

“ Listen – Act – Change

Council of Europe Handbook on children’s participation

For professionals working for and with children



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SECTION 2

DEVELOPING PARTICIPATORY ORGANISATIONS AND ENVIRONMENTS



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This section focuses on the organisations or systems within which professionals work – for example, schools, early childhood education centres, hospitals, health clinics, offices, justice and child protection systems. It explores how organisations and systems can be adapted or changed to create more respectful spaces for children to be able to express their views with trust and confidence and how to strengthen capacity for participation. The aim is to integrate children’s participation into everyday decision making for individual children and into the functioning and management of organisations or systems. This is achieved through establishing high-quality, rolling, rights-based participation processes throughout the organisation including representative structures such as school councils, patient and service user forums.

Professionals can take a series of steps to help co-create with children, an environment where meaningful, ethical and effective participation can thrive:

- ▶ 2.1 Ensuring ownership at the highest level
- ▶ 2.2 Undertaking an assessment of current play
- ▶ 2.3 Developing organisational policy and procedures
- ▶ 2.4 Building staff capacity
- ▶ 2.5 Establishing safe and accessible complaints mechanisms
- ▶ 2.6 Monitoring and reviewing implementation

2.1 ENSURING OWNERSHIP AT THE HIGHEST LEVEL

The first step of each participatory process is to secure a commitment to designing policies and services around the needs and rights of children and young people, giving them a real say and real choices about the institution or agencies policies and services that affect them. Teachers, social workers, health care workers, psychologists, court welfare officers, lawyers, judges, and politicians who want to improve the scope and practice of children’s participation in their organisation or agency should seek allies (including wherever possible children and senior professionals) and build networks. Professionals should involve these allies in re-examining how resources for children’s participation can be reallocated so that participation processes that cater for the needs of all children can be supported. Developing the infrastructure and building organisational capacity needs time, commitment, sufficient staff support and an undertaking to adopt an organisational learning approach. For the most part, change of culture is needed as much as resources and it is important that senior managers feel part of this and lead by example. *Conversations and dialogue* between children and senior managers or ministers can create understanding and impetus for this kind of change.

Professionals wanting to drive children’s participation within their agency or institution, the so-called ‘champions’ of children’s participation should prepare information that illustrates the benefits of children’s participation and highlights the legal and policy obligations to enable it. They should provide senior managers with advice on some easy first steps to be taken and then follow up this progress with further advice as set out in this section of the handbook. The *checklists* at the end of section 2 illustrate in two different settings, the key elements of a child-friendly and participatory institution.



EXAMPLE

Conversations and dialogue with government ministers

In Finland, a hundred children (aged 5-17) from across the country took over the Government Palace on 20 November 2019 and worked with 15 ministers and 40 officials for three hours. They attended workshops about social media, global warming, good living standards and prepared a statement called “Children’s Will”. The statement was given to the Chancellor of Justice and Deputy Chancellor of Justice and it was discussed in a government meeting called “evening school” which is a nonformal working meeting organised once per week.

The issues raised by the children were taken into consideration in several places afterwards. For example, the Minister of Family Affairs and Social Services raised the children's wish for a low threshold for access to mental health services. The issues raised by the children were promoted in development of the upcoming National Child Strategy. The event also helped a lot of decision makers realize they can actually work with children and young people and that children have important perspectives and considerations. This may act as an incentive to take children's inclusion into account more in the future.

See <https://www.lskl.fi/blogi/lasten-tahto-politiikan-tulisi-olla-vuorovaikutusta-ja-kuuntelua/>

2.2 UNDERTAKING AN ASSESSMENT OF THE CURRENT STATE OF PLAY

Creating participatory environments requires a strategic approach responsive to the local factors such as the political environment, administrative structures, population size and available resources. The current situation of children's participation needs to be assessed to identify good practice and areas for improvement. Children should be involved in such an assessment. The *Council of Europe's Children's Participation Assessment Tool (CPAT)* provides advice and guidance on this.

Professionals leading the change should work with all stakeholders (including the affected children) to define specific objectives for the different participation activities to be undertaken (for example, service user forums, designing complaints procedures). These should cover objectives for inclusion of diverse groups of children, and objectives for outcomes (impact on children's lives, on professional understanding and practice, on policy, planning and law, and on public attitudes). This will help clarify thinking and ensure a shared understanding between children, staff and partner organisations. Anticipate that children's priorities may differ to professionals.



EXAMPLE

Child participation assessment tool (CPAT)

The Council of Europe's [Child Participation Assessment Tool](#) provides a framework for 10 indicators against which member states assess policy and practice in respect of *The Recommendation on Participation*. Member states gather information from children, professionals working with children and government departments. The assessment highlights areas requiring attention and plans further action. Feedback on assessments using the Tool, undertaken by around 10 member States (as of May 2020), indicates that the process itself contributes to greater awareness of the meaning and significance of children's participation; increases interest in strengthening participation opportunities; and highlights gaps in current law, policy and implementation. Elements of the Tool can help frame assessments of practice at an organisational level or in a specific context. For example, Indicator 7 describes information measures that should be in place in children's homes, schools, hospitals and other places working with children.

Indicator 7: Children are provided with information about their right to participate in decision making

Government departments and those delivering key services to children are required to produce information on children and young people's rights to participate including, for example, information on complaints mechanisms, legal processes and opportunities to participate in their own organisations and in decision-making or planning processes. Information available in child friendly formats, including through social media networks, should be accessible to children of different ages and abilities. It should be made available in arenas that are accessed by children such as specialised websites or helplines. Education on children's rights, including the right to participate, is a mandatory component of school curricula. Public information and education programmes (ideally as part of a national strategy) are in place to raise awareness among the general public, children, young people, parents and professionals, of children's right to participate, including the right to form or be part of children or young people's organisations.

2.3 DEVELOPING AN ORGANISATIONAL POLICY AND PROCEDURES

Participatory ways of working need to be informed by organisational policies and procedures, developed in partnership with children. The policies and procedures will need to enshrine practice which enables and ensures that children can share their views, professionals can take these into account, and that inclusion is promoted. The comprehensive policy developed by the European association Eurochild on children's participation within their own network provides a useful model to consider.



EXAMPLE

Eurochild children's participation strategy

Eurochild have developed an exemplary policy on children's participation contained within their [children's participation strategy](#). It was co-created with children. The strategy sets out an overall mission and policy for involving children in different aspects of Eurochild's work and supporting child-led activities, including influencing activities, campaigns, strategic planning and events. It describes the role of Eurochild's Children's Council (ECC), and National Eurochild Forums (NEFs) as well as operational rules and arrangements for recognition and evaluation. Children continue to be involved in development of the policy through regular monitoring and reviews.

Participation requires the development of relationships with children that are rooted in mutual trust and respect. Policies and procedures that organisations adopt should therefore promote the conditions which make positive interpersonal relationships with children possible. Children's involvement is then integral to daily practice, rather than an after-thought or an occasional tick box exercise and them making decisions about their own care, education or other aspects of their life is a rolling process.

Because creating participatory environments for children will challenge prevailing attitudes towards children, children's participation strategies need to contain mechanisms that check and review that legal obligations are being followed. Participation strategies should therefore explicitly require that the organisations demonstrate how they have taken children's views into account, that children can access complaints mechanisms if their rights to influence decisions are not implemented, and that monitoring, evaluation and review are written in, with provision for children to be involved in this.

Policies and procedures should enable the co-creation of a range of spaces and processes through which children can influence and take part in decision making and receive feedback. Professionals will need to think about how any children's structures (such as forums and advisory groups) can be best positioned within organisations in a sustainable manner, so they can influence adult decision-making arenas (such as management boards and tribunals). Those driving change should work to put in place mechanisms that ensure, within all settings, that children's views are presented in the relevant places and that they result in action. Professionals should consider how they can build clear and direct links between any new children's structures and corresponding adult ones, ensuring adults and children in the parallel structures know each other and work together.

Spaces and processes

The ultimate aim is to develop good practice across the whole setting - a school, a health care clinic, an educational psychology service, or an alternative care home - and to institutionalise participation. In schools, for example, cultures of respect for children's views can be created by following a [Rights Respecting School](#) or [Reggio Emilia](#) style, child-centred learning approach. These movements start from a professional and institutional commitment to personalised learning with children understanding, through explanations and experience, that they can influence their own learning programmes. Using a variety of informal and formal spaces and activities at different steps of collective participation processes can increase the feeling of inclusion of everyone, in ways that suit their needs. For example, children in formal spaces can identify issues and views can be investigated by involving children in informal spaces. This can help formal spaces become more inclusive (see [Annex 4](#) on challenging unintended organisational discrimination). Figure 9 below lists some of the more common formal and informal spaces that could be part of participation processes.

Figure 9: Formal and informal participation spaces and activities

Formal spaces provide designated opportunities to involve children in governance and decision making:

- ▶ Dedicated mechanisms, including school councils, patient or service user fora
- ▶ One-off consultations and inquiries
- ▶ Regular group meetings
- ▶ Suggestion boxes
- ▶ Web-platforms
- ▶ Online feedback portals

Informal spaces are part of day-to-day child centred practice: they enable children to be listened to, as and when they feel it is appropriate. They inform decisions about personal care and services as a whole, and may include:

- ▶ Spending time alongside children
- ▶ On-going dialogue
- ▶ Observation
- ▶ Listening to spontaneous communication

When creating and improving spaces and activities for children's participation think about the nine basic requirements for a safe, secure, inclusive and enjoyable experience for children (see [Annex 1](#), nine principles for effective and ethical participation and [Annex 3](#), checklist on safety and well-being).

Other organisational policies and procedures that professionals should consider as important for institutionalising participation practice across their organisation include:

- ▶ A set of quality standards or charters for services (developed in participation with children) to help ensure the participatory approach scales out to the whole organisation, establishing participation as the accepted way of working.
- ▶ Building participation into job description and including work on participation as part of staff induction and appraisals.
- ▶ Establishing *safe and accessible complaints mechanisms* (see 2.5).

Of course, policy is insufficient without also providing support and building the commitment and skills amongst staff to the new ways of working.



EXAMPLE

Child-friendly Health Care

The Council of Europe [Recommendation on Child-Friendly Healthcare](#) contain standards in many areas, including children's participation, for example:

- Facilitating the implementation of the principle in Article 6 of the Oviedo Convention which states that as children's age or maturity evolve, their views should be increasingly taken into account in decisions about their own health.
- Founding all decisions regarding children's health on their best interests, in a process involving the children themselves and their families.
- Improving health education to empower children to make informed choices about healthy lifestyles.
- Consulting and involving children and, where appropriate, their families, in the planning, assessment and improvement of health care services.
- Facilitating the development of appropriate practical tools for health practitioners to implement the child-friendly health care approach.

In [some members states](#), this Recommendation is now being implemented. There are also national level standards, for example in Spain, a "[Child Friendly Hospitals](#)" status is awarded to settings which ensure that children have accessible information about their medical conditions. Having this information helps children take part in decisions about their day to day care and management of their conditions, as well as about medical procedures.

2.4 BUILDING STAFF CAPACITY

Staff in any organisation should be at the heart of any participation strategy and professionals will need to plan processes to build their capacity to work in new ways. To develop the knowledge, attitudes, skills and confidence of any team, identify and support mechanisms for:

- ▶ Providing training on child rights and children's participation.
- ▶ Ensuring all staff have sufficient time to actively listen to children.
- ▶ Involving staff in undertaking direct sessions/projects with children.
- ▶ Ensuring senior management take part in some participation activities.
- ▶ Organising shadowing opportunities for children within the institution/ organisation.
- ▶ Building links with parents and families.
- ▶ Identifying existing, and recruiting new, children's participation "champions" (see below).
- ▶ Involving children in delivering training and recruiting staff (see below).

Training

The Recommendation on Participation urges member states to:

enhance professional capacity concerning children and young people's participation among teachers, lawyers, judges, police, social workers, community workers, psychologists, caregivers, officials of community homes and prisons, health-care professionals, civil servants, immigration officials, religious leaders and members of the media as well as for leaders of children's and youth organisations.

Where possible, children and young people themselves should be involved in this capacity building as trainers and experts. So, plan for how to involve children and young people in training, using [Section 4](#) as a guide for how to make this a participatory process and [Section 5](#) for useful resources.

Training for children and professionals should be developed on the basis of a training needs analysis. Organisations or institutions will have strengths in some areas and weaknesses in others. Professionals should consider all of the staff within the team or organisation and ask the following questions:

1. Do they have understanding of the concept of children's participation as set out in this Handbook and in the Council of Europe's *Recommendation on Participation* and the UN *General Comment 12*?
2. Does the training provided equip and assess staff in respect of attitudes as well as competencies and knowledge?
3. Which aspects of participatory processes have relevance for their role?
4. Is there new knowledge and skills that some staff need in order to fulfil their responsibilities?
5. Are there staff and children in contact with the organisation who could help provide relevant information and deliver training?
6. What is the necessary timescale for rolling out this training programme?
7. How will you know that the training has been successful?

Champions of children's participation

'Champions' of children's participation can be adults or children who believe children's participation is and should be a powerful tool for improving practice, usually based on their own experiences, values and an understanding of how it works. These people can be real catalysts for change and any capacity building programme developed should aim to engage existing champions within the organisation and recruit new ones. Champions can be the "conscience" within an organisation, reminding others of the importance of involving children and providing support and confidence on how best to do it. They can bring new ways of thinking and working and help to create spaces to be innovative. They support change across the organisation, rather than being the only ones working in a participatory way. Key questions to consider include:

- ▶ Are there existing champions of children's participation in this organisation?
- ▶ What are their positions?
- ▶ How are they supported to network and promote their visions and knowledge?
- ▶ What are the best ways to create new champions within your organisation?

Involving children in the recruitment and selection of staff

There are many examples of children participating in the recruitment and selection of staff or volunteers in health care, child protection, education and alternative care settings. Children can be involved at any stage - drawing up job descriptions and person specifications, shortlisting, as a member of a formal interview panel or other assessment centres. There are tried and tested methods and models, including the following:

- ▶ **A parallel children and young people's panel.** This creates unique opportunities for children and young people to plan, organise and facilitate their own involvement. They can have a lot of control over the format of the interview and their role within it.
- ▶ **A guided group discussion.** This brings together all of the candidates and asks them to either answer in turn or openly discuss a number of topics or statements relevant to the post or the children and young people they would be working with.
- ▶ **Mixed adult and young people panel.** This involves children sitting alongside adults, usually on a formal interview panel. Candidates should be made aware of the different roles of the panel members.

When involved in recruitment, children, like adults require training and support. Be clear about children's role, what specific aspects of the work or the person specification they will assess and the weighting their views will carry in the final selection. Weighting for different aspects of the person specification (for example, strategic planning and financial management or knowledge of young people's issues and skills in working with children) can vary between members of the recruitment panels.



EXAMPLE

Child participation in the recruitment of an ombudsman

In Ireland, children have been involved in the process aimed at recruiting the Ombudsman for Children in 2014/2015. After having been selected via school networks and with the support of civil society organisations, on the basis of a number of diversity criteria (gender, race, ability and socio-economic mix, including seldom heard children and young people), they were consulted according to two different age groups (primary school and older young people). The process was run by the competent ministerial service and involved age-appropriate methodologies. Children were not only consulted on the "ideal qualities" for the new Ombudsman, but some of them were actually selected to take part in the adult interview panel of the Ombudsman candidates. The process was judged to have been a satisfactory experience by most stakeholders and to represent an important collective learning experience. Source: Department of Children and Youth Affairs, Ireland, August 2020.

2.5 SAFE AND CHILD FRIENDLY COMPLAINTS MECHANISMS

Children have the right to make a formal or informal complaint or challenge a decision of a court or other proceeding. Support to make a complaint should be provided to children in all settings such as schools, day care centres, children's homes, hospitals or penal institutions. Children should have good access to relevant information and independent advocacy to help them use the procedures effectively. Children should be able to contact an ombudsman or a person in a comparable position in order to ensure complaints are heard outside of the setting which is causing a concern when necessary.

Having in place child-friendly complaints procedures prescribed by law is one of the 10€ indicators the Council of Europe has developed in the [Child Participation Assessment Tool \(CPAT\)](#), to assist member states in assessing their progress towards full implementation of [The Recommendation on Participation](#).

Child-friendly complaints procedures have the following elements:

- ▶ **They are safe and accessible.** For example, children are protected from any retribution. Experience illustrates how children need to feel safe and confident in the arrangements for dealing with their concerns and complaints before they will use them. There are positive examples of the pro-active approach required with children coming into alternative care, being advised that any complaint or concern will be heard and taken seriously and that it will be dealt with by an independent person.

- ▶ **Information and assistance are provided to children to enable them to lodge and pursue a complaint.** Many public services have procedures for dealing with customer complaints, but the information is often very technical. The survey undertaken for this Handbook highlighted examples of hospitals and schools producing accessible information about how to raise a concern and who can provide support with this.
- ▶ **Information is made available in age and disability appropriate formats.** Accessible information can be leaflets, brochures, posters for schools, and dedicated websites spread across locations where children are able to find them. One manager of a children's home explained that a poster explaining how the complaints procedure works was on the notice board at the home at all times with telephone numbers for children to contact in confidence. (See [Annex 2](#) of the Handbook for some advice on producing accessible information).
- ▶ **Follow-up, referral and response mechanisms are well-established.** To be effective these must demonstrate changes implemented in response to legitimate complaints.
- ▶ **Timely feedback is communicated directly to children.** Feedback should be in an accessible format. If deadlines are not adhered to, support children to challenge the delay and help get things moving (or find someone else who can).

UNICEF (2019) have developed a tool with detailed guidance on [Child-friendly complaint mechanisms](#), the principles to abide by, the key elements to be considered, the common issues and ways to overcome challenges, which also contains a number of examples from different countries.

2.6 MONITORING AND REVIEWING IMPLEMENTATION

Building participatory environments requires regular opportunities to reflect on practice, to review progress and to capture and share the learning and successes. On-going reflection and self-evaluation by staff and children can help increase access to the relevant *Spaces* and *Audience* as well as ensuring that children experience inclusive opportunities to *Voice* their views and *Influence* decisions (see page 15, Section 1). Busy practitioners often find it difficult to stop and reflect on what they do. A participatory organisation or environment will have policies and practices that encourage and support staff to take time out to reflect and learn.

Developing a more participatory environment for children can be a big step for some organisations. For other organisations it may just mean a series of small steps forward from their existing practice. Whether the steps taken are to be big or small the staff and children involved need to know that it is safe to name any challenges that they have faced in changing institutional environments.

In addition to time, creating environments in which it is safe to name and reflect on challenges and successes requires a combination of reassurance, protection and anonymity. Protection and anonymity can be provided by ensuring that there are ways of passing on learning that are de-personalised, perhaps through suggestion boxes and group discussions without the presence of managers. But most importantly, reassurance must be provided by giving clear messages to children, their advocates and associated professionals, that this is a learning organisation. As we hope the Handbook makes clear, learning and finding effective ways of securing inclusive and impactful children's participation is an on-going process.



CHECKLIST

A listening 'alternative care' institution

It is particularly important for alternative care settings to become "listening institutions". It can be hard to replicate positive and family style conversation and listening in more formal living institutions. Deliberate steps must be taken to ensure that the staff hear and take proper account of the children's views and respect their civil rights.

[Securing Children's Rights: A guide to professionals working in alternative care](#) provides useful advice on those deliberate steps for those working with children:

- Listen to children, their wishes and the messages that they give about the way in which they take in information.
- Ask children to comment, it helps them and the adults to evaluate if they have understood what has been discussed.
- Give children the chance to ask questions.

- Leave room for them to express their feelings and create opportunities for this.
- Show children positive reinforcement with encouragement and praise when they speak out.
- Communicate with children in simple language that is clear and comprehensible for them, depending upon their age and level of maturity.
- Use for this purpose tools such as drawings, photographs, the child's personal objects, toys including little dolls (or simple pieces of wood that stand for the key people in the child's life: mother, father, brother, sister, grandparents, themselves).

Children should participate in deciding layout and the decoration of rooms, including their own room and shared spaces. This should be done in a warm way that encourages living together. Space should be made for every child to have objects around them and space, however small it may be (a shelf, cupboard or part of a cupboard) for their personal use. Children should be involved in decisions about the food they eat, for example, children should help plan weekly menus. Children feel more able to express their views freely where there is not a sharp division between living space and offices, this can be achieved by workers spending most of their time in living spaces and taking part in shared activities with children.



CHECKLIST

A child-friendly and participatory classroom

No two classrooms will be exactly the same. However, the following list illustrates features associated with a classroom where children's right to be heard is fully respected:

- Students and teachers negotiate and agree a classroom code of conduct, agreement or charter expressed in terms of rights from the UN Convention.
- Students have regular opportunities to give their teachers feedback on what helps them learn, what they enjoy most and what hinders their learning.
- Students are fully involved in the assessment of their own learning and the evaluation of their own work; there is supportive evaluation of their peer's work.
- Students have responsibility for aspects of classroom organisation
- Students have opportunities to make choices in their learning
- There is a strong emphasis on mutual support and collaboration.
- Teachers make use of a wide variety of teaching strategies and routes to learning, recognising that students may differ in their preferences for how they learn.
- Behaviour is good or improving as everyone listens to each other and recognises and respects the rights of all to their education.

Teachers and teaching assistants listen positively to students' views and show respect for their opinions; they avoid put downs and sarcasm; they give clear reasons for use of sanctions; teachers avoid use of 'blanket' sanctions of the whole class when only individual students have misbehaved; teachers show respect for teaching assistants and all other adults.

- Students respect and value each other's similarities and differences and support each other; there are few incidences of negative behaviour, name calling, racist or sexist comments.
- High status and adequate time is given to listening and acting on students' views, individually and collectively, for example through the school council.

Adapted from: [Every child's right to be heard: A resource guide on the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child General Comment no.12 \(2011\)](#) published by UNICEF and Save the Children.



HINTS AND TIPS

Making child participation work in the long term

Developing a participatory environment is a long-term project, here are some hints and tips:

- Get senior managers involved as soon as possible.
- Establish objectives for inclusion and outcomes and review progress regularly.
- Take your colleagues along on this journey.
- Involve children in training on children's participation and staff development.
- Be creative in co-designing participatory spaces and processes with children and ensure children have more than just one way to get involved.
- Find and nurture other champions of children's participation.
- Take time to reflect on personal and organisational practice. Be open to making and learning from mistakes as well as successes.

Once participation is underway, the challenge is to sustain enthusiasm and momentum. Here are some ideas on motivating commitment within your organisation:

- Provide on-going training and discussion opportunities.
- Highlight benefits and gains to staff and the organisation.
- Celebrate achievements with staff and children.
- Provide professional rewards and incentives for people who demonstrate changed attitudes and practice: profiling their work, bonuses and promotion.
- Celebrate outside recognition (e.g. visitors, references, good project reputation, positive inspection or evaluation).
- Enter award schemes that recognise high standards of participation.

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.