

# Consulting Children About Play

The idea that children have a right to be consulted about the decisions that affect their lives is so commonplace today that it is easy to forget how recently this mindset has developed. The main cause for the change in attitude to children's rights is the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child,<sup>1</sup> (1989), ratified by the United Kingdom government in 1991. Playworkers were among the first professional groups in the UK to grasp the potential of the Convention, especially its Article 31, which proclaims the right of children to rest, play, leisure and participation in the arts. Equally important, however, is Article 12, which states that all children have a right to be consulted about matters that affect them in areas of public policy, and to have their opinions taken into account. After years of campaigning by children's rights groups, Article 12 is now widely supported, and many organisations acknowledge it in their policies: even Government departments nowadays have strategies for children's participation. This fact sheet is about the implications of Article 12 for organisations concerned with children's play.

## WHAT IS CONSULTATION?

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<sup>1</sup> The Convention defines a child as anyone under the age of 18 years. For brevity's sake, this factsheet follows the same practice.

Service users (for example, children using play services) can be involved in many ways and at many levels in decision-making about the services they use. Hart (1992) distinguishes eight levels of what he terms young people's participation in projects, which he represents in diagram form as a "ladder of participation". Hart's ladder has four main sections:

1. Bogus participation: mere window-dressing, usually done to impress politicians, funders etc.
2. Informed choice: services are offered on a take it or leave it basis, but children are properly informed about the options open to them and have a genuine choice whether to take part.
3. Consultation: within limits set by adults, children are asked about their preferred alternatives, and serious attempts are made to provide what they want. Adults give explanations if they cannot do what is asked.
4. Participation: children, with varying degrees of adult support, are able to initiate and carry out projects of their own devising. There is power sharing between children and adults.

The ladder metaphor may seem to suggest that “higher is better”. In fact, with the exception of bogus participation – which is dishonest and should never be countenanced – all the levels are valid ways of working in certain circumstances. In practice, the boundaries between informed choice and consultation, and between consultation and participation, are often blurred. This fact sheet, however, is about consultation rather than participation. It is thus aimed at those who want to find out children’s views about actual or potential services, and who are willing to take action based on the responses they receive.

### **WHY CONSULT CHILDREN?**

There are at least four reasons why service providers may want to consult children. Often there will be a mixture of motives, but it helps to be clear what your motives are, since this can affect how you approach the consultation process.

#### **1. Because children have a right to be consulted**

Children’s rights are a convincing argument, but remember that Article 12 is a right, not a duty for the child: children also have a right not to take part. Service providers have an obligation to all children, not only those who respond to consultation.

#### **2. Because it will help you to deliver better services**

Consulting users can often lead to better service provision. You need to be clear about your boundaries, however, including the value base of your project. If there are limits to the actions you are able or willing to take as a result of the consultation – because of resources, policy, law or any other reason – then make this clear to participants from the outset. You also need to be sure that you have

consulted and fairly weighed the views of all users – not just the ones who shout loudest. And what about the children who are not using your service in the first place? Should you be consulting them too? In the end, you are responsible for the quality of experience you are offering to children: consultation is not an alibi for responsible decision-making.

#### **3. Because consultation can be a positive learning experience for children**

By taking part in consultation, children can learn about things like decision-making, listening to other points of view, assertiveness, negotiation, and resource constraints. The more deeply children are involved in the process, and the closer they get to actual participation – genuine power-sharing with adults - the more they are likely to learn.

#### **4. Because you have to do it in order to satisfy funders, regulators or other external bodies.**

If this is your main motive, beware! You may be in danger of carrying out a bogus exercise that could alienate staff and service users. The first rule of consultation is: never do it unless people can say what they really think, and unless you are genuinely committed to act on the results. Better no consultation than dishonest consultation.

### **A LISTENING CULTURE**

Effective consultation of children is not something that you can simply “bolt on” to any setting regardless of its ethos. Where adults value and respect children as individuals, where children are listened to, and where equal opportunities are actively promoted, children are likely to have the confidence and the motivation to

take part in consultation and to say what they think. In such a setting, formal consultation is just one element in a constant stream of feedback. Where these qualities are lacking, children are likely to feel their opinions are not really valued, and hence they may be unwilling to take part in a meaningless consultation: there will be little feedback of any kind. So get the basics right first.

### **CONSULTATION AND THE VALUES OF PLAYWORK**

Compared to 1989, when the UN Convention appeared, there is now a much better understanding within the playwork profession of the uniqueness and importance of play in personal development and species evolution. Allied with this understanding has come a more critical, self-aware playwork practice that is alert to the dangers of “adulteration” of play (Hughes, 2001). Playworkers thus need to approach consultation with caution. Interrupting playing children, armed with pencil and clipboard, to ask them what they think of the play facility, is the antithesis both of good playwork and of effective consultation.

Play, by its very nature, is a participative process: children empower themselves through playing much more than through any formal consultation process. By observing children at play, responding to children’s play cues, and reflecting on this experience with colleagues, playworkers can learn a lot about the quality of their play provision without the need for any formal consultation (Hughes, 1996). And while a well-designed consultation process may offer the opportunity for children’s learning, such learning is not necessarily a playwork priority.

Playworkers, however, are not the only people who may need to consult children about play provision, and even in play settings there may be times when formal consultation is appropriate – so long as it interferes with actual play as little as possible. Equipment purchase, programming, setting ground rules, and staff appointments are examples of issues where organised consultation may be required.

### **ETHICS OF CONSULTATION**

Consultation is essentially a kind of research. Alderson (1995) outlines eight ethical criteria for doing social research with children, which can be applied as a checklist for consultation about play.

- 1) Who benefits from the consultation? Unless the participants (in this case, the children) are going to benefit, it’s unethical to consult them.
- 2) Are all children in the relevant group able to take part? Or are you only hearing certain voices? Think carefully about children you might be excluding – perhaps because of how you have organised the process. How can you make sure everyone is included?
- 3) How will you secure informed consent from children to take part – and from their parents if necessary? Are children really able to say No, or do they feel obliged to join in? If they say Yes, can they change their minds later?
- 4) How will you make sure that children’s confidentiality is respected?

- 5) Are children able to choose how they will take part in the consultation, or are you offering only a one-size-fits-all approach?
- 6) Are the consultation activities interesting and fun, or are they boring?
- 7) When you summarise the consultation results, will you genuinely reflect children's views and allow a variety of voices to be heard – or will you put your own spin on the results?
- 8) How will you give feedback to the participants about what the consultation shows, and about what happens as a result?

It is good practice to draw up a plan for the consultation that deals with all these issues in a positive way. It is important to allocate enough time for all stages of the process, including analysis and feedback – this can take longer than you expect.

### **SOME WAYS TO CONSULT CHILDREN ABOUT PLAY**

When deciding what methods to use, you will need to consider what you want to find out, what the children will enjoy doing, and what resources are available. It's important to use a variety of approaches whenever possible, especially if you are working with a wide age range. This gives children a choice and lessens the risks of exclusion. The "golden methods" that you should always use are:

1. Observe the free play of the children you work with. Record and discuss with colleagues what you see and hear. This will teach you a lot about what is important to the children.

2. Encourage children to talk to you by paying attention to what they say!

Here are some other methods that may be useful:

3. Use games. Under-fives may enjoy pretending that a soft toy is a new child and "introducing" it to the project – who's who, good points, bad points, what the rules are and so on. Primary age children may enjoy co-operative games such as Simon Says or parachute games, where the actions are based on options or questions – "Everyone who wants to go the park this afternoon stand on one leg". Older children may enjoy dramatic role-play about scenarios in the play setting or about play issues in their neighbourhood.
4. Use art and craft. Children can draw, paint and model their favourite activities or ideal play spaces, their ideal playworkers or other aspects of the setting. You may need to talk with the children to find out what the images mean.
5. Use photography. This is an excellent way of getting children's views about an environment or neighbourhood – go on an expedition and record the good and bad of what you see. Depending on what you can afford, Polaroid, disposable or digital cameras can all be used to good effect by children, and they can make up commentaries to go with the photo display or slide show. Or you can go one better and make a video!

6. Use songs, poems and stories. Individually or in groups, children can express in performance their feelings about the play setting.
7. Use pictures to help select favourite activities. This works well for younger children and those with communication difficulties. Photos of different attractions at the project, or pictures from catalogues etc, can be laminated and mounted. Children can select favourite activities by sticking dots on the pictures or dropping beans in a jar.
8. Use tape recorders. Children may enjoy interviewing one another about likes and dislikes concerning the project. Be prepared for plenty of showing off on tape, but you can still gain some useful information.
9. Use a graffiti board. You may need to have some ground rules to prevent personally abusive messages.
10. Use a "suggestion box ". This could take the form of leaves on a tree, fish in a net, bricks in a wall, postcards in a mailbox, etc.
11. Use worksheets and questionnaires. Some children enjoy filling them in! Although not very playful, they have the advantage that they can be easy to analyse and can give you numbers for external consumption.

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## RESOURCES

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The Children's Play Information Service produces factsheets and student reading lists on a variety of play topics, and can also provide customised reading lists in response to individual requests.

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