

Child participation in practice

WHAT TO CONSIDER BEFORE
INVOLVING CHILDREN?



HINTALOVON
Child Rights Foundation

Introduction

This document is for you if you are planning to involve children in your work and you would like to hear their opinion because you either

- need their insight and feedback,
- or you are considering launching a project together with children.

It gives you input from a child-rights perspective in questions such as

- whether it is a good idea to involve children at all,
- what you need to clarify with your co-workers and collaborating partners,
- what responsibilities you will have,
- what methodological questions you should think about,
- what are the ethical considerations you need to take into account.

This document will not help you with:

- How to be a good facilitator: this material focuses on decisions related to child participation but it will not prepare you how to talk to children or how to plan a consultation with them. However, you will find a list of suggested materials at the end of this document to help you with that.
- Step-by-step instructions: there is no universal method as to what to do and how, therefore this document provides you with guidelines that help you come up with your own solutions. It asks questions rather than providing answers since you know best what works for you.
- Safeguarding measures: It does not provide a comprehensive overview of what you can do to ensure the safety of the children you are about to involve in your project/ use your products. There are many more things to consider when, for instance, you invite children to your events, into your stores, when you are casting children into your commercials or when you sell children's items. This material focuses on what to consider when you want to get information or feedback from children.

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1. Decision

First, you have to decide whether you want to involve children. Assess whether the conditions are right for the children to participate, or if not, what steps do you still need to take to make it happen?

Where did the idea to involve children come from?

Are you curious about the children's opinions?
Have you heard of a similar collaboration before and it seemed like a good idea?
Do you have any resources left?
Do you want to stand out from the crowd?
Is it necessary for a tender call?
Did a colleague entrust you with it?
Did the inspiration come from somewhere else?

It's great that you want to make children's voices heard!

Now stop for a moment and bear in mind:

- • What are you responsible for in your work, what is your job about? (e.g. to increase brand awareness)
- • What is the purpose of the project in which you would like to involve children? (e.g. launching a product)
- • What do you expect from children's participation in this project? (e.g. get feedback about the product)

If you are unsure about any of these questions, do not proceed any further. Make sure to clarify any uncertainties.

If you feel confident in all of the answers, fill in the following chart.

Rate how much you agree with the following.

3: very much, 2: a little, 1: I disagree, ?: I do not know

Viability / Resource	3	2	1	?
There is enough time to get to know the children's opinions and implement them into your project.				
There is a designated person in charge of child participation.				
The person in charge of child participation has free capacity to do the job.				
The people who can incorporate children's opinions have the free capacity to do so.				
There is funding to cover the costs of child participation.				
The leadership supports the use of resources needed to involve children.				
Goal / Impact				
There is a need for child participation.				
You are interested in the children's opinions.				
Child participation helps your work.				
Child participation helps this project.				
Children benefit from taking part in the project.				
Child participation helps those colleagues who work for the organisation.				
Involving children does not put them in a vulnerable position when participating in the project.				
Involving children does not put the organisation in a vulnerable position.				
Involving children has an important social message.				
Children's opinions will have an influence, and you will be able to take them into account.				

Evaluate your answers.

(?) If you are unsure about any of these questions, do not proceed any further. Make sure to clarify any uncertainties.

(red) If you disagree with many statements, consider whether there are still shortcomings in one or more areas. Think about the causes and consequences. Recognize what you can change and what you have no control over. Discuss this with the person responsible for the specific area. Evaluate the risks and ensure that the principle of "do no harm" is upheld. If you feel that the conditions are not right, do not involve children. If you just lack the resources, consider when you could schedule it or how you can generate additional resources.

(yellow) If your answers typically fall into this column, reconsider the concept and think about how to make it even stronger. Specify what you would need for more confident answers.

(green) If you agree with most statements, you are starting with a good foundation.

Once you have the basic requirements and have recognized the expected impact of involving children, you can start planning. It is important to involve others in this process so that you can develop a well-thought-out plan on how to involve children, based on enough information about the framework. Consider the following steps and considerations.

2. Defining goals and roles

Find out about the intentions of all stakeholders.

If the initiative is not yours or you won't be the only one working with the children's opinions, it is important to understand the intentions of your partners. This could be your supervisor, colleague, collaborating partner, or project coordinator – anyone who is interested in learning about children's opinions.

- What are their goals? What would be useful for them and how can they take into account children's opinions? What influence can it have?
- What is the topic or question in which children can be meaningfully and safely involved? What should not be expected of children? What are the areas where children typically enjoy participating or are more easily engaged?

Define your expectations regarding the involvement of children.

- What kind of outcomes do you expect (e.g., a video, report, or campaign material)?
- How flexible are your goals (e.g., can they be modified based on children's opinions or other factors)?
- How do you measure the success of involving children?
 - Quantitative indicators, e.g., number of people reached by children's opinions, number of children involved.
 - Qualitative indicators, e.g., feedback from the partners, and feedback from children about the collaboration.

Consider the role of children.

- What influence can children have?
 - a. You are curious about their opinions, but you make the decisions.
 - b. You decide together what to do, you collaborate closely.
 - c. Children lead/ implement the project, you only support them in doing so.
 - d. Mixed, with variations in different parts of the project.
- Which part of the project can they be involved in?
 - a. Preparation
 - b. Planning
 - c. Implementation
 - d. Evaluation
 - e. Mixed

Coordinate the tasks and responsibilities.

- Who will work directly with the children, and who will work with the children's opinions?
- What competencies are needed from the adults' side?
- What will be the task and responsibility of each person? Who gets to decide what?
- How will the children fit into the team?
- With whom, how often, and how will you coordinate children's participation?

3. Methodology

Schedule tasks and assign responsibilities.

Typically the following tasks should be completed:

Coordination

- contact keeping
- organizing the meetings with the children
- administrative tasks
- procurement
- contracts, consents
- other operational tasks

Preparation

- defining a goal, developing a methodology, discussing roles
- risk analysis
- writing and issuing a call
- selecting the applicants

Child participation

- preparation (e.g. preparing the survey, activity plan, meeting/consultation)
- implementation (e.g. meetings or collecting data)

Summary

- analysis, evaluation
- drafting the materials
- presentation

Taking into account children's opinions

- consultation with the project team and partners

Communication

- project launch, issuing a call
- publishing results
- targeted communication (e.g. reaching out to partners, media)

Evaluation and closing

- evaluation with the project team and the children
- giving feedback to participating children
- reporting

Select children you want to involve carefully.

- Who are children who have relevant knowledge and experience in the topic? (age group, background, skills needed, profile etc.)
- What are the benefits and risks of involving a child who is directly and currently affected by your issue? What are the risks of working with a different target group?
- Who can you reach easily?
- Are you trained or prepared to get along with that particular group?
- How does a homogenous or a heterogenous group affect the results? What would you benefit from, and how can you ensure it?
- What can you do to include children, whose voices are less heard?
- How many children can you include meaningfully? Working with at least 2 people is recommended.
- Would you work with a permanent (closed) group or may the number of participants/ the composition of the group change?
- Does it help if participants already know each other?
- How does knowing the child participants affect the project and your relationship?

Consider how you want to keep in touch with the children.

- Who is responsible for keeping in touch with children? Who will access their contacts?
- Is it necessary to involve the parents and communicate with them?
- What platforms will you primarily use for communication (app, video chat, email, phone), taking into account children's safety in the online space?
- How can you communicate as a group or individually?
- When will you communicate, taking into account school hours, work hours, and everyone's personal lives?

Consider how children can easily, comfortably, and safely express their opinions.

- with other children / alone
- to you / to the person directly working with the children's opinions
- in person / online
- verbally / in writing / non-verbally (e.g., through play, drawing, visual aids)
- once / on multiple occasions
- within a consistent team / among changing members
- with an intensive / extended schedule
- completely anonymous / anonymous for the public / if children can be identified
- publicly / in a trusted environment.

Consider which form aligns well with your goals and possibilities.

For example:

- An advisory board, who you can occasionally reach out to?
- A few people with whom you can establish a deeper relationship?
- A call for proposals to gather ideas from a wider audience?
- An observation which allows you to gather information without intervention?
- A questionnaire where you can receive anonymous responses and easily compare them?
- Focus group discussions where you can ask specific questions?
- Workshops where you can gain a deeper understanding of participants' thinking?
- Ballot voting where it's easy to summarize the results?
- Message board where you can receive more open and honest opinions?
- Public discussions where the children's opinions can reach others immediately?
- Individual, informal conversations where you can engage in relaxed discussions?
- Asking the children within the company's environment without significant investment?

Be careful when communicating about child participation.

- How do you reach your audience and stakeholders? What is the role of public disclosure?
- What do you want to showcase? Only the results or also the process of how you got there? If you write about the process, present the children's role, too.
- Use words that accurately reflect the children's role (with children's collaboration, cooperation, utilizing their ideas, based on their initiative, etc.). Transparency is important. For example, don't claim that something was made by children if it was actually implemented by adults based on the children's ideas.
- Is it necessary to use photographs/videos of children? Why, what do they serve for?
- Are the children willing to publicly share their participation? How can this be done safely (in writing, using pseudonyms, anonymously, through recordings)?

By now, you understand why you involve the children and have an idea of what you want to do. To make responsible decisions about the details, it is important to always keep ethical considerations in mind.

4. Ethical considerations

Consider the ethical principles.

Test your idea based on the principles of ethical and safe child participation. Run the concept through this checklist and shape it to align as closely as possible with ethical considerations. The examples provide further assistance, but what matters is not answering "yes" to all of them, but finding your answers and becoming aware of the steps required to prevent risks.

Checklist

We have considered how children's participation will be:

Transparent and informative	Voluntary	Respectful
Relevant	Child friendly	Inclusive
Supported by training	Safe and sensitive to risk	Accountable

Transparent and informative	Can children of different ages understand the purpose of the project, their own roles, and the process of their involvement, so they can give informed consent? What supports are in place to assist them?	<p><i>For example:</i> Is there a clear description and information about the tasks provided for children in a way they can understand? Is there an opportunity and time for children to ask questions if they don't understand something? Do we ask them during the different stages if they understand everything or have any questions? Do we inform the parents of the children? Do they understand the children's roles and help them better understand their own tasks?</p>
Voluntary	What supports children in making decisions about their participation freely and voluntarily, and allows them to change their decision at any time.	<p><i>For example:</i> Is anyone influencing their decision in this matter? Do children know that they can say no to a specific task? Do they understand the implications of accepting a task or potentially declining it? Whom can they notify if they no longer wish to participate?</p>
Respectful	How can we prepare children and the adults who interact with them to listen to each other and respect each other's opinions?	<p><i>For example:</i> Do we agree on shared rules that promote the development of trust? Do we establish these rules together with the children? Is there an adult who facilitates the discussions and meetings, ensuring that everyone has a chance to speak and intervening if something is said that goes against these rules?</p>
Relevant	What are the topics that children are interested in and concerned about, and about which they have information and experience?	<p><i>For example:</i> Can children choose the topics that interest them? Can children bring in new ideas and topics that engage them and that they would like to work on?</p>
Child friendly	How can we create an environment and schedule that allows children to express their opinions in a comfortable and safe manner?	<p><i>For example:</i> Do we consider the scheduling to accommodate children attending school, extracurricular activities, and other commitments? Is transportation safe for children? Are they familiar with the platform or means through which they can share their opinions? Will participation be enjoyable for them? Are there trusted adults in their immediate environment who provide a sense of security? Do parents support their children's participation? What is their attitude towards it?</p>

Inclusive	What should we do to ensure that no one experiences discriminatory treatment and that the opinions of those whose circumstances are more difficult to understand or reach also receive attention?	<p><i>For example:</i> Do we select the children in a transparent way? Are we aware of who we can possibly reach? How well does it cover our target audience? Do we know the advantages and disadvantages of this? Are we communicating about it authentically?</p>
Supported by training	What assistance do we need to provide to children to practice and develop the skills necessary for their participation and to be prepared to engage in the project?	<p><i>For example:</i> Do we help children acquire knowledge in a specific subject? Do they have practice opportunities? Is there a need for them to engage in discussions with external experts to address their questions?</p>
Safe and sensitive to risk	What is needed for children to feel safe, how they can be harmed during the process, and how we can prepare for and address risks.	<p><i>For example:</i> Is there a safe online or offline space available for children to express, with or without disclosing their identity, if something or someone has harmed them after the collaboration? Is there an adult they can turn to if they encounter difficulties? Do we collaborate with colleagues and partners who respect children's rights throughout the collaboration?</p>
Accountable	What ensures that children receive feedback on the outcome of their participation?	<p><i>For example:</i> Do children receive feedback specifically addressed to them? Are they informed about the decisions and how are the children's opinions taken into account? Can children provide feedback on the collaboration, sharing their own experiences, suggestions for improvement, and positive aspects?</p>

Every project has its strengths and weaknesses. Often, one aspect receives more emphasis than the other, but the key is to make conscious decisions and understand the impacts of those decisions.

Use these principles in every phase.

No matter where you are in your work, ethical considerations serve as a compass for what to do. You can refer back to the methodological questions above and weigh the advantages, disadvantages, and consequences of each choice.

- In the preparation phase, they assist in evaluating the idea and feasibility.
- During the planning phase, they help formulate realistic and meaningful goals, develop appropriate concepts and responsible methodologies, and refine steps and schedules.
- In the implementation phase, they help monitor risks, carry out tasks, and review steps if necessary.
- In the closing phase, they provide evaluation criteria and support tasks related to dissemination, feedback, and monitoring.

Pay attention to the emotional and physical safety of the participating children.

It may be necessary to develop the process and rules in more detail. This is especially true if your topic is sensitive (e.g. it is about their families), if you are working with vulnerable groups (e.g. younger children, children with disabilities), or if you are using methods that entail greater risks (e.g. handling data or involving the public). Creating a child safeguarding policy can be highly beneficial, outlining the measures taken to ensure children's safety, prevent abuse, and address incidents if they occur.



Essential steps

1. Be aware of your goals
2. Assess your possibilities
3. Assess the risks
4. Prepare well
5. Get in tune with the children
6. Take into consideration what you learned from them
7. Communicate authentically
8. Give feedback to children



Suggested materials

See the webpage of the Hintalovon Child Rights Foundation:
www.hintalovon.hu/en

Additional methodological materials

[YouCreate: Youth-led Arts-based Participatory Action Research for Well-being and Social Change](#) (Terre des hommes / International Institute for Child Rights and Development)

[Supporting Children's Participation](#) (Terre des hommes)

[Child Participation Guidelines for Online Discussions with Children](#) (Child Rights Coalition Asia)

[We Are Here: A Child Participation Toolbox](#) (Eurochild)

["Listen – Act – Change"](#) (Council of Europe)

[Toolkit for Monitoring and Evaluating Children's participation](#) (Save the Children UK)

[Children's Participation: How to involve children in decision-making](#) (Global Child Forum)

[Best Practice Models of Child Participation in Decision-making](#) (Save the Children)

[Listening Together](#) (LUMOS – Protecting Children, Providing Solutions)

[Youth Participation Toolkit](#) (Erasmus+)

[Weaving a Collective Tapestry: A Funders' Toolkit for Child and Youth Participation](#) (Elevate Children Funders Group)

Written by:
Barbara Németh
Lilla Buday-Palotay

Contact:
info@hintalovon.hu

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