

Engaging with young children's voices: A practical workshop on consultation with young children in early childhood services

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The Healthy Ireland Fund supported by the Department of Health, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and the Department of Rural and Community Development.



“all those who are affected by social institutions must have a share in producing and managing them.” (John Dewey, 1937)

“children are and must be seen as active in the construction of their own lives, the life of those around them and of the societies in which they live- children are not just the passive subjects of social structures and processes” (James and Prout, 1990)

Introductions

- Introduce person beside you to the group
- Housekeeping
- Agreements for workshop

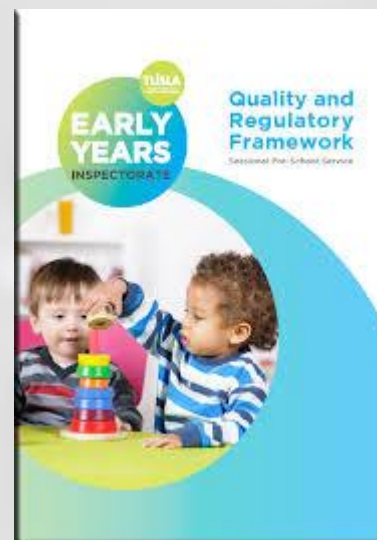
Workshop Objectives

- To provide an overview of the importance of consulting with children in the early years
- To support practitioners to think more about involving children in decision making at various levels in the service
- To suggest strategies for consulting with children and for representing the children's ideas in your documentation.

Core Questions to be considered

- What are the different understandings of young children's participation and involvement in decision making in the ECEC?
- In what ways is participation considered to be a good thing?
- How can we distinguish meaningful participation from other forms of participation?
- Why are young children considered to be 'seldom heard' in decision making processes?
- What skills and processes contribute to effective participation in the ECEC context?

Mandate for the participation of young children in decision making



The UNCRC and Children's Participation in Decision Making

- The UNCRC recognises that children's rights are part and parcel of human rights. Ireland ratified these rights in 1992
- Article 12 says respect for the views of the child should be respected and when adults are making decisions that affect children, children have the right to say what they think should happen and have their opinions taken into account.
- Article 13 says that children have the right to express themselves in any way they chose, not just the spoken word.

Participation is about respecting rights

Siolta Std 1- Ensuring that each child's rights are met requires that she/he is enabled to exercise choice and to use initiative as an active participant and partner in her/his own development and learning.

1.1 Each child has the opportunities to make choices and decisions and for these to be respected.

1.2 Each child has opportunities to take the lead, initiate activity, be appropriately independent and supported to solve problems.

1.3 Each child is enabled to actively participate in the daily routine, in activities, and is considered to be a partner by adults.

Frameworks for consultations



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SPACE

Safe and inclusive
opportunity to form
and express a view

VOICE

Facilitated to express
views freely in medium
of choice

Views are
expressed

AUDIENCE

The view must be
listened to

Views are given
due weight

INFLUENCE

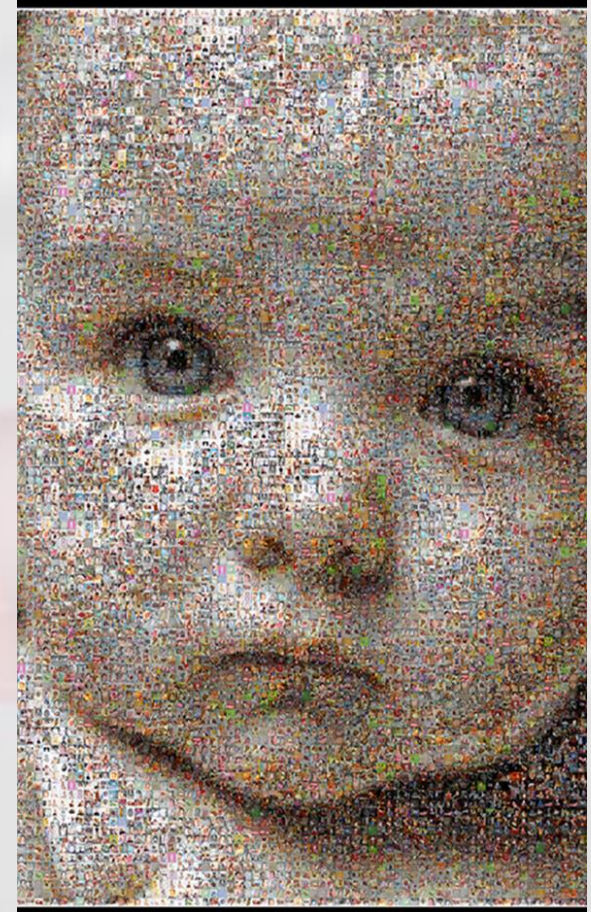
The view must be
acted upon

Laura Lundy 2011



26 octobre 2014

The Mosaic approach is a multi-method one in which children's own photographs, tours and maps can be combined with talking and observing to gain deeper understanding of children's perspectives in relation to matters that directly affect them.



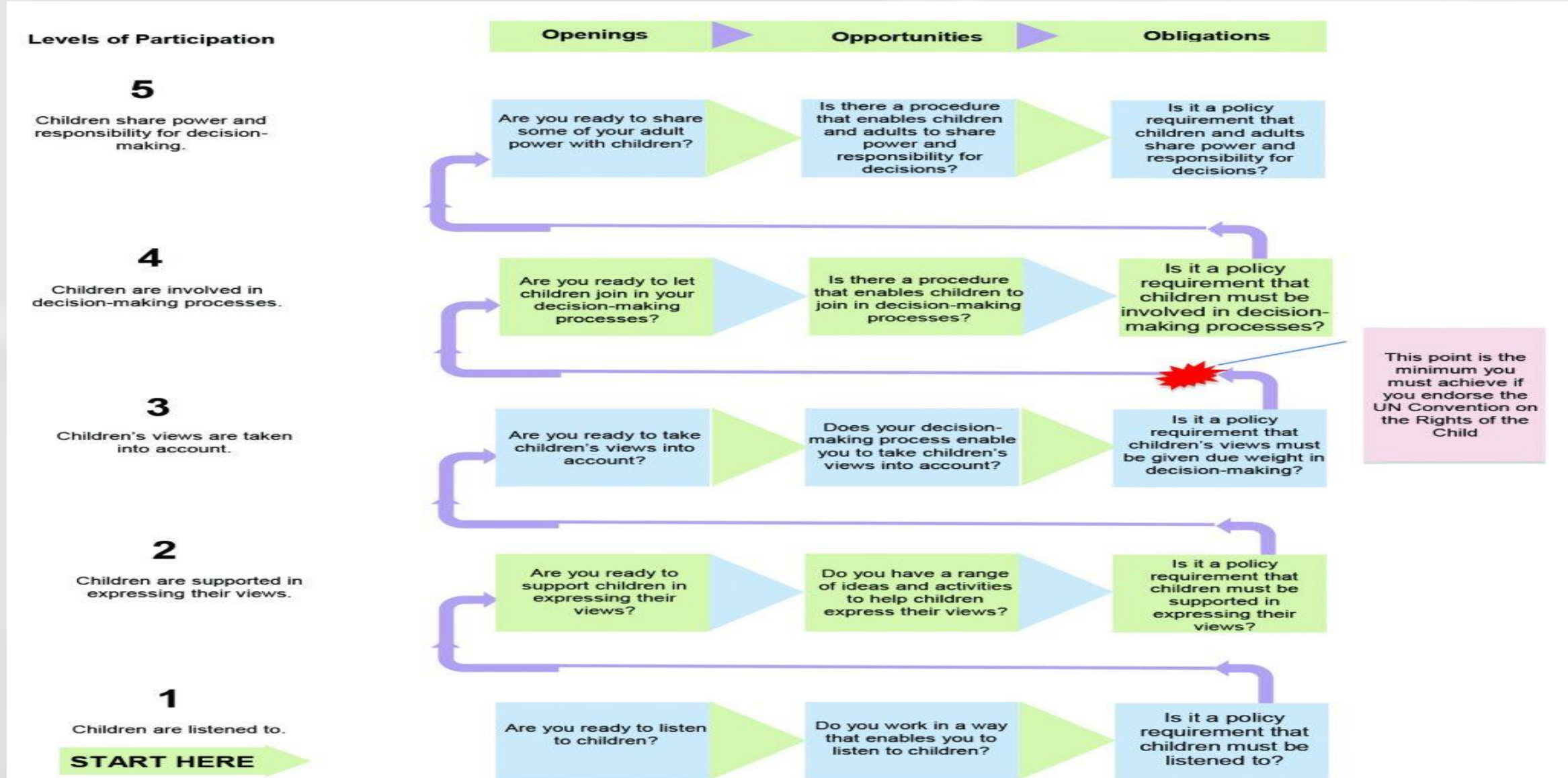
Consultation is a form of Participation

Children can participate in many ways and at many levels in decision-making in the ECEC. Hart (1992) distinguishes eight levels and 4 categories of children's participation which he represents as a "ladder of participation".

1. *Tokenistic participation*: window dressing
2. *Informed choice*: children are properly informed about the options open to them and can make genuine choices.
3. *Consultation*: children are asked about choices, needs and preferences. Adults listen, respond, act and give feedback.
4. *Participation*: children, with varying degrees of adult support, are able to initiate and carry out projects of their own devising.



Shier's Model of Participation (2001)



Consultation involves listening but listening with a particular purpose

'.....seeking the views of children as a guide to action' (Borland, 2001).

- Listening is a vital part of establishing respectful relationships and is central to the learning process.
- Being listened to can have a positive impact on children's self confidence, social skills, learning and development. It can also keep children safe if their concerns are taken seriously.
- Listening has benefits for practitioners and parents. It challenges assumptions, strengthens democracy, raises expectations and provides insights into children's capabilities.
- Listening is respectful of the child's right to be heard.

However....

In early childhood care and education, the issue of children's participation is often seen from quite a narrow view, as if it means *simply listening to children voices* (Clark, 2005).

Different Understandings of childhood

- Traditionally, childhood was seen as an early biological/ physiological stage of life, marked by universally shared stages of growth and development.
- Pre-sociological perspectives considered childhood as a time where children needed discipline and correction and where innocence needed protection and where the child is an adult in the making.
- Assumptions: children are passive, adults shape children, development is linear.

The New Sociology of Childhood

Post (or new) sociological perspectives on childhood are that children are human beings in their own right and that their development is shaped by the contexts in which they live and are cared for.

Assumptions:

- Children are active agents with emerging capacities for self regulation and self determination
- Children are innovative and creative
- Children are rights bearers
- Children influence adults in addition to being influenced by them
- The child's competencies develop within social networks
- Childhood is a social construct rather than a linear stage of development

The New Sociology of Childhood emphasises children's agency: Thumbs up for rock and roll!

Agency in early childhood means the child is able to make choices and decisions, to influence events, to understand their own world and to have an impact in their learning and care environments.



Our image of the child impacts on the extent of their participation

Meaningful participation of young children recognises and respects that young children are;

- experts in their own lives with a unique insight into their experiences and perspectives;
- skilful communicators possessing a range of languages with which to articulate their views and experience. Reggio Emilia describes this as the “hundred languages of children” (Edwards et al. 1993).
- active agents, influencing and interacting with the world around them;
- meaning makers, constructing and interpreting meaning in their lives.

(Clark and Moss 2001)

Positive impacts on the child

- Research shows that if children are listened to and participate in decision making processes, they demonstrate or experience:
- greater self esteem and self confidence;
- access to more skills;
- access to wider opportunities;
- an awareness of rights;
- a sense of efficacy and empowerment (Lansdown 2005).

Group Discussion

In your groups, think about the informal opportunities for child consultations in your settings. Give examples where possible.

Group 1: Circle Time

What is the purpose of Circle Time?

What do you like most about Circle time?

What is challenging about Circle time?

In what ways are the children involved in the Circle Time routine?

Group 2: Observations

How do staff carry out observations in the setting?

Do the children understand the purpose of the observations?

Do the children have a voice in how the observations are conducted and what is documented?

Group 3: Staff Changes

What happens when a staff member moves room or leaves the service?

How is this change explained to the children?

In what ways do you think children could be more involved when there are staff changes or when new staff are being recruited to the service?

Group 4: Changes to the routine or the environment

How are changes made to the routine or environment?

Who is involved in planning and implementing the changes?

Are the children consulted about the planned changes?

Do you feel they are listened to and their ideas used in a meaningful way?

Role of Practitioner

- Observations as starting point in understanding young children's preferences, experiences, abilities, needs and interests.
- Adopting a commitment to consulting with children and taking them seriously at all levels of early years' provision, for example
 - the individual decisions and choices children wish to make
 - children's influence over the culture, organisation and content of the setting
 - children's contribution to the development and planning in the service
 - children's involvement in the monitoring and evaluation in the service

Discussion point: how might child participation at each of these levels look like in practice?

Role of Practitioner

- Develop a participation policy in the service that expressly includes children as stakeholders
- Provide a safe, nurturing emotional environment
- Take children seriously and value their contributions
- Respond to what children say and give feedback on their ideas.
- Take the time to listen-The younger the child the less possible it is to rely on direct questions
- Respect privacy and silence as well as expressed viewpoints; consulting should not invade children's time, thoughts and spaces
- Engage in reflective practice
- Ensure EYPs also feel consulted and listened to, and that their views are taken seriously

Facilitator

Asks

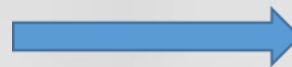
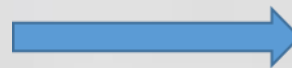
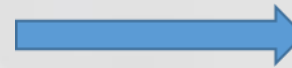
Motivates by following children's ideas

Gets the children to set the agenda

Listens without speaking or judging

Open questions and without an answer in mind

A learning style that is about supporting the child to find their own answers



Teacher

Informs

Rewards and Encourages

Sets goals for the child

Listens thinking about the right answers

Looks for the right answer

Information driven

What good consultation looks like in practice

- Children are seen as stakeholders alongside EYPs, parents etc
- Formal/ informal opportunities are created
- Supported by respectful interactions and relationships
- A shared, collaborative and inclusive processes
- A willingness to negotiate
- Power is shared
- Involves observations, interpretation and documentation
- Framed by Aistear and Siolta
- Responds to the non verbal cues as well as engaging with the voice of the child

Participation should be voluntary, engaging, challenging and rewarding.

- **Information** - The children involved need information that is clear and easy to understand.
- **It's Their Choice** - The children must be asked if they want to be involved and you may need parental consent.
- **They Get Something out of it** - Children should benefit from taking part in the process to make sure that participation is a positive experience.
- **Feedback** - Receiving feedback is important so children know if they have made a difference and how their ideas have been used.
- **Improving How we work** - It is good practice to continue to improve practice by asking children to evaluate our work

Strategies to initiate consultation

- Adult to child opportunities for talking (formal and informal dialogue, talking and listening)
- 'I wonder.....' 'tell me more about....'
- Child to child talking and listening
- Circle time discussion
- Using tools to support dialogue and listening
- Explore questions as themes

Strategies to support consultation

- Consider the children's age, specific interests, specific learning needs, available resources
- Consider the multiple ways in which young children express themselves:
 - Movement and play
 - Photography and IT
 - Art
 - Music, dance and song
 - Themed drawing and painting
 - Story telling

Strategies for everyday listening

- Prioritising time to listen to children talking, in groups and individually
- Using children's Learning Stories as a daily listening tool
- 'Tuning in' routines to young children's rhythms, interests and developing skills
- Giving young children increasing control over their personal care
- Explaining, discussing and negotiating rules
- Seeking young children's opinions and solutions to problems which arise
- Developing ways of listening to and involving young children which open up more channels of communication with parents
- Designing personal 'passports' to listen to and empower young children with additional needs
- Bringing in older children as 'consultants'

(Clark 2003)

Strategies for one off consultations

- Observation is of particular importance in reviewing the experiences of pre-verbal children
- Traditional consultation techniques such as focus groups or surveys can be adapted to meet the needs and requirements of young children.
- Less traditional visual and/or multi-sensory methods which are less reliant on the written or spoken word such as themed drawing, role play activities and the use of puppets.
- Participatory games and Child Tours
- The use of different media, for example cameras for young children to record their own perspectives

Ideas for informal participation

(from my PhD fieldwork)

- Mind maps
- Circle time discussion
- Voting
- Golden Rules
- Menu planning
- Flexible snack time
- Open doors
- Smiley faces
- Games and stories



Documenting Participation

- Learning Stories should document listening and dialogue as well as learning and development.
- But they tend to be created for an adult audience (Bath 2012)
- Carr (2001) views learning stories as assessments of 'participation repertoires' that and as such, she reinforces that children need to have a say in the process.
- Learning Stories that include children's voice and narrative demonstrate participation. The child's view point should influence what might happen next, in terms of planning activities and experiences for the child as a result of the learning story.

Discussion point: *How can we achieve a pedagogy which involves children in documentation?*

Final Thoughts

‘we need to take time to think about why and how we are doing child participation before rushing ahead on the one hand and at the same time, we need to be brave enough to try it, trusting that we will learn as we go along, particularly if we listen to the children involved’ (Bray & Clacherly 2009).

Thank you for listening

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- www.CYPSC.ie/Galway
- www.CYPSC.ie/Roscommon
- <https://www.tusla.ie/services/family-community-support/investing-in-children/>