

Empowerment and participation of children

Children have the right to give their views and opinions about decisions that affect them and to be listened to.

Empowerment is about helping children to have their say. Acting to empower children should always guide the work of your organisation.

Participation is important for children because it gives them an opportunity to have a say about issues and decisions that affect them. Children are more likely to speak up about their concerns about feeling unsafe, or make a complaint, if they feel their views are valued and welcomed.



Empowerment and participation is not a one off event – it is an approach that needs to be a part of your organisational culture.

Empowering children and facilitating their participation enhances their safety. In Victoria, mandatory child safe standards have been introduced to help protect children from abuse in organisations. Standard seven requires organisations to take steps to promote the participation and empowerment of children.

Benefits of empowering and supporting the participation of children

Participation and empowerment are vital components of a child safe organisation that benefits children, families, organisations and staff.

- Involving and consulting with children enables your organisation to improve its policies, practices and services as children provide a unique voice regarding what makes them feel safe and unsafe.
- Facilitating the empowerment and participation of children enhances a culture of child safety and listening to children within your organisation.
- Children and young people learn new skills, build self-esteem and develop an understanding of collaboration and rights.
- Children are more likely to report abuse or concerns if they feel safe and empowered in the organisation.
- Children feel their views are valued and listened to. Children are more likely to support the outcome if they have been involved.

It is critical that you are genuine in your approach to children and follow through on what you say you will do – credibility needs to be earned and can be easily lost.



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How to encourage the empowerment and participation of children in your organisation

As with all activities, it is vital to plan your involvement of children:

- Ensure participation is designed to be:
 - ethical
 - age appropriate and child-friendly
 - culturally respectful
 - inclusive of a diverse range of children, demonstrating respect for children of all ages, abilities, social and cultural backgrounds
 - positive and fun
 - voluntary and with informed consent.
- Be clear, honest and realistic about the boundaries of a discussion and what can change.
- Give adequate time to consult and make sure the venue is appropriate.
- Listen to what you are being told by children – they may have a very different view to you or what you expect – acknowledge, value and take seriously the views put forward by children.
- Ensure adults involved are skilful in facilitating the participation of children.
- Be clear if the discussion will be confidential or if the outcomes will be made public.
- Monitor the impact your consultation may have had on the children involved.
- Ensure you have procedures in place to provide support to any child who may be distressed as a result of their involvement or disclosure of concerns.
- Provide feedback to children about how their views had informed decision-making.

Examples of child participation events might include:

- Conducting a meaningful consultation with children to inform the development of your organisation's Child Safe Policy – asking them about what makes the children in your organisation feel safe and unsafe?
- Planning and identifying the risks involved in an overnight camp – it is important to be aware that your views about safety may be different from those held by children.

Useful resources

Gerison Lansdown *Promoting children's participation in democratic decision-making* February 2001, <<http://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/insight6.pdf>>

Moore, T., McArthur, M., Noble-Carr, D., & Harcourt, D., 2015, *Taking us seriously: children and young people talk about safety and institutional responses to their safety concerns*, Institute of Child Protection Studies, Australian Catholic University, Melbourne (funded by the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse commissioned) <<http://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/getattachment/33a95fc9-0e8d-41da-ac9f-31f625794d4f/Taking-Us-Seriously>>

Western Australia Commissioner for Children and Young People *Involving Children and Young People: Participation Guidelines* <<http://www.ccyp.wa.gov.au/files/Participation%20Guidelines.pdf>> and <<http://www.ccyp.wa.gov.au/files/CHECKLIST%20Participation%20Guidelines-%20.pdf>>

Commissioner for Children Tasmania, *Involving children in decision making; Your quick, practice guide* June 2015 <<http://www.childcomm.tas.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Guide-to-making-decisions-booklet.pdf>>

