council of Europe in collaboration with international child participation experts and following the consultation of more than 50 children and young people on the challenges to be addressed.

It is meant to be a hands-on tool for people who work with children in a professional capacity, for example in schools, hospitals, alternative care settings, child protection services, and other social services. It is designed for social workers, teachers, judges, lawyers, immigration officers, psychologists, civil servants, youth workers and day care workers, offering them practical approaches to "do" children's participation and make it work for all children, including those in vulnerable situations, both at an individual and a collective level.

Professionals using this Handbook are invited to improve their capacities and skills to "listen" to children, to "act" upon the lessons learned and to "change" any decision making involving or concerning children. They are also invited to spread the good practice promoted through this tool and thus, in the end, to make a life-changing impact for children in those contexts where decisions are made without truly listening to them.

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The Council of Europe is the continent's leading human rights organisation. It comprises 47 member states, including all members of the European Union. All Council of Europe member states have signed up to the European Convention on Human Rights, a treaty designed to protect human rights, democracy and the rule of law. The European Court of Human Rights oversees the implementation of the Convention in the member states.