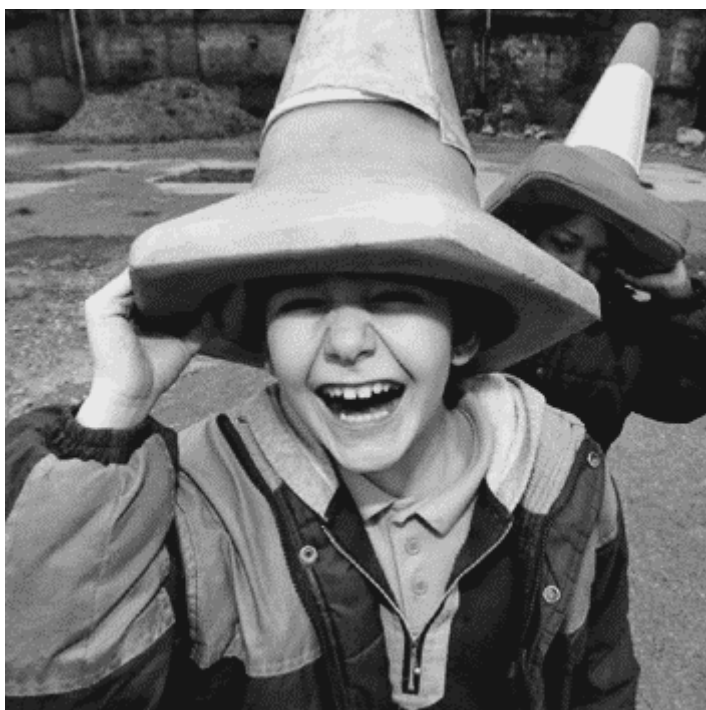


Growing Up in the West Midlands

Participation Practice in The Children's Society

Written submission by The Children's Society



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1 Introduction

The Growing Up in the West Midlands Strategic Forum exists to develop the West Midlands as a region that respects and acts upon the needs, interests and aspirations of children and young people, and the voluntary and community organisation that work with them.

The Children's Society has been commissioned to profile its work with regard to children and young people's participation in decision making. It will outline some case studies of participation practice in order to share models of good practice that can be developed and shared in line with the vision of the Growing Up in the West Midlands Forum.

The outcome of this work will further support and develop a culture of children and young people's strategic involvement, a body of evidence to support its values, and established routes for policy makers to engage children and young people.

2 Participation Practice in The Children's Society

The Children's Society has been reaching out to vulnerable children and young people since 1881. Today, more than a century later, its work remains as vital as ever. It is a story of three eras; the first spans from 1881 – 1970, when The Children's Society ran children's homes all over England and Wales and was a leading adoption and fostering agency. The second runs from 1970 to the late 1990s, when residential homes were gradually replaced by a series of innovative projects that tackled specific needs, and helped families and children and young people to solve their own problems within their own communities. The third era starts at the end of the 1990s, with The Children's Society working to secure social justice for children and young people.

The Children's Society is committed to creating positive change in the lives of young people, and to ensuring that they share in deciding what these changes are and how they are achieved. It is through these positive changes to their lives, relationships, and communities that we can judge the success of our work with children and young people. Participation is about change, about challenging ourselves to work together in new and exciting ways. Through this we share power and responsibility with children and young people in all areas of our work.

We will also tackle the barriers preventing children and young people from taking part and by doing so, we hope more children will learn what participation can bring – the

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ability to change their lives, their relationships, and their communities for the better.

Our new Participation strategy, **Be Part of It**, sets out our vision of what we want participation to mean in The Children's Society, what we are committed to, and what action we will take to turn our vision into practice, whether you are a child or young person or work directly with a child or young person.

We have developed seven principles for effective participation, based on responses from nearly 1,000 children and young people and staff to a priority search questionnaire.

For further details about our work please visit our website, www.childrenssociety.org.uk

(From 'Be Part of it', The Children's Society's Participation Strategy: 12.05.2006)

3 The Children's Society – Involving young people in decision making

In recent years, increasing attention has been given to children and young people's rights through debates in parliament and legislation. Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the Government's Green Papers, 'Youth Matters' and 'Every Child Matters', champion the rights of children and young people to have their say in decisions that affect their lives and for those views to be taken into account.

Children and young people currently have a say on issues such as staff recruitment, strategy development and as trustee board members. However, their flair and enthusiasm has driven us to strengthen their existing involvement and reach a shared understanding of participation, in order to create real change.

Children and Young People

Within our Destination Statement for 2008 - 2009, we state that ... ***"the talent and resilience of the children and young people we serve has inspired us and driven us to share power and responsibility."***

The driver behind achieving this is our Participation Strategy. The Strategy promotes our vision for participation, calling for greater opportunities for children and young people to have a say on issues affecting their lives. Their participation will be supported and recognised

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and they will be able to influence how policies and services are designed so that they reflect their needs.

There are many benefits to this increased participation. For the children and young people themselves, it includes a greater knowledge of our work, a say in decision making, a chance to develop new skills and build relationships with adults, and a better understanding of their rights. They will be able to say what they want from The Children's Society and we will be able to respond to that.

4 Case Studies

We will now share perspectives from our practice and case studies from children and young people, summarising their experiences in the decision making process and how it felt for them.

4.1 A Programme Manager's Perspective

The Children's Society

"It was one of the original aims of the Children's Fund to involve children and young people and parents in running the programme and commissioned services. Participation is key to The Children's Society's work and, in addition to this, we want to better involve children and young people in decision making so that the programme meets their needs in the most effective manner. This could not be achieved without their involvement."

In your view, what impact does children and young people's involvement in decision making have: for them / the organisation / for the community?

"Not all children and young people want to be involved in decision making, which needs to be recognised and respected. Those who have been involved reported increased self-confidence and other personal skills. For the organisation, more logistics have been necessary to make it happen, i.e. transport, refreshments, decisions taking longer, dealing with children and young people who felt they weren't listened to or their decisions ignored. This has been a learning curve for the project with limited impact on the community. Some of the children and young people have moved on to the Youth Council, which will continue to

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impact in the participation arena. It is difficult to trace how a 10 year old picks up new skills via decision making and how they take these out into the community. Parents' work has more visible impact in the community, as demonstrated by parents leading their own play schemes, and organising trips."

What advice would you give to other organisations looking to engage young people in decision making within their project?

"There is the need to think through details and logistics before diving in. It is essential for consideration to be given to budget, staff time implications, how long decision making may take, and how different views can be reconciled."

4.2 Young People's Stories

4.2.1 My Story By Anna

Myself

My name is Anna; I'm 14 years of age. At the moment I attend a school in Birmingham. I am involved in a group at The Children's Society. I started this group when I was 11 years of age in my first year of secondary school. My hobbies are singing, dancing, drama, things to do with music, talking to my friends on MSN, going to look for my family. Things that I don't like are two-faced people, disloyal people, and adults and children with no respect and who treat you like a baby because you are younger than them.

What have I been involved in with The Children's Society?

- Interviews
- Team Work
- Group discussions
- Evaluations
- Bids and tenders
- Presentations
- Promotion for leaflets & flyers
- Designing logos
- Creating a stall for fun days
- Recruiting members
- Surveys

My experience of interviews

The very first time I said that I would do interviewing I was very excited because it was something I had never done before. When it came closer to the time of interviewing we had to do some preparation. During the preparation we had to come up with some questions to ask at the interviews, we had to decide how long the interview would take and what the presentation would be about.

Then the interview day came along and we ran through what would happen and then started. When my first interview person came in I began to get nervous but as the interview was coming to an end I started to relax a bit. As the second interview person entered I was back to my normal self again and now when I do interviews *I'm confident.*

4.2.2 My story by Beth

Myself

Hi my name is Beth and I am 13 years old and I am in year 9 at school. I go to a school in Birmingham and go to a group outside school at The Children's Society. I started with the group when I was 9. I was one of the first people to join the group. Some of the things I like are music (*I am quite good at music*). I am good at speaking to people; I got that talent from The Children's Society because I was treated like an adult by an adult. I like people to like me as I am. I like going to the project because I have loads of friends there. The things I don't like are being told what to do. I don't like going to school that much but I do like some of the lessons such as swimming, PE, Music, and French. So that is all about me. I hope you find it interesting.

What have I been involved in with The Children's Society?

- I came up with the name of the group with other people. I also helped design a logo (we all drew our own logo) and they took a part from each logo to make the final one.
- We joined up with other groups from around the world and found out what their groups did
- We went on a UK tour on a plane, that was fun
- We had to do our own stall at the fun day
- We did some interviews, they were interesting
- Three way meetings
- Training adults to work with children
- Ackers Trust workshop days
- We did evaluations they were good.

My Experiences

But the one thing that I am going to tell you about is the interviews. Well it all started when we had to be trained up by the workers at The Children's Society. There were people that we had to interview. The first time their body language told me they were really nasty but the second time they sat there and listened and that was quite easy. We had to make an interview check list to find out if they were child friendly. When I did the actual interview I was really nervous but in the end I enjoyed it and developed a lot of skills such as communication and body language and making eye contact so that is one of the activities that I did with The Children's Society.

4.2.3 My story by Shelley

Myself

My name is Shelley; I am 14 years old. I was 13 when I first got involved with The Children's Society and it has helped me. When I took part in The Children's Society's National Initiative, which was really fun, you get to talk about your feelings.

What have I been involved in?

- The Children's Society's National Initiative – taking messages from young people to Government and designing a poster on drugs, alcohol and bullying
- Christmas Party
- How to make a trifle.

My Experiences

I enjoyed it because I got to meet new people who had similar problems to my two friends and me; it was worthwhile because I got to go to London and to Nottingham. It felt quite good to be involved although I was nervous. It's really good for other members of staff to hear about your decisions and your work gets out around the centre so everyone gets to look at it. On a scale of 1 to 10, I give The Children's Society 10 because they really understand people.

The Children's Society project could get other young people involved by putting up advertisements and visiting different schools to tell them about it.

4.3 The Children's Society's 3 Way Decision Making with Parents

The 3 way decision making group at The Children's Society consists of a children's group, a parent's panel and a steering group led by professionals.

They all meet up once a quarter during the school holidays. The meetings last for two hours and a crèche provides play activities for the parent's children.

Purpose of the meeting:

- To listen to each other's opinions and feelings about things that matter
- To make decisions about what services they need
- To meet other people they would not ordinarily meet

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- To raise awareness about problems and signpost to services

The decisions they have made so far:

- Where to make budget cuts – Oct 03
- What local evaluation said – June 04
- What services to run next year – Oct 04
- What participation means – Feb 05
- What we have achieved so far – June 05
- Finding new members for the group – ongoing

Their achievements to date:

- Planning trips and activities including fun days out and community super Saturdays
- Building good relationships and connecting people
- Children getting involved
- Schools wanting to be more involved
- Getting and keeping good staff
- Working with families that need support.

Their challenges have been:

- The play bus that parents wanted has not yet happened
- Reduction to funding
- Getting other agencies on board

5 Wish List of Ideas to involve young people in decision making

The Children's Society's Take Part Torbay Participation Project

The Take Part Project has worked with hundreds of young people aged 8-18 over the last three years. Young people have been at the heart of decision making, planning project delivery and evaluation, through involvement ranging from play projects, youth forums, and organising fun community events to evaluation and training Children's Services Managers, recruitment and selection and national lobbying.

At the end of 2005, we asked young people involved in a variety of projects to explore why they like to take part and what keeps them coming along.

The groups involved were ***Helping Young People Achieve (HYPA)***, ***Teen Network Torbay (TNT)***, ***Film Us Now Krew (FUNK)***, young people from ***Link Youth Support***, ***Indigos***, and ***Play Development Services***.

The young people discussed their ideas and reasons and these were then grouped and voted into ranking order. The young people then went on to design, film, edit and produce a DVD to highlight their "**Top 10 Tips**" for involving children and young people.

The Children's Society's Top Ten Tips for involving children and young people:

1. Make it Fun and interesting
2. Listen to everyone's ideas
3. Food
4. Make it so everyone can join in
5. Have the right workers
6. Rewards and recognition
7. Provide training and team building
8. Be organised and communicate
9. Work at our pace
10. Help us with problems



So if you want to make a success of it, use this as a checklist and you can't go wrong!

6 What have we learnt from this process?

Key Messages

We have learnt that the value of involving children and young people is essential to our work, but also essential to their rights as citizens and contributors to society. They bring their own perspective on particular issues and situations that we as adults can learn much from. It has proven the potential for children and young people to comprehend our issues and demonstrates, not only their capabilities as citizens, but also as a democratic part of society. We fully support their involvement in processes which will enable them to make choices and give them options in the world around them.

In The Children's Society we continue to provide a platform for children and young people to ensure their views are heard through practice, policy, and our campaigning work, but also to bring those views to an open arena for policy makers to hear, and ensure children and young people's views impact on service provision and delivery.

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The Children's Society

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