

Children's Participation

Systematic Literature Review

Exploring the Effectiveness of Structures and Procedures Intended to Support Children's Participation in Child Welfare, Child Protection and Alternative Care Services

BY

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Key Findings-Accessible Format

WHAT IS THE CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION WORK ABOUT?

The Children's Participation package is one of five packages of the project. The aim of this package is to find out to what extent children and young people are participating in decisions made by Tusla, the Child and Family Agency.

This document presents the key findings of a **systematic literature review**. The aim of the research was to examine the effectiveness of structures and procedures used to support children's **participation** in decision-making in:

- (a) child welfare (child happiness);
- (b) child protection (safety of a child); and
- (c) alternative care services (for example: foster care, placement with relatives, or residential care).

TYPES OF STRUCTURES AND PROCEDURES THAT SUPPORT CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION

When an individual child is involved in decisions regarding their personal care, protection and welfare, they can be supported to be involved in the decision-making process in the following ways: one-to-one consultation with their case manager or coordinator; recording their views in writing for assessment, planning and review meetings; attending and being actively involved in meetings; using an independent advocate (or in the case of court proceedings **a Guardian ad Litem**) to bring their views to the attention of the decision-makers; being involved in a process of family-led decision-making, as happens in a **Family Welfare Conference**; or making a complaint through a designated complaints procedure.

When a representative group of children are involved in communicating their views collectively, for the purpose of influencing decisions related to service planning and review, they can be supported to be involved in the following ways: national, regional or local advisory **forums** organised by service providers, central government or local authorities for children receiving services (or who have previously received services); involving a panel of children in the recruitment of new staff; involving children in the development and in the delivery of training; including children's views in inspection reports; consultations or research carried out with children who receive services; and child or youth-led research.

HOW THE INFORMATION WAS GATHERED AND ANALYSED?

This review includes national and international studies published in English. All studies reviewed provided evidence of the effectiveness of a structure or procedure used to support a child's participation in child welfare, child protection and alternative care services. Studies focused on structures or procedures to support a child's participation specifically in the court process were excluded. In total, 26 studies were included in the review. The studies included are primarily small and informed by the views of children and families who use services and of professionals who provide services. The vast majority of the studies were carried out in Europe and almost all the studies focused on children between the ages of 7-18.

List of Definitions

Systematic literature review: to identify and summarise the findings of all relevant studies, thereby making the available research more accessible (Centre for Reviews and Dissemination, 2009).

Participation: refers to the right of children to express their views on decisions of relevance to them and for their views to be taken into account in accordance with the age and maturity of the child (Article 12, UN Convention on the Rights of the Child).

A Guardian Ad Litem: an independent professional person (usually a social worker) who is appointed to represent the wishes and interests of a child.

Family Welfare Conferences: meetings that are designed to actively involve families in decision-making about the future safety and welfare of a child/ children.

Forum: a meeting where ideas and views on a particular issue can be exchanged.

WHAT WE HAVE FOUND OUT?



1. There is no one way to support all children to participate in decisions regarding their care, protection or welfare. Children need various options to accommodate their individual preferences and abilities.

2. Effectively supporting children to be involved in decision-making is dependent on: the quality of the relationship between the child and the Tusla worker; the worker's ability to communicate well with the child; whether the worker believes in a child's right to participate and understands what participation means; the child's willingness to participate and whether the child is adequately prepared to express their views; and whether the views of the child are communicated to those with the power to act on these views.



3. Having an independent advocate available to a child, whose role it is to support them to have their views taken into account, is an effective means of supporting children's participation.

4. Family Welfare Conferences can be effective in supporting the child to be a central part of the decision-making process. This happens only when the child's views are made known to all involved in the conference proceedings.



5. A child's attendance at a meeting (especially at more than one meeting) makes it more likely that they will be actively involved in decision-making.

6. When a child's views are recorded in case records or reports the research tells us that for these views to be taken into account good practices must be followed. Good practice includes, being clear on why these views are being recorded and knowing which meeting they are intended for. Safeguards also need to be in place to ensure they are the true views of the child. This may include recording the child's views in their own words with the support of child-friendly forms or asking them to review and sign the records.



7. There is, as of yet, insufficient research to draw conclusion on how effective child-friendly complaints mechanisms are to support children and young people's participation in decision-making. There is also insufficient research to draw conclusions on how effective youth advisory forums or other means of supporting children to collectively participate in service planning and review are to support children and young people's participation.

8. Overall there is a need for further research on ways to effectively involve children and young people in decisions about their care, protection and welfare. In particular, there is a need for further research on ways to effectively involve very young children in decisions about their care, protection and welfare.




ABOUT THE PROGRAMME

The Development and Mainstreaming Programme for Prevention Partnership and Family Support (PPFS) is carried out by Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. The programme wants to change child and family services in Ireland. This change means making sure that any harm to children, young people and families is prevented and in situations when they need support and help, it is offered to them as quickly as possible.

ABOUT THE UNESCO CHILD AND FAMILY RESEARCH CENTRE, NUI GALWAY

Our job at the UNESCO Centre is to study how Tusla is supporting families, youth and children and present what we find out. There are five areas we examine on this programme including: Meitheal and Child and Family Support Networks; Children's Participation; Public Awareness; Commissioning; and Parenting Support and Parental Participation.

FURTHER INFORMATION



If you would like to learn more about the Children's Participation literature review, please visit our website for full report

www.nuigalway.ie/childandfamilyresearch

or if you have any questions, please email

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This literature is derived from the Children's Participation work package as part of the Development and Mainstreaming programme for Prevention, Partnership & Family Support.

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