

What Should Be Known About Participation of Children with Disabilities

Summary

Article 7 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) states:

1. Parties shall ensure that children with disabilities have the right to express their views freely on all matters affecting them, their views being given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity, on an equal basis with other children, and to be provided with disability and age appropriate assistance to realize that right.

The following summary outlines some of the best practices according to UNICEF¹ for where and how children with disabilities can participate in making decisions that affect them and their lives.

Where Can Children With Disabilities Participate?

Opportunities for participation for children with disabilities need to be the same as those for all children. Much can be done for children with disabilities at the local level. Children can inform their community about situations or barriers they face as children with disabilities and help identify solutions to overcome them through participation in local committees, child-led organizations, school councils, youth councils/parliaments, etc. For example, UNICEF explains that a child with a disability could provide their view on the local transport system or the design of school playgrounds. Children can also conduct or contribute to research for informing policy or audit local services to see if they are disability friendly. They may also stimulate community dialogue about prejudice or exclusion in communities and how to reduce it. This could be done through writing for their local newspaper or participating in social media initiatives. Children with disabilities can also provide education to their peers about disability.

At the national level, children with disabilities can participate across the government by providing insights on legislation reform, policy making, planning, data collection and resource allocation². They can be involved in research or present their ideas on disability in national and international forums. Children with disabilities can even be involved in the reporting process to the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

How Can Children with Disabilities Participate?

Participation can take place in separate (meaning a space specifically for children with disabilities) or inclusive environments but all participation opportunities need to be fully accessible for children with disabilities. However, if a child chooses a separate environment for participation, it may allow children a safe space to develop points of view specific to children with disabilities that may not come out in a larger setting. Participation must always start with consent, be voluntary, ethical, disability sensitive, and respectful.

- **UNICEF outlines three different levels of participatory engagement:**
 1. Consultative Participation- is when adults speak with children with disabilities about their experiences. This type of engagement is adult initiated and led but recognizes that children with disabilities have expertise that is needed to inform adult decision making.
 2. Collaborative Participation- is when adults and children actively engage at any stage of a decision or project. This is a partnership between the adult and child where decision making is shared, empowering the child. For example, a child could collaborate on research or policy development.

For example, collaborative participation can be seen in Estonia. The Ombudsman for Children formed an advisory

¹ UNICEF (June 2013) Take Us Seriously: Engaging Children with Disabilities in Decisions Affecting Their Lives. Available from: https://www.unicef.org/disabilities/files/Take_Us_Seriously.pdf

² UNICEF (June 2013) Take Us Seriously: Engaging Children with Disabilities in Decisions Affecting Their Lives:14

committee consisting of children, including children with disabilities, that belonged to different youth organizations in Estonia. The committee aided the Ombudsman's decision making processes³

3. Child-led participation- is when children have the opportunity to initiate activities and advocate for themselves. Allows children to identify the issues of concern and control the process. Here, adults take the role of facilitator rather than initiator. For example, children can advocate for themselves through courts, complaint mechanisms, or peer education.

Creating an Inclusive Environment for Participation:

First, it is important to check whether the environment allows everyone to participate equally (i.e. are there ramps or wide enough doorways). There are many types of disability so it is important to accommodate a child's individual needs based on their specific impairment. A child should also be asked how best to meet their needs. Yet, one should avoid helping children with disabilities unless they need it or ask for it. Be open to change to accommodate children. Recognize that every child has something they can contribute to the group but may do so in different ways. Also, focus on the child's strengths.

In group settings, budget time for children to get to know each other. Encourage children with disabilities to contribute equally and share the same obligations as other children. Introduce activities that lead to children learning about the experience of disability. Encourage team work and pairing up with each other during an activity if someone needs assistance or support. This creates an atmosphere of equal opportunity.

For more information on how to create successful participation please refer to:

UNICEF (June 2013) *Take Us Seriously: Engaging Children with Disabilities in Decisions Affecting Their Lives*. Available from: https://www.unicef.org/disabilities/files/Take_Us_Seriously.pdf

Prepared by Emma Anderson for Child Protection Hub for South East Europe, December 2016

Sources:

- *Inclusion Europe (June 2014) Rights of Children with Disabilities in the International Human Rights Framework and European Union Policy: Norms, Concerns and Opportunities*. Available from: http://www.inclusion-europe.org/childrights4all/images/HoV_Policy_briefing_final.pdf
- *UNICEF (June 2013) Take Us Seriously: Engaging Children with Disabilities in Decisions Affecting Their Lives*. Available from: https://www.unicef.org/disabilities/files/Take_Us_Seriously.pdf
- *UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), Article 7*. Available from: <http://www.un.org/disabilities/convention/conventionfull.shtml>

³ Inclusion Europe (June 2014) *Rights of Children with Disabilities in the International Human Rights Framework and European Union Policy: Norms, Concerns and Opportunities*. Available from: http://www.inclusion-europe.org/childrights4all/images/HoV_Policy_briefing_final.pdf