

# Children, participation, projects – how to make it work!

Project on “Children, democracy and participation in society”

Integrated project “Making democratic institutions work”

Council of Europe

French edition:

*La participation des enfants aux projets – Comment faire pour que ça marche !*

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## What is participation?

“Participation” means that children<sup>1</sup> express their views and relate their experiences, and that these are given weight in the decision-making process. The right to participate in decisions that affect one’s own life is a fundamental human right, enshrined in Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Along with the protection of children and provision of children’s basic needs, participation is one of the three key principles of the convention, which has been adopted by almost all states of the world. Article 12 reads:

... States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child ....

Despite the possibility for children’s expression afforded by the convention, children still feel quite often that adults neither listen to nor respect their views. They still have a weak position in modern societies, low status, little power and often no control over their own lives within the family, school, residential institutions, community, social services and politics.

## Why should children participate?

“Planning something for children without asking them is absolutely stupid.”  
(Norwegian boy, 11 years old)

According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, children are not mere objects of decisions taken by adults, but active, equal citizens and social actors. This means that children should be valued as people in their own right, rather than as mere adjuncts to their parents.

If children and their needs are taken seriously, they should be given the possibility to express their views, formulate their thoughts and make decisions that are relevant for their lives. Children themselves are the experts for their own lives, in all its aspects and dimensions.

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1. “Children” should be taken to mean those under 18 years of age, or up to the age of majority if lower. This definition follows United Nations usage in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Concerning the suggestions in this text, the reader should use discretion in interpreting what better applies to small children or to older age groups.

It is clear that children, depending on their age and degree of maturity, need support from their parents and other adults. Nevertheless, there are vast numbers of things that children can decide and realise by themselves. The aim of participation is to make children visible in social life and policy, as well as to promote education for democratic citizenship by giving children opportunities to learn democratic rules and procedures practically, and to be treated and respected as equal citizens.

Participatory processes will help to achieve these aims. It is a great challenge to make participation a reality for all children so that they are empowered to contribute to decisions that affect them as individuals and as a group, on local and national levels.

## **What is a participation project?**

A participation project is one in which children are directly involved in decision making relating to a project on themes relevant to their lives, such as a play space, public transit, school issues, city festivals. In brief, a participation project is about planning things with children, for children.

## **Who is this booklet for? What are its aims?**

This booklet is addressed to people who want to meet the challenge of children's participation by carrying out projects in which they directly work with children and who want to convince others of the need for children's participation.

The following presents a brief overview on important issues related to the preparation and implementation of participation projects with children. You will find information on: things to consider before setting up such projects; practical questions regarding child-friendly approaches; setting up and using networks; and the documentation, dissemination and evaluation of your work.

You will also find several examples of successful strategies for this type of project that have been identified by the Council of Europe's project on "Children, democracy and participation in society", which was carried out by a pan-European project working group.

## What are the benefits of participation?...

In the beginning, you may be confronted with negative or even hostile remarks, with barriers and obstacles on different levels. People may not understand why the participation of children is important, why they should support your project, or what the outcomes will be.

Participation projects can be successful if all involved people and institutions benefit from them, such as children, parents, teachers, other adults, schools, local authorities and communities, funding bodies and other stakeholders. One of the first things you need to do is to convince politicians and other key decision makers or fund givers that children's participation works and that it is their fundamental right to be given a voice in matters that concern them.

### ... for children?

- They are taken seriously by adults. Ideally, they become acquainted with a culture of democratic decision making, in which children and adults are equals.
- They participate actively in areas of life which are normally off-limits to children, such as decisions making on a local policy level. This gives children a sense of importance and builds up their self-confidence.
- They are educated for democratic citizenship, by directly learning how democracy works.
- Participating in a decision-making culture can increase respect for property and goods held in common. For example, children report that they handle new equipment and installations more carefully if they have participated in the decision-making process on what equipment should be bought and how it should be installed.
- They learn from each other. In mixed age groups, younger children learn from the older ones who serve as role models in demonstrating self-confidence, for example by giving speeches to adult audiences. Older children learn to treat younger ones thoughtfully, with respect and consideration, and, when necessary, give them protection. Generally speaking, participation projects are opportunities for peer education in both directions, enhancing the development of mutual respect between different age groups.
- They learn to work as part of a team, which has a positive effect on relationships between children. In mixed groups, gender equality is reinforced.

- They learn that, in well-implemented projects, participation can be fun, lively and enjoyable.
- They develop important personal and social skills, such as methods of conflict resolution, decision making and communication. In some projects, they learn to speak in public in front of adults, and to explain why they hold a certain opinion or why they reject or dislike something.

### ... for adults?

- Learning from children is part of an adult education experience.
- Adults get more in touch with children's views, and realise the great potential of the young generation. They discover how sophisticated, sensitive and thoughtful children's views are, and how much knowledge they have on different topics.
- They become more receptive of new ideas raised by children. Participation projects can increase adults' awareness of the needs, opinions and wishes of children, particularly as a vulnerable group of society.
- The active involvement of adults in participation projects leads to more tolerance and respect towards children. An adult's experience of getting to know children from social groups with which he or she has had little contact, may increase respect and tolerance for that particular group.
- Adults learn to share power with children.
- Participation projects strengthen intergenerational dialogue. For example, adults can learn more about the conditions of modern childhood, which may differ greatly from their own.
- Relationships between adults and children can improve due to the experiences shared while working on the project. For example, pupils and teachers involved in such projects have reported improved relations.

### ... for society and politics?

- Participation projects raise awareness of children's views and needs on the policy-making level.
- The benefits children reap from working on a participation project are beneficial for the whole of society as well. Girls and boys who are empowered to



form and defend their own opinions, who are aware of their skills and needs, and have experienced practical democratic decision making, are competent, responsible citizens who will contribute to society's continuity and further development. Participation projects help to consolidate democracy, encourage lifelong responsibilities of children and foster the development of civil society.

## What are the impacts on school and community life?

- Children who have played an important and active role in democratic decision making enrich the social life of their school and community.
- The involvement of local authorities in participation projects can increase awareness of children's rights within the community. Local politicians and authorities learn about children's needs and interests, their worldviews and the way they approach problems. Children's participation can become a core element of the life of the community.
- Children's devotion of their time to community concerns can change their standing in that community and influence adults' views on participation.
- Participation projects can lead to the creation of new common spaces in the municipality, such as re-structured playgrounds and schoolyards.
- More respect towards individual and common goods is another positive effect of participation projects.

The participation of children in many cases facilitates the creation of a tolerant, non-violent, safe, community environment by fostering a culture of mutual respect, trust, democratic decision making and citizenship. Participation can help children to appreciate the value of joint actions and may help prevent violence. Moreover, an increase in trust generally leads to an increase in safety.

### How does it work in practice?

Raising awareness on the importance of children's participation on the political level might be very time consuming but once done it can be very worthwhile. Political support is essential for the successful implementation of a children's participation project. The strategies to convince politicians are many: informing them about children's rights by organising training courses, publicity and information campaigns or conferences. Or, simply invite politicians to meet children and listen to them, explaining the benefits of participation projects for their work and for the whole society.

## What should be done before starting?

Careful preparatory work is essential for the successful implementation of children's participation projects. Much of the work has to be done by adults, but the involvement of children in the planning process is very important. This can be done by having children assess the project plan to sharpen its focus.

The following is a checklist of pre-project tasks:

- define the objectives of your project;
- develop the project design and prepare a brief description of the project;
- convince key people, find potential partners and create strong networks;
- develop child-friendly tools and methods. Publications such as *Participation – Spice it up!* (Save the Children Foundation, UK) can provide a lot of useful information (see end of this document for other relevant texts).
- establish project management tools, including schedules, distribution of tasks and communication systems;
- set up co-operation with relevant media;
- collect information on existing programmes and initiatives for children, such as national programmes that could serve as a frame for your planned project;
- consider time and other resources needed for the evaluation process;
- organise any needed training for the adults involved in your project; this will greatly improve the results.

One of the most important pre-project tasks is resource planning. Participation projects require commitment in terms of different resources, and if the project is to be successful, you need to consider:

- fund raising strategies, including international donors, co-financing strategies, corporate sponsorships;
- staff time, including time for training, ongoing communication with the working group and other involved or affected people, regular evaluation meetings, and general administration;
- extra costs, such as training for adults on the project, expenditure for materials to be used during the project, expenses for children to attend meetings;

- other resources, for example access to telephones and computers so that children can carry out tasks independently.

There is often concern about the resources needed to allow the meaningful involvement of children. In order to justify the extra costs, consider all the resources that will be wasted on facilities and services that do not meet the needs of this particular group. Further, imagine the indirect advantages that children, as well as adults, the community and the whole society will get out of children's participation.

### How does it work in practice?

The following fund raising strategies have proven successful:

- a co-financing strategy, which means that the participation project is funded by different bodies (ministries, municipalities, local authorities and other stakeholders);
- international donors and sponsorships, when funds are not available on the national, regional or local levels;
- corporate sponsorship is another strategy to put children's proposals and ideas into practice (for example sponsoring new equipment for a playground).

## How can networks be created and used?

A participation project does not include only children and the adults who support them. There is a wide range of other people and institutions that might be directly or indirectly involved: colleagues, teachers, parents, local authorities, politicians, funding bodies, other stakeholders and the local population. The number of associated people and/or institutions depends on your project's objectives and scope. People who will be involved or affected by your planned project need to be committed to the rights of children, and recognise that the benefits will outweigh any extra resources and time that will be needed.

To establish strong networks, it would be useful to distribute a short outline of your project proposal to potential partners, which should include objectives, target groups and expected benefits for all actors.

To make your networking effective, it is important to use existing structures, contacts and co-operation work among adults. Build upon positive experiences with other children's participation projects from the past.

Possible co-operation partners are:

- schools and other child/youth related institutions, such as kindergartens, youth centres, residential institutions;
- institutions where children spend their leisure time, for example sports and leisure centres and associations, as well as cultural institutions, including theatres and galleries;
- other professionals who are working with children, such as social workers;
- local politicians and authorities, as well as high-level policy makers;
- non-governmental organisations (NGOs);
- parents (and/or parents associations).

#### How does it work in practice?

Schools can play an important role in implementing a participation project. Children are easily accessible regardless of their social or ethnic background and school staff is used to working with children and child-friendly methods. Schools are at the centre of children's lives, and there is a wide range of schools from which to choose in each country.

## How can a project be made as child-friendly as possible?

Participation projects with children can be managed adequately only if the whole process is designed in a child-friendly way, with due attention to the age of the children.

The role of the involved adults is to create a child-friendly project design and to put it into practice. Be aware that you play a supportive and not an intervening role; it is the children who are responsible for the content and who are the real experts. The following will help you ensure that your project is as suitable as possible for the young.

- Treat children with the same respect as adults, and take their views and interests seriously. This will help them feel important.
- Treat all of the involved children equally.
- Choose a topic that is attractive to children and one that they are comfortable with. It should be as concrete as possible and be closely related to their daily lives. If necessary, provide background material.

- Involve children as early as possible – ideally, during the preparation phase – as this strengthens their motivation and identification with the project’s objectives.
- Invite and encourage all children to participate in the project. Keep the project open for all children, regardless of their social, cultural or ethnic background and status, or their performance at school.
- Try to guarantee easy access to information on the project and its outcomes for the children involved, as well as outsiders.
- Keep the organisational structures and procedures transparent, including schedules, and session rules.
- Create an open, tolerant and nurturing environment that encourages the children to say what they think. Give everyone the opportunity to express his or her opinion.
- Use the type of language that children can understand, and listen carefully to what they have to say. All written material should take into account the ages of the children working on the project.
- Use child-friendly settings, methods and facilitation techniques, such as small working groups, amusing games, varied materials, photos, paintings, symbols, such as animals, flowers, smiling faces, and moderating cards and colours.

### How does it work in practice?

In general, a child-friendly design takes the needs of children into account in an enjoyable way, with due consideration to their age and degree of maturity. One of the many child-friendly methods possible is the James Bond game, which is appropriate for children aged 6 to 10. This game aims at the exploration of a site or playground, and children usually adore it as they behave like spies on a secret mission. Children explore the area around free-standing posts by performing tasks, such as searching for something colourful or something spiky in this area. Finally, they are asked what they like/dislike in the area. This method is more fun for children than, for example, being formally interviewed about their preferences concerning their play areas.

Symbols of appreciation and visible signs of sharing power are extremely important for children. For example, at a local children’s council in France, children participate in all important ceremonies and festivities of the community, hold speeches in front of an adult audience as well as the mayor, and represent the community in mayor-like roles in ceremonies. Children are allowed to wear the tricolour sash as well as the mayor, which has an enormous symbolic value for them.

- Be careful to not overstrain children, for example involving them in a long conversation about their playground and in doing so, denying them play-time.
- Be honest and explain to children, giving concrete reasons, when you think that their ideas are not realistic.
- Think of small symbolic objects to express your appreciation, such as diplomas, personal letters, stickers, badges, pins and mouse pads.
- Take into account that children and adults have different time horizons. It is motivating for children to achieve at least some results promptly. Visibility of results is a main factor of success in children's views.
- Be self-critical and flexible. If some methods, tools or approaches turn out to be not child-friendly enough, you need to adapt your original ideas to the children's needs and requirements. This may affect the way certain things are done and their duration.

Working with children requires specific skills and competences, such as flexibility, sympathy, patience and creativity. Special training may be of particular importance in order to acquire or improve these skills and competences. When they are involved in successful, child-centred participation projects, children feel happy, valued and learn that participation can be fun – and that's what really counts.

## What are useful documentation and dissemination strategies?

Sharing both good and bad experiences from your participation project with others is important. The information you may want to share could include the project description, workshop reports, activity reports, method diagrams and advice tool kits. In order to guarantee an efficient information flow, you should consider the following.

- The material has to be prepared by children and/or adults in a child-friendly format, taking into consideration aspects such as text, layout, pictures and paintings.
- Information on the project has to be easily accessible. The Internet provides excellent possibilities for an exchange of information.

- The development of public relations and publicity strategies through various media is essential, and has to be considered during the planning phase of the project.
- Documents should ideally be available in the national language, and another European language of regional importance. By disseminating the results of your local project internationally, you could ultimately reinforce local/global synergy.

### How does it work in practice?

It is very exciting for children to appear on television or in newspapers, and this is an excellent strategy to have their work appreciated and disseminate the results to a wider audience. Organising information campaigns, marches, exhibitions, conferences and seminars are also useful strategies to disseminate the outcomes and make the public listen to children's voices. Be aware that children themselves can contribute a lot to efficient and child-centred documentation and dissemination, through writing articles, drawing and preparing documents for other children.

## Why evaluate the project?

Systematic and regular evaluation is a very important element of long-term or ongoing children's participation projects, and it enables you to improve them on a continual basis. Evaluation is an excellent tool with which to examine critically the implementation process, including both positive and negative experiences. It can help to understand what the children on the project and other stakeholders think about it, why certain children withdraw from a project, and also how children's involvement influences their lives, perspectives, and political commitment on a community level.

## What is a successful evaluation?

A successful evaluation should:

- involve children at all stages of the evaluation process. At the starting point, they should help decide on the evaluation criteria. During evaluation, their views should be taken into account, and they should be informed of the final results;

- consider the views and experiences of involved adults as well, with a view to improving the organisational structures and/or the project management;
- ideally be carried out by external professionals and not by involved adults;
- be part of the project plan and budgeted accordingly.
- carried out systematically and on a regular basis



## For more information

### *Council of Europe*

“Children’s participation in schools and the local community. It works!” (running title of forthcoming publication)

Committee of Ministers Recommendation No. R (98)8 on the participation of children in family and social life, available at <http://www.coe.int> (click on “Institutions”, then on “Committee of Ministers”)

For information on Council of Europe funding of pilot projects, see: [www.coe.int/youth](http://www.coe.int/youth)

Other activities concerning children available at <http://www.coe.int> (click on “Social Cohesion”, then on “Social policy”)

### *Other sources*

*Participation – Spice it up!* Save the Children Foundation, UK

For information on European Commission funding, see: <http://www.europa.eu.int>

UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, available on the website of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, <http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu2/6/crc/treaties/crc.htm>

### *Existing participating projects*

Austria: “Q.I.S. – Quality in schools – playground dreams”, see: [www.qis.at](http://www.qis.at)

Albania: “Stop child labour in Albania”, see: [www.crca.org.al](http://www.crca.org.al)

France: “Conseil Communal de Jeunes Brie”

Norway: “Children and youth: empowerment, participation and influence”, see: [www.vfk.no](http://www.vfk.no)

Portugal: “The school and the assembly”, see: [www.parlamento.pt](http://www.parlamento.pt)

United Kingdom: “Playing for real”, see: [www.devonplay.co.uk](http://www.devonplay.co.uk)

The above-mentioned projects were visited and assessed by the working group on “Children, democracy and participation in society” (See forthcoming publication “Children’s participation in schools and the local community. It works!”)

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