

Guidance material for child and youth participation



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Developing structural tools to support the implementation of the European Child Guarantee in Portugal



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1. FOREWORD

The project

The following manual provides guidance material to enhance the capacity of Portugal's Child Guarantee local interlocutors/units to develop age-sensitive communication approaches and ensure meaningful participation of children and young people in the implementation of the national Child Guarantee action plan.

This document is delivered as part of the project *23PT11 – Developing structural tools to support the implementation of the European CG in Portugal* (Activity 3.4), funded by the European Union through the Technical Support Instrument. Within this project, the European Commission's Directorate-General for Structural Reform Support (DG REFORM) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) are providing technical support to Portugal to successfully implement and monitor its Child Guarantee Action Plan (CGAP), under the umbrella of the European Child Guarantee (ECG).

The European Child Guarantee

Adopted in 2021, the ECG aims to prevent and combat social exclusion by ensuring children in need have access to a set of key services. This ambition fosters equal opportunities and the reduction of child poverty. The ECG recommends European Union (EU) Member States to implement measures targeting people aged under 18 years old at risk of poverty and social exclusion, considering specific forms of disadvantage. These measures must contribute to ensuring free access to childcare and healthcare services, the promotion of healthy nutrition and access to adequate housing. The ECG also provides guidance to member states to achieve these goals, establishes governance and reporting mechanisms, and provides for implementation, monitoring, and evaluation procedures.

The Portuguese CGAP (2022-2030) reflects the need to create a national public policy instrument, with a set of coherent, articulated, and integrated actions to significantly reduce the incidence of poverty. The plan considers the specific socio-economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, adding to the importance of having a solid national instrument to combat child poverty (República Portuguesa, 2023[1]).

The implementation of the Portuguese CGAP acknowledges that children and young people have a central role in the development and implementation of policies affecting their lives. Thus, they are not only beneficiaries or recipients of policy measures; they are protagonists with a say on how these measures are drafted and rolled out. This requires adopting a children and young people participation framework, which is still far from being a standard. This manual aims at supporting Portugal's Child Guarantee local interlocutors/units to adopt children and young people participatory strategies.



2. QUICK GUIDE

This manual is anchored on three principles to support professionals and organisations in promoting participatory experiences for children and young people. These principles inform the structure of the manual across three sections combining key concepts, recommended strategies and suggested communication processes to promote children and young people's participation. This quick guide outlines these principles in connection with different parts of the manual.



1. What children and youth participation is (and is not). While participation is not a straightforward concept, it is more than simply listening to children and young people's voices. Participatory processes require creating safe conditions for facilitating the expression of views, needs and expectations, but also providing concrete actions for influencing decision-making in matters relevant to the participants. Section 3 of the manual defines children and young people's participation and outlines some key concepts that are often associated or confounded with participation (Figure 3.1). In addition, this section discusses the benefits of participation for children and young people (e.g., increased agency, sense of competence, citizenship development, well-being) (Figure 3.2), but also for adults and the communities at large (e.g., better services delivery, improved decision-making-processes) (Figure 3.3). This section also sheds light on approaches that do not constitute meaningful participation opportunities (Table 3.1).



2. Promoting children and young people's participation is not a straightforward process, but there is a way to get there. Section 4 of this manual lays out a pathway for promoting participation from a very practical perspective considering four different steps. First, participation starts with the provision of safe and meaningful opportunities to children and young people to make their voices heard and practice their skills in real-life settings (Figure 4.2). Second, participatory processes with children and young people rely on capacity-building in terms of knowledge accumulation, knowledge production and/or skills development (Figure 4.3).

Third, action and tangible outcomes should emerge from participatory processes (Figure 4.4). Finally, dissemination and uptake of the results is key to promote the desired impacts (Figure 4.5). To facilitate action in a practical way, all of these stages are accompanied by concrete strategies emerging from on-the-ground experiences, programmes and initiatives taking place across Portugal. Importantly, the examples provided reflect diversity issues and characteristics. This section of the manual also includes some extended examples to better illustrate how professionals can tackle each of the different participatory stages. Finally, this section includes suggestions on how to integrate participatory principles into daily practices (Figure 4.6).

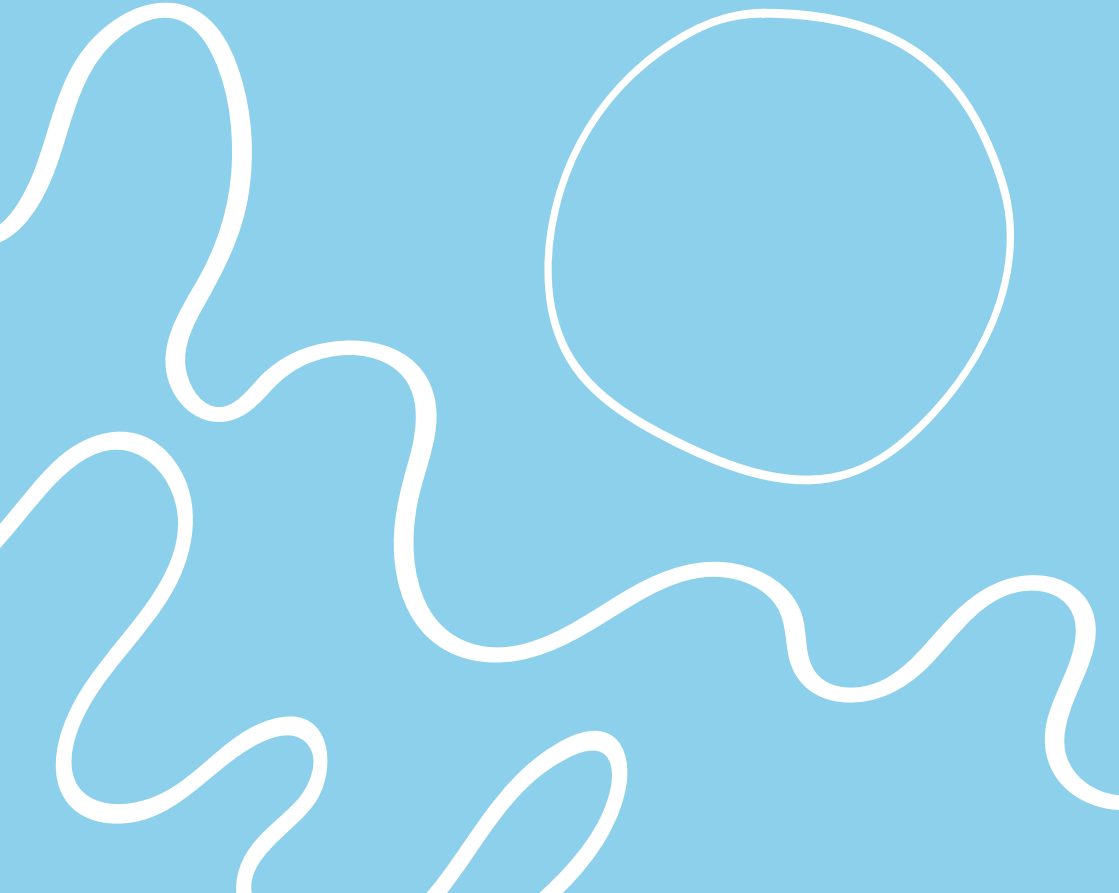
3. To facilitate children and young people's participation, effective communication is key. Communication strategies must be tailored to children and young people's preferred communication styles and tools and support active listening that acknowledges the participants' voices. Effective communication can also promote safe and inclusive spaces based on positive relationships, while also continuously inform the design and implementation of participatory processes based on participants' needs. Section 5 of the manual outlines communications processes and strategies to engage children and young people in participation initiatives. This section outlines basic definitions of communication and offers an extended list of communication strategies (tailor, listen, relate, repeat and adjust) (Table 5.1). This part of the manual also pays special attention to discussing appropriate communication strategies for vulnerable groups (Table 5.2) and different age groups (Table 5.3).



Section 6 provides a Toolbox for practitioners, including notably a checklist for preparing and delivering children's participatory projects and a list of myths and facts about children's participation.

Overall, this manual is informed by the experiences of those working daily with children and young people, aiming to spark collaboration across regions and sectors and contribute to more inclusive and participatory programmes and initiatives involving children and young people under the Portuguese CGAP.

3. MAIN CONCEPTS





What is children and young people's participation?

Children and young people's participation has become increasingly relevant in public discourse and policymaking. Its current definitions are multiple and sometimes contradictory. So, what does participation mean for children and young people? The different definitions seem to agree that children's participation is both a right and a form of expression. Participation has been established as a fundamental right of all children and youth to participate in all matters and decisions affecting them. Such issues are associated with their different life contexts, such as family, school, and community settings, as well as with political decisions and regulations impacting their lives (Correia and Aguiar, 2022[2]).

The United Nations (UN) has acknowledged this fundamental right on a global level through Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of Children (CRC) (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2005[3]; United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009[4]). According to the CRC, children and young people's participation consists of their right to express personal views and be heard and taken seriously from birth onwards. This means that all children and youth, regardless of age, are entitled to participate in relevant decisions affecting their lives.

The CRC further establishes that each country must promote children and young people's participation rights through age-adequate strategies (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2005[3]; United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009[4]). From a broader perspective, the CRC's vision for children and young people's participation is seen as a key instrument for strengthening and propagating a culture of human rights, democratic values, citizenship, and the rule of law across different societies while ensuring children and youth well-being and ability to meet their potential (Correia, N. et al., 2019[5]; Lansdown, Jimerson and Shahroozi, 2014[6]; Council of Europe, 2020[7]). Children and young people's right to participate is also aligned with the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)

Recommendation on Open Government (OECD, 2024[8]), the OECD Recommendation on Creating Better Opportunities for Young People (OECD, 2024[9]), the OECD Recommendation on Children in the Digital Environment (OECD, 2024[10]) and the OECD Child-Friendly Justice Framework (OECD, 2023[11]).

The OECD Recommendation on Open Government seeks to foster greater trust and collaboration between governments and their citizens, including children, by promoting openness in decision-making, policy implementation, and public service delivery. The OECD Recommendation on Creating Better Opportunities for Young People lays down policy principles and strategies to improve youth measures and outcomes across multiple areas (e.g., employment, education, social inclusion, and well-being in all relevant areas), while ensuring young people's trust in government and public institutions and strengthening their participation and representation in public and political life.

The OECD Recommendation on Children in the Digital Environment aims to help governments better address the risks and opportunities of digital progress for children, through the involvement of all stakeholders, stressing the need for children and young people's participation in regulating digital environments.

As a form of expression, children and young people's participation implies that they can **voice their ideas, expectations, and choices in matters affecting them** (Correia, N. et al., 2019[5]). Some propose that participation requires more than sharing views and opinions (Cushing, 2015[11]).

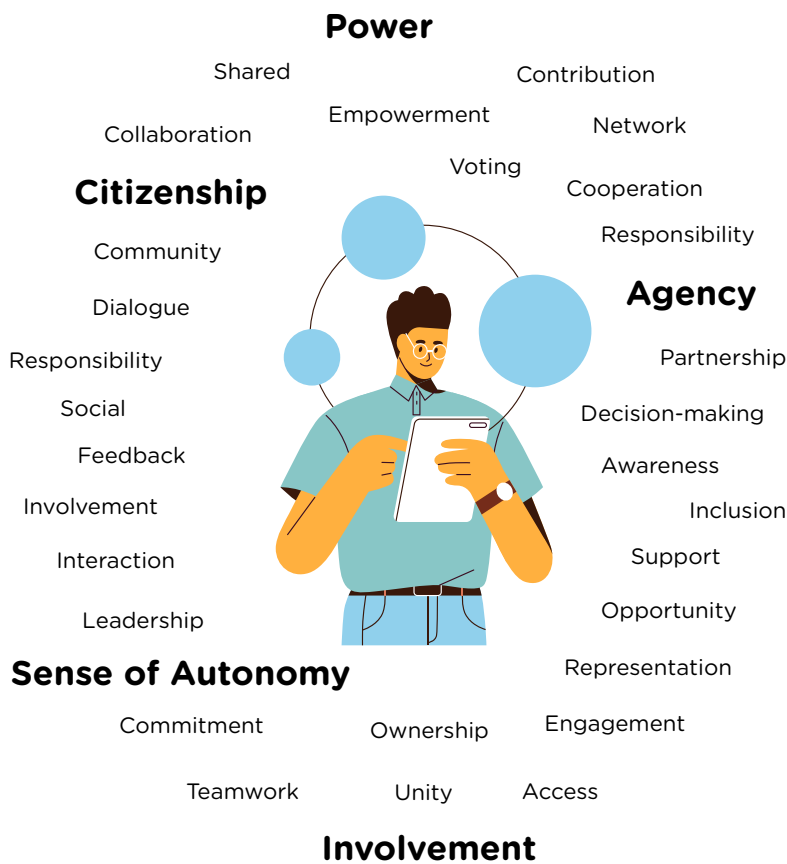
Children and youth participation involves acting and solving problems that can impact their life contexts, from proximal ones such as family to the wider community. Regardless of adopting a narrower or a broader conceptualization of children's participation, different proposals agree that children and young people's participation requires that they:

- have or develop the necessary skills for participating;
- benefit from adequate opportunities in multiple real-life settings to do so;
- see that their voices (or actions) are acknowledged by others, particularly by adults and the community (Cardarelli et al., 2021[12]).


Is it easy to define participation?

Not really. While there is some consensus about children and young people’s participation as a universal right expressed through different forms of action, there are close concepts that intersect with or are specific elements of this wider notion. The word cloud in Figure 3.1 shows the variety of concepts that can overlap or be confounded with participation.

Figure 3.1. Concepts related to children’s participation



Source: Developed by the author based on (Correia, Aguiar and Amaro, 2023[13]; Correia, N. et al., 2019[5]; Correia and Aguiar, 2022[2]) (Hanson, 2016[14])



Some of the notions intersecting with the idea of participation can be considered **adjacent concepts**, as highlighted below:

- **Power** is usually described as enacted behaviour and action (Foucault, 2003[15]). Participation requires strategies that enable children and youth to commit to change and achieve certain goals. This demands specific strategies to balance power differentials between children and adults, challenging dominant adults' authority. Children's participation requires an intentional power redistribution, ensuring children's views are considered meaningfully and appropriately (Correia, Aguiar and Amaro, 2023[13]).
- **Agency** is the capacity to set goals, reflect and act responsibly to produce change, influence the courses of action, and make autonomous choices (Hanson, 2016[14]). Agency is developed through socialization and interdependence. Agentic participation requires acknowledging children and young people as equal members of society, with their priorities and needs, and entitled to shape decisions affecting them (Correia, Aguiar and Amaro, 2023[13]).
- **Sense of autonomy** consists of children's progressively increasing needs of self-direction according to age development requirements. Fulfilling children and youth autonomy needs will ultimately allow them to become independent human beings. A strong sense of autonomy, one that acknowledges children and young people's views and needs as well as their dignity as citizens, while creating the right conditions to express them in an age-appropriate way, encourages them to be active and to participate (Correia, Aguiar and Amaro, 2023[13]).



- **Involvement** pertains to how much children are focused on or are engaged in activities (Laevers and Declercq, 2018[16]). Involvement is the effort, energy, and capacity to strive in a task that may be relevant or decisive to fulfill participatory goals. In turn, participation is driven by expressing needs and, more importantly, producing change in line with children and young people's needs (Ingman, B. C. et al., 2023[17]). Both involvement and participation require an adequate structure that facilitates the communication of personal priorities and effort development toward the implementation of desired changes.
- **Citizenship** is an umbrella concept covering many of the elements presented in Figure 2.1. It corresponds to the individual feeling of belonging to a community, as well as to reciprocity in social relationships in terms of enacting individual rights and duties (Menezes, 2003[18]). Children and young people's participation is expected to deliver fully empowered citizens, meaning those who exercise their rights (including the right to participate) and responsibilities for the sake of individual well-being and the common good (Correia, Aguiar and Amaro, 2023[13]).

Participation has become a buzzword applied to multiple engagement processes, from mere consultation to involvement (Aresi, G. et al., 2023[19]). This makes it even harder to identify true participation. A complete definition of children's participation requires the identification of forms of participation that are not meaningful. Table 3.1 lists some examples, based on Hart's ladder model of children's participation (Hart, 1992[20]).

Table 3.1. What children and young people's participation is not

Manipulation

Children and youth are mobilized by adults but do not understand the issues and the nature of their actions. Lack of awareness prevents their inclusion in an appropriate democratic process. This approach does not acknowledge children's capacity and abilities to fully participate as well.

Example: Children are involved in a community demonstration by parents and local leaders, but do not know the reasons for protesting.

Decoration

Children join some actions or events in support of a cause in an indirect way. They are not aware of the cause itself and/or are interested in the action or event for another reason.

Example: Children use t-shirts and distribute stickers with messages about climate change in a festival, but what they are really interested in is the concert coming up later in the event.

Tokenism

Children are apparently given a voice, but in fact have little or no choice about the topic, the way of communicating it, and limited space to share their own ideas. Under these circumstances, adults often consider the "participation context" reflects the best interests of children, but children are not heard.

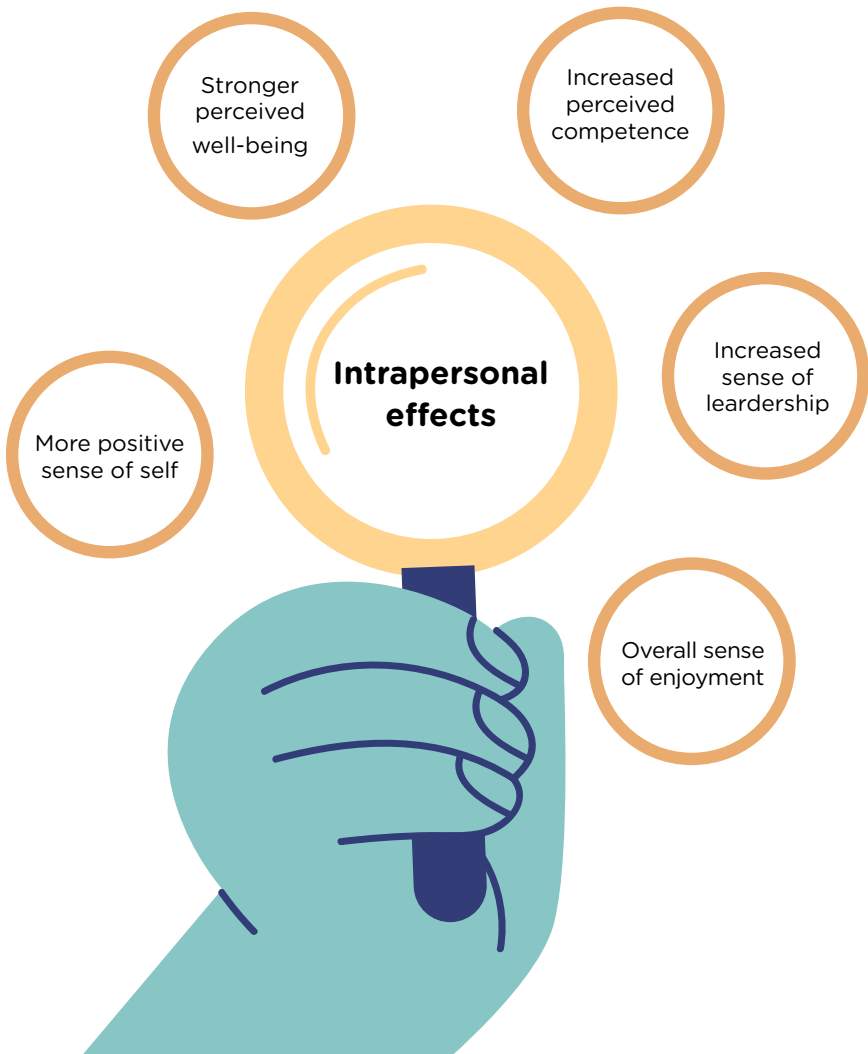
Example: Children participate in a conference panel, but the process of selecting who is speaking, the questions to be explored and the way these questions are going to be debated is decided by adults running the conference.

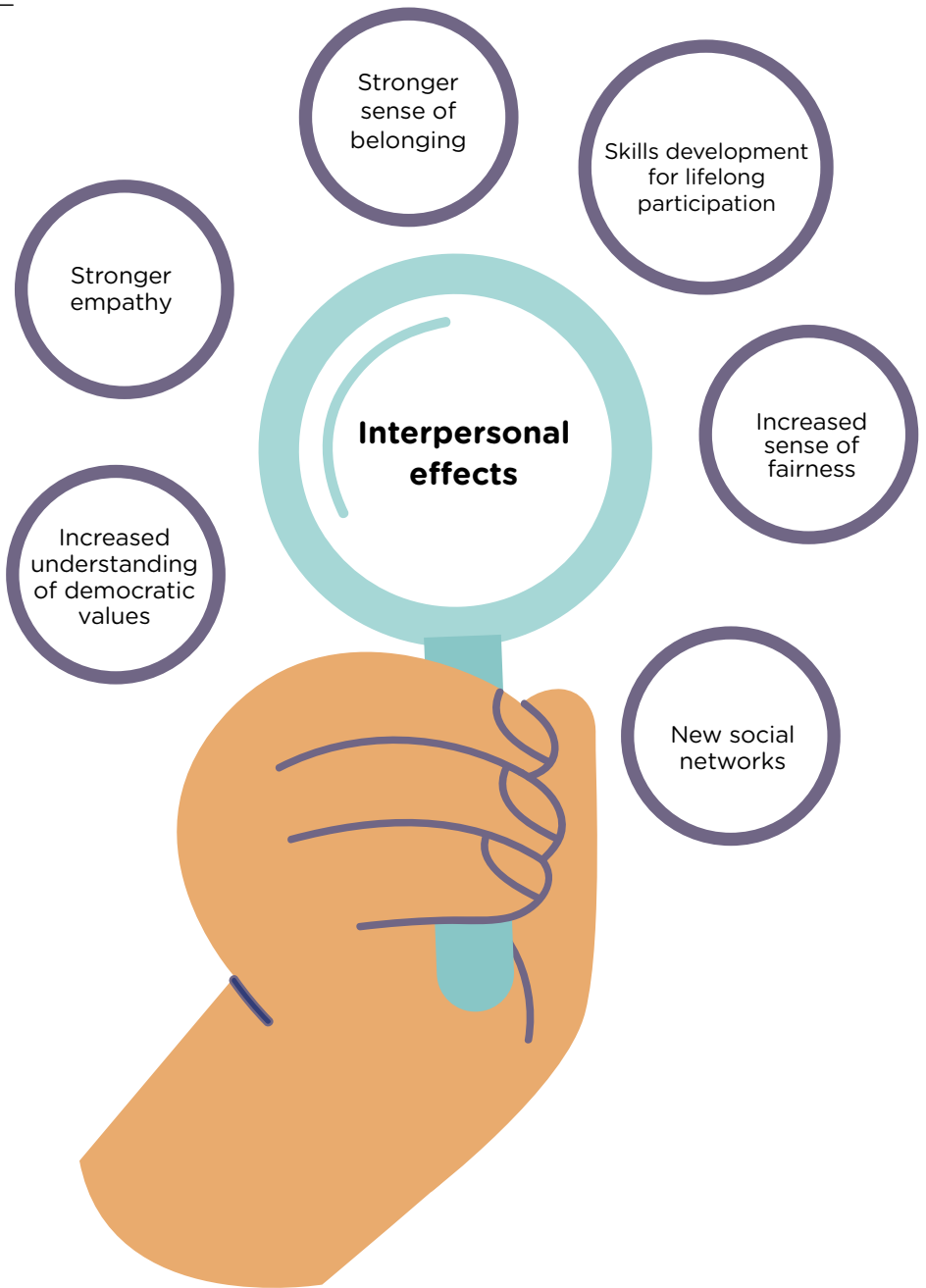
Source: (Hart, 1992[20]).

What are the benefits of children and young people's participation?

The list of benefits stemming from children and young people's participation is extensive and applies to them and other stakeholders involved in the participatory process. The benefits for children and youth are abundantly reported (Correia, N. et al., 2019[5]; Correia and Aguiar, 2022[2]; Cushing, 2015[11]; Ingman, B. C. et al., 2023[17]). Figure 3.2 highlights some of the main intrapersonal and interpersonal benefits of children's participation.

Figure 3.2. Children and young people's participation: Intrapersonal and interpersonal benefits





Source: Developed by the author based on (Correia, N. et al., 2019[5]; Correia and Aguiar, 2022[2]; Cushing, 2015[11]; Ingman, B. C. et al., 2023[17]).

Children’s participation offers benefits for communities as well that are summarized in Figure 3.3 (Correia, N. et al., 2019[5]; Correia and Aguiar, 2022[2]; Cushing, 2015[11]; Ingman, B. C. et al., 2023[17]).

**Figure 3.3. Children and young people’s participation:
Community benefits**



Source: Developed by the author based on (Correia, N. et al., 2019[5]; Correia and Aguiar, 2022[2]; Cushing, 2015[11]; Ingman, B. C. et al., 2023[17])

Why does the CGAP adopt a children and young people's participation approach?

The Portuguese CGAP follows the ECG central aim to ensure that all children and young people under 18 years old have access to essential services, contributing to realizing their rights according to the UN's CRC while fighting child poverty and reducing social inequalities. The ECG contributes to other EU pivotal policies (e.g., The European Pillar of Social Rights), thus aiming to expand its relevance and impact (República Portuguesa, 2023[1]).

Moreover, there remains an underlying risk of neglecting attention regarding the process from policies to outcomes. This means decision-makers may overlook important mechanisms leading to lasting societal changes, such as stakeholder participation (Trischler and Trischler, 2021[21]). There are six main reasons for fostering children's participation in the CGAP implementation, listed in Table 3.2.

The CGAPs broad vision requires the commitment of all stakeholders to fulfil their goals and overall strategy, including children and young people. As mentioned before, even in the context of the CGAP, children and young people's participation is not certain. Organizations and society are still inclined to protect children and youth instead of promoting them, thus preventing them from exercising their right to participate (Correia, Aguiar and Amaro, 2023[13]).

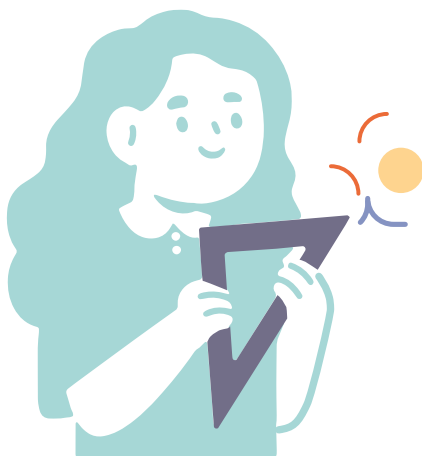


Table 3.2. Reasons for supporting children’s participation in the CGAP

At the individual level

1. Promoting children’s skills development | Participatory processes require children to learn about the needs and decisions affecting their lives (e.g., access to education) using formal and non-formal learning approaches. Importantly, children’s participation is a valuable way to help children develop or expand cognitive, behavioural, social, and emotional skills, thus ensuring the full realization of their potential (Correia, Aguiar and Amaro, 2023[13]) in line with the CGAP ambition.

2. Stimulating citizenship from early years | The CGAP is focused on making sure all children have access to the services and resources that support their development. Effective public policies rely on checks and balances, including a strong civil society. Promoting children’s participation from an early age ensures each child exercises her/his rights and duties and, therefore, learns to be active in society (Correia, Aguiar and Amaro, 2023[13]).

At the organizational level

3. Supporting children-centred organization | The CGAP aims help to transform public and the private sector organizations to become more children-centred. This means organizations processes, goals and programs are tailored upon children’s needs and aspirations, based on participatory approaches co-designed with children seeking to promote their strengths and skills (Trischler and Trischler, 2021[21]).

4. Increasing cooperation between stakeholders | Children's access to health services or adequate housing are only a few examples of complex social problems addressed by the CGAP that demand organizations to listen and value children's views for generating more effective and fair programs and interventions. The CGAP provides the means to address these complex social problems, which require solutions cutting across multiple governance sectors (Christensen, 2015[22]).

At the policy level

5. Improving policies that affect children | The CGAP derives from an EU framework to move forward children's rights and well-being. Creating the right conditions for the participation of all stakeholders, particularly children, supports implementation adapted to the specific national, regional and local contexts, increasing the likelihood that the CGAP roll-out will meet its ends (República Portuguesa, 2023[1]).

6. Promoting a culture based on human rights and democratic values | The principles and benefits of children's participation are a sustainable pathway to transform societies, ensuring human rights, democratic values, and the rule of law. The CGAP helps to protect and promote civic space in the current historical context (República Portuguesa, 2023[1]).

Source: Developed by the author based on (Christensen, 2015[22]; Correia, Aguiar and Amaro, 2023[13]; Trischler and Trischler, 2021[21])



The background is a solid light blue. There are several white, hand-drawn style wavy lines of varying lengths and curves scattered across the upper and middle portions of the page. One line starts near the top left and curves towards the center. Another starts near the top right and curves downwards. A third line is more horizontal in the middle, and a fourth is more vertical on the right side.

4. CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S PARTICIPATION: A HANDS-ON APPROACH

This section briefly describes the necessary conditions and recommended strategies to promote children and young people's participation. The approach followed here is a “hands-on” one:



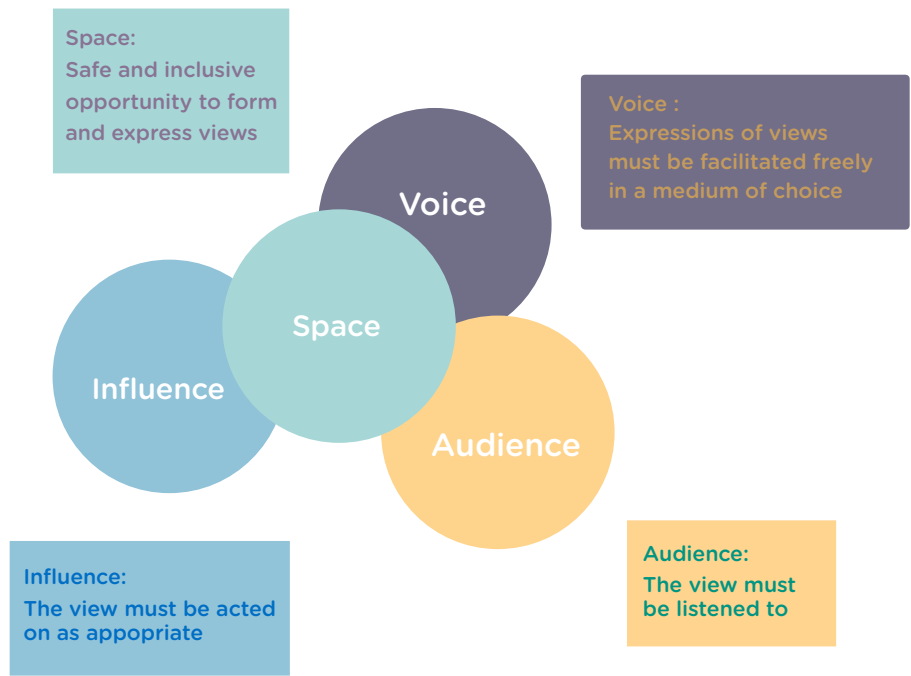
- Laying down the requirements of children's participation initiatives, grounded on a model of reference.
- Illustrating participatory strategies based on examples from projects and programs in diverse organizational settings from different regions of Portugal.
- Addressing how participatory strategies can be tailored according to age requirements, considering two age subgroups: children (aged 0-9 years old) and young people (aged 11-18 years old).
- Proposing additional strategies for organizations to further promote children and young people participation under the CGAP.

What are the requirements for promoting children and young people's participation?

There are multiple models describing children's participation¹. The most widespread model is the Lundy Model of Child, Young Person and Parent Participation (Lundy, 2007[23]). The model represented in Figure 4.1 closely follows the CRC definition of children's participation and has been adopted by the European Commission as a reference for implementing the European Child Guarantee (ECG) (UNICEF, 2021[24]).

¹To have a sense of the diversity of children's participation models, check: <https://www.nonformality.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/Participation-Models-20110703.pdf>

Figure 4.1. Lundy’s model of children’s participation



Source: (Lundy, 2007[23])

Lundy’s model (2007) relies on four dimensions described below, in Table 4.1. These dimensions establish the “golden rules” for delivering a children’s participation project, meaning the basic requirements for appropriately addressing children and youth needs for expressing their views and being acknowledged by meaningful others (UNICEF, 2021[24]). This model can also offer important insights for young people’s participation.

Table 4.1. The four dimensions of Lundy’s model of children’s participation

● **Space**

<p>What?</p> <p>Children and young people should be given safe, inclusive opportunities to form and express their views.</p>	<p>Avoid</p> <p>Places that can trigger children and youth negative emotions (e.g., social services).</p> <p>Spaces which do not allow for action, moving around, play – the full range of expressions that might be useful to spark participation.</p>
<p>Consider</p> <p>Different locations according to the participation goals: children and young people’s home, school, community centers, playgrounds, other outdoor venues.</p> <p>Various group sizes and settings: big groups (e.g., classes); small groups; one-on-one interactions.</p>	

● **Voice**

<p>What?</p> <p>Work on capacity-building with children and encourage the expression of their opinions and views..</p>	<p>Avoid</p> <p>Providing only one way of expression.</p> <p>Influencing children and young people’s thinking or imposing your view. The process of developing ideas should be supported and facilitated – but not manipulated.</p> <p>Using complex concepts and jargon in the capacity-building stages.</p>
<p>Consider</p> <p>Offering information, in different formats (contacts with stakeholders, research, training) and through different channels (conversations, play, online tools).</p> <p>Managing boundaries and expectations along the process.</p> <p>Providing time for forming an opinion.</p>	

● Influence

What? Ensure that children's views are taken seriously and acted upon, where appropriate.	Avoid Not providing feedback to children on the results achieved with participation processes. Not managing expectations on outcomes and impact of participation projects. Missing to explain the reasons why their views were not acted upon.
Consider Using communication and dissemination campaigns based on multiple tools (e.g., social media, stickers and banners campaigns, flyers) to raise awareness about children's needs and priorities. Engaging in advocacy actions, to reach-out to decision-makers and make them consider children's views in a serious way. Explaining children how their views were used, and what were the outcomes.	

● Audience

What? Ensure that children's views are communicated to someone with the willingness and responsibility to listen to them.	Avoid Failing to be transparent about the goals of the participation process for both the children and the audience. Disregarding the involvement of different stakeholders at relevant stages of a participatory process.
Consider Motivating relevant stakeholders (parents, local leaders, decision-makers) to be engaged in the process. Matching children's views with community needs, while preparing the participation process.	

How to promote children and young people's participation?

Implementing children and young people's participation initiatives demands a thoughtful consideration of some principles and requirements. Below, this manual provides insights on how to effectively plan this sort of initiatives across four steps: engagement, capacity-building, action, and dissemination. This step-by-step approach to the implementation of children and young people's participation projects is illustrated through several examples of national initiatives.

These projects were selected to cover experiences across (1) different Portuguese regions; (2) distinct age groups (children aged 0-9 years old and young people aged 10-18 years old); and (3) multiple policy domains (e.g., education, social inclusion, health).



Engagement

Engagement corresponds to when stakeholders are given the opportunity and the necessary resources (e.g. information, data and digital tools) to collaborate during all phases of the policy-cycle and in the service design and delivery (OECD, 2024[8]). Engaging with children and young people means **providing with opportunities to voice their opinions and practice their skills in real-life settings, often (but not only) through group collaboration.**

The goal of this stage is to support children's sense of confidence and acknowledge that their efforts can shape desired outcomes (Cardarelli et al., 2021[12]). There are multiple strategies to promote children's engagement in participatory processes. Some examples are provided in Figure 4.2.



Figure 4.2. Engagement: Practical examples

Discussion spaces

Children share their perspectives about their priorities and collaborate with others (e.g., teachers) on the planning, development and implementation of intended changes. These techniques involve adult facilitation, active listening and creating a safe space.

Crianças em Participação (Municipality of Funchal): This project focuses on children enrolled in primary education (typically aged 6-9 years old) and consists of successive rounds of participatory meetings at class-, school- and municipality levels. These participatory meetings involve discussion and voting strategies and are aimed at the implementation of the best ideas to be funded under the child participatory budget.

To learn more, visit

<https://pem.funchal.pt/projeto-criancas-em-participacao-2023-2024/>

Storytelling

Discussions leading to participatory processes can be sparked by storytelling. These might be mediated by using puppets (especially with younger children) or first-person testimonials/examples to illustrate the selected topic.

Project 3D (Caritas of Ilha Terceira): The project funded by the Municipality of Angra do Heroísmo is aimed at 6 to 9 years old children, coming from vulnerable communities. The team tells stories to the children using original characters “brought to life” as muppets. The stories pose moral dilemmas and communicate the need for action in the children’s own community. These stories are then transformed in participation activities (e.g., campaigns to improve the quality of life in their neighbourhoods).

To learn more, visit

<https://acores.caritas.pt/projetos/3d-2/>

Gaming

Cooperative activities involving playing or developing games promoting teamwork in a productive and non-judgmental manner. Playing or developing games can make them feel like their opinions are accepted and appreciated and that they have needs in common with others.

KidLe project (Iscte - University Institute of Lisbon & international partners):

The KidLe project aims to support the inclusion of migrant children/pupils in new school environments by co-creating intercultural board games and integrating them into a digital gaming pack. The children's engagement is achieved through co-creation workshops, in which they share ideas (e.g. their experiences with other games), express preferences (e.g. games that contain a 'path/paths' to follow, in which challenges can be solved, games with a physical component or games involving "fantastic" figures) and contribute creatively (e.g. elements of the game, how the game ends). The project also plans gaming events in which the children will be involved, thus participating in the design, development and experimentation of the game.

To learn more, visit
<https://kidle-eu.org/>

Artistic and creative activities

A range of artistic and creative activities, from writing essays, stories or music lyrics, to drawing, painting, or short plays are useful to engage children and youth in participatory processes. This pathway works by providing opportunities to the participants to express their views in a more indirect way, which might be useful in the early stages of topic exploration.

CONEXIO project (Solidaried'arte Association):

In this project funded by the EEA & Norway Grants (Program Cidad@s Ativos), participants from ages 16-18 were involved in the development of several visual artistic displays in their community (e.g., murals). These artistic expressions were developed through groups discussions and other collaborative tools. The project addressed the identified need to increase community belonging and raise awareness about topics such as domestic violence.

To learn more, visit
<https://gulbenkian.pt/cidadaos-ativos/projects/conexio-ligarte-ao-bairro/>

Source: Developed by the author based on information collected through online interviews, email exchanges, and website analysis of the mentioned projects.

The following vignette illustrates how the project “Around the Conversations”, promoted by a consortium led by the Between Association and funded by the General Directorate for Health, uses a specific discussion strategy: the Citizenship Circles². These circles are a discussion space to engage children aged 10-18 from vulnerable backgrounds in the participatory processes focusing on mental health issues.

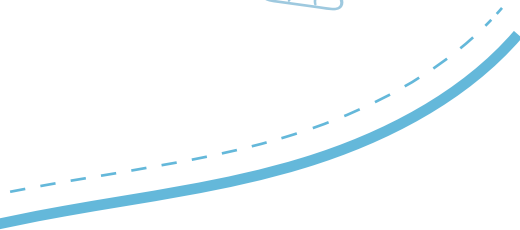
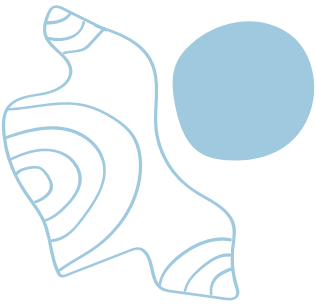
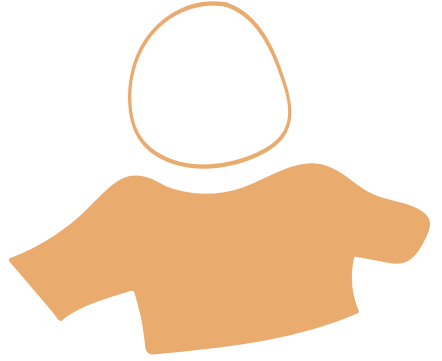
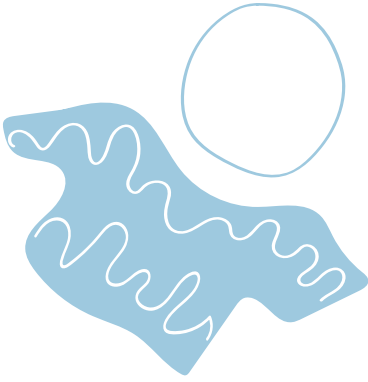
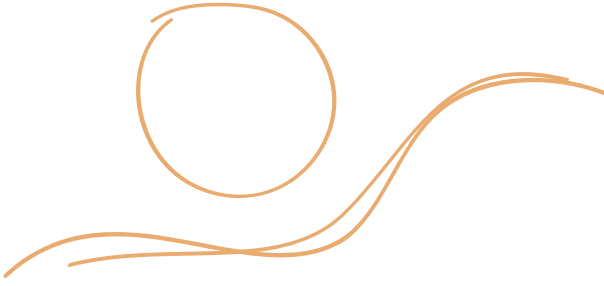
The Citizenship Circles consist of creating circles of 15 to 20 people (children, young people or adults), with 2 facilitators per circle, preferably living in the same geographical area. The main aim of these circles is to engage children and create spaces for debate, reflection and action planning. Their goal is to improve the conditions in the surrounding community, considering the wellbeing of its participants. These circles take place weekly and last around 90 minutes.

The Citizenship Circles allow to conduct diagnostic sessions on the current situation of the community on the main topic and follow-up sessions that lead to the building of a “joint dream” towards which people want to evolve together. The Citizenship Circles are usually combined with other participatory tools and collaborative dynamics to facilitate this process. They were designed so that when the circles reach a significant number of participants in a territory, representatives are chosen from each circle to form another level of debate. Their operation is governed by balancing individual opinions and society needs. The decisions are taken by consensus.

Source: Developed by the author based on information provided by the project manager through an online interview.

² To learn more, visit <https://www.between.pt/projetos/a-volta-das-conversas>







Capacity-building

A key element to spark children's participation is capacity-building. Capacity-building refers to children's knowledge accumulation, knowledge production and/or skills development for addressing participation goals. It also encompasses training or preparing adults in children's life contexts to support their participation rights.

Capacity building is crucial because it provides the necessary instruments for children, young people and adults involved in the process to understand the nuances of a selected priority and the participatory process itself. It also prevents participatory processes from being unfocused or unclear, leading to disappointing experiences (Cardarelli et al., 2021[12]; Correia, Aguiar and Amaro, 2023[13]).

Figure 4.3 provides a list of capacity-building examples involving learning, training and research strategies that can be used in children's participation projects (Foster-Fisherman et al., 2010[25]; London J. K. et al., 2003[26]; Wang and Burris, 1997[27]).

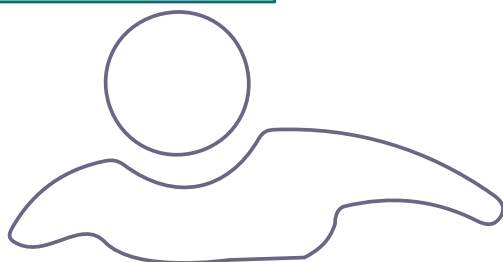
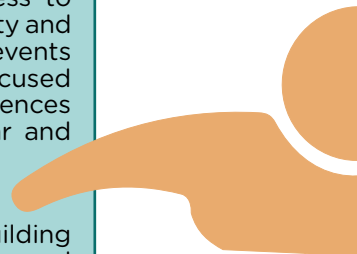


Figure 4.3. Capacity-building: Practical examples

Peer-to-peer learning

Mutual learning and training strategy that involves participants of the same level engaging in collaborative learning. Simply put, peer-to-peer learning is when one or more learners teach other learners.

Escola de Superpoderes (Municipality of Porto/Transformers): Peer-learning programme through mentoring and volunteering activities, aimed at children aged 16 to 18 in foster care. The programme aims to support the development of citizenship, entrepreneurship, personal and social skills, activate agents of social change and co-create community impact projects.

To learn more, visit

<https://www.cm-porto.pt/juventude-projetos/escola-de-superpoderes>



Stakeholders' training

Training courses, workshops or seminars to raise awareness among professionals and other adults (e.g., parents) about children's participation rights and the processes to support them.

Project JUS – Justice for Children (National Commission for the Promotion of the Rights and the Protection of Children and Young People (CNPDP CJ)): Project co-funded by the European Commission under the Rights, Equality and Citizenship programme seeking to promote the implementation of Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1989 and ratified in Portugal in 1990. The project includes resources for different age groups (3-6; 7-10; 11-14) and provides training materials for professionals (educators, social workers, youth workers) on children's right to participate.

To learn more, visit <https://projeto12.pt/>



● Experiential learning

Process of learning by doing. By engaging children and young people in hands-on experiences and reflection, they can connect their priorities and discussions to real-world situations more easily. Experiential learning in participatory processes can be promoted through field trips, job shadowing, voluntary work and other experience-based activities.

Project MALA VIP (Instituto de Apoio à Criança - Child Support Institute): The project focused on exploring and raising awareness about human rights, involving vulnerable young people, some of them in foster care, aged between 13 and 18. The process involved the development of a game and videos that would make it easier and more fun to understand human rights. During the process of developing the videos, the participants learned about different technical skills (screenplay writing, make-up, video production and edition) through activities such as field trips to the Portuguese Public Radio and Television or other studios or by working with professionals on audiovisual editing.

To learn more, visit
<https://iacrianca.pt/projeto-mala-vip/>

● Photovoice

Photovoice is a research method by which children – normally those with limited power due to poverty, ethnic background, or class, among other reasons – use photo images or video to capture aspects of their environment and experiences and share them with others. The pictures can then be used with captions to bring the realities of the children's lives and their communities to the audience and promote change.

Garcia et al. (2023) (Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of the University of Porto): documents a full example of using photovoice in the Great Porto area. Through the photovoice method, the participants aged 13-17 coming from a vulnerable social background were encouraged to research their community's reality, thoroughly observe and examine the contexts and represent them visually, using photovoice.

To learn more, visit
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15575330.2022.2131860>

Source: Developed by the author based on information collected through online interviews, email exchanges, and website analysis of the mentioned projects.

The example below illustrates how multiple capacity-building processes can be combined in a participatory initiative. The project in the spotlight is Jovem Autarca, an initiative of the Municipality of Santa Maria da Feira running since 2014 and aiming to develop active citizenship and civic awareness among children aged between 13 and 17³.

The Jovem Autarca project (young mayor project) project aims to enhance behaviours of active citizenship and civic participation by valuing young people's opinions, ideas and perspective for the future.

The Project is an electoral and democratic initiative that promotes the election of the Young Mayor and two councillors, who will represent the youth of Santa Maria da Feira for one year. All young people aged between 13 and 17 who study and/or live in the municipality of Santa Maria da Feira are eligible to apply.

After running an electoral campaign and voting procedures to select the Jovem Autarca, all the participants are invited to build a team and be involved into a collective decision-making process. This process involves managing an annual budget of 10,000.00€, from the discussion of measures to planning and implementation of agreed proposals. During the process, all ideas discussed during the campaign are considered – even those which were not selected by students in the voting process.

The project depends heavily on the capacity building of the participants on issues regarding citizenship, electoral processes and pitching ideas.



Among other measures, the Jovem Autarca project includes a residential training over a weekend on various aspects of political life (e.g. contact with decision-makers, electoral processes and rules), a visit to the Portuguese Parliament or the participation of the candidates in the local youth council as observers to learn with peers and stakeholders how institutions work.

³ To learn more, visit <https://cm-feira.pt/jovem-autarca>

Capacity-building efforts based on research range considerably from using a single research tool to whole research approaches based on children's participatory efforts. This also means that the extent to which children are involved in research-driven, participatory activities is very diverse. They might be involved in a single step of the research process (e.g., data collection) or in all stages of the research process, from research planning to drawing and disseminating conclusions (Foster-Fisherman et al., 2010[25]).

The textbox below illustrates Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) model use in children's participation projects. YPAR is a research approach that actively involves children or young people at all stages of the research process – design, data collection, analysis, and dissemination of research – focused on issues that directly affect their lives and communities. Unlike traditional research, where children and youth are often passive subjects or participants, YPAR emphasizes collaboration, empowerment, and shared decision-making (Foster-Fisherman et al., 2010[25]).

The illustration is based on the project Dream Teens powered by Jovem Cascais⁴. Inspired by the Dream Teens network, an initiative of the Social Adventure Project team, the project focused on children aged 11 to 18 years old.



The **Dream Teens project** aimed at empowering young people aged 11 to 18 years old and making their voices heard in identifying the needs and problems of their generation, as well as strategies for solving them. The project created a network of 19 young people promoting social action and participation by young people living in the municipality of Cascais, to promote their participation, citizenship, leadership and social entrepreneurship skills. The project was implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic, meaning that it was run almost entirely online.

The project followed an action-research methodology including the following steps: (1) opening a call for participation led by three ambassadors who were born and living in the municipality (charismatic volunteers from Jovem Cascais); (2) disseminating the call through institutional means (e.g., schools) and online, including a registration document; (3) delivering an online conference to present the project and its methodology, as well as scheduling online workshops; (4) creating a YouTube channel and a WhatsApp group that allowed for greater and better contact between participants for collecting and debating the needs/problems of the young participants; (5) delivering an online workshop, with a fundamentally active methodology, aimed at developing action-research and social entrepreneurship skills. At the end of the training, they were asked to submit an individual project (via email) within the next 15 days; (6) development of the projects, with ongoing support from the research team and the scheduling of online meetings with the young people; (7) the final closing event of Dream Teens powered by Jovem Cascais, in which the individual projects were presented and discussed by Jovem Cascais and by members of the Cascais City Council's governing body.

Source: Developed by the author based on information provided in the project's website.

⁴ To learn more, visit <https://jovem.cascais.pt/pt-pt/node/1300>

Action

Overall, the action component of a participatory process corresponds to translating participation into visible or tangible results. **Often through collective action, children and young people develop a tangible outcome in line with their discussions during the participatory process.**

The action dimension of children and young people's participation is expected to be driven by themselves, with adults facilitating the process and providing resources (Cardarelli et al., 2021[12]; Correia, Aguiar and Amaro, 2023[13]). The results can take many different forms. The examples presented in Figure 4.4 are a non-exhaustive list of strategies adopted by children to express their views in a participative process.



Figure 4.4. Action: Practical examples

● Campaigns

Use of tangible (e.g. brochures, outdoors) or online resources, particularly websites and social media and various formats (e.g., short videos, creative posts, etc.), to conduct awareness-raising campaigns or calls to action.

ADN project (Fernão Mendes Pinto Association): Project funded by the EEA & Norway Grants aiming at children and young people, professionals, carers and members of the community. The project focuses on compliance with international and national directives for the promotion of children's rights in all systems for the promotion and protection of children and young people. The project combines capacity-building activities for children and young people and educational and social professionals with campaigns to raise awareness of children's rights (e.g. right to an opinion, right to play).

To learn more, visit
<https://afmp1977.webnode.pt/projeto-adn/>

● Learning materials

Development of materials, whether in physical or digital formats, to raise awareness or enable capacity building of other groups of children about the topics selected by children in participatory processes.

Project Geração Online (Instituto de Apoio à Criança - Child Support Institute): The aim of the project defined by the participants aged 10-18 years old was to work on raising awareness about internet safety. Based on training strategies with professionals and peer to peer learning activities, the young people produced a series of animated videos. The videos focused on providing tips to avoid three main risks: online shopping frauds, online abuse and using unsafe websites.

To learn more, visit
<https://iacrianca.pt/projetos-transversais/justice-initiative-portugal/>



Comprehensive programs

Multicomponent programs (e.g., capacity building, social and emotional development programs, community engagement) which reflect participatory principles and results across all activities.

Ubuntu Academies (Padre António Vieira Institute):

Ubuntu is an internationally applied philosophy that focuses on the person and their uniqueness and, at the same time, proposes a path that everyone is called to take: to become a person. In Portugal, the Ubuntu method has been applied in school contexts across the country in municipalities such as Coimbra, Gondomar, Matosinhos, Santa Maria da Feira, or Sintra, to mention just a few. The participants are children as young as 6 years old. The project focuses on the development of five core competencies: Self-knowledge, Self-confidence, Resilience, Empathy and Service. The first three dimensions are more individual and the last two are more relational and linked to participation.

To learn more, visit
<https://academialideresubuntu.org/pt/>

Source: Developed by the author based on information collected through online interviews, email exchanges, and website analysis of the mentioned projects.

The following vignette illustrates how children's action sometimes culminates in recommendations or manifestos. These are documents produced by a group of children targeting specific audiences, particularly decision-makers, presenting suggestions or an integral roadmap to promote a desired change in a community. The provided example is Project Designing Dialogues, from Associação Contexto⁵.



The main aim of the project **Designing Dialogue** was to promote youth participation, and it consisted of four main phases/activities: Democracy Labs, Social Labs, Hackathon, and a Final Conference. The project culminated in the production of a Manifesto to increase youth participation in quantity and quality in decision-making processes and to promote sustainable urban development. The Manifesto presented young people's opinions and proposals for the city of Faro, a characterization of how they participate, and recommendations for promoting youth participation resulting from the project's activities. The document aims to help young people, youth organisations, the Municipality of Faro, and others, promote greater involvement of young people in local civic and democratic processes.

Source: Developed by the author based on information provided in the project's website.

⁵ To learn more, visit <https://contextos.org.pt/designing-dialogue-capacitar-jovens-para-a-participacao-civica/>.

Dissemination & Uptake

Dissemination pertains to the public disclosure of results by any appropriate means, while uptake refers to the application of the project results to achieve the desired impacts. Children and young people's participation processes close the circle when their results are delivered to the community and the stakeholders, while seeking to fulfil their vision.

Dissemination and uptake approaches in participatory projects may follow very distinct goals. While some projects prioritize putting a certain topic on the agenda, others go a step forward, by using the outcomes of the participatory processes to influence desired structural or legal changes. Figure 4.5 synthesizes different dissemination and uptake strategies in children's participatory processes.



Figure 4.5. Dissemination and uptake: Practical examples

Exhibitions, performances

Children decide to disseminate the results of their projects by organizing events to present the results of their participatory process such as exhibitions, performances or alike.

Project 3D (Caritas of Ilha Terceira):

Throughout the school year, children involved in project 3D develop several collaborative projects. Every three months they and the facilitators co-organize gatherings with teachers and parents to present the results of their proposals for improving school life and the community. This is also an opportunity to add meaningful adult feedback to participation initiatives and, thus, improve impact.

To learn more, visit <https://acores.caritas.pt/projetos/3d-2/>

Feedback sessions

The dissemination strategy can include sessions with community leaders, professionals, or parents for sharing results, but also to obtain feedback from experienced or meaningful adults to validate or further improve the outcomes of the project.

Project Geração Online (Instituto de Apoio à Criança - Child Support Institute):

The aim of the project defined by the participants, most of them aged 14-18 years old, was to work on internet safety. When concluding the project, the participants organized sessions for presenting the videos and obtaining the feedback from parents, but also from professionals who had helped them through capacity-building activities, such as Polícia Judiciária (Portuguese Criminal Investigation Police) officers.

To learn more, visit <https://iacrianca.pt/projetos-transversais/justice-initiative-portugal/>

Source: Developed by the author based on information collected through online interviews, email exchanges, and website analysis of the mentioned projects.



Sometimes, the dissemination and uptake stage involves institutional presentations. These presentations are made in decision-making settings such as municipal assemblies, meetings with regional authorities, or hearings in regional or national parliaments to influence changes in policy in a relevant and more direct way. The following example from Project Children Assembly, promoted by the Municipality of Santa Maria da Feira, reflects this approach to target the project's audience.

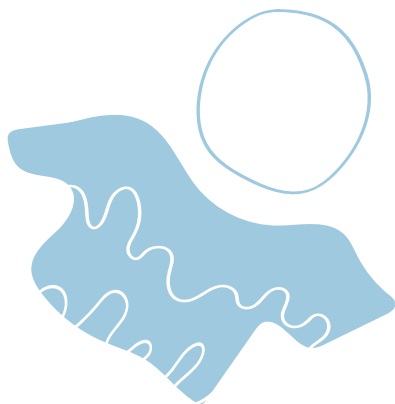
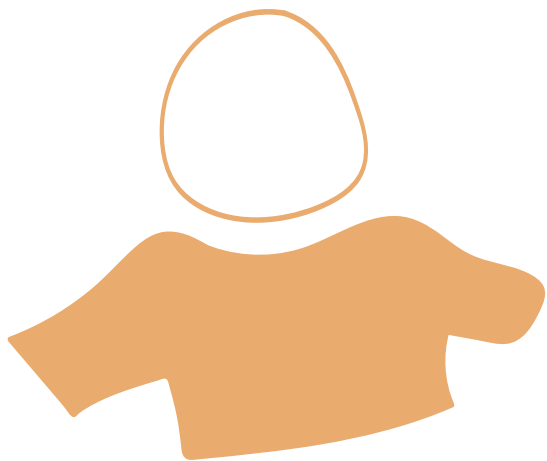
while fostering self-esteem, respect for the other, peer learning and friendship. At the end of the school year, in a public ceremony, children present their proposals to the mayor and the different municipality departments. The best proposals are funded and implemented by the Municipality. Children Assembly has children as protagonists and agents of change, they are the ones who decide in all stages of the project. This project is seen as a preparation for the Jovem Autarca Project (Young Mayor Project).

Children Assembly is a citizenship project from the Municipality of Santa Maria da Feira. It started in 2006 and involves every year about 250 children aged 6-9 years old from 12 classes of different schools of the municipality. Across the school year, children meet regularly according to an assembly format to develop proposals that match the needs of their local community, normally under a specific selected main topic for each edition. Guided by non-formal education, the project includes training in specific domains like democracy, freedom of speech, voting process, visit to the National Parliament in Lisbon

Source: Developed by the author based on information provided by the project manager through an online interview and email exchanges.

The plethora of strategies mapped across multiple projects implemented in Portugal can be repositioned and reinterpreted according to Lundy's model (Lundy, 2007[23]). Table 4.2 follows that approach while offering tips on building up a participatory process across the four dimensions of the model.





What strategies can organizations use to promote children and young people participation in the framework of the CGAP?

The CGAP is an aspirational policy framework aimed at a very ambitious goal: ensure that all children and young people have access to essential services, thus contributing for the promotion of their rights, the fight against child poverty and the promotion of equal rights among all children.

The range and scope of this ambition demand for an integrated governance approach. Integrated governance encompasses an intersectoral collaboration between different departments of the State government as well as between public services, the third sector and private organizations (Christensen, 2015[22]). At the same time, the roll-out of policies associated with the CGAP requires coordination between different decision-making levels (national, regional, inter-municipal, and municipal). Thus, the CGAP is anchored on a collaboration culture involving multiple stakeholders and interactions.

In complex institutional environments, **there is the risk that children and young people are seen only as beneficiaries of the different policies and programs issued in the framework in the framework of the CGAP, instead of being protagonists of a process of change.** Increasing an organization's adoption of children's participation strategies requires a multi-level approach that integrates both cultural change and practical implementation (Lefevre, 2018[28]). Figure 4.6 offers an overview of some strategies to foster children and young people's participation at the organizational level. These strategies are in line with the CGAP vision and include links to examples or resources from on-the-ground initiatives.

Figure 4.6. Organizational strategies to promote children's participationL

Leadership

Action: Organizational leaders must visibly commit to children and young people's participation strategies by prioritizing them in organizational policies, funding, and decision-making. When senior leadership supports for children and young people's rights and participatory practices this attitude sets the tone for the entire organization.

Tips & Examples: Has your organization ever appointed a champion for leading and advocating for children's participation issues across all levels of the institution? Or has it engaged youth leaders or ambassadors in its initiatives? For instance, **Project CONEXIO** identified youth champions in the community for promoting children's participation and ensure a consistent focus of activities with participants' priorities, reaching-out to peers and advocate for their rights with local leaders (e.g., Parish Council).

Capacity-building

Action: Provide training for staff at all levels, from leadership to field workers, to build their understanding of children's rights and the importance of participation. This should include practical tools for involving children in decision-making processes and creating safe spaces for them to express their views.

Tips & Examples: Applied research initiatives are outstanding opportunities for improving staff's skills on children participation issues. Take for instance project **PARTICIPA**. This initiative was funded by the Erasmus+ programme and developed by a consortium comprising Iscte - the Hellenic Open University, Odisee, the University of Warsaw, the Polytechnic Institute of Porto, and Association of Early Childhood Education Professionals (APEI).

The PARTICIPA project used a multi-level professional development approach with the aim of supporting kindergarten teachers in providing high-quality early childhood education by strengthening their knowledge, attitudes and skills to engage in constructive teamwork to develop, implement and monitor the participation of young children in activity rooms and kindergartens.

To learn more, visit
<http://child-participation.eu/>

Incorporating children's voices

Action: Embed children's participation directly into the organization's core processes and policies. This can include integrating child consultation into program design, evaluation, and monitoring to ensure their perspectives shape decisions.

Tips & Examples: Do you have an advisory board for including children and youth perspectives in activities and services? Has your community established fora that regularly offer children's perspectives for decision-making? These are just a few examples on how to incorporate children's perspectives in organizational settings. For instance, the **Municipality of Santa Maria da Feira**, through its projects Assembleia de Crianças - Children Assembly and Jovem Autarca - Young Mayor, has provided resources and spaces (e.g., annual presentation of proposals to the municipal assembly) that are an integral part of its annual agenda. These projects and their public fora are running for almost 20 years now.

(Inter)national collaboration

Action: Partner with organizations or experts that specialize in children's rights and participation to share best practices and build networks. External partnerships can provide technical support, resources, and advocacy to enhance the legitimacy and sustainability of participation strategies.

The Instituto Português do Desporto e Juventude - Portuguese Institute of Sports and Youth also provides several programs which can constitute a good starting point for promoting children and young people participation:

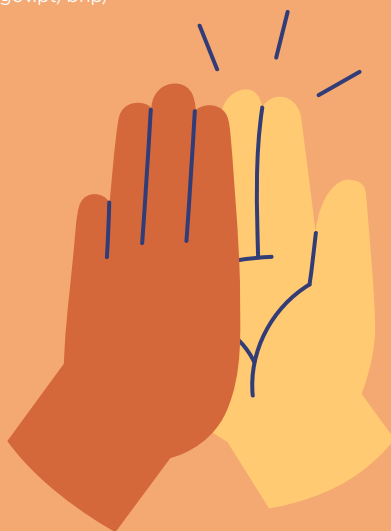
To learn more, visit
<https://ipdj.gov.pt/programas>

Tips & Examples: Has your organization considered reaching out to national organizations for advice? For instance, the National Commission for the Promotion of the Rights and the Protection of Children and Young People (CNPDP CJ) has recently issued a White Paper on Children's Participation. The whole process implemented by the CNPDPCJ can provide valuable learning points and spark collaboration.

Also, have you considered collaborating internationally on children's participation matters?

Advocacy groups or think-tanks such as the Youth Partnership provide multiple resources and training to youth workers on participation issues. Funding schemes such as the Erasmus+ are valuable tools for learning with others at the international level on participation initiatives.

To learn more, visit
<https://bibliografia.bnportugal.gov.pt/bnp/bnp.exe/registo?2151420>



Monitoring, evaluating, sharing

Action: Regularly monitor and evaluate the impact of children's participation, and share success stories as well as lessons learned within and outside the organization. This helps build a culture of accountability and continuous improvement while demonstrating the value of child participation.

Tips & Examples: Does your organization conduct impact assessment of its children's participation initiatives? Does it include children and young people's voices in monitoring and evaluation processes? Does the dissemination of the initiatives offer enough space for children's testimonials?

Evaluation is an opportunity and not a formality! The project **"Around the Conversations"** is focused on assessing and sharing its impact production. The project is particularly interested in ensuring social recognition of the results to promote the participation of more young people. To do so, they conduct an impact assessment and combine it with dissemination strategies such as campaigns in social networks, first-person accounts or testimonials and storytelling.

To learn more, visit <https://www.between.pt/projetos/a-volta-das-conversas>



Sources: Developed by the author based on: (Cardarelli et al., 2021[12]; Cushing, 2015[11]; UNICEF, 2021[24]); information provided by project managers through online interview, email exchanges and project's websites analysis.



5. SUPPORTING CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S PARTICIPATION THROUGH EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Communication is the human process of **reaching a shared understanding or putting something in common**. Human communication combines analogue communication, corresponding to its relational dimension composed of non-verbal messages, with digital communication, pertaining to the content which includes verbal and written messages organized according to language codes (Alarcão, 2000[29]).

Communication constitutes a key element of children's participation processes. Children's participation is fostered through multiple communication elements such as listening, interpretation, discussion, (dis)agreements, or feedback.

Effective communication is, to a great extent, the main driver of successful participatory processes. Its benefits are extensively documented in the literature and include improved emotional development, stronger relationships, improved well-being, including lower anxiety and depression rates or greater empathy, to mention just a few (Lefevre, 2018[28]).



Communication principles in children and young people's participation

Effective communication follows two main principles in the context of children's participation:

The communication process must be person-centred: participatory processes are based on the child or youth's preferred way to share their opinion, meaning that the facilitators must be flexible, provide multiple forms of expression and be creative (O'Reilly and Dolan, 2016[30]; Bannister and Huntington, 2002[31]) describe this principle in a very straightforward way:

Following, rather than always thinking we can or should lead; actively listening rather than always talking; engaging with children on their terms not just ours; being respectful of what they can do rather than largely focusing on what they cannot do (applying the deficit model of child development); or bringing our creativity and knowledge to the interactions we have with them, are all examples of routes to child-centred interactions.

The communication process must enable cooperation: the process relies mostly on a dialogical approach driven by empathy, inclusiveness, curiosity, and exploration, as opposed to a dialectical approach, based on argument and persuasion to find common ground. The emphasis on a dialogical approach to communication in participatory processes has the potential to increase reciprocity and to promote the children and young people's agency while valuing verbal and non-verbal communication elements (Ruch, G. et al., 2020[32]).



Acknowledging the centrality and benefits of communication in participatory processes are two necessary steps to setting up more efficient and rewarding participation initiatives. In addition, several communication strategies and techniques can lead to successful children's participation initiatives more easily. Table 5.1 lists some of them (Lefevre, 2018[28]; Ruch, G. et al., 2020[32]; Bannister and Huntington, 2002[31]).

Table 5.1. Communication strategies to improve children's participation

TAILOR

What?

Children and young people's participation processes must foster every child's preferred method of communication. This means considering different approaches and offering different options to engage and communicate (e.g., play, arts, guided discussions) making sure they are also age-appropriate.

Why?

Tailoring ensures participatory processes are children- or youth-centred, inclusive and that they mobilize children's strengths and skills.



How?

Prepare in advance: Collect information about the children or young people participating in the process.

Listen to more than one perspective: Sometimes organizations (e.g., schools) convey biased or inaccurate messages about the participants, based on deficits. Try to understand the group features from more than one perspective.

Be aware of your own biases: Involve other facilitators in the process for tailoring the participation strategy and how communication occurs.

Check if any of the children or young people participating has any specific requirements that affect communication: There might be language, cultural, socioeconomic, cognitive or physical issues that need to be managed.

Test the strategies and be prepared to adjust: Most probably you will need to fine-tune your communication style along the way to be more effective.



How?

Create a safe and inclusive environment: Set clear expectations for respect and inclusion from the start, model positive behavior, and encourage diversity in contributions. This can involve regular check-ins to ensure all children and young people feel heard and valued, and actively involving them in the decision-making process.

RELATE

What?

Create a safe environment, based on predictable, trustworthy, respectful and caring relationships with facilitators and peers.

Encourage collaboration: Design activities that require cooperation, such as group problem-solving, joint creative tasks, or role-playing exercises. Make sure participants have an opportunity to take on different roles within the group, allowing them to interact with various peers and develop stronger bonds.

Why?

Positive relationships encourage the expression of opinions, increase individual agency and promote cooperative behaviours. It also offers a model for how different audiences can be targeted.

Offer opportunities for leadership and responsibility: Provide children and young people with age-appropriate leadership roles, such as being a group leader, project planner, or mediator in discussions. Encourage them to take responsibility for specific tasks and support each other in achieving common goals.



REPEAT & ADJUST

What?

Communication in participatory initiatives involving children and young people must include space for communication about the process itself and its results, for continued improvement. Children and young people offer abundant and valuable information on how to improve communication and participation strategies.

Why?

More effective projects acknowledge communication risks, prevent and mitigate their effects, are flexible (by accepting that to a certain extent the process includes a trial-and-error approach), and continuously refine their approach.

How?

Multilateral, constructive feedback:

Design the activities to include reflection points about how the activities are being conducted (what is going well, what needs to be improved) involving all stakeholders - children, facilitators, audience (e.g., a field diary can be used to take notes or summaries about the process).

Ritualize and repeat: Try to put in place a predictable environment and set of activities. This is particularly important for reassuring younger children and participants coming from more vulnerable backgrounds. Using rituals (e.g., a warning cry for opening the session or a feedback moment by spokesperson of the group to close an activity) is a good way to increase certainty in participation spaces.

Summarize, summarize, summarize:

Make sure to include activities to revise and recapitulate rules, next steps, or individual/group responsibilities (e.g., debriefings, talking points, synthesis).

Manage expectations: Frequently promote activities with children and young people for discussing and regulating expectations, both regarding the process and the results (e.g., a graphic timeline exposed in the usual meeting room can indicate how much of the project has been achieved and what is still missing).

Effective communication in the context of children and young people's participation demands specific attention and targeted approaches for those from vulnerable groups, including based on race and ethnicity (e.g. Roma), migrant status or (dis)ability status. Table 5.2 lists some communication strategies for each of the dimensions provided in Table 5.1 aiming at facilitating the communication and engagement in participatory projects from children and young people from disadvantaged and under-represented groups.

When engaging children and young people from vulnerable groups, it also remains essential to coordinate from the beginning with public institutions that have a mandate to promote the rights and protect these groups.



Table 5.2. Communication strategies for promoting the participation of children and young people from disadvantaged and under-represented groups

TAILOR

What?

Participatory processes with vulnerable children and young people must include actions to accommodate each child's preferred method of communication, ensuring accessibility and inclusivity.

How?

Migrant children and young people: Provide multilingual resources, interpreters, and visual aids to support those with limited proficiency in the dominant language.



Roma children and young people:
Use storytelling, music, and interactive activities that align with Roma cultural traditions.

Disabled children and young people:
Check specific needs ahead of the implementation of the project. Offer alternative communication methods such as sign language, Braille, AAC (Augmentative and Alternative Communication) devices, and simplified language.

LISTEN

What?

Listening must be rooted in culturally and physically sensitive strategies to make sure all children and young people's voices are heard, acknowledged, and valued in a genuine way.

How?

Migrant children and young people:
Consider dedicated time in the sessions for these participants to share their specific experiences associated with the topic. Create peer-led discussion groups where they can express their thoughts in their own language.

Roma children and young people:
Conduct informal and trust-building conversations to encourage open sharing, avoiding overly formal settings.

Disabled children and young people:
Use one-on-one sessions or assistive technologies to capture opinions in ways that suit their needs.

RELATE

What?

Create a safe, predictable, and respectful environment where children and young people coming from vulnerable backgrounds feel valued and supported. Facilitators need awareness of sensitive cultural relational issues as well as skills for diversity and inclusion.

Disabled children and young people:
Train facilitators in inclusive communication strategies and disability awareness to ensure a welcoming space.

How?

Migrant children and young people:
Assign cultural mediators or mentors who understand their background and experiences and help facilitate or co-facilitate participation activities. Peer mentoring might be very useful in this context.

Roma children and young people:
Consider conducting preparatory activities for engaging only with Roma community leaders first to build trust, before starting the participation process. Involve these leaders as facilitators from Roma communities in the activities to strengthen trust and cultural relevance. Make sure these facilitators have a leading role in their communities so that they can help prepare other stages of the process in a more efficient and effective way (e.g., dissemination of results).



REPEAT & ADJUST

What?

Communication processes must include continuous feedback on the participation process, ensuring flexibility and responsiveness to children and young people's most outstanding or evolving needs.

How?

Migrant children and young people:
Regularly check in to adjust language support as their proficiency improves. If needed, consider short individual or small group feedback moments with participants.

Roma children and young people:
Adapt engagement activities based on feedback, making space for cultural and family involvement.

Disabled children and young people:
Use periodic evaluations with children and caregivers to refine accessibility and participation methods.

Sources: UNICEF (2018). Every Child's Right to be Heard: A Resource Guide on the UNCRC General Comment No.12.; Council of Europe (2020). Listen, act, Change: Council of Europe Handbook on children's participation for professionals working for and with children. <https://rm.coe.int/publication-handbook-on-children-s-participation-eng/1680a14539>.



Effective communication in the context of children's participation requires specific attention is given to the use of age-appropriate communication strategies. Table 5.3 lists some communication requirements for children aged below 10 and young people aged 10-18 years old, by key dimensions.

Table 5.3. Children and young people's participation: Age-appropriate communication strategies

● Cognitive development

Children (aged 0-9 years old):

Focus on concrete ideas and clear guidelines.

Promote more immediate experiences.

Offer more guidance and clarification when implementing group discussions.

Young people (aged 10-18 years old):

Provide space for considering multiple perspectives and nuances in discussions.

Create opportunities for debate or presenting as young people tend to show greater interest and have the needed cognitive skills for more nuanced discussions.

● Social and emotional development

Children (aged 0-9 years old):

Promote engagement based on personal interests.

Provide greater guidance for understanding other children's interests.

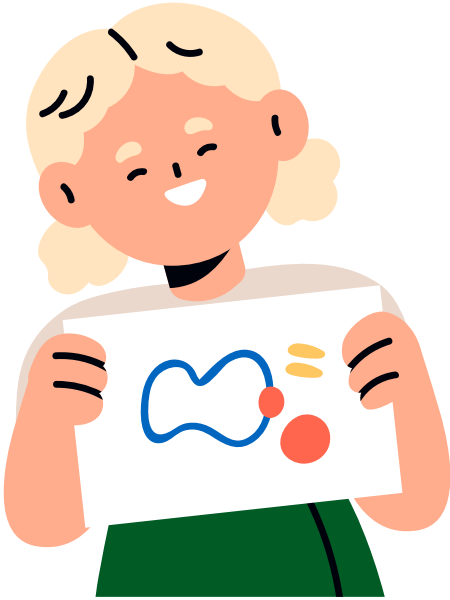
Take every opportunity to encourage and validate children to express themselves.

Young people (aged 10-18 years old):

Design activities considering a strong focus on peer relationships, social norms, and the desire for social acceptance.

Provide space for emotional regulation in communication, due to greater attunement with emotional cues.

Use different communication styles to explore the best way to reach out to different groups and different participants within a group.



● Group dynamics

Children (aged 0-9 years old):

Provide more structure to promote engagement in decision-making processes (e.g., clarify and repeat rules and procedures for decision-making).

Collaborative decision-making entails alternative ways for preparing consent or consensus (e.g., play and games approaches).

Young people (aged 10-18 years old):

Encourage leadership roles and autonomy.

Provide opportunities for challenging authority or dominant perspectives in group settings (e.g., support that everyone participates or has the right space to participate, especially the most vulnerable ones; use role-playing for understanding others' perspectives).

● Language use

Children (aged 0-9 years old):

Implement unconventional strategies for expressing complex ideas or thoughts clearly (e.g., arts, storytelling), thus preventing barriers due to vocabulary and grammar.

Pay attention to visual or non-verbal communication (e.g., gestures, facial expressions) which are more relevant in early ages.

Young people (aged 10-18 years old):

Welcome the use of slang and figurative language.

Make room to examine more complex ideas, emotions, and abstract concepts using debate approaches (e.g., discussions, assemblies).



● Power dynamics

Children (aged 0-9 years old):

Communication must prevent greater inclination from younger children to defer to adult facilitators (e.g., use indirect forms of communication such as storytelling, games or arts for reaching decisions).

Young people (aged 10-18 years old):

Communication must convey a greater desire for independence and an evolving sense of power within social groups (e.g., gradually reduce your intervention as facilitator; assign leadership roles; promote task delegation).

● Non-verbal communication

Children (aged 0-9 years old):

Use non-verbal communication (e.g., facial expressions, gestures, and body language) in a strategic way, especially in the case of children who struggle to express themselves verbally.

Take note of overt physical cues, like playing with or seeking proximity to a trusted adult or peer.

Young people (aged 10-18 years old):

Observe non-verbal communication cues that signal in-group membership or distance from authority figures (e.g., identify subgroups that form spontaneously and use cooperation activities to prevent competition between them).



● Motivation for participation

Children (aged 0-9 years old):

Encourage participation based on curiosity and play.

Use external motivation (e.g., approval from adults) as children are more sensitive to that kind of validation.

Implement fun capacity-building activities to learn and explore about participation themes.

Young people (aged 10-18 years old):

Integrate peer influence, desire for validation and personal interests in communicating goals, strategies and decision-making processes.

Provide additional room for young people's expressing opinions, asserting their views, and gaining respect from peers (e.g., add specific time slots for discussions if needed).

● *Feedback and reception*

Children (aged 0-9 years old):

Make use of positive reinforcement and clear, direct feedback: younger children are more sensitive to this kind of approach.

Young people (aged 10-18 years old):

Build-on constructive feedback for promoting engagement (e.g., rotate spokespersons to make summaries of meetings, discussions or activities).

Consider that feedback is often filtered through the lens of social relationships and self-esteem (e.g., be attentive to signs of emotional distress and manage them at the individual- and group-levels, as appropriate).

Sources: Developed by the author based on: (Bannister and Huntington, 2002[31]; Lefevre, 2018[28]; O'Reilly and Dolan, 2016[30])





6. TOOLBOX

Delivering projects to promote children and young people's participation is demanding, time-consuming and, in some cases, costly. Preparing ahead is key to avoiding mistakes and disappointment among participants and facilitators. From an organizational standpoint, delivering successful and impactful children and young people's participation initiatives increases the odds of conducting new participatory endeavours. This, in turn, strengthens an organizational culture led by collaboration with children and democratic values. This section includes two practical instruments to help professionals and organizations prepare their participatory projects involving children.

These tools will help you question the conditions for starting a participatory initiative, identify potential traps and respond to myths associated with children's participation. Importantly, these tools are based on existing guidelines for the European Child Guarantee (UNICEF, 2021[24]) or relevant literature in the field of children's participation (Cardarelli et al., 2021[12]; Correia and Aguiar, 2022[2]; Correia, Aguiar and Amaro, 2023[13]; Hart, 1992[20]; Ingman, B. C. et al., 2023[17]; Lundy, 2007[23]).

Checklist for preparing and delivering children's participation projects⁶

Space

- ☐ Were participants consulted in choosing the space and did you consider their preferences?
- ☐ Can participants and their families get to the venue, and fully participate at the venue?
- ☐ Is the space safe both in terms of environmental and in atmosphere and do you have enough adult-to-participant ratio?
- ☐ Is the space child-friendly? Have you looked at the room from a child's perspective?
- ☐ Does it have furniture and supplies that allow for dynamic use of the space? Does it allow for noise, movement and creativity?
- ☐ Have you considered the effect that group size will have on the conversation and adapted accordingly?
- ☐ Did parents/caregivers give permissions/approval and sign indemnity for their child to be at this space?

Voice

- ☐ Have children and young people been given all the information they need to form a view?
- ☐ Have different options been provided to them?
- ☐ Have different ways of communicating been offered to them? Drawing, writing letters, singing songs, putting comments in anonymous comment boxes, etc
- ☐ Do the participants know that this process is voluntary and that they can opt out at any time?
- ☐ Is the language being used age appropriate, jargon-free and aligned to references appropriate to children's ages and interests?
- ☐ Have you created an atmosphere that encourages asking questions and seeking clarifications?
- ☐ Are you frequently checking that your understanding of participants' inputs is correct?

⁶ Adapted from UNICEF (2021). Guidance on child and adolescent participation.

Audience

- ☐ Is there a process/system for communicating children/young people's views and meaningfully embedding them into decision-making?
- ☐ Have children been informed about the communication chain and who will be privy to their views?
- ☐ Are your facilitators experienced and trained in conducting children or young people's participation activities?
- ☐ Have stakeholders been mapped together with participants to identify who needs to know what?
- ☐ Have participants been informed about the whole decision-making process and understand their role in the process in a way that manages expectations?

Influence

- ☐ Were children/young people's views considered by decisions makers?
- ☐ Was preparatory work done to ensure participants' voices are taken seriously?
- ☐ Was feedback provided to participants about decisions taken and how their views were used or not used?
- ☐ Have you laid foundations with decision makers, NGOS, partners around the importance of child, young person and parent participation and are they willing and ready to listen?
- ☐ Can you demonstrate that the views of children or young people have influenced your services or how you do business?



Myths and facts about children’s participation

Below is a list of myths and facts about children and young people’s participation. The list summarizes many key messages about their participation explored in this manual. It can also be used as a communication tool by organizations and professionals when communicating about the importance of children and young people’s participation.

<div>Myths</div> <div><div>1. Children are too young to have a meaningful opinion.</div><div>2. Children and young people only care about fun or entertainment, not serious issues.</div></div>	
<div>Facts</div> <div><div><div>1. Children can contribute meaningfully to decision-making. This can be achieved if participatory strategies are age appropriate.</div><div>Using the right strategies, children provide valuable insights and perspectives based on their unique experiences, even at a young age.</div></div><div><div>2. Play and having fun are optimal routes for exploring complex social or political issues with children and young people.</div><div>Many children are highly aware of issues like climate change, equality, and community well-being, and they can form strong opinions on such matters. Non-formal approaches will help those opinions become visible and relevant.</div></div></div>	

3. Children and young people's participation is only about having a voice, not about influence and action.

4. Children and young people's participation does not bring significant impact on decision-making.

3. True participation involves: being or becoming aware, developing knowledge and skills, expressing a personal view, taking action and influence decision-making on a certain issue. Providing a space for venting opinions is not enough.

Not addressing the several components of participation may lead to artificial processes (manipulation, decoration, tokenism).

4. Children and young people's participation is time-consuming and can demand significant resources.

Planning is key. Reverse planning, in the sense that the final outcome is secured before the participatory process starts (e.g., a hearing in the municipal assembly) ensures the project has greater chances to deliver.

Participation can often be integrated into existing processes in ways that are cost-effective and efficient.

Having local leaders and influential citizens championing for a participatory initiative can help reduce the burden of the process and unblock access to resources.

Myths

5. Children and young people repeat what they hear from adults or caregivers.

6. Children and young people's views are not as valid as adults' views.

Facts

5. That will certainly be the case when children and young people are not given the space, time and resources to explore important issues on their own terms.

Children and young people are capable of critical thinking and can express independent thoughts and opinions, especially when encouraged to do so in supportive environments.

6. Until not long ago, policymakers and societies at large considered that children and young people should be protected. This vision sustained the belief that adults were better equipped to make decisions because they have more life experience.

Contemporary societies deal with complex problems. These require the participation of all – including children and young people. True change requires them to be protagonists – instead of mere beneficiaries of adults good-will.

Better decisions also require children and youth agency: they are in a better position to interpret their needs and expectations than organizations or bureaucracy.

7. Children can not understand the consequences of their decisions.

7. While children may not always predict every outcome, they can understand consequences at a level appropriate for their age and be part of discussions on cause and effect.

Skilled facilitators can help deliver activities to help children and young people fully grasp the long-term consequences of their actions or decisions (e.g., continuous feedback, anticipation of scenarios).

8. Involving children in decisions will lead to chaos or poor decisions.

9. Children's participation is only about having meetings or formal structures.

8. When properly guided, children can offer thoughtful, practical contributions and may even come up with innovative solutions that adults may not have considered.

Experienced facilitators provide a structure – which is different from a hidden agenda – to avoid chaos or poor decisions.

A progressive structure of goals following different steps (from engagement to dissemination) and room for continuous improvement prevent chaos or poor decision-making.

9. Participation can take many forms, from informal conversations to creative activities, and does not always require formal settings to be effective.

Children and young people's participation is a powerful tool for empowering them, enriching decision-making, and promoting a more inclusive society.

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