

Effective (and ethical and meaningful) participation



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What I am going to talk about

1. What is participation? The participation tree from Nicaragua.
2. Why is participation important?
3. What is effective (and ethical and meaningful) participation? How does the Norn Irish version compare with the United Nations' version?
4. Three types of participation – and their dark sides.
5. Conclusion: Why we have to insist on effective, ethical and meaningful participation.

The Participation Tree from Nicaragua

By the "Building a Children's Rights Culture" working group, CODENI, Nicaragua, August 2007
Translated from the original Spanish

To understand the tree, start at the roots.

The fruits: Respect, equality, respect for human rights, development, peace

The leaves of the tree: Children and young people empowered

- Children and young people as community educators
- Children and young people in community development
- Children and young people supporting others in difficulty
- Children and young people as defenders of children's rights
- Children and young people reporting abuse and exploitation
- Children and young people in educational policy and planning
- Children and young people as renewers and defenders of traditional culture
- Children and young people as spokespeople and representatives in local democracy
- Children and young people as protectors and defenders of the environment
- Children and young people in their own groups and organisations
- Children and young people in direct action for social change
- Children and young people in media and communications
- Children and young people as mediators of conflict
- Children and young people as a new generation of community leaders.

The branches of the tree are the various activity groups and spaces in which children and young people gradually develop their active and pro-active participation in tune with the growth of their knowledge and experience

The seed from which the tree grows is the family home: the first setting where the child learns to participate and be a part of the community

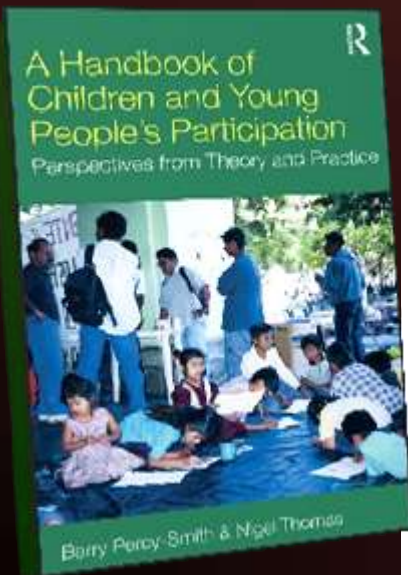


The trunk: The strong central trunk that holds up the whole tree is made up of all the learning processes through which children and young people gain awareness of their rights, raised self-esteem, awareness of themselves as members of society and rights-holders, as competent and capable of achieving anything in life; ability to express themselves and to organise.



The growing seedling is strengthened by attendance at organised activities outside the home: That's to say, the child becomes a "Participant".

Fertile soil: Participation is rooted in the children's rights focus and the legal framework that guarantees these rights: Children's Rights Code, UNCRC





2. Why is participation important?



1. Better decision-making means improved services, policies, provisions, budgets, quality of life.
2. Develops skills and knowledge for responsible citizenship, including tolerance, respect and empathy (“responsible” doesn’t mean meek and obedient. A responsible citizen can be a whistleblower or a trouble-maker if necessary).
3. Protects children: helps them develop confidence and self-esteem, empowers them to identify and speak about risks and denounce people who would do them harm.
4. Demands accountability from adults in power; promotes transparency, accountability and good governance, which means a fairer society.
5. Active citizenship builds stronger, safer communities; better places to live in.
6. Strengthens and defends democracy.
7. It is a fundamental human right (and by the way, though it is not a duty, when you exercise it, you are automatically taking on responsibility).

3. What is effective (and ethical and meaningful) participation?

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.



Experts from all over the world, meet in Geneva, Switzerland.



As well as reviewing 5-yearly reports from all the countries in the UN, the Committee can issue general guidance to the world's governments on what their obligations are with respect to children and young people's rights and what they must do to fulfil these.

These guidance papers for governments are called "General Comments".

In 2009 they issued a General Comment on *"The right of the child to be heard"*.

They said:



If participation is to be effective and meaningful, it needs to be understood as a process, not as an individual one-off event. Experience since the Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted in 1989 has led to a broad consensus on the basic requirements which have to be reached for effective, ethical and meaningful participation. (Para 133)

The nine basic requirements

All processes in which a child or children are heard and participate, must be:

1. Transparent and informative



2. Voluntary



3. Respectful



4. Relevant



5. Child-friendly



6. Inclusive



7. Supported by training for adults



8. Safe and sensitive to risks



9. Accountable





The Participation Network in Northern Ireland has also developed participation standards.

How do they compare?



The 9 basic requirements of the UNCRC

1. Participation is transparent and informative
2. Participation is voluntary
3. Participation is respectful
4. Participation is relevant
5. Participation is child friendly
6. Participation is inclusive
7. Participation is supported by training for adults
8. Participation is safe and sensitive to risk
9. Participation is accountable

Northern Ireland Standards

1. Use appropriate methods
(Train adults on these)
2. **Provide support** (Includes keeping children safe)
3. Provide knowledge and information
4. Give feedback
5. Inclusion. No discrimination
6. Treat children and young people with respect
They decide to participate or not – and what's relevant to them.
7. **Contact with senior decision-makers.**
8. **Children and young people involved at early stages.**

So, on some issues, the local standards are ahead of the United Nations!

4. Three types of participation:



Taken from “*Every child’s right to be heard*” (Lansdown 2010): A user guide to the UN CRC General Comment

Consultation:

Is when adults ask children for their views, and children are not involved beyond this.



Collaboration:

Is when adults and children and young people work together, sharing roles and responsibilities in planning and carrying out an activity.



Pro-activism (child-led):

Activities initiated, organised or run by children and young people themselves (adults may still provide support, though not always necessary).

But there are two sides to each one...

Consultation:

The powerful can listen to and take on board the children and young people's views and this can have a positive influence on policy-making etc.



OR: They can go through the motions of a consultation and totally ignore the results.

Collaboration:

Adults can facilitate a process in which children, young people and adults genuinely work together sharing roles and responsibilities according to their abilities.



OR: Adults can use their greater power, and access to resources, to manipulate the whole process to get whatever they want at the end of it (especially with younger children who have less experience).

Young people's pro-active participation:

Adults can support young people's independent initiatives: provide resources (transport, food, place to meet etc.), help them get access to the powerful who make decisions and control purse-strings.

OR: Adults can either completely ignore the young people's efforts, or worse, they can attempt to silence them or even punish them for getting out of line.



So ... it's not that one kind of participation is good and another kind is bad.
They all have a good and bad side.

But any kind of participation can be rendered meaningless if the basic requirements are not met.

5. To sum up...

It is important for adults to meet the requirements for effective, ethical and meaningful participation, and it is important for children and young people to insist that they do so and complain if they don't, because:

- ⇒ If participation isn't **transparent and informative**, it's secretive and manipulative.
- ⇒ If participation isn't **voluntary** it's being forced on children and young people against their will.
- ⇒ If participation isn't **respectful** it's disrespectful.
- ⇒ If participation isn't **relevant** it's pointless.
- ⇒ If participation isn't **child-friendly**, it's alien and hostile to children and young people.
- ⇒ If participation isn't **inclusive** it's discriminatory.
- ⇒ If participation isn't **supported by training for adults** it's being run by people who don't know what they're doing.
- ⇒ If participation isn't **safe and sensitive to risks** it's dangerous.
- ⇒ If participation isn't **accountable**, the powerful can and will ignore it.

