Children's involvement in family decision-making

Although public policy and professional practice strongly encourage the involvement of children in decisions on matters that directly affect them, little is known about how children in their immediate pre-teen years participate in everyday decision-making in their own families. This study was carried out by Ian Butler, Margaret Robinson and Lesley Scanlan. Based on group discussions with 69 children and in-depth interviews with a further 48 children, all aged between 8 and 11, they found that:

- The ways in which families made decisions involved a subtle, complex and dynamic set of processes in which children could exert a decisive influence.
- Most families operated democratically but children accepted the ultimate authority of their parents, provided that they felt their parents acted ‘fairly’.
- For children, ‘fairness’ had more to do with being treated equitably than simply having the decision made in their favour. Children could use claims to fairness as a moral lever in negotiations with parents.
- Children varied in the degree to which they regarded themselves as competent decision-makers: most of those in this age group regarded themselves as in the process of learning how to make ‘better decisions’.
- For many children in this age group, the proving ground for learning how to make decisions coincided with their developing sense of identity and wish for greater independence.
- Family precedent, especially that set by older brothers and sisters, was an influential factor in ‘good decision-making’ and was a more common point of reference than the experience of peers and other families.
- Children regarded fathers as less actively involved in making domestic decisions, except where these affected the whole family or when decision-making concerned ‘public’ rather than simply ‘domestic’ matters. For most children it was mothers, rather than fathers, who were the most frequently consulted source of domestic authority.
Background

As children’s rights to citizenship have strengthened over recent years, a strong presumption in favour of involving children in decisions on matters that directly affect them has developed in a number of areas of law, public policy and professional practice (for example, school councils and case conferences). Yet surprisingly little is known about how far children’s participation extends to their home lives and the routine business of everyday life. This study examined how and to what extent children were involved in shaping their own and their families’ domestic lives.

Deciding family business

Most families did not rely on formal or explicit ways of deciding on family matters. Rather, they had developed complex but largely unspoken ways of going about their business. These processes tended very strongly to the democratic. This applied to relatively trivial decisions about where to go for a treat:

Int.: Who chooses where you go?
Amy: We all decide together.
Int.: What if all three children want something different?
Amy: We decide on one and on the next week we do the other and the week after that we’d do the other.
(Amy, aged 9)

It also extended to major decisions, such as whether to move house, where children could have a decisive influence:

Holly: All of us decided to move ‘cos we didn’t like where we were staying.
Int.: Did you all go together and look at other houses?
Holly: Yeah. My mum said, ‘If they choose this one and I choose that one, then I’ll just go with their decision’.
Int.: So the house you’re moving to, did everyone like it?
Holly: Most of us.
Int.: Who was less keen?
Holly: My mum.
(Holly, aged 11)

Competence came through experience, as far as the children were concerned:

Because they’re older and wiser and they know more about the world than us children, because children are young and parents have got jobs and everything and they know more than us.
(Lee, aged 10)

‘Good’ decisions were those that children regard as ‘fair’. Fairness

Fairness, for most children, meant being able to be part of the ‘democracy’ of the family. ‘Having a say’ was more important to most children than ‘getting their own way’. As 9-year-old Ellen explained, a decision was fair when:

Everybody has a say about what they want to do even if we don’t get to do it.

Fairness extended to children’s judgement on the application of principles derived from precedent, an important consideration in family decision-making. This did not mean that they felt all the children of the family
should be treated identically once they had reached the same age and stage. Where differences in personality or circumstances applied, a fair decision was one that respected those differences.

As such, claims to fairness reflected sophisticated moral judgements on the part of children. These claims were also used to counterbalance the greater power held in the family by adults. However, adults did not always recognise children’s emotional investment in the moral imperative of fairness.

**Making your own way**

Children varied in the degree to which they regarded themselves as competent to make their own decisions. Children recognised that they were in the process of learning how to make decisions for themselves and were aware of how the example set by parents was important to the development of their own capacity to make decisions.

However, children did make claims to both an entitlement and a competence in decision-making in relation to their growing sense of individual identity and independence. At home, children’s bedrooms assumed both a practical and symbolic significance in a child’s progress towards autonomy:

> Int.: Why is [having your own space] important?  
> Mandy: I dunno. I just have stuff I don’t wanna tell them sometimes.  
> (Mandy, aged 10)

In public, choice of clothes and of friends also defined the developing boundaries between a child and his or her parents:

> Int.: What happens if mum wants you to have something you don’t like?  
> Jenny: I just say ‘No, I don’t wanna wear it’ and I won’t wear it. Yeah, because it’s like my body that I’m covering, and I should feel comfortable in the clothes I wear, and it should be my decision.  
> (Jenny, aged 11)

In relation to such matters as bedrooms, clothes and friends, children were prepared to risk confrontation and friction and even sometimes to lie to their parents.

**Looking ahead**

Most children had a sense that increasing competence and opportunity for autonomous decision-making would come with increasing age. For some children, the point of transition would be moving to secondary school or becoming a teenager:

> Mum keeps saying, ‘I don’t care what you wear when you move out’. But I’ll probably have the final say when I’m fifteen or something ‘cos by then I’ll be able to put my foot down and say, ‘Look mum I’m not doing that’ and that’s what teenagers do anyway.  
> (Lauren, aged 11)

For those with older brothers and sisters, existing patterns offered a map into the future. Children expected a high degree of consistency in the application of the family’s rules across the generations but accepted flexibility where circumstances required, consistent with their conception of fairness. The importance of precedent set by older brothers and sisters added to the sense in which family decision-making can be understood as cumulative.

**Friends and other families**

The experience of friends and other families had little bearing on patterns of decision- and rule-making for children at this age, except where this conflicted with or compromised children’s developing sense of their own social identity. This was often expressed in terms of ‘fitting in’ with their peers. In the following example, 10-year-old Mandy invoked the idea of fairness to make her point:

> Int.: Why do you think she’s suddenly letting you go to town on your own?  
> Mandy: I think it’s ‘cos all my friends do and I keep saying it’s not fair ‘cos they’re going, so she’s starting letting me now ‘cos I’m getting older.  
> Int.: Why didn’t you think it was fair?  
> Mandy: ‘Cos all my friends were going and I wasn’t. And I wanted to start buying my own stuff.

**Mothers and fathers**

Most of the children in the study appeared to assume that their parents (even those few who lived apart) were in agreement over their decisions and in the interpretation and application of family rules. However, many children identified striking differences in the roles of their mothers and their fathers, usually along traditional gendered lines. For most children mothers, not fathers, were the most frequently consulted source of domestic authority. Fathers, where they did engage with routine decision-making, tended to do so in relation to questions of discipline:

> Well, my mum is: Why don’t you wake up early? Did you brush your teeth? Did you eat? … My dad does: Do your work properly, don’t be naughty, and stuff like that.  
> (Rory, aged 10)
Fathers did become involved in ‘bigger’ decisions, however, such as choice of family holiday. Fathers also featured more prominently in decisions occupying the boundary between domestic and public, such as a child’s choice of friends, curfews and where children could go unaccompanied.

**Int.:** What kind of decisions does your dad make?  
**Jo:** If we have a day off from school, what we’d do and where we’d go, and my mum decides what we have for tea.  
(Jo, aged 10)

**Implications**

The researchers conclude that decision-making processes in families are complex, cumulative, subtle and dynamic. They rely on a shared, intimate knowledge of precedent, mutual trust and a common understanding of the family’s unique ‘culture’. Such findings may shed light on some of the difficulties faced by step-families who, initially at least, are seeking to blend divergent family ‘cultures’ without the necessary intimate knowledge, common experience and trust.

For children separated from their parents (for example, through entering into public care or through extended illness), these findings suggest some of the adjustment difficulties that children may face in out-of-family placements. In cases of substitute family care in particular, both the child and the host family will experience the possible difficulties described, especially as the child may not have developed the tools and personal skills for the more explicit negotiation of family rules in his or her birth family. Such difficulties may be compounded where a child is subject to multiple moves. Finding out how a family makes its decisions and formulates its rules is not the work of a moment or even of a couple of weeks or months.

These findings suggest that it is important for all of those with an interest in families and in the provision of services to families to:

- understand and respect the complexity of family processes, family histories and the particular ways that families have of going about their everyday business;
- respect the authority of parents, the confidence that many children have in their parents and the capacity of children to engage meaningfully and purposefully in determining the conduct of family life;
- respect children’s inclination towards participatory forms of engagement in family life and be sensitive to children who are in the process of developing their capacity for autonomy and independence;
- respect and respond to children’s claims to fairness and equitable treatment.

**About the project**

This research was undertaken by Ian Butler, Margaret Robinson and Lesley Scanlan from the Universities of Keele and Cardiff. It was designed as a two-phase study. Phase 1 involved discussions with small groups of 7 to 10 children (69 in total) about the range and ‘territory’ of family decision-making. In Phase 2 interviews with a further 48 children explored in depth the issues arising from Phase 1. Before commencing group sessions or interviews the researchers ensured that each child had consented to take part freely and with a clear understanding of the nature and purpose of the study.

**For further information**

The full report, *Children and decision making* by Ian Butler, Margaret Robinson and Lesley Scanlan, is published for the Foundation by the National Children’s Bureau as part of the Understanding Children’s Lives series (ISBN 1 904787 54 1, price £12.95 or £10.95 for NCB members, plus £3 p&p for orders under £28).