

# Participation: Sharing the stage

A practical guide to helping children and young people take part in decision making



nsw commission for  
children & young people



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# TAKING PARTicipation

## SERIOUSLY

Participation is more than just giving the younger members of our community a say - it is about listening to their views, taking them seriously and wherever possible giving practical effect to their ideas and suggestions. Children and young people are a great resource in our community and organisations can only benefit from the qualities they are able to bring.

TAKING PARTicipation seriously is a toolkit for organisations who want children and young people's participation to move from rhetoric to reality. It is made up of separate booklets to give you good ideas that are practical and fun.

**Sharing the Stage** is a booklet which sets out an approach to help improve the way your organisation includes children and young people in its work. You might find it helpful to read *Sharing the Stage* before you move on to *Conferences and Events*.

**Conferences and Events** is about how to plan, organise and run meetings, conferences and major events so that children and young people can participate fully in them.

**Including children and young people** is an information sheet that explains why participation is important and how it benefits organisations and children and young people.

The Commission will continually be producing more resource materials to help organisations interested in TAKING PARTicipation seriously. They can be found at the Commission's website at [www.kids.nsw.gov.au](http://www.kids.nsw.gov.au).

## ABOUT **sharing the stage**

Children and young people participate in organisations in a number of ways. They can be involved in programs run by the organisation or they can access the services offered by the organisation. In *Sharing the Stage*, participation refers to children and young people's involvement in policy-level decision-making – children and young people having a say in the decisions the organisation makes that affect them rather than on having a say in personal decisions.

**Sharing the Stage** is here to help you shift your focus from theory to practice. It aims to highlight the key elements that need to be in place for children and young people to participate effectively in decision-making and provides practical advice for organisations who want to involve children and young people in policy-level decision-making.

**Sharing the Stage** challenges adults to change the way we do things so that Young People's participation is effective. It asks us to surrender some of our power and control, and make space for children and young people on our organisation's stage.

**Sharing the Stage** is based on the consultations the Commission held with schools, local government and non-government organisations. We spoke with nearly one hundred children, young people and adults to find out how their organisations involved children and young people effectively in decision-making and what made their participatory models effective.

### **Sharing the Stage** is divided into five sections:

**Dress Rehearsal** is a brief introduction to the guidelines and explores the concept of participation through the metaphor of "Sharing the Stage."

**The Five Key Elements of Effective Participation** features each of the key elements that need to be in place for children and young people to participate effectively in decision-making and provides practical advice for involving children and young people. The points made under this section are illustrated with examples drawn from the consultations held. These examples appear under the heading "Participation in practice."

**The Show Goes On** reinforces the importance of involving children and young people in decision-making, provides concluding remarks and invites organisations to continue to improve the ways they involve children and young people in decision-making.

**Curtain Calls** acknowledges the organisations and individuals who contributed their views during consultations held as part of the Participation Project.

**Useful Resources** lists some references about children and young people's participation in decision-making.

## DRESS REHEARSAL

Involving children and young people in decision-making makes sense. Texts on participation show that initiatives designed for children and young people are more likely to be effective if children and young people are involved in their development and implementation. Other literature shows that children and young people are one of the most important players in decision-making as they have an acute understanding of the issues that affect them. Some of this literature is listed in the "Useful Resources" section of these guidelines.

The 'we know what's best for you' approach where adults impose decisions on children and young people based on what they consider to be their best interests does not always deliver 'what's best for you'. Children and young people must be partners in the decision-making process and their contribution integral to those decisions that affect them.

Participation is often confused with consultation but there is an important difference. Participation involves adults devolving a degree of power to children and young people so that they can have a share in decisions that affect them. Consultation gives children and young people less influence because in the end adults make the decisions and play the lead parts.

The people with the most power or the loudest voice in an organisation - often adults - tend to dominate the decision-making stage sometimes at the expense of children and young people. Where decisions have an impact on children and young people, room should be made in the organisation for children and young people to participate.

It takes an entire cast of actors and a dedicated crew to produce a strong theatrical production. Likewise there are many actors - children, young people, youth workers, teachers and principals - who are significant to decision-making processes that affect children and young people. When space is made for children and young people to participate in decision-making processes that affect their lives, then the show usually opens to full houses.



THE **FIVE Key Elements**

PARTICIPATION IS PART OF THE  
ORGANISATION'S **culture**



## 1. Participation is part of the organisation's culture

For participation to be effective, it needs to be part of the belief system of the organisation, reflecting the importance the organisation places on children and young people and on giving them a say in decisions which affect their lives. Here are some ideas for making children and young people's participation part of the culture of your organisation.

### **Make children and young people's inclusion part of your vision and document this commitment**

The elected representatives and senior managers set the policy and priorities of an organisation. If they have a demonstrated commitment to involving children and young people there will develop an organisational culture of involvement. If they are unenthusiastic or believe that children and young people have nothing to offer it will always be a struggle to put in place effective mechanisms for participation.

Most organisations have documents - constitutions, policy guidelines, social or community plans, strategic directions, or management papers - which define the organisation's values and priorities and set out how things should be done. These documents should specify the organisation's commitment to children and young people's participation in decision-making.

It is always important to allocate resources for setting up participation mechanisms and recruitment and training of staff if the involvement of children and young people is to be effective. Resources to support participation are more likely to be allocated if children and young people's inclusion is part of the organisation's culture.

### Participation in practice

*"Young people are encouraged to participate in decision-making processes at all levels that affect service provision".*

*This is a statement included in a non-government organisation's policy guidelines, expressing a commitment to participation.*

*"The participation of children and young people in services is part of the culture of our agency.*

*We firmly believe that participation is a way of working that is based on building relationships founded on respect and trust. This involves sensitivity to any potential barriers to participation as well as the active development of skills to support participation".*

*In this way one organisation providing a range of services to children and young people expresses its commitment to participation.*

*"The Youth Council will act as a link between young people and the Council".*

*This is how one local council demonstrated its commitment to participation: by establishing a Youth Council to advise on matters affecting children and young people and by incorporating the above statement into its Social Plan.*

### Demonstrate support for participation in day-to-day practice

While the importance of participation should be documented in strategic plans, work plans, practice manuals, decision-making flow charts and other documents, it is equally important to bring these documents to life. Participation must be more than a mission statement or theoretical principle: it has to be a practical reality.

Participation of children and young people should not be viewed as a one-off exercise (or a series of one-off projects). It needs to be integrated as a core activity and considered in every project affecting children undertaken by the organisation.

### Participation in practice

*One primary school demonstrates its commitment to children's participation in decision-making by highlighting the importance of participation in its Code of Core Values. The school then translates this principle into practice by involving children in decision-making during weekly class and school meetings.*

### Establish structures to facilitate participation

The leader or manager of the organisation should establish effective structures and processes for children and young people's participation in decision-making. This provides pathways for children and young people to join in the life of the organisation. It can also protect their participation.

### Participation in practice

*The Mayor of one local council established a steering committee through which children and young people could participate in decision-making. This committee is on the public record and any future Councils would have to pass a resolution to abolish it.*

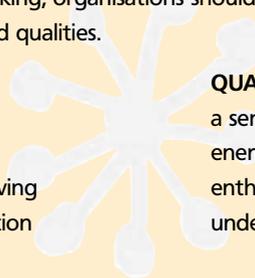
### Recruit committed and skilled staff

Participation by children and young people is most effective when key staff members believe in the principle and support the practice. It is people who bring the organisation, its policies and practices to life.

When employing staff to work with children and young people and facilitate their participation in decision-making, organisations should bear in mind that they will need the following skills and qualities.

#### SKILLS

listening  
facilitation  
problem solving  
communication



#### QUALITIES

a sense of humour  
energy  
enthusiasm  
understanding

### Make participation part of their official duties

Participation by children and young people tends to receive a lower priority than 'adult business'. This can be avoided by including participation in key workers' job descriptions and making it part of their official duties.

#### Participation in practice

*One local council has incorporated the requirement to "consult with the Youth Council" into its youth worker's job description.*

### Give staff the necessary time, resources and training

Staff who are busy or struggling to keep within a tight budget may find it hard to devote sufficient time and resources to children and young people's participation. Their managers must support them and remind them that participation is a priority.

#### Participation in practice

*At one school, the teacher responsible for co-ordinating the Student Representative Council (SRC) is given additional period allocations of approximately 80 minutes per week to attend to these duties.*

### Involve children and young people in staff selection and reviews

When appointing staff to work with children and young people, it is a good idea to involve children and young people in the selection process. How the interviewee responds to the child or young person in the interview is often a good measure of how well that person would work with children and young people if selected for the position. If a staff member is to work directly with a youth council or youth group it makes sense that young people from the group should be part of the selection process. Children and young people can also be involved in staff performance evaluation and appraisal processes.

#### Participation in practice

*An independent primary school always arranges for short-listed candidates for positions as teachers to be interviewed by students before an appointment is made.*

*In selecting a youth worker for its local youth centre, a local government had a young person on the selection panel and ensured that the young person's views carried considerable weight in making the appointment.*

### Employ senior staff who support participation

Senior staff who are enthusiastic about children and young people's involvement in decision-making set the stage for effective participation. Participation is unlikely to be effective if they give it a low priority, or see it as an optional extra rather

than as the core business of the organisation.

Senior staff of an organisation can demonstrate their commitment to participation by making it part of their performance contract.

They can reinforce the culture of inclusion by meeting with children and young people involved in the work of their organisation and listening carefully to what they have to say. When busy executives make the time to listen to their concerns, they show staff that children and young people's participation is important.

Before leaders of organisations approve policies or initiatives affecting children and young people, they must make sure that children and young people have participated in the development of the proposals. They can also check that all documentation – including constitutions, policy guidelines, social or community plans, strategic directions, and management papers – emphasise the paramount importance of the principle of children and young people's participation in decision-making.

### Participation in practice

*Some school principals and local government councillors demonstrate their commitment to participation by speaking directly with children and young people on a regular basis or having weekly meetings to keep up-to-date with their activities.*

### Scrutinise arguments for not involving children and young people

Arguments against involving children and young people should be examined carefully. An organisation may say it would like to involve children and young people but does not have the funds or the human resources to do so. Closer examination may reveal that arguments such as these are a sign of resistance to change and reluctance to consider new ways of working. They may also indicate an underlying belief that children and young people are unlikely to have anything to offer.



THE **FIVE** Key Elements

KIDS HAVE A **place** IN  
DECISION-MAKING

## 2. Kids have a place in decision-making

Organisations need to ensure that children and young people understand their role in the organisation's decision-making processes and that the organisation itself is clear about their role.

Here are some tips for ensuring that children and young people and the organisation share an understanding of how the participation of children and young people in the organisation works.

### Develop different mechanisms for participation

Organisations need to find different ways of accessing the views of a broad range of children and young people. Here are some suggestions.

- Simple questionnaires written in language children and young people can understand and with space for additional comments
- Structured interviews in which small groups of children and young people respond to a series of questions about a particular issue and have their answers recorded electronically or in writing
- Videos or films (vox pops) to highlight the views of children and young people about a particular issue
- Interactive websites through which children and young people can express their thoughts and opinions
- Brainstorming sessions where children and young people feel they can give free expression to their views
- Action or advocacy groups which focus on a specific issue
- Cultural action techniques such as art, posters, drama and interactive exercises.

### Remember to make it relevant to a broad cross-section of children and young people

Some ways of involving children and young people attract particular groups, often those with similar backgrounds and significant levels of skill. To make sure that decisions reflect the interests of all their young clients, organisations should aim to involve as diverse a group of children and young people as possible, in particular:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people
- children and young people of non-English-speaking background
- children and young people with disability
- gay and lesbian young people
- children and young people from a range of socio-economic backgrounds and life experiences (e.g. employed and unemployed youth and young people in vocational training)
- children and young people who are in the care of the State
- children under twelve.

### Participation in practice

*An organisation was having difficulty in involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.*

*It approached a Aboriginal Youth Group and made an arrangement that members of the organisation's youth advisory group would attend Youth Group meetings from time to time and would seek the views of the young people present.*

*In an effort to involve children with disability an organisation sought advice from a disability group and made funds available to that group to organise focus groups of young people with disability. The disability organisation was able to facilitate communication by providing transport, support persons, signing interpreters and advocates.*

### Encourage youth advisory bodies to seek the views of other children and young people

Youth advisory bodies and reference groups should be encouraged to seek the views of other children and young people outside the group. Children and young people are connected through schools, sporting, social and other activities. By drawing on these informal networks, organisations can gain a wider range of views and a more complete picture.

### Be clear with children and young people about their role in decision-making

Participation can take many forms and it is important when involving children and young people in decision-making that both the organisation and the children and young people involved understand that 'participation' means having an impact on decisions.

### Participation in practice

*Some organisations, agree on a constitution, developed with children and young people, that sets out important information about the decision-making body, including the role of those involved in the decision-making process and the role of the body itself.*

*"The role of the Youth Council is to provide advice on youth issues and to organise, co-ordinate and participate in decision-making processes of Council and consultative committees."*

*In this example, children and young people's participation is clearly defined as involvement in decision-making. The document defining the participation of the children and young people's group does not need to be cumbersome or legalistic. It can simply state the purpose of the group so that all involved in the decision-making process know their role.*

### Do not restrict participation to trivial decisions

Children and young people will soon lose interest if they perceive that their participation is tokenistic or their views are sought only on trivial issues. Schools, for example, should not restrict student participation to school social activities and fundraising.

### Involve children and young people in choosing a model

Ask children and young people what they consider to be the most effective method of participation. They may know best what will work with their friends or peers and this can be translated for use with a wider group.

#### Participation in practice

*A non-government organisation that had to move premises wanted to involve young people in selecting a new location. They asked users of their services how they might go about consulting more widely with other children and young people in the area. They suggested random interviews recorded on video. When the video was shown to the organisation's management committee it proved very effective in persuading the management committee to approve the new location.*

### Consider the organisation's needs

The following points need to be considered to make sure that participatory mechanisms meet the needs of the organisation as well as those of the children and young people.

- **Consider if participation by children and young people will be an ongoing part of the organisation's work or will it be limited to particular projects or planning decisions.**

#### Participation in practice

*In one non-government organisation, where ongoing participation is necessary to ensure that its work remains relevant to the children and young people it serves, a Youth Forum meets monthly.*

- **Consider the most effective ways of reaching the range of children and young people the organisation is trying to involve.**

#### Participation in practice

*One local government council, with a large population of children and young people, has adopted a two-pronged approach. It has established a Youth Council but also conducts surveys to involve children and young people in decision-making. These complementary mechanisms are able to involve the diverse groups of children and young people in the area more effectively.*

- **Consider if a joint venture is to be undertaken with similar organisations or are you going it alone.**

When initiatives involving children and young people in decision-making are too big for one organisation, it may be helpful to establish joint ventures with similar organisations.

**Participation in practice**

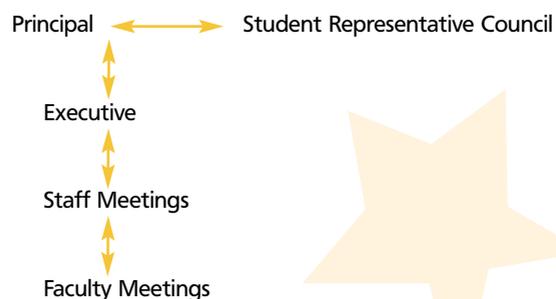
*A rural Shire council approached neighbouring councils about setting up a "Regional Youth Forum" to attract a broader range of young people. In making this approach, the council was also motivated by the prospect that a regional group would have a higher profile and more chance of attracting funding for projects. It would be better able to foster cross-border cooperation and avoid competing for resources.*

**Bring children and young people as close as possible to the decision-maker**

If children and young people's views are filtered through various layers of bureaucracy before they reach the decision-makers, they are more likely to be distorted or ignored.

**Participation in practice**

*In some schools, the Student Representative Council has a direct relationship with the principal.*



**Explain the decision-making process**

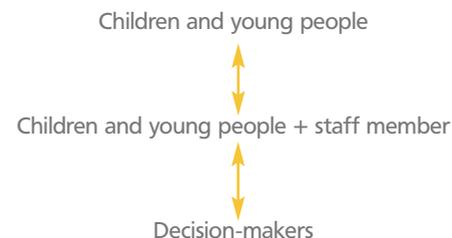
To be able to participate effectively in decision-making, children and young people need to know how decisions are made in the organisation. One way of clarifying the decision-making process is to prepare a flow chart.

**Participation in practice**

*In the first example, the decision-making process is collaborative. Decision-makers invite all parties, including children and young people, to participate in reaching a decision.*



*In the second example, a group of children and young people who have an idea for improving the service start the decision-making process. They flesh out their idea with an adult and then jointly approach the decision-makers.*



## Be open and direct about limits and bottom lines

Children and young people understand about limits. Organisations should be prepared to share with children and young people what 'bottom lines' there are that may prevent or delay implementation of their ideas or recommendations. If there are obstacles explain why they are there and how they might be overcome.

There may be legal, policy or resource limitations within which the organisation must work. If participants are not made aware of these bottom lines they are likely to feel frustrated when their proposals are knocked back. If they are aware from the start of the bottom lines they can either try to work round them or save their energy in not putting up proposals which are bound to fail.

## Specifically think about budgets

One way of showing confidence in an advisory group or youth group is to allocate a sum of money to be available for their discretionary spending. It is empowering for children and young people to be entrusted with funds whether they be designated for a special purpose (such as travel costs, or refreshments for meetings) or whether they are entirely discretionary.

### Participation in practice

*Some schools make available to Student Representative Councils an annual sum of money which is available (with certain limits) for discretionary spending by the Council.*



THE **FIVE** Key Elements

**Adults adapt** TO KIDS' WAY  
OF WORKING

### 3. Adults adapt to kid's way of working

Systems and arrangements that work for adults may not suit the needs of children and young people. More often than not organisations try to fit children and young people into a decision-making framework designed by and for adults.

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

#### **Appoint a child or young person as chair or co-chair**

When an adult chairs a meeting, children and young people are likely to be reluctant to say what they really think. One way of overcoming this problem is to appoint a child or young person as chair or co-chair but to make sure that:

- the adult co-chair is prepared to work cooperatively with the child or young person
- the child or young person has a clear understanding of the role of the chair or co-chair
- the child or young person receives the necessary training.

#### **Avoid unnecessary formality**

Children and young people prefer informal meetings that allow for flexibility and enable them to concentrate on the issues rather than worry about procedural rules. If they have to take part in formal meetings chaired by adults, a special time and format should be arranged for them to present their views so they will not have to sit through lengthy formal business.

### Participation in practice

*A special time is set aside for one local authority youth group to present its report at Council meetings. The other business of the Council is interrupted so that the Youth Council representatives do not have to sit through routine Council business. Their time slot is immediately before the tea break so there is an opportunity for youth group members to socialise with Council members at the break.*

### Have regular breaks and break up the monotony

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. Breaks are particularly important during day-long forums or lengthy meetings.

Exercises such as brainstorming, small group activities and 'graffiti' exercises make participation fun rather than a chore. Training texts giving information on such activities are available from libraries and on the internet (see Useful Resources section).

Children and young people could be asked to facilitate ice-breaking or warm-up activities and to give the feedback from brainstorming or small group activities. Sharing these responsibilities may be less daunting than having one chairperson for the whole meeting.

### Serve refreshments

Providing food and drink before or during meetings creates a sociable atmosphere, builds energy levels and can relieve monotony. Serving appropriate food, pizza rather than gourmet sandwiches and soft drinks rather than tea or coffee, helps create the right atmosphere and makes children and young people feel comfortable.

### Participation in practice

*One organisation has a budget allocation for food and drink for meetings and the young people agree on the type of refreshments to be bought. Their choice is wide: it caters for different likes and dislikes and includes such things as vegetarian and health foods.*

### Provide participants with background information

The quality of advice depends on the quality of the information made available to the advisors. This principle applies to children and young people as it does to adults. If they are being asked to give their views on a particular issue they should be fully briefed in a manner and language that they can understand.

### Participation in practice

*Some organisations provide written briefing papers to members of their youth advisory group in advance of meetings and give a further verbal briefing before each item on the agenda. This means they can think about the issues and discuss them with friends and colleagues before the meeting and can note down their preliminary views.*

*Before children and young people go into a formal meeting with adults some organisations organise a pre-meeting where they can run through the agenda, discuss what they are going to say and sometimes appoint spokespeople to speak on particular issues.*

*One organisation gave young children a blank postcard asking them to tell the organisation what facilities they would like at the local family centre. This allowed them to write down, draw or paint what they would like.*

*With young children, complex issues can be broken down into simple steps and the issues framed in a personalised way that connects with their own life experiences. Information can be provided in the form of a story or example which reflects their own experience. With pre-school children, some form of guided activity may be the best way of finding out their views. If they are being asked about play equipment they can be taken to a playground or shown pictures of different play equipment and asked what they like best and why.*

### **Identify the skills children and young people need**

These will vary according to the individual situation or context. While it may be appropriate to train Youth Council members to use the media to influence council decisions, such training may be inappropriate for members of a Student Representative Council.

### **Arrange meeting times and venues to suit the needs of participants**

For school aged children, evening or weekend meetings are likely to be most convenient but availability of local public transport may need to be taken into account. Find out from the participants what days and times are most convenient for them. This may require staff of the organisation to work occasional evenings or weekends.

A questionnaire can also be used to identify any particular needs or facilities required for any participant with a disability so they can raise questions of accessibility of transport, access to buildings, special equipment etc.

Thought should be given to questions of safety of participants both during meetings and while travelling to and from the meeting place. The question of whether participants are covered by the organisation's insurances policies should also be looked into and ground rules should be set in relation to young drivers offering lifts to other participants.

### **Participation in practice**

*Before selecting participants some organisations ask candidates to complete a questionnaire as to their availability and preferences and indicating whether they require assistance with transport to and from meetings.*

*Some organisations pay the transport costs of children and young people attending meetings. Others collect participants from their homes and return them afterwards.*

### **Do not overburden participants**

Children and young people have school, homework and job responsibilities and may not always be able to attend meetings. They are likely to be reliant on public transport or on their parents or other adults to get them to and from meetings.

Do not make them feel guilty if they miss meetings or arrive late. Participation should enhance, not diminish, their self-esteem.

### **Participation in practice**

*One non-government organisation makes sure that those who cannot attend still feel part of the group, by informing them by phone of decisions made, or by posting out meeting papers and minutes.*

*Some organisations allocate half-an-hour or so of free time at the start of their meetings so that participants can socialise, share refreshments and get to know one another. This sets the mood for a productive meeting and reduces disruption from late arrivals.*

### Remove financial barriers

Make sure that the ability of children and young people to participate is not limited by financial barriers. Reimburse participants for out of pocket expenses and look at the possibility of arranging sponsorship or subsidies for conferences and forums arranged by other organisations. Some young people may need cash up front, just to make it to the group or meeting.

### Protect the privacy and confidentiality of young participants

Where children and young people are asked to provide advice for an organisation on general policy matters, care should be taken not to publish the views of named individuals without their informed consent. There may be negative consequences for the child or young person if publicity is given to his or her views. If the media ask to interview participants, the organisation has a responsibility to gain the prior consent of individual participants and to guide and support them in their dealings with the media.

Where the organisation provides services to individual children and young people and their feedback on the organisation or its services is sought, questions of confidentiality arise and participants should be given assurances that their honest comments will not be used to their disadvantage.

#### Participation in practice

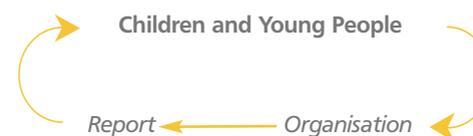
*An organisation which provides supported accommodation for young people pays for an outside professional to facilitate meetings of residents where they can express their views freely and without fear of repercussions or victimisation. Any concerns they raise can be relayed to the organisation by the facilitator or by a meeting with the management at which the facilitator acts as an advocate for the residents.*

### Record views accurately

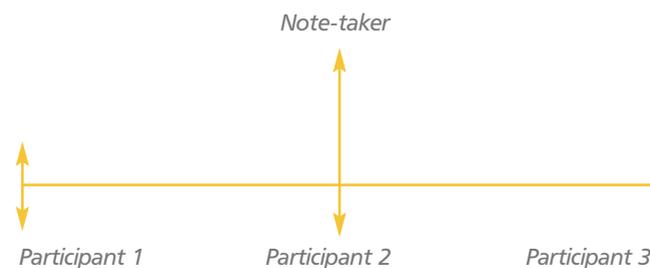
Be wary of 'editing' the views of children and young people by rewriting them in a form likely to be more acceptable to adult decision-makers or of attributing to all, the views expressed by selected members of the group.

#### Participation in practice

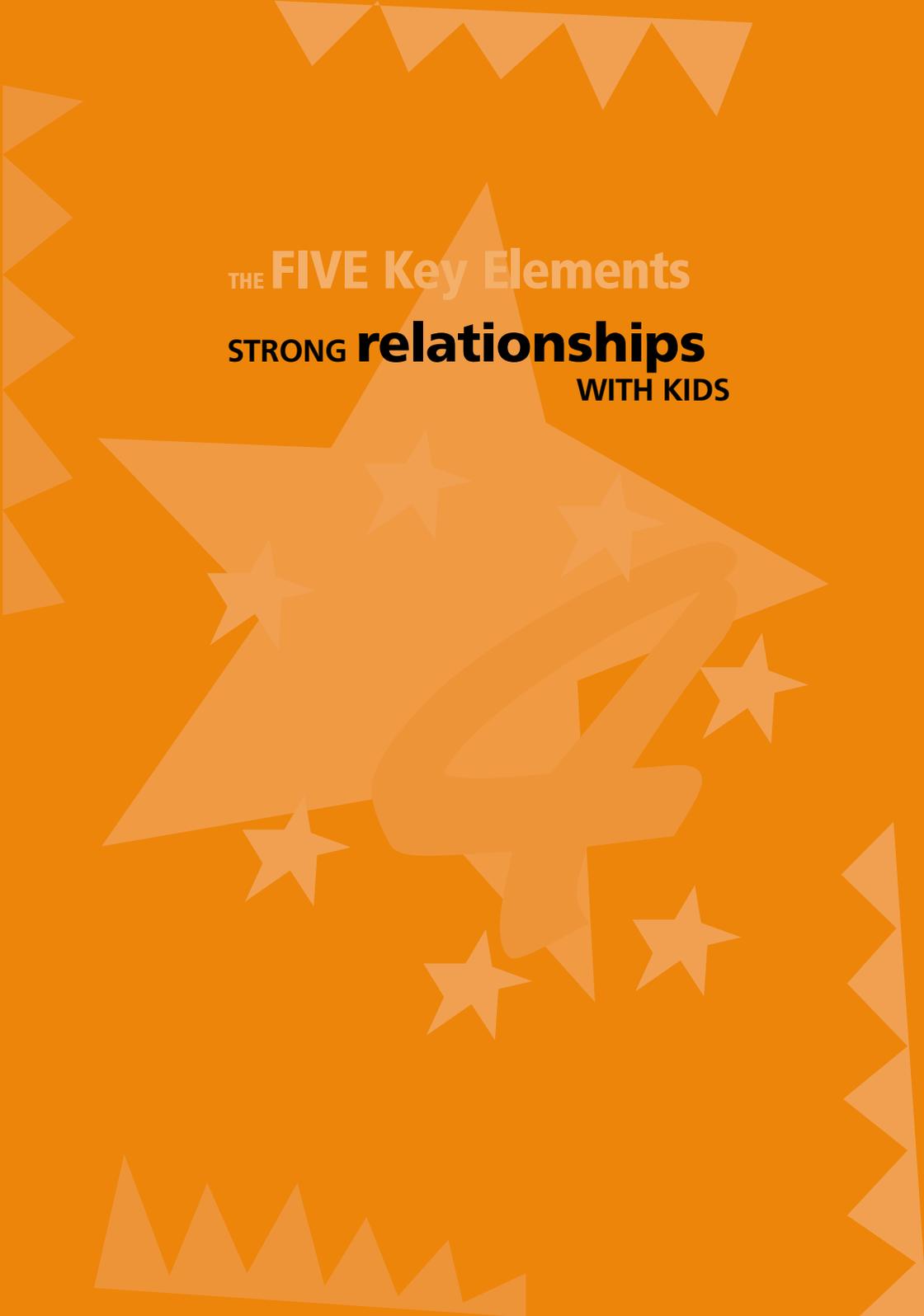
*One organisation consults with a group of children and young people so that their views may be included in a report. Before it is published, the document is given to the group to check that their views have been recorded accurately.*



*One member of a group takes notes of the views expressed during a meeting of children and young people and later circulates this record to the others, including those who were not present at the meeting. If members feel that their views have not been recorded accurately, they can speak with the note-taker.*







THE **FIVE** Key Elements

**STRONG relationships**

WITH KIDS

## 4. 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. So the more adults in the organisation who are able to engage children and young people, the more successfully organisations will achieve participation.

Here are some tips for cultivating good relationships with the children and young people involved in the work of your organisation.

### Have an 'open-door' policy

This simply means being accessible. You may decide to give the children and young involved in the organisation your direct email address or telephone number, or invite them speak to you face-to-face if they have an important issue to discuss.

### Make time to meet with children and young people

Decision-makers in the organisation should meet regularly with representatives of the children and young people's decision-making group and listen to what they have to say.

#### Participation in practice

*In some schools, where Student Representative Councils meet independently of the principal, the principal sets time aside every week to meet SRC representatives and hear about student activities and concerns.*

### Organise 'getting to know you' activities

If children and young people are expected to work together as a team and come up with an agreed position on issues, they need time to get to know one another and learn to work as a team.

#### Participation in practice

*Some organisations take children and young people on outings, adventure activities or karaoke evenings as a team-building exercise. The opportunity to meet new people and make new friends is one of the attractions of being involved. Social and recreational activities should be properly planned and supervised and the safety of the participants must always be a priority.*

### Appoint a staff member to support these activities

One or more members of staff who have a good understanding of the workings of the organisation should be appointed to act as the day-to-day contact persons and advisers. Their role should be to provide encouragement and information and to help the children and young people to put their views forward. Staff should not try to impose their own opinions or put pressure on children and young people to modify or abandon their views.

#### Participation in practice

*In one area, Youth Council members are supported by the local council's Community Development Officer in putting their recommendations to the General Manager who is the organisation's main decision-maker on bureaucratic issues.*

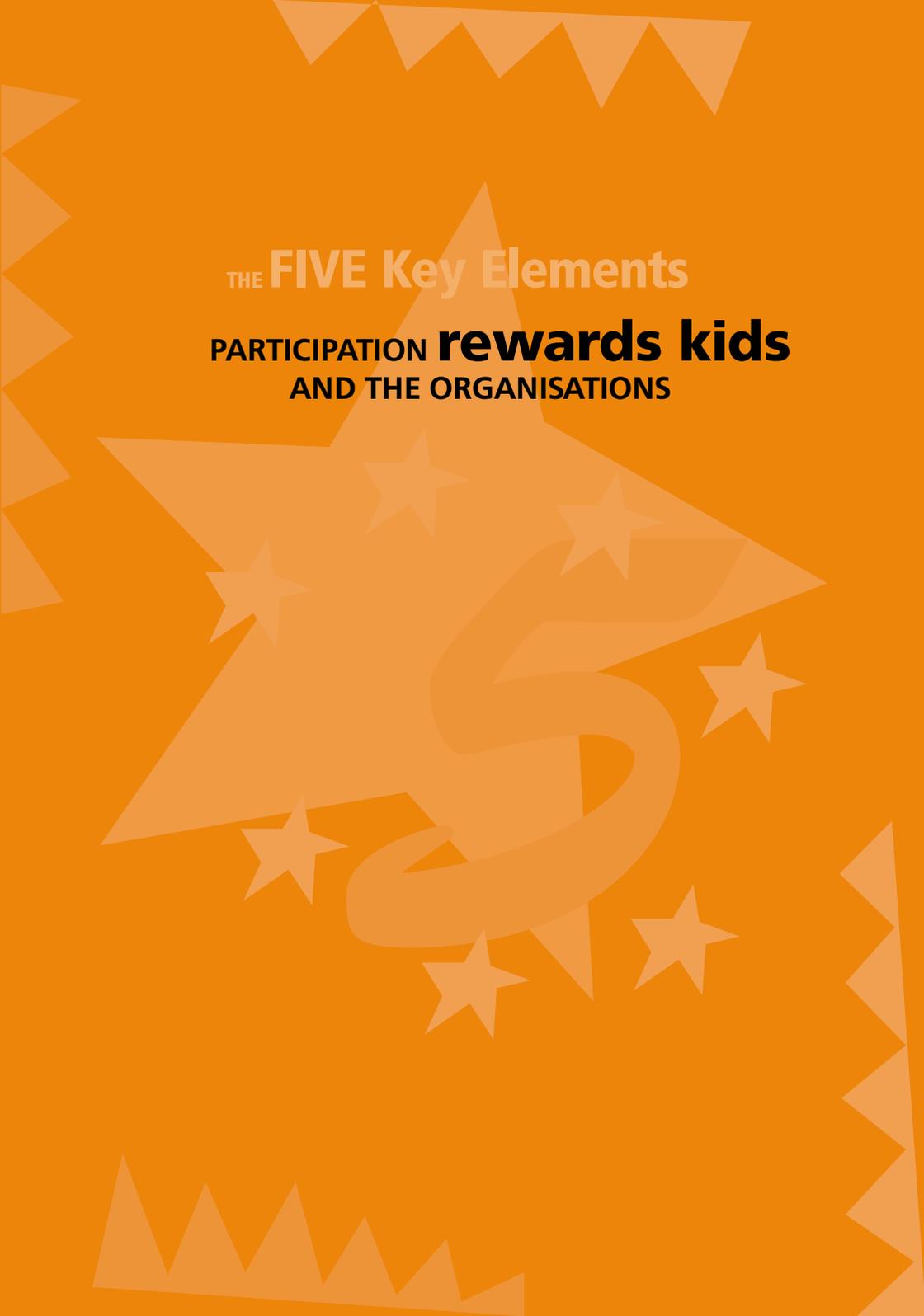


#### Scenario

*Rainbow City Council is developing its Social Plan which will include what it intends to do for children and young people. No children and young people, apart from the five members of the Rainbow City Youth Council, have been consulted. The Youth Council recommends that \$1000 be spent to sponsor a youth forum, so that young people in the area have a chance to participate in the development of the Social Plan.*

*In this scenario, the relationship between the Youth Council and the Community Development Officer would be very important because that officer would be able to advise on how best to navigate the local government bureaucracy and convince the General Manager to approve its recommendations.*





THE **FIVE** Key Elements

PARTICIPATION **rewards kids**  
AND THE ORGANISATIONS



## 5. Participation rewards kids and the organisation

If children and young people are to maintain their enthusiasm for participating in decision-making they must find the experience enjoyable, challenging and fun. They must feel that their time and effort is valued. It is also important that the organisation benefits. Remember too, that children like adults come in all shapes and sizes with quite different views.

### **Involve children and young people in designing discussion forums**

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-designed forum.

#### **Participation in practice**

*One local government council involves young people aged 12 to 18 by holding regular forums about issues of concern to them. The council has appointed a steering committee of young people to help design and organise the forums and to follow up on the recommendations made.*

### **Do not allow more confident members to dominate**

Some young people may feel too shy to speak up in a group or may be too polite or embarrassed to openly disagree with more confident or opinionated speakers. For many children and young people voicing one's opinion in a group situation may be unfamiliar, culturally inappropriate or discomfoting.

The views of the quieter members of the group can be elicited by asking each person in turn for a comment or by getting everyone to write their comments on butchers paper or anonymously on a piece of paper. Some young people are more comfortable expressing their views in electronic form through sending an email or contributing to a chat site.

#### Participation in practice

*At one focus group of rural young people, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people appeared reluctant to speak up in the group setting. It was arranged that they would form a separate group with a youth worker from their community. In this setting they were more comfortable in expressing their views.*

#### Allow for minority views

Participants should not be pressured to reach a consensus. They should be reassured that the organisation is interested in all views, not just those which have broad support.

#### Participation in practice

*In one primary school the children agreed to replace a long list of school rules with one simple rule "take care of yourself, others and property". But an exception to the rule was agreed to at the request of a kindergarten class who wanted to be able to have pillow fights.*

#### Provide 'soft entry' points

Opportunities can be provided for children and young people to come along to meetings as an observer or to come with a friend. With young children, parallel activities can be arranged for parents or relatives of the children.

#### Participation in practice

*One organisation holds an orientation afternoon at which members of its children's advisory committee are invited to attend with their parents or carers for a joint briefing session. After this, separate activities are arranged for the children and adults. In this way parents are fully aware and supportive of their children's involvement and the children gain in confidence in having their parents with them at the first meeting.*

*A Youth Forum has an open membership and members can bring a friend to observe. Possible new members are encouraged to come along to one or more meetings before they make a commitment to join the Forum.*

#### Give peer groups time together

Young children often feel shy about speaking out in a group of teenagers and may be influenced by the views of their older peers. In a small group with children of their own or similar age, they are more likely to say what they think. It is important to give children and young people of varying ages the opportunity to gather their thoughts and formulate their own views before combining their views with those of others.

### Participation in practice

*At one primary school, before children of all ages attend Student Representative Council meetings, separate class discussions are held to identify the issues each class considers important.*

*At a high school, students in years 7 and 8 and those in years 9 and 10 meet as junior and middle school committees. In these forums, younger students have the opportunity to discuss issues that are significant to them and formulate a view to take to an SRC meeting.*

### Find out participants' skill levels

Organisations should assess participants' existing skill levels so that they can provide opportunities for further development where necessary. As a result of their life experiences, many will already have a number of relevant skills.

### Participation in practice

*One organisation prepared the following simple questionnaire to gather information on the interests, experience and skill levels of participants and identify where further development was required.*

*What activities have you been or are you currently involved in?*

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*What skills have you gained from these activities?*

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### Provide opportunities for skills development

Core skills, such as formal meeting procedures or how to put forward motions to a school or local council, are best acquired through skill-building forums. These may take the shape of training workshops or programs.

Children and young people see the chance to develop new skills as one of the key benefits of participating in decision-making. Here are some ways organisations can encourage this.

**Sponsoring children and young people to attend conferences, seminars and training courses:** When sponsoring children and young people to attend conferences, it is important to look at the skills they would like to develop and their fields of interest.

### Participation in practice

*Some organisations nominate participants for local or national awards or as delegates at national or international conferences, youth parliaments and other events. Additional support should be offered where necessary such as transport and accommodation costs.*

**Give children and young people the opportunity to work on issues that interest them**

### Participation in practice

*In one non-government organisation young people are given a portfolio that interests them - local government, health, or transport. Their task is to look at issues of concern to children and young people in their portfolio area, and to suggest ways in which the organisation might respond to these concerns. Portfolio holders have the opportunity to develop their interests and skills.*

*Some organisations keep young people motivated by asking them to organise specific projects or events such as debates, discussions, seminars, meetings with people they are seeking to influence such as MPs, media people, government agencies.*

### Draw on the skills of those around you

Staff of the organisation can be asked to assist with training children and young people in aspects of effective participation. Organisations should conduct an audit of the skills of staff members and involve them in developing programs relating to their particular areas of expertise.

#### Participation in practice

*Organisation: Rainbow City Council  
Name: Jane Doe  
Position: Manager Community Education*

<i>Experience</i>	<i>Skills</i>
<i>Works with the media – print, radio and television- to develop the corporate image of the organisation</i>	<i>Media Public relations Marketing</i>

*If Rainbow City Council wanted to develop a training workshop to give members of its Youth Council the skills to work with the media, instead of out-sourcing the work, they could employ the skills of their own Community Education Manager to develop and run the workshop.*

### Involve children and young people in training their peers

Children and young people should be involved both in the development and delivery of training workshops. This a good way of developing organisational and facilitation skills. Often, children and young people learn best from those of their own age with whom they can more readily identify.

Organisations will benefit from:

- employing the skills of experienced children and young people to develop and deliver training workshops or programs
- conducting 'train the trainer' sessions to give groups of children or young people the skills to train others
- engaging children and young people who have already done the training program to train others.

### Explain how issues are relevant to them

Children and young people need to see that the issues they are considering are relevant and that their participation in the decision-making process will have a positive impact on their lives or the lives of other children and young people. If the relevance of an issue is not immediately obvious, explain its significance.

#### Participation in practice

##### Scenario

*An advisory group of children and young people is asked to consider an organisation's annual budget. The budget lists how much the organisation will spend on staffing and new technology in the coming financial year but makes no mention of how the advisory group or other children and young people will be affected.*

*It may not be immediately obvious how budgetary items such as staffing and new technology are relevant to children and young people and the connection may need to be explained.*

### Involve participants in goal-directed activities

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.

If organisations wish to have input from children and young people on long-term policy issues they need to explain clearly what the ultimate aim is and set milestones against which progress towards that goal can be measured.

#### Participation in practice

*One youth policy organisation tries to involve young people in both short term projects and longer term consultations believing that small wins from short-term projects are valuable in keeping alive the enthusiasm and commitment of the participants.*

### Show children and young people that their opinions are taken seriously

Children and young people need to see that their contributions affect the decision-making process and make a difference. They should receive regular feedback on their earlier suggestions and recommendations. They will lose interest or drop out unless they see results for their time and effort.

#### Participation in practice

*The reports from a local government young people's committee are written in the form of an action plan.*

<i>Issue</i>	<i>Action</i>	<i>Progress</i>
<i>Issue under consideration</i>	<i>Action being undertaken</i>	<i>Achievements and further action</i>

*This is a simple way of representing the issues under consideration, the steps taken to progress them and the further action required to achieve the objective. It is also a good way of keeping children and young people informed of the effect of their proposals and recommendations.*

### Acknowledge the contribution made by children and young people

Organisations should acknowledge the important role children and young people play in decision-making and show their appreciation. Here are some ideas.

**Pay children and young people for their participation:** Payment may not always be feasible or appropriate within an organisation's budget. But in situations where adults are paid for their expertise, children and young people should be too.

#### Participation in practice

*Some organisations pay children and young people for their time and effort at a rate equivalent to that paid to adult advisers. Others give participants special benefits or privileges to compensate them for their time.*

### Give official recognition to the contribution of children and young people:

Official recognition may take the form of certificates or references that outline the role the child or young person has played in the decision-making and the skills acquired in the process. These are particularly good for children and young people to present to prospective employers.

### Participation in practice

*As well as keeping records of students' sporting and academic achievements, some schools also record their contributions to the life of the school and their participation in school decision-making. Students can access their portfolio at any time and use it as part of their CV.*

*Photos of participants, information about their ideas and the projects they have worked on, can be published in organisations' newsletters, annual reports and other publications. Local media outlets can be invited to run stories highlighting the contributions made by children and young people.*

### Monitor and evaluate participation processes

There is no simple formula that will guarantee effective involvement of children and young people. Organisations are operating in a changing environment, the views of children and young people change over time and individuals have different views and preferences.

One constant is the need for monitoring and evaluation of participation processes to ensure that they are meeting the needs of the organisation and that they are satisfying the children and young people involved. Children and young people who lose interest are likely to drop out or drift away and a lively and committed group can easily fall apart if the interests and needs of its members cease to be met.

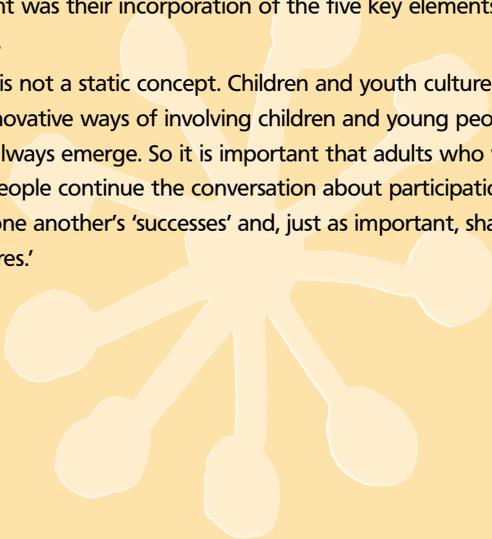
Time should be set aside at meetings to discuss housekeeping issues and to allow participants to voice their views about the group and its direction. Before children and young people will voice criticisms they need to be confident that the organisation is willing to listen to negative comments. There should be a more formal evaluation at least annually. There are advantages in bringing in an outside facilitator.

## THE **SHOW** GOES ON

It is a challenge to bring children and young people into centre-stage in an organisation. Like the first night of a play you may be worried that it is all going to go terribly wrong. However as the examples of Participation in practice show, when organisations have a will to involve children and young people, it works well for the organisation and for the participants.

The organisations consulted by the Commission used a variety of models to facilitate the participation of children and young people in decision-making. What was consistent was their incorporation of the five key elements explored in this set of guidelines.

Participation is not a static concept. Children and youth culture changes and better and more innovative ways of involving children and young people in decision-making will always emerge. So it is important that adults who work with children and young people continue the conversation about participation, learning and building on one another's 'successes' and, just as important, sharing the experience of their 'failures.'



## CURTAIN CALLS

We would like to thank the following organisations for their involvement in the consultations associated with the Commission's Participation Project:

Albury City Council	South Grafton High School
Curambeena Primary and Pre-School	MacArthur Drug and Alcohol Youth Project
Dubbo City Council	Merriwa Central School
Fairfield City Council	Oasis Youth Centre
Queanbeyan City Council	Truscott St Primary School
Regional Youth Support Services	Western Sydney Youth Forum
Rooty Hills High School	Wingecarribee Shire Council
Seven Hills High School	Youth Action & Policy Association (Western)

Special thanks also to the following children and young people who took part in and contributed their ideas to the Project.

Amanda, Nathan, Stephen, Sheree, Ashley, Liz, Rebecca, Kenrick, Julie, Kayleigh, Troy, Ryan, Kim M, Kim H, Armina, Debbie, Angela, Rachel, Greg, Kristy, Lisa, Derek, Dale, Kendall, Ben, Dennis, Linda, Dean, Loretta, Mark, Krissi, Rebecca, Barry, Katrina, Hayley, Russell, Raymond, Elise, Briana., Katie, Peter, Ashlee, Kelly, Andrew, Masey, Lyndal, Narelle, Vikki, Dean, Sam, Matthew, Pierce, Tahila, Laura.

Commission for Children and Young People's Reference Group Members  
Zeah Behrend, Katherine Fan, Hugh Farmer, Jelina Frail, Katie Green, Luke Kercheval, Sarah Khanlari, Matt Lendrum, Tim Morrison, Armina Soemino, Kate Tyrrell, Charlie Zoghaib.

Asaf Fisher made an important contribution to the consultations and the writings.

The following people and organisations made an important contribution to Sharing the Stage by making suggestions or commenting on drafts:

Chris Burgess  
Dr Judy Cashmore  
Community Services Commission  
Department of Education and Training  
Department of Local Government  
Ethnic Child Care, Family and Community Services Co-operative Ltd  
Stuart Hearne  
Bob Ireland  
Helen Kerr-Roubicek  
Kylie Kilgour  
Kim Marden  
Kate McCosker  
Muslim Women Association  
People with Disabilities (NSW) Inc.  
Police and Community Youth Club  
Diane Robb  
Uniting Care Burnside

## USEFUL RESOURCES

### General

*Pathways to Participation: Openings, Opportunities and Obligations* Shier H, *Children and Society* Vol 15 No 2 107 (2001).

*Promoting Youth Participation: A rights perspective* (1995). Kaplun, M. National Children's and Youth Law Centre, University of NSW Sydney, NSW 2052.

*Taking Part: Children's Participation in Decision-Making* (1995). Landsdown G, Institute of Public Policy Research, London.

*Taking the Initiative: promoting young people's involvement in public decision-making in Northern Ireland* Rodney Green, *Carnegie Young People Initiative* 39 York Road, London SE1 7NQ [carnegie-youth.org.uk](http://carnegie-youth.org.uk).

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*Youth Participation. UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and Pacific*, Rajadamnern Nok Avenue, Bangkok 10200.

*Youth Participation Handbook: A Guide for Organisations Seeking to Involve Young People on Boards and Committees* (2000). Office of Employment and Youth, South Australia.

### Schools

*Schooling for Democracy* (2000). Wilson S, *Youth Studies Australia* Vol 19 No 2.

*Schools that create real roles of value for young people* (1998). Holdsworth R, 12 Brooke St., 3070, Victoria.

*Student participation, connectedness and citizenship* (1997). *Connect* 104 p17.

*Young People's Participation in their School Environments* (2000). Karen Nairn, Children's Issues Centre, P.O. Box 59, Dunedin NZ.

### Local government

*Seeking Counsel: Young people's involvement in local government decision-making processes* (1999). Paterson K, *Youth Studies Australia* Vol 18 No 3.

*How Local Councils Consult with Young People: A report on findings from a survey of local councils in NSW* (1997). NSW Department of Local Government.

*How Young People would like to be Consulted: a report on findings from interviews with young people as part of the Youth Consultation Research Project* website [www.dlg.nsw.gov.au](http://www.dlg.nsw.gov.au)

### Children in care

*Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998: Children and Young People's Participation in Practice* (2000). Create Foundation.

*Voices of children and young people in foster care* (2000). Community Services Commission

*Having a Say* (1998). Spall P, Testro P, and Matchett R. NSW Child Protection Council.

