Rough Guide to Participation for Children & Parents

The Rough Guide to Participation is part of a series of practice guides produced by the HSSCP & STSCP support practitioners working with children, young people and families. It focuses on the practical application of participation in children's services and aims to promote effective involvement of children and parents in assessment, planning and review processes. The guide concentrates on individual participation—how children and parents are involved in decisions affecting their own lives and families—rather than wider public consultation or service development.

What is Participation?

Participation is:

"A process where someone influences decisions which are about them and their lives."

Participation is more than simply listening to children and parents or gathering their views. While having a voice is important, true participation is a two-way process were the views, wishes and experiences of children and parents help shape decision-making.

Meaningful Participation:

- Involves children and parents throughout the decision-making process.
- Helps individuals understand what decisions are being made and why.
- Ensures views and experiences influence outcomes.
- Provides feedback on how views were considered.
- Promotes shared decision-making between families and professionals.

What is Participation Is Not?

Participation should not be confused with:

- Completing a form or "ticking a box"
- Simply recording views and wishes
- Attendance at meetings
- A one-off event or activity
- Consultation alone
- Giving children or parents complete control over decisions
- Promising outcomes that cannot be delivered
- Meaningful participation requires professionals to actively consider children's and parents' views and explain decisions when those views cannot be fully implemented.

Children's Participation

Research and practice show that involving children leads to:

- Better assessments
- More effective planning and reviews
- More focused interventions
- Improved outcomes.

Children often have valuable insight into:

- Their experiences and relationships
- Causes of difficulties in their lives
- What support is likely to help.
- What outcomes matter most to them.

Participation is also a right. Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that children should have their views considered in matters affecting them. Participation is a right, not an obligation.

South Tees Safeguarding Children Partnership

Hartlepool & Stockton-on-Tees SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN PARTNERSHIP

Factors Affecting Participation

The degree of participation should reflect:

- The decision being made
- Age and maturity
- Ability and understanding
- Physical and emotional wellbeing.
- The child's willingness to participate.

Participation Methods

Children may participate through

- Written Methods
- Letters
- Questionnaires
- Storyboards
- Statements Verbal Methods
- Interviews
- Meetings
- Advocacy
- Recordings Visual Methods
- Play / Art
- Photography / Video
- Observation

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For babies and very young children, participation often relies on observation of facial expressions, behaviour, body language and interactions.

Barriers and Challenges

Common Barriers for Children

- Not being listened to or believed
- Lack of understanding of processes
- Lack of confidence to ask questions
- Professionals speaking mainly to parents
- Feeling overwhelmed or judged
- Believing participation will not influence decisions

Common Practice Pitfalls

- Assuming young children cannot participate
- Focusing only on "voice" rather than influence
- Confusing attendance with participation
- Raising unrealistic expectations
- Assuming professionals always know best.

How to Promote Children's Participation

Effective practice includes:

- Considering participation from first contact
- Using methods suited to the child
- Providing clear, accessible information
- Offering genuine choices where possible
- Exploring preferred communication methods
- Giving feedback on decisions
- Being flexible and adapting approaches when needed
- Ensuring children can see how their participation made a difference

Participation should be reviewed regularly by considering:

- Scope – Was the child involved appropriately?
- Quality – Was good participatory practice achieved?
- Impact – What difference did participation make?

Parents' Participation

Parents who actively participate in decision-making are more likely to engage positively with services, commit to plans and improve outcomes for their children. Their knowledge and experience are valuable in understanding family needs and developing effective solutions.

Barriers Reported by Parents

- Fear of professional authority
- Feeling misunderstood or judged
- Lack of information about processes
- Feeling decisions have already been made
- Hidden agendas
- Lack of honesty about the influence they can have
- Limited opportunities to challenge decisions.

Good Quality Participation Practice

Strong participation is built on:

- Honest and respectful relationships.
- Transparency
- Clear explanations of roles and responsibilities
- Recognition of practitioner authority
- An outcomes-focused approach
- Treating families as experts in their own lives

Supporting Parents to Participate

Practitioners should:

- Clearly explain why they are involved
- Discuss what parents can and cannot influence
- Use simple, jargon-free language
- Explain assessment, planning and review processes
- Share information openly
- Clarify expectations
- Listen actively and acknowledge emotions
- Build trust through consistency and reliability
- Involve parents in identifying desired outcomes and actions

Key Messages

- Participation is about **influencing decisions**, not simply expressing opinions
- Participation is a **two-way process** between families and professionals
- Attendance at meetings does not equal participation
- Children and parents should receive clear information and feedback throughout the process
- Participation should be tailored to individual needs, abilities and preferences
- Strong relationships, honesty, transparency and trust are essential to meaningful participation
- Effective participation leads to better assessments, planning, engagement and outcomes for children and families.