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Sharing our journey

Introduction

The Commission gave me a great opportunity to be heard, experience a formal process of change and gain insight into other views and perspectives.
(Abdul, 18 years)

At the Commission we believe we can do our job better if we listen to children and young people and take their views seriously. The 'we know what's best for you' approach, where adults impose decisions on children and young people, does not always deliver 'what's best for you'.

We have found that making children and young people partners in decision making processes gives legitimacy to our work. It means that our research, submissions, recommendations and reports reflect the experiences of the children and young people we work with in New South Wales. Kids' participation has also assisted us to influence how others involve children and young people at both state and national levels, for example, in research, conferences, summits and the development of policies.

Children and young people's participation has been central to the Commission's work since we began in 1999. In developing our participation initiatives, we have used the advice from children and young people featured in our *TAKING PARTICipation Seriously* kit (TPS) to guide our approach.

TPS is a kit based on the views of children, young people and adults working with kids about how their organisations involve kids effectively in decision making. It features the following seven modules:

- **Sharing the Stage**
- **Conferences and Events**
- **Meeting together – deciding together**
- **All aBoard!**
- **Checking the Scoreboard**
- **Count me in!**
- **Participation: Sharing the journey**

The range of topics and practical tips makes TPS a unique and valued resource. It has been well received by organisations and people working with children and young people across New South Wales, Australia and worldwide.

About this Module

The Commission's experience of involving children and young people in our work has been fun, rewarding and challenging. We have learnt a lot about the ways that children and young people want to be involved and have their say, by allowing them to do just that. We don't have all the answers, but with each initiative we undertake we build on our knowledge, learning more about what works and what can be improved.

This module documents our learning as we involved children and young people in our work. It's not a guide on how organisations should involve children and young people in their work, rather it shares our successes and failures as we continue the conversation about participation which we began in *Sharing the Stage, TPS*.

It's based on a project we undertook to review and reflect on our participation initiatives. Children and young people shared their views through written questionnaires, small focus groups and one to one meetings. Some young people who participated in the review also read parts of this report and provided their comments on the content. The quotes from children and young people in this report feature their ages when they participated in this reflection project. Many of the kids were therefore younger when they were actually involved in the Commission's work.

From this project we learnt a number of lessons about how to improve our participation mechanisms and methods. The two most significant things we have learned are that participating in decision making is important to children and young people's well-being and the information from kids featured in the Commission's *TAKING PARTICipation Seriously* kit does help kids participate.

Why participation is important to kids

It was a week of my life that will stay with me forever. (Emily, 17 years)

I loved my experience. (Paddy, 17 years)

All of the children and young people we spoke with in reviewing our experiences of participation had positive comments to make about their experiences. For many of the young people, having the opportunity to participate in a decision making process was a significant event in their life.

All round the Commission gave me the opportunity of a lifetime. (Katy, 19 years)

Children and young people told us that participating is important to them because it helps them to meet new people and make new friends.

I met people I will be friends with for life. (Amanda, 16 years)

Giving children and young people the support to participate in decisions that affect them also helps to build a sense of agency that contributes to their well-being.

I've learnt some good leadership skills, gained confidence, it made me start listening to the news to know what's going on. I want to really make a difference.

(Young People's Reference Group member, 15 years)

Participation can help to make children and young people more active, informed and confident citizens. Children and young people told the Commission that participating in the Commission's work was an opportunity to gain new skills and experiences to use now and in the future.

Helped in my CV in applying for jobs and also in volunteer roles. (Sandi, 22 years)

Involving children and young people also helps to build a sense of connection between kids and the community they live in.

It got me interested in making a difference and I wouldn't be who I am today if I hadn't had this experience. I'm now involved in various community projects and my school's SRC.

(William, 16 years)

Our Experiences

1. KIDS' PARTICIPATION IN ESTABLISHING THE COMMISSION

Children and young people's participation was fundamental in shaping the direction of the Commission from the very beginning. The New South Wales Government was the first in Australia to seek, and take seriously, the views of children and young people in the formation of a Children's Commission. This has since been adopted in other Children's Commissions, both in Australia and overseas.

In 1998 more than 150 children and young people from across New South Wales participated in group discussions about the possible role and functions of the Commission. Meetings were run by young people from the Premier's Youth Advisory Council with support from the NSW Office for Children and Young People. The young people running the meetings were able to easily relate to kids and help kids feel comfortable having their say.

Kids have a place in decision making

Ask children and young people what they consider to be the most effective method of participation. They may know what works best with their peers.

- Page 16, TPS: Sharing the Stage

Children and young people said that the Commission should be able to consider all of the issues that are important to kids in NSW. The views of children and young people influenced the decision that a child and youth-friendly Commission should be established with a broader mandate than that which was initially proposed by the 1997 Wood Royal Commission into Paedophilia.

Young people of different backgrounds should all be accepted and they need to feel like they belong and that there is someone out there for them.

(Young person in consultation, 16 years)

During the Commission's establishment more than 1,200 children and young people participated in selecting the Commission's logo. The NSW Department of Education and Training (DET) developed teaching and learning materials to assist students select a logo and understand the role of the Commission. The assistance of DET was essential in getting so many children and young people to participate and developing participation methods that were appropriate to kids.

This project helped to promote the role of the Commission amongst children and young people, as well as select a logo that appealed to kids and made the Commission feel more approachable to them. Children and young people who participated gained knowledge about the role of the Commission.

When we consulted children and young people about the qualities they felt the Commission should have many said it should be 'accessible', 'friendly' and 'approachable'. The Commission's location, near Sydney's Central Station, as well as our design and office fit-out, were chosen to reflect these qualities.

On entering the Commission, kids can immediately identify our office as a friendly place by the children's play equipment in the foyer. Our offices and furniture are brightly coloured and we have games for children and young people to play.

Our office is also decorated with art created by children and young people who were finalists in our *Art of the State 2000* competition and from DET's *Operation Art* each year. The artworks brighten the Commission and help to stimulate our working environment. They help remind staff to 'listen' to what kids have to say so that we can better understand their views and opinions. The artworks also demonstrate to children and young people who come to the Commission that kids are part of this place.

Apart from the office fit-out, the attitudes of staff at the Commission contribute to making it a place where children and young people feel comfortable visiting. As one child who visited the Commission's office said:

*Four people said hello to me and five smiled.
At my Dad's work no-one does that.*

(Carina, 8 years)

In Summary

Involving children and young people in the formation of the Commission has created an organisational culture of kids' participation that helps us to consider issues from the perspective of kids. It has also helped kids to understand and relate to the Commission as they influenced the formation of the Commission's identity, from our legislation to our logo and our office design.

In turn this helps the Commission to better perform our functions of promoting the participation, safety, welfare and well-being of children and young people.

2. KIDS SETTING DIRECTIONS

Children and young people's participation helps us set our directions. The main way this happens is through the Young People's Reference Group. Their advice and feedback has covered a broad range of issues for the Commission's governance, general legislation, submissions, our strategic plans and policies. They have also helped determine the nature and content of many Commission publications, our website and our promotional items.

Young People's Reference Groups 2000 – 2005

I felt I was making a difference. It felt good.

(Sarah, 17 years)

The first Young People's Reference Group was established in April 2000. Since then more than 65 young people between the ages of 11 and 18 years from a diversity of backgrounds and areas across NSW have been members of the Reference Group. Each year children and young people across NSW are invited to nominate to be on the Reference Group. Applicants are chosen by a panel of Commission staff and young people and are interviewed over the phone before being appointed.

Staff meet Reference Group members at the beginning of each year, are kept informed at staff meetings of the Reference Group's work and are invited to attend meetings to seek the young people's views.

Kids have a place in decision-making

To be able to participate effectively in decision-making, children and young people need to know how decisions are made in the organisation.

- Page 19, TPS: Sharing the Stage



Reference Group members receive training, including *Speak Up Speak Out* Advocacy training, when they first start so that they understand their role at the Commission, how decisions are made and their part in influencing these decisions. This is particularly important as many of the young people have not had the experience of participating in a committee before. They also receive a member's package at the start of their term with all the information they need about the role of the Reference Group, the Commission and where they can get assistance if needed.

The Commission invites parents and family to the Group's first meeting so that they can meet Commission staff and learn about the Commission and the role of the Group. We have found that building these relationships and trust with young people's families increases the likelihood that young people will participate in other opportunities.

The Group meets regularly, which helps staff with project planning and makes it easier for staff to incorporate kids' views into projects, particularly those projects with short timeframes. Meetings are held every six to eight weeks at the Commission and are attended by the Commissioner and other Commission staff. Meetings run for half a day with plenty of scheduled breaks so that young people can refresh and have some informal fun between meeting agenda items.

Before each meeting members are sent a meeting package, which includes an agenda and background information on each agenda item. The background information is kept to one page and written in an easy to read format. In this information the Commission asks members to think about their views on each issue to be discussed before the meeting. This gives young people time to prepare for meetings and perhaps talk with their friends or families about the issues to be discussed.



The Commission supports young people on the Reference Group by organising travel for members from rural and regional parts of NSW and we employ a youth worker to supervise members who are required to stay in Sydney overnight prior to meetings. We also support young people's participation by paying for their accommodation and meals during their stay in Sydney.

When asked about their experiences, the majority of young people who have been Reference Group members said it was a positive experience for them.

Young people told the Commission that the best things about participating on the Reference Group were that they were listened to, learnt new skills, got involved in other projects, met new people, had fun and felt supported. Young people also spoke positively about feeling appreciated for their input, both by Commission staff and by being paid for their time on the Group.

It was great fun, I learnt a lot and I would do it again any day. Whilst we were helping the Commission with their work they made it enjoyable and worthwhile for us.

(Daniel, 18 years)

Strong relationships with kids

Children and young people see the world through their relationships with others. The stronger these relationships the easier and more actively they participate in their world.

- Page 29, TPS: Sharing the Stage



One of the most important lessons we've learned is that good relationships are key to the successful participation of children and young people. Most young people who participated in the Young People's Reference Group said that the friendships they had made and the support they received from Commission staff were some of the best things about participating.

Someone was always there to support us with any issues we needed help with, without putting us down.
(Rohan, 17 years)

A few young people told us that they didn't feel like they made much of a contribution to the Commission's work because they felt too young to confidently participate. In a group setting this is often an issue and the Commission is learning as we go about ways we can help all young people to have a say, for example, through small group work and using a variety of methods that cater to different young people's strengths. We aim to vary the activities, which are often taken from the *Conferences and Events* module of the Commission's *TAKING PARTicipation Seriously* kit, throughout each meeting so that young people don't feel bored or excluded in any way.

When we break into small groups you have a bit more of a say because of less people.
(Young People's Reference Group member, 14 years)

Young people we spoke with as part of this review project identified that one limitation of the Reference Group was the small number of young people who had the opportunity to participate each year.



Kids have a place in decision-making

Reference groups should be encouraged to seek the views of other children and young people outside the group. By drawing on these informal networks, organisations can gain a wider range of views and a more complete picture.

- Page 15 TPS: Sharing the Stage

Young people suggested that one way to strengthen the group is to utilise the links between members and their communities more. They suggested that Reference Group members could be asked to undertake projects in their communities or research issues with other kids that will be discussed at upcoming meetings.

I used the advocacy training we received to help my SRC.
(Young People's Reference Group member, 2005)

Young people also said that they leave the Reference Group with new skills and knowledge that they want to continue to use and develop.

Not only was I encouraged to get involved, but even after my term had ended the Commission continued to involve me in projects ... and it opened up many other opportunities.
(Sarah, 17 years)



At times we have recommended past members for committees, asked them to present at conferences and involved them in other participation initiatives. A number of Reference Group members have also undertaken traineeships at the Commission upon leaving the Group. One challenge for the Commission is how to continue to support these young people, and other kids we work with, to participate in their communities or other settings. This is something we are considering in the development of our future participation initiatives.

In Summary

As the central strategy for kids' participation in the Commission, the Young People's Reference Group has played a significant part in influencing our work, structure and operations.

The Reference Group has also been important in helping the Commission to model, promote and continually develop our knowledge, on making participation worthwhile for both kids and organisations.

3. KIDS AND GOVERNANCE

At the Commission we have developed a number of strategies to involve children and young people in the governance of our organisation. We believe this improves the quality of our governance by having an organisational culture where the contributions of kids are recognised and valued, strategic directions that reflect kids' issues, and more accountability to kids.

Participation is part of the organisation's culture

For children and young people's participation to be effective it needs to be part of the belief system of the organisation.

Without a culture where children and young people's participation is valued, it can be a significant struggle to put effective mechanisms for participation into practice.

- Page 7, TPS: Sharing the Stage

Organisational culture

Having a leader who is dedicated to involving children and young people in the Commission's work has been essential to the success of kids' participation. The Commissioner's commitment to kids' participation has meant that resources are allocated to support participation, including for staff development, and decision making structures are adapted to suit children and young people. Young people also told us that they appreciate the support given to their participation from staff at all levels within the Commission.

I like the fact that [the Commissioner] sat in on meeting and tried to be involved with the forums that we did.

(Amanda, 16 years)

At the Commission we have a number of staff related policies that aim to make children and young people's participation part of our culture. These were developed during the Commission's establishment in consultation with the Young People's Reference Group and have been further revised and developed since.

Kids' Time

The Commission's Kids' Time policy encourages staff members to volunteer part of their normal paid work time with children and young people outside their typical work and family duties. This policy is intended to improve staff understanding of childhood and children and provides a direct point of reference within the Commission for children and young people.

Some of the Kids' Time activities that staff undertake include homework help for young people, caring for children in after school care and assisting at a children's hospital.

Commission staff values

Participation is part of the organisation's culture

Children and young people's participation is most effective when staff members believe in the principle and support the practice. It is people who bring the organisation, its policies and practices to life.

- Page 10, TPS: Sharing the Stage

"To us, kids are paramount" is listed under the values section of every Commission staff member's job description. At performance review time, supervisors and staff discuss and assess how well they put this value into practice. This helps to keep all staff focused on children and young people's needs and how kids can participate in any decisions that are made in their work. When staff undertake projects, or new staff begin work at the Commission, these values help make it clear what their focus should be.

For Commission staff personally, children and young people's participation is an opportunity to build positive relationships with kids on a face-to-face basis. Interaction with kids can re-energise adults and give them a focus to their work.

It's great being able to directly relate to and understand who you are working for - children and young people.

(Commission staff member)

In Summary

Having an organisational culture of kids' participation helps Commission staff to clearly understand their priorities, enjoy their work by being with kids and consider kids' different perspectives to assist in their work.

Human resource management

Staff and tender selection panels

Participation is part of the organisation's culture

The involvement of young people in the selection and tender process means that they have direct involvement in the organisation.

It helps to make participation part of the workplace culture and reinforces the culture of participation as staff and contractors are selected who can develop a good rapport with children and young people.

- Page 11, TPS: Sharing the Stage

Young people are fully involved in the selection of all permanent staff and consultants employed by the Commission. This includes participating in short listing of applicants, developing interview questions, participating in interviews and selecting the preferred applicant. Some of the tender selections that young people have been involved in include the design of the Commission's website and evaluations of Commission projects.

Young people who participate in panels are usually current or past Young People's Reference Group members who have an understanding of the Commission. The Commission does not involve children under 12 years on selection panels as the relatively formal process we are required to undertake as a public sector agency would not be an empowering experience for most children.

Young people have told us that participating in the recruitment process provides them with new and valuable skills they can use in other areas of their life.

Being on a selection panel is both fun and educational. Young people can often see things about an applicant that adults don't notice.

(Young People's Reference Group member, 17 years)

To help make young people's participation on selection panels positive, other panel members provide support and assistance so young people feel able to participate with confidence. Young people have told us this is important.

When I was asked to be on a selection panel I was unsure about my role and what the Commission was looking for, but [a staff member] supported me and made me feel really comfortable.

(Young People's Reference Group member, 19 years)

We have also learnt that it is important to adapt the selection process to kids' needs as much as possible, for example, regular breaks while interviewing so that the young person can refresh and ask questions if needed and contacting the young person's school beforehand so they can be released from classes.

Trainees

During consultations to establish the Commission, children and young people said that Commission staff should be young and able to relate to children and young people. Traineeships give young people the opportunity to be involved in the Commission's daily work. Trainees help staff to keep in touch with issues concerning children and young people. They also provide a direct link to kids in the community, which staff can utilise to make their workload easier when undertaking consultation or research projects with kids.

Since its establishment the Commission has offered at least three trainee positions every year for young people. These traineeships are in the areas of Policy, Community Education and Administration and trainees undertake a Certificate in Business Administration.



Traineeships also benefit young people directly. Young people who have undertaken traineeships have told us that it provided them with valuable workplace skills, experience and opportunities.

My experience of being a trainee was invaluable. I was involved in the Commission's daily work, not just given a marginal role.
(Asaf, 22 years)

Trainees are appointed a supervisor, who assigns them tasks and assists them in their work, as well as a buddy. The role of the buddy is important in helping Trainees with their transition to full-time work or with any issues that may arise. The success of the Commission's traineeships are also dependent on the kind of work Trainees are given. Young people have told us that they appreciate being given experiences and opportunities that match and expand their capabilities.

In Summary

Involving children and young people in the Commission's human resource strategies has resulted in the Commission employing staff who can work well with kids and who better understand the perspectives of kids as a result of working with young people on a daily basis.



Accountability

For the Commission being an accountable organisation means not only fulfilling our legislative and corporate requirements, but also being accountable to those we represent, children and young people.

Participation rewards kids and the organisation

Children and young people need to see that their contributions affect the decision-making process and make a difference.

- Page 40, TPS: Sharing the Stage

Early on the Young People's Reference Group told us that they wanted to be shown the outcomes of their contribution. They also told us that children and young people in NSW wanted to know about how kids are involved, and how they can get involved, in the work of the Commission.

Other children and young people have told us that participation is worthwhile for them when something happens as a result of their involvement. This means following through on what children and young people say and showing them how we are doing this.

I've seen [the Commissioner] on the news sometimes talking about things we have discussed. I've seen magazines with their work, our work and our picture in it.
(Young People's Reference Group member, 14 years)





Feedback

*It's great that everything we say you guys take into consideration and then you show us the outcome, e.g. Feedback magazine.
(Young People's Reference Group member, 17 years)*

To report back to kids we produce *Feedback*, our Annual Report to the kids of NSW. *Feedback* shows kids how their input has helped develop and maintain our organisation and influence change.

Children and young people participate in the production of *Feedback*, as well as our Annual Report, by taking photographs and providing comments to use in the reports. This means that the planning and production time for *Feedback* needs to be longer to allow time for kids to participate.

When we posted out *Feedback* in 2002 to children and young people we also sent reply paid postcard style surveys to find out what kids thought of it and the work the Commission does. We used this to improve the next issue of *Feedback* in 2003. For example, one young person suggested:

*Maybe having a bit more input other than just quotes from kids. For example, reports on what they do, in their opinion, with the Commission.
(Young person, 16 years)*



In 2005, we produced two versions of *Feedback*, one for children and the other for young people. We did this as we recognised the need for more age appropriate materials for both children and young people and following the popularity of our *Your Voice* brochure produced for primary school children.

Kids reports

The Commission often prepares a report on our consultations to send back to kids. These reports are written in a way that is appropriate for the age group who have participated and are sent out to all kids who participate, as well as being available on our website.

Kids have told us that they appreciate receiving a report back as soon as possible after the Commission meets with them. This has sometimes been difficult for the Commission to achieve when projects take a significant time to complete or reports are not able to be released due to the requirements of other agencies or Parliament. Children and young people suggested the Commission could address this by writing letters to their school or organisation to update them on the project regularly.

In Summary

By being accountable to kids, they are more likely to trust the Commission and want to participate in our initiatives, which means that we become a more credible organisation because we are able to accurately identify and promote children and young people's views to decision-makers.



4. KIDS, COMMUNITY EDUCATION AND AWARENESS RAISING

Encouraging participation

One of the Commission's key functions under the *Commission for Children and Young People Act 1988* is to promote the participation of children and young people.

TAKING PARTicipation Seriously kit

In 2001 the Commission developed *TAKING PARTicipation Seriously*, a kit that encourages organisations to involve children and young people in decision-making. Since 2001 the Commission has further developed the kit to include six modules:

- **Sharing the Stage**
- **Conferences and Events**
- **Meeting together – deciding together**
- **All aBoard!**
- **Checking the Scoreboard**
- **Count me in!**

In developing the kit, the Commission has spoken with children, young people and adults about their experiences of participation. Young people have given feedback on the final content, design and distribution of the kit.

The kit draws on the real experiences of children and young people. For example, *Meeting together – deciding together* is designed to assist adults involve children and young people in meetings where decisions are made about their lives, such as case-planning meetings. The tools and tips in the module are based on the experiences and ideas of young people in care, for how to improve children and young people's participation.

To understand the experiences of children and young people in care, we worked with the Office of the Children's Guardian, Department of Community Services and CREATE, an organisation that advocates for kids in care. Young people participating in the project were supported on an advisory group by Department of Community Services caseworkers.

Participation rewards kids and the organisation

Children and young people like to participate in projects where there is a clear goal so they can have the satisfaction of having achieved that goal and seen the results of their efforts.

- Page 40, TPS: Sharing the Stage

The young people who participated said the project increased their understanding of their rights and their expectations of their own caseworkers. They also said it helped them to make new friends, learn new skills and increase their confidence.

We can have a say in what happens to us and our life.

(Kids in Casework participant, 12 years)

The kit provides the basis for the Commission's approach to participation, as well as being a resource for other organisations to use. Staff at the Commission are also able to use parts of the kit that apply to their work, helping them to develop a greater understanding of, and ideas on, how to best involve kids.

The Commission has received positive feedback about the kit from many children, young people and adults. The value of the kit is that it is based on a broad range of children and young people's views, so organisations can feel confident using it in their work with kids.

Training and workshops

In performing our key function of promoting kids' participation, we believe it is necessary to provide children and young people with opportunities to develop their skills so that they are able to participate in their communities.

Speak Up Speak Out

The Commission has developed an advocacy training package for young people, *Speak Up Speak Out*, with the aim of demonstrating how to offer training to kids, and so children and young people better understand their rights and have the skills to advocate on their own behalf. Young people from the Young People's Reference Group participated in the development of the training.

In developing the training we learnt from young people it was important to make it fun for young people to participate in, relevant to their experiences and flexible enough to cater to the needs of different young people.

Since then the Commission has conducted the training program with young people in different parts of NSW and it has been well received by young people.

I have learnt more about myself, my abilities and my surrounding peers. I can use the skills learnt in everyday activities.

(Lake Macquarie District SRC member, 16 years)

However, we soon realised that we did not have the resources or contacts to make the training available to the diversity of young people across NSW. Therefore, the Commission decided to offer a licence to other organisations working with young people to run the training independently of the Commission. A number of organisations now have the licence, so the training is available to a broader range of young people than the Commission could deliver it to.

Minto under 12s project

In 2002 the Commission worked with teachers at Sarah Redfern Primary School and community workers in Minto to develop advocacy training for year five students on the Student Representative Council (SRC).

The content of the training was adapted for the younger age group from *Speak Up Speak Out*. Working with teachers with knowledge of the children's experiences and capabilities was important in making the training appropriate to the needs of the children it was being developed for.

Teachers at Sarah Redfern Primary School have continued to provide the leadership training to students on the SRC each year following the project. As a result of the project, students have initiated their own community projects, including caring for their local natural environment and supporting children and their families who are refugees. This project has not only helped the children to develop new skills and confidence, but the local community has benefited more broadly.

It's fun. You get to express your feelings. You get more confidence.

(Sarah Redfern Primary School student, 11 years)

Delegates at conferences and events

To support the development of children and young people's skills and promote participation, the Commission often assists kids to participate as delegates at conferences. We have supported young people to participate in conferences such as the Ninth Australasian Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect, Association for the Welfare of Child Health (AWCH) 10th National Conference and Youth Action & Policy Association (YAPA) annual conferences.

Young people who have participated in events have told the Commission that the experience has been valuable in giving them new skills, meeting new people and increasing their confidence.

However, some young people said that they wished they had been better informed about the conference topic before participating. Some young people said they felt they had been treated in a negative or tokenistic way by adults at conferences. Young people suggested that the Commission should have more of a role in creating positive relationships and understanding between young people who attend conferences and other organisations involved or attendees.

Maybe first brief young people on how to deal with adults and some of the issues that may be raised during the conference.

(Young People's Reference Group member, 17 years)

Adults adapt to kids' way of working

Involving children and young people in the planning of the event at the earliest stages possible can help make kids participation a success for everyone.

- Page 36, TPS: Conferences and events

By forming a committee of children and young people, or involving kids on the event organising committee if appropriate, kids can be involved early on in the planning. We have learnt that it can also help to get children and young people together with conference organisers before the event to discuss any issues that might arise and provide the kids with background information.

By modelling the possibilities for involving children and young people in conferences, the Commission has influenced others to make kids' participation a central part of conferences. It is now hard to imagine a conference on child abuse, alcohol and drugs, health, or any other issue concerning children and young people, taking place in Australia without kids' participation.

Kids giving presentations and workshops

The Commission regularly gives presentations and runs workshops on participation at conferences, forums and other events. These presentations are one way we perform our functions of promoting children and young people's participation and well-being. Young people often co-present with Commission staff, modelling how young people and adults can work together. This assists the Commission in our role of promoting children and young people's participation.

For example, in 2002 young people co-presented with Maura Wolf, an expert on participation from the US, at the Commission's Kids on Board Forum. Young people spoke about their experiences of participating, sharing their views with adults and other young people in the audience.

Participation rewards kids and the organisation

Children and young people see the chance to develop new skills as one of the key benefits of participating in decision-making.

- Page 37, TPS: Sharing the Stage

Young people who have participated in presentations have told the Commission they enjoy being involved as it gives them new skills and confidence.

Before giving the presentation we have learnt that it is important to spend time with young people preparing what each person is going to say. This makes everyone feel more confident when they are presenting. We have also learnt that encouraging young people to speak about their own experiences and from their perspective works best, rather than asking them to read a speech written in "adult words".





If young people know there are people who want to listen and help them they are more likely to voice their own opinion and speak out.

(Young People's Reference Group Member, 14 years)

Communication and promotion

Since our establishment the Commission has undertaken a number of initiatives involving children and young people in order to further promote and model participation to other organisations and communities.

The Commission should educate the wider community on kids issues - lectures, community information sessions, videos made by kids from their perspective.

(Young person in consultation, 18 years)

Kids and the media

As with public presentations, the Commission supports young people to help represent their views through the media. While not official spokespersons for the Commission, their work as members of the Young People's Reference Group and other projects such as the NSW Obesity Summit usually generates strong media interest.

While the experience can be intimidating, many young people said they enjoyed learning more about how the media operates and its role as a powerful influencing 'tool' in society. Young people are also keen to understand the different ways that print, radio, television and the website can be used to communicate kids' views.



The media training we did was good, it helped me to learn more about how the media works, so when I was interviewed I felt confident.

(Young People's Reference Group member, 14 years)

Young people's participation is especially important when the media is covering an issue affecting young people's lives but the public 'discussion' is dominated by adult perspectives. Weaving children and young people's voices and opinions into the coverage helps to inform public debate and provide a balance of views that are representative of more than one section of the community.

Before young people speak to the media it is important to spend time with young people preparing for what each person is going to say and the key messages they wish to communicate. Like adults who undertake media training, the Commission encourages young people to participate in 'mock' interviews to help them practice speaking in the short, pointed style preferred by the media and to help them stay focused on the topic.

The Commission also supports young people in the media by setting up the interviews and screening requests so young people aren't exposed to media formats they can't handle.

What's the Story? Youth Media Forum 2001

The Youth Media Forum was hosted by the Commission, initiated by the Minister Assisting the Premier on Youth Affairs and conducted jointly with the NSW Office for Children and Young People. A young person chaired the forum.



The event brought together 60 young people, journalists and youth advocates from across NSW. It looked at young people's representation in the media and developed young people's media skills. Young people participated in panels and workshops during the day, having input into the Forum's recommendations.

Information stalls at expos and events

On occasion, the Commission has held information stalls at events, such as Kids Universe and the 2005 Education Expo. As well as Commission staff, we ask young people, usually from our Young People's Reference Group, to assist at the stall. This demonstrates to others that kids are part of the Commission. It can also mean that kids are more likely to approach our stall, our stall is fun and it helps the young people involved develop skills and confidence in communicating with members of the public.

I think the Commission is doing a great job but they need to advertise what they are doing more, so kids know what's being done for them.

(Submission to legislative review from young person, 14 years)

Kids as Commission ambassadors

On various occasions the Commission has supported children and young people to represent the Commission at events. Young people have attended events such as Gala Dinners, including the 2002 NSW Council for Reconciliation Dinner and 2005 Sydney Peace Prize Gala Dinner, as well as launches of various reports and events, including National Youth Week.

His [Olara Otunno] words were inspiring and it was definitely a night to remember.

(Caroline, 15 years)

Children and young people also featured in the Commission's television community service announcement in 2004, speaking alongside the Commissioner about the role and work of the Commission.

By supporting children and young people to represent the Commission, we are demonstrating to other organisations and adults the valuable role that kids can play as leaders in their communities. Children and young people told us that they enjoy these opportunities as something they would not usually have the opportunity to participate in.

In Summary

By modelling a culture of kid's participation in our own work, providing resources and supporting kids' skills development, the Commission has been able to successfully achieve our function of influencing other organisations and government to involve children and young people in their organisational culture and decision making processes.

5. KIDS AND POLICY

Policy helps shape children and young people's world. Yet children and young people are often excluded from the policy process because consultations are only advertised in papers that they don't read, or meetings are held at times during school hours, or only written submissions are called for. The Commission has actively tried to be a bridge between children and young people, and the policy process, so they too can help shape the world.

Issues identification

In order to inform and give legitimacy to our policy work, we need to first understand children and young people's experiences and the issues that are important to them. At the Commission we believe that the best way to do this is to ask children and young people directly.

The type of issues which authorities and the media see as important are often not truly issues that young people see as important.

(Young person in focus group, 17 years)

Important issues project

In 2003 we held small focus groups with 115 children and young people aged 4-19 years from across NSW to find out the issues that were most important to them. In addition, the Young People's Reference Group distributed a questionnaire which 315 children and young people completed. It was also combined with information from other consultations we'd previously held and published in *Ask the Children – Children and young people speak about the issues important to them*. This information was used to identify issues for the Commission to take up.

Young people from the Reference Group said that they enjoyed researching the important issues for kids, as they developed new skills and gained a better understanding of a broad range of kids' issues. This method also benefited the Commission as we were able to gain the views of a range of children and young people that we may not have reached without the Reference Group's assistance.

Participation rewards kids and the organisation

Children and young people are more likely to be enthusiastic about participating in an activity or forum they have planned themselves rather than being given a 'youth' slot in an adult-designated activity.

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Young people have suggested that the Commission could engage children and young people as researchers in a similar way for other projects. However, this approach can use a lot of resources in skilling up kids and supporting them. We are considering this approach for our future participation strategies.

Young Refugees Rule

In 2004, 35 young people who have settled in Australia as refugees, participated in a workshop supported by the Youth Action & Policy Association (YAPA), Auburn Migrant Resource Centre and the Commission. The young people gained practical leadership skills as well as the opportunity to speak about their experiences and needs. This workshop helped Commission staff to better understand some of the issues facing newly arrived refugee young people in NSW.

It was essential to the success of the workshop that the Commission worked with agencies that had an existing relationship with the young people. Workers from these agencies had an understanding of the young people's abilities and cultural backgrounds and were able to provide cultural support. Young people were also more likely to attend and feel comfortable participating as they trusted the workers.

In Summary

Our work in identifying emerging issues for kids helps gives us credibility as an organisation and means we are able to provide advice and solutions on issues as they arise.

Agenda setting

The agenda setting part of the policy cycle is about getting issues onto the public policy agenda so attention is paid to them. The Commission has tried to create opportunities for children and young people to do this either directly or with the Commission acting as their voice.

Instead of consulting children, actually have them represent themselves.

(Young People's Reference Group member, 16 years)

Inquiry into children and young people who have no-one to turn to

Between 2000 and 2001 the Commission held an Inquiry into children and young people who have no-one to turn to. The Commission organised 25 focus groups, seminars and observations with children and young people across NSW. We spoke with approximately 240 children and young people from 4–18 years in settings that included child care centres, schools and TAFE, community based services and a juvenile justice centre.

I think that this was a great experience, talking to these people, and well, I wouldn't have done this if I wasn't encouraged by anyone, and I don't mind this at all!

(Inquiry focus group participant, 11 years)

During consultations for the Inquiry we worked with teachers, childcare workers and other adults who had existing relationships with children and young people in order to help make the kids feel more comfortable participating.

Children and young people's views not only informed the Inquiry report, but were significant in influencing the Commission's understanding of kids early on in our operation. These views are still a major influence in the way we conduct our work and how we involve children and young people.

During the Inquiry, children and young people told us they wanted us to work on preventing them from being hurt and to stop situations arising where they have to be separated from their families, friends and schools. We also learnt from kids that helping them to foster strong connections and relationships is one of the most important and beneficial things we can do, which we aim to do in all our participation initiatives.

In Summary

This Inquiry enabled the Commission to move a number of important issues for children and young people onto the public policy agenda. In particular, the focus on promoting, strengthening and maintaining the well-being of children and young people, rather than working exclusively on deficits. It also highlighted how central relationships with family, friends, schools and communities are to children and young people's well-being.

Consultation

Consultation is used to test possible policy choices, to build consensus or to identify solutions. Since the Commission's establishment, we have undertaken a number of consultation projects involving focus groups and surveys with children and young people. These consultations have been at the request of other agencies or to facilitate children and young people's participation as part of broader community consultation. They have enabled children and young people's voices to be part of the policy process.

It was good because they put our ideas in a booklet and used our ideas to help other kids as well.

(Eddy, 11 years)

At times groups of children and young people visit the Commission as part of a school excursion or community group. When kids visit the Commission we usually take the opportunity to consult with them on an issue we are currently working on. This helps kids to understand what the Commission's role is, as well as providing us with a range of kids' views, making the kids' visit to the Commission worthwhile for both them and us.

From each of our consultation projects we have learnt new lessons that have helped us to improve our approach to children and young people's participation.

Education Futures

As part of their Education Futures project, the NSW Department of Education and Training asked the Commission to consult with children and young people outside of mainstream schools. We spoke with more than 100 children and young people from alternative education programs, juvenile detention centres, child care centres and schools, in a children's hospital. The views of children and young people informed the Commission's report to DET and *Ask the Children – children and young people speak about education*.

In preparing our consultation methods for this project we structured group discussion through activities such as role plays and hypothetical situations, rather than just asking children and young people questions. Being flexible and fun in the methods we use means that we are more likely to gain kids' trust and more in-depth information from them in a short timeframe. During consultations with younger children we asked them to draw pictures and discuss the drawings with us. We have found that testing the methods with children and young people first helps us get it right.

Everyone got the chance to speak up and no one was overlooked.

(Young person in consultation, 15 years)

Young Drivers

Following the release of the NSW Roads and Traffic Authority's (RTA) discussion paper on improving safety for young drivers, the Commission undertook consultations with young people to get their views on road safety. We spoke with more than 130 young people aged 14-19 years across NSW through small focus groups. Their views informed the Commission's submission in response to the RTA discussion paper and *Ask the Children – Young people talk about driving*.

If it's coming from youth, the youth are going to listen, they are not going to listen to someone in a suit and tie who sits in an office all day. If they hear it from us, they'll understand it better.

(Young person in consultation, 17 years)

Adults adapt to kids' way of working

To make the most of children and young people's contributions to decision-making, organisations should create an environment in which children and young people feel comfortable to participate and fit with their way of doing business.

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In adapting to the way that young people work, the consultations were held in places where young people felt comfortable or where they went, such as Western Sydney International Dragway. By going out to where young people are, we have found that they are more likely to participate as they feel more comfortable in their own environment and with other young people they know.

It was a comfortable environment, so we felt ok about talking and sharing our ideas with the Commission.

(Young person in consultation, 16 years)

A-World Fit for Children

In 2004, the Commission was contracted by the Department of Family and Community Services (FaCS) to undertake a consultation with children and young people throughout Australia. This was the Commission's first experience of a participation project that included significant work outside NSW.

We held small focus groups with 235 children and young people between 5-18 years in NSW, Western Australia and Queensland. Developing positive relationships with agencies in these states was essential in organising consultations. One of the key lessons we have learned about conducting consultations is the importance of having good relationships with parents, carers and people who work with children and young people, particularly in working with younger children.

Participation is part of the organisation's culture

Supporting children and young people's participation takes time and this needs to be built into project planning and given the necessary resources.

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During this project this meant making additional time to phone schools and organisations to discuss projects, rather than just sending a letter or email, and taking time to keep in contact throughout the project.

We also ran an online survey on our website which 267 children and young people participated in. This was the first time the Commission has used an online survey as a participation mechanism. In speaking with children and young people about their experiences of participating, many encouraged the Commission to make better use of technology such as internet, email and video.

I would listen to what they [kids] have to say about this survey and seriously consider the changes I would have to make, to make Australia a better place to live in.

(Online survey participant, 14 years)

Children in immigration detention

In 2002, the Commission spoke with ten children and young people from 8-18 years who had lived in Australian immigration detention centres.

The interviews were used as the basis for the Commission's submission to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission *Inquiry into Children in Immigration Detention* and *Ask the children – Kids speak out about immigration detention experiences*.

Having lived in immigration detention and through traumatic events, it was possible that many of the children had negative experiences of authority and questioning. Therefore the Commission contracted an expert with skills working with refugee young people and an understanding of their experiences to conduct the consultations.

We did not have the language and we did not know the system. So in those first weeks it was very difficult for us but we did not know to say anything.

(Young person in interview, 15 years)

We decided to speak with children and young people individually so they felt more comfortable sharing their experiences. This allowed the consultation techniques to be adapted to the kids and for the interview to occur in an environment the kids chose where they felt comfortable and safe. By using methods such as play techniques, interviewers allowed kids to take some control of the interview, which helped build kids' trust.

Prescription and over the counter medications

As part of developing the Commission's submission to the NSW Parliamentary Committee's *Inquiry into the use of prescription drugs and over-the-counter medications by children and young people*, we consulted with children and young people to find out their experiences with prescribed drugs and medications. Small focus groups and online discussion forums were held with 70 children and young people from across NSW.

Children and young people's views formed the basis of our submission as well as a series of *Ask The Children* on prescription drugs and doctors. Where the Commission contracted other organisations to conduct consultations, the Commission received a report summarising the views of children and young people. While the information contained in the report was extensive, it may have been beneficial for Commission staff to request a face to face briefing from the consultant on the project. This would have helped to communicate any issues that could not be adequately represented in the reports.

One of the values in spending time and speaking directly with children and young people is that Commission staff are able to gain a first hand experience of kids' views, experiences and the kinds of places they go to and use. Often these experiences of speaking directly with kids cannot be adequately represented in writing or replaced by a report.

In Summary

Seeking the views of children and young people directly has helped the Commission to gather a wealth of information about kids' lives and what's important to them. Each time we consult with children and young people we further build on our knowledge about different aspects of kids' diverse lives, which helps us to better advocate on behalf of kids.

Policy formulation

In formulating a course of action that can impact significantly on children and young people, it is important that their voices are heard. Since our establishment the Commission has undertaken some initiatives to involve kids in policy formulation.

2003 Alcohol Abuse Summit

The Commission was asked to facilitate young people's participation in the 2003 Alcohol Abuse Summit. While the Commission was able to make decisions and recommendations about how young people would participate, we had to be creative in adapting young people's participation into the formal Summit structure.

In the lead up to the Summit the Commission undertook a number of focus groups to gain young people's views about alcohol-related issues. During these focus groups the Commission consulted with over 200 young people. *Ask the Children – Young people talk alcohol* was developed based on the consultations.

The consultations were invaluable in providing information for the young people participating in the Forum and Summit about what a broad range of young people's views on alcohol are.

The day before the Summit the Commission hosted a Young People and Alcohol Forum. The Forum brought together 59 young people from around NSW to discuss alcohol-related harm and how it can be reduced. Young people at the Forum developed resolutions that were then taken to the Summit by 16 young people.

Young people who participated in the Forum said it was a positive experience. They enjoyed the fun "dramathetical" role play and the opportunity to get together with other young people during the small group work during the day.

I like how the forum was laid back and informal. It was a comfortable environment and was easy to put your opinion forward.

(Alcohol Forum participant, 16 years)

(The Alcohol Forum) gave me the opportunity to see views from all different facets of society.

(Alcohol Forum participant, 16 years)

Strong relationships with kids

If children and young people are expected to work together as a team, they need time to get to know one another and learn to work as a team.

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Some young people felt the day was too rushed. They said they would have preferred more time to get to know each other and feel comfortable before they got together to discuss the issues in small groups.

At the Summit young people participated as delegates and associate delegates. They delivered speeches, tabled the resolutions from the Forum, debated issues, participated in working groups and undertook media interviews. Our experience from the Obesity Summit suggested that having two young people as members of any working group provides mutual support during debates.

Young people's participation proved successful in influencing the Summit outcomes, with the Summit adopting 70 per cent of the young people's resolutions. Given the impact that alcohol issues can have on young people, young people's participation was important so that the resolutions reflected the real needs of young people in NSW.

Young people we spoke with enjoyed participating in the Summit. They said it gave them an insight into how decisions are made, they made new friends, learnt new skills and felt supported by the Commission.

Attending the Alcohol Summit and participating in the Forum was one of the most memorable and worthwhile experiences of my life.

(Sarah, 17 years)

The Commission also received positive feedback from other delegates involved in the Summit regarding the participation of young people. They commented that the young delegates were professional and dedicated to pursuing the issues raised by other young people in the community.

Young people suggested that their experience could have been improved by having more time to understand their role and to get to know other young people. This was a challenge for the Commission as we had to fit within the structure of the Summit.

It would have been better to have met the people at least once before I attended the project firstly, because I think we would worked better as a team because of an earlier orientation.

(Matt, 17 years)

Following the release of the Summit communiqué the Commission developed a young people's version of the Government response, which was sent out to young people who had participated in the Alcohol Forum and Summit. We also asked young people to nominate on a written survey the priority issues in the Government response that the Commission should focus on. Given the broad range of issues, projects and programs being undertaken, and the limited Commission resources, asking young people's views on the priority issues has helped the Commission to prioritise our workload in this area.

Kids have a place in decision-making

Developing a range of mechanisms for children and young people's participation helps to access a broad range of children and young people's views.

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Twenty per cent of the surveys sent out to young people were completed and returned to the Commission. In our experiences, sending out written surveys to young people is only appropriate for some young people. We have learnt that some ways to encourage and make it easier for children and young people to have their say through written surveys are to include pre-paid self addressed envelopes and provide forms of appreciation, such as gift vouchers, for kids who complete surveys.

2002 NSW Childhood Obesity Summit

In 2002 the Commission worked with NSW Health and the NSW Department of Education and Training to support children and young people who participated in the NSW Childhood Obesity Summit. Sixteen young people from across NSW were selected to attend the Summit.

Young people helped organise the Summit and gave advice to organisers about how to effectively involve young people. As delegates at the Summit the young people were involved in working groups, keynote, opening and closing speeches, panel discussions and media interviews.

Other children and young people participated in the Summit through vox pops by FLY TV about food choices and their perspectives on the eating and physical activity habits of kids. The FLY TV videos were shown at regular intervals throughout the Summit, giving the delegates an understanding of a range of kids' views.

Kids have a place in decision-making

Bringing children and young people as close as possible to the decision-makers will reduce the chances of them being ignored or their view being distorted.

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Many young people involved said being a delegate at the Summit was a positive experience.

Yes, because the resolutions/outcomes actually had young people's views in consideration and if we didn't agree with it we could say so and it would be changed.

(Obesity Summit participant, 14 years)

As with the Alcohol Summit, the Commission made it easy for young people to participate by arranging their travel and accommodation and meeting the costs of these. We also arranged for a breakout room where young people could relax and have access to computer facilities to prepare their speeches.

However, some young people felt that other delegates at the Summit didn't take their contribution seriously at first. They felt they had to prove themselves before the adults would listen to what they had to say, whereas other adults were awarded instant respect simply because they were adults.

I enjoyed the Summit. However, at times I felt the other delegates did not take into consideration the views of children and young people. In my focus group I was listened to, but I saw other examples where the young people were completely ignored by the older delegates.

(Simon, 22 years)

Young people suggested that the Commission could have taken more of a role in preparing the adults for children and young people's participation. Some young people told us that they would have liked more preparation and information before the Summit on the issues to be discussed.

Young people said that having more information may have given them more confidence to participate. This feedback was taken on board by the Commission in preparation for the Alcohol Summit where we conducted consultations and a forum before the Summit to provide the young delegates with additional information on alcohol issues from young people's perspectives.

Kids' participation in policy formulation has demonstrated to government that the participation of children and young people can improve the search for solutions. These initiatives have also provided a positive example to governments for future kids' participation initiatives.

Commission forums

Forums can be a useful way to get children, young people and adult decision makers together to discuss issues and formulate policy solutions within a short time frame.

Adults adapt to kids' way of working

It is important for children and young people to have breaks so that they can socialise with others, discuss their ideas or simply re-energise.

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However, in our experiences we have found that some limitations of forums for children and young people are that there is typically not enough time for them to get to know each other and feel comfortable participating. In particular, young people who are not confident speaking in front of others have told us that they find it difficult to participate in forums.

2001 Mobile Phones Forum: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

In 2001 the Commission together with the National Children's and Youth Law Centre, held a forum on mobile phones with young people and mobile phone companies and carriers.

Young people participated in the Forum as the Co-Chair, on the hypothetical panel debate, as well as in workshops with adults to come up with recommendations for government and telecommunication organisations.

The forum directly assisted the Australian Mobile Telecommunications Association (AMTA) to consult with young people in regard to mobile phone contracts. Following the forum the Commission has continued to work with AMTA to address the directions agreed on at the forum.

Supporting kids on committees

The Commission has supported a number of young people to be part of committees and working groups, both internally and externally. For example, young people have participated as representatives on the Drug and Alcohol Workforce Development Council and the Commission's Children at Work Task Force. This provides young people with an opportunity to increase their skills and knowledge. Young people's participation also means that the committee hears directly from young people and the outcomes are more likely to address the issues important to kids in NSW.

I knew about the organisation and the good work it was doing for young people and wanted to be part of that.

(Rey, 20 years)

In recommending young people to participate on committees we consider the nature of the committee before recommending young people, and suggest only young people who have an interest in the issue. We also encourage the participation of two or more young people so that they feel more comfortable and can support each other. Between meetings

Commission staff make themselves available to go through committee agendas, minutes or other issues that arise in relation to the committee with the young people.

Some young people who have participated in committees said that it was not a welcoming or comfortable environment for them. They suggested that the Commission should work with the committee Chair or other members to help them understand how to involve young people in the committee. Young people also suggested to the Commission that it would be useful having an adult mentor or buddy on the committee, who they can ask questions of.

In Summary

Involving children and young people in formulating policy improves the quality of Commission's advice. It helps us design solutions and strategies that reflect kids' views and therefore their needs, rather than leaving it up to adult decision makers only, which may not reflect the needs of kids.

Policy evaluation

Policy evaluation helps keep programs responsive and up to date. It's an opportunity for people to share their experiences and lessons from the policy implementation. Children and young people are impacted by policy, so it makes sense to include them in evaluating policies.

Review of Commission's legislation

During 2004 the Commission's legislation was reviewed by Ms Helen L'Orange AM. As part of the review 255 children and young people shared their opinions on the Commission's role through focus groups and written submissions.

Adults adapt to kids' way of working

The quality of advice depends on the quality of the information made available. If children and young people are being asked to give their views on an issue they should be fully briefed in a manner and language they can understand.

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Kids have told us that it is important to provide background information for children, young people and their parents before asking them to participate. This helps children and young people to think about the issues to be discussed and allows them time before the consultation to discuss it with friends or their family. For the legislative review we prepared a discussion starter to help children and young people organise their thoughts. It was written in a way that was easy for kids to understand and was also available from our website.

Talk to me briefly, use my language - not big technical words.

(Young person in consultation, 15 years)

The views of children and young people were presented to all Commission staff for consideration in our work. Many of the children and young people consulted said that the Commission's very existence made them feel appreciated, but they did not know about the Commission or its role. They suggested that better promotion would encourage more children and young people to participate in the work of the Commission.

If young people know there are people who want to listen and help them they are more likely to voice their opinion and speak out.

(Young person in focus group, 15 years)

6. KIDS AND RESEARCH

When children and young people express their opinions through research it gives them opportunities to be heard by decision makers. In our experiences this can lead to better implementation of research findings, better evaluation and therefore improved policy and practice.

Many of the lessons we have learnt from our participatory research with children and young people has informed *Count Me In!*, part of the Commission's *TAKING PARTicipation Seriously* kit.

In order to act ethically in our research with children and young people, this section does not include direct quotes from kids who participated in our research projects, as the consent we sought from kids did not extend to releasing their quotes for this report.

Setting up research

As children and young people may communicate differently from adults, the Commission aims to design research procedures and questions that take these differences into account.

Children at Work

In 2001 the Commission began research into the experience, extent and nature of children's participation in paid and unpaid work. In consultation with the NSW Department of Education and Training (DET) the Commission distributed a survey questionnaire to young people in high school years 7-10 in a selection of NSW schools. A representative sample of 11,000 young people participated in the questionnaire during school time. This partnership with DET was essential to reaching such a large representative sample of young people.

Kids have a place in decision-making

Children and young people are well placed to help identify methodology that will work effectively with kids participating in research. A test run of the proposed methods will help make sure they are meaningful for children and young people.

- Page 37, TPS: Count me in!

One of the key features of this project was the participation of young people in setting up the research to be child-centred. To make sure the questionnaire was written in an appropriate way for young people, the Commission piloted it with young people in three schools first. We observed how young people approached the questionnaire and what processes would be needed to administer it effectively. We also held small focus group discussions with young people from each school and asked their views on the questionnaire content and process. On the basis of this testing we made a small number of alterations to the wording of some questions and how the questionnaire would be administered.

Another issue that had to be addressed in setting up this project were young people's interpretations of the concepts of work to be used in the research. To make the questionnaire's concept of work relevant to young people and their experiences, we felt it necessary to avoid measures of work traditionally used in research, and to allow for some flexibility. To do this we had to be careful not to pre-judge young people's likely responses. On the other hand, we had to avoid weakening the concept of work by including an overly broad range of activities in the questionnaire. To address this we used open ended questions so that young people provided details of anything they understood to come within the category of work, with the exception of routine household tasks and schoolwork.

The open nature of questions in the questionnaire meant that while we were able to gain a thorough understanding of young people's experiences of work, significant resources and staff time were needed for analysis and writing the report. In order to undertake a project involving such a large number of young people such as this, we learnt that it is necessary to have the resources to support it and the time to commit.

The process itself was also flexible in some aspects. For example, the questionnaire was generally administered with a school year group all at one time. However, in some schools the questionnaire was administered through small friendship or class groups formed by young people themselves. In addition, the questionnaire and administration was adapted for young people with learning and physical disabilities by allowing young people to complete the survey as a group activity or having a specialist teacher assist.

Young people's responses to the questionnaire shaped the Commission's *Children at Work* report that was published in 2005. We felt it was important that young people's views continued to inform the Commission's efforts to act on the conclusions of the report. Two young people from the Young People's Reference Group and two young people from the NSW Youth Advisory Council participated in the Task Force which was set up to make recommendations from the research.

In Summary

Involving children and young people in setting up the Children at Work research instruments gave the Commission a thorough understanding of the diversity of young people's experiences of work.

As a result, the research has dispelled some of the common assumptions made about children and young people's experiences of work and we can influence policy in this area so that it reflects kids' experiences more accurately.

Research processes

We have learnt that one of the best ways to make the Commission's research relevant and fun for children and young people participating, is to ask them to design their own research processes.

Children and Young People's Understandings of Well-being

In conjunction with the University of Western Sydney the Commission has been undertaking research on how children and young people understand 'well-being'. The aim of this research is to develop a set of indicators of well-being, which can be used to monitor children's well-being over time. This project was significant as we allowed children's experiences and attitudes to drive the research process.

Throughout 2003-2004, interviews were held with 130 children and young people aged 8-15 years. The research involved three stages, the first and second involved informal interviews, and in the third stage children and young people did a project of their own design about any aspect of well-being they chose. Projects that children and young people undertook included photo diaries, collages, drawings, journals, making maps and trail walks.

Adults adapt to kids' way of working

Participatory research with children and young people requires a commitment to involving kids and a willingness to be flexible and adapt to their ways of working.

- Page 26, TPS: Count me in!

The Commission adapted to kids' ways of working for the project, by allowing the children and young people to choose when and where to meet for interviews, whether they wanted the interviews recorded or not, and to choose how they would participate in the third stage of the project. The methodology we developed attempted to minimise the power imbalance between adults and kids by giving the children and young people some control over the research process.

One important lesson we learnt from this project was the need to be flexible and able to adapt our approach when the methods are not working for kids. This means acknowledging that our way of working is not always the best way for kids, which can sometimes be difficult for adults.

For this project, researchers spent significant time building relationships with the children and young people who participated. This was important in helping kids to develop their projects and the confidence to interpret their own work, and therefore assisting researchers to gain a thorough understanding of kids' views on well-being. As with the Commission's other participation initiatives, the kids who participated said that they appreciated being listened to and taken seriously by adults.

In Summary

One positive outcome of allowing kids to develop their own research processes in this project has been the rich, in-depth data we received. This allows the Commission to more thoroughly explore how kids understand well-being and influence the development of more appropriate indicators.

Looking to the future

Participation is not a static concept. One constant is the need for evaluating participation processes to ensure they are meeting the needs of children, young people and the organisation involved.

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The participation of children and young people is a positive and rewarding experience for the Commission and the kids involved. While over the last few years we have faced some challenges involving children and young people in our work, these have helped us to improve our approach.

For the Commission, children and young people's participation is a process of involving children and young people in decisions made by the Commission, rather than a series of projects or an 'add on' to our work. It is not about trying to fit children and young people into the way we do work, but adapting our processes to fit kids.

Child and youth cultures change and more innovative ways of involving children and young people in decision-making will always emerge. We are continually considering how we can create opportunities for a diversity of children and young people to participate in the Commission's work. It is after all their Commission.

Undertaking this project to reflect on our experiences of participation has assisted the Commission to consider the possibilities for how children and young people will continue to be involved in the Commission. We now have a better understanding of what has worked, what could be improved, and the gaps and the opportunities, from the perspectives of children and young people. We have identified that one significant gap in our participatory initiatives is the ongoing involvement of children under 12 years.

Our aim is to develop ongoing participation mechanisms so that a broad range of children and young people continue to have opportunities to participate in the Commission, their communities and the decisions that impact on their lives.



Thank you!

The Commission would like to thank everyone who shared their views and experiences for this report. In particular, we would like to thank the young people who have been trainees at the Commission and young people who were involved in the following initiatives:

- **Young People's Reference Groups 2000 – 2005**
- **2003 Alcohol Abuse Summit and Alcohol Forum**
- **2002 NSW Childhood Obesity Summit**

