



Commissioner for Children and Young People
Western Australia



Participation Guidelines

Ensuring children and young people's voices are heard

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Recognising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People

The Commissioner for Children and Young People WA acknowledges the unique culture and heritage of our Aboriginal peoples and the contributions Aboriginal peoples have made and continue to make to Western Australian society. For the purposes of this publication, the term ‘Aboriginal’ is intended to encompass the diverse cultures and identities of the First Peoples of Western Australia and also recognises those of Torres Strait Islander descent who call Western Australia home.

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Alternative formats

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Commissioner for Children and Young People
Level 1, Albert Facey House,
469 Wellington Street, Perth WA 6000

Telephone: (08) 6213 2297

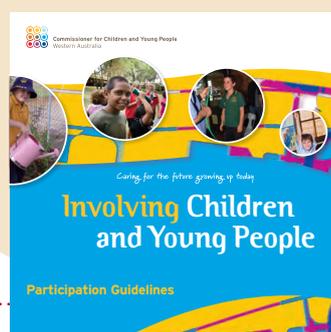
Freecall: 1800 072 444

Email: info@ccyp.wa.gov.au

Web: ccyp.wa.gov.au

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This is the second edition of the Participation Guidelines, produced by the Commissioner for Children and Young People. This edition replaces the 2009 edition of Involving Children and Young People: Participation Guidelines, shown here:



Introduction

The right of all children and young people to have their voices heard and to participate in making decisions that affect them is enshrined in the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child.¹ Western Australia's *Commissioner for Children and Young People Act 2006*² further recognises that the views of children and young people should be given serious consideration by organisations and taken into account.

Children and young people have differing needs, experiences and perspectives to those of adults and they should be empowered to share their views and to participate in society. Empowering children and young people means they are supported and helped to have their say.³

Participation involves informing children and young people of their right to be heard, supporting them to make a contribution, giving careful consideration to their views and including them in decisions that affect their lives. It also involves building children and young people's confidence and skills to enable and support their participation.

In any decision-making process, adults, organisations and the wider community have a responsibility to listen, respond to and collaborate with children to ensure they are protected and supported to participate.

These guidelines are designed to assist organisations, whether government, non-government, private or volunteer, to listen to and involve children and young people in decision making about services, activities and processes. The level of participation will vary depending on the type, nature, size and capacity of the organisation.

The information in these guidelines is not exhaustive, but is based on best practice working examples and on the experience of others. More importantly, it is centred on the voices and experiences of children and young people who continue to tell the Commissioner they want adults to listen to them and work with them to build and improve the services, communities and systems they use on a daily basis.

These guidelines should be used in conjunction with the Commissioner's other resources.

Type of organisation	Commissioner's resources
All organisations providing services that impact children and young people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Statement of Commitment to WA's children and young people • Child Impact Assessment Guidelines • Engaging with Aboriginal Children and Young People Toolkit • Tips for Children and young people on how to make a complaint • Consent form template
Child Safe Organisations – those that engage in child-related work, including: education, sport, recreation, arts, health, disability, transport, religious, child care, tuition, support services, child protection, out-of-home care, justice services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child Safe Organisations WA: Guidelines, Self-assessment and review tool, Information for parents, carers and family members • Feeling safe and respected in organisations

The following principles apply when planning the participation of children and young people:

Meaningful engagement:

The opportunity to participate is not tokenistic, and the contributions of children and young people are genuinely sought, valued, and used by the organisation.

Voluntary and informed:

Children and young people must understand what they are being asked to participate in, and can choose if they want to be involved.

Promote safety and minimise the risk of harm:

Children and young people are not exposed to any harm during or as a result of participating, and their safety is prioritised.

Recognise diversity and seek diverse views:

A range of views and experiences are sought. Children and young people are recognised as a diverse group and as individuals.

Addressing power imbalances:

Organisations address power dynamics when interacting with, and responding to feedback from, children and young people and involve them in designing and delivering the participation opportunity.

Understanding Aboriginal cultural contexts:

It is essential organisations involve Aboriginal children and young people in culturally appropriate ways and understand the Aboriginal communities in which they are working. This will ensure agencies deliver programs that strengthen the cultural identity, connection and leadership capacity of the Aboriginal children and young people accessing them.



“Adults can involve us by adding our thoughts and opinions into making decisions such as asking us if we want a basketball court built at a park or a bike track built at a park.”

Why is participation important for organisations and communities?

Organisations that involve children and young people:

- are safer for children and young people
- are more informed with inclusive practices and decision making grounded in the experiences of children and young people
- are likely to benefit from more engaged children in programs they have helped to develop
- enjoy stronger, more trusting and rewarding relationships between children and adults
- ensure programs and services are relevant, engaging and effectively meet the needs of children and young people
- identify creative and innovative solutions to complex issues based on the insights of children and young people
- apply quality improvement, by including feedback from children and young people
- foster more cohesive systems and inclusive communities.

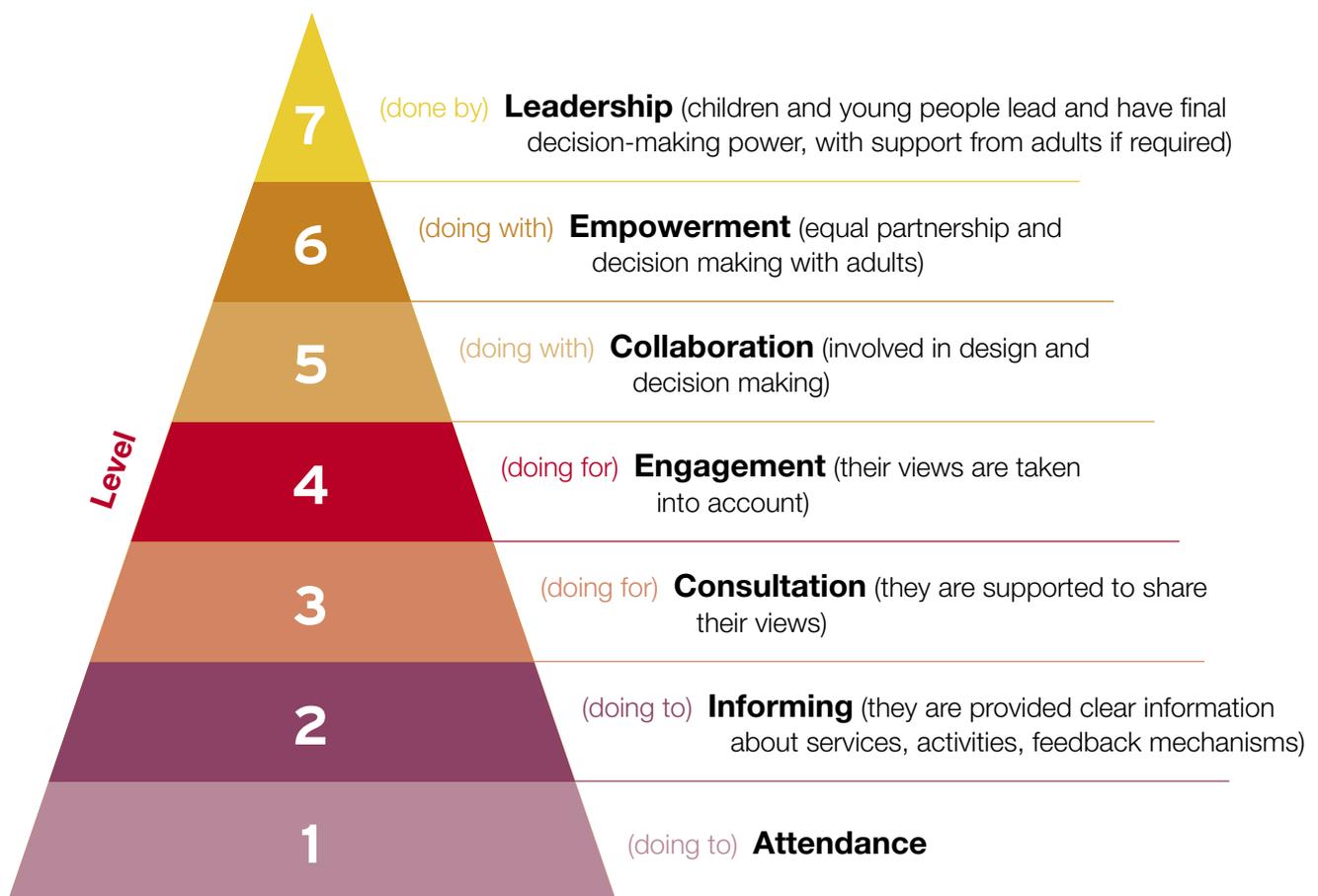
Why is participation important for children and young people?

Meaningful participation contributes to children and young people's wellbeing and development by:

- nurturing and developing their skills in problem solving, decision making, communication and negotiation
- improving confidence, autonomy, mastery and self-efficacy
- building an awareness of rights and responsibilities as citizens
- cultivating a sense of belonging and connection with adults, peers and the organisations they have helped to create and improve
- fostering feelings of empowerment that their voice can make a difference
- motivating other children and young people to support and inspire their peers to also participate
- encouraging positive risk-taking and resilience to life's challenges.

Levels of participation

Participation efforts and intentions vary from approaches with lower levels of engagement to strategies that aim for high levels of participation and empowerment.



Organisations may use a range of levels of participation. Skilled and supportive adults can move from doing work 'to' and 'for' children and young people to working 'with' them and ultimately supporting them to do the work by themselves.

**"I am important
- ask me what
I think... I have
good ideas."**

Nine year-old

The participation cycle

Within each level of participation, organisations should use a continuous cycle of reviewing, reflecting and responding to ensure the purpose is clear and the focus of the involvement is child-centred.



Planning

Start with clear goals and objectives in seeking the views of children and young people and what the organisation is seeking to learn. It is important to be clear on what level of involvement children and young people will have. Consider:

- How can children and young people be involved?
- How can a diverse range of children and young people be reached?
- Is enough time being allowed to incorporate children and young people's feedback and contributions? Always consider involving children and young people from the beginning.
- Are there sufficient resources (staffing and budget) to be able to meaningfully involve children and young people?
- Is the activity supported by key decision makers within the organisation?

When involving children and young people, they invest time, effort and commitment. Before inviting them to be involved, the organisation needs to commit to and have a plan for acting on their involvement. Consider:

- What is intended as a result of children and young people's involvement, feedback and their ideas?
- What can children and young people influence, and are there any non-negotiables that their input cannot influence?
- What is realistic with the time and resources available?
- What might prevent or limit action on their feedback, and can barriers be overcome?
- Does the whole organisation understand the commitment being made?
- Is the organisation prepared to consider and incorporate children and young people's views into decision making?

"Being given a voice as a rural student is really cool."



Preparing

Review how well the organisation is prepared to support children and young people's participation. Consider:

- What can be done to improve rights awareness for children and young people, including their right to participate and be safe?
- What are the planned opportunities for participation and how are they documented in the organisation's policies and plans?
- How are staff supported to have meaningful engagement and relationships with children and young people and to listen to their views.
- What is the organisational commitment to understanding the diversity of children and young people, their cultural differences, and their developmental needs?
- What skills are required to facilitate more child-friendly ways for children to express their views as well as to analyse and interpret the feedback?
- How will the organisation respond to honest, uncomfortable or inconvenient feedback from children and young people about their participation?

Decide which children and young people should be involved and why:

- Are there existing or potential service users, or specific cohorts who may be impacted by decisions?
- How will children and young people find out about the opportunity to be involved?
- Which local community groups, leaders, or elders can the organisation connect with and seek advice from about children and young people's involvement?

Other organisations that may have advice include local schools, the **Youth Affairs Council of Western Australia (YACWA)**, local youth advisory council (coordinated through local councils), or youth/community peak organisations.

Participation methods need to be safe, child-friendly and appropriate to the age, background and capabilities of the children and young people the organisation wishes to involve.

When choosing a participation method, consider:

- What is the best way to get feedback and input on the particular issue/s?
- Have children and young people been asked how they would like to participate and what methods they prefer to have their say?
- What logistics need to be managed, for example timeframe, budget, level of staff expertise and experience?
- Is the method suitable and accessible for different children and young people (age groups, abilities, language proficiency)?
- How will children and young people's feedback be captured, recorded and reported on?
- Do the participation methods (including both physical and online) promote child safety and minimise the opportunity for harm?

Examples of participation methods include suggestion boxes, focus groups, online surveys, meetings, summits, advisory groups and interviews. Successful projects will adapt and offer a range of different methods and activities to cater for the individual needs of children and young people.

Involving

Once the participation methods and activities are confirmed it is important to adapt to children and young people's ways of working. Ways to do this include:

- involving children and young people to help plan activities
- using creative, engaging and fun presentations and activities
- encouraging and training children and young people to be co-facilitators or peer researchers
- offering the chance to build their skills and confidence in participation, decision making and leadership
- presenting information in easily understandable ways suitable for different learning styles
- allowing enough time within each session
- selecting places and spaces that are accessible and friendly
- scheduling plenty of breaks and variation in activities
- seeking feedback from children and young people about what they enjoyed, what they would like to see more of, and what could be better.

"I learned that an adult point of view is very different to a child's/ teenager's."

Communication

The success of any participation opportunity depends on genuine, effective communication and building relationships with those involved. Children and young people (and their parents/guardians) need clear information about every aspect of their involvement. Ensure they understand:

- who the organisation is and why participation is wanted
- what will happen as a result of their participation (for example, the action that will be taken and what they can or cannot influence)
- what they will actually be doing (activities they will be involved in, and what they are contributing to)
- who will see/hear their contributions and what will be done with the information (be clear about confidentiality)
- the timeframe and level of commitment required
- where and when it is happening
- how the organisation will support and promote their safety and wellbeing
- how to access further information (including policies and processes) and who to talk to about any concerns about their experiences
- that their consent (and that of their parent/guardian) is required.⁴



Consent

Any organisation needs to seek the consent of children and young people (and parent's/ guardian's consent) before participation begins. They should be aware that they can withdraw their consent at any time, even once they have started the activity.

See the **Commissioner for Children and Young People's consent form** for an example. Emergency contacts and information about any specific needs, such as dietary, access, communication or support needs, should be part of this process.

Children and young people need to be able to communicate with the organisation in an ongoing way. This can be supported by allocating a specific staff member to liaise with young people, planning 'getting to know you' time and activities and engaging with them in a way that suits their preferred communication styles and times.

Recognise contributions and ensure the experience is rewarding

When voluntarily giving their time, children and young people need to find the experience meaningful, benefit from it and should have their contributions, time and effort recognised. Organisational decision makers should also hear from children and young people directly wherever possible to demonstrate respect and appreciation of their views and involvement.

Children and young people have told the Commissioner they like to take part in activities that are challenging but achievable, that build knowledge and confidence, make a difference, are fun, safe and enjoyable. They also want to be taken seriously, feel respected and valued.

Wherever possible, seek advice from children and young people themselves about the type of activities they would enjoy and how they would like to be recognised.

After the activity:

- recognise them through certificates, accreditation or references
- consider payment or rewards for their time and contribution, for example with vouchers – especially when they have undertaken a leadership or support role
- provide them with the final products, pre-screenings of videos, publications or similar
- where they have given consent, acknowledge their contributions in publications, newsletters or social media
- consider reimbursement for any out-of-pocket expenses they may have incurred (e.g. transport).



Follow up

Children and young people should be provided with frequent, meaningful and timely feedback and updates about the project and their involvement.

Ask them how they would like to be contacted and how they would find it easiest to provide feedback to you. Important updates include:

- acknowledging their attendance, contributions, and work they completed
- explaining any changes, updates or progress of their feedback
- allowing them to review documents that record their views
- seeking further feedback on actions as they progress
- responding to queries, requests and suggestions
- describing how their views and feedback have influenced work, including any actions taken and decisions made
- the organisation's responses to their feedback.

To keep the feedback process on track, develop a plan that includes a schedule of dates and the methods used, then monitor by keeping a record of when and how updates were given. Be realistic about what is achievable and then follow through on the plan.

When providing feedback during workshops and activities, make sure all views are acknowledged, valued and responded to.

"I enjoyed having an opinion about something and knowing my feedback will be taken on."

Pay attention to their feedback

Asking children and young people for feedback throughout and at the end of the activity on what it was like to be involved will improve your participation activities in the future, meaning better results for children and young people and your organisation. This should form part of your organisation's continual improvement and evaluation process.

All relevant staff in the organisation should hear children and young people's feedback in a way that is constructive and leads to better ways of working.

Deliver what was agreed

Be prepared to show evidence to children and young people of what has been done or the ways their views have influenced decision making and explain any delays that may have occurred or reasons why something different has happened.

Formally monitoring and evaluating the project, and children and young people's involvement in it, will improve processes. This will demonstrate the way in which children and young people's participation has supported the organisation's objectives.

Consider how children and young people will be engaged in the future to provide feedback and their views. This may include seeking their views on how a program or service is being delivered once their feedback has been incorporated, or identifying the impact of policies that have been implemented as a result of their feedback.

Participation and Child Safe Organisations

All children and young people have the right to be safe, feel safe and be treated with respect wherever they are. In 2019 the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) agreed to 10 National Principles for Child Safe Organisations (National Principles), which outline the key actions organisations undertaking child-related work must take to promote the safety of children and young people and protect them from harm.

Principle two of the National Principles relates specifically to empowering children and young people to participate, ensuring that *“children and young people are informed about their rights, participate in decisions affecting them and are taken seriously.”*⁵

When children and young people have the knowledge, skills and confidence to actively participate within organisations, they are more likely to speak up and to seek help when they feel unsafe.⁶ Children and young people are clear that in order to **be** safe they must also **feel** safe and they need adults to take them seriously by welcoming their views and providing them with a level of ‘power and control’ over decisions.⁷

There are four key actions for organisations under Principle two:

1. Ensuring that children and young people are informed about all of their rights, including to safety, information and participation.
2. The importance of friendships is recognised and support from peers is encouraged, to help children and young people feel safe and be less isolated.
3. Where relevant to the setting or context, children may be offered access to sexual abuse prevention programs and to relevant related information in an age appropriate way.
4. Staff and volunteers are attuned to signs of harm and facilitate child-friendly ways for children to express their views, participate in decision making and raise concerns.

Organisations can promote the safety of children when they commit to child friendly and safe approaches across their services and activities that empower them to take control of their own lives.⁸ When the voices and needs of children and young people are prioritised over institutional needs, organisations *“demonstrate commitment to creating a child-friendly organisational culture.”*⁹

Equity and diversity

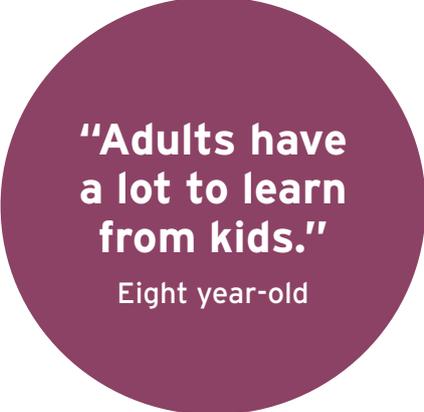
Principle four of the National Principles also sets out a requirement for organisations to ensure that *“Equity is upheld and diverse needs respected in policy and practice.”*

Organisations should provide meaningful opportunities for diverse and vulnerable groups of children and young people to participate and make commitments to ensure they are included. Organisations should also ensure the individuality and strengths of all children are celebrated. This includes consideration of diversity according to age, ability, gender identity, sexuality, geographical location, cultural background, religious or faith background, or whether they are vulnerable or disadvantaged for another reason.¹⁰

Participation of different groups of children and young people

Adults and organisations can limit children and young people from having their say when they see them as not having the capacity to share their views, where they are unwilling to adapt participation methods to include their voices, or where they are concerned a topic might be too sensitive to discuss.

However, with thorough planning organisations can easily adapt participation methods to ensure that children and young people are included in ways that are sensitive, ethical and safe. Participation is possible for all children, including children who are very young, not verbal or are not easily able to communicate, who speak a language other than English or have had challenging experiences.



**“Adults have
a lot to learn
from kids.”**

Eight year-old

Endnotes

- 1 United Nations 1989, *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, Geneva, Switzerland.
- 2 Commissioner for Children and Young People Act 2006.
- 3 Commission for Children and Young People n.d., *Tip Sheet: Child Safe Organisations – Empowerment and participation of children*, Commission for Children and Young People Victoria, Melbourne.
- 4 Commissioner for Children and Young People WA 2019, *National Principles for Child Safe Organisations WA: Guidelines*, Commissioner for Children and Young People WA, Perth.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Moore T et al 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.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Commissioner for Children and Young People WA 2019, *National Principles for Child Safe Organisations WA: Guidelines*, Commissioner for Children and Young People WA, Perth
- 9 Community and Disability Services Ministers’ Conference (CDSMC) 2005, *Creating Safe Environments for Children – Organisations, Employees and Volunteers*, p.3.
- 10 Commissioner for Children and Young People WA 2019, *National Principles for Child Safe Organisations WA: Guidelines*, Commissioner for Children and Young People WA, Perth, p.17-18.

Resources

There are a range of resources outlining different methodologies and activities to engage with diverse groups of children and young people.

Commissioner for Children and Young People

Child Safe Organisations WA resources, including the National Principles for Child Safe Organisations

Statement of Commitment to Western Australia's children and young people

Child Impact Assessment Guidelines and Assessment Form

Engaging with Aboriginal children and young people toolkit

Other resources

Western Australian Department of Communities, *Youth Participation Kit* (includes resource sheets for both organisations and young people)

Commission for Children and Young People Victoria, *Empowerment and participation: A guide for organisations working with children and young people* (Includes tools and resources to support organisational planning, and examples of how to support participation for different age groups, including 0–3 year olds, 3–8 year olds, 8–12 year olds, 12–15 year olds and 15–18 year olds)

Commissioner for Children Tasmania, *Involving children in decision making: Your quick, practical guide* (Includes example activities for the participation of children aged 3–12 years old)

New South Wales Advocate for Children and Young People, *Engaging children and young people in your organisation*

Government of South Australia and Youth Affairs Council of South Australia, *Better Together: A Practical Guide to Effective Engagement with Young People*

Youth Affairs Council of Victoria, *YERP: Young People Making Change*

Children and Young People with Disability Australia, *Strengthening participation of children and young people with disability in advocacy*

Centre for Multicultural Youth, *Inclusive Organisations: A guide to good practice strategies for engaging young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds in services and programs*

CREATE Foundation, *Children and Young People as Decision-makers: Encouraging Participation in Out-of-Home Care*

Emerging Minds – National Workforce Centre for Child Mental Health, *An overview of child participation: Key issues for organisations and practitioners*

Rainbow Network, *List of resources* (including inclusive practice for LGBTQI+ children and young people)

Institute of Child Protection Studies, Australian Catholic University, *Kids Central Toolkit*

Moore et al, *Taking us seriously: children and young people talk about safety and institutional responses to their safety concerns*

Office of the Children's Commissioner New Zealand, *Child and youth wellbeing – Child and Youth Toolkit*

Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland, *7 Golden Rules for Participation* (resources for both children and young people)

Sligo Leitrim Children and Young People's Services Committee, *Local Participation Practice Guidelines: Sligo Leitrim CYPSC* (includes example for activities for the participation of children 3–5 years; 5–12 years; 12–18 years)



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Level 1, Albert Facey House, 469 Wellington Street, Perth WA 6000
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