

KEEPING CHILDREN IN MIND AND IN VIEW

Practice Guide 1:

Importance of engaging with children and young people

Acknowledgement of Country

The Centre acknowledges the past and present traditional custodians of the land on which we work. We pay respect to Elders past and present. We acknowledge that sovereignty was never ceded and that this was and always will be Aboriginal land.



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Foreword

This guide is one in a series of practice guides written by the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare to enable practitioners to keep children first and foremost in service system responses. Funding for these guides has been provided by Family Safety Victoria.

The aim of the guides is to support key workforces involved in maintaining child safety and wellbeing to:

- use a child rights lens
- identify and prioritise what is in the child's best interests
- work in ways that promote children's participation in the decision making and processes that affect them
- document what happens to children so that they are kept in mind and in view.

The guides are intended to make sure that children and young people are at the centre of our thinking and our practice. They are not intended to replace leader or manager practice guidance or to replace existing agency protocols; rather, they are aimed at providing practical, simple and accessible information that will increase practitioner understanding of how to work with children and young people and enhance confidence in their ability to do so.

In engaging with children, particular attention needs to be paid to the safety and wellbeing of children who are non-verbal or very young, who have developmental challenges, who have a disability, who are from a non-English speaking background, who are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, who have a parent with a disability or mental ill-health, who identify as LGBTIQ+ or who experience (and/or use) violence in the home.

The guides aim to address confidence and knowledge gaps for practitioners across the sector and promote the importance of effective and meaningful observation, communication and empowerment of children and young people. They are intended to be an easy to understand, practical reference tool for new practitioners, or for practitioners who have not had significant experience in working with children or young people.

Importance of engaging with children and young people

Having a voice in family matters is considered a protective factor from harm, and key to promoting children's wellbeing. However, since the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and specifically Article 12 pertaining to children's participation, research reveals that children's voices often remain invisible in child protection and family welfare services.¹

There is a strong body of research, theories and concepts supporting child-inclusive approaches in the context of family violence and child and family services.² Some of the benefits found in the literature include:

- helping to build children's sense of belonging, self-esteem and responsibility
- building their ability to make choices, problem solve and set goals, and
- developing social and psychological resources that can positively affect their capacity to participate.³

The information which children and young people offer professionals can play an integral role in establishing safety and stability for them, and in assessing what forms of treatment and/or therapeutic supports might be required. Including children in planning and allowing them to share their experiences may contribute to their recovery from traumatic experiences and empower them to make positive decisions that impact upon their future. 'The infant or child is entitled to be part of a process that directly impacts them'.⁴

Children can tell us about the trauma they have experienced, what concerns them and other key information, including who and what makes them feel safe, secure and happy. They can do this through their words, in storytelling, in their movements and actions, through their body language and their mannerisms.

Listening to children and young people does not mean disregarding other sources of information, such as listening to other professionals, other adults and family members involved, or applying theoretical and practical frameworks.

Professionals generally recognise the importance of working with children and young people but do not always feel confident in their ability to directly engage with children or to elicit information from adults in the child's family or social networks, or from other professionals.

Understanding the 'Ages and Stages' of a child's growth and development and the impacts of previous experiences – including attachment and trauma – can help professionals engage in thoughtful and sensitive interactions with children and young people to promote their best interests.

Children may experience and identify problems that have a much greater impact on their lives than is known or perceived by adults: for example, violence from teachers and bullying by peers may not be particularly visible to or seen as important by adults.⁵

¹ Stafford, L., Harkin, J-A., Rolfe, A., Burton, J., & Morley, C. 2021, Why having a voice is important to children who are involved in family support services, *Child Abuse & Neglect*, vol. 115, iss. 1, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2021.104987>

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Bunston, W. 2020, Listening to the voices of infants and children who have experienced family violence. Information sheet and podcast, Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, <https://www.cfecfw.asn.au/information-sharing-resource-hub>

⁵ West, A. 2018, Listening to the most vulnerable children, Year 1: Children's views of vulnerability in four countries, World Vision UK, 5.

Capturing the views of children

The ACT Family Safety Hub captured a range of children's views about their experiences of domestic and family violence and the ways in which adults interact with children, including these perspectives.

'Adults make decisions without listening to, informing, and involving young people. Young people's rights are routinely disregarded. Services are designed by and for adults.'

'We need a voice. I feel like a lot of us kids feel like we don't have a voice. We go to someone, we do talk to them and they're not going to listen.'

'They're still going to want to talk to the parents instead of you because they don't see you as you, they see the parents. They look through you and then when they want to talk to you, they just talk to the parents.'⁶

Research involving children's perspectives on why they should have a say over what happens to them highlights four main themes.

- Children have first-hand knowledge of a situation and this knowledge can help make a difference.
- Children are part of the family and it is important that everyone in the family feels heard.
- Having a say can help children get the support they need and can also bring help to the family.
- Being heard makes children feel listened to, happy and valued.⁷

Why children are often invisible

There are conceptual and structural barriers to children being given agency, including 'adultism' and 'protectionism': the former assumes children are not capable of providing accurate accounts of their lived experiences and the latter assumes that children need to be protected from adult conversations or content.⁸

Some of the practices that contribute to children being invisible include the following.

- Interpreting the identity of the child or young person in a narrow way: for example, making assumptions about what a child likes to eat or do based on their culture, gender or country of origin.
- Making a generalised assessment: for example, making an assessment that is not individualised or tailored to the specific needs of the child.
- Neglecting to see children as separate from their siblings or other family members: for example, assuming all siblings will have the same views about having contact with a parent or family member.
- Supporting parents in a vacuum: for example, working individually with a parent to provide therapeutic support without being aware of the full range of family needs, such as financial hardship, housing, mental health or other challenges that might involve or require other services.⁹

⁶ ACT Family and Safety Hub (n.d.), Now you have heard us what will you do? Young people's experiences of domestic and family violence. ACT Government, Canberra, <https://hrc.act.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Booklet-young-peoples-experiences-of-family-violence.pdf>

⁷ Stafford et al., p. 7.

⁸ Stafford et al.

⁹ Horwath, J. & Tarr, S. 2015, Child visibility in cases of chronic neglect: Implications for social work practice, *British Journal of Social Work*, vol. 45, iss. 5, 1379-94, <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcu073>

Importance of children's rights

Recognising that children have rights is an important step in recognising their individuality and agency. The child's right to have a say about their lives and what happens to them is outlined in Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.¹⁰ As Australia is a signatory to this Convention, our practice is guided by these articles. The Convention covers a whole range of different human rights – civil, political, economic, social and cultural – and sets out the specific ways these rights should be achieved for children and young people.¹¹

Importance of children's agency

It is important to recognise that children are not homogenous and to distinguish the different perspectives based on age, gender and disability but also other differentials within communities, such as family income, wellbeing'.¹²

Research shows different kinds of decision-making approaches which can involve children and young people and the associated limitations and benefits of each approach. A commonly used tool for understanding the various levels of shared decision making is Hart's Ladder of Participation.¹³ The Ladder (Figure 1) depicts eight stages:

1. **Manipulation:** This decision making is led by adults with children doing or saying what adults suggest, with no real understanding of the issues. Adults ask children what they think and may even use some of the child's ideas but not tell the child what influence they have had on the final decision.
2. **Decoration:** In this kind of decision making, children take part in an event or situation – such as wearing a t-shirt with a logo on it – but without really understanding the issues.
3. **Tokenism:** This occurs when children are asked what they think about an issue but have little or no choice about how they express those views or the scope of the ideas they can express.
4. **Assigned but informed:** Adults decide on the project but respect the views of children. Children participate, understanding the project and why they should be involved.
5. **Consulted and Informed:** In this scenario, the project is designed and run by adults, but children are consulted, have a full understanding of the process, and their opinions are taken seriously.
6. **Adult initiated-shared decisions with the child:** In this decision-making model, adults have the initial idea but children are involved in each step of planning and implementation. Their views are considered and they are involved in making the decisions.
7. **Child initiated and directed:** Children have the initial ideas and decide on what is to be done. Adults are available to assist but do not take charge.
8. **Child initiated, shared decisions with adults:** In this participatory model, children initiate with their own ideas and invite adults to join in making decisions.

¹⁰ United Nations 1989, Convention on the rights of the child, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CRC.aspx>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² West.

¹³ Hart, R. 1992, Children's participation: From tokenism to citizenship, United Nations Children's Fund International Child Development Centre.

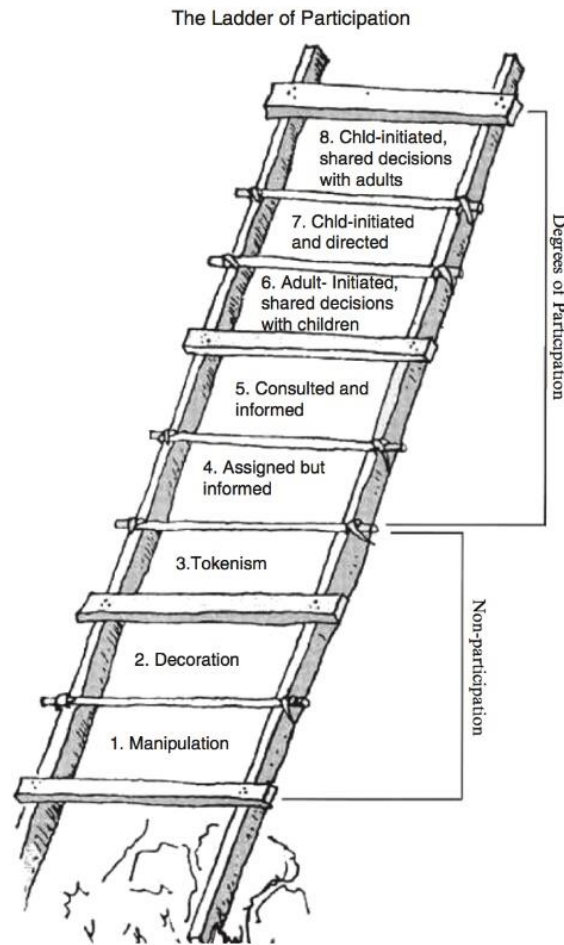


Figure 1: Hart's Ladder of Participation

Another typology of child and youth participation and empowerment distinguishes between adult, youth and shared control. In this approach, the optimum degree of empowerment is seen as shared control, with adults and young people jointly participating in the decision making rather than being only youth driven.¹⁴

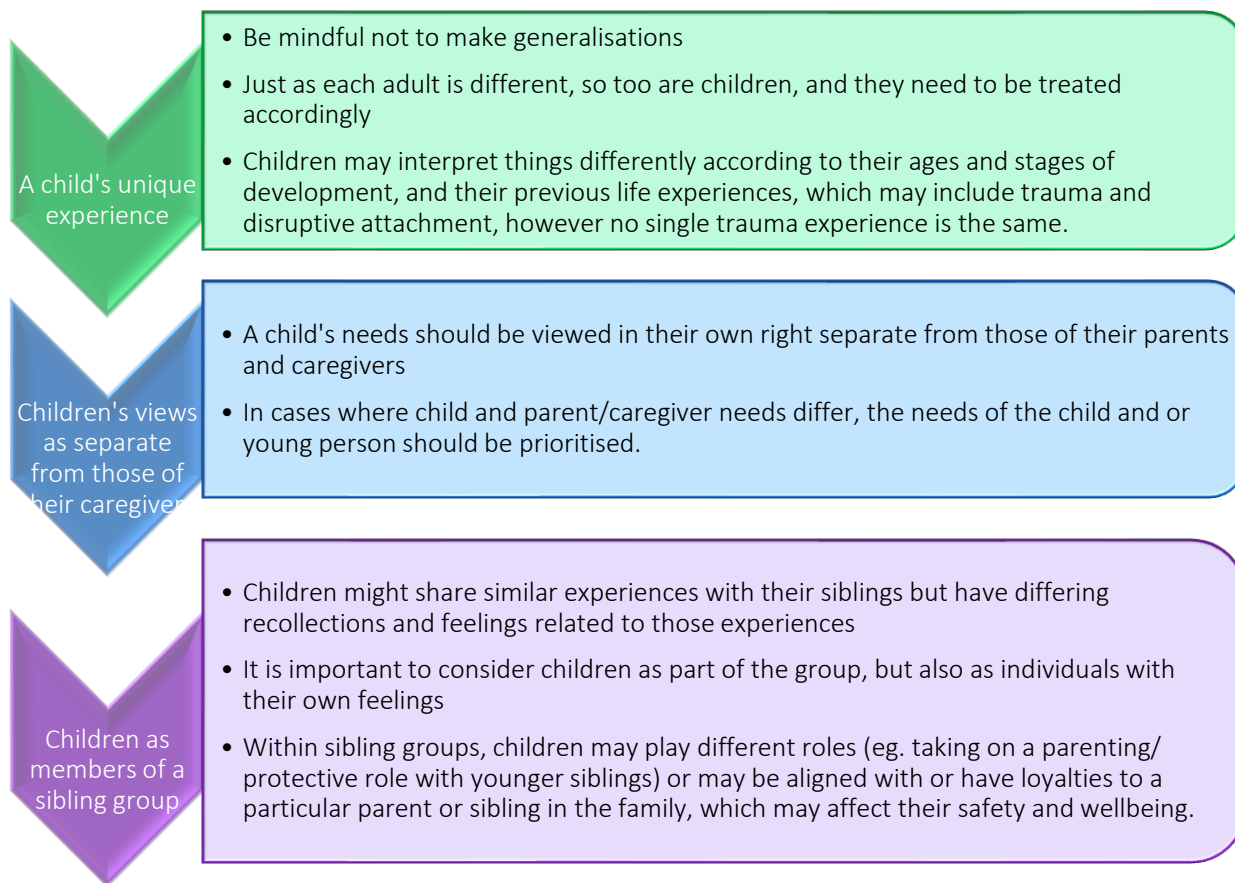
Empowering children builds on their strengths and assists them to become more confident in who they are as individuals. It also provides them with a greater sense of control and power over their own lives so that they can make decisions that affect them.¹⁵

Practice tips

The following diagram highlights some key practice tips when seeking to engage with children in their own right.

¹⁴ Wong N., Zimmerman, M. & Parker, E. 2010, A typology of youth participation and empowerment for child and adolescent health promotion. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, vol. 46, pp. 100–14.

¹⁵ Moore, T. 2017, Protection through participation: Involving children in child-safe organisations. CFCA Practice Paper.



Understanding children's vulnerability

Vulnerable children need consistent, coherent and coordinated support throughout childhood.¹⁶

It is important to prioritise the safety and wellbeing of children over adults given their vulnerability but care also needs to be taken to avoid adopting a paternalistic view of vulnerability that concludes children need to be protected from participation and in effect silenced.

Children have specific vulnerabilities in the sense that they are less able to avoid being harmed.¹⁷ There are also particular situations, such as being exposed to long-term neglect and abuse or to high levels of family violence that render some children more vulnerable than others.

Assessment of vulnerability requires careful examination and interpretation of evidence and professional knowledge and experience.¹⁸

¹⁶ OECD. (2019), Changing the odds for vulnerable children: Building opportunities and resilience, <https://doi.org/10.1787/a2e8796c-en>

¹⁷ Ibid.

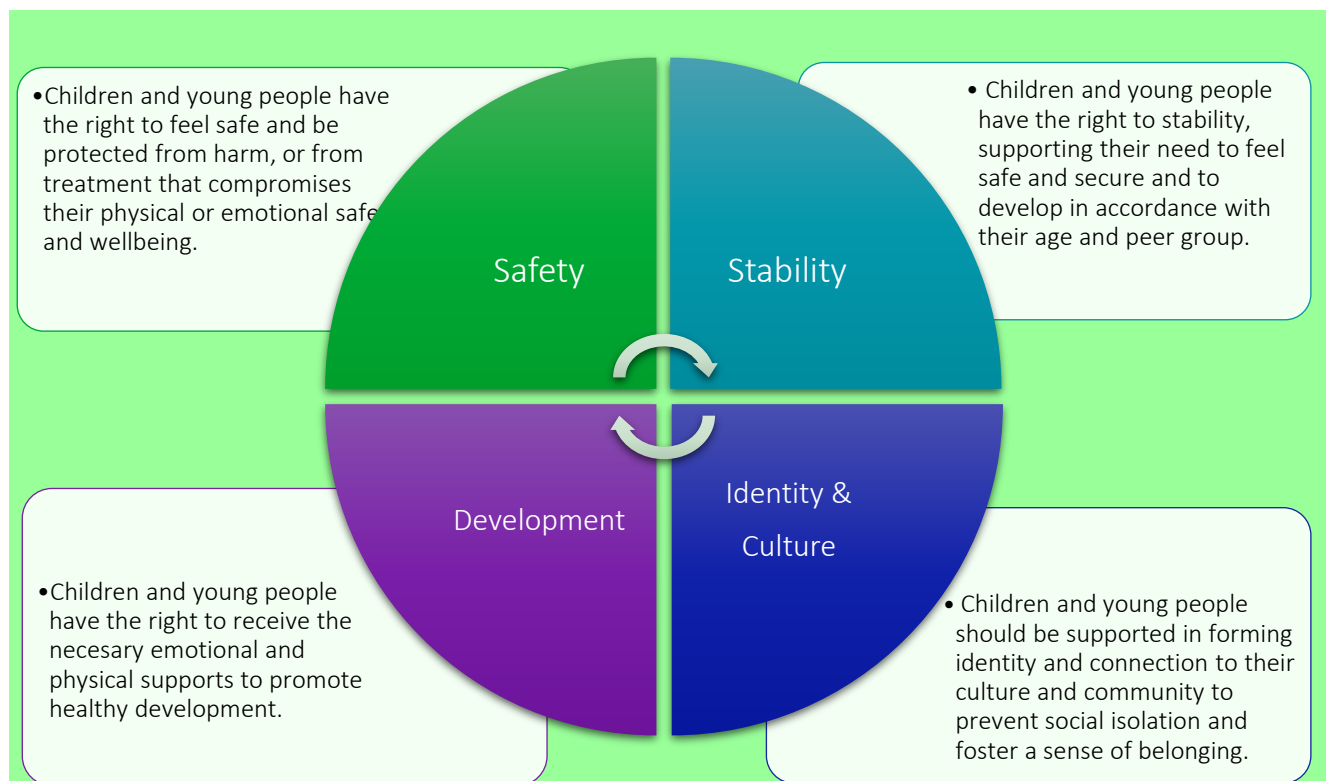
¹⁸ Department of Health and Human Services, 2017, Healthcare that counts: A framework for improving care for vulnerable children in Victorian health services, <https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/about/populations/vulnerable-children>

Children’s vulnerability can be long term or time limited. It can arise from a wide range of interconnecting factors and circumstances, including (but not limited to):

- cognitive, emotional or physical capabilities such as disability or mental health challenges
- being part of an immigrant group, which may mean limited access to economic, social or health supports
- being subject to maltreatment
- living in an income-poor household or in insecure or unsafe housing conditions
- being placed in care
- living with parents or caregivers with mental health challenges or with alcohol or substance abuse
- being exposed to family violence.¹⁹

Children’s rights and wellbeing

The diagram below looks at key domains of wellbeing, showing the interconnections between children’s vulnerability, rights and wellbeing.



¹⁹ OECD.

Key messages in engaging with children

Ultimately, children want adults to listen to them, to take their views seriously and to act appropriately and responsively if they are being harmed or at risk of being harmed.²⁰

The findings of a study on effective engagement with families applies equally to engaging with children *within* those families.²¹

- Engaging with children is a relational process where success depends on the nature and quality of the relationships established between those involved.
- The skills required are able to be learned.
- Engagement is the medium through which intervention to change behaviour and outcomes for children can be driven.
- Decision making is based on several sources including the child's views and wishes.
- Engagement must be done authentically and not through a tick box approach if it is to lead to improved circumstances for children.²²

Meaningful engagement with children, young people, their parents, caregivers and families is the key to successful practice when seeking to maintain child safety and wellbeing.²³

²⁰ Moore, T. 2015, Engaging and partnering vulnerable families and communities: The keys to effective place-based approaches, invited presentation at the Goulburn Child FIRST Alliance Conference 2015 – The NEXT Generation: The future of our children and young people's safety is in our hands – Shepparton, 27 October.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

