



SECTOR REPORT

Did You Hear Me?

Children and Young People's
Experiences of Participation in
Community Services

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Western Sydney University (WSU) for financial research support and driving partnership with industry and community.

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“Listen to me, I’m an expert in my own life...”

YOUTH PARTICIPANT



Foreword

The National Principles for Child Safe Organisations sets out ten principles for creating a child safe organisation, aimed at promoting child well-being and preventing harm, including Principle Two: Children and young people are informed about their rights, participate in decisions affecting them and are taken seriously. The ‘principle’ of participation is now a key feature in policy, funding agreements, service guidelines and some legislation involving children and young people. But what is participation and how do you do it? How is participation operationalised? How do we build participation culture in community organisations?

These are some of the questions and concerns that inspired the Did you hear me? project, a partnership between three community organisations and Western Sydney University. All three partners, Uniting, Mission Australia and Life Without Barriers, have an established commitment to children and young people’s participation. I commend our community partners for their willingness to go beyond the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of participation, and seek to understand, most importantly, how it is experienced by children and young people and staff in community organisations.

The Did you hear me? report has been designed to centre the voices of children and young people and staff who gave of their time and insights so generously. We present three key findings and recommendations for practice reform. We hope the report will open, and continue, conversations with the child and family sector (children and young people, families and carers, practitioners, service leaders, academics and more) about what’s working well, what needs to be different, and strategies to get there. Let’s work together to shift practice from ‘giving children voice’ to establishing structures and support so their voices lead to meaningful change and outcomes – for them!

Professor Gabrielle Drake

Professor of Social Work, Interim Deputy Dean School of Social Sciences and Associate Dean Engagement, Western Sydney University

Summary of Key Points

“You’ve got to have a young person participate. That’s a policy.”

STAFF PARTICIPANT

1

Children and young people and services do not think about participation and how it happens in the same way.

Action: Staff and young people should be given the opportunity to engage in open and ongoing discussions about both the *meaning of* and *actions related to* ‘participation’.

2

Sector, organisation and staff efforts to engage children and young people in decision making are not always experienced as participation by children and young people.

Action: The community services sector needs to address the barriers created by policy and funding imperatives, in order to be flexible in responding to children and young people’s expressed views about how best to participate in decision making processes.

3

The quality of relationships children and young people have with staff influence how they understand, engage and commit to participation opportunities.

Action: Services should prioritise safe and supportive relationships between workers, and children and young people, as the primary strategy for enabling participation.

Practice Concern

A key recommendation of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse was the development of National Principles (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2023) to make all child-related organisations safer for children and young people. **All organisations who work with children and young people are required to include practices and culture where children and young people participate in decisions that affect them and are taken seriously** (NSW Office of the Children’s Guardian, 2023). This work is guided by state initiatives, for example, the NSW Child Safe Standards (Royal Commission Into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2017) and Child Safe Scheme.



However, what participation entails, who is responsible for it, and how much influence children and young people’s voices should have remains both nebulous and contested (Strømmland et al., 2022; Slaatto et al., 2024). Discourse on child-centeredness emphasises the need to attend to the child or young person and can neglect the conditions necessary for adults to centre the child (Michail et al., 2023). As Lundy (2007) argues, **participation is more than providing opportunity for voice, it is about the structures, processes and relationships adults need to operationalise participation**, for example providing children and young people with ‘audience’ (adults to listen to children and young people) and ‘influence’ (acting on what children and young people have communicated) (Canosa et al. (2022).



Community of Practice

In 2021, against a background of significant policy reform and new regulation, **Western Sydney University (WSU)** established a **Community of Practice for Child Safe Specialists (COPCSS)**, with membership from five leading community service agencies. The COPCSS acknowledged, that while there are a range of available resources and guides to assist organisations to facilitate children and young people’s participation, they are not nuanced in operational detail for practitioners and agencies, are being used inconsistently across organisations, and it is unclear how they are experienced by children and young people.

This community comes together to improve protection and safeguarding practice with children and young people, by sharing expertise, resources, practice wisdom, and working collaboratively to develop research knowledge on child safe cultures. **It now has membership from over 11 non-government organisations with child safeguarding responsibilities**, in NSW (New South Wales) and nationally, including Aboriginal-led organisations, as represented below.



Practice Response

Three community agencies in collaboration with Western Sydney University set out to learn more about how their investment in children and young people's participation had been experienced, in a research project called **Did You Hear Me? (DYHM)**.



The project asked, **how can organisations build a culture of participation?**



19 YOUNG PEOPLE

engaged in focus groups and interviews in five sites

We worked collaboratively with **3 partner community organisations** in **two program settings**, and across regional and metro settings in two states (NSW and QLD).

Young people and staff gave us insightful responses to help us answer two primary questions:

1. How is child participation operationalised by community service practitioners?
2. How do children and young people experience participation in non-government organisations?



20 STAFF

engaged in focus groups and an online survey

Presenting our Findings

The findings of this research are presented in an unconventional format. Firstly, there are two comparative sets of experiences; those of children and young people, and those of staff. Each set of findings is supported *by both*, children and young people, and staff participants' comments. It is inspiring to see the insightful comments *by staff* that support what children and young people say about their poor participation experiences. This indicates staff have a clear commitment to child voice. It is also useful to know that children and young people are aware and can articulate the efforts of staff to hear their voice.

Secondly, the different sets of experiences indicate the dissimilar ways in which participation is understood and practiced. For staff, their experience is tied to the boundaries under which they provide services. For children and young people, their experiences of participation are steered by what staff offer as opportunities to shape decisions. The recommendations bridge these differences by suggesting how we might work together as a sector to improve children and young people's experience of participation.

We hope the data demonstrates that participation experiences for both children and young people and staff can be responsive if they are driven by dialogue, within relational practice, about child and youth determined best interests.



CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCES

“It's like if you were told okay, there's a 16-year-old girl, she needs a house, design it. Like I don't fucking know what she likes, I don't know what colour she likes, I don't know what she wants, what her interests are.

So, that's what it's like when some random in the government or [organisation] is designing something and they haven't interacted with the kid, they don't know anyone in care or anything like that, there's no understanding or anything. It's just what they want, and our wants are ignored.”

YOUTH PARTICIPANT

Children and Young People's Experiences

We know that the right to participate and improve community services is important to children and young people! So, we wanted to describe their experiences of participation and let the community sector know how we've been tracking on this front.

How is participation experienced by children and young people in community services?

In the context of positive relationships

Young people recognise the importance of positive relationships in service provision. These relationships demonstrate to young people a genuine interest and value for them as an individual person not just a client of the service.

“Being present. Being here. Turning up, knocking on their door. Letting them know, I'm here. I want to see you, tell me what you've been up to. Just really wanting to know what's going in their life, and they know whether you're genuine or not.”
(Staff participant)

“It's the way they treat us. It's very much like, you're a person, I can hang out with you, and I can support you rather than like, I'm here to do a job.”
(Youth participant)

This valuing goes beyond mere talking and interacting. When there is a comfortability, familiarity and trust built, then participation is not transactional but relational.

“It's like if you were told okay, there's a 16-year-old girl, she needs a house, design it. Like I don't fucking know what she likes, I don't know what colour she likes, I don't know what she wants, what her interests are. So, that's what it's like when some random in the government or [organisation] is designing something and they haven't interacted with the kid, they don't know anyone in care or anything like that, there's no understanding or anything. It's just what they want, and our wants are ignored.”
(Youth participant)

As meeting their needs not their interests

Staff articulated that young people were not always asked their views but did feel that they met young people's needs as required by their program.

“No, they don't have a say. We don't ask them. But I think that's – we individually try and meet their needs within the program. But I never directly ask them about the overall...”
(Staff participant)

Children and Young People's Experiences

"Instead of just talking to a caseworker who says, this, that, the other, sign this, do this, sort of thing."
(Youth participant)

"I don't know actually, because they [staff] just made us do the thing and they kept the notes that we made and that was about it."
(Youth participant)

Not always ending with responsive action

Young people were not confident that when they participate, that their views had been heard, because there was usually no change or action taken based on what they had said.

Most importantly, young people are not usually told what will happen as a result of what they have contributed. This sort of experience is in sharp contrast to positive relationships that indicate value, trust and respect.

"...I was so excited about it and that's the thing, like I've been part of so many programs now, like so many, and some of them I knew it wasn't like just something they're trying to do. It's just like to know my opinion, how I feel right now, and stuff from right now. It's not something they're planning to do in the future. So it's kind of like leaving me in like a cliffhanger now."
(Youth participant)

"It's almost like our hands are tied behind our back and we're trying to have that conversation with them going, we really tried, buddy. We will take your feedback on, but what else can we do when they're literally trying to – you know. So, that's, I think, another barrier, is the external pressure to our system that has to be there because this is just the way it is."
(Staff participant)

The participation process is confusing, not well understood by young people, often not explained in its entirety or they are invited in at different points of the process and rarely for the whole process.



STAFF EXPERIENCES



“No, they don’t have a say. We don’t ask them. But I think that’s – we individually try and meet their needs within the program. But I never directly ask them about the overall...”

STAFF PARTICIPANT

Staff Experiences

We know that participation can be difficult to operationalise. Here staff describe how they implement participation in practice and their participation experiences.

How is participation operationalised by community service practitioners?

As everyday practice tasks

Practitioners understand participation as young people being part of regular service provision processes and activities. These are service oriented processes and aimed at meeting young people's needs.

"I guess we do have policies around our care planning and our assessments that we have to do where it states in policy you've got to get the young person's – you know, you don't just go away and write a case plan. You've got to have a young person participate. That's a policy."
(Staff participant)

While young people are the subject of practice, the processes that meet their needs are not aligned to young people's self-identified interests. Participation for practitioners can mean the young person being present for or being part of processes such as...

- o initial assessments
- o accepting service provision
- o talking about service concerns

"It's like, a young person doesn't have much choice in that because it's just like, we've got this amount of time and this is what we can get done for you in that time. It's like, you accept it or you don't."
(Staff participant)

But these are not activities that young people understand as participation.

"I don't know actually, because they [staff] just made us do the thing and they kept the notes that we made and that was about it"
(Youth participant)

As targeted and separate initiatives for specific cohorts of children and young people

Young people are often brought together as a group for a limited time and a specific purpose.

"It took at least six to nine months, the whole process."
(Youth participant)

They can be asked to be part of one-off activities or limited participation opportunities that are disconnected from the core functions of the service in which the participation opportunity has been designed.

Staff 1: "Youth survey consultation."
Staff 2: "...then staff concept, then consultation again."

Contributing to participation can be a disjointed and an ad hoc experience, separate to the young person's receipt of service provision.

Staff Experiences

Young people can be asked to participate in prescribed and discrete activities with tight boundaries based on the demographics of the young people, and for a limited time. These targeted and separate initiatives are not integrated with each other or with a longer-term vision for participation of the child and young person's self-determined outcomes, or across an organisation and into the future.

"I've done a lot of meetings and stuff. My [...] call me the ambassador."
(Youth participant)

As unstructured and impromptu interactions with children and young people

Staff go to great lengths to be with and present for children and young people, talking with them and spending time with them, with the intention of building rapport. Participation can be misunderstood as

"hanging out" with young people.

"I love being able to bond and build a rapport with my young people and I think that's probably one of the main reasons why I wanted to be a youth development coach."

(Staff participant)

"They treated me nicely. They always asked - like you look sad or something like if I looked sad or if anything, if they see - like ask if I'm okay, like that type of stuff, and ask if I'm hungry or anything. Here you are mate."

(Youth participant)

Staff experiences of participation are often described as being with children and young people and involved in an activity together. This can be a limited understanding of the concept of 'voice', that requires a meaningful change in children and young people's lives as a result of relationship. While doing activities together supports rapport building and is often the first step to genuine participation experiences for young people, it doesn't constitute participation on its own.

"So, we went out to [service] one day when there was a group work going on and [practitioner] and I just turned up, and asked the group of young people that were there if they wanted to talk to us about this."

(Staff participant)

Practice Recommendations

How can we build a culture of participation together?

The organisations that took part in this research demonstrated their investment as evidenced by structures, and processes focussed on participation of children and young people. These form a base platform on which participation praxis currently exists. This investment needs to be investigated for how it supports children and young people's experiences of participation. These organisations understand the need to critically examine the quality of experiences to improve and embed participation in service provision. They support the development of the concept of participation and this research partnership indicates their reflexivity on this goal. This is an essential step forward to ensure that children and young people participate.

1

What we heard... Children and young people, and services do not think about participation and how it happens in the same way.

What we recommend...

The community services sector should be open to hearing what participation means to children and young people as core to child safeguarding work. Their views form the basis for mandated policy directives around engagement in decision making, supported by child and youth led resources.

Organisations should create opportunities for children and young people to feel safe by creating participation initiatives that are responsive to children and young people's needs and self-determined interests, are purposeful, achieve change and are integrated across the agency.

Staff should talk with every child and young person about participation as a matter of course. These discussions should occur regularly, are documented, and the child and young person is aware of how they can participate and and or shape participation opportunities.

Practice Recommendations

2

What we heard... Sector, organisation and staff efforts to engage children and young people in decision making are not always experienced as participation by children and young people.

What we recommend...

The community service sector should acknowledge and mitigate the impact of funding and legislative policy contexts as drivers of practice that focus on compliance to meet children and young people's needs and not their self-determined interests.

Organisations should be supported by the sector to increase staff awareness and capacity to build participation opportunities in various ways. This means supporting bespoke implementation of participation based on children and young people's self-determined interests. Implementation should account for community agency size, mission, resourcing, structure, and governance mechanisms that can be sustained over substantial time.

Staff should shift the discourse about the complexity of operationalising children and young people's participation and recognise that starting with children and young people's self-determined interests creates synergies with organisational imperatives.

Practice Recommendations

3

What we heard... The quality of relationships children and young people have with staff influence how they understand, engage and commit to participation opportunities.

What we recommend...

The community services sector should prioritise relational approaches to children and young people's participation. This requires providing resources beyond guides and manuals that focus on the principles of participation and in favour of child and youth designed resources based on their lived experience.

Organisational policy should be extended to capture the purpose of building rapport with children and young people as essential to providing services that meet need and for ensuring the children and young people can participate in decisions about their own life, based on their self-determined interests.

Staff perspectives of participation should be based on their knowledge of children and young people's interests and occur within positive relationships, with them, so that opportunities are child and youth-led. This means, participation opportunities are directly negotiated with them and staff are moved to follow through on children and young people's perspectives.

Podcast Series

To hear from the children and young people and staff directly involved in this research you can access our **Podcast Series, also titled *Did You Hear Me?*** from the Western Sydney University, School of Social Sciences webpage dedicated to changing social work with children and young people.

THE PRACTICE PROJECT

The *Did You Hear Me?* podcast is a three-part **podcast series** about participation for children and young people. This podcast will share the experiences of participation from the perspectives of children and young people and community service staff and ways to improve the lived experiences of community services for both children and young people. It will be a learning resource for community service staff who work with young people to support their ongoing efforts to develop participation and their ideas for innovation.



Episodes

Episode 1: Unpacking Participation

Episode 2: More Than Listening

Episode 3: The Participation Revolution

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We acknowledge the Aboriginal lands on which this research was conducted. We honour and celebrate Elders of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nations past and present. The lands were, are and will always be the lands of First Nations Peoples. We recognise that sovereignty was never ceded. We also recognise the deep wounds to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples which came from colonisation, racism, forced removal and the subjugation of First Nations peoples and knowledges.

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