



## **Derby City and Neighbourhood Partnerships**

# **Engaging Children in Decision Making**

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## **1. Introduction**

- 1.2. Children have the right to be involved in decisions that affect them. They help to ensure services that are provided are relevant to children's needs.
- 1.3. There are many benefits to children participating in decision making, such as learning to consider the needs of others, developing problem-solving skills and it can increase their commitment to making decisions work. However when children are not being listened too and their views are not being given the same value as adults, they will often display feelings of frustration.
- 1.4. Adults need to start by examining their own beliefs about childhood and the capabilities of children, and how that affects the opportunities we offer them. This will encourage us to look at how much we currently value the children we work with in our organisation. Simply asking children what they think is unlikely to work, there needs to be thought given to the developmental needs, age and ability of the child/children to find the appropriate participation method.
- 1.5. To support and help organisations to involve children in decision making the Children and Young People's Participation Network have developed a best practice approach to participating with children.

## **2. Planning for Children's Involvement**

- 2.1 When planning to involve children in decision making we need to identify the following:
  - how are children participating now
  - the opportunities that children can get involved in
  - staff attitudes and beliefs to children being involved in decision making
  - a set of SMART outcomes for children's participation that should be agreed and signed up to by all staff
- 2.2. To enable children to participate in decision making we need to consider their:
  - experience of being able to interact with other children
  - developmental capacity to participate and make informed decisions
  - developmental and age appropriate information
  - developmental and age appropriate methods of participation

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- communication and language barriers
- cultural norms and religious beliefs
- managing children's expectations

### 3. Listening to Children

3.1. Children communicate in different ways and at different stages of their development. Children need to be provided with opportunities and choice including their interests and ensuring adequate time is given to them to be involved in decision making. Organisations should plan to engage with children appropriately and allocate the time for this to be meaningful and effective. A key way to make sure that children are being listened to, is by starting with observe, wait and listen which is part of the OWLing Strategy (Hanlen, 2011).

#### 3.2. Observe

- Observing a child/children's body language such as facial expressions, sounds, gestures and actions as well as words helps to understand their interests and what they want to communicate.
- Provide opportunities and time to listen to children
- Provide a choice and include the child's interest
- Focus on what they their body language as well as what they are saying even if it does not make sense there may be key words or sounds that will help you to understand

#### 3.3. Wait

- Stop talking, move into a listening position this could be at the same level as the child/children by sitting, make eye contact, giving time for the child/children to respond even if they change what they are doing. Wait until the child/children communicates, this could be sounds, gestures, actions or words.
- Be at the same level as children, even if it requires lying down to make eye contact
- As tempting as it is, do not interrupt or finish their sentence as some children need time to explain their thoughts

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### 3.4. Listen

- Focus on all the child/children's facial expressions, sounds, gestures, actions and words to know what it is they are trying to communicate. Provide time and space without interruption, so the child/children know what they want to communicate is important. A child/children will express frustration due to not being understood, but it is important to continue to try to understand by guessing what they are trying to communicate. This will show that what the child/children want/s to communicate is still important.
- Talk respectfully and honestly, resist the urge to tell them what they think, but it is acceptable to repeat back the correct word, for example:

Child: 'The house is Lello'  
Adult: 'The house is Yellow'

- When repeating back add one or two extra words 'The house is yellow with a green door'
- Emphasise the words you wish the child to listen to such as:

Child: 'I runned around the garden'  
Adult: 'You ran around the garden'

- Use open ended questions to explore the child's view:]

Child 'My grass is blue'  
Adult: 'Your grass is blue, why?'

- Acknowledge their feelings through reflective listening, 'Yes, you want your mum and you're feeling sad, your mum will be coming back soon. What would you like to play with until she arrives?'
- Acknowledge children's perceptions.
- Modelling language will help children to listen, learn and repeat words correctly.
- Ensure all background noise is at a minimum.
- Support children to understand and express themselves with communication tools such as Makaton symbols.

#### 4. Developmental and Age Appropriate Participation in Decision Making

The tables below are based on the approach published in the National Children’s Bureau (2009) Embedding Listening within the Early Years.

0 – 18 months		
Developmental Stage	Involvement in decision making	Methods of participation
<p>Enjoys the company of others and shows/ seeks contact with others.</p> <p>By 6 months babies usually make sounds like babbling and cooing, at 1 year babies usually will start to make talking noises like ma-ma-ma and da-da-da.</p> <p>By 18 months babies usually can say around 20 familiar words such as bye-bye, no and more.</p> <p>Experience things in the present through their senses</p> <p>Use facial expressions, body language, pre-verbalisation and gestures to express their views</p>	<p>Food</p> <p>Clothing</p> <p>Who they want to be with</p> <p>How they are handled</p> <p>What they play with</p>	<p>Given options to choose from</p> <p>Use visual aids and say the words</p> <p>Accept or refuse things that are offered</p> <p>Show interest and preference through nodding or shaking their head, reaching and looking towards things/people they want</p> <p>Show feelings through body language such as tensing their body, tears, laughter, turning away.</p>

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1 ½ - 3 ½ years		
Developmental Stage	Involvement in decision making	Methods of participation
<p>By 2 children usually communicate using more than 50 single words such as ball, cup and juice. They will start to put sentences together using 2/3 words such as 'ball gone' and 'more juice.'</p> <p>By the age of 3 children will usually use up to 300 words. They will use a variety of words to describe to show their understanding or put 4/5 words together to make short sentences such as 'Me want to go park.'</p> <p>Still use senses, facial expressions but able to consider options beyond the immediate present such as letting you know they want to go outside by walking to the door saying coat.</p> <p>Able to wait for wishes for short periods of time</p> <p>Beginning to use language to do some sharing and take turns</p> <p>Will actively participate in small groups such</p>	<p>Food they eat and how much</p> <p>What they wear</p> <p>What activities they engage in</p> <p>Who they play with</p> <p>Which activities they attend by showing they do or do not want to go such as refusing to put their coat on to go</p>	<p>Choosing from options, pointing to pictures, some basic verbal communication, mime, movement, painting, music, story telling</p>

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as singing, movement Some may not see danger and others may see danger		
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3 ½ - 5 years		
Developmental Stage	Involvement in decision making	Methods of participation
<p>Can empathise and consider others</p> <p>Some understanding of cause and effect</p> <p>Use language to express themselves</p> <p>Use their imagination to help them understand such as what if...?</p> <p>Can share, take turns, follow rules</p> <p>Interact more in groups</p> <p>Talk about the past and future</p> <p>By the age of 4 children will ask lots of questions such as 'why, where and what.' They will use longer sentences and link them together such as. 'Mummy and me goed to the shops and had some sweets.'</p>	<p>Food, clothes, activities, people, groups, environment</p> <p>Choosing new equipment, menus, routines</p> <p>Problem solving and conflict resolution</p> <p>Caring for themselves and others Rules and Boundaries</p>	<p>Choosing from options</p> <p>Suggesting new options</p> <p>Expressing preferences</p> <p>Compiling scrapbooks/books about themselves Making representational drawings and models</p> <p>Discussing issues raised from a story</p> <p>Making up and acting out stories personally or using puppets</p> <p>Taking part in group activities such as circle time</p>

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By the age of 5 children will use sentences that are well formed such as 'I went on holiday with Mummy and Daddy.'		
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6 to 10 years		
Developmental Stage	Involvement in decision making	Methods of participation
<p>Can critically evaluate, query judgements, consider more than one thing at a time and change opinion</p> <p>Can plan, carry out tasks, problem solve individually or in a group, take account of others ideas</p> <p>Understand and work with numbers, size, space, time, symbols and words</p> <p>Have awareness of fairness, injustice, issues with a desire to take action</p>	<p>All of the above</p> <p>What to learn and do in their spare time</p> <p>Who they live with and where</p> <p>Setting and working to rules</p> <p>Wider community e.g. play areas</p> <p>Consider cost, space, plans, quality and quantity</p> <p>Health and medical needs/treatment</p>	<p>All of the above</p> <p>Group discussions/meetings, presentations, workshops, mind maps, pros and cons and prioritising</p> <p>Drama, music and movement</p> <p>Writing stories, letters, plans</p> <p>Making maps, posters, books, models</p> <p>Using cameras and recording equipment</p> <p>Latest technology and digital media</p>

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## **5. Evidencing Involvement**

- 5.1. As a partnership when collecting evidence we need to ensure that it is consistent, systematic and timely to enable effective and unbiased analysis.
- 5.2. When measuring outcomes with a start and end point, the start point will measure the evidence of need and the end point will evidence what you have achieved. Comparing the start and end of your evidence will show what change or improvement has taken place or has been maintained, for example, recording on a daily plan the needs the child/children have displayed or communicated and in their review updating how their needs have influenced their next plan.
- 5.3. There are two main uses for this information:
  - 1) Reporting to your stakeholders/funders about progress towards achieving your outcomes
  - 2) For you and your project to learn and improve from your findings.
- 5.4. It is essential to focus on service improvement by doing more of what works or doing less of what does not work. Rather than simply recording the number of children, young people and families that took part, a mixture of both qualitative and quantitative data produces the most effective evidence base.

## **Reference List**

Commissioner for Children Tasmania. 2013. Involving Children in decision making – Your quick practical guide

Department for Education. 2012. Development Matters, Early Education,

Department for Education. 2014. Statutory framework for early years foundation stage.

Hanen Early Language Program. 2011. Owling Strategy.

National Children's Bureau. 2009. Embedding Listening within the Early Years – Training guide.

Miller, J. Save the Children. 2009. Never Too Young – How young children can take responsibility and make decisions.

## **Engagement Activities and Case Studies**

### **1. Case Study Verity's story: Listening to babies, (Listening as a way of life, National Children's Bureau, 2011)**

Being given choices is a significant part of being listened to.

Verity is sucking a plastic toy and as she does so she moves to the corner of the room where there are large soft play shapes covered in coloured plastic. Jackie notices and moves to the centre of the room where there is a large, soft cylinder supported on two blocks that the children can ride on. She smacks the sides of the cylinder with her hands and calls to Verity, 'Are you going to play on this? Come on then.' Verity comes across and with some help, climbs up tentatively. She sits straddled on the cylinder but looks slightly ill at ease and Jackie's says, 'Don't you like it, Verity?' Verity shakes her head very slightly. She slides off. Verity looks on as the games on the cylinder are repeated with Jake. Then Jackie says, 'Do you want to do it, Verity?' but Verity does not move and Jackie comments, 'She knows what she doesn't want to do, doesn't she!'

(Case study taken from Everyday Stories, NCB)

### **2. Butcher paper pictures, (Commissioner for Children Tasmania, 2009)**

**Aim:** for participants to clarify and express visually their feelings on a particular issue

**Do this with:** A group of 3 to 15 participants (aged 3 to 12 years)

**Good for:** Works best with effective/emotional stuff, like how participants feel about themselves, or friends or school.

**Time:** 30 minutes

**What you will need:** Paper, coloured pencils, crayons, magazines for pictures

**How to do it:**

1. Decide the problem/issue you want to look at and turn the problem./issue into a question e.g. how can we ensure children are safe?
2. Split the larger group into small groups of 2 or 3 participants.
3. Explain that you want the children to find a space in the room and draw what you think is important to them about the topic i.e. yourself, friends, school home.

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4. Tell the children that 'you can use words, draw pictures, stick down images, make a comic strip – whatever you want'.
5. Let the group work on their pictures. Remind them regularly of how much time they have left.
6. When the group has finished, get each small group, if they want to, to explain their picture to the larger group.

### **3. Case Study: Listening to children about food, (Listening as a way of life, National Children's Bureau, 2011)**

Life at the Children's House Nursery, North East Lincolnshire involves continually and very actively listening to children. This ethos is intrinsic to the way we work so that children perceive themselves as, and are active in, playing a formative role in decision making. This includes children's views on food.

Our nursery prides itself on sourcing organic and non-GM food wherever possible, as well as supporting local farmers and producers. Our menus are informed by advice from the Caroline Walker Trust and mealtimes are a relaxed, social occasion, and an opportunity to share a meal and conversation. But perhaps most importantly, the nursery children's views of food shape our menus, our food buying and the role food plays in the life of the nursery.

We make displays of fresh fruit and vegetable, including more unusual types; run tasting sessions; and have discussions with our foundation stage aged children about healthy balanced diets and how our bodies benefit from each food type. We visited the local supermarket and the children chose food for the tasting and even used the barcode scanner on the till.

We established a café in our role-play area. The children set tables and decorated the café with appropriate signs. The menus were on laminated cards and had pictures of and writing about food. The children made meals from photographs – cut from cookery magazines and then glued on paper plates and served each other meals. They also made food out of dough served it to each other.

The staff observed children closely through this role-play and made notes, used video recorders and engaged the children in discussions about their likes and dislikes. There was a great discussion about when, where and with whom children eat at home. Interestingly, popular lunches at a nursery, such as tuna pasta, formed a large part of the children's conversations, and it reinforced our knowledge and understanding of children's preferences.

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Taking these 'food favourites' as well as attitudes to less popular food, staff produced notes that were used in our menu planning. Working with our cooks, we then produce menus which are nutritionally balanced as well as responsive to the children's views.

Source: The Children's House, Stallingborough.

### 4. Jars of Importance

**Aim:** To provide a way for children to explore a particular issue or give feedback about a session or activity.

**Do this with:** A group of up to 30 participants divided into small groups of two or three children (aged 3 to 12 years old)

**Good for:** Getting to identify what is most important to them, keeping a visual reminder of what children think at a particular time.

**Time:** 20 to 30 minutes

**What you will need:** Large sheets of paper (flip chart size or bigger), glue, felt tip pens, scissors, A4 sheets of paper

#### How to do it:

1. Explain that the aim of the activity is for children to decide what they think about an issue (e.g. keeping healthy) or something they have done (e.g. recent activity). Stress that there is no right or wrong answers – you just want to know what they think. Keep reminding the children of this throughout the activity. Organise the children into small groups of two or three.
2. Ask each small group to draw three large jars on a sheet of flip chart paper and label them:
  - Very important
  - Important
  - Not important
3. Put the sheets on a table, the floor or wall so that each small group can see and reach them.
4. On the A4 paper write a series of either comments about an issue (e.g. young carers) or responses to a question (e.g. what have we learned about how to keep healthy? Or what should the group do next term?) Make sure the writing is easy to read. You can prepare this bit of the activity before the groups begin but you will need to ask the group for any comments that they would like to add. It can be very useful to invite the group to think up the comments themselves.

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5. Cut the comments up so each comment is on a separate piece of paper.
6. Ask the groups to decide which jars they think each comment should go in and once agreed, they glue the comment to that jar. The discussion among the group is very important and you might want to keep a few notes about why the children think some comments should go in which jar.
7. With the whole group, look at the jars again and talk about them. Is there anything missing?
8. You can keep these jars to use in project evaluation, for example, to help identify issues to address in future planning or to display at events or keep as a portfolio of evidence about the work of the project and what children see as important. The children might also want to leave them on display for a while

### **5. Case Study: Leadership for Listening, (Listening as a way of life, National Children's Bureau, 2011)**

Stanley Scamps Out of School Club in Blackpool provides a service for children aged 3 – 11 years old and has been working with the local authority in order to improve listening practice within the setting. Over the previous year, the setting had been reflecting on and developing practice related to enabling children's voices within the setting.

Through attending training and professional reflection, the centre leader developed a clear philosophy around the importance of providing a listening and responding ethos in the setting. Materials from the training she attended were used to disseminate a clear message to the team and promote discussion around the best way to achieve a shared vision. In these discussions concerns were raised and worked through.

Initially some team members thought that this development would mean that whatever the child said they wanted would have to happen – that children would be allowed to do dangerous things that the team member would find uncomfortable.

The whole team was invited to assume the role of a children's participation champion, with the responsibility of ensuring children's voices were heard. The team discussed ways in which they could be guided by the children about what they liked and didn't like about the resources, snacks, opportunities and experiences offered, and the people who worked at the club; and why they did and didn't like the above. These decisions were analysed and, if not acted upon, staff explained why and worked with the children to find an alternative action.

As the team began to gain confidence they were able to ascertain from the children which methods of consultation and participation they preferred.

To enable children's informed participation in decisions, a visual representation of the budget with removable pieces is displayed on the wall, so that all the children

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can understand what effect spending would have on their allocated budget. Team leader Rachel Howson outlined some of the challenges.

'There was a time factor involved in changing embedded habits – for the children and the team. Some of the team were comfortable that consultation might be something we did once a term or for a particular event, for example planning a party, rather than everyday practice. It took over a year for all the team to embrace this new practice.

At a recent Ofsted inspection, the setting received an outstanding grade and the first words of that report are: The children have a strong voice within their setting.

Inclusion is a process of identifying, understanding and breaking down barriers to participation and belonging. (This definition was devised by members of the national Early Childhood Forum, 2005)

### **6. Looking at Rules – Save the Children (Never Too Young, Miller J, 2009)**

**Aim:** To provide a way for children to explore their perceptions and understanding of the rules or give feedback.

**Do this with:** A group of up to 30 participants (aged 2 to 10 years)

**Good for:** Getting to know if the children understand and what is important to them.

**Time:** 20 to 40 minutes.

**What you will need:** A puppet or card, paper clips, magnet, string, 6' length dowel, 2 boxes or nets

#### **How to do it:**

1. Introduce to the children a 'naughty puppet' who doesn't know the rules of your group and does 'naughty' things.
2. Ask the children to tell the puppet off when it does something it shouldn't or doesn't do something it should.
3. Listen carefully to the language children use and the explanations that they give to the puppet. You may learn not only which rules they know but also:
  - What your own requests and explanations sound like to them
  - How they interpret what you say
  - Ways in which you could phrase requests and explanations so that the children would find them acceptable/understandable.

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4. Alternatively cut fish shapes out of card, write a rule on each fish shape including rules you do not have, attach a paper clip to the fish, and make a fishing rod by attaching a magnet to the dowel with a length of string.
5. Ask a child to catch a fish, the rule is read by the child if possible (if not then the adult) and asks the children if this rule belongs to the group
6. Discuss why the group has this rule, does everyone stick to the rules, are there any rules they would like to give away, are there any rules they'd like to add.
7. If the rule belongs to the group it is put in the net/box and if it does not then it goes into a separate net/box, and so on.

**7. Listening to young disabled children - Communication Guide (Listening as a way of life, National Children’s Bureau, 2011)**

Practitioners must establish the appropriate method and communication tools in order for children with disabilities to participate effectively, even those with limited communication and complex disabilities these could include: signs, symbols, images, observation of body language/gestures/sounds.

An example of a Communication Guide

<b>When I do this:</b>	<b>People think I mean</b>	<b>You should do</b>
Smile	I am saying 'yes' I am happy I like what I am doing	Give me time to smile and act accordingly to any answer of 'yes'
Lift up my left hand and bang the tray (I am just learning to do this)	I am trying to say 'no'	Ask me the question again and act according to my answer of 'no'
Close my eyes and moan	I am uncomfortable I am sad I am bored I don't like what I'm doing	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Ask me if I am uncomfortable, if I smile, move my position; for example, if I am in my wheelchair, take me out and let me stretch out on a mat. If I'm on the mat, sit me back into my chair. See my practical support plans to help you to so this properly</li> <li>2. If I don't smile, just talk to me and see if you can cheer me up</li> <li>3. If I don't smile, see if I would like to do something else; offer me a choice</li> </ol>

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Keep letting my head fall forwards	I am tired	Let me rest, stretched out on the mat, or on my side lying board
Stick my tongue out	I am thirsty	Give me a little warm drink of water from my special mug. See my practical support plans to help you do this properly
Cry but there are no tears	I am cross	1. Check to see if I need anything, change my activity or include me in an activity 2. Move me from sitting next to someone who may be upsetting me
Screw up my hands	I feel very unsafe	Give me more support
Screw my nose up and twist my head	I have a tummy ache	1. Help me change my position 2. Give me sips of warm water to drink

## 8. A Fun Consultation Method – (Funability Derby, 2014)



### Ticket to Choose – A Fun Consultation Method!

**Aim:** To provide a way for children to be consulted with that is fun and engaging. We used it to consult with our disabled children but it could be adapted for non-disabled children too.

**Do this with:** A group of up to 30 participants divided into small groups of 2's or 3's. As we were doing it with disabled children some of them had one to one support.

**Good for:** Getting to understand what the young people think in a fun way that they are eager to take part in.

**Time:** Variable depending on the number of stations and children and their speed of work.

**What you will need:** Various pens, paper etc depending on the activity at each station. You will need a “ticket” that can be stamped for each child and something to put on the floor to indicate the route.

#### How to do it:

1. Decide what particular things you want to consult on and how many “stations” you will need. Each station should be a fun activity  
2 examples of our “stations”:-

	What sort of club would you like?	We made a giant clock with different clubs round the side and used the 3 hands for them to choose their 3 top choices
	Who do you want to go with?	We asked the children to put their face on 3 paper figures and choose which box to place them in. The choice was Boys/Girls or both: Only disabled children/all children etc.

2. Ensure you have a big enough room to be able to lay a route out and place the “stations” at regular intervals. At the end have a “Station Café”, where they can show their stamped ticket and get a treat for taking part.
3. The small groups of children start at regular intervals, 2 or 3 minutes apart. Each child is given a “ticket”. If you had non-disabled children you could have each station manned, but as we were doing it with disabled children, staff went round with the children, helping them to take part but not influencing their decisions.
4. You will need a way of recording information at each station to ensure each group of children do not know the choices of the group before.
5. After the event collate the information, write a report or disseminate as needed.

Submitted by: Janet Tristram, the Fun-abil8y Service, St James Centre, Derby