

Rough Guide to Participation



Hartlepool & Stockton-on-Tees
**SAFEGUARDING
CHILDREN**
PARTNERSHIP



Introduction

This *Rough Guide to Participation* is one of a series of practice guides produced by Hartlepool and Stockton-On-Tees Safeguarding Children Partnership (HSSCP) which have been designed to be read and used by the range of practitioners and professionals working across children's services in the borough.

All of the *Rough Guides* have been developed to support the valuable work that is carried out with children and young people and families¹ by identifying the key elements which underpin good practice and incorporating significant messages from research.

It should be noted that *Rough Guide to Participation* does not replace, provide the detail of or interpret legislation, policy, frameworks and procedures, which are all subject to change, but focuses more on the 'how to', offering advice, suggesting ideas and providing signposts to sources of information and further reading.

Participation can refer to children and parents participating in matters which affect them as individuals and families (personal or individual decisions) and those that relate to them as a group or community or population (public decision-making). This *Rough Guide* focuses on the former, that is children's and parents' participation in the decision making that is about them and their families.

What is participation?

There is often a lack of clarity about what is meant by "participation" and many people misunderstand the concept. A range of terms such as 'having a voice', 'taking part', "engagement" and 'consultation' are often used interchangeably and there is no one universally accepted definition.

Over the past decade, children's services have seen a practice shift with much greater commitment to ensuring the participation of families, children and young people in the key processes of assessment, planning and review. Therefore, we need to have clear and consistent understanding of what participation is and what we are aiming to achieve.

There is a significant difference between having a voice and participation. Having a voice has been described as being a one-way process, where children and parents express their views and wishes, which may or may not be taken into account by the decision-makers. Participation, on the other hand, is a two way process where all parties express their views and decisions are made together. For the purposes of this *Rough Guide* and practice locally, the following definition of participation has been adopted:

¹ For ease of reading, child or children are the terms used to refer to children and young people, and parents is the term used to refer to parents and carers.

Participation is a process where someone influences decisions which are about them and their lives.

Remember.....



To participate, the child or parent has to have some sense of what participation means, some idea of who they will be participating with, why they should participate, an understanding of what's in it for them and what's in it for the practitioners.

What participation isn't

To help identify what makes for meaningful participation, it's useful to clarify what participation isn't:

- X** It isn't just about ticking a box on a template or form.
- X** It isn't just about asking children and parents what they think and recording their views.
- X** It isn't just about inviting children and/or parents to meetings of professionals and practitioners. Attendance isn't participation.
- X** It isn't an isolated activity or one off event. Meaningful participation is a process.
- X** It isn't about trying to find something to feed back into a decision-making meeting or conference.
- X** It isn't the same as consultation. Consultation is seeking children's and parents' views. Participation is their direct involvement in decision making.
- X** It isn't just about having a say or having a voice or being listened to. Participation means that children's and parents' views, ideas and perspectives *inform* the decisions that are about and affect them. Even when it is not possible to act on those views, ideas and perspectives, children and parents should be given an explanation of what consideration was given to them and why they cannot be implemented.
- X** It isn't about giving children and parents what they want. There is an important distinction to be made between *involving* children and parents in decision making and them actually *making* the decision.
- X** It is never absolute. Realistically, in any participative context, there will be some elements over which children and parents are able to exercise power and some elements over which they are not

Model of participation

Not all children and parents will participate or be involved in decision making in the same way. It isn't a case of 'one size fits all'. The following model is useful to understand and distinguish *different degrees of participation* for children and parents and helps to identify what is appropriate in the context of making a particular decision about a particular child.

Unlike 'ladders' of participation, the model is non-hierarchical and no level is assumed to be better than another. The degree of participation is determined according to the context, circumstances and the decision being made, and the capacity and wishes of the participating children and parents.

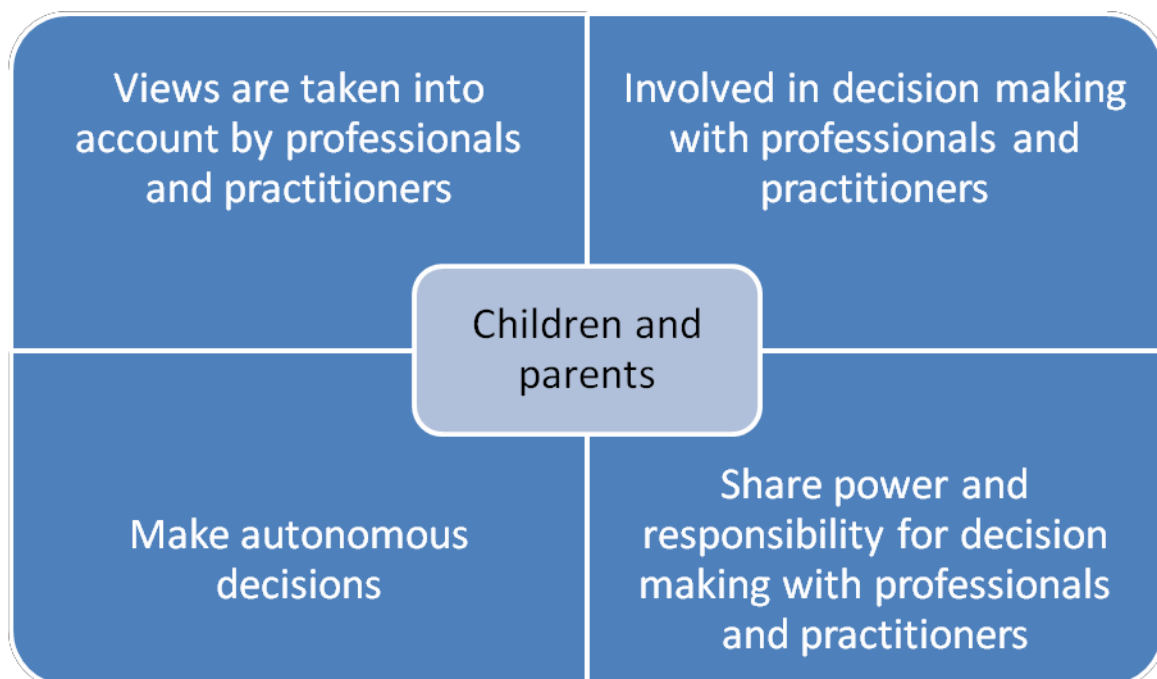


Fig 1 (Kirby et al, 2003)

Children's participation

There is evidence to suggest that children's participation leads to more effective assessments, plans and reviews, more focused practice and ultimately to better outcomes.

All children have insights, perspectives, ideas and experiences which are unique to them. Many children have an understanding of what is causing their problems and what underlies their needs. They have insight into what might or might not work within the context of their family or social network. They know what sort of support they would most value and be able to access.

Participation gives children a way to connect with the assessment, the plan or review of the plan, and shows them that their opinions, views and wishes really do matter. It can also give them a sense of control.

"As adults working alongside children we may think we have much to offer but we should never underestimate how much the children have to offer". *Vicary et al, 2006*

But, basically, children have a *right* to participate in matters which affect their lives. Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child gives *all* children (Article 12 imposes no lower age limit) the right to have their views given due weight in all matters affecting them. Of course, this does not imply that children should be required to participate if they are unwilling or not interested. Article 12 embodies a right to participate in decision making, not a duty.

Children clearly have an important contribution to make in decisions which will impact on them but they are not a homogenous group; each child is individual and the *degree* of participation (see Fig.1 above) will vary depending on:

- The decision being made
- The age of the child
- The maturity of the child
- The capability of the child
- The physical and mental wellbeing of the child
- The choice of the child to participate or not

A core value for meaningful participation, therefore, is respect for the individuality of children. Not everyone is, or wants to be, involved in the same way, but there should be scope for **all** children to make a contribution in whichever way they feel appropriate, according to their own inclinations, interests and capacities.

Of course, it isn't enough to just listen to children. Participation means that proper consideration must be given to their views when decisions which affect them are being made. It's also crucial that children see the outcomes of their participation, the difference their participation has made to the decisions affecting them. Even when their wishes cannot be implemented, children need to know what consideration was given to them and why they cannot be implemented.

Remember.....



Participation is a two way process

Participation methods

Across children's services, much of the decision making which takes place occurs in meetings, either within practitioners' own organisations or multi-agency. As a result, there can be over reliance on the notion that good participation practice should include children attending bureaucratic, adult orientated meetings. But children's participation should never be confused with attendance. Hearing their views first hand is undoubtedly powerful, and for some children it will be highly appropriate for them to attend where decisions about them are being made, but more important, perhaps, is the quality of their advocacy and the commitment to ensuring that professionals, practitioners and families really address and take account of children's wishes in the decision making process.

The question to ask, then, is not whether a child participates but *how*. Children, including very young children, can participate in various ways and the methods and approaches to be used, both formal and informal, should be agreed with them so that how they participate reflects their preferred medium of expression, their age, maturity and capacities, and enables them to express their views without being put on the spot. Participation can utilise:

Written methods e.g. letters, questionnaires, statements, storyboards, symbols etc.

Verbal methods e.g. speaking in meetings, in interviews, through advocates, drama, tape recordings etc.

Visual methods e.g. art, photography, play, video, observation etc.

There are a number of participation toolkits available which provide ideas and information about a range of methods and approaches, some of which are included in the resources at the end of this *Rough Guide*.

Remember.....



For babies and very young children, watching is an important part of listening and involves observing body language, facial expressions, movements, different cries etc.

Some of the issues and pitfalls

- Not knowing how to achieve effective participation, especially for younger children, children with learning difficulties or children who use alternative forms of communication
- Concerns about children's competence, understanding and abilities to participate coupled with unease about interpreting children's view
- Thinking that very young children are unable to participate
- Making assumptions about the information children are able, or not able, to provide
- Questioning participation on the basis of 'we know what is best for that child'
- Concerns about children participating where there is a significant power differential
- Children's concerns might not coincide with the concerns that brought the family to the attention of services
- Deciding how much information it is appropriate for children to have about formal processes, such as the child protection system. Some practitioners may not explain aspects of the system to the child, with the intention of protecting them from a process that they feel the child is too young to understand
- A focus on 'voice' and 'listening to children' which risks being limited and tokenistic
- Confusing children 'having a say' with participation
- Raising false expectations. Children value honesty

Remember.....



It's important that children can see the outcomes of their participation, the difference their participation has made to the decisions affecting them

What children say stops them from participating:

- Not being properly listened to
- Not being believed
- Not understanding what's being said or what's being decided
- Not wanting to hear all the bad stuff about themselves and their families
- Not really knowing the professionals and practitioners making the decisions
- Not feeling confident to ask questions or challenge what's been said
- Professionals and practitioners talk to parents rather than children
- Parents don't always support or help children to participate
- Professionals don't have enough time to get to know children
- Being bombarded with questions
- Having worries and concerns about their situation which are different to those of practitioners
- Feeling there's no point, it doesn't make any difference to what's decided

What supports children's participation?

- Taking a wide definition of participation to encompass participation of *all* children and recognise the importance of mechanisms such as observation and non-verbal means of communication
- Ensuring that children's views really are part of the process of decision-making and actively encouraging all adults to ensure that children are genuinely heard and that their views are properly considered in the decision making process
- Understanding that participation is a continuum and will be determined by the child's capabilities and choice, and even if a child's capabilities are limited their views can still form part of the process

- Recognising that participation involves the availability of options, having adequate information concerning each option, being aware of the consequences of each option
- Being aware that participation will only be successful if a child has full, accessible and appropriate information on the decision-making process and is fully supported throughout the process



The starting assumption should be that children *will* participate in making choices and taking action, and where they do not, this needs to be carefully considered, justified and communicated

Suggestions for practice to bring children into the decision-making process

- **From the first point of contact consider what is relevant and appropriate** for each individual child, whatever their age
- **Ask yourself** 'How is this child going to make sense of this situation from what I and others are doing and saying?'
- **Create opportunities** for the child to give their own version of events in whichever ways are appropriate for them, and reinforce that their version has the same credential as an adult version of events
- **Create opportunities** for the child to make reasoned choices. If there is no room for choice this should be an accountable matter. At an interactive level, can choice be offered about who asks the questions, where the interview is conducted, silence, play, timing, order etc?
- **Real choice and participation must be informed.** Disseminate as much information as possible and as is relevant for the child as determined by the child. Be creative, use as many methods as possible eg tape record your interview and leave it with the child to reflect on, add to, listen to. Use written correspondence in a similar way. Construct a joint evaluation format for intervention, to be completed by all the children in the family

- **Ask yourself** what you might be taking for granted in relation to the child's understanding, eg what an assessment is, what a social worker is, what a police officer is, where your office is, who your 'boss' is, what risk is, what a concern is, in short any concept that will arise in your communication with a child and vice versa
- **Be attuned to the child's world**, pay attention not only to what the child says, but in some cases to what they are not saying and in all cases to how they behave
- **Consult children about preferred participation methods.** Children's preferences for expressing themselves, for example verbally, through play, art, writing, photography, should always be explored and harnessed
- **Ensure that all children in a family are treated equally** and all are given the opportunity to express their opinion and give their perspective using appropriate and accessible methods and approaches
- **Take the different time horizons of children and adults into account.** For younger children especially, it is important to get at least some results or feedback from their participation promptly
- **Provide sufficient prior information** on what children are participating in (eg assessment, planning or review) which is easily accessible and understandable, in a child-friendly format. Good preparation, particularly for meetings, can usually eliminate surprises
- **Provide information about the impact of the child's participation** and give feedback about how their views and wishes were considered when making decisions. If their views could not be implemented, provide a clear explanation of why
- **Keep organisational structures, procedures and processes transparent.**
- **Be self-critical and flexible.** If some methods, tools or approaches turn out to be not sufficiently child friendly, try others

Remember.....



Preparing children and young people to participate takes time and an individual approach

Evaluating children's participation

We should all ensure we review and critically evaluate our practice (as a self-audit, with a colleague or in supervision) in relation to supporting and enabling children's participation. There are three dimensions to be explored:

Scope: what degree of participation has been achieved with this particular child? (You may find it helpful to refer to the model on page 4). Was this appropriate given the decision being made, the child's age, competence and choice?

Quality: to what extent have participatory processes complied with standards for good practice? What improvements could be made in future practice?

Impact: what has been the impact of participating on the children themselves and their families?

Parents' participation

Research shows significant benefits from increasing parent involvement in children's services processes and decision making, and engaging and involving services users is at the forefront of public service policy across the UK.

Involving parents in decisions that affect them and their families has benefits both for the process itself, by ensuring that parents' knowledge is included in decision making, and for children's outcomes. Parents who participate early in identifying and solving the problems that brought them into the system, and who become decision-makers and active partners in their child's welfare or health or education, are more likely to commit to plans and change, and are more likely to persevere if the work gets difficult.

What parents say gets in the way of participation

- Fear of professional/practitioner authority
- Feeling they are misunderstood by professionals and practitioners
- Feeling unable to correct misunderstandings and inaccuracies
- Regarding children's services systems, particularly the child protection system, as more powerful than themselves
- Feeling they are given little opportunity to discuss or challenge the interpretation given to events or the plans practitioners have formulated for their families
- Professionals' and practitioners' negative attitudes, such as a pessimistic view of the parent's capacity to change, a focus on what parents are doing wrong and a reluctance to acknowledge positive behaviours
- Decisions are already made, regardless of what parents think should happen
- Lack of information – about roles, processes, expectations, choices, options
- Lack of honesty on the part of practitioners about the extent to which parents can participate in decision making
- Hidden agendas
- Not being helped to understand decision making processes
- Being put on the spot in decision making arenas

"Nothing I said would have made any difference. They'd already decided what they were going to do".
Quote from a father

Good quality participation practice

The quality of the relationships between the family and practitioners appears to be central to parental participation in assessment, planning and review processes, and particularly those relating to child protection. Research has also highlighted that parents value honesty, fairness, reliability and demonstrations of concern and sensitivity for them as individuals and for their circumstances and viewpoints, all of which promote their participation.

Good quality participation practice additionally incorporates the following:

- Clarifying the practitioner's role and the intervention or service context
- Acknowledging the authority of the practitioner
- Ensuring clarity of purpose about parent participation and honesty about its parameters. Don't call it participation when what you mean is consultation
- Adopting an outcomes focus. All parents can participate in deciding the outcomes or results they want for their children
- Promoting common understanding across all involved professionals and practitioners that families are experts on their own families and need to be actively involved in planning and decision making processes

How to support parents to participate

Working with any parent is complicated by a host of factors, such as their previous experience or views of practitioners and services, and fear of what might happen. Parents are likely to be more receptive to intervention and to participate when they have requested assistance for their families or have experienced or witnessed the benefits of receiving a service.

Working with involuntary clients, such as within the statutory child protection system, can present additional challenges. Families who display evasive or resistant behaviour can be highly challenging to work with and, if asked for their views, might well express the wish that professionals and practitioners just leave them alone. We have all experienced and can recognise this type of behaviour which includes:

- Parents avoiding home visits (often cancelling at the last minute) or not appearing to be home (curtains drawn and not responding to telephone calls or knocks on the door)
- Children failing to attend school or child care
- Parents not attending appointments, in particular pre-arranged meetings that involve the assessment of themselves or their children

Attempts to build relationships with parents are further hindered by the power and authority inherent in the role of the children's services practitioner. Parents consistently want to know where they stand vis-à-vis the authority of the practitioner, particularly in child protection (hence the frequently asked question 'Are you going to take my child away from me?' during inquiries).

Clearly, power and authority cannot be removed from the encounter between practitioner and parent, no matter how respectful, self-aware or careful the practitioner may be. But when the practitioner is both comfortable with and clear about the nature of their power and authority in the relationship, this can help lay a foundation for a working partnership between practitioner and family. On this foundation partnership can be further enhanced by practitioners who then work to minimise the power differential by:

- Building trust
- Involving the family as much as possible
- Sharing information
- Providing choice wherever possible and
- Enabling family input at every possible opportunity

Incorporating the following elements of good practice can help build a trusting relationship and promote the participation of all parents, including the most resistant:

- **Make clear at every contact:**
 - What the purpose of the intervention is
 - What your role is
 - What the parents have control over
 - What the parents do not have control over
 - What is going to happen next
 - What the likely consequences will be

- **Stick to a simple, clear message, and repeat this consistently**, for example “I’m here because we are worried about We need to make sure..... is safe/well.” Check with the parents that this is understood and then check again
- **Be honest and realistic** about the extent to which the parents can be actively involved in making decisions about their children. Explain the parameters and limitations. Never raise expectations
- **Be transparent.** The daily reality for children’ service practitioners is that they must constantly make judgements (See *Rough Guide to Assessment*). When practitioners’ judgements become hidden agendas, those judgements, however sound they may be, will tend to create many problems in the relationship with parents. Be clear and open with parents about why you think what you think, giving information about any frameworks or methods being used, the evidence for conclusions reached, the rationale for judgements made and the implications
- **Use straightforward language** that is jargon free. Words like ‘assessment’, ‘risk’ and ‘concern’ are not always easily understood. Use mirroring. Take note of words used by the child or family and try to incorporate them into your conversations
- **Explain clearly the processes of assessment, planning and review.** We operate in highly bureaucratic, procedures driven systems which can be bewilderingly complex for parents. Provide information in appropriate formats, check that parents understand and eliminate surprises. Remember that too much information, for example long, complex reports, can be as unhelpful as too little
- **Ask questions** rather than issuing threats or commands
- **Clarify expectations** - what the parents can expect from you and what you expect from the parents
- **Acknowledge difficult feelings** and encourage open and honest discussion of parents’ feelings
- **Listen to the parent's explanation of the situation** without correcting or arguing
- **Be consistent, persistent and follow through**

- **Respond quickly to concrete needs.** Finding quick solutions to problems which may seem minor given the bigger picture may help to establish a positive and more trusting relationship
- **Reframe the family's situation.** This is particularly useful when the children and family are making arguments that deny an issue or problem or risk; it acknowledges their statements, but offers a new meaning or interpretation for them. The children's and family's information is recast into a new form and viewed in a new light that is more likely to be helpful and support change
- **Involve parents in identifying children' outcomes (the desired end results) and deciding the actions to achieve those outcomes.**

Remember.....



Each family is unique and the strategies for involving parents should be adapted to each individual situation

When parents are hostile

One form of parent resistance that is particularly difficult for practitioners to manage is anger and hostility. The following are suggested techniques for de-escalating anger (though remember these do not replace your own agency's procedures and guidance):

- Remain calm; try not to show fear or anxiety
- Be firm without raising your voice
- Make statements simple and direct
- Recognise and address feelings and do not take hostile statements personally
- Offer the person a choice between positive alternatives
- Be always alert for the possibility of aggression
- Attempt to have the person sit down, and distract him or her from the source of anger

- Give the person lots of space; do not touch them
- Remember it takes a person 30-40 minutes to calm down physiologically
- After the visit, do not sit in front of the house to write notes
- Pay attention to intuition or "gut instinct" and leave if this seems to be warranted



Give consideration to involving another professional or practitioner trusted by parents where there are high levels of anxiety or hostility

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Sources of information and further reading

Australian Supported Parenting Consortium, practical guides

www.healthystart.net.au/resources/cat_view/6-practical-tools-to-use-with-parents

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