

# Children's Participation

## A 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



## KEY FINDINGS

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## Introduction

This document presents the key findings of a systematic literature review, aimed at exploring the effectiveness of structures and procedures intended to support children's participation in decision-making in child welfare, child protection and alternative care services. The full report was conducted as a foundational study for a larger project designed to research and evaluate to what extent the participation of children and young people in decision-making is embedded in the structures and cultures of Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. The term 'participation' refers to the right of children to express their views on decisions of relevance to them and for their views to be given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

## Structures and Procedures that Support Children's Participation

Structures and procedures supporting the participation of children may operate at either the individual or collective level. A scoping review of the literature revealed that structures and procedures designed to support the **individual child** to be involved in decisions regarding their care, protection and welfare include: *one-to-one consultation with their case manager or coordinator; submitting their views in writing to 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; engaging in a process of family-led decision-making, as happens in Family Welfare Conferences; and making a complaint through a designated complaints procedure.*

Structures and procedures designed to support a representative group of children to communicate their views **collectively**, for the purpose of influencing decisions related to service planning and review include: national, regional or local advisory forums convened by service providers, central government or local authorities; *convening a panel of children to support in the recruitment of personnel; involving children in the development and delivery of training; including children's views in inspection reports; conducting consultations or research with children in receipt of services including child- or youth-led research.*

## Methodology

To systematically review the literature means 'to identify, evaluate and summarise the findings of all relevant individual studies, thereby making the available evidence more accessible to decision-makers' (Centre for Reviews and Dissemination, 2009: 1). In this systematic literature review, national and international studies published in English were included if they provided evidence of the effectiveness of the structures and procedures listed above. Studies were included if they provided theoretical, indicative or causal evidence of effectiveness, as defined by Veerman and van Yperen (2007). Studies that focused on structures or procedures to support a child's participation specifically in the court process were excluded. While fundamental decisions concerning a child's care are made in court, it was felt the scope of the search would not comprehensively return all such studies.

# Overview of Included Studies

In total, 26 studies that satisfied the inclusion criteria were identified for inclusion in the literature review. The studies included are primarily small scale empirical studies and the level of evidence documented is mostly indicative, drawing on service user and service provider testimonies. Of the included studies, 24 focus on individual participation: one study focuses on one-to-one consultation with the child, six on a child's attendance at a meeting, seven on a child's submission of their written views, eight on the use of advocates, five on Family Welfare Conferences, and two on complaints procedures (some studies provided evidence of the effectiveness of more than one structure or procedure). Two of the studies focus on collective participation, confirming previous findings that there is little research in this area. The vast majority of the studies included were undertaken in Europe, and almost all the studies focused on children aged 7-18.

## Key Findings and Messages for Practice

- There is no one definitive structure or procedure that is effective in supporting all children to participate in decisions regarding their care, protection or welfare. There needs to be a range of options available to children that accommodate their individual preferences and abilities at each stage of responding to a child welfare or protection concern.
- The effectiveness of structures and procedures to enable children to be involved in decision-making is heavily reliant on **external influencing factors**. Common influencing factors are: the presence of a trusting relationship with the child; the practitioner's communication skills; whether there is 'buy-in' to the participation principle and a shared understanding of what it entails by managers, practitioners and parents; the degree to which the child is willing to engage and is adequately prepared; and whether the views of children are communicated to those with the power to effect change.
- There is a body of evidence indicating that having an **independent advocate** available to a child whose role it is to solely support them in having their views taken into account is an effective means of supporting children's participation. Children themselves repeatedly testified to the value of having an advocate in the studies included.
- A review of the relevant studies on **Family Welfare Conferences** revealed that they can be effective in supporting the child to be a central part of the decision-making process. However, studies have found that, for a variety of reasons, a child's views may not be brought into Family Welfare Conference proceedings. If a child's views are not directly or indirectly brought into the proceedings, this is a significant barrier to Family Welfare Conferences being an effective model to enable children's participation.
- A child's **attendance at a meeting**, in and of itself, is not synonymous with participation. However, there is some evidence that a child's attendance, and particularly their attendance at more than one meeting, makes it more likely that they will participate in the process. This holds an important message for practice, given that some studies reveal that the attendance of children at child welfare, protection or care planning and review meetings can still be relatively low.
- When **recording a child's views** in case records and indirectly submitting them to decision-making proceedings, it is evident that for these views to be taken into account their submission needs to be supported by good practices. Good practice includes clarity around the exact purpose of documenting these views and which meeting they are intended for. Safeguards need to be put in place to ensure they are the child's authentic views, which may include documenting the child's views in their own words with the support of child-friendly forms or asking them to review and sign the records.
- As of yet, there is insufficient evidence to draw conclusions as to the effectiveness of the other structures and procedures under consideration in this literature review. These being, particularly in terms of one-to-one consultations with a child, complaints mechanisms, and structures and procedures designed to facilitate collective participation in decisions pertaining to service planning and review in child welfare, child protection and alternative care services.
- Overall, there is a need for further research on what structures and procedures are proving to be effective in engaging children and young people in personal and public decisions pertaining to their care, protection and welfare. In particular, research is required on what are effective structures and procedures to engage very young children.

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

Full literature review is available online at: [www.nuigalway.ie/cfrc/mainstream/ourworktodate](http://www.nuigalway.ie/cfrc/mainstream/ourworktodate)