

Young children's citizenship

Young children's citizenship

Ideas into practice

**Carolyn Willow, Ruth Marchant,
Perpetua Kirby and Bren Neale**

Edited by Bren Neale



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1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Bren Neale

These papers were commissioned in response to the concerns of researchers and practitioners that, with the growing interest in the views of younger children, wheels were being reinvented and opportunities to share knowledge and experience were needed. There was also a concern that some practices were potentially damaging. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation convened two meetings with researchers and practitioners before commissioning these papers. Discussions were held with an advisory group comprising practitioners, policy specialists and children's rights specialists, researchers and a young person with campaigning experience. Following the completion of the papers by Willow and Marchant and Kirby, a seminar was organised with representatives of key organisations and government departments to discuss the implications of the findings. The final section of the report draws on the recommendations made at this meeting.

The introduction to this report sets out a new way of 'seeing' children – not simply as welfare dependants but as young citizens with an active contribution to make to society. Citizenship for children is defined as an entitlement to recognition, respect and participation. These basic needs are as crucial to children's well-being as their needs for care and protection. Key challenges for the future are to apply these principles to younger children, and

to find ways to integrate citizenship and welfare for children more effectively in public policy and professional practice.

The two papers that form the core of this report review and reflect on current developments in according citizenship to younger children. Carolyn Willow surveys over 100 consultation initiatives involving children of primary-school age across a wide range of local authorities, voluntary organisations and children's rights organisations. Most of these initiatives were designed to inform the development of children's services and facilities, and their breadth and diversity is impressive: children are clearly being recognised in ways that would not have been possible a decade ago. But Willow also reveals limitations in the overall effectiveness of these activities, particularly where listening to children is not followed through with any tangible response.

These themes are taken up and developed by Ruth Marchant and Perpetua Kirby. They focus on the issue of how to ensure that listening to young children, particularly those of pre-school age, is a meaningful and productive activity for children themselves. For example, how far is consultation being built into routine day-to-day interactions between adults and children, or is it destined to remain a one-off activity that is simply 'tacked onto' organisational structures? If children are now being recognised, to what extent are they being respected and taken seriously? Is consultation built on effective modes of communication and mutual understanding between adults and young children? These issues, they suggest, need urgent attention so that respect for young children can be woven into all adult-child relationships.

The conclusion to this report presents an overview of findings and recommendations from these two papers and from the seminar convened by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Pointers for future development are summarised below.

- *A spectrum of approaches*: consulting with young children is not a uniform activity and requires a variety of approaches. These can range from one-off consultations, such as those now found in public sector organisations that tap into children's collective voices, to ongoing participatory practices that are built into daily routines and tap into children's individual voices. Techniques for improving the quality of one-off consultations are needed, while ongoing participatory practices are poorly developed and understood, and deserve a much higher profile.
- *Defining consultation and participation*: consultation is about listening *and* responding to children. It entails inviting children to communicate and take part in decision making about matters that affect them, in order to improve their lives. It can, therefore, be seen as a process rather than a one-off event, for it involves identifying an issue to investigate, engaging the participants (both adults and children), exploring the issue, feeding back and discussing possible courses of action or future plans and, finally, reviewing the effectiveness of the process against anticipated outcomes. It may also be useful to focus on what children do (contributing, participating) rather than on what adults do (consulting, responding). This way of thinking about the activity offers scope for children to become actively engaged in the process as a whole, and even to take ownership of consultative and decision-making processes for themselves.
- *Partnership arrangements*: there is a need to ensure that consultation is not simply tacked on to organisational structures but is integrated into routine working practices.

This would be facilitated by establishing partnerships between children, practitioners, service managers and specialist staff.

- *Participation as an ethical process*: respect for children can be woven into participatory practices by careful attention to ethical considerations. These include identifying children's own agendas, giving them an informed choice about taking part, based on clear and simple information, and ensuring they are not exploited. It also means communicating effectively and sensitively, using a range of methods (verbal and non-verbal) that are appropriate for young children. These need to be built into each stage of the process, including subsequent discussion and feedback and making final decisions.
- *Do children want to participate?*: it is important to ensure that no child who wishes to participate is excluded. Mechanisms need to be devised to ensure that children who wish to raise issues are identified. But not all children will want to participate and their wishes should be respected. *Inviting* children to participate is not the same thing as *requiring* them to do so.
- *Distinguishing between participation and choice*: participation for children is not the same thing as choice. Children prefer to make decisions collaboratively with supportive adults rather than autonomously. Children will accept adult responsibilities to make final decisions as long as these are based on open communication and the reasons for particular decisions are made transparent.

- *Monitoring and evaluation:* these phases of the participatory process need to be developed and built into individual initiatives. Periodic reviews that gather and review information across initiatives are also very helpful in moving developments on. Measuring *processes* as well as *outcomes* is essential, along with developing audit tools that are sensitive enough to measure respect and well-being. Asking children for their evaluations of the process they have been through and what the outcomes have been for them should be integral to audit mechanisms.
- *Support for adults:* developing an ethos of participation for young children cannot occur without considerable support for adults. Training and resources (time, staffing and funding) are needed, along with collaborative forums (meetings, websites, professional associations, conferences, action research and public discussion and debate) that will enable adults to share ideas and reach a common vision for the future.

2 INTRODUCTION: YOUNG CHILDREN'S CITIZENSHIP

Bren Neale

The notion of listening to children and taking their views into account is an established principle within English law and public policy. It has been sanctioned and given force through the Children Act (1989) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which was ratified by the UK Government in 1991. Children are now to be encouraged to express their views and take part in discussion and decision making about everyday matters that affect them. This in turn requires adults to understand and communicate effectively with children in a variety of contexts in which they live out their daily lives – in their families, in social and health care settings, in schools, youth clubs and play settings, as well as in specialist settings such as legal, medical or social services that deal with specific and often difficult circumstances for children. They are also to be included in forums where public policies that impact on children are formulated and developed.

The practice of listening to children is, in itself, a relatively simple and straightforward matter. However, hearing what children tell us, responding to them and encouraging their participation in decision making is far from simple. It is a complex process that raises some fundamental questions about the place of children in our society. Before we can begin to understand how and why adults respond to children in particular ways, it is

worth stepping back from the practical issues of consulting with them to think about how adults 'see' children in the first place. For example, what status are children accorded by adults? Do they see them as rights-bearing individuals? Or as vulnerable 'people in the making' who are not yet ready for full human rights? What does this mean for power relations between adults and children? At the present time, there is little consensus over these issues and they continue to be hotly debated in public and policy forums.

It is possible to see in these debates two distinct ways of viewing children, which have important consequences for policy and professional practice. On the one hand, children can be seen as *welfare dependants* who need care and protection. On the other hand, they can be seen as *young citizens* who are entitled to respect and participation. These two ways of seeing children have been explored in some detail elsewhere (Neale and Smart, 2001; Neale, 2002), but it is worth drawing out their salient features here.

1 Children as welfare dependants:

- children are dependants
- children are incompetent and vulnerable
- children need care, protection and guidance
- children's childhoods are determined by adults.

2 Children as young citizens:

- children are people
- children have strengths and competencies
- children need recognition, respect and participation
- children influence their own childhoods.

The welfare paradigm set out above is the dominant framework for understanding and responding to children in public policy and in the daily settings of their lives. Indeed, it has become so ingrained in our thinking that it has a 'taken-for-granted' quality about it. It is a necessarily protectionist framework that sees children as relatively incapable and vulnerable to harm, and therefore in need of strong guidance, control and support from responsible adults. The younger the child the more strongly these presumptions are applied. Of course, welfare can be said to embrace children's rights and interests, as well as their needs, but adults tend to define what these rights and interests are. Welfare, then, is something that is applied *to* children by adults in a way that leaves adults very firmly in control.

Seeing children through the lens of their citizenship gives a very different picture of their place in the social world. Here they are recognised as young people with strengths and competencies. Competence within this framework is not linked simply to age but is borne of social experiences and interactions, and can therefore be nurtured in all children, including the youngest members of our society. Citizenship means different things in different contexts. For adults, it is usually defined in narrow political terms, connoting an entitlement to autonomy and freedom of choice that goes hand in hand with the acquisition of adult responsibilities. But citizenship also has a broader and more inclusive meaning. It can be defined as an entitlement to *recognition, respect and participation*. This social form of citizenship operates not only in civic settings where public policy is created and put into effect, but also in the routine contexts of day-to-day life. Defined in this way, citizenship applies as much to children as to adults and it suggests new ways for adults and children to relate to each other in their daily lives.

Crucially for our discussion here, the three components of citizenship outlined above are *all* necessary to children's well-

being. They may be regarded not purely as entitlements or rights but as basic needs that are as crucial to children's well-being as their care and protection. In other words, children's citizenship is both a need and a right, and it is this dual nature that makes it so compelling. The first element, recognition, is more than a simple courtesy that we owe to people. It has been described as a fundamental human need (Taylor, 1992, p. 26). Applying this to children is a challenge in a system that, until recently at least, could render children invisible by simply ignoring them. It is only when children are recognised as people in their own right that adults can acknowledge that they have their own ways of understanding the world and are capable of defining their own needs, rights, interests and responsibilities. When adults begin to notice children in this new way, they can then begin to appreciate and show some respect for children's subjective world views. Recognising and respecting children in these ways is the necessary precursor for developing appropriate modes of participation, and knowing how and when (and when not) to employ them. Participation is important of course, but it may not be the most important element of citizenship for children themselves (Neale, 2002). Without due recognition and respect, participation may become an empty exercise, at best a token gesture or, at worst, a manipulative or exploitative practice. 'Real' citizenship, then, involves a search for ways to alter the culture of adult practices and attitudes in order to include children in meaningful ways and to listen and respond to them effectively. Inherent in this way of seeing children is an acknowledgement that adults need not necessarily determine what is best for children nor control their childhoods, but can support them over time as they begin to take responsibility for their own lives.

Citizenship for children is hardly a new concept, of course, but there has been a tendency to see it as incompatible with welfare or to submerge it *within* welfare in a way that merely

pays lip service to it. There is a presumption, too, that citizenship (seen in adultist, political terms) is something that gradually replaces welfare over time, rather than something that can and should be intertwined with welfare in beneficial ways. Yet, as Marchant and Kirby (in their paper, which forms Chapter 4 of this report) suggest, these two ways of understanding children do not have to be seen as mutually exclusive, nor are they contradictory. Children clearly *are* dependent and in need of care, protection and guidance. They are fully aware of this themselves and, indeed, value the support they are given. A citizenship framework does not make this any less the case. Nor should it obscure the very real differences that exist between children of substantially different ages. The social experience, understanding and social contributions of a baby or a pre-school-age child, for example, are likely to be markedly different from those of a young person of secondary-school age or over. This is why children's citizenship needs constant nurturing, for it is a fledgling status that is continually under construction.

That children have welfare needs, however, does not make their entitlement to citizenship any less compelling, yet these needs remain less well understood. As Marchant and Kirby (in Chapter 4) illustrate, there is a popular misconception that giving children a voice means liberating them from adults so that they can make autonomous choices. Perhaps understandably, adults are concerned that this will alter the balance of power across the generations and set adults and children against each other. Such fears are largely unfounded. Participation in decision making is not the same thing as having unfettered choice and, unless there are exceptional circumstances, children prefer to make choices collaboratively with supportive adults rather than independently (Neale and Smart, 2001). Granting citizenship to children, then, is not the same thing as granting them autonomous political rights, nor does it detract from their welfare needs.

A key challenge for the future, then, is to find ways to balance care with respect, and protection with participation; in other words, to promote a more effective integration of children's welfare and citizenship in policy and professional practice, and in the everyday settings of children's lives. At this stage, the practical task of nurturing citizenship for children is necessarily part of a larger strategic enterprise, that of promoting the principle of children's citizenship. Measures such as the adoption of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (which will shortly be followed with the establishment of a Children's Commissioner for England) play a vital role in this regard, for they provide a benchmark against which developments can be measured, as well as raising public awareness of the special needs and rights of childhood.

Consulting with children

The project of listening to children in a variety of contexts and making their views count has seen some significant advances over the past few years, as the two key papers in this report (see Chapters 3 and 4) clearly show. It seems that an impressive amount of active listening is occurring in the real world. The impetus for much of this development has come from statutory requirements to consult, but it has also been fuelled by a great deal of enthusiasm and commitment on the part of adults. The mapping exercise carried out by Carolyn Willow in late 2001 (see Chapter 3) is based on a questionnaire survey of public sector initiatives across England, Wales and Scotland. She documents over 100 consultations involving primary-school-age children, most of which have been designed to inform the development of public services and facilities. The breadth and diversity of these initiatives is impressive. Willow notes that there seems to be no limit to the types of methods employed to draw out children's

views. These range from standard research techniques (group discussions, one-to-one interviews, surveys, observation), to the most creative activities imaginable (play techniques, drama, model building, artwork, storytelling, competitions, graffiti walls, interspersed with a range of fun-based activities that provide incentives to take part and rewards for doing so). As Willow observes:

Play workers, teachers, social workers, civil servants, housing managers and commercial organisations are seeking the views of children ... *[They]* are being asked to share their views and experiences of playing, learning and getting help. They are being consulted on the telephone, by computer, in one-to-one interviews and in group discussions with their friends and peers – at school, in early years settings, in children's homes and foster care, and in community centres and youth projects. Websites, conferences, workshops, fun days, festivals and school councils are all being used to put adult decision makers in touch with young children ... Diverse groups of children are being listened to and questions are being posed that, just a decade ago, would have been seen as too challenging or controversial for our youngest children.

As with all surveys, Willow captures a particular moment in time. She observes that this is a rapidly expanding field, with new projects continually coming on stream. Whatever else this work reveals, it is clear that adults with public responsibilities for children can no longer routinely ignore them. Indeed, Willow notes that adults appear awestruck that very young children have feelings, ideas and views that they can richly communicate. Simply recognising children in this way and beginning to see them in a new light is the crucial first step in according them citizenship. These initiatives show that the necessary infrastructure for

developing children's citizenship is now under construction, and becoming a familiar part of the policy landscape.

These themes are taken up and developed by Ruth Marchant and Perpetua Kirby. In their discussion paper (see Chapter 4), they explore the crucial issue of how to ensure that listening to children is a meaningful activity for children themselves. If children are now being recognised, to what extent are they being respected? How far are such practices built on effective communication and mutual understanding between adults and children? Is children's confidence nurtured so that they can express their views and feel that they have a valued contribution to make? And to what extent are their views taken seriously and acted upon? In Marchant and Kirby's view, the time has come to give urgent attention to these dimensions of children's citizenship in order to develop and safeguard children's involvement. They present a thoughtful and wide-ranging analysis of this issue, identifying, for example, the need to change the culture of adult workplaces and practices to make them more child-friendly; and to develop adult communication skills so that they can more easily understand the worlds of children, and make sensitive and effective responses.

Citizenship for young children

Despite the advances outlined above, applying ideas of citizenship to the youngest members of our society remains a challenge. This is the central theme addressed in the two papers that form Chapters 3 and 4 of this report. The principle of blending welfare and citizenship in the way that we treat children applies to them all, of course, regardless of age. Citizenship is not a conditional status, for children do not become any more deserving of recognition, respect or participation simply by virtue of growing older. Nor do they earn it by acquiring competencies,

responsibilities, understanding or maturity. These qualities are not the product of biological growth, nor do they develop in a social vacuum (Dunn, 1988). They are born of experiences, activities and interactions with others – in short, they develop *through* participatory practices. The notion that children grow through their experiences and contributions in the social world means that their development is as much a *relational* as an innate or predetermined process. Moreover, this process begins from the moment of birth. Seeing children's development in these relational terms presents adults with a particular challenge – that of recognising the strengths and competencies of the youngest members of society and finding ways to nurture these qualities so that young children can flourish. In particular, the challenge is to recognise and become 'tuned in' to the '100 languages' of young children, and to find effective ways of responding to their communications (Edwards *et al.*, 1998; Clark and Moss, 2001).

The scale of change needed to turn these principles into practice, however, should not be underestimated. Young children are often understood to be more dependent and vulnerable than older children, and the balance of their citizenship and welfare needs is therefore heavily skewed towards the latter. The result is that they are routinely derided, marginalised and ignored. This perhaps explains why there is little attempt to accommodate young children in workplace or civic environments and why statutory requirements to consult with children discriminate between older and younger children, and are not generally applied to the youngest age groups.

It is hardly surprising that most of the advances in fostering children's citizenship have occurred with older age groups. Young people of secondary-school age and over are well on their way to entering the adult world; they will have some knowledge of how to operate in adult environments and an appreciation of adult rules and customs. In principle, the task of listening to these

young people is therefore relatively straightforward, for it requires little change on the part of adults other than a willingness to include them in adult agendas and practices. There is an underlying assumption that it is only when (or if) young people can accommodate to the world of adulthood that they will have something worth saying and can be taken seriously. In other words, their inclusion is conditional on their assuming 'adult' modes of behaving and communicating. Citizenship for young children, on the other hand, requires some effort on the part of adults to accommodate children's varied modes of doing, saying and being. This might entail engaging in different ways of communicating and interacting (both verbal and non-verbal); observing as well as talking; making creative use of communicative props such as visual, artistic or play materials, and adapting to children's language, time rhythms and pace of life. Furthermore, it means adapting physical landscapes and environments so that young children and adults can comfortably inhabit the same spaces and places, and operate effectively within them. Such challenges, of course, are familiar to parents in home settings and staff in nurseries, play groups and primary schools (albeit with varying results), but, currently, they are almost unheard of in our civic settings, which are oriented almost entirely towards adults. The very real differences that exist between the ways in which adults and young children inhabit the world, make meaning and engage with others should not be seen as part of a deficit model of childhood; rather, these differences need to be acknowledged, accepted positively and accommodated.

Without the effort to communicate effectively with young children, attempts to consult them can become little more than demeaning and meaningless experiences. Marchant and Kirby (see Chapter 4 of this report), for example, describe young children who become:

... caught up in consultation projects designed ... for older children or even adults: they have been asked to fill in questionnaires; sign consent forms; read leaflets and letters incomprehensible to many adults. ... We know of children destroying, hiding or eating their review forms; crawling under the tables at meetings where their futures are decided ... and drawing all over their assessment checklists.

Projects of this nature may well be counterproductive, producing disillusionment for adults that children can ever contribute meaningfully to adult decision-making. This need not be the case, of course. With the right encouragement and support, adults can communicate effectively with young children and develop participatory practices that work for the benefit of all. However, while training is now available, the acquisition of such skills is too often seen as relevant only to early years specialists and may hold no interest for adults in general. The challenges, as Willow (Chapter 3) notes, are therefore substantial. The biggest hurdle, perhaps, is to convince adults of the value of changing things in the first place:

To move beyond simply consulting young children ... the culture and decision-making practices of organisations have to fundamentally change. ... The way in which organisations usually make decisions – through formal meetings, lengthy reports, and often complicated and combative dialogue – creates barriers to most people outside the organisation. For very young people, the barriers are impenetrable. ... That young children are so invisible from most decision-making processes makes it incredibly difficult to *imagine* how they might one day become partners and collaborators.

Overall these authors make a compelling case for nurturing the citizenship of all children, regardless of age. Their work makes clear that citizenship is an unfolding process that cannot simply be switched on at some arbitrary point in a child's life, but should be seen as integral to a child's development from the very beginning.

The climate of change

The papers presented in this report are important and timely, for they allow us to gauge not only the nature, extent and future potential of citizenship for young children, but also the current professional climate in which these developments are occurring. Their discussions reveal just how much is happening but also how little things are actually changing. Given this scenario, it is perhaps not surprising that the authors of these papers present different and sometimes conflicting views on what the main issues are and how best to tackle them, in particular, where the efforts of policy and practice should best be concentrated in future. We will return to these themes in the conclusion of this report (see Chapter 5), where we review the main concerns raised by these authors and, drawing on a wider constituency of professional ideas, set out some suggestions for future developments in this field.

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3 CONSULTING WITH UNDER 12s:

A MAPPING EXERCISE

Carolynne Willow

Summary

Background

This mapping exercise was carried out in the 12 months up to July 2002. It provides an overview of the types of consultations under way at local and national level. The focus is on under 12 year-olds.

In July 2001, the Children's Rights Alliance for England was commissioned by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation to carry out a mapping exercise that included:

- an overview of the types of activities under way at local and national level – to include an overview of the agencies/practitioner groups with responsibility for consulting with children, current procedures and concerns
- identifying innovative/good practice, giving specific examples and drawing on evaluations where these have been undertaken
- a list of available resources.

What we did

Between September 2001 and January 2002, surveys were circulated to all local authorities in England, Wales and Scotland. They were circulated to the major children's organisations and to members of Children's Rights Officers and Advocates (CROA), and included twice in CRAE's (Children's Rights Alliance for England) bi-monthly member bulletins. Telephone contact was made with research and development departments in three leading toy manufacturers – a lead that unfortunately proved too hard to follow.

Over 100 consultation examples were obtained during the information-gathering phase, with scores of reports and relevant documents piling into the office. A lot is happening. Once the information was read and analysed, telephone and e-mail contact was on many occasions necessary to seek clarification on both methods and outcomes. In the closing months of 2003, contact was made with most of the organisations cited in the report, asking them to clarify the accuracy of the practice examples and to add any further pertinent information. Contact details were obtained, to allow readers to make their own approaches to organisations; these are included at the end of each boxed summary.

Although examples are included from the four countries of the UK, this report is nowhere close to a complete picture. It is an *illustration* of the kinds of activities, approaches, challenges and achievements evident from the growing commitment to listen, hear and respond to young children. We hope it will encourage organisations and individuals to take time out, reflect and carry on consulting with new ideas and more inspiration.

The structure of the report

The report provides snapshots of over 100 consultations with children aged 12 and under. Each snapshot shows some element of innovation or good practice. To underline the key learning points, practice examples have been grouped under each of the following eight headings:

- Eliciting children's ideas and views (consultation methods)
- Consulting diverse groups of children
- Analysis and presentation of children's ideas and views
- Feedback to children and their families/carers
- Facilitating change through consultation
- Organisational learning and staff development
- Consultation as part of a broader commitment to children's participation in decision making
- What do children make of consultation?

A resource list is provided at the end of the report.

What we found out

Young children are being asked to share their views and experiences of playing, learning and getting help. They are being consulted on the telephone, by computer, in one-to-one interviews and in group discussions with their friends and peers – at school, in early years settings, in children's homes and foster care, and

in community centres and youth projects. Websites, conferences, workshops, fun days, festivals and school councils are all being used to build bridges between young children and adult decision makers.

The three main areas of activity identified through this mapping exercise were in:

- play settings through Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships
- social services settings through the Quality Protects programme
- other council settings arising from the Best Value review process.

Much of the work was carried out through partnerships between statutory and voluntary organisations, or by voluntary organisations acting on behalf of a local authority.

If we were to repeat the surveys now, a fourth site of major activity would emerge – children's participation in Children's Fund initiatives. We received several forms and heard a great deal about organisations' plans for consulting and including children in this work.

This mapping exercise was not just about charting and highlighting good practice; it also aimed to identify current concerns. Five themes emerge, relating to:

- making changes – the impact of consultation
- fun versus rigour – the quality of consultations

- preparing to consult – explaining the task and obtaining children’s informed consent
- not just adults asking all the questions – peer research and child-led projects
- when the consultation is over – keeping children informed.

Making changes

A huge amount of energy and goodwill is being invested in consulting with under 12 year-olds. It is striking, though, how little change there is to show for all the effort and time invested.

For example, in the area of play, survey respondents commonly reported that children’s views and experiences informed their councils’ play strategies. Yet the play strategies obtained through this mapping exercise did not on the whole show *how* local play policy and practice was influenced by the views or experiences of children. A strategy document might include a summary section on consultation with children and parents, or have quotes from children scattered throughout the document. But these do not, by themselves, count as a result for children.

Still in the area of play, improving the training of workers was the second most common reported outcome of consultations; essential but not providing any immediate change for children.

Sometimes, children’s comments and advice led to direct change in their play provision – new equipment for a school playground, a traffic safety scheme or a new skateboarding park, for example. However, the examples of change – in play as well as in other settings – were usually one-off and small-scale. That consultations can cost thousands of pounds and take several months to plan and execute raises questions about whether the means justify the ends. Some decision-making processes –

making new laws or planning how to renew a neighbourhood for instance – are complicated and specialised, and the opportunity to directly influence is fairly small. On these occasions, the resources invested can be expected to outweigh the immediate gains. But other decisions – such as how a nursery can spend a couple of hundred pounds or how a hospital ward might be made more appealing to young children – do not necessarily require months of enquiry or the specialist (and expensive) skills of external researchers or consultants.

Fun versus rigour

One of the most popular methods of finding out what children value about adults is to ask them to create their 'dream' or 'ideal worker'. As this mapping exercise progressed, it became apparent that the strength of practitioners undertaking consultations is their ability and confidence to employ creative and fun methods. By comparison, the analytical skills and rigour of researchers stood out. Whereas reports written by practitioners were often characterised by lists and random quotes, those prepared by researchers were usually thoughtful and well presented. If we were to design a dream person or organisation to consult children, we would combine the talents of practitioner *and* researcher.

Preparing to consult

Not many reports or other documentation described how children were prepared for the consultation sessions; these materials did not, on the whole, provide examples of pre-meeting information, or letters to children or to parents/carers – especially important for young children.

Few researchers would arrive cold in a workplace or a leisure facility to spend the day hearing adults reflect on their employment conditions or their 'after-work' leisure pursuits. To get the most from these kinds of consultative forums, participants would have

had to have been briefed in advance. The same principle should surely apply to very young people.

Not many reports showed how informed consent was obtained from children, both before and during the consultations. There are particular challenges in obtaining informed consent from younger children. Parents, head teachers and social workers may volunteer certain children to take part in an activity; because they believe they will get the most from it, or because they think they will be able to contribute more than their peers. Here, it is still vital to inform and seek permission from the individual child.

Children may be a 'captive audience' – in school or in another setting where they cannot freely opt in and out of activities – sometimes making it more difficult for those carrying out the consultation to offer genuine choice about taking part. Even if the child is asked if they want to take part, if they are in an environment where they usually conform to adult wishes and expectations, it might be hard – impossible even – for them to say 'no thanks'.

Not just adults asking all the questions

Listening to children in care is now an everyday part of social work, in theory if not in practice. In this profession, practice has progressed from adults taking the lead to making space for children and young people to design and carry out their own consultations. Peer research has mushroomed – where young people with care experience consult others with similar concerns and experiences. We found few examples of young children taking the lead in a consultation.

When the consultation is over

There are only a few examples of children not being thanked or not being provided with information about the results of the consultation. There are several ways of acknowledging children's

contribution – through certificates, thank-you letters and summary posters or newsletters, for example.

There is, however, a noticeable gap in providing information on what might *happen* as a result of the consultation; and in informing children over time of the changes that have arisen from the consultation exercise.

Monitoring the impact of consultations is essential; in the care system, locally based children's rights, participation or independent advocacy services have often taken on this job. There is no equivalent monitoring body across other services, say in education or housing, and only two areas in the country have established mechanisms to promote children's rights and participation across the whole local authority – the Oxfordshire Children's Rights Commissioner and the Milton Keynes Children's and Young People's Rights Service.

Importantly, locally based children's rights and participation projects serve as a central resource for children and young people who wish to undertake their own projects on improving the care system. However, most self-advocacy or young-people-led projects are carried out by the over 12s.

What do children make of it?

Children's engagement with consultation processes seems consistently high. The range of methods used and the questions put to children appear to be at the right pitch, with few reports of lack of interest or boredom.

However, we found only a handful of examples of children being asked to directly comment on the consultation process itself; this is easy to build into programmes and can elicit extremely useful feedback.

Consultation and participation

Consultation is a process of inviting people to share their experiences, ideas and knowledge. It can be a one-off activity as well as part of an ongoing dialogue and relationship – between teacher and student, social worker and client, and paediatrician and patient, for example.

Children too can be the helpers and information seekers, though this is still too rare in professional settings. Adults nearly always see themselves as the leaders, initiators and experts in relationships with children: the increasing practice of consulting children about public decision making has not broken this mould.

Consultation can and should enable children to influence decision making. At its most limited, it simply involves children being asked to share their experiences of using a particular service or of living in a particular neighbourhood. If done properly, it gives children a one-off experience of being valued and listened to, but it does not necessarily equip or encourage them to be part of making changes in the services or neighbourhood under examination. They might not even know the subject or purpose of the consultation until they arrive on the day. In the worst examples, children never get to hear how their contributions have helped (or not) make a difference.

Including children in nursery, school or community governance; helping children to run their own projects or events; supporting them to learn about and claim their human rights; and providing training to children on being heard and influential are examples of activities to support broader participation in decision making. While consultation should be part of all these initiatives – constantly asking, enquiring and learning from children – participatory practice is usually aimed at changing the culture and everyday ‘feel’ of children’s environments.

The environments in which all children play, learn or get help from a dentist, school nurse or lawyer are critical in helping them to feel valued, respected and able to express their feelings, views and ideas. When considering babies and very young children, usual forms of one-off consultation – surveys, focus groups, conferences and workshops – are not appropriate or useful, either to the child concerned or to the individual or organisation that wants to learn and change something. Here participatory environments are crucial – creating spaces and places where all babies and children are seen and treated as individual people with feelings and preferences that they can communicate. Offering choices, and being receptive and responsive when babies and very young children express what they want or do not want, is critical. Ongoing relationships with children are vital – to get to know their favourite people, places, faces and pastimes; to get to know how they communicate; *to get to know them*.

The examples in this mapping report relate mostly to consultation as a one-off activity, carried out as a means of finding out or improving something. In addition, there are some examples of consultation reflecting a broader and ongoing commitment to children's participation in decision making.

The surveys we circulated to local authorities and to voluntary organisations did not ask about broader participation projects or initiatives: the purpose of the mapping exercise was to map and discuss what works in consultation with under 12s. A bias towards school-age children emerged early on in the project, because one-off consultations are less common with infants and very young children. Hopefully, this mapping exercise will spur on other information gathering (see final section of this paper).

Even though we did not specifically ask for examples of children's participation in decision making, we received many reports and materials that suggested a broader commitment to participation in decision-making processes. But the focus of these

broader participatory initiatives tended to be over 12 year-olds. There was little evidence that *younger children* were being allowed, encouraged or supported to have an ongoing influence in decision making – in their everyday settings, in the decisions of their local councils, or in the work of other organisations that might affect them.

Why do broader participatory initiatives seem to focus on over 12 year-olds? To help answer this question, we can think about what stops or starts attitude and behaviour change. Four major and inter-related factors can be said to have been instrumental in creating a pro-participatory culture for 'older young people':

- legal changes
- self-advocacy
- scale of the challenge
- adult perceptions and expectations.

Legal changes

For over 25 years, childcare legislation has required that social workers ascertain the wishes and feelings of children in care. Section 22(4) of this Act requires that, before making any decision about a child they are looking after, or proposing to look after, the local authority must ascertain and give due consideration to the child's wishes and feelings. Other sections of the Act require consultation with children being provided with local authority accommodation, or police protection. Section 1(3)(a) requires that whenever a court considers any question with respect to the welfare of a child, it must have regard in particular to the ascertainable wishes and feelings of the child (considered in the

light of the child's age and understanding). The Adoption and Children Act 2002 strengthens these provisions by requiring adoption agencies (as well as courts) to have regard to the child's ascertainable wishes and feelings. Statutory guidance promotes listening to children in other aspects of social services.

Besides social workers in certain prescribed areas, professionals working with children are not legally required to take into account children's wishes and feelings when making decisions affecting them. While it is increasingly seen as good practice for nursery workers, teachers, health visitors or paediatricians to take account of children's views, it is not a statutory requirement. The 'Gillick competence' test (known in practice as the Fraser Guidelines) allows children to exercise some control over health decisions, though under 12 year-olds are often (wrongly) assumed to be outside the boundaries of the 'test'. Even when government guidance has been introduced concerning services or activities used by young children, listening to young children has not been consistently promoted. For example, although consultation with children is expected in the development of Early Years and Childcare Development Plans, Sure Start programmes for the under fours must consult and involve only parents. Further, the Education Act 2002 requires local education authorities, school governors and head teachers to have regard to government statutory guidance on pupil consultation. Children in nursery education are specifically excluded from the legislation.

Self-advocacy

In social services, professional attempts to increase children's and young people's participation in policy and service development began with older children – those living in children's homes and care leavers. This was undoubtedly in response to the campaigning activities of teenagers in care, starting with the establishment of

the National Association of Young People in Care in 1979, then the creation of Black and in Care in the 1980s and, most recently, A National Voice in 1999. Whereas older 'consumers' of the care system have achieved national profile and influence, younger children in care have remained, by virtue of their age and circumstances, unorganised and invisible. The absence of external pressure on decision makers to include younger children in decision making makes them easier to ignore or underestimate.

Scale of the challenge

The ways in which public bodies usually make decisions – through formal meetings, lengthy reports and often complicated and combative dialogue – creates barriers to most people outside of those organisations. For very young people, the barriers are impenetrable. To move beyond simply consulting young children about a particular issue or experience, the culture and decision-making practices of an organisation have to change fundamentally. This kind of change is easier the smaller the scale: creating a democratic family, playgroup, hospital ward or health centre is much less of a challenge than setting in place participative structures and mechanisms within local councils, primary care trusts or larger children's charities.

That young children are so invisible from most decision-making processes makes it incredibly difficult to *imagine* how they might one day become partners and collaborators in decisions, beyond those that immediately affect them. This is before we even get to the trickier task of planning and implementing the changes.

Adult perceptions and expectations

Babies and young children suffer from a huge lack of respect. They are easily and commonly patronised and dehumanised. The

way they communicate and what they communicate is more often seen as cute, funny or obscure rather than as intelligent, insightful or challenging. Their photographs and statements are often used to beautify consultation reports and materials. Their life stage is often used against them – being emotional, physical and having new and changing ideas are seen as impediments rather than as positive characteristics. Laughter and derision often greet adults who seriously advocate taking seriously very young people.

Six, eight and ten year-olds are often seen as closer in looks and behaviour to very young children, just as teenagers are seen as closer to adults. While under 12s lose status and credibility by being grouped with their younger counterparts, teenagers increase their status and credibility the more they look, think and behave like adults. When young people say they are not children, they mean they are not *young children*. Ultimately, then, debates about how to increase the participation of under 12 year-olds lead us to questions about the unequal position of children in our society. How we see and treat the youngest people in this age group presents us with the biggest challenges of all.

The mapping

Eliciting children's ideas and views

The range and creativity of consultation methods is striking. Although traditional methods – such as questionnaires, focus groups and one-to-one interviews – are commonly being used to elicit young children's views and experiences, there is a strong inclination towards using artwork, play, observation and conversation to get the most from very young participants. Holding competitions and running fun days that blend consultation with play and leisure activities seems popular. Even when conventional methods like questionnaires are used, there is

evidence of practitioners investing a great deal of energy (and sometimes resources) into ensuring they are appropriately designed and are appealing to children. Interactive computer-based questionnaires seem particularly popular as a means of consulting looked-after children.

Nurturing self-expression and individual decision making

The experience of being consulted should not be confined simply to being a 'client', 'service user' or 'customer'. It needs to be part of everyday relationships and activities. Parents and caregivers are critical in helping babies and young children develop their capacity to make choices and express their feelings, thoughts and preferences. We found only one example through this mapping exercise of professionals actively supporting parents to place consultation at the centre of their relationship with their baby or young child.

The Children's Society portage service in Brighton works with babies and young children who have mental or physical impairments. Parents are supported to actively encourage babies' and children's communication and choice making. Senior portage worker, Julia Widdows, describes her work:

When a child is delayed or disabled, it is easy for carers to fall into the habit of anticipating the child's every need and interpreting on their behalf ... Parents are encouraged to find situations where they can easily offer their child a choice. It could be between having milk or juice to drink, or two tee shirts to wear.

Contact: Early Support and Portage, The Children's Society,
18 Wellington Road, Brighton, East Sussex BN2 3AA.
Tel. 01273 682659

There were other examples of children being provided with ongoing professional support to express their feelings and views. Many social services departments now commission independent advocacy services for looked-after children, or for children in need, and we also heard from child psychologists about how they work with individual children to encourage self-expression.

The Children's Society in Warrington has produced a summary report of how their project encourages young children's decision making and self-expression. Examples of how very young children can be encouraged to make choices include: showing photographs of different activities and equipment; going on a train round the building so children can stop at their chosen activity; and using a puppet or teddy so children can tell adults where they want to play.

Contact: The Children's Society, 4 Catterall Avenue, Orford, Warrington, Cheshire WA2 0JA. Tel. 01925 852 905

Competitions

Competitions can be extremely motivating and fun for children, and a good way of obtaining a broad range of creative ideas. The medium is one that children can relate to, and the setting of team or group challenges can encourage children to work together to find solutions, rather than relying on adult facilitators or adult prompts. Although the three examples featured below selected only a few 'winners', the public bodies that held the competitions generated a huge amount of information from children, which they could fully utilise, if they wished. Competitions can be a very good means of gathering information from children in different formats (written, artwork, poetry and video) and on many different topics. However, they are simply a consultation tool and in themselves have little to contribute to increasing young children's participation in decision making, unless they are also used to stimulate children to get involved in projects and activities.

In June 2000, the Department for Work and Pensions launched an art competition across the UK. Children and young people between the ages of five and 16 were asked to imagine a better Britain, where poverty no longer exists. The overall winner was a seven year-old. Her drawing appeared on the inside cover of the Government's second annual poverty report, and she and other winners were given tickets for the London Eye and invited for tea at 10 Downing Street.

Tel. 020 7712 2171; www.dwp.gov.uk

'Changing places, shaping lives' is the theme for the 2003/04 Annual Stan Kenyon School Challenge for primary and secondary students in Leeds. Schools have been asked to 'use your imagination and design skills to describe to us how you think we will be living in 20 years' time'. The award ceremony will be presided over by the Lord Mayor of Leeds.

The winning school will get a trophy and the four main award winners will each receive a cash prize and a digital camera donated by a local business. Previous challenges had themes such as a safe journey to school, warm homes—cool planet, safe play and tree-time.

The challenges have been running each year from 1995 when High School students were asked to design a car park that was safe for women drivers, for International Women's Day.

Primary-school children have been the overall winners in all the challenges since 1996. The challenge is named after Stan Kenyon, Leeds' Director of Education, who retired the month the first challenge was launched.

Contact: Linda Banks, Senior Administrator, Planning Services, Leeds City Council. Tel. 0113 247 6421; Linda.banks@leeds.gov.uk

Dumfries and Galloway Council and the Scottish Natural Heritage held a drawing competition and a map-based quiz at an agricultural show and environment fair. The purpose was to raise awareness among children and young people about three national scenic areas in Dumfries and Galloway; and to identify their favourite places within the area.

Contact: Anna Johnson, National Scenic Area Officer, Dumfries and Galloway Council. Tel. 01387 260 242; Anna.Johnson@dumgal.gov.uk

Specially designed consultation materials

We found examples of expensively produced materials as well as home-grown worksheets and questionnaires. The former were usually more sophisticated in design, and visually more appealing, but there was no noticeable quality difference in the content of questions or introductory text. Home-grown materials had a tendency to use 😊 😐 😞 faces giving children a quick and easy way of responding to questions. However, these faces on their own do not enable serious analysis unless accompanied by children's comments.

Probably one of the most significant examples of specially designed materials for young children was the Children's and Young People's Unit consultation on a national strategy for children. The Children and Young People's Unit was established in 2000 to ensure consistency across government in policy and service development for children and young people. There are two reasons why its consultation with young children stands out: this was the first time government in England had sought the views of all children about all aspects of their lives; and the consultation methods were unique within central government, with children encouraged to contribute through a workbook and through group discussions and activities with civil servants.

In November 2001, the Children and Young People's Unit (CYPUP) launched a consultation on its national children's strategy. Consultation materials were produced for under 12s as well as for young people. They were distributed to children's organisations, local authorities and schools. Thousands of postcards were circulated to schools and cinemas asking children and young people to state what they would change for children if they were the Prime Minister. Consultation events were also held across the country; there were six with under 12 year-olds.

The report from the children's consultation was posted on the CYPUP website in April 2002. It broadly describes the results from 1,300+ contributions from children aged 12 and under. Children's support for the CYPUP's six strategic objectives (described as 'Our dream: our big picture') are given, with children ranking marginally highest 'the chance to live in a place where you are safe from harm' and 'the chance to grow up in a place where you are happy'. From 700+ postcards, 298 children mentioned enjoyment; a seven year-old said: 'You should make bigger play areas please. I would really like that thank you! Because it will be quiet.' A 12 year-old asked for 'more youth centres to stop teenagers vandalising things because they are bored'.

Contact: Barbara Herts, Head of Participation Team, Children, Young People and Families Directorate, Department for Education and Skills. Tel. 020 7273 5327; barbara.herts@dfes.gsi.gov.uk

Since 2000, North Lanarkshire Council Planning and Environment Department has consulted children about their journeys to and from school. Children aged between five and 12 years are given an explanatory leaflet and issued with a questionnaire and street map of the area. They are asked how they get to school and invited to give advice on how walking routes could be improved.

Contact: John Marran, Traffic and Transportation Manager, North Lanarkshire Council. Tel. 01236 616 253; MarranJ@northlan.gov.uk

Following the Government's announcement that it would end child poverty by 2019, the Children's Rights Alliance for England and Save the Children UK teamed up to consult children and young people about child poverty. Between February and May 2001, 106 children and young people were consulted in nine different locations across England. Eighty per cent of the children were aged 12 and under; 59 five and six year-olds took part. A story book featuring the character 'Splodge' was used. At the end of the consultation sessions, children were extremely pleased to be able to play with a hand puppet of 'Splodge' and a Polaroid camera was provided for them to take photos of themselves holding the puppet. Save the Children in Wales carried out a similar consultation.

Contact: Carlyne Willow, National Co-ordinator, Children's Rights Alliance for England. Tel. 020 7278 8222; cwillow@crae.org.uk

Contact: Faye Hall, Development Officer for Poverty, Save the Children UK. Tel. 0121 555 8888; F.Hall@scfuk.org.uk

Group and individual interviews

There are many examples of children being asked to share their ideas and experiences in group settings, and in one-to-one interviews. These methods for eliciting information are the basic tools of professional researchers. While the process may not be as enjoyable for young children compared to fun days or interactive computer programmes (see below), there are clear advantages in recording information and ensuring consistency. This mapping exercise revealed that many practitioners and some young people are carrying out consultations using group and individual interviews. This shows that non-researchers are seeing the value of, and increasing their skills in, conventional research methods.

Nottingham City Community Education Psychology Service consulted six to 15 year-olds on the effectiveness of educational psychologists. Semi-structured interviews were used in group settings.

Contact: City of Nottingham Education Department, Sandfield Centre, Sandfield Road, Lenton, Nottingham NG7 1QH

As part of its Best Value review of school catering, East Riding of Yorkshire Council consulted primary and secondary school students about their school meals. Lunchtime focus groups were held, carried out by the Council's corporate research team.

Contact: Simon Laurie, Service Development Manager, East Riding of Yorkshire Council. Tel. 01482 887 700; simon.laurie@eastriding.gov.uk

Bristol City Council consulted looked-after children and young people during summer 2000. Consultation topics included health, accommodation and housing, participation in review meetings and who helps children and young people feel that they are listened to. The consultation was part of an ongoing scheme of work led by the children's services participation co-ordinator. The Norah Fry Research Centre carried out the consultations with young disabled people.

The following year, in 2001/02, five to 16 year-olds were asked by social services to suggest how written and illustrative material that sought to explain the role of social workers could be improved. Children and young people were consulted individually and in groups. After the consultation, participants were sent a thank-you letter and a gift to acknowledge their help.

Contact: Charles Beaton, Participation Co-ordinator, Bristol City Council Social Services and Health Department. Tel. 0117 903 7948; charles_beaton@bristol-city.gov.uk

Children aged between five and 16 years were consulted about their perception and experience of risk and accidents in adventure playgrounds. The London Boroughs of Lambeth, Lewisham and Southwark commissioned the National Children's Bureau to carry out the consultation. The research was conducted using one-to-one interviews.

Contact: National Children's Bureau Research Department. Tel. 020 7843 6000

Questionnaires

We found lots of examples of questionnaires being used to ascertain the views of young children. Some used only text while most used cartoons and illustrations to engage young children. Several themes emerged in relation to using questionnaires: questions are kept short and to the point; the questionnaires were usually no longer than two sides of A4; children were encouraged to express their views through drawings as well as through writing; and help was usually available to support individual children in completing their forms.

The Children's Law Centre and Save the Children in Northern Ireland consulted children and young people about the role and function of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young people. Questionnaires were circulated to children and young people across Northern Ireland; the youngest respondent was seven years old. Focus groups were also held but these involved only over 12 year-olds.

Contact: Sheri Chamberlain, Northern Ireland Programme Director, Save the Children UK. Tel 028 9043 1123; Sheri.Chamberlain@scfuk.org.uk

Slough Library Service consulted all its young readers during a week in March 2000 to ascertain how much they used local libraries and to obtain their ideas for improving the service. There were three different questionnaires: for under fours, a questionnaire was produced for parents/carers; and two others were prepared for five to nine year-olds and for ten to 14 year-olds.

Contact: Zoe Dickens, Principal Librarian, Slough Library. Tel. 01753 535 166; zoe.dickens@slough.gov.uk

During 1999, 31 children and young people with autism were consulted about their experience of school and home – what they enjoy doing, who gives them support and who they like to be with. The relationship between school and home was also addressed, with questions about children's feelings and views of their parents visiting their school and receiving information through their home/school book. The consultation was part of a broader consultation co-ordinated by Suffolk County Council's parent partnership officer. Teachers, well known to the children and young people, supported them to complete the questionnaires, which used text and drawings.

Contact: Eithne Leming, Head Teacher, First Base Pupil Referral Unit, Ipswich. Tel. 01473 719 553; eithne@firstbase-ipswich.co.uk

The Children's Society PACT project consulted disabled children under 12 as part of a broader consultation on 'inclusion of disabled pupils in mainstream schools' and 'what makes pupils happy and successful at school'. Questionnaires were used to elicit children's views and experiences.

Contact: PACT Yorkshire, George House, 18 George Street, York YO1 9QB

Each year since 2000, Hampshire County Council Education Department has used questionnaires to ascertain the attitudes towards school of seven to 12 year-olds.

Contact: Terry Rath, Education Officer, Hampshire County Council. Tel. 01962 846457; terry.rath@hants.gov.uk

The National Children's Bureau consulted 11 year-olds about their experience of transition to secondary school, using questionnaires and one-to-one interviews. The children were interviewed again one year later to assess how well they had adjusted to secondary school.

Contact: National Children's Bureau Research Department.
Tel. 020 7843 6000

A development worker was recruited by Hampshire County Youth Service to advise the council on its corporate strategy for ten to 13 year-olds. A new after-school club was subsequently run for a trial period. Local children and young people were consulted about the club's activities before it opened, through questionnaires circulated to schools. Bullying, smoking and drugs were the top three topics chosen by the survey participants for discussions within the after-school club. Cooking, table tennis and pool/snooker were the top three activities. Parents were also consulted to seek their support for youth workers addressing the selected issues with children and young people.

The club was seen as a huge success, with between 35 and 40 children and young people attending each of the two evening sessions every week for the five-month period. Since this pilot, after-school clubs now operate in ten of the 11 district areas of Hampshire.

Contact: Sue Cooper, Youth Service Manager, Hampshire County Council. Tel. 01962 846250; sue.cooper@hants.gov.uk

Between November 2000 and February 2001, Bristol City Council Social Services carried out a Best Value review of childcare field social work. The review included a consultation with children and young people. Participants were aged five to 18 years; 50 per cent were aged 12 and under. Children and young people were sent questionnaires and interviewed in their own homes by community care workers.

Contact: Charles Beaton, Partnership Co-ordinator, Bristol City Council Social Services and Health Department. Tel. 0117 903 7948; charles_beaton@bristol-city.gov.uk

Evaluation forms and ongoing monitoring

Several examples of ongoing monitoring were obtained through the survey to local authorities and voluntary childcare organisations. However, given the much larger volume of responses showing one-off consultations or initiatives aimed at ascertaining the views of particular groups of children, these examples suggest that regular monitoring of children's views is atypical.

Nottingham City Council runs out-of-school 'arts plus' sessions for three to 19 year-olds. Each school term, participants in the sessions are asked to complete written evaluation forms, and group discussions are held on how well the activities have gone and what else would interest them.

Contact: Nottingham County Council Education Department, Sandfield Centre, Sandfield Road, Lenton, Nottingham NG7 1QH

SPACE (Suffolk Partnership Achieving Choice and Experience) works with disabled children and young people from birth to 19 years throughout the county of Suffolk. Managed by The Children's Society, the project routinely consults disabled children about their views and experiences of short-term care and holiday and after-school provision.

Contact: SPACE, Warrington Lodge, 3 Warrington Road, Ipswich, Suffolk IP1 3QU

Electronic consultation

The increasing availability of computers to children – at home and in nurseries and schools – mixed with their educational appeal and entertainment value makes electronic consultation irresistible. While we found a handful of examples of social services using computers to consult looked-after children, there were only two examples of organisations using this method to engage a broader constituency of children.

Looked-after children and young people aged ten and over were consulted by Southend on Sea Borough Council on how well they understood and agreed with their care plan. The Council's social care department commissioned the independent organisation Viewpoint to develop computerised software that could systematically analyse children's and young people's questionnaire responses. The questionnaire was administered by reviewing officers.

Contact: Chris Munday, Children's Quality Manager, Southend on Sea Borough. Tel. 01702 534 407; chrismunday@southend.gov.uk

Contact: Viewpoint Organisation Ltd, Riverside Mills, Saddleworth Road, Elland, West Yorkshire HX5 0RY. Tel. 01422 315 410; services@vptorg.co.uk

Knowsley Social Services commissioned the Viewpoint Organisation to help with a consultation about the Council's services for those in and leaving care. An interactive computer programme was developed with games and a voice-over. The consultation took place in summer 2001 and involved ten to 21 year-olds.

Contact: Viewpoint Organisation Ltd, Riverside Mills, Saddleworth Road, Elland, West Yorkshire HX5 0RY. Tel. 01422 315 410; services@vptorg.co.uk

The 4UM young people's group in Sunderland was set up to give looked-after children and young people a forum for sharing their views and ideas with social services. Sunderland Social Services commissioned Viewpoint to develop an electronic consultation, using a Big Brother/Little Brother question-and-answer format.

Contact: Alyson Boucher, Young People's Officer, Sunderland Social Services. Tel 0191 553 7111, alyson.boucher@ssd.sunderland.gov.uk

In September 2001, the East Riding of Yorkshire Council launched a pilot website called 'Saysomething'. The website was designed to consult with local young people on a variety of topics. The project was initially set up as a partnership between several local agencies and the first year was funded partly by the Treasury. The 'Saysomething' website has instant polls, a feedback facility and surveys. Prizes are available to those completing the monthly surveys. Anyone under 25 years who lives in the East Riding of Yorkshire is eligible to use the site.

Contact: Sue Rae, Research Assistant, East Riding of Yorkshire Council. Tel. 01482 887 700; sue.rae@eastriding.gov.uk

Between October 1999 and February 2000, The Children's Society ran an online survey on their website. The question put to children was 'What would make where you live a better place?'. Over 500 children took part; 62 were under eight and 72 per cent of respondents were aged ten and under. Children's biggest worries were drugs, guns, racism and robberies. Stopping dog mess was the single biggest concern of primary-aged children.

Contact: Tim Linehan, Assistant Director Campaigns, The Children's Society. Tel. 020 7841 4564; tml@childsoc.org.uk

Workshops and fun days

One-off events sink or swim according to how well they are marketed to children and their parents/carers. Unlike consultations with captive young audiences – in play settings, hospitals and schools, for example – workshops and fun days are stand-alone events that require children and their parents/carers to make a special effort. Advertising an event as a fun day or a festival has instant appeal, communicating to children that they will be entertained and catered for during the consultation process. But that is not all that is needed. Most children like to be reassured that they will not be bored; the promise of regular breaks and drinks and food is also important. Consultation methods seemed extremely varied, mixing conventional research techniques with art and play-based activities.

The School Council: A Children's Guide was the result of a series of consultations with children from two primary schools in Birmingham. After visiting several school councils across Birmingham it became apparent that there was a lack of resources on the development of the school council, particularly for children themselves.

Over a period of two months, children aged eight to 11 years took part in workshops where they were consulted on developing and being a representative on a school council. The workshops included arts and crafts, drama and role play, and writing and drawing.

A young person was subsequently commissioned to illustrate various parts of the guide, in particular to develop the tour guide 'Pen Pal', which was conceived and named by the children.

The children helped to launch the guide at a local conference and at the House of Commons when they were invited to present their work at the Children's Select Committee in December 1999.

Contact: Faye Hall, Development Officer for Poverty, Save the Children UK. Tel. 0121 555 8888; F.Hall@scfuk.org.uk

Surrey Children's Services and The Children's Society consulted children and young people in care, aged between seven and 17 years, about participation in statutory review meetings. Children were involved in redesigning consultation forms, training reviewing officers, giving their views about reviews to workers and councillors, and writing and editing their magazine *Wazzzup!*.

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Contact: Gabrielle O'Donovan, Voice of the Child Officer, Surrey Children's Service. Tel. 020 8541 7315; gabrielle.odonovan@surreycc.gov.uk

Contact: Nicola Taylor, Project Manager, The Children's Society. Tel. 01483 303774; script-project@childrenssociety.org.uk

The Inclusion Festival 2002 was organised jointly by Suffolk Social Care Services and The Children's Society to consult four to 19 year-olds about their experiences of social services. The two-day event was packed with a range of activities, including music and art workshops, bouncy castles, horse and cart rides, a play bus and finishing with a carnival-type finale led by a Samba band. Senior representatives from all the relevant local agencies attended on the second day to answer questions prepared by the children and young people. A similar festival was held the previous year; a brochure was produced after the event, reporting children's and young people's ideas and views.

Contact: Julia Kett, Children's Rights Officer, Suffolk Social Care Services. Tel. 01473 583 468; Julia.Kett@socserv.suffolkcc.gov.uk

In December 2001, the Rights and Participation project (RAPP) in Hull held a consultation event for looked-after children and young people. The age range of participants was nine to 16 years. They were asked to produce three golden rules for social workers; and to give three qualities that all foster carers and residential social workers should have. Answers were collated in different ways.

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- They were put on a cut-out of each young person's hand and placed on the RAPP Christmas Wishing Tree
- They were posted into Christmas stockings
- They were placed in Santa's chimney.

A graffiti wall was provided for spontaneous comments. Children's and young people's ideas are now included in the essential criteria in the person specifications for social workers and residential staff in Hull.

Contact: Ian Bolton, RAPP. Tel. 014822 225855; rapp@rapp.karoo.co.uk

Peer research

We found three examples of children themselves carrying out consultations and three examples of teenagers carrying out peer research. Two of these projects focused on ascertaining the views and experiences of looked-after children and young people, while one was more broadly associated with democratic participation.

During 2000, three children working with The Children's Society in Warrington consulted 52 five to 11 year-olds to find out the best thing and the worst thing about being a child. The report, written entirely by the young researchers, summarises:

We found loads of children sadly said that they were getting shouted at and thumped by people. Some said they got bullied by their parents. But there was loads of happy things as well. Most of the happy things was that they liked play. Other children said the best thing was dosh [*money*]. Lots of children said they are sick of their parents nagging at them.

Contact: The Children's Society, 4 Catterall Avenue, Orford, Warrington, Cheshire WA2 0JA. Tel. 01925 852905

Young researchers in Wakefield (aged 14 to 17 years) interviewed 11 to 19 year-olds about their ideas and preferences for getting involved in the local democratic process. A range of statutory agencies, including the youth service, housing and social care, central services and the local Health Action Zone, supported the consultation, which was carried out between April 2000 and March 2001.

Contact: John Tollick, Involving Young People Programme, Room 21, Town Hall, Wakefield WF1 2HQ. Tel. 01924 305181; jtollick@wakefield.gov.uk

Children in an after-school club were trained by The Children's Society to consult with other children during a family fun day at Westy. Twenty-six children were consulted, aged between four and 14 years (most were six, seven and eight year-olds). They were asked to think back to 'when you were little'; and to say what was good and not so good about living in their area. Playing outside, being with friends and particular activities such as Play-do were cited as best things, whereas litter, vandalism and doing work at nursery were listed as bad things.

Contact: The Children's Society, 4 Catterall Avenue, Orford, Warrington, Cheshire WA2 0JA. Tel. 01925 852 905

Six young people in foster care in Brighton and Hove carried out a telephone survey with 107 local children and young people in care during the Easter holidays in April 2000. The survey questions were based on the national Who Cares? questionnaire circulated in 1997. Forty-nine per cent of the participants in the survey were aged 12 and under (the youngest were seven years old). Brighton and Hove children's rights service supported the young researchers.

Contact: Kristyn Wise, Children's Rights Officer, Brighton and Hove. Tel. 01273 295512; k.k.wise@talk21.com

City of Westminster Social Services commissioned First Key leaving care organisation to train care leavers to consult looked-after children and young people on their care experience. The age range of those consulted was ten to 16 years. Individual interviews were undertaken, and a questionnaire distributed to children in foster and residential care. The Council has also revised its reviewing forms to encourage greater participation from children and young people in their statutory review meetings.

Contact: Martin Hazlehurst, National Leaving Care Advisory Service. Tel. 020 8808 6127

Planning for Real and related activities

Planning for Real uses three-dimensional models to assist individuals to express their ideas and views. It involves people working together creatively to construct models, with lots of cutting, sticking and building. It is a very social and physical activity, with obvious appeal to young children.

York Travellers Trust ran a very successful Planning for Real initiative with travellers in 1998 to plan a new council site. The consultation included under 12s.

Contact: York Travellers Trust. Tel. 01904 630 526

Ten and 11 year-olds were consulted on how to create a world where the abuse of children no longer happens. Consultation methods included discussion and drama and movement. The children created a large-size boat sculpture with accompanying treasure chest and 'crew's log'. They then presented their ideas to their parents and teachers and to their local MP, the

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Chancellor Gordon Brown. In 2000, the consultation project won the Scottish prize in an Amnesty International competition on raising children's awareness of human rights issues.

Contact: Kate Brown, Arts Development Co-ordinator, Fife Council. Tel. 01592 415 528; kate.brown@fife.gov.uk

Suffolk County Council consulted children and young people aged between five and 13 years about their school journeys and safety concerns. Using the Planning for Real technique, children were helped to create a model of their local neighbourhood, and placed cards on the model showing where, when and how they travelled to school. They also marked out danger areas and places avoided by local children. The information received from children led to safe route improvement schemes being established.

Contact: Mike Motteram, Suffolk County Council – Environment and Transport. Tel. 01473 583 199; Mike.Motteram@et.suffolkcc.gov.uk

Pick 'n' mix

Most organisations combined conventional research methods with play and leisure-based activities. Here the expertise of those running consultation events shines through, with playworkers, primary school teachers and community artists having the most creative approaches.

A 40-week project during 2000 gathered the reactions of nine to 11 year-olds to sustainable housing. Integer House is situated on the Lyng Estate in West Bromwich, Sandwell. The house has many environment-friendly features. Children's

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views and ideas were elicited through poetry, prose and artwork. Partners in the project were four primary schools, Sandwell Urban Forum, Integer Partners and the building construction company Wates Construction Limited.

Contact: Mollie McPherson, Education Liaison Offices, Sandwell Metropolitan Borough. Tel. 0121 5693441; mollie_mcpherson@sandwell.gov.uk

As part of the Promoting Positive Behaviour programme in primary and secondary schools in Swansea, Dynamix was commissioned to consult children in three primary schools about how they see their school, and how different behaviours are or could be rewarded and discouraged. The sessions were carried out between November and December 2000. Dynamix specialises in consultation events that are 'seriously fun', and the days were packed with games and art and craft-based activities.

One of the unique aspects of the project was that, after two days with the children, a third day was held with staff/teachers, addressing many of the same questions. This then led into a 'whole-school Parliament' where children and adults could work together to decide how they might respond to their respective ideas and concerns, as well as to work out how they could set up and run an effective school council.

Contact: Dynamix. Tel. 01792 466231; dynamix@seriousfun.demon.co.uk

Children's Voice is a Single Regeneration Budget project in Tower Hamlets, running for four years from 2000. One of its target groups is under 12s. Consultations were carried out on redevelopment of local parks and Home Zones, and health initiatives and leisure facilities. A range of methods were used to elicit children's views and ideas, from arts and crafts, to photography, to collage making. Questionnaires, video and picture boards have also been used.

Contact: The Children's Society East London Network.
Tel. 020 7613 2886

Between October and November 2001, Save the Children consulted over 300 children between the ages of three and ten years for the London Borough of Shoreditch. The focus was children's perceptions and experiences of living in Shoreditch, especially their education, health and safety and their opportunities for play and enjoyment. Three consultation methods were used.

Over 200 children in four schools and one play setting were asked to write or draw messages for Shoreditch New Deal Trust about how they would like local money to be spent.

Over 150 children in six classes created drawings and posters about how they would improve their lives and the lives of their families.

Postcards were left in each setting for those children unable to take part in the activity sessions; 80 were returned.

Contact: Lina Fajerman, Development Officer, Save the Children UK. Tel. 020 87414054; L.fajerman@scfuk.org.uk

During 2000/01, the Daycare Trust consulted children in a particular locality, aged between three and 14 years, about pre- and after-school provision. Cheshire County Council Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership commissioned the consultation. Various methods were used, including questionnaires, telephone interviews, focus groups, face-to-face interviews, arts and crafts, and board games. Disabled children and children from minority ethnic communities were included.

Contact: Maxine Bretherton-Budd, Early Years and Childcare Manager, Cheshire County Council. Tel. 01244 602 587; maxine.bretherton-budd@cheshire.gov.uk

In 1998, children in Edinburgh were consulted about their play experiences and needs. Consultation methods included a play quiz, talking walls, one-to-one interviews, focus groups, surveys and artwork. The City of Edinburgh Council commissioned Blake Stevenson Limited, Donald MacLeod Consultants and Playplus to undertake the consultation and to develop a play strategy from the findings. Parents/carers, service providers and play experts were also consulted.

Contact: Margaret Westwood, Play Development Officer, the City of Edinburgh Council. Tel. 0131 529 7925, margaret.westwood@edinburgh.gov.uk

During 2000/01, The Children's Society's LARCH (Listening and Responding to Children) project in Leeds consulted 498 children in 50 different settings about play schemes and out-of-school clubs. Ten different consultation methods were used to elicit children's views: specially prepared worksheets with happy/sad faces; asking children to draw their favourite play

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activities (very popular with under eights); giving children cameras to photograph their favourite things; a dream/nightmare playworker activity; asking children to list ten top rules for play settings; a graffiti wall; taped interviews; inviting children to select their favourites from activity-based photographs; and one-to-one interviews using questionnaires. The comprehensive report from the consultation summarises children's views and experiences, and gives an analysis of what consultation methods worked.

Contact: The Children's Society Head Office. Tel. 020 7841 4400

During 2000, Bolton Youth Service and The Children's Society in Bolton consulted 357 nine to 11 year-olds on how their area could be improved. The consultation was carried out as part of the area's Single Regeneration Budget 6 programme. One-hour sessions were held in 11 different schools, usually in groups of 15. Children were split into small groups and given a rubbish bin into which they could throw all the things they did not like in their area. Children wrote or drew a picture of their worst things. Next, each small group was given an 'Aladdin's Lamp' to make wishes for their communities; this often involved them taking paper out of the rubbish bin and making suggestions on how the worst aspects of their neighbourhood could be improved. A full group discussion was held at the end of each session.

Contact: Bolton Youth Service. Tel. 01204 332 323; youth.service@bolton.gov.uk

Five to 12 year-olds were consulted in Blackpool on their perceptions and experiences of local play opportunities and facilities. The consultation was carried out during two weeks in 2000 by Blackpool Advocacy, the local play council and staff from a Teenager to Work initiative. Consultation methods included discussion groups and questionnaires. Children's responses contributed to the Council's play strategy and led to additional training for playworkers. It also informed a funding application for The Children's Fund, to establish a participation project for children and young people.

Contact: Ann Rodham, Blackpool Advocacy. Tel. 01253 311019; ann.rodham@blackpool.gov.uk

As part of a Best Value review of services for looked-after children, Lincolnshire Social Service consulted children, aged eight to 18 years, about their experiences and perceptions of residential and foster care. The consultation included those with no personal experience of care, as well as those with direct experience. Consultation methods included one-to-one interviews, discussion groups and postal questionnaires.

Contact: Frank Grisaffi, Human Resource Planning Officer, Lincoln Social Services Directorate. Tel. 01522 554042; frank.grisaffi@lincolnshire.gov.uk

Glasgow primary school students have been consulted about several features of their school life. Pupil councils exist in all primary schools across Glasgow City Council; here, children are regularly consulted by their head teachers and teachers on various aspects of school life. Since June 2000, home-school agreements have been developed in consultation with children, parents and staff. These agreements describe what

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is expected from different people to ensure children get the most from their primary school experience. Various consultation methods are used, including circle time, focus groups and questionnaires. In addition, in October 2001, a Best Value review of primary schools was undertaken, using a group discussion format.

Contact: Christine Higginson, Head of Primary Schools, Glasgow City Council. Tel. 0141 287 6711; Christine.higginson@education.glasgow.gov.uk

Children and young people aged between eight and 14 years took part in a consultation project to raise awareness among Swindon councillors of children's play facilities and preferences. The project ran from August 1999 to October 2000; consultation methods included artwork, photography, video and audio recording, discussions and presentations. Swindon Borough Council's play development workers and playworkers carried out the consultations, bringing children and young people together to express their views as well as visiting playsites to engage with children in their own play environments. One of the outcomes of the consultation was a staffed adventure playground: a junior committee was established to help design and develop the playground.

Contact: Jenny Jones, Play Development Officer, Swindon Borough Council. Tel. 01793 465452; penhilln@swindon.gov.uk

During the latter part of 1999, researchers from the Thomas Coram Research Unit consulted 20 three and four year-olds using the 'mosaic approach'. Information was gathered from children in a variety of ways, including through observation,
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role play, open and semi-structured conversation and through children taking photographs and creating maps of their childcare settings. Childcare staff and parents were also interviewed. Two aspects of this consultation stand out – the rigour and care taken when recording and analysing children's words and actions; and the follow-up meetings that were arranged to see whether children's experiences, thoughts and preferences had changed over time.

Contact: Alison Clark, Research Officer, Thomas Coram Research Unit. Tel. 020 76126540; a.clark@ioe.ac.uk

Blackpool's Children's Fund Consultation 2001, aimed at five to 13 year-olds, included a questionnaire, peer discussion groups, artwork and one-to-one interviews. A youth and community worker and a children's advocate from Blackpool Advocacy Children's Services facilitated the consultation events.

Contact: Ann Rodham, Blackpool Advocacy. Tel. 01253 311 019; ann.rodham@blackpool.gov.uk

During 2000, Coventry City Council heard from 1,110 children aged 18 and under about out-of-school activities. A large proportion of the children were aged 11 and under. The initiative was part of the Council's Best Value review of its Children and Family Education Service. Consultation with children and young people took several forms:

- a children's clubs survey (29 per cent of respondents were under eight years old)
- a summer activity survey of children aged four to 11 years

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- a survey for non-users of children's clubs or summer activity programmes (aimed at four to 11 year-olds)
- an interactive consultation day for 11 year-olds
- a survey and focus groups with children with special needs (56 per cent of focus group participants were aged 11 and under)
- a focus group with looked-after children under 11 years
- an interactive focus group of African Caribbean children under 11 years.

The interactive consultation day for 11 year-olds tried to ensure children had fun while advising the Council. Children responded to questions about their children's clubs on acetates mounted on frames ('stained glass window exercise'). There was a soapbox/video corner where children could interview each other about why they had joined their children's club. Cardboard images of a children's worker were placed on the floor and children were asked to make comments on the qualities they liked or disliked about their children's club staff.

A chain link was made by children writing on a strip of paper something that would make their children's club better. The individual strips were then joined, producing a chain circle. The alphabet word game involved children selecting letters on A4 card that had been placed on the floor, to show what activities they liked best at their club. The balloon game was by far the favourite activity, with 200 balloons hidden in different parts of the activity room. Teams were allocated a colour and, at the start of a whistle, were asked to find all their balloons. Once each team had collected their balloons, they were asked to burst them to find their team questions.

One of the questions in the balloons was 'How could children help more with the organisation of the children's club?'

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Children said they could organise their own activities and trips, and carry out fundraising. They said they could organise the equipment in their club and run their own tuck shop. Other proposals related to how people behave in clubs: children said they could behave and make their own rules.

The focus groups for 'children with special needs' gave six to 19 year-olds the opportunity to say what they enjoyed doing in their spare time and the reasons for them not using out-of-school activities. Transport was an issue for many of the children and young people, with one group of younger children suggesting there could be a children's 'Ring and Ride' scheme. Parents' reluctance to respect children's and young people's evolving capacities was another concern, with participants feeling that they were not permitted as much independence as their peers. Lack of knowledge about out-of-school activities was also raised, as was exclusion from mainstream activities. One girl explained she had been refused admission to her local guide troupe because of an 'insurance issue'.

The consultation with the looked-after children took place as part of a trip to Stratford Theatre. None of the group had ever been to this theatre. The key barriers to attending programmes were lack of transport; the need to have friends at the venue; and the lack of staff time to accompany them to the programmes.

The focus group with African Caribbean children took place at the British Road Transport Museum in Coventry and involved a range of different activities. The children said they would improve programmes by resolving conflicts between children, having more trips and introducing new activities.

Contact: Kevin Crawford, Strategic Officer, Children and Family Education Service, Coventry City Council. Tel. 024 7640 5700; Kevin.Crawford@westcafes.coventry.gov.uk

Consulting diverse groups of children

This mapping exercise shows that diverse groups of young children are being consulted – in formal settings such as schools, in their neighbourhoods and communities, in their families and foster homes, as well as in leisure and play settings. There was a significant gap in information about how organisations listen to and communicate with very young children, including babies. The emphasis in this mapping exercise was on formal consultation processes, so very young children’s absence from the documentation was not unexpected.

We found that many children are being asked to give advice on subjects that, in the past, might have been viewed as too controversial or sensitive for younger children.

The examples below illustrate how organisations are consulting children with diverse experiences, and on a range of matters.

Between January and July 2001, Bristol City Council Social Services and Health consulted looked-after children and young people of dual heritage (aged five to 19 years) about their experiences in care. The Council recruited independent facilitators to carry out the consultation; they used structured interviews. The consultation was part of a Department of Health Quality Protects demonstration project.

Contact: Charles Beaton, Partnership Co-ordinator, Bristol City Council Social Services and Health Department. Tel. 0117 903 7948; charles_beaton@bristol-city.gov.uk

Between May and June 2001, 40 young disabled people, aged between four and 18 years, were consulted about their experiences of inclusion and involvement. An independent organisation, Triangle, was commissioned to carry out the project by Southwark Social Services Department and by W.S. Atkins Education (formerly Southwark Local Education Authority). Children were encouraged to communicate their views and experiences through conversation (most sessions were on a one-to-one or one adult to two children basis), artwork and drama. Visits to children took place in schools, family homes and a residential unit.

Contact: Triangle. Tel. 01273 413 141; info@triangle-services.co.uk

In July 2000, the Drug Education Forum consulted 27 children (nine to 11 years) in the London Borough of Redbridge about drug education and support. The Department for Education and Skills commissioned the consultation, which involved older children too.

Two focus groups, each lasting one hour, were held. Smaller group discussions spontaneously took place, thus allowing quieter children to contribute their ideas and views. The sessions were videoed.

Contact: Joanne Butcher, National Children's Bureau. Tel. 020 7843 6311; jbutcher@ncb.org.uk

As part of Nottingham City Council's Best Value review, children who were out of school were consulted during 2001. The consultation included children in hospital, those receiving home tuition, and pregnant girls and young mothers. Children

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refusing to attend school were also included. Participants were aged between five and 16 years.

Contact: City of Nottingham Education Department, Sandfield Centre, Sandfield Road, Lenton, Nottingham NG7 1QH. Tel. 0115 915 0600

When the Department of Health issued its consultation on physical punishment in the home, the National Children's Bureau and Save the Children UK decided to consult young children about smacking. During 1998, 76 children were consulted in 16 small discussion groups in six primary schools and two summer play schemes. The children were aged between five and seven years (there was one four year-old). A community artist was commissioned to prepare a storybook with the consultation questions; a strange-looking character called 'Splodge' was created to engage the children. The following year, five of the children who took part in the consultation shared their ideas and experiences on video, for a national conference on ending physical punishment. The children took part on the day by operating the video machine and showing their short film. Their parents and teacher also attended. Similar consultations were subsequently carried out in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

Contact: Carlyne Willow, National Co-ordinator, Children's Rights Alliance for England. Tel. 020 7278 8222; cwillow@crae.org.uk

Contact: Tina Hyder, Diversity Adviser, Save the Children UK. Tel. 020 7012 6855; t.hyder@scfuk.org.uk

Babies and children up to the age of 16 years were included in a consultation by Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council about the development of a new green space. Other partners in the 12-month project were Sandwell Reg'n, Collective Art Noise and a local residents' group. Consultation methods included art lessons, site visits, open days and park events. Various designs by local children were incorporated into features added to the open space – the young people decided the wildlife theme. The project is now complete. Compared with other open/green spaces, there has been minimal vandalism, largely attributed to the children's ownership of the space.

Contact: Paul Evans, Senior Project and Initiatives Officer, Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council. Tel. 0121 5695093; paul_evans@sandwell.gov.uk

During May 2002, the Office of Children's Rights Commissioner for London consulted three groups of under 18s on how children and young people see problems, and where they seek help. The aim of the project was to encourage advice and advocacy agencies to provide services that are child-friendly and child-centred. The group of seven to 11 year-olds worked particularly well. Children positively responded to all of the games and exercises, such as pretending to be agony aunts/uncles and giving advice on different problems that children may have.

Contact: Nancy Kelley, Principal Policy and Practice Manager, Barnardo's. Tel. 020 85508822; nancy.kelley@barnardos.org.uk

Between August 2001 and March 2002, Save the Children and Adams Childrenswear 'Where's My Peg?' consulted four to six year-olds in five schools across the UK on their experiences of starting primary school. Prior to the consultations, Adams Childrenswear stores made available materials for children to decorate postcards sharing their experiences of starting primary school.

The information obtained through the postcards was then used to develop consultation sessions with children in the five participating schools. Methods included story telling, Persona Dolls and art. The findings were used to develop two resource packs, one for parents to use with their children prior to starting school and another for teachers to help them address the challenges and difficulties young children can face when starting school. In August 2003, Save the Children and Adams Childrenswear launched a joint website to help children and parents prepare for the first few weeks in school, www.wheresmypeg.co.uk

Contact: Faye Hall, Development Officer for Poverty, Save the Children UK. Tel. 0121 555 8888; F.Hall@scfuk.org.uk

At the end of the 1990s, the Daycare Trust consulted 45 children in nurseries in the London Borough of Haringey, in groups and individually, about what they enjoyed in their nurseries. Children were given a teddy and asked to suggest how they would make sure the teddy enjoyed going to nursery. A colourful and accessible guide, describing young children's ideas and reflections, was then prepared for parents. The aim was to encourage parents to include their young children in making decisions about childcare.

Contact: Daycare Trust. Tel. 020 7840 3350; info@daycaretrust.org.uk

Analysis and presentation of children's ideas and views

While the consultation examples shown in this mapping exercise demonstrate an enormous amount of energy, creativity and positive engagement with young children, the analysis and presentation of children's ideas and views is extremely disappointing. Too often, children's conversations and communications are reduced to bullet points or incoherent lists that give no overall picture of what they said, felt or wanted. There continues to be a real imbalance of time and investment, with contact with children consuming most energy and passions, and the recording, analysis and follow-up action left as the poor relation. It is as if the consultation process ends when the last child goes home.

The analysis and presentation of children's views and experiences is hugely important – not only to validate and respect children's contributions but also to generate *action and change*, which is presumably the goal of all consultation. Our survey asked organisations to specify what action had resulted from the consultation: a depressingly high number said it was too early to say or, worse, they simply noted a strategy document that children's views would be fed into.

Photographs are often included in reports but, without any context or summary, all they can ever demonstrate is that young children took part (and that they were usually very happy to do so).

Despite these serious reservations, we did obtain several examples of innovative ways of recording and disseminating children's views and ideas.

The Housing Education Initiative in Birmingham aims to involve children and young people in the process of regeneration. Project workers have consulted children in junior schools using classroom-based activities and through local residents' meetings. Bi-monthly news videos were produced showing children's and young people's views of their neighbourhoods and suggestions for change. These were shown at residents' meetings and led to practical changes such as new leisure equipment being installed around a local reservoir.

Contact: Paul Capelin, Paul.Capelin@birmingham.gov.uk

During a three-month period in 2000, children and young people, aged between five and 16 years, were consulted about how they would like to see their area in the twenty-first century. The consultation was organised by three partner organisations – Sandwell Education Department, Sandwell Urban Form and the DIY company B&Q. Children took part in discussion groups and then worked together to design and paint hoardings for display in their local neighbourhoods.

Contact: Mollie McPherson, Education Liaison Offices, Urban Form. Tel. 0121 5693441; mollie_mcpherson@sandwell.gov.uk

The Young Citizens Project is part of Kirklees' Involving Young Citizens Equally (IYCE). During summer 2001, children and young people were consulted about their understanding of children's rights. A children's version of Kirklees Metropolitan Council's Children's Services Plan was subsequently produced in calendar form and circulated to schools, nurseries, youth settings and individual children and young people.

Contact: Richard.lynch@kirklees.gov.uk

Between 2000 and 2001, The Children's Society in partnership with West Sussex County Council consulted 432 children (four to 14 years) about out-of-school childcare, specifically exploring their experiences and views of after-school clubs, holiday clubs and breakfast clubs. Twenty participants were disabled children. Group and individual consultation methods were used, and children were encouraged to express themselves through drawing and collage making.

One of the main messages from the consultation was that the play environment appears to hold equal or more significance than activities. Children said they wanted safe and comfortable areas to play – 'somewhere to sit down and relax', 'comfy chairs and sofa', 'famous pictures and paintings', 'a quiet room with inflatable chairs'. One child asked for a 'magic bed and pillow' while another requested 'flying wheelchairs'. Food was the next priority area, with repeated calls for food that children like and for children to be allowed 'all you can eat'. Being outdoors was important but so was the opportunity to have access indoors to televisions, computers and computer games. Here the emphasis was on not being made to do 'school stuff' in out-of-school settings. Theme parks were a favourite activity for children not using out-of-school activities, as were shopping trips.

The following year, The Children's Society undertook another consultation, aimed this time at ten to 14 year-olds (who were under-represented in after-school clubs, holiday clubs and breakfast clubs). The report from this exercise, *Kids Rule!*, was published in March 2002.

Contact Dr Sue Virgo, The Children's Society. Tel. 01273 605040; sgf@childsoc.org.uk

To prepare for the Government's examination by the Committee on the Rights of the Child in September 2002, The Children's Society commissioned two freelance consultants to consult children and young people about the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. During 1998 and early 1999, 109 children, aged between 12 months and 19 years, were included in the consultation; 57 per cent were aged 12 and under. Children's ideas and experiences were obtained through artwork, specially prepared activity sheets and discussion groups. Although it was assumed that under 12s would prefer using activity sheets to express themselves, 23 of 62 children chose instead to take part in the structured discussion groups. The report from the consultation was submitted to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, and young delegates from The Children's Society took part in a meeting in Geneva with the Committee and non-governmental organisations.

Contact: Carolyne Willow, National Co-ordinator, Children's Rights Alliance for England. Tel. 0207 278 8222; cwillow@crae.org.uk

The Children's Society and Save the Children joined forces to encourage the Greater London Authority (GLA) to take into account the experiences, views and ideas of some of its youngest citizens. The two organisations supported nursery staff across London to consult 32 young children they were working with, aged between two and four years. Consultation methods included a 'sensory walk' where children pointed out and discussed aspects of their local community. Cameras were available to help children describe their neighbourhoods, and views and ideas were also obtained through games, artwork and observing play.

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The report from the consultation, *London on your Doorstep*, translates children's ideas and views about living in London into different aspects of the GLA's strategic planning.

Contact: Julie McLarnon, Principal Policy and Practice Manager, The Children's Society. Tel. 020 7841 4610; julie.mclarnon@childrenssociety.org.uk

Feedback to children and their families/carers

Almost all projects we heard about had provided children with some form of feedback, usually through letters, newsletters or personal visits. Some organisations gave children thank-you cards and a gift or gift voucher to acknowledge their help.

Bristol City Council Social Services and Health commissioned the Norah Fry Research Centre in 1999 to consult children and young people (aged five to 19 years) about the closure of two children's homes and the opening of a disabled children's resource centre. The project – called 'Having a Voice' – employed disabled adults to carry out the work with support from a researcher at the Norah Fry Research Centre. Individual interviews were used, with diagrammatic and written material. Feedback to participants was through diagrammatic material sent through the post.

Contact: Charles Beaton, Partnership Co-ordinator, Bristol City Council Social Services and Health Department. Tel. 0117 903 7948; charles_beaton@bristol-city.gov.uk

During 2000, the Office of the Children's Rights Commissioner for London consulted nearly 3,000 children and young people about their experiences and views of living in London. Information was gathered through questionnaires (1,237 were returned by children aged 11 and under) and small discussion groups. The summary report from the consultation, *Sort it out!*, was produced in A3 size with lots of colourful and eye-catching design. It was circulated to all participants and to schools, youth settings and rights and participation projects.

Contact: Carolyne Willow, National Co-ordinator, Children's Rights Alliance for England. Tel. 0207 278 8222; cwillow@crae.org.uk

In Darlington, children and young people aged between eight and 18 years were consulted about the development of a new skateboard park. An open forum was held where participants could brainstorm their ideas. After the meeting, participants were each sent a photocopy of the draft design and a letter explaining what would happen next.

Contact: Norman Maltby, Community Projects Officer, Darlington Borough Council. Tel. 01325 388527; Norman.Maltby@darlington.gov.uk

A 'fun day' in November 2001 brought children and young people together to share their experiences and advice on improving services to children in need offered by the Borough of Poole. Parents and carers also took part. A *Kilroy*-style interview was held, together with a *Big Brother* diary room and drama and art workshops. A questionnaire was also given to each participant. Following the event, a feedback newsletter

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was produced summarising the key issues and concerns raised by children and young people (and their parents/carers), and proposed action by the local council.

Contact: Karen Mayo, Borough of Poole. Tel. 01202 714740; k.mayo@poole.gov.uk

Safety First was the name of the report from a consultation with young disabled people, carried out by the National Children's Bureau in 1997 for the Department of Health. The consultation project was commissioned as part of the Children's Safeguards Review. Young children using short-term residential care were consulted about keeping safe, as well as older teenagers in residential settings. Feedback was given personally to each group of children and young people that took part, with diagrams on flipchart paper for the youngest. The Department of Health sent each child a personal thank-you letter; these were translated into Braille for young people with visual impairments. One child was given a copy of the full report on audiotape, at her request.

Contact: Carlyne Willow, National Co-ordinator, Children's Rights Alliance for England. Tel. 0207 278 8222; cwillow@crae.org.uk

In November 2001, the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) held a consultation day in London for over 100 children and young people about the Government's proposals in the *Schools Achieving Success* White Paper. Save the Children UK advised and supported the DfES, both in preparing for and running the day. Pupils from ten schools across England participated; three were primary schools.

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Following the day, a fold-out leaflet, summarising children's and young people's ideas and concerns, was produced in eye-catching colours. This has been widely circulated, to the consultation participants as well as to relevant organisations. A section is included in the leaflet on 'the Government's response', indicating that there will be more consultation events in future and stating that pupils' views were taken into account in the Education Bill that followed.

Contact: Michelle Foster, Assistant Programme Director:
Education, Save the Children UK. Tel. 0113 242 4844 ext. 215;
M.Foster@SCUK.org.uk

Facilitating change through consultation

We did not find many examples of concrete change arising from consultation. There can be many reasons for this. Time was a factor consistently given by survey and telephone respondents. In almost equal measure, we were told it was either too early to report changes or that there had been staff and organisational changes since the consultation, which made it difficult to track what had actually happened as a consequence. When external organisations are commissioned to carry out consultations, there is the added challenge of ensuring that those who receive the information are committed and engaged enough to act on it. Nothing beats personally hearing or seeing children communicating their views and ideas. If decision makers are not directly involved in the consultations, it is imperative that facilitators arrange direct contact between them and the children who took part. If this is not possible or appropriate, even more energy and skill needs to be invested into the consultation report – a drab document with pages and pages of randomly presented quotes will spur into action only the most committed.

Another consideration was the broad nature of many consultations – asking children to say what they like to do in their spare time is much less specific than asking them to advise on activities in a particular children's club or youth centre. Similarly, some consultation activities – such as asking children to design their ideal playworker or social worker – are difficult to immediately implement. Children's views and ideas could be fed into the staff selection process and induction and training, but only long-term monitoring would establish whether the children did in fact end up with their dream adults.

More fundamentally, there is the question of whether young children's contributions are perceived as credible and worthy of action. It seems that many adults remain awe-struck that very young children have feelings, ideas and views that they can richly communicate. While there were no examples of reports representing children's views and ideas in an overtly disrespectful or patronising way, there were several examples of children's photographs and quotations being presented in documents without any serious discussion. Sometimes it seems that the sole outcome of consultation is proof of young children possessing and being able to communicate ideas and opinions – an exercise more in anthropology than social change.

Where concrete changes were recorded, either on the survey form or through telephone discussions, it was noticeable how many were relatively straightforward to implement – an increase in pocket money allowance for children in care, or the purchase of play equipment, or the times of meetings being rescheduled to enable children's participation. Less common were changes on a bigger scale – introducing new services or policies, supporting children to establish their own projects and activities, or transforming the staff selection and reviewing process to ensure children's ongoing role in developing professional practice. This kind of change requires long-term commitment to children's

participation in decision making, rather than just to consultation *per se*. Here the crucial role of independent advocacy services or other children's champions is underlined, constantly monitoring, persuading and demanding that consultations with children result in measurable and positive change.

At the end of 2001, Flintshire Children's Services completed a consultation with under 18s on children's participation in child protection case conferences. Questionnaires and group discussions were used. The process led to practical changes in the conference process and professional guidance was issued on methods of engaging children.

Contact: Carol Salmon, Children's Services Manager (Fieldwork), Flintshire County Council. Tel. 01352 702647; carol_salmon@flintshire.gov.uk

Twenty-four children between the ages of five and seven were given the chance to influence the way their holiday camp was organised in Birmingham, during summer 1998. A specialist under-11s development officer from Save the Children UK joined forces with BYV Adventure Camps, which has been running holidays for disadvantaged children for over 30 years. The aim of the partnership was to make the camp more participatory. Through questionnaires and arts and crafts, children were able to choose food and activities for the holiday. Many of the children also kept 'All about me' books, where they recorded each of their day's adventures. Save the Children UK and BYV Adventure Camps prepared the books in advance, and included activity sheets such as 'find out all the names of people on your minibus'.

Contact: Faye Hall, Development Officer for Poverty, Save the Children UK. Tel. 0121 555 8888; F.Hall@scfuk.org.uk

The British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) and the Thomas Coram Research Unit consulted 82 five to 19 year-olds on their adoption experience; 20 per cent were aged between five and ten years. Consultation methods included questionnaires via parents, group meetings and individual interviews. Children's and young people's experiences and ideas contributed directly to the national adoption standards, published by the Department of Health in August 2001.

Contact: John Simmonds, BAAF. Tel. 020 7593 2000; john.simmonds@baaf.org.uk

The Scout Association circulated questionnaires to all its members (27,600 to under 20 year-olds) to obtain advice on the scout uniform. The youngest participants were six years old. As a result of the consultation, a new uniform that reflected children's and young people's preferences was introduced.

Contact: Sarah Hobbs, Programme and Development Manager, The Scout Association. Tel. 020 8433 7100, sarah.hobbs@SCOUT.ORG.UK

Barnardo's Hive project in Sunderland was established in 1996 to work in partnership with local people, including children, on reducing the fear of crime and increasing education, training, social and employment opportunities. Children at Gillas Lane Primary School were consulted about what they liked and did not like about their local estate. Staff from the project then worked in the school one day per term on issues raised by the children. This led to new adventure play equipment being installed in the school's playground and a

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play equipment loan scheme being established for lunch and break times.

Contact: Audrey Bewick, Deputy Children's Services Manager, Barnardo's – The Hive. Tel. 0191 584 5729; audrey.bewick@barnardos.org.uk

A consortium of statutory and voluntary organisations in the West Midlands consulted 11 to 14 year-olds about their aspirations and ideas for a local park. Teachers at George Salter High School in Sandwell carried out the consultation with assistance from Sandwell Urban Form, Groundwork Black Country and the Education Microtechnology Unit. Children developed questionnaires in personal health and social education lessons, and the consultation sessions took place in geography classes. The consultation led to practical improvements in the local park.

Contact: Mollie McPherson, Education Liaison Offices, Urban Form. Tel. 0121 5693441; mollie_mcpherson@sandwell.gov.uk

Hull's rights and participation project consulted nine to 21 year-olds with personal experience of the care system. They encouraged children and young people to express themselves through message boards, pictorial presentations and artwork. Group discussions were also tape-recorded. Education was one of the recurring themes of the consultation; this led to 'The Rights Thing Group' being established where young people delivered training workshops to teachers. In addition, following concerns about children's health care, community nurses now regularly visit children's homes and are available to children and young people in foster care.

Contact: Ian Bolton, RAPP. Tel. 014822 225855; rapp@rapp.karoo.co.uk

Organisational learning and staff development

We found only two examples of rights and participation training being provided for professionals working with children. One is an established in-service training programme, whereas the other is a planned course for playworkers, building on previous arts and crafts workshops. The theme will be communicating and listening to young children (three to four year-olds). Hopefully a lot more is happening. Our survey asked whether organisations have a written policy on consulting young children; in hindsight we should have asked also about staff training and development.

Trafford Metropolitan Borough, through the School Improvement Service, offers in-service training for teachers on school councils, citizenship, circle time, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, sustainability and eco schools and healthy schools.

Contact: Elaine Jackson, Senior Adviser, Trafford School Improvement Service. Tel. 0161 911 8608; elainejackson@dialstart.net

Playworkers in Worcestershire will soon get the chance to take part in a specially tailored course on communicating and listening to young children. Following consultations with children for Worcestershire's Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership (EYDCP) (see below), a booklet was prepared on what children said that they wanted. In addition to the booklet, course participants will receive a resource box, giving ideas on how to use puppets in consultation and the importance of observation and dialogue.

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In addition to this planned course, arts and craft workshops have already been held for playworkers on consulting children about out-of-school activities. All participants were asked to provide feedback to the EYDCP on how they had implemented the ideas and skills developed at the workshops – including by submitting examples of children’s artwork.

Contact: Cath Ellicott, Business Support Officer, Early Years and Childcare Service, Worcestershire Council. Tel. 01905 790 588; cellicott@worcestershire.gov.uk

A young person from the young people’s care group 4UM helped deliver training to social services staff on children’s rights and participation – the Total Respect course devised by Children’s Rights Officers and Advocates (CROA) for the Quality Protects programme. She is currently involved in evaluating the impact of the training on social work practice, using a questionnaire and face-to-face interviews with staff and with young people living in children’s homes.

Contact: Alyson Boucher, Young People’s Officer, Sunderland Social Services. Tel. 0191 553 7111; alyson.boucher@ssd.sunderland.gov.uk

Consultation as part of a broader commitment to children’s participation in decision making

We found several examples of organisations seeking to build young children’s participation into their ongoing policy and service development.

During May 2000, a team of specially trained consultants aged between eight and 13 years carried out three fact-finding missions in rural and urban settings (including schools and village halls) in Worcestershire. The team was recruited and supported by the Article 31 Children's Consultancy Scheme, which is a project of the national organisation Playtrain. The team collected data using questionnaires, then prepared a report and presentation for Worcestershire's Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership. The event took place at Redditch Town Hall. The consultants gave the following recommendations for improving out-of-school provision.

- Toilets should be nice and clean.
- There should be a quiet room for doing homework, reading and other quiet activities.
- There should be an outside space for play.
- There should be facilities for disabled people.
- There should be ground rules, which all children have a say in.
- Clubs should have a savings scheme and children should decide what to spend the money on (the money for this scheme should come out of the fees already paid to the club).
- Children should vote on what activities they want to do.
- Every club should have safety rules and regular fire practices.
- Leaders should be qualified first-aiders.
- There should be lots of activities to keep the children busy.
- Staff should be nice and friendly and care about the children.
- There should be a mix of older and younger children.

Following the work of the young consultants, Worcestershire Council established a small grant system to encourage play

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providers to implement children's ideas. The grants were very small – £50 – but benefited children from 20 different groups. The most popular activities were day trips and special events such as hiring a bouncy castle or holding a barbecue. Grants were awarded to groups only if they could show that the proposals had come from children.

Contact: Cath Ellicott, Business Support Officer, Early Years and Childcare Service, Worcestershire Council. Tel. 01905 790 588; cellicott@worcestershire.gov.uk

The Children's Society's Children and Young People's Participation Initiative (CHYPPI) was launched at the end of 1999. It aims to involve children and young people in the governance of the organisation.

A national conference, where more than 70 children and young people involved in The Children's Society set out their priorities for action, was held in August 2001. The age range of participants was eight to 21 years. The top three priorities for the youngest participants were to stop ignorance, intolerance and racism; for children and young people to be listened to and respected the same as adults; and to stop all forms of cruelty and abuse, especially bullying. Conference delegates elected an Advisory Group of young people to progress issues pertinent to children and young people, and to increase access to decision-making bodies within The Children's Society, including the Board of Trustees.

Contact: Matt Atkins, CHYPPI support officer, The Children's Society. Tel. 07810 796 510; matt.atkins@childrenssociety.org.uk

Children living in Coventry were consulted about their perceptions of their neighbourhoods. The project was carried out by the City Council's Children and Family Education Service and fed into planning for a local New Deal for Communities initiative. Participants were aged five to 11 years; the consultation methods included games, storyboards and group discussions. Children are involved in the New Deal projects and have been active in the running of the children's resource centre and involved in the recruitment and selection of staff.

Contact: Kevin Crawford, Strategic Officer, Children and Family Education Service, Coventry City Council. Tel. 02476 405700; kevin.crawford@westcafes.coventry.gov.uk

During summer 2000, Newport Borough Council circulated a questionnaire seeking the views and experiences of looked-after children and young people. Fifty children and young people participated in the survey. After the data was analysed, a newly established Consultation Task Group issued a short-term plan for further consultation with children and young people during 2001/02. A variety of events and activities took place, including art, music and drama workshops. Participants were aged six to 18 years and target groups included young disabled people and those placed out of authority.

Contact: Newport County Borough Council, Civic Centre, Newport, South Wales NP9 4UR. Tel. 01633 244 491

Involving Young Citizens Equally (IYCE) is a corporate initiative in Kirklees, supported by Kirklees Metropolitan Borough, Calderdale and Kirklees Health Authority and Save the Children UK. The aim is to facilitate and support children's and young people's participation in decision making in policy and service

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development. IYCE gives 'participation grants' of up to £500 to groups of children and young people aged 17 and under, to work on a children's rights project of their choice.

Contact: Richard.lynch@kirklees.gov.uk

What do children make of consultation?

We found three examples of children being consulted about the consultation process itself. One was the Sex Education Forum's consultation for the Department for Education and Skills. The other was part of the National Children's Bureau's and Save the Children UK's consultation with young children about smacking. The third example was from the Christmas 2001 consultation event run by the Rights and Participation project in Hull.

In all three projects, children spoke enthusiastically about having had the chance to express their views and ideas. For the two consultation events where food was provided, feedback on the quality and choice was frequently recorded. The young children who took part in the pilot session for the smacking consultation unanimously said the facilitators had taken too long at the beginning of the session to describe the project and to explain confidentiality and child protection. The introductory process had taken no longer than ten minutes, but the advice from these five, six and seven year-olds was to 'just get straight on with it'.

Resource list

New (2003/04)

Publications

Alderson, P. and Morrow, V. (2004) *Ethics, Social Research and Consulting with Children and Young People*. Barnardo's.

- Blake, S, and France, G. (2004) *Promoting Children and Young People's Participation through the National Healthy School Standard*. Department of Health, Department for Education and Skills and National Children's Bureau
- Clark, A., McQuail, S. and Moss, P. (July 2003) *Exploring the Field of Listening and Consulting with Young Children*. Research report No. 445. Department for Education and Skills
- Kirby, P., Lanyon, C., Cronin, K. and Sinclair, R. (December 2003) *Building a Culture of Participation. Involving Children and Young People in Policy, Service Planning, Delivery and Evaluation*. Research report. Department for Education and Skills
- Kirby, P., Lanyon, C., Cronin, K. and Sinclair, R. (December 2003) *Building a Culture of Participation. Involving Children and Young People in Policy, Service Planning, Delivery and Evaluation*. Handbook. Department for Education and Skills
- Mooney, A. and Blackburn, T. (2003) *Children's Views on Childcare Quality*. Thomas Coram Research Unit

Training materials

- Coram Family (2004) *Listening to Young Children Resource Pack*. Open University Press
- Coventry City Council Children and Family Education Service. *Involving Children in Recruitment Decisions. A Toolkit for Agencies working with Children and Young People*
- NSPCC and Triangle (2004) *All Join In*. (A video made with three to seven year-olds about communicating, making friends and understanding feeling.) NSPCC
- Radford, K. (2004) *Think of Me, Think of You. An Anti-discrimination Training Resource for Young People by Young People*. Save the Children UK
- Save the Children UK (2004) *Starting with Choice. Inclusive Strategies for Consulting Young Children*. Save the Children UK
- Save the Children UK (2004) *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child CD-Rom Training Kit*. Save the Children UK

Pre-2003

Publications

- Alderson, P. (1995) *Listening to Children. Children, Ethics and Social Research*. Barnardo's

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- Gibbs, S., Mann, G. and Mathers, N. (2002) *Child-to-child. A Practical Guide. Empowering Children as Active Citizens*. Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham Health Action Zone and Groundwork Southwark
- Kilgour, K. (2002) *Circus Skills. A Training, Support and Development Needs Survey of Participation Workers*. Carnegie Young People Initiative
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- Milner, P. and Carolin, B. (1999) *Time to Listen to Children, Personal and Professional Communication*. Routledge
- Morris, J. (1998) *Don't Leave us out: Involving Disabled Children and Young People with Communication Impairments*. YPS for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation
- Office of the Children's Rights Commissioner for London (2001) *Sort it out! Children and Young People's Ideas for Building a Better London*. Office of the Children's Rights Commissioner for London
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- Stirling Council (2000) *Children as Partners. A Guide to Consulting with very Young Children and Empowering them to Participate Effectively*. Stirling Council
- Save the Children (1999) *The School Council. A Children's Guide!* Save the Children
- Triangle (1999) *Making it Happen: Communicating with Disabled Children*. Triangle
- Ward, L. (1997) *Seen and Heard: Involving Disabled Children and Young People in Research and Development Projects*. YPS for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation
- Whittles, S. (1998) *Can you Hear us? Including the Views of Disabled Children and Young People in Decision-making*. Save the Children
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- Willow, C. (2002) *Participation in Practice. Children and Young People as Partners in Change*. The Children's Society
- Willow, C. and Hyder, T. (1998) *It Hurts you Inside. Children Talking about Smacking*. National Children's Bureau and Save the Children

Training materials

- Article 12 (2002) *A Right to Know*. (A children's rights information pack for use with groups of children and young people.) Young people's organisation Children in Scotland. *Onwards and Upwards, Involving Disabled Children and Young People in Decision-making. A Training Manual for Professionals*. Children in Scotland
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What next?

This mapping exercise has shown there is a huge amount of consulting going on with children under 12. There seems to be no limit to the type of methods used, from conventional research techniques to the most creative and fun-based activities imaginable. Playworkers, teachers, social workers, civil servants, housing managers and commercial organisations are seeking the views and ideas of children. Diverse groups of children are being listened to and questions are being posed that, just a decade ago, would have been seen as too challenging or controversial for our youngest citizens.

But we have to be careful. The energy, goodwill and ambition of many of these projects should not carry us away from critical questions such as what is the quality of the listening, thinking and reporting; and what changes are resulting for children?

This project was only ever going to be the start of a process of enquiry, to help us develop a picture of what is happening well and to identify some of the challenges in consulting under 12s.

Throughout the report, a number of questions have been raised, not to dampen the joy and value of consultation but to encourage us to get better at respecting and responding to children.

Three further pieces of work might help us progress from here.

- *A guide for commissioning organisations on what they should plan for and expect from consultations with young children:* this would help to improve the quality of consultations, many of which are being carried out by voluntary organisations on behalf of public authorities. It would urge commissioning organisations to become partners in the process, so they develop the skills and confidence to consult in future. Too often, being able to

consult children is seen as a magic talent that only those in the voluntary sector possess. Regrettably, the vested interests of voluntary organisations have meant that too few challenge this view. Now that children's participation in policy and service development is being championed within central government, demand will keep on rising for external organisations to undertake consultations on behalf of government. There is no doubt that the voluntary sector has huge skills and expertise to pass on. However, if government *itself* is to get better at working directly with children, civil servants must start taking their first participation steps.

- *A short, attractively produced briefing for practitioners on the key stages in consulting children, from deciding what to consult on to responding to the changes proposed by children:* to date, there has been an almost exclusive focus on methods of consultation – encouraging practitioners to be creative and inclusive – but little has been produced on hearing and responding to children.
- *A short booklet on achieving young children's everyday participation in decision making:* this would be aimed at parents and practitioners in a range of settings, from nurseries, to health centres, to schools, to playgroups. It would distinguish between one-off consultations and the everyday respectful relationships that are vital in helping young children develop the confidence and skills to make choices.

4 THE PARTICIPATION OF YOUNG CHILDREN: COMMUNICATION, CONSULTATION AND INVOLVEMENT

Ruth Marchant and Perpetua Kirby

Preface

We were invited by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in June 2001 to write this think piece and we accepted the invitation with some enthusiasm; we had both been working with children and young people for many years and had been involved in consulting them in different contexts, often struggling to find ways to ensure the youngest children were involved meaningfully. We hope this paper contributes to the debate.

Introduction

Well, I have to know, what are my *choices*?
(Four year-old in fury, personal communication)

This paper aims to encourage reflection and debate on the participation of young children; to raise questions about practice; and to build knowledge of the challenges faced in enabling the meaningful involvement of society's youngest members.

The context

The participation of young children is an emotive and political issue that is inextricably tangled up with adult power, the nature of childhood, the tasks of parenting, the function of education, and models of culture and society.

There is currently an unprecedented wave of development of consultative work with children and young people by a range of statutory and non-statutory organisations. Every government department and Government itself is now committed to the participation of children and young people in the planning, delivery and evaluation of government policies and services. Each department has been working with the Children and Young People's Unit (CYPU) to develop its own plans for implementing those principles (CYPU, 2002). From the Quality Protects programme alone, local authorities were planning to spend £9m. on children's participation in 2001. The figure for 2002 is not yet available.

The literature on children's participation is now enormous, much of it published in the last few years. If participation is widely defined, this literature touches all spheres of life: parenting, childcare, education, community and leisure, as well as medical, social and legal processes. Almost without exception, the literature argues for greater involvement and participation of children and young people in decisions that affect their lives. However, most of the practice-based literature on children's participation describes work with children older than eight, particularly teenagers. Young children are almost invisible and babies appear not to exist at all.

This paper attempts to help redress the balance, focusing specifically on children younger than seven.

Our position on young children's participation

We share a pro-participation position, believing that it is important to increase children's involvement in society. We believe that children's active participation is their right as citizens and is also essential for their well-being and to ensure a healthy inclusive society.

We also believe that an open debate is needed about the challenges, risks and realities of involving young children. We need to listen carefully to some of the concerns being raised and to consider our practice reflexively. We have our own concerns about the nature of some approaches, about the directions that the field of 'child consultation' is taking and about the quality of the debate.

We are committed to the development of good practice in this area. Less than perfect consultation with children is better than no consultation at all, but poor consultation can be damaging and harmful both to those directly involved and to our understanding of young children in a wider sense.

For example, in recent years, we have seen some young children 'caught up' in consultation projects designed and intended for older children or even adults: they have been asked to fill in questionnaires; sign consent forms; read leaflets and letters incomprehensible to many adults; and take part in 'participation processes' that make little sense to them and have little apparent relevance to their situation. We know of children destroying, hiding and eating their review forms; crawling under the table at meetings where their futures are decided; colouring in their questionnaires (which then get discarded as unusable); and drawing all over their assessment checklists.

We are very concerned about the energy, time and resources being directed to one-off, short-term consultation events (projects, reviews, research) often unlinked to children's daily lives.

Of greatest concern, we believe that the youngest children are the most vulnerable to 'inept', clumsy consultation; for example, we have seen the assent of some young children to a series of leading adult questions defined as 'participation' in decisions about their lives.

In some contexts, 'consultation' has dangerously come to mean an expert adult intervention done *to* children, with or without their genuine consent, often by adults who do not know them and have no other involvement in their lives.

Instead, our vision is of a cultural shift such that young children's participation is a routine, accepted social process in all settings.

We believe that skills in consulting with and enabling the participation of children should be a required competence for *everyone* working with children, and the development and safeguarding of participatory cultures should be a priority in *all* settings. This would mean changes in power structures and resources, but primarily in attitudes and practice.

We would like to see a redirection of resources towards the development of participatory practice with young children as routine in all settings, for example by building children's involvement within the settings, developing adult skills and changing attitudes and practice.

Such a shift would reduce the need for one-off, distant consultations because genuinely participative cultures would provide contexts in which young children could easily be consulted about a range of issues. For example, in community regeneration initiatives, local parent and toddler groups in the area would already be routinely ascertaining young children's views. In the development of health services, children who are spending time in hospital would be used to 'having a real say' in how things are for them. Curriculum development would be a regular focus for young children in school.

There is a place for independent consultation and there is a place for innovative research, for example to develop practice with groups of children often excluded (such as disabled children, babies, refugee children, children who face serious illness).

However, in general, we believe that resources should be redirected away from independent, one-off consultations with the aim that all young children as routine would spend time in participatory settings, with adults and other children skilled in engaging with them. We believe that this would both trigger and drive a far more profound and lasting cultural shift than the current focus on consultation as a process often isolated from children's everyday lives.

What do we mean by 'young children?'

After some thought we have focused this paper on *babies and children under the age of seven*, because this group:

- are the least visible in the current literature
- present particular practice challenges
- have very different needs and interests to older children
- have no direct representation or shared forums
- are currently subject to major societal changes.

There has been a shift from the use of 'children' as a collective term for anyone under 16 or 18, to the use of 'children and young people'. We believe this shift has been driven in part by a desire not to be 'disrespectful' towards teenagers by calling them children. 'Childish', 'immature' or 'babyish' continue to be serious

insults through adulthood. We think this in turn reflects a wider underlying assumption that young children are 'worth less' than older children – being seen perhaps as further away from adulthood and 'proper' full citizenship.

Legally, in England, one is a child until the age of 16 or 18, depending on the context. Some would argue that, as babies are human, we are all young people from the start. However, the term 'young people' has come to most commonly mean teenagers.

Our concern is with the other end of childhood and there is no universal definition of 'young children'. The relatively new category of the 'early years' covers a range of ages depending on both agency and area. In education, for example, it can mean children from three to six years (for Foundation Stage); the Children Act guidance on early years covers services from birth to eight; the Early Years Partnerships cover services through to age 12, with many including certain groups of children (e.g. disabled children) under the early years' umbrella until age 16.

We have tried deliberately to include babies in our thinking throughout, but have struggled because so much of the literature focuses on children over eight or more commonly over 12. Such work claims to represent the views of 'children' but in fact includes only older children, particularly teenagers. There is rarely any justification given for excluding younger groups and there seems to be an implicit assumption that teenagers can speak for all children, or advise on methodology for all children.

But children's lives have been changing rapidly and the experiences of young children today may be substantially different to those growing up even five years ago. It cannot be assumed that older children and adults understand modern-day young childhoods.

While, for older children/teenagers, an increasing number of forums/organisations exist to represent their views, this is not the case for younger children.

Many of the issues raised in this paper are not specific to young children, as the debates around participation are still in their relative infancy for all age groups. There are issues common across ages and, where relevant for young children, they are included in this paper.

What do we mean by 'consultation' and 'participation'?

To participate means to 'take part' or 'be actively involved' (*Collins English Dictionary*, 1991). Participation in society can work on a number of different levels. Being present is one form of participation, but 'the presence of the child is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition of participation' (Marshall, 1997, p. 105).

Young children are a unique group in being frequently present *but not included* in social processes. We talk across young children in ways that would be considered extremely rude if they were older. They spend much of their time in environments that were not designed with them in mind. We often act as if young children are *not there*. Their invisibility as citizens creates a culture in which it is difficult for their views to be ascertained and heard, and where parents are defined as the users of most services for children (nurseries, schools and childcare).

Although beyond the scope of this paper, we feel it is important to extend the debate about children's participation to include *access* to public and private space, the physical *design* of buildings, the implicit and explicit *social rules* about children's presence; the production of *information* about services.

Within this paper, however, we are focusing on young children's participation in *making decisions*, in which their views and feelings are noted and acted upon. Different models of participation (e.g. Arnstein, 1969; Thoburn *et al.*, 1995; Hart, 1997; Shier, 2001) have identified various levels at which children can be involved in

making decisions and taking action.

We are concerned primarily with children's *consultation*. The word has several definitions, but we use 'consultation' to mean adults *having a regard for a child's feelings, interests, etc., in making decisions or plans* (Collins English Dictionary, 1991). We examine children's agency in their consultation and choices: the definition we use focuses on the two-way interaction between children and adults. It also assumes that adults will consult with intent to *use* the information obtained in determining future action; adults may take action alone, together with children, or enable children to take action themselves.

What do we mean by 'communication'?

We had no problem with maintaining a broad and inclusive definition of communication, resisting the current emphasis on spoken and written communication, which we believe creates barriers for consulting with young children. Although much work with older children relies heavily on spoken and written language, almost everyone working specifically with young children seems to assume that children communicate in many ways, and to work accordingly.

This said, many writers acknowledge the systemic emphasis on language-based communication, particularly in the criminal justice system, and the problems this creates for young children.

Aims of the paper

This paper is about consulting, involving and enabling the participation of young children (babies and children under seven) in ways that are meaningful and relevant to children's lives and respectful of children's views, however these are accessed.

The aims of the paper are as follows.

- 1 Examine young children's involvement in making decisions (and taking action) on issues affecting their lives.
- 2 Focus on young children's involvement in both private and public decisions. Young children's involvement in decisions about their private or personal lives might include choices about food, clothes, activities, which schools to attend or which parents to live with. Young children's involvement in public decision making refers to their opportunities to impact on organisations and public bodies, to ensure the quality and appropriateness of the services they provide.
- 3 Explore the range of ways of involving young children in making decisions on a regular basis. There is a strong current focus on one-off consultations and formal forums, but we stress the importance of young children's ongoing and less formal involvement in decision making in their lives.
- 4 Focus on young children's active choices and action on an 'everyday' basis. By this we mean involving children in daily choices, as well as consulting them about life-changing events. We wanted to consider the involvement of young children with all those who spend time with them: parents and other family members and childminders, in their playgroups and nurseries, schools, leisure activities and communities. We have struggled to maintain this focus and to think about the everyday experiences relevant for most young children, because much of the literature concerns the involvement of children in processes that the great majority of young children do not experience:

- research
- social welfare processes
- legal settings
- medical consent.

Some of the literature does consider young children's day-to-day experiences (e.g. Miller, 1996; Cousins, 1999; Phillips, 1999; Alderson, 2000; Clark and Moss, 2001) and we draw heavily on this limited base.

Young children's views about being consulted

Throughout the paper, we have tried to represent children's own views about the issues discussed, where these are available. Few studies have set out to ask children, particularly young children, whether and in what ways they wish to be consulted and to participate in their communities.

We found two main sources of children's views.

- 1 Where the focus of the research specifically included this.
- 2 Where researchers asked children their views about taking part in research on other issues, for example at the end of a project children might be asked how they felt about participating. This second was surprisingly rare.

There was a marked absence of younger children's views about being consulted, reflecting the general absence of consultation work with this age group. We have made the age of children

clear where this is given. There was also a lack of children's views on participating in everyday contexts, as existing research has tended to focus on children's involvement in more formal public and private decisions.

The general message from across the age range is that children and young people do want to be consulted. One writer gives a vivid description of a four year-old who 'was determined to be heard. It was as if his life depended on it' (Cousins, 1999, p. 13). Many young children clearly enjoy being asked their views. Another child of four was asked at the end of a research 'interview' – 'can I ask you one more thing?' and the child replied, grinning, 'Yes, or lots' (Dyer, 2001). Pre-school children have been found to talk openly, even to an outsider (Borland *et al.*, 2001).

Research has consistently found that older children want to be consulted more about their views and be listened to, for example in deciding the rules and running of children's homes (Triseliotis *et al.*, 1995), in major family decisions (Brannan *et al.*, 2000, cited in O'Quigley, 2000), in discussions with professionals about their health (Elliot and Watson, 1997), in decisions about their care when living away from home (Thomas and O'Kane, 1998), in family decisions about post-divorce arrangements (Smart and Neale, 1999) and in private law proceedings (O'Quigley, 2000). Children become disillusioned, however, if consultation is ill considered or tokenistic (Borland *et al.*, 2001).

Children aged eight have talked about the conceptually difficult notion of 'rights' and being listened to (Morrow, 1998). Fairness appears particularly important to children (Thomas and O'Kane, 1998; Borland *et al.*, 2001). They want to be listened to and have their views taken into account, even if those views cannot always be acted on.

As well as the long-term life decisions, it is important to children to be involved in everyday decisions, such as where and when they can go out (Thomas and O'Kane, 1998). The reasons children

gave for wanting to be involved in decisions while in care, listed below, reiterate much of the adult arguments outlined elsewhere in this paper.

- It is our life.
- It is fairer.
- It leads to better decisions.
- You gain more information and knowledge.
- You learn from it.
- It leads to positive change (Thomas and O’Kane, 1998).

Questions for future discussion

- What do children think are the benefits and limitations of different approaches to involving them in decisions, including one-off consultation methods and integrated participatory approaches, which routinely involve children in having a say?
- What differences exist with respect to gender, age, ethnicity, disability and other equality issues?

Policy and inclusive practice

The UNCRC

Children’s moral right to participate in society was established internationally just over a decade ago. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1990) is the world’s most comprehensive bill of rights and the first that gave every child the right to be heard on issues which affect them. Article 12 of the Convention gives ‘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' including any judicial and administrative proceedings. This includes all children from birth to 18.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) receives much attention in the literature on children's participation, but still appears relatively unknown by those who work with children on a day-to-day basis. It does, however provide a good tool for lobbying for policy changes and helping to raise the agenda of children's participation in society.

National legislation and guidance

This commitment is being translated into international legislation and policy guidance, which has increasingly demanded the active involvement of children in decisions that affect their lives and in the planning and assessment of services. The key relevant national legislation in the area of children's participation is detailed on the CRAE website (www.crights.org.uk) and on the DfES' Children, Young People's and Families Directorate's website (www.dfes.gov.uk/childrenandfamilies/).

A somewhat paradoxical situation has been created, where the principle of greater involvement of children is at the heart of much national legislation and guidance, while the pressures created by this guidance can tend to drive practice in the opposite direction. Thus the national curriculum, the assessment framework, the code of practice on SEN all emphasise the need to consult with children, while introducing measures that many practitioners feel make such consultation more difficult in practice.

Social work example

Social workers are expected to increase the involvement of children within a far more structured assessment framework, which also requires additional consultation with parents and other adults, and more paperwork:

Young people feel their personal needs and wishes are often sidelined as a result of social workers' preoccupation with fulfilling legal and procedural requirements.

(Hill, 1997, p. 24)

Education example

Teachers face organisational barriers to consulting children, particularly the demands of the national curriculum and assessments of children's attainment. These are seen to limit pupils' opportunity to pace and control their own learning, while other initiatives demand this. They ignore children's level of involvement and well-being as more valid measures of quality (Dyer, 2001, p. 4).

As well as children becoming more involved in making decisions about their own lives, young people, and occasionally children, are becoming involved in planning and developing services, reflecting the general shift towards user involvement in local government and public sector work. Recent national policies begin to require that children participate in the development of services. For example, guidelines from the Children's and Young People's Unit have instructed government departments to consult children and young people about the services they receive (including the departments of Health, Education, etc., but also, interestingly, the Ministry of Defence). In addition, childcare audits carried out annually by the Early Years

Development and Childcare Partnerships are required to show how children have been consulted.

For practice to be genuinely inclusive, it needs to involve young children because they are also part of the community and in fact are high users of many public services. Changing family structures and employment trends mean that children are now spending less time at home and more time in dedicated social and learning spaces; less time 'alone' with other children and more time under adult supervision, particularly with childcare professionals. There is little national guidance on how to involve children in the development and provision of childcare services (exceptions include Clark and Moss, 2001, p. 62; Clark *et al.*, 2003). While citizenship education has recently been made statutory for secondary students it is not for primary-school children.

Young children need to be involved not only in developing obviously child-related services and policies – such as play or education – but also in wider community issues such as housing, transport, health and welfare. As young children are not a homogeneous group, attention also needs to be paid to involving different groups, particularly those who are most marginalised. This includes issues of age, geography, class, gender, culture, ethnicity and religion. Specific groups, such as disabled children, young travellers and asylum seekers, face additional barriers to involvement in consultation.

Some initiatives (e.g. Quality Protects) seem to have encouraged one-off or irregular consultation rather than requiring that children's consultation be integral to daily routine.

While policies increasingly require children's consultation, practice is scattered and variable. Legislation and guidance do not in themselves make good practice.

Questions for future discussion

- How can young children be consulted about all issues that affect their lives (including community-wide initiatives) in a way that will not cause consultation fatigue?

Child–adult relationships

Enabling children to exercise greater choice and power means changing relationships between adults and children. In this section we will consider:

- challenging perceptions of young children
- examining and challenging power imbalance
- recognising young children as citizens
- recognising that both adults and young children have something to learn.

Challenging perceptions of young children

The way in which young children are seen can facilitate or prevent their participation in society. Obviously, assuming that young children are incompetent, irrational or irresponsible will create barriers to their participation. In more subtle ways, beliefs that young children are ‘developing adults’, or inevitably egocentric, or in need of continuous adult protection will also mitigate against their participation in making decisions and taking action for themselves. Finally, believing that children are ready to take full responsibility for controlling their lives will also create barriers to their meaningful involvement.

There is a genuine interest, love and enjoyment of children that drives many adults to dedicate much of their lives to working and being with them. But, to develop young children's true participation in society, adults need to examine their 'ideological baggage' (Johnson *et al.*, 1998, p. 21) by challenging their assumptions and prejudices about children's abilities and their roles within society. Adult views of children are often polarised between an idealised vision of 'innocent angels' and the demonised and sensationalised view of 'uncontrollable deviants'. There is a common view that children are out of control and parents too lenient. This perception is associated most with older children and teenagers, but also exists for babies and younger children. We often ask whether new babies are 'good', generally understood to mean quiet, co-operative and undemanding.

Shifting advice on baby care is informative in the debate on the involvement of young children (see box below).

It may have taken a generation, but every official bit of advice given to new parents toes the liberal, child-centred line: breast-feeding on demand (sorry, 'request'), baby slings, co-sleeping, the lot ... There's a sense that the balance of power has swung too far in the child's favour. The case for the child-centred approach has perhaps been overstated to get the message across.

More recently, there has been something of a rebellion – and some serious moaning about the martyrdom of modern motherhood – as well as terrifying TV programmes on 'damage limitation' methods, from toddler-taming to controlled crying ... Feeding on demand and co-sleeping are out. Timed feeds and controlled crying are in.

(Worseley, 2002)

Similar thinking exists around the behaviour of very young children – for example, ‘the terrible twos’ – reflected in book titles such as *Toddler Taming* (Green, 1991). The quotes below illustrate how very young children can be seen as simultaneously skilled enough to manipulate adults, yet not competent enough to be involved in decisions about family life.

Many of our toddlers are at this moment playing games with their unaware parents. With so many words and so little action, all this verbal incontinence does nothing but stir the home. Educate and listen to little people, but when the sole object of the exercise is to wind you up – drop democracy.

(Green, 1991, p. 83)

In the middle of intense and complicated negotiations with him, a mist lifts from my eyes and I see how little he is. He really is a baby, for God’s sake. I am being ruled by someone with dimpled knuckles ... I have shown him the power he has over me, and – it being the only power he has – he abuses it left and right ... A few nights ago, he reduced me to sobs of exhausted despair because he kept dragging me from my bed with impossible demands for sweets, television and bottles of milk.

(Saunders in Glendinning and Glendinning, 1996)

The most pervasive perception that devalues children is that childhood is ‘preparation for adulthood’. If childhood is seen as a training ground, then the further one is from becoming an adult the more vulnerable one’s status; in many ways, young children are at the bottom of the pile.

Restrictions in the UNCRC and the Children Act 1989 that require children to have a ‘capability of forming his or her own

views' and 'maturity' hit particularly hard with very young children, who may be seen as not having views or not being able to express them. Even adults who insist that they value and respect children may have difficulty in ensuring that their views are heard, as they have other competing 'dominant voices' that need to be listened to (Hadfield and Haw, 2001, p. 20).

The onus here is on children demonstrating their capacity to communicate their feelings and preferences, rather than on adults finding ways to understand children (which will be explored in the section on adults' competencies). All humans have feelings, preferences and experiences, and the youngest babies can indicate distress, yet very young children are seen as incapable of forming or expressing their own views and this contributes to their 'devaluation', because forming one's own views is seen as part of what makes one human.

The very act of involving children more fully will help to challenge attitudes by questioning underlying values and assumptions about children (Boyden and Ennew, 1997). Finding out children's views, abilities, capacities, strategies and ingenuity (Johnson *et al.*, 1998), and demonstrating these to others will also help to challenge prejudices.

Improving relationships and valuing children is not simply about listening to children, it is also about involving them equally in public and private spaces, ensuring their needs and interests are taken into account, as illustrated below.

Health clinics

Reception desks in health clinics are usually too high for young children to see the receptionist; doctors frequently discuss the child only with the parent and do not show their notes to children. One young child asked her paediatrician 'what are you writing?'.

Examining and challenging power relations

The power relations between children and adults (and older and younger children) in consultations and other participatory interventions mirror wider societal power relations and differences in status based on age, as well as gender, ethnicity, class, etc. The challenge, opportunity and responsibility for adults is to find ways to best reduce power barriers through good practice (Christensen and James, 2000; Mayall, 2000). Participatory practice can tackle the oppressions of more traditional approaches of working with children by using appropriate methods of enquiry and demonstrating their success. Participatory work demands that adults create environments that enable children to voice their views, engage in dialogue and share responsibilities with adults (see section on 'Creating participatory space').

Some have argued that prejudice against young children reflects similar power imbalances found in sexism and racism (e.g. Barford and Wattam, 2001, p. 99). There are obviously differences:

- childhood is a temporary state
- young children are dependent
- we were all once children.

But those undertaking consultations or involving children in decision making are unavoidably engaged in political activity.

Involving children is not enough to redress power imbalances; adults can still abuse power even in participatory projects. Adults use both their verbal and non-verbal communication – such as sarcasm, unclear language and avoidance of eye contact – to

signal their power and to constrain children's voices (Kirby *et al.*, 2002). The childcare literature highlights a familiar example for younger children, discussed in the box below.

The populist writer Christopher Green believes that young children who repeatedly ask 'why?' should be 'answered once and after this it is better to divert, become selectively deaf or pull rank and say "Don't – because I say so!"' (Green, 1991, p. 83).

Other commentators argue that young children's questioning is a crucial developmental stage: 'Children of about four become conscious of some of their own misunderstandings and misinterpretations. With that consciousness comes the need to talk. Questions just "tumble out"' (Cousins, 1999, p. 19). Refusing to answer is a means of imposing adult power.

Children's participation means improving all community relations, to build greater understanding of others' feelings and views, improved respect, trust and co-operation between different members and groups within a community. Their ability to participate depends on a 'basic competence in thinking about the thoughts and feelings of others' (Hart, 1997, p. 30).

Power relations exist between adults and young children, and between children. As well as age, there are differences of gender, ethnicity, disability, class, etc., which can mean certain young children are more marginalised than others. For example, boys are sometimes less likely to take part in public decision initiatives and some differences in ethnicity and affluence/deprivation have also been found (Edwards and Alldred, 1999; for review see Kirby, 2002a). More popular children can also influence group decisions (Kirby *et al.*, 2002).

Recognising young children as citizens

Many advocates of participation argue that children should be involved in making decisions because they will be citizens of the future and will later reap the rewards of current service and policy changes. Alan Prout (2000), for example, explored how recent concerns with child poverty are driven by the wish to make 'better adults' rather than improve the lives of children. These futurist arguments ignore the value of children's current lived experiences.

Recognising young children as capable citizens benefits society as a whole. It acknowledges their political involvement and a respect for the principles and practice of democratic life (Miller, 1996). Enabling young children to be active citizens helps ensure a healthy society (Department of Health, 2000).

Adult and young children's learning

Participatory practice is an opportunity for mutual learning, not just children's learning. To learn demands a degree of humility on the part of the adult, an ability to listen and a commitment to reflect on their relations with children.

Learning can develop professional practice: teachers who are committed to raising pupils' voices in schools are finding they develop a better understanding of their pupils, their teaching and the nature of learning (Fielding, 2001; Paley, 1986, cited in Clark and Moss, 2001). Research into young children's emotional literacy concluded that adults have other equally important lessons to learn from children:

The research made it very clear how much children and adults need to learn *together* about emotional intelligence; children are not passive recipients, they have much to teach adults; their attitudes to each other continually

challenge adults to reassess their own views ... Children have much to teach adults about morality, generosity, intuitive kindness, moral courage and an ability to play with emotional ideas in a way that adults may find harder to access.

(Dyer, 2001, pp. 57–70)

The hope is that the more services and policies are informed by children's views, the more likely they are to suit their needs, although more evidence is needed about how their views can impact on services.

A review of literature on the representation of children's views in private law proceedings found that 'better decisions' were made with children's involvement, 'which will be more likely to be adhered to in the longer term' (O'Quigley, 2000, p. 1).

The literature cites a number of ways that consultation may benefit children, although little of this is based on rigorous evaluation (Kirby, 2002a). Children can learn about themselves and others; develop cognitive, communication and practical skills; gain knowledge and understanding; and develop self-belief, all of which are necessary for their well-being as well as their social education. These personal benefits are often cited above other impacts, reflecting the fact that children's views are often not seriously used in management decisions, shaping policy and influencing politicians (Hadfield and Haw, 2001).

Questions for future discussion

- How can environments be created where adults feel able to learn from young children?
- How does involving young children impact on services?
- How does involving young children benefit the participating children?
- What are the implications of involving young children as democratic citizens for local and national government structures?

The participation–protection relationship

Under the UNCRC, children have the right both to *participate* in decisions and to be *protected* by having their best interests promoted. Currently, these rights are frequently seen in opposition to each other. Some of the strongest objections to young children’s participation are based on protection arguments; ‘children have interests to protect before they have wills to assert’ (Freeman, 1997).

In this section, we rethink the relationship between children’s rights to participation and to protection. Rather than viewing these rights as mutually exclusive, we examine the ways in which participation and protection are interlinked, and argue that *children’s meaningful participation is inherently protective*. When drafting the UNCRC, the right to be heard in judicial and administrative proceedings was originally included within Article 3 (best interests) rather than Article 12; the assumption being that children’s views should be heard when making decisions about their best interests (Marshall, 1997; O’Quigley, 2000, p. 33).

We examine some of the protection/participation dilemmas faced:

- children's rights versus parents' rights
- establishing boundaries
- young children's autonomy
- ensuring young children's safety and well-being.

Children's rights versus parental rights

Children have historically been seen as the possessions of their parents. This in part reflects reluctance in the UK for the State to intervene in family and private matters, whereas it will do so in public issues (Prout, 2000). The challenge is to ensure that young children's views are taken into account by parents and others making decisions on their behalf.

Legal examples

A review of the legal research literature (O'Quigley, 2000) found that:

- parents do not always make decisions based on their children's best interests
- children are frequently not consulted in family legal cases, particularly where the parents are in agreement about post-divorce arrangements.

In fact, children are often given more opportunities to voice their views and influence decisions at home with parents than they are in services (Prout, 2000). There has been a dramatic recent rise in parenting education, which often includes a focus on consulting and communicating with young children. Some parents, however, may not be happy about organisations – particularly schools – introducing participatory practice that enables children to have a say.

Parent's concerns with participatory practice

- 1 In one participatory nursery, parents requested that their children be given homework and taught to read and write rather than rely on self-directed learning (Dyer, personal correspondence).
- 2 'I'm very old fashioned; I don't have a problem with a child being dragged along by its ear ... It makes me happy to know that if my child steps out of line [at school] she'll be brought back in, and in a way that's very much in line with how I deal with her at home' (parent, personal correspondence).

There are some very different cultural and social approaches to child rearing, and young children will in general have no choice about the style used. For example, many minority ethnic group families (with high quality and committed parenting) adopt a less individualistic and more collective approach to bringing up their children than their European counterparts. Some families have lifestyles that in turn impose certain conditions on family life, for example young children on farms, living on boats or in homeless accommodation may have their freedom limited because of risk of harm.

Establishing boundaries

There is increasing concern about children being outspoken, unruly and aggressive at school and in public spaces. Adults may fear the consequences of children being consulted and listened to – that, by enabling children to participate, they will have to give up all control and anarchy may result; with children abusing this 'power' and taking advantage and manipulating adults. Under the UNCRC, however, children do not have the autonomy or power to control, but rather the right to influence decisions by having their views taken into account (Marshall, 1997).

Adults' fears about consulting children

A manager of one early year's service explained at length her fears about 'raising children's expectations' and making them 'impossible to look after' (personal correspondence).

Young children need boundaries about what is acceptable and adults need to be able to say 'No' at times. Those undertaking research or consultations sometimes face challenging behaviour; young children may insult each other or threaten physical violence (e.g. Hill *et al.*, 1996). This raises the question about how much an adult committed to enabling children to make decisions and take action should impose their authority to ensure socially appropriate behaviour, and the difficulty of getting that balance right at times. The type and level of authority will also differ depending on the role of the adult: for example, teacher, parent or researcher.

Charlie (age three) is a very demanding child who screams if he doesn't get his way. His parents are at the end of their tether because they feel they have no control over his behaviour: they tell me that he 'insists' Mother cooks pasta every day. He 'has to have' a story read before bedtime. He 'refuses' to let anyone but Mum put him to bed. The list of his demands is endless and his parents fit in with each and every one of them. What is striking is that Charlie's parents feel they have no say in how he behaves, no recourse. They take his wishes for needs and comply.

(Phillips, 1999, p. 58)

Very young children have stated a preference for a calm but positive approach to finding shared solutions to their conflicts and are consistently negative about adults' 'challenging behaviour', and particularly dislike shouting (Cousins, 1999).

I hate people getting cross and shouting at kids. We mustn't shout, shouting's rude, then the teachers shout (imitating adult in a very loud voice): 'tidy up time! Tidy up time! Stop now! Tidy up time!'

(Four year-old, cited in Cousins, 1999, p. 35)

Young children may not be aware of the implications of their choices and it is adults' responsibility to consider these if taking the final decision. It will also be appropriate at times to override young children's expressed choices. All people have to accept that there are inevitable boundaries to the choices we can make and young children are no exception.

Young children's autonomy

Matters on which young children can be consulted and have direct experience are in many ways more limited today than they have ever been, because of increasing fears about the perceived risks and the dangers that they face.

The perception of children as vulnerable has lost them much of their former independence and made them more subject to the rules, regulation and control of adults as they are chauffeured 'from one 'island' of childhood to another' (Prout, 2000, pp. 310–11). Children therefore have to seek permission and negotiate with adults, or break the rules, to do what they want. Even designated spaces for children are controlled by adult fears rather than negotiated with children; research into commercial

playgrounds found that children wanted equipment to be more challenging while adults were more concerned with making playgrounds safer (McKendrick, 2000). The younger the child the more restrictions are placed on their autonomy. The lack of opportunity to exercise independence, make choices and take risks inevitably impacts on their competence and confidence to participate more fully (Alderson, 2000).

I feel really fed up! Everyone wants their kids to be independent and to grow up, grow up, don't be a baby ... it's like that with cuddlies. Then it's not like it when you want to go to the park on your own to play! Then you're not allowed because it's too dangerous. You get murdered and that.

(Six year-old, cited in Cousins, 1999, p. 41)

Sometimes consultation makes it easier for adults to control children's lives, because we know more about them and what is important to them (Clark and Moss, 2001).

Ensuring young children's safety and well-being

Children, especially young children, remain an extremely vulnerable group in society. Some of this vulnerability results from their physical size and dependence. Some of it results from their position of relative powerlessness and invisibility in society. In particular, the failure to respect children's rights to be consulted creates vulnerability by placing too much control in the hands of adults (Masson and Oakley, 1999). If adults do not consult children then they alone interpret what is in the children's best interests.

Thus children's structural vulnerability, reflected in their lack of political and economic power and civil rights, is partly historical and social rather than inherent.

Establishing the 'right' relationship between ensuring protection and enabling their participation in decisions and action is difficult with all children. It is harder still to get it right with very young children.

The protection of children in its widest sense creates enormous dilemmas. Parents and professionals make difficult decisions daily about children's involvement. With the best of intentions, adults sometimes exclude children from having a say because of their own fears or concerns or anxieties. We need to create safe open forums for these issues to be resolved. Children's voices must be heard in these forums.

A recent project involved children as young as seven with serious health conditions working together to define their information needs about their condition. There was enormous professional and parental concern about the risks of involving these children in group work, given their uncertain futures. To resolve some of these issues, other children with serious health conditions were consulted and they were absolutely clear that children had a right to be involved. The work went ahead, and even the youngest children responded very positively to the opportunity to be with others with similar experiences and to contribute to the thinking about their information needs.

e.g. from Triangle work

We believe it is possible to take a lead even from very young children and start by gauging their level of understanding, aiming to give them control of the information they need. Adults may have unrealistic notions of children's understanding.

A recent project involved young children in the development of images about feelings, rights, safety, sexuality and personal care. There was strong concern from some adults about introducing 'inappropriate' knowledge to young children, particularly in relation to private body parts. However, the project found that children as young as two could draw recognisable images of the genitals of their own and the opposite sex, and all children in the sample had a word for bottom in their vocabulary by the age of 18 months (Marchant and Cross, 2002).

Adults have concerns that children may not be able to express themselves in ways that will be understood, they might be given inappropriate and private information, be expected to take on inappropriate levels of responsibility, and become distressed by what they say, see and hear (Marshall, 1997).

Legal example

Young children are often excluded from attending legal and care proceedings because of adult concerns about exposing them to sensitive and potentially distressing information and discussions. While 85 per cent of 12 year-olds in care are invited to attend meetings, the figure is only 38 per cent of eight year-olds (Thomas and O'Kane, 1998). We do not have figures for younger children.

We suggest that the starting assumption should be that children will participate in making choices and taking action, and, where they do not, this needs to be carefully considered and justified. There may be very valid reasons to exclude young children, but these need to be considered explicitly, especially where decisions are being made about children in public care.

Strategies can be employed to minimise the potential risks of involving children; Alderson (1995) recommended making impact statements to assess any possible harm that might be caused. Adults can undertake preparatory work to ensure processes are appropriate for children. Meetings can be made more informal and enjoyable for children, they may attend just parts of meetings or separate meetings can be held (Thomas and O’Kane, 1998). In situations where a child might feel inappropriately responsible for outcomes, such as arrangements when parents separate, they can be ‘asked about their feelings in general, rather than engaged on the subject actually under debate by adults’ (Marshall, 1997, p. 92).

At times, it will be appropriate to prevent young children’s participation in certain types of meetings or activities to protect their best interests. In this instance, children need to be supported to participate in other ways, for example, if they are not able to attend a meeting, their views can be presented in writing, by tape, on video and/or by someone else.

It is also important to consider whether the involvement of one group of children will impact adversely on other children or the wider community, and for their interests to be weighed up against those of other groups. An adult concern, for example, is that children’s presence at legal and care proceedings will inhibit adult discussions about their best interests, and parents may need space to discuss their children without them being present (Marshall, 1997). Other adults can also feel inhibited by the presence of children, as it demands that they change their communication to meet the needs of children.

Children do not necessarily believe that adults should not discuss them in their absence. Children are also aware that adults may need to talk about them in their presence and may be more concerned with *how* this happens than whether it happens.

One group of disabled children and young people worked together to define their basic rights. The issue of being discussed by adults created much debate. The final outcome was the right 'Never to be talked about as if I am not there' (Chailey Heritage, 1991).

Questions for future discussion

- How can adults be supported to establish the 'right' relationship between protection and participation with very young children?
- How much should governments insist on children's routine consultation within public and private services, and within the family?
- What are the implications for families as services become more participatory?
- What are the implications for services as families become more participatory?
- How can adults enable young children to control the information they have access to?

Child and adult competence

This section explores young children's competence to participate in making decisions (and taking action), and also the competencies required by adults to facilitate young children's participation, including the different roles they need to adopt and the communication and interpretive skills needed.

It includes information on the following.

- 1 Young children's competence:
 - Competing views about young children's competence
 - Assessing young children's competence
 - Offering appropriate choices

- The reliability of young children's views
 - Learning to have a say.
- 2 Adults' competence:
- Facilitation roles
 - Communication skills
 - Understanding children's communication.

Young children's competence

Competing views about young children's competence

Within the last 15 years, there has been a paradigm shift in theoretical models of childhood. The general shift has been from models of child development and socialisation – in which children are viewed as incompetent and 'becoming adults' – to one in which they are seen as social actors in their own right (James and Prout, 1997).

The new perspective asserts that children are not passive recipients but active agents of change, in the following ways.

- Children can report on their experiences and offer valid explanations.
- Children have different competencies and interests to adults.
- Children construct their relationships and childhoods; they influence others as well as being influenced by others.
- Children's feelings and understanding of their situation are of equal value to adults'.
- Children have their own concerns and agendas.

- Children have the competency to actively participate in society (Miller, 1996; Boyden and Ennew, 1997; Thomas and O'Kane, 1998; Mayall, 1999).

Research and development practice has begun to place children centre stage, rather than relying on adults' perspectives, and to develop participatory methodologies to involve children (explored further below).

While this shifting view of childhood has filtered into practice with children, and sometimes young children, children's competence is still widely questioned. The common belief that 'adults know best' can mean that children's competence is underestimated. Adults' perception of children's (in)competence can thus present a major barrier to their involvement in addressing issues within their lives and making difficult decisions, which serves to reinforce existing power relations between children and adults.

Research example

There are numerous research studies 'on' young children, but their lack of perceived competence has restricted young children's participation in research. There are relatively few research studies that ask the views of children under eight years and far fewer that include under fives. Some (e.g. Oakley, 2000) argue that younger children cannot give informed consent.

Education example

The age at which teachers consider children ready to participate in the running of their school varies enormously; in one survey, only a seventh of primary schools and very few infant schools had school councils, although, in other schools, children as young as four were found to be competently involved in electing peers using a secret ballot (Newson 1995, p. 4).

Health example

Within the medical profession, there is much resistance to listening to children, and particularly young children, in devising their own treatment plans. In medical research, ethics committees often act as a barrier to undertaking face-to-face work with children. Yet research has demonstrated that children can become knowledgeable about their own condition and treatment at a very young age (Alderson, 1993).

Legal example

In legal cases, young children have been found to have good knowledge and understanding of the law, legal processes and issues, plus an appreciation of why decisions are made about their future and the implications these have for themselves, and yet they are frequently excluded from legal processes (O'Quigley, 2000).

Assessing young children's competence

A history of developmental psychology research on children has focused on children's deficits and on the most vulnerable groups of children, and has repeatedly failed to explore children's competencies and the strategies they develop to deal with adversity.

Others question this deficit model of young children and argue that they can be capable of making wise choices (e.g. Alderson, 2000). Young children have different competencies to older children and adults, but they are not inherently incompetent. Like adults, young children sometimes make wise decisions and sometimes they do not.

Existing linear models of children's participation (e.g. Hart, 1992; Shier, 2001) are useful frameworks for assessing children's varying level of participation in making decisions and taking action.

They are appropriate for young children, as well as older children. All children can express feelings and preferences, and therefore have the capacity to participate in making choices and taking action. Ascertaining babies' 'views' means understanding how they 'see' or perceive the world and their feelings about their experiences. Young children develop opinions and beliefs based on considered judgements, for example about why they like and dislike things.

This is my teacher with her happy face and she's very, very kind and I like her because she's all green and I like green ... And she's very kind to little children when they talk and talk and take long to ask her things ... and she can say never mind ... ah ... never mind in a softy voice and never, never shout.

(Four year-old, cited in Cousins, 1999, p. 31)

The level of competence required to participate at different levels will depend on the individual child, the context and the type of decision or action. It is very different choosing a toy or breakfast cereal, compared with deciding which doctor or school to attend or which parent to live with.

Children develop different capacities as they get older, but they will do so at different times and in different ways, and there are no universal developmental stages. Younger children will not be able to participate in the same ways as older children, and babies will similarly participate in different ways. Their ability, experience and exposure to being listened to and making decisions, as well as the context, will affect their competency. Children's capacity to participate also varies across cultures and time.

In 1902, five-year-old Margaret walked across Derby to collect her three-year-old sister Elizabeth from hospital, because her mother was at home in labour and therefore unable to go.

In 1998, five-year-old Kevin had never walked the 90-second distance to school on his own. One day, he had to walk to school while his mother watched from the front door. After a short way, he ran back crying and very frightened.

(Examples from Alderson, 2000, p. 51)

In all situations, young children need to be involved in ways that are appropriate to their abilities and interests. The challenge is to assess how best to do this. The younger the child the more integral a part adults will need to play in supporting their participation in making decisions and taking action. Rather than using a linear model of participation, we are proposing the idea of a 'playground of participation' that emphasises the need for fun, involves different approaches and uses different skills according to children's competencies.

An awareness of the wider developmental and cultural factors that impact on children can be useful in deciding children's level of ability to participate, but adults 'should not make assumptions about the individual child based on this knowledge' (O'Quigley, 2000, p. 28). Miller (1996) and Hart (1997) provide some useful guidance for assessing young children's capacity to participate. While there may be a need for guidelines on assessing children's understanding, Thomas and O'Kane (1998) argued that it is more important 'to work on the presumption that children can understand if things are explained to them well, rather than requiring them to demonstrate their understanding' (p. 24). In the criminal justice system (and beyond), however, non-verbal children are easily discredited, and it has been suggested that an

opportunity for the child to demonstrate communicative competence should be an essential stage in child protection investigations (Marchant and Page, 1997).

Legal example

One young child, interviewed following concerns about sexual abuse, had been asked a sequence of leading Yes/No questions and had answered 'Yes' 103 times and 'No' twice. His evidence was deemed inadmissible in court. His 'incompetence' resulted from the way in which he was questioned. He needed to be offered options in a more open and less leading way.

Offering appropriate choices

Sometimes children are given inappropriate choices that they are not yet ready to make. Learning to choose well means having meaningful experience of real choices and being supported to understand the options and the consequences of choosing one thing over another.

Adults can become so preoccupied with giving children options that they offer unnecessary, unrealistic or complex choices. Children are sometimes presented with an apparent opportunity to make decisions when their choices are in fact limited or non-existent. Apparently open questions, such as 'what shall we do today?', can create confusion unless the child has understood that the options are painting, bricks or dressing up, rather than going to the park or going home.

A two year-old, offered seven flavours of ice-cream in a restaurant, answered 'yes', meaning yes she would like all seven.

False choices are often used by adults to gain compliance from children. The following examples from medical practice are particularly clear.

- Shall we just take your jumper off?
- Do you want to pop up here?
- Would you like this injection?

Having one's views apparently sought but without having any real control can be a very damaging experience.

Most young children need to start with simple choices, like 'here's a drink, are you thirsty?', and then begin to make choices between familiar options, 'would you like juice or milk?', before being asked open questions, 'what would you like to drink?'. Some children will need to see, taste or feel both options before they can make a meaningful choice.

Making choices real

One project working with children who present severely challenging behaviour has found that limiting the choices presented to young children can help enormously in settling their behaviour and clarifying adult responsibilities. Part of the guidance for workers is:

- when setting limits with children, do not give a reason unless the child asks for one
- then give the simplest clearest reason possible, for example 'because it's wet', 'because it's not safe'.

This conflicts directly with expectations in some settings that maximum information and choice should be offered to children in every situation. One nursery worker failed part of her NVO assessment because she told a three year-old that the sandpit was being covered over 'because it's time to cover it over' instead of giving a 'full explanation'.

Life does not present consistent opportunities to participate in decisions or take action, and the type and range of choices that children can make varies from context to context, from day to day and even person to person. This is not necessarily a problem, but it may create difficulty if children cannot make sense of the changes or if they are particularly major.

There are times when young children suddenly lose choices and control that have previously been theirs, for example, on transfer from pre-school settings, where children have a high level of self-determination of their own play and learning, into school, where the curriculum is far more structured by adults. This can be experienced as a massive loss of control.

Older children and adults who are repeatedly consulted can suffer from 'consultation fatigue'. It is likely that younger children will experience this reaction if consulted unnecessarily or ineptly, or without obvious meaning and outcomes.

Determining an 'appropriate' level of involvement of children will continue to present challenges to all of us. The views of young children themselves must be heard in these debates.

The reliability of young children's views

Young children's views may be seen as unreliable because they lack experience and knowledge, because their views may change and also because they are particularly open to influence by others. As Morrow (2000, p. 206) notes, anyone involved in research with children is likely to be asked if they can 'really believe' children's accounts.

Inevitably, young children's views will be determined in part by their level of experience and knowledge, and they may be unable to see the limits of this knowledge. Yet young children still know most about how they feel and experience their own lives, and they also offer unique insights into the world (Hadfield and Haw, 2001), which adults cannot hope to understand without listening to them.

Young children's views may be unstable over time, place or person and this is seen as evidence of their unreliability. Older children and adults also often change their views, especially on matters of emotional significance, but this is rarely perceived as making their views inherently unreliable. It may be necessary to consider when and why children's views change, if they do. This is difficult to achieve in one-off consultations. Those wanting to fully understand children's feelings and views need to consult them over time (and/or involve those who know children well to help them interpret their views). This is another reason for giving priority to developing participatory practice within everyday settings for children.

There is evidence that children in interview situations are very affected by the perceived power and status of adults, and by presumptions about what answers are expected (Hill *et al.*, 1996, p. 133) and may say things to placate adults, which may not be their own views (O'Quigley, 2000). While adults have the power and frequently the skill to divert or reflect unwanted questions, young children may find it hard to say 'mind your own business'.

Legal examples

Children are often perceived as unreliable witnesses in our judicial system. Legal professionals have been found to reject children's views on the assumption that the child has been pressured to express these views by a parent (Sawyer, 1999,

(Continued)

cited in O'Quigley, 2000). Some Court Welfare Officers view children 'as potential manipulators and victims of manipulation at the hands of parents' (Murch *et al.*, 1998, cited in O'Quigley, 2000, p. 7).

Some children are particularly 'discreditable' in court, for example children who communicate without speech and children who have difficulty understanding.

Children may give sworn evidence in court if they understand the nature of the oath, but the definition of 'sufficient understanding' is difficult. The dividing line is regarded as being somewhere between eight and ten years (*R. v. Hayes* 1977 1 WLR 234, quoted in Monro, 2000, p. 221), although different judgements have made clear that the test is not one of age but of understanding.

Learning to have a say

Many young children have daily experiences likely to inhibit or prevent the development of their competence to say what they feel, for example being 'seen and not heard'; being talked about as if one is not there; having one's views ignored.

[We don't like] being all squashed together on the carpet ... in the book corner ... but we've got to learn to listen.
(Young child, cited in Cousins, 1999, p. 20)

Adults frequently ask questions that set out to test whether children are listening, paying attention or can provide a 'right answer' (Wiles, 1998, cited in Cousins, 1999). Through their interaction with adults, children learn very early on that there is a right and a wrong answer, and that usually adults are seen to know the answer.

Why do you keep asking us questions when you know all the answers? Like 'what colour is it then?' You can see for yourself it's red, so why do you keep asking?
(Four year-old, cited in Cousins, 1999, p. 16)

More exposure to genuine opportunities to formulate and express their views would enable children to explore alternative solutions and develop the confidence and belief that adults want to hear what they really feel. In the absence of these opportunities, it needs to be acknowledged that children may lack the confidence and capacity to express what they think.

Where children are being consulted, it is important that they are assured that there is no right or wrong answer and that they can change their minds (Bannister, 2001), but this alone may be insufficient. Adults need to take the time to develop relationships with children in which their views are clearly respected and listened to. They may also need to make clear that they, as adults, do not know the answer.

Some children do not want to say what they feel (or take action), partly because they do not like the available mechanisms for taking part (such as group work), they do not think it will make a difference, or they have not had enough experience of making choices (Miller, 1996).

Children may also lack the confidence and self-esteem necessary to feel able to take part, which has been found to be related to class and culture (Hart, 1997). Integral to consultation is the support that will enable children to develop the capacity to get involved. Citizenship education in primary schools may go some way to helping children to learn to express their views, although this is not a statutory curriculum requirement and it still allots only a specified time in which children can engage with expressing their views and making decisions. It falls short of

enabling children to have more input in planning their own learning and influencing other decisions in schools. The curriculum guidance for the foundation stage makes brief mention of the need to involve children, although this is framed in terms of developing children's competence:

If the practitioner shares decisions with the children on the organisation of the environment, provision of resources and the content and direction of their activities, they will learn to be independent and curious and to take the initiative.

(QCA, 2000, p. 29)

Adults' competence

Commentators too often focus on children's competence to participate rather than on adults' competence to support children to make decisions and take action. This section examines the challenge facing adults in learning to adopt appropriate support roles, plus the communication and interpretive skills required to involve young children.

Facilitation roles

The challenge for adults is finding the balance between ensuring enough support is offered, without being overly protective and controlling. This is a dilemma for all those facilitating consultation work with all children and adults, but more so for those working with young children, as they may be less able or willing to say how much help they do or do not want, and the level of support required will vary greatly across child and context. Adults have to remain flexible enough to vary the support they offer at different times.

Adults need to occupy a number of different support roles. They may observe or give support, such as asking guiding questions or offering advice and suggestions. At times, adults will have to be more directive, telling children what to do, to get tasks done, to ensure their well-being and safety, and to enforce socially acceptable behaviour. Adults may have to adopt different roles even within one task or with different children undertaking the same task. It will frequently be appropriate simply to leave children alone to get on with their own tasks, being on hand if needed.

'I did it by myself!' was a frequent boast, accompanied by beaming smiles which reflected the children's greatest pleasure.

(Cousins, 1999, p. 47)

Young children value adult support. As was seen in an earlier section, children do not always want ultimate responsibility to make important choices in their lives, although they do want to be involved and have their views taken into account.

[It's good when adults] help you, but only help you if you need help.

(Nine year-old, cited in Kirby *et al.*, 2002)

In order to engage with young children, adults have to be prepared to work in new ways (Ivan-Smith and Johnson, 1998). Adults who are already committed to participatory practice sometimes find it hard to establish appropriate boundaries for children, while others may find it difficult to let go their control and remain overly directive. Finding the balance between allowing children's participation while offering the appropriate level of

support and protection requires some to radically alter their practice. Even those who intuitively achieve this balance need to continue to reflect on their practice.

Communication skills

Some adults are committed or required to consult young children, but have anxieties about how to do so. Adults fear that they require special expertise to talk to children, particularly young, disabled or non-verbal children, and there is a lack of shared information and forums for exploring good practice. Part of the problem is also that children are segregated from adults within society, and many children and adults do not get the opportunities to engage with those of different ages and to develop the skills to do so. Even schools are strictly age segregated, with little interaction between different school years.

Alderson (2000) stressed how unhelpful it is to suggest that talking to young children is difficult or complicated, or needs special courses, as it 'requires the same skills as talking to anyone else of any age' (p. 74). We are not sure this is true. Adapting one's own communication to make sense to young children often presents as great a challenge as making sense of children's communication, although the latter often gets more attention. Many professionals, for example, struggle when asked to explain their role as they would to a three year-old.

'I'm a social worker in the Permanent Placement Team and we need to do some preparation for your LAC [*Looked After Children*] review meeting' (social worker speaking to a young child).

Adults are sometimes frightened of interacting with young children, fearing, for example, what to do if a baby cries or how to respond to young children's often very frank communication.

A five year-old asked her grandmother, politely and with interest: 'Isn't it time you died, you're old enough?'

Legal example

O'Quigley's (2000) review of research on children and young people's experiences of talking to professionals in private law proceedings illustrates the harm that can be done when those who consult are not appropriately placed to do so. The children and young people said:

- they were generally reluctant to talk to 'outsiders' about family issues, as this is seen as disloyal and liable to lead to an escalation of problems
- professionals were seen as interventionist rather than supportive
- discussions with professionals felt like interrogations
- adults were felt to be judgemental and intrusive in their approach
- discussions were not confidential (p. 24).

Almost everyone can develop the ability to communicate with children, and the skills to do so should not be over-professionalised. However, there is a need to consider the core competencies involved. With those who cannot develop these skills, it may be necessary to 'shoo them sideways and away from children' (Ross, 1996, p. 102).

There are some key underlying principles that are important to follow when communicating with children; some people seem

naturally capable of understanding and implementing these, while others need additional support to develop and practise the skills. Much of it is down to common sense and relies on people's natural abilities to communicate. The key areas that adults need to ensure when communicating with young children are as follows.

- Demonstrate respect, interest and care.
- Attempt to see the world from the children's perspective.
- Use clear and appropriate language.
- Listen and observe the different ways in which children communicate their feelings and preferences, both verbal and non-verbal, including their unprompted communication.

Fundamentally, adults have to engage in mutually respectful relationships with children, in which their voices are recognised as different but equal. Respect 'needs to become a methodological technique in itself' (Morrow and Richards, 1996, p. 100). Letting children know they are respected requires adults, for example, to signal that they are listening, attentive and interested in the child's world and their perspective on it. Language and action that constrains children's voice and demonstrates disrespect for them is deeply entrenched within society, and even those most committed to listening to children can fall into established patterns of speaking and behaving. It will take great effort to change.

The most powerful weapon in empowering the child is adult modesty.

(Delfos, 2001)

A commitment to seeing the world from the child's perspective and to letting go of adult assumptions is also important. This means being humble and accepting adults are not the experts, and making it clear that you will not know what the child is thinking or feeling unless they tell you. Other specific suggestions include not using jargon, checking back, using uncomplicated sentences, speaking at the child's pace and stressing key words.

Simply asking questions of young children will not necessarily yield a full understanding of what they think. It is important to be creative about developing opportunities for children to communicate what they think and feel.

Some children are much more vulnerable to the incompetence or ineptitude of adults, for example children who communicate without speech. Those working with children with specific needs may require more developed skills, such as different communication systems (e.g. sign language, use of symbols), or experience of working with communicators or interpreters (Marchant and Gordon, 2001).

Children communicate, for example, through their behaviour, art, gestures and sounds, and also by their inaction, what they choose not to do or say (for discussion, see Marchant *et al.*, 1999). They communicate their emotions, as much as they articulate their opinions and views. Listening to all modes of communication is particularly necessary with babies, younger children and others with little or no speech.

Adults need to pay close attention to babies and young children's unprompted communication. Their 'chatter' is frequently undervalued in educational and other contexts, and is not recognised as useful for providing insights into their 'puzzling minds' (Cousins, 1999, p. 53). Children are rarely encouraged to talk or ask questions in classrooms (Mercer, 1995).

Observing young children is as important as listening to what they say; both are needed as 'without observation, much of what

children say would not make sense' (Cousins, 1999, p. 28). In some instances – particularly with babies, the youngest children and those with severe communication impairments – observation will be a primary source of information. This demands specific skills, including the need to carefully distinguish between observed events and interpretation of these events. The role of observer also needs to be carefully considered and negotiated to ensure children do not become subjected to additional, intrusive surveillance.

Some children, particularly those with insecure attachments to current carers, may become overattached to the worker who listens carefully and treats them with respect, which requires careful handling by the worker (Bannister, 2001, p. 137). Where possible, it is important to tell children the role of the worker, their limitations and the scope of the consultation (particularly if this is a one-off exercise). Where it is not possible to communicate this to a child, we need to try to find ways to let children know the most important things. It is possible in one's body language and tone of voice to communicate to even the youngest child that you have time and that you are interested in them.

Understanding children's communication

Assigning intent to potentially communicative acts is an important adult role with babies and young children. Children's feelings and preferences are communicated in infinite ways; their different 'voices' need to be recognised as valid.

The need for adult interpretation can be difficult at times and raises concerns about its reliability. This is more so with younger children and those who rely less on speech. Where possible, interpretations should be checked with children themselves. This requires staff to make time for reflecting on their perceptions and for 'constantly engaging the children at each stage to check meanings have not been assumed' (Clark and Moss, 2001, pp. 64–5).

Overchecking with children, if done inappropriately, can sound interrogational and signal to children that they need to give the 'right' answer. There is some evidence that the error rate in children's accounts will increase if they are asked to repeat their story, but only if this is done badly (see Hewitt, 1999).

There are strategies that are respectful as well as safe and effective, for example non-directive commentaries on children's play; gently reflecting back in a confirmatory tone what you think children may be telling you. These can be combined with an attitude of 'calm bafflement' when it seems necessary to be additionally cautious, for example, if you think a child is beginning to communicate about abusive experiences (Marchant and Jones, 2003).

Information gained from children needs to be analysed and presented in ways that make sense to the target audience, which may be adults and/or young children. Interestingly, reports produced for children are often the most popular with all ages.

Basic research analysis skills are required to accurately represent the views of children (particularly if the sample sizes are large), which many undertaking consultations are not experienced at or trained in. Some consultation reports have inadequately represented young children's views.

In a consultation with young children about their local area, the worker did not know how to write up the views and artwork of 50 three and four year-olds. He planned to include only the views of the more verbally articulate primary-school children in the final consultation report. With the older children, only their written views were included in the report, rather than any analysis of their drawings.

Children's different methods of communication can prove a barrier when presenting their views to policy makers and service providers, who do not understand how to translate the visual or non-verbal representation into action planning; more work is needed to support them to do so. Some consultation reports do little to demonstrate how their views could seriously be used to influence the planning of services or policies. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation and The Children's Society's CD-ROM *Ask Us* (a Quality Protects initiative) provides a good example of presenting older children's experiences.

The current professional climate demands cost-effectiveness and measurable outputs, often in the form of statistics. Involving children can be perceived as taking a great deal of time, money and effort for little 'output'. With younger children, the outputs are fewer, and sometimes harder for adults to interpret, which can leave them questioning 'will it tell us anything we don't know already?'. These outputs, however, are perceived in adult terms, and do not value children's own perspective and the importance of children's rights, as humans and citizens, to participate regardless of how 'plentiful' their outputs, or how easy they are for adults to incorporate into current knowledge.

Children may make decisions that turn out to be 'wrong' or not work, and money can be wasted in this way. But this is also the case with adults and not a reason for not undertaking consultation (Miller, 1996). The nature of the topic will dictate the level of seriousness of the decision and will help decide to what extent adults should make the final decision. Children's views will be more 'useful' to adults if the children are consulted in meaningful ways and given opportunities to understand the context in which they are being asked to form and express their views. Perhaps we do not know enough about how to use the information that is collected from children, or how to adequately present it?

Much of the time involved in consulting young children includes playing and doing creative activities, which can be seen as 'unproductive'. During a consultation on respite care, for example, one researcher spent around an hour playing on a seesaw when making a consultation visit to a young child. These 'asides', however, are important information that can cast insight into children's lived experiences. Building knowledge of young children's perspectives on the world will mean being alongside children in accepting and receptive ways, not trying to control their focus or their behaviour, and abandoning many of our usual definitions of what constitutes 'useable outcomes'. But, still, this information has to be made useful for those who need to make decisions, not just cute quotes and drawings by children.

Questions for future discussion

- How can we better interpret young children's communication?
- How can young children's perspectives be effectively conveyed to policy makers?

Creating participatory spaces

This section examines some of the process and organisational issues involved in creating spaces where children can be consulted and take action. It is divided into the following sub-sections.

- Commitment and resources
- Using child-friendly processes
- Children's agendas

- Consent
- Providing young children with appropriate information
- Providing feedback
- Acting on young children's views

Commitment and resources

For children to be meaningfully involved in their communities, adults need to be committed to children's participation and to believe 'within their hearts' of its value (Fielding, 2001, p. 10). Shier's (2001) model of children's participation stresses three stages of adult commitment: whether they are ready to share power with children (openings), having procedures to enable them to do so (opportunities) and having a policy requirement to do so (obligations).

Developing a culture of participation takes time and requires agencies to demonstrate and promote the principles and practice of involving children. Institutionalising participation, so that children are routinely consulted and able to make choices and take action themselves, is one of the biggest challenges for organisations (see Blackburn with Holland, 1998). In the meantime, encouraging adults to give it a try may help persuade them of the value of listening to children. Adults have to be prepared to take risks. Participatory work does not always develop as expected and there needs to be some flexibility to allow for the unforeseen and for children to influence the direction of the work. Organisations need to develop learning processes, allowing participants time to train and reflect on their experiences. Developing inherently participatory environments within settings already working with children does not necessarily require

additional resources. But participatory research, one-off consultations and facilitating children's forums take time. Some organisations or sectors may require dedicated champions of participation – at least in the short term – to offer support and help promote a culture of participation. Funders have to be aware of the additional costs and willing to meet them. They also need to allow for some levels of unpredictability and a set-up period in which children can help decide the agenda for, and design of, projects.

Using child-friendly processes

Many attempts to increase children's consultation rely on formal methods that mirror adult bureaucratic structures (e.g. school councils, youth forums) or reliance on written communication. Some attempts have been made to introduce these methods for younger children, which may be appropriate in some situations, but should not be relied on as the main mode of involvement for children and are inappropriate for very young children.

Existing consultation methods are frequently unchild-friendly, and particularly unsuitable for young children. Both informal and more formal processes, particularly in law and local authority care, use venues, times, procedures and jargon that prevent children from participating even if they are present. Meetings, hearings and processes may be too long or too inaccessible to allow for young children's participation. The underlying ethos is concerned with the needs of the adults, and particularly professionals.

Young children's concentration span extends according to the level of curiosity that activities inspire.

(Cousins, 1999)

Involving young children means making processes engaging, stimulating and fun: all of which might be considered unadult-friendly to those who are used to formal interaction based solely on written or spoken mediums. Visual methods can be engaging for young children, but sometimes there is an assumption that young children require puppets and pictures, etc., to express themselves when they can capably do so verbally. There needs to be some flexibility in methods, with children having real choice. There are welcome new developments in tools for involving children in assessment processes (Connolly and Shemmings, 1998).

Children's agendas

There is often an underlying assumption that adults know best and it is unnecessary or even threatening to try to understand the child's own situation. Decisions about when and how much to involve children are dictated by professionals' own guiding ideology.

Legal example

The judicial ideology that children should maintain contact with both parents is so dominant that this is the basis of legal decisions and renders children's views irrelevant, thus 'in effect the child had no voice' (O'Quigley, 2000, p. 4).

Even where children are consulted they are generally asked about issues that adults are concerned with. This ranges from parents making assumptions about a child's behaviour based on their own experiences, to researchers setting topics to be investigated, to professionals dictating what issues can (and cannot) be discussed.

Education example

In schools, children are consulted only on certain issues – decided by adults – such as school rules, uniform and codes of conduct (Hadfield and Haw, 2001).

Professionals working under conditions of increasing concern with quality assurance and organisational accountability can feel the pressure to ensure they protect their own backs rather than promote the needs of children (Thomas and O’Kane, 1998, p. 26). The need to produce quick results can mean that children’s views are not adequately obtained, or adults listen to the most articulate children and those who speak ‘sense’ (Fielding, 2001). Positions of power can be used to cover up mistakes, to silence or override children’s views, to ensure their position is protected. Or adults can use leading questions, thereby manipulating rather than facilitating participation. This is so much easier to do, even inadvertently, with younger children who lack the knowledge or ability to challenge adults.

It is important for adults to make space for children to raise their own issues and questions. Some consultation work sets out to do this. For example, circle time has been used in some places to enable children to raise their own agendas. When enabling children to do this, it is important to ensure they are aware of how their views will (and will not) have an influence, to help ensure they do not develop false expectations.

Consultation example

Over time, one organisation involved in consulting disabled children has shifted to a far broader, child-led agenda. Early work involved asking children what they thought of a particular service. Asking more generally ‘how are things for you?’ produces much richer insight into children’s experiences and enables them to raise issues that adults might not otherwise have identified.

Research example

A few research studies have enabled children to identify some of the themes to be explored (e.g. Hill *et al.*, 1996; Mahon *et al.*, 1996; Smith and Barker, 1999) and which methods to use in the consultation (e.g. Smith and Barker, 1999). Rarely are children allowed to define the whole agenda of what is researched.

Where adults have an agenda, but also want to enable children to raise their own issues, it can be difficult to strike a balance between the two, so that the children do not digress too much from the adult themes (Hill *et al.*, 1996). The aside comments or digressions that children introduce into conversations (i.e. their own agendas), however, are important items of information that cast insight into their lived experiences. The difficulty is maintaining the flexibility to allow for these seemingly 'unconstructive' episodes to become a central focus of discussions with young children.

Consent

Children have a right not to participate and a right to silence, to ensure their privacy. They have a private life and we should not assume it is our right to be nosy. An apparent reticence to take part may reflect different cultural expectations about how and when children participate, including different roles according to age and gender (Hart, 1997). Sometimes children would rather be doing other things, and may have good reason for not wanting to get involved.

In a consultation one three year-old said, as he drew the child conferencing session to an early close: 'I've done enough talking now' (Clark and Moss, 2001, p. 61).

Attending school is mandatory and school-based consultation work sometimes does not allow children to opt out. Pupils provide a captured population for those undertaking research and consultations. Having gained the schools' agreement, adults may be less concerned about ensuring that children give their informed consent (Morrow and Richards, 1996). Adults are relatively free to abuse their power by ignoring children's signs of withdrawing consent.

A respected researcher working in primary schools said she distracted children when it seemed that they no longer wanted to continue, and then coaxed them into going on, as she did not want to affect her sample size (personal correspondence).

Much attention has been given to the ethics of informed consent (particularly in the literature on research with children). With babies and very young children, it is rarely possible to ensure that they understand the full context of why they are being consulted and how the results will be used, but they can still be competent to give and withdraw their consent by signalling whether they are willing to participate in the ongoing interaction. This means assessing whether a child wants to participate in the interaction and being aware of any change in their behaviour that may indicate withdrawal of consent. Children appreciate being able to talk in privacy and in confidence.

Social services example

Research with children in social work settings found they were unhappy that social workers often did not respect their privacy and did not keep their information confidential (Hill, 1997).

Education example

In a school survey, children were asked what they thought of the self-completion questionnaire, and the most common response was that it was 'private and the teachers would not see our answers' (Alderson, 2000).

Legal example

Children may feel disempowered when information shared with legal advocates is not treated confidentially (Smart *et al.*, 2000, cited in O'Quigley, 2000).

One-off consultation example

Some learning-disabled young people (aged nine to 16) made comments that highlighted that they were more conscious than had been expected of the possible consequences of talking to the adults. For example:

Donna asked me: 'what's going to happen?'

'What do you mean?'

'What's going to happen to these things?', pointing at the dictaphone.

'It's to help me remember what you told me. No one else will listen to it.'

'Is it for my portfolio?'

'No, it's not for your portfolio.'

'Do you know my social worker?'

'No, I don't know your social worker' (Marchant *et al.*, 1999).

Providing young children with appropriate information

Children are repeatedly denied access to information relevant to their own lives, in families, schools, research, legal cases and local authority care. This is driven in part by a concern with protecting children's interests. But it also serves adult interests.

For children to be fully involved, they need access to relevant information. With younger children, the ways in which this information is presented is particularly important. It must include clear spoken information and gesture, but also the opportunity to see things demonstrated and to handle information themselves (such as tape recorders) (Miller, 1996). Engaging methods and visual information are important. Written information must be kept to a minimum and illustrated to make it appealing and to help understanding. It can take time for children to fully understand and will possibly involve repeated visits or explanations. Miller (1996) and Marshall (1997) detail further the principles for facilitating access to appropriate information.

Striking the balance between providing sufficient information and not overburdening the child can be difficult to achieve. Even if there is some doubt about how much a child understands, it is still important to offer simple explanations, in case those assumptions are false. Parents and professionals working with a child can be useful starting points for assessing how much a child understands, but it is easy to over or underestimate a child's ability. Many adults have been surprised by how much a child understands and can contribute in a consultation process.

Children (who want to and are able) should have access to observation notes, unless there is good reason to withhold these. Knowing that a child (and/or their family or others who know them well) will have access to documentation of their experiences can provide a useful check on what is recorded. Open-access policies

to notes often mean open access to parents rather than children. Some projects are involving children in recording information about their needs, their achievements and their goals. This can lead to far 'friendlier' and meaningful recording systems that are more accessible for everyone (Marchant and Jones, 2003).

Providing feedback

Children appreciate feedback both during and after being consulted. Morrow (2000, p. 210) describes twice receiving a round of applause when she fed back the summary of her research to classes of children involved.

Children's views can be given back to them in ways that make sense and are recognisable. Children often enjoy listening to their taped discussions and several children, when sent colour reports summarising their views, using their own artwork, have taken them to school to show adults: 'this is our report – we done it!' (Marchant *et al.*, 1999).

There is often a long delay before children are provided with feedback following consultation. For young children, this is particularly problematic, as they may forget the context of the consultation.

Acting on young children's views

I think adults will never listen to kids.
(Boy, aged 9, cited in Kirby, 2002b)

While legislation increasingly requires professionals to listen to children, it does not demand that they act on their views. There has been a recent boom in consulting children in the public arena, although less so younger children, but little evidence of adults responding and taking action (Kirby, 2002a).

An out-of-school worker involved in a children's participation project: 'It's good to do this so the children *have the feeling* that we are listening to them' (Ball, 1998, quoted in Shier, 2001, p. 113, italics added).

It is not enough to justify the process as simply beneficial for the young participants without considering adult responsibilities to make meaning of the collected information and use it to improve children's lives.

Young children need ears willing to hear, followed by hands and minds willing to act.

(Hewitt, 1999, p. 277)

Adults do not have to agree with children's views. Nor do they have to act on them. But, at a minimum, they should listen, seriously consider the expressed views and feed back what action they do (or do not) plan to take. If children are not listened to from an early age, they may quickly learn that taking part makes no difference.

Some professionals are concerned about involving young children when their expectations may be unduly raised about hoped-for outcomes. Given the little weight that children's views are often given by adults in making decisions, this is an understandable concern. The solution is not to exclude children, but to change the ways decisions about children get made: ensure adults give more weight to their views and make children aware of how decisions are made and that these may go against their wishes.

If children are given the opportunity to make decisions, then it must be clear to what extent adults will or will not veto their decisions if considered inappropriate.

A group of children chose to call their group the 'Children's Discovery Ring'. Adults decided to override this decision because they felt the name was suggestive of paedophiles. With hindsight, they realised that they should have been clear about exactly how much say the children really have (Tutchell, 2000).

Questions for future discussion

- How can organisations be encouraged and supported to develop participatory cultures?
- How will participatory cultures look in different settings (e.g. nurseries, hospitals, GPs, play groups)?
- How can policy makers and co-ordinators of national initiatives (e.g. Sure Start) ensure that young children's participation is meaningful, not tokenism and manipulation? What mechanisms and structures can be put in place to ensure good practice?
- What are the cost benefits of undertaking one-off and irregular consultation compared with supporting organisations to develop ongoing participatory practices in which children are routinely consulted and enabled to make choices and take action?
- How do one-off, irregular consultations impact on services, children and organisations?
- How do we ensure that adults act on children's views?
- How do we ensure that children's expectations are not unrealistically raised?
- How can we ensure adults do not infringe children's privacy by consulting them unnecessarily?

Conclusion

In this paper, we have argued that young children's meaningful and active participation in society means more than taking part in occasional consultation exercises. It means ongoing consultation; having an 'everyday say' through routine opportunities to express views and feelings, make choices, take action, as well as having improved access to information and physical space.

We have argued for a shift in thinking and resources away from independent one-off consultation projects towards the development of ongoing participatory practice in all settings for young children. We believe that this will create more profound and lasting societal change.

Ensuring young children's active participation in making decisions and taking action within society requires more than just a change of practice by individual professionals. The structures that prevent children's participation, and the beliefs that constrain relationships between individual adults and young children, need to be examined and changed. This includes adult perceptions of young children and the ways we interact with them. Both adults and young children have a lot to learn about how to get on better together. Younger children's involvement in making choices and taking action is central to creating a healthier, democratic society.

Children's participation is also integral to ensuring their protection and well-being. However, the level of involvement and methods used must be appropriate to the individual child and context. To involve children in ill-considered or tokenistic ways may have adverse effects.

Creating participatory spaces in which children can have a say requires a genuine commitment to involving young children and ensuring the resources are available to do so. We have proposed some minimum standards, including using child-friendly methods, informing children in ways they understand, gaining their consent,

providing appropriate feedback and protecting them from harm. Far more needs to be done to allow children to raise their own agendas and to assess how their involvement impacts on their lives and on the settings where they spend time.

Supporting young children's consultation (either ongoing and one-off) should not be overprofessionalised, although at times we all need support to develop our practice of being with young children in facilitative and participatory ways. This includes learning how to demonstrate respect and listening to the diverse ways young children communicate their feelings and preferences.

We suggest that young children's views about taking part could routinely be sought in all consultations on any topic, to build our understanding of children's perceptions of consultation processes. An open debate about the realities of involving young children is needed and a priority must be to include young children's views in these discussions.

There is an unprecedented level of interest and activity around consultation with children. This is a crucial moment to reflect on the direction of this development. We have argued that children's consultation should be normal and routine in all areas of their lives, and that the creation of this everyday participation should be a priority.

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5 CONCLUSION: IDEAS INTO PRACTICE

Bren Neale

Turning the principle of children's participation into practice is a complex task that involves changing the cultures of adulthood alongside those of childhood. Bearing this in mind, the developments outlined above are impressive. They are more than a response to statutory directives (although this may be the initial impetus), for they reflect a real enthusiasm on the part of adults to bring about change. The authors of the above reports, however, warn against complacency. In particular, they express concerns about the quality of one-off consultation exercises, their overall effectiveness and the lack of a policy and resources infrastructure for developing participation as an ongoing process in everyday settings. Willow notes, 'It is striking how little change there is to show for all the time and effort invested'. It is worth reflecting on why this is the case and what else is needed if future strategies are to be effective. Drawing on the findings of the above papers, and on the key points raised at the Joseph Rowntree Foundation seminar, we present an overview of current practice and suggest some pointers for future developments.

A spectrum of approaches

It is apparent from the work of Willow and Marchant and Kirby that listening and responding to children is not a uniform activity.

Indeed, a whole array of different activities and methods are discernible. A useful way forward here might be to think in terms of a spectrum of approaches. At one end of the spectrum, there are simple *one-off consultations* of the sort mapped by Willow, which are fast becoming a routine feature of public sector work with children. As clients or service users, children are asked to provide information that can help monitor or feed into the development of public services or facilities. Examples are the development of a skate park, improvements to a nursery environment, or satisfaction with health care or educational provision. Such consultations are often carried out by independent consultants rather than by internal staff. Children's collective views may also be sought in a wider context – that of reviewing policies that impact on the lives of children in general (provision for childcare and issues around work–life balance, for example). In essence, these are short-term *information-gathering exercises*, designed to address particular issues that affect more than one child and using a variety of methods to tap into children's *collective voices*.

At the other end of the spectrum are *ongoing consultations* between one or more children and the adults with whom they routinely share their lives (parents, teachers, nursery and youth workers, and so on). These enable children to participate in decision-making processes as an integral part of their daily lives. Such modes of participation, as Marchant and Kirby show, depend on sustained, conversational modes of listening that can be integrated into everyday practices, and are sensitive enough to enable the voice of each child in a group to be heard and their differentiated circumstances understood. Changing the cultures of everyday interactions between adults and children in this way requires long-term commitments on the part of adults and children and a change in the mindset of adults towards children, along

with the mindset of children towards adults. Participation at this end of the spectrum is localised, less visible and its impact perhaps less well understood. But its significance is global in scale, for it has the potential to touch the lives of *all* children and *all* adults who routinely interact with them.

Participation, then, is inherently varied. It can entail a highly formalised, carefully planned and budgeted, one-off group consultation over the development of a public service, or a highly informal, iterative communication between a young child and an adult over short-term, day-to-day choices or plans, or something in between these two extremes. It can apply to children individually or collectively, be tailored to different issues and needs, involve different children or groups of children, involve different adults (parents, early years specialists and other practitioners, service managers, external consultants, policy makers) and encompass different time cycles. Whatever approach is adopted needs to be context-specific, tailored to the needs and circumstances of particular children and the nature of the issue at hand.

Inclusive strategies for development?

Having identified this spectrum of approaches, a key question arises. How should we view such diversity? Is it a useful and creative way forward, a means of promoting children's citizenship in as many ways and as many contexts as possible? Or are resources being spread too thin? Does such proliferation merely reflect the lack of a coherent strategy for future developments and of commitment to bringing about meaningful change? A further key question then arises. What are the relative merits of initiatives at different ends of the spectrum? Are both equally worthy enterprises and, given limited resources, where should future investment be targeted?

The authors of the above papers give different answers to these questions, reflecting the tensions that exist between different ways of defining and tackling the issues. Marchant and Kirby express grave concerns about 'the energy, time and resources being directed to one-off, short-term consultation events (projects, reviews, research) often unlinked to children's daily lives'. While they acknowledge that such practices may have value, they warn of the dangers of clumsy and child-unfriendly practices that can be unhelpful or even exploitative and hence do more harm than good. If the key issue is one of establishing priorities, then they argue for 'a shift in thinking and resources away from independent one-off consultation projects towards the development of ongoing participatory practices in all settings for young children'. Willow, on the other hand, takes a broader, more inclusive approach. She, too, identifies limitations in the way one-off consultations are currently being conducted, in terms of both their intrinsic quality and the relatively unthinking fashion in which organisational structures are being put in place. But the solution, in her view, is to improve and refine practices across the board rather than to prioritise one set of developments over the other.

On balance, it would seem that practices at different ends of the spectrum serve different but equally important purposes. Collective consultations are high-profile activities that are helping to establish the public face of children's citizenship. They make it impossible to simply ignore children and thus are an important means of challenging adult thinking and encouraging an inclusive ethos. But this is not their only value. The notion that children should have a collective voice in civic society and in broad policy processes is laudable and worth pursuing in its own right. That this might be possible for younger children is a particular challenge, given the current state of developments, but this suggests that *more* effort and creativity is needed rather than

less. In particular, there is a need to improve the quality of such initiatives by ensuring they are based on respect for children, appropriate levels and modes of participation, and effective means of communication.

Ongoing consultations, whether in institutional or domestic settings, are less visible, and less well developed in policy terms, but their potential for making a global impact on the lives of children is beyond doubt. They are fundamental to the task of building a broader based, more integrated culture of participation for children and, as such, will play a key role in transforming the nature of child–adult relationships and redefining children's place in the social world. To date, however, we know relatively little about the nature or extent of such participation, particularly in the privacy of home settings, although it seems likely that practices are scattered and highly variable. Initiatives at this end of the spectrum therefore deserve a much higher profile than they have hitherto received, and a concerted effort is needed to develop a policy and resource infrastructure that will support their development.

Ideas into practice

In devising strategies for future development, we set out below a number of issues that deserve special attention.

Defining consultation: listening and responding

Currently, there seems to be a lack of consensus on what consultation actually is and what sort of commitment it entails. If consultation is defined as a means of 'inviting people to share their experiences, ideas and knowledge', this does not imply anything more than asking questions and listening to the answers.

There is no onus on the listeners to do anything tangible with the information once it has been acquired (beyond, perhaps, a basic attempt to document it and record how it was obtained). Yet listening is only part of the process. If consultation is to be effective it should be followed through with an active response, one that produces some kind of change (in ways of doing things or in ways of thinking or feeling).

Willow's mapping exercise revealed a disappointing lack of tangible outcomes from consultation exercises. Where children's views are distilled into a few bullet points and buried in a strategy document that is then filed away, this hardly constitutes an effective response. It reflects a failure to take children's views seriously, let alone act on them. Reaching a consensus over what the consultation process actually *is* would, therefore, be helpful. Whatever precise definition is used, it is about *listening and responding*, and entails a process of *inviting children to participate in discussion and decision making about matters that affect them for the benefit of all*.

Consultation as a process

Defining consultation in this way clearly establishes it as a *process* rather than as an event, one that involves adults and children working together through a number of stages: *identifying* an issue or theme to investigate; *planning* methods of investigation; *engaging* particular children and adults in the process; *exploring* issues through discussion or other methods of communication; *analysing* findings, feeding back, crystallising viewpoints, discussing possible courses of action or future plans; *facilitating* whatever plans are agreed; *monitoring and evaluating* the effectiveness of the process, assessing outcomes; and *refining* future strategies for participation.

Thinking about this process as a cycle of stages that can be

repeated or can reoccur over time (whether routinely or irregularly) is also useful. Ideally, the process should be an iterative one between children and adults, with conversation or other modes of shared understanding interspersed with action and changing practices in a continuous and cumulative process of development.

Who 'owns' the process? Developing partnership arrangements

If children deserve to be listened to, then the question arises: who should do the listening? In large organisations that are required to consult with children as clients and service users, external consultants may be called in to conduct a one-off consultation or alternatively the process may be seen as an integrated practice carried out by internal staff. Marchant and Kirby make a strong case for discussion and feedback to be built in as a routine part of the work of an organisation. The listening can be done by front-line staff (practitioners), those who have some knowledge of the child, who understand the particular context of a child's experiences, and are in a position to respond quickly and adjust or fine-tune things as an iterative process. This allows for planning and decision making to be tailored to the needs of individual children in a way that has immediate and direct benefits for them.

These core activities, however, may need to be supplemented by complementary strategies where the task is to change the overall culture of an organisation or the institutional structures that guide its work. The key reason for this is that front-line practitioners are relatively powerless in large organisations and may not be in a position to effectively influence or create change at an institutional level. Commitment from senior managers, in particular their willingness to listen to and learn directly from children and front-line staff, is therefore essential. One-off

consultations with collectives of children may have particular importance where large-scale organisational reviews, changes or developments are being considered by managers or policy makers. External consultants or researchers can play a valuable role here and bring particular analytical or communication skills to the task. However, there is scope for *partnership arrangements* between children, front-line staff, independent consultants and senior managers within organisations who have the power to change things. Such joint working has a number of advantages. It enables children and decision makers to be brought together so that children's views can have maximum impact. It also allows for a constructive and mutually beneficial sharing of skills and knowledge between adults with widely different remits. In this way, participation will develop beyond a specialist task that is simply 'tacked on' to an organisation, to become part and parcel of workplace practices at all levels of an organisation.

Consultation or participation?

These terms are both in current use and yet have different shades of meaning. In order to move developments on, it might be beneficial to downplay what *adults* do (consulting, listening, responding and so on) and place the emphasis, instead, on what *children* do (contributing, participating). *Consulting*, in this context at least, implies a rather narrow activity, one that gives adults ownership of an issue, its investigation and any outcomes. The broader concept of *participating*, on the other hand, allows for a wider range of activities and interactions, and the possibility that children can collaborate in the overall process. For example, this way of framing the activity raises questions about who can identify issues or themes to be investigated. Is there room for children's own agendas to be identified? What mechanisms are in place to enable children to raise issues themselves and to ensure that

any child or collective of children is in a position to do so? How far are children involved in the planning phase of the process, so that appropriate methods can be used? Do children want to be involved in consulting others (rather than simply being consulted themselves) and what part might they play in evaluating outcomes?

There is clearly potential for children to move beyond simply expressing their views about an issue, to taking an active part in making decisions and effecting changes. This requires that adults do more than simply listen but encourage children to exercise their agency and follow through an agreed course of action. Willow, for example, identifies initiatives designed to change the culture and everyday feel of children's environments and interactions with adults. These include involving children in the running of their nurseries and primary schools; helping to devise new staff selection procedures and contributing to staff training programmes in care settings; helping children to run their own projects and events; supporting them in learning about democracy and claiming their human rights; and providing training on how to get their voices heard.

Facilitating children to actively engage in these ways also opens up the potential for them to take ownership of consultative and decision-making processes and use them for themselves. To date, most peer-led initiatives are with young people of secondary-school age, but there are many contexts in the lives of younger children where they too can take the lead in raising an issue, thinking it through in a collaborative way and instituting changes. Participation, then, is not simply about changing the external world in response to children's views, but redefining the place of children within the world and thus making a real difference to all our lives.

Participation as an ethical process

We have stressed above that participation is a means to an end, not simply an end in itself. However, this stress on outcomes should not obscure the fact that the process itself is important, particularly in its ethical dimensions. Ethical considerations come into play at each stage of the process, from identifying issues to explore, deciding on an appropriate means of investigation, giving clear information and an informed choice about participating; communicating sensitively and effectively; ensuring confidentiality; providing feedback; using information provided by children sensitively and ensuring that individuals are not exploited. It is through attention to these dimensions of the process that respect for children can be built into adult–child interactions.

Do children want to participate?

The issue of informed choice for children is a particularly pressing ethical consideration. It is important to ensure that no group of children is excluded on the grounds, for example, of their disability, language or communication skills, or other defining feature. It is also important to ensure that particular groups (refugee or transnational children, for example, or those affected by ill health or other circumstances that require extra support) are identified and that there are mechanisms in place to enable any child, regardless of circumstances, to raise issues for themselves. In this way, due recognition will be afforded to all children.

But not all children will want to communicate or engage in decision making. There is an assumption that participation is an unmitigated good for children. However, some may value their privacy more than the opportunity to express their views or feelings, or they may prefer alternative strategies as a means of

dealing with particular problems or challenges in their lives. Alternatively, they may have strong preferences concerning who they want to communicate with, and under what conditions they might want to do so. Disclosing their innermost thoughts and feelings to professionals may be a last resort for them. *Inviting* children to participate and express themselves, therefore, is not the same thing as *requiring* them to do so. If they are given sufficient and appropriate information about the issue at hand and the process for investigating it, then they will be in a position to make informed choices about their participation. This needs to be borne in mind in school or nursery settings where, tellingly, children are often described as a 'captive' audience and have little choice about their involvement. Unless children participate through choice, then the process may come to feel more like 'intervention' or, even worse, as 'interrogation'.

If children choose to participate in group consultations, they may prefer an indirect or passive role, one that enables them to get a better grasp of an issue and how others understand it before they begin to formulate their own views on the matter. Drawing children out on particular issues, therefore, may not be the most appropriate course of action. It might be more ethical to let them choose for themselves how much or how little they wish to communicate. Considerations such as these are integral to the task of respecting children and thereby nurturing their citizenship.

Effective communication with young children

For reasons outlined above, these issues of informed choice and level of participation are perhaps particularly important to bear in mind with the youngest members of our society. Some creativity will be needed on the part of adults if they are to engage constructively with the varied communicative repertoires open

to young children. Although their verbal skills may not be finely developed, they may want to engage verbally with adults. On the other hand, discussion and dialogue may not always be suitable or may be more effective where they are combined with observation or with non-verbal modes of expression. Finding a balance between modes of communication suited to adults and children is not easy. Whatever methods are used, they should be based on clear and simple information from adults. In the context of one-off consultations, for example, adults need to communicate clearly about the purpose of the exercise. Bouncy castles or water fights might be appreciated by children as an incentive or reward for their time and input, but such fun activities may also be confusing and detract from the issue at hand. Indeed, children may well find it demeaning if there is a lack of transparency or straightforward communication from adults over the purpose of an interaction and what it entails.

Being able to discern how children locate themselves in relation to adults, gauging when they might be ready or willing to engage over a particular issue and what mode of expression they feel most comfortable with are important considerations when devising a strategy for participation.

Validating children's views? Distinguishing between participation and choice

Once children's views have been ascertained, a host of other issues immediately arise. What is the status of children's views and how far should these views be taken into account in decision-making processes? Children are not a homogeneous group, of course, and their views may well conflict, if not with each other then with a range of other stakeholders (parents, teachers, planners, funders and so on) in whatever issue is being explored. Children's views may well run counter to prevailing adult wisdom

and, if this is the case, whose views should prevail? How can this process be managed with adequate transparency and accountability? Some practitioners are of the view that adults should not raise children's expectations of being able to choose and should, therefore, limit their participation. However, as noted above, children distinguish between participation and choice and prefer, where possible, to make decisions collaboratively with supportive adults. Marchant and Kirby show that children readily acknowledge adult responsibilities to make decisions and will accept this as long as there is open and honest communication with them about what decisions have been made and why. Whether adults are able to act on the views of children, then, will depend on a range of contextual factors. These will need to be thought through carefully and made transparent in any strategy designed to make children's views count.

Analysing, monitoring and evaluating

These elements of the participation process seem to have been neglected by adults. Willow notes in her mapping exercise that 'the analysis and presentation of children's ideas is extremely disappointing' and that organisations have so far paid little attention to monitoring or evaluating these processes and their outcomes. It seems that mechanisms for carrying out these stages of the process are not well developed or understood and that the necessary infrastructural support in terms of time and resources is missing.

Evaluation (much like the participation process as a whole) is a varied activity that can take different forms, from localised evaluations of individual initiatives at one end of the spectrum through to large-scale, collaborative monitoring and reviews at the other. Building evaluation into individual projects is essential if practitioners are to reflect on and improve their practice. Wider

review processes that collate information on initiatives across a range of services or contexts (such as those carried out by the Children and Young People Unit, and, increasingly, by local authorities) are very useful in bringing practices into a common frame and fostering cross-agency collaboration and co-ordination. They enable an overview of developments and a sharing of skills and ideas on good practice, and also a candid acknowledgement of what to avoid. Uniting adults in a common endeavour in this way has the added benefit of strengthening and making tangible the ethos of children's participation.

More mapping exercises would be useful, particularly with a focus on the ongoing modes of participation that occur in the everyday settings of children's lives. Bearing in mind that the way participatory practices are conducted is as important as the outcomes, there is a need to attend to both *process* and *outcome* in the development of audit tools. Much thought will be needed to develop tools that are sensitive enough to measure the qualitative dimensions of 'respect' and 'well-being' for children in participatory practices. Developing effective tools can be a joint venture, with a sharing of knowledge about what 'outcomes' are relevant and how they should be defined, as a precursor to exploring how best to monitor and evaluate them. But, whatever audit or monitoring tools are developed, children themselves need to be brought centrally into these review processes. Regardless of the sophistication of audit tools, arguably the most effective way forward is to ask children for their own evaluations of the process they have been involved in and what the outcomes have been for them.

Linking policy and practice

The relationship between policy and practice in this field is not well documented or understood. How far are participatory

mechanisms and practices encouraged through statutory guidelines? For example, issuing a simple directive to design forms (such as educational or care plans) so that the child's input into the process must be fully documented and agreed may be a simple and highly effective mechanism for putting policy into practice. Are there other examples that could be shared and built on? On the other hand, is too much time and energy being expended on meeting inspection and regulatory criteria that may not necessarily promote or encourage participatory practices? How far do apparently protectionist guidelines (for example, that children should not be left alone with a member of staff) mitigate against ethical participatory practices (for example, the need to accord children privacy and confidentiality when expressing their views)? Greater appreciation of the policy context in which developments are taking place would be helpful. Recent work (Willow, 2002) has sought to document the different regulatory frameworks and policy directives that exist and the rationales behind them, investigate the various ways in which these are translated into practice, identify gaps and inconsistencies, and assess the overall effect on developments. Given that this is a developing field with changes in the policy landscape continually occurring, there is a need for such analysis to be ongoing. A concerted effort is also needed to disseminate the findings from such overviews throughout the practice community, thereby increasing awareness of policy issues and how they impact on grass-roots developments.

Finally, a consideration of the ongoing effectiveness of 'top-down' approaches could be matched by a consideration of how far and in what ways 'bottom-up' grass-roots thinking and experience (from children, of course, as well as adults) can be fed into and can influence policy developments.

Support for adults

The final and, perhaps, most pressing area for development resides with adults themselves. Trying to change children's place in the world cannot occur without a shift in adult attitudes, values and behaviour, particularly with regard to younger children. As we have seen, the basic task here involves weaving notions of children's citizenship – recognition, respect and participation – into adult thinking so that it is understood to be as crucial to children's well-being as their welfare needs. This involves a far-reaching change in the culture of adult–child relations that cannot occur without considerable support and guidance for adults themselves. Three main areas of support have been identified: training, resources (time, staffing and funding) and collaborative forums.

The first of these areas of support – training – is of paramount importance. Alongside the development of specialist training courses that focus on communication skills, the ethos of children's citizenship needs to be built into basic training for all those who routinely interact with children (for example, teachers, nursery, health care, social and youth workers, and, of course, parents). It needs also to be built into training programmes for managers, inspection staff and policy makers across the public sector. Training packages (such as the Total Respect training package) are now available and, where they involve children as trainers, can be particularly effective.

Second, adults need tangible resources in order to build the new ethos into their practices. Providing a strong infrastructure in the form of staffing and funding is essential. So, too, is the provision of time, which is a scarce commodity in busy workplace environments. Adults need time to rethink the way they 'see' children, to practise and reflect on new way of relating to them and, most importantly, to build these new ways of working into

their daily routines. Overall, then, the new ethos needs to be built more effectively into the infrastructure of public policy.

Third, developing forums in which adults can exchange their experiences and concerns, and share their skills and knowledge will play a key role in future developments. A wide range of collaborative forums – regular meetings (both formal and informal), websites, newsletters, professional associations, state-of-the-art conferences, as well as 'action' research projects based on partnership arrangements – are needed if adults are to share ideas and unite behind a common goal. More broadly, the idea of children's citizenship needs to be fed into and inform public discussion and debate (for example, through judicious use of the media) so that it can begin to take hold in the public imagination. Currently, not all those who interact routinely with young children will have the knowledge, skills or confidence to weave citizenship into their welfare responsibilities. Opening up discussion and debate through these forums will therefore enable a sharing of enthusiasm and commitment that will strengthen the new ethos and give it a tangible focus.

Perhaps above all else, adults need reassurance that approaching children in this new way is a worthwhile and rewarding enterprise. Showing respect for children will encourage a climate of mutual respect between adults and children. Similarly, encouraging children to engage in decision making and take some responsibility will nurture confident, self-reliant and responsible children. Bringing children's citizenship centrally into adult thinking and practice, then, will foster a climate of mutual respect and support across the generations that will bring benefits to all.

Reference

Willow, C. (2002) *Participation in Practice: Children and Young People as Partners in Change*. London: The Children's Society