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Engaging with children and young people

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Engaging with Children and Young People

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Engaging Children and Young People: Background Briefing

About the Author

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www.open.ac.uk/education-and-languages/people/people-profile

Inviting your Critical Engagement

Photos used throughout this publication are sourced from Shutterstock (http://www.shutterstock.com). They have been selected to highlight the diversity of ways in which children and childhood can be represented.

We encourage you to engage critically with these images as you reflect on the idea that 'childhood' is socially constructed. Ask yourself, 'What message about children or childhood is being conveyed through this image'? 'How do these images challenge my understandings of children and childhood'?

Introduction

Without effective engagement with children and young people we cannot access their perspectives, understand their concerns, provide adequately for their needs or convey our regard for them.

Laurie Lee (1959), author of *Cider with Rosie,* reminds us of how oblivious we can be to the barriers that divide adults' and children's worlds. Lee's account of his first day at school describes how his teacher pointed to a vacant chair in the classroom and told him to 'sit there for the present'. Lee dutifully obeyed. Later, when asked by his mother how his first day at school had gone, he told her of his crushing disappointment; 'the teacher told me to sit there for the present and I sat there all day but I never got one'.

Humorous though this miscommunication may be, it poignantly illustrates how frequently adults' and children's communication functions on parallel lines. In another example an adult trying to comfort a teenager whose grandfather had died was seeking to establish how emotionally intimate the relationship had been and asked 'Were you close?' to which the teenager replied 'No, he lived in Whitby'.

Children and young people's domains are partially opaque to adults. Complexities of peer subcultures, ranging from the imaginary worlds of young children to teenage social internet chat rooms, position us as outsiders.

Children and young people see with different eyes and have different priorities and concerns. Effective engagement is about children guiding us into their worlds. Communicating with children and young people requires both different and similar approaches to engagement with adults.

Theoretical frameworks

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) radically shifted global perceptions on the status of the child towards acceptance that children are agents in their own right, not adults in waiting. The UNCRC is the most complete statement of children's rights produced to date and has 41 substantive articles. It is also the first enactment to focus solely on the child, regardless of gender, religion, social origin, where the child was born or to whom.

This new focus has compelled us to find effective ways of engaging with children and young people including improved listening skills, better consultation processes and the inclusion of children and young people as active participants in all matters affecting them (Sinclair, 2004).

Developing a listening culture

The importance of listening to children began to be better recognised in the 1990s as nation states assimilated the implications of UNCRC. Hearing is the physical processing of sound, listening is different - listening is hearing with understanding.

Child advocates such as Alderson (1999; 2000) raised awareness about how children in hospital, or those living with chronic health conditions, were invisible to practitioners who sought their views by adult proxy. Alderson argued that children's competency was habitually underestimated. She gave an example of how misguided our adult preconceptions of competency can be when she described a conversation with a ten-year-old girl in which she asked 'So you're having your legs made longer?' and the girl replied, 'I suffer from achondroplasia and I am having my femurs lengthened' (Alderson, 2000, p. 244).

Not listening to children can have serious consequences, an obvious example being child protection (Sayer, 2008), but at a more general level it prevents us from understanding children's lived experiences.

Adult-child power relations are at the heart of the listening process and generational issues feature prominently. Alanen (2003) maintains that there is a form of 'generational ordering' at work in the way children are contained in the 'private' world of the home and the family and excluded from the 'public' world of politics and economics.

Mayall (2000, p.120) argues that the asymmetrical power relationship of childhood versus adulthood is a feature of social organisation:

> *Adults have divided up the social order into two major groups – adults and children, with specific conditions surrounding the lives of each group: provisions, constraints and requirements, laws, rights, responsibilities and privileges. Thus, just as the concept of gender has been key to understanding women's relationships to the social order, so the concept of generation is key to understanding childhood.*

Mayall was faced with these kinds of generational issues in her research into child health care (1996). When trying to elicit information about children's views, even at the most informal level, she was aware of the power dynamics at work, particularly in the authoritarian context of a school classroom.

The generational divide is a consideration for all professionals in their engagement with children and young people. Awareness is an important starting place for effective engagement. As McLeod (2008, p.21) explains, some impasses occur because adults and children have different conceptions of what listening is.

'It's just hearing her, being respectful' said Tammy's social worker, explaining to me how she had responded when Tammy had asked to move and there was nowhere else to go. As she and the other social workers saw it listening to a child meant paying attention to what they said, having an open attitude, respecting and empathizing with their feelings, but not necessarily doing as they asked. For the young people on the other hand, if no action followed, the adults had not been listening … 'she used to look like she was listening but she never was. She just used to look and nod and do nothing'.

Here, McLeod has uncovered a dual interpretation of listening; one an ethical construction that embodies respect and openness, the other an empowering construction that implies achieving change.

For effective engagement with children and young people, listening needs to encompass both of these i.e. respect *and* a willingness to empower. In reality, these two constructs, which may start out on parallel lines, come together and then sometimes separate again according to the different needs and expectations of children, young people *and* professionals in given contexts.

Consulting with children and young people

The listening emphasis of the early 1990s progressed over the course of that decade toward a consultation agenda in which governments actively promoted consultation with children and young people about aspects of their lives. In the UK, for example, this was personified in the Every Child Matters programme (Green Paper, 2003).

Children's commissioners, whose briefs were to consult with and represent children and young people, were appointed in many signatory states to the UNCRC, including Australia. Many countries also legislated to ensure consultation was actively engaged in e.g. the UK Children Act 2004. A critical issue was not children's right to be consulted, since this was enshrined in Article 12 of the UNCRC, but the translation of that principle into practice.

The first decade of the 21st century, however, has been marked by dissatisfaction with the tokenism of consultation. Consultation activities, framed in adult language with adult metrics that excluded harder to reach groups of children, were typical of the early 2000s. Token 'tick box' consultation exercises were sometimes undertaken merely to ensure funding for projects was forthcoming where grants were only made if children had been consulted. More cynical still were biased consultation exercises which manipulated and exploited children's views in order to secure a particular adult perspective or a hidden agenda.

Consulting children and young people is not the same as sharing decision-making powers with them and this can only be achieved where consultation is accompanied by agentic involvement and child-influenced outcomes. This is why the focus has swung towards *participation* as a better representation of the spirit of Article 12 and a vehicle for involving children and young people in meaningful decision-making processes (Lansdown, 2005).
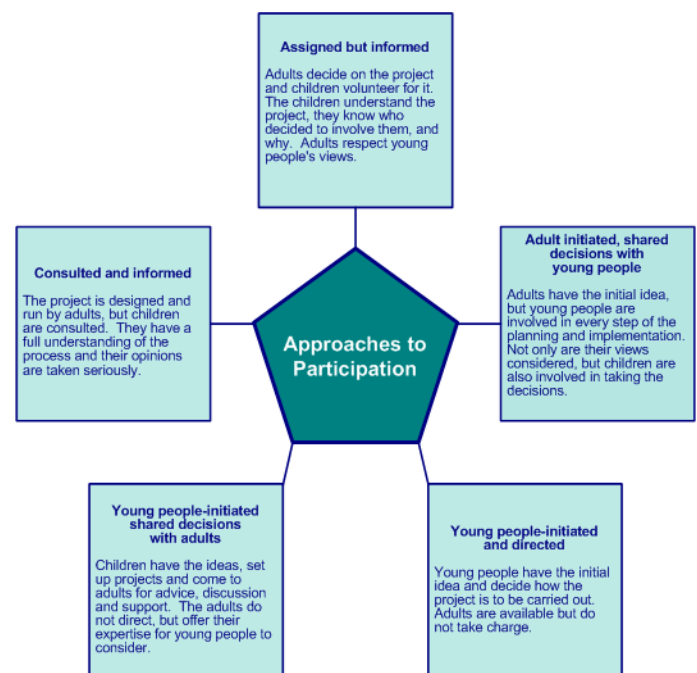
Participation

An issue with both listening and consulting is that, while there may be political and even legislative frameworks in place, in reality both processes can happen at a tokenistic level because adults can listen and/or consult with children and still choose to ignore what they hear and/or exclude them from decision-making. Concerns such as these have led to an emphasis on more active participation of children and young people in decision-making processes.

Hart's (1992) 'Ladder of children's participation' was the first substantial attempt to quantify this. Hart refers to the first three rungs on his ladder - *manipulation*, *decoration* and *tokenism* – as non-participation and describes four further rungs – *assigned but informed, consulted and informed, adult-initiated shared decisions with children, child initiated and directed* – before the eighth and top rung of the ladder: *child-initiated shared decisions with adults.*

Some (e.g. Pridmore, 1998) found Hart's Ladder to be a powerful evaluation tool. Others (e.g. Reddy and Ratna, 2002; Hart. J. *et al,* 2004,) criticised the implicitly sequential nature of the model and its implication of hierarchical values.

Treseder (1997) critiqued Hart's model as failing to acknowledge cultural context. Treseder's own model of participation takes the top five levels from Hart's ladder and arranges them in a circle demonstrating that they are different, but equal, forms of participation.

From: Treseder, P. (1997). *Empowering Children and Young People*. London: Save the Children.
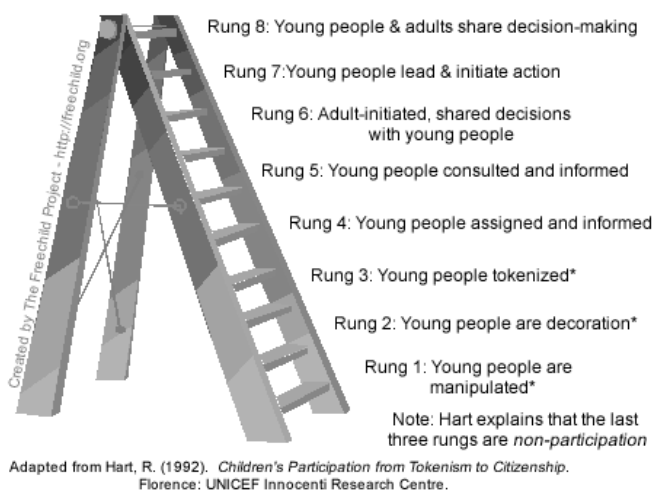
Shier's model (2001) (see over) focuses more on adults' roles rather than the status of children within projects. This model maps participation from the lowest level ('children are listened to') to the highest ('children share power and responsibility for decision making').

Levels of Participation

⇓

5. Children share power and responsibilities for decision making.

4. Children are involved in decision-making processes?

3. Children's views are taken into account.

2. Children are supported in expressing their views.

1. Children are listened to.

START HERE

Openings>Opportunities>Obligations

| Are you ready to share some of your adult power with children? | Is there a procedure that enables children and adults to share power and responsibility for decisions? | Is it a policy requirement that children and adults share power and responsibility for decisions? |

| Are you ready to let children join in your decision-making processes? | Is there a procedure that enables children to join in decision-making processes? | Is it a policy requirement that children must be involved in decision-making processes? |

This point is the minimum you must achieve if you endorse the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

| Are you ready to take children's views into account? | Does your decision making process enable you to take children's views into account? | Is it a policy requirement that children's views must be given due weight in decision-making? |

| Are you ready to support children in expressing their views? | Do you have a range of ideas and activities to help children express their views? | Is it a policy requirement that children must be supported in expressing their views? |

| Are you ready to listen to children? | Do you work in a way that enables you to listen to children? | Is it a policy requirement that children must be listened to? |

Kirby and Gibbs (2006) criticised both Hart and Shier's models on the basis that each participation initiative or task cannot be assigned a single level of participation because levels of decision making power constantly shift within projects and within tasks.

Contemporary attitudes veer towards advocacy and outcomes.

The continued involvement of children can only be achieved, and sceptics (both children and adults) won over, if participation is shown to result in improvements to children's quality of life. If participation becomes an end in itself, there is an inherent danger that people will not be open and honest about what does and does not work (Leverett, 2008, p.195).

These various models highlight the layered potential of 'participation' and the ways in which engaging children and young people can be a complex and challenging process.

Voice

Participation is the act of doing and being involved. There is a danger that it becomes no more than this and children merely participate in participation. Voice, on the other hand is the right to free expression of views that may, or may not, be linked to participation. Lundy (2007, p.933) maintains that voice is constituted in four parts:

> *Space: Children must be given the opportunity to express a view*
>
> *Voice: Children must be facilitated to express their views*
>
> *Audience: The view must be listened to*
>
> *Influence: The view must be acted upon as appropriate*

This is a helpful framework and highlights the possibilities of voice operating in a vacuum. The right conditions need to be in place before children can exercise voice and before that voice can be heard in a way that can influence society.

Creating space for children to express their views is implied in Article 12 of the UNCRC. This means that professionals have to be proactive rather than passive in providing for, encouraging, and facilitating children to express their views in safe spaces without fear of reprisal.

Voice is best developed through opportunities which reflect local needs, interests and children's preferred ways of engagement so that children's voices do not simply reinforce adult perspectives and adult governance (Wyness 2006). This can be facilitated by an integrated approach to the creation of child-friendly spaces in order to nurture voice. Multi-agency working can facilitate the construction of child-led infrastructures for the exercising of voice (Bennett Woodhouse, 2003).

Many children do not express their views in words. For these children to be heard, adults need to know how to interpret their non-verbal cues. Thus, a confluence of factors are in play for child voice to have influence, not least a pre-disposition on the part of adults to value what children have to say and to appreciate the uniqueness of their perspective.

However, Percy-Smith and Thomas (2009) remind us that a rights-based concept of participation, in so far as it represents an entitlement to have a say, is not enough. For these writers, the most effective participation is where children work "as members of a community where roles and responsibilities are shared, where 'agency' rather than 'voice' is the key concept" (Percy-Smith and Thomas, 2009, p.359).

Young children begin to participate through everyday family practices and this learning continues throughout childhood as children gradually take up more and more opportunities in society to exercise agency. As Graham and Fitzgerald (2010) argue, participation is about relationships and shared responsibility that deepens inter-generational understandings. This, takes place, they suggest, through dialogue.

The interface of social participation and community agency is potentially a more powerful form of child involvement than simply implementing initiatives that emphasise 'voice', many of which imitate adult governance structures such as youth parliaments and youth councils (Thomas, 2007).

Local community participatory initiatives that start in relatively small ways are more likely to be sustainable and provide platforms on which more extensive political links can ultimately be built. An example is the Child-friendly Cities initiative that has been adopted in Canberra and other cities in Australia and elsewhere (Woolcock and Gleeson, 2008). The movement for Child-friendly Cities has seen young citizens take part in municipal decision-making, assist planners in designing 'the city they want', and child-sensitive quality indicators have been developed to measure progress against child-oriented goals.

Adult responsibilities lie in putting empowering structures in place that will provide children with the right kind of opportunities, and in being willing to exchange some power and control for advocacy and facilitation. These enabling environments can be developed throughout childhood on a continuum that starts in the home and moves through school, community, regional and national levels of inter-generational engagement.

Diversity issues

Children and young people are not a homogenous group and attempts to engage with them on this basis are likely to be singularly ineffective. Different skills are required to engage with a teenager and a toddler, just as different approaches are needed across the diversity of childhoods, including in relation to gender, ethnicity and disability. There are some formal and informal distinctions at work.

Generally, childhood can be categorised in three age groups:

- young children: infancy and early years (0-6)

- children: the primary school years, pre-teens (6-12) and

- young people: the secondary school, teenage years (12-18).

Sometimes delineators are legal ones such as the age of compulsory schooling, the age of criminal responsibility or ages attached to permitted working hours.

Terminology differs across nations and cultures and can inadvertently affect the quality of engagement. This is most noticeable with 'labeling', where children and young people find themselves stereotyped.

Consider the term 'adolescent'. What does this label conjure up? Is the term imbued with value-laden developmental characteristics and social connotations such as 'not quite an adult', 'immature', 'volatile', 'child in an adult body'? In what ways might some of the images in this Background Briefing reinforce or challenge such stereotypes?

Adolescence most often refers to a particular time in childhood when puberty occurs. Yet the term adolescent has come to be equated for many with a troublesome period of childhood. The term 'teenager' signals different meanings to that of 'young woman' or 'young man'. Once again, the term has become imbued with a subtext that suggests a rather different undercurrent of characteristics. It is easy to forget that the last two teenage years (i.e. 18 and 19) have legal adult status in many countries.

An equity concern is that our efforts to engage with children and young people will exclude harder to reach groups. Examples of marginalised children and young people include Indigenous populations, those with physical and learning disabilities, refugee and asylum-seekers and those from minority ethnic groups. Differently nuanced communication is required to engage harder to reach children and some suggestions are explored later in the unit.

Ethical issues

Ethical considerations should centrally feature in all activity related to children and young people, including the ways in which we engage with them. There is much shame attached to the harm we have perpetrated against children in the guise of promoting their best interests, from legalised assault to cruel experimental research (e.g. see Schein and Bernstein, 2007).

In contemporary society we are much more cognizant of the rights of the child and a number of ethical codes and guidelines have been developed to encourage good practice. One example is the Early Childhood Australia Code of Ethics (2006, p.3) which upholds the protection and wellbeing of children as paramount. It provides 12 ethical prompts for professionals working with young children, but these are equally applicable to other age groups.

1. Act in the best interests of all children.

2. Respect the rights of children as enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1991*) and commit to advocating for these rights.

3. Recognise children as active citizens participating in different communities such as family, children's services and schools.

4. Work with children to help them understand that they are global citizens with shared responsibilities to the environment and humanity.

5. Respect the special relationship between children and their families and incorporate this perspective in all interactions with children.

6. Create and maintain safe, healthy environments, spaces and places, which enhance children's learning, development, engagement, initiative, self-worth, dignity and show respect for their contributions.

7. Work to ensure children and families with additional needs can exercise their rights.

8. Acknowledge the uniqueness and potential of all children, in recognition that enjoying their childhood without undue pressure is important.

9. Acknowledge the holistic nature of children's learning and the significance of children's cultural and linguistic identities.

10. Work to ensure children are not discriminated against on the basis of gender, age, ability, economic status, family structure, lifestyle, ethnicity, religion, language, culture, or national origin.

11. Acknowledge children as competent learners, and build active communities of engagement and inquiry.

12. Honour children's right to play, as both a process and context for learning.

*1991 relates to the date Australia ratified the Convention, not the date of its inception (1989).

At a more overarching level there are some general ethical principles that apply for all adults wishing to engage with children and young people across the age spectrum. The first of these relates to consent.

Provision of information and consent

Open and honest dialogue is important when engaging with children and young people and this extends to providing them with information that enables them to judge if they want to respond to you and/or give you information about themselves.

If you want to interview a child or young person then that child or young person needs some context. They need to know what you are likely to do with the information they give you and why you are seeking it. An accessible explanatory leaflet or a verbal explanation is a basic requirement.

If you are seeking personal information then it is courteous to offer some small personal details about yourself beyond your name in return. What work do you do? Do you have any children of your own? What is your favourite hobby? Sharing such information helps to balance the power relations.

Once children are in possession of sufficient information to enable them to make informed decisions (sometimes this will be in collaboration with a parent or adult advocate) then they need to give consent. Again, this is likely to be in conjunction with a parent or guardian.

There are different levels of consent. The lowest level of consent is *assent,* when consent is obtained from a parent and assent is assumed on the part of the child. While this may comply with the legal requirements it does not satisfy ethical practice.

Consent should always be sought additionally from children themselves, irrespective of their age. If children are not capable of giving formal consent then professionals need to satisfy themselves that the children are happy and willing to participate and that they are not being coerced in any way.

Informed consent is the minimum ethical level of consent and involves providing accessible background information in order that children can make informed choices. However, *ongoing consent* is a preferred level and requires adults to check at intervals that children are still happy to continue to consent (Kellett and Nind, 2001). This is particularly important if, for example, a professional has interviewed a child and later wants to use the interview data in a report, or if video footage has been filmed and the professional wants to show it to a new audience. The opportunity to *dissent* without recrimination is equally important.

These issues of informed consent are frequently discussed in relation to research with children and young people, however they are equally important in other forms of engagement.

Anonymity and confidentiality

The right to anonymity and confidentiality is the same for children as for adults, however there are some additional complexities. There is a degree of protection offered by anonymity when relaying information provided by children. However sometimes children want to be identified as they feel proud of whatever part they have played and want this acknowledged. This has to be sensitively negotiated with the child and his or her guardian as it may not be in the child's best interest.

Promises of confidentiality, too, have to be tempered with caveats about disclosure of abuse. The ethical rationale behind anonymity and confidentiality goes beyond a protectionist stance to the creation of safe environments where children feel able to communicate their views and emotions without constraint or fear of recrimination. When set up skilfully, this creates spaces where adults can more easily enter children's worlds.

Deception

Deception is never a good basis for engagement with children and young people. The economical truths and white lies that adults might tell to simplify their engagement with children may have an innocent veneer but can also have poisonous undercurrents.

The worst kind of deception is any which sets out to trick children such as asking if you might observe them playing, stating that you are interested in learning more about child-created games, when in fact the purpose of your observation is to collect evidence of children's bad language. Other kinds of deception may result in children feeling foolish or suffering loss of self-esteem and this is ethically unacceptable.

Ethical interaction with children is positive, promotes wellbeing, avoids harm or distress, is respectful of children as human beings with rights and meets them on their own terms. If adults take these guiding principles to heart they are likely to succeed in effective engagement.

Power relations

Power relations are inextricably connected to ethics. Strong adult-child relations can put children under pressure to become involved in activities and may result in coercion, either covert or explicit. While we can go some way towards counteracting power relations we cannot negate them (Kellett, Robinson and Burr, 2004).

Children, as a powerless minority group, struggle to have their voices heard or their views acted upon. One way of reinforcing adult-child power relations is the confining of children to the private spaces of home and family and keeping them away from the public arenas of policy and decision-making. This reinforces a perception that children's participation in more public arenas is a gift for adults to bestow rather than a child's fundamental right to access (Hamill and Boyd, 2002).

Historically, Western children have been silenced either through oppressive conventions that prize children being 'seen and not heard' or by their voice being distorted in the mediated accounts created by historians, anthropologists, sociologists and psychologists (Lloyd-Smith and Tarr, 2000). It isn't easy for children, without any 'authorial voice', Hendrick (2000), to challenge adult accounts.

Power is not just about force but also about the creation of knowledge which renders children doubly disempowered. As has already been highlighted, children's knowledge can be disregarded and they can still be controlled by force, however benevolently that force may be construed by adults.

A further factor that sustains unequal adult-child power relations is a belief that adults have superior knowledge. Undoubtedly this is the case in some areas of life but with regard to childhood – in the sense of what it is like to be a child – then children have the superior knowledge (Mayall, 2000).

Location and context are also central tenets of power relations between adults and children. The school environment is a prime example of this.

> School and schooling is experienced as something 'done to' the children, legitimized by a discourse which prioritizes adult/future-oriented needs and expectations over present lived experience. The emphasis lies with the preparation of children as future citizens, equipped with the skills (productivity, competitiveness, comportment and control) to contribute as adults to the needs of modern industrial/post-industrial society (Devine, 2002, p.312).

It is unlikely that we will ever fully neutralise adult-child power relations but it is better to acknowledge them than to pretend they do not exist. Sometimes the very acknowledgement of power relations leads to a scrutiny of practice that, in turn, minimizes their negative impact.

Strategies to minimise power relations

There are some very obvious power differences between adults and children: one is height, another is strength. How often do we speak to children from a standing position?

The height difference can immediately create a power imbalance. This could easily be rectified by sitting down with children, squatting down to their height or camping on the floor with them. If you are communicating with children from a sitting position, check if this is an open sitting position or one fortressed behind a desk while the child is more openly exposed. The latter is a common power tactic employed by adults when they want to impose their will on children such as a pronouncement from a head teacher or a juvenile magistrate.

Location is just as important. When we want to talk to children and young people do we do this on their territory or ours? Do we think about power relations in choosing a location or does convenience take precedence?

Physical strength can be used overtly or implicitly to sustain power relations. Superior physical strength can instil fear in children even if an adult does not intend to use it. Avoid body movements that could be interpreted in a threatening way such as pointing or jabbing.

Think about tone of voice - a question boomed out like a sergeant-major is likely to make children nervous. Language use is a notoriously common power issue when engaging with children and young people. Inaccessible language not only reduces the effectiveness of the communication but also raises the power stakes, damages rapport and closes down responses (Aoslin *et al*., 2009).

Sometimes power relations can be perpetuated at an organisational level. If you work in an organisation for children and young people think about how children might perceive your organisation. For example is the physical entry intimidating, is there a daunting receptionist to face or a complex website portal? Do you have any power minimising protocols at institutional level? Is this ever discussed at your professional development events or staff meetings? Is it ever discussed with children who attend the service?

Group power dynamics

Of course, engagement with children and young people is not always at an individual level. Frequently, it happens in groups. Other power dynamics are at work here including child-child power relations (Kellett, 2010).

In group situations, power can be exerted by adults favouring some children and/or excluding others in the communication flow. Children have an acute sense of fairness and will soon detect if you are inviting responses from the same few children. Those left out feel disempowered. This power imbalance can be exacerbated by children themselves and we should not ignore the existence of child-child power relations. This might manifest itself as popular versus unpopular, articulate versus less articulate, white versus ethnic minority, older child versus younger child, able-bodied versus disabled.

Children can become nervous if swamped by adults so consider also how a group adult approach might affect the power relations. For a child being interviewed by several adults there is no hiding place as there are always several sets of eyes peering at the child even if they are not talking at that moment. Equally, one-to-one interaction can be intense and anxiety-provoking. It is a good idea to ask children if they would like a friend to accompany them. This often results in a much more relaxed and productive outcome.

Effective methods of engaging with very young children

There are many issues to consider when engaging with very young children. They may be shy around unfamiliar adults, even afraid, so it is important to find ways of making them feel safe and secure. All of the tips about height difference, tone of voice and body language referred to above are particularly relevant. Other things to consider include time of day and concentration span.

Young children get tired easily - late afternoon may not be an optimal time to talk to them. They are also less likely to be communicative if they are hungry so try not to schedule chats with young children close to scheduled meal times. Young children have short concentration spans so frequent, short interactions are better than long interviews. However, the best way to engage with young children is through their own worlds.

Play-based approaches work well (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2007). If you want to find out how young children feel about something you can elicit their views through pretend play and role play. Dressing up is great fun and it also enables children to communicate through an invented identity. If you join in the fun and become an improvised character

too then they may feel less inhibited about sharing their thoughts and feelings with you.

Story telling can provide a framework for conveying information in an engaging and non threatening way. If talk is important to the engagement you are seeking then puppetry is a valuable tool. Finger puppets are quick to make or cheap to purchase and the interchange can be done entirely via the puppet characters (Kruger, 2008). If there is something a young child wants to convey that is distressing or embarrassing, the puppets provide a safe vehicle through which to communicate. Dolls and favourite toys can also become 'voices' of the adult and child.

An excellent approach to persuading young children to open up their worlds to adults is the mosaic approach developed by Clark and Moss (2001). Clark (2004) describes how she used a variety of different methods to explore what three to four-year olds felt about the early childhood settings they attended. She explored methodologies that played to young children's strengths rather than deficiencies and cast herself in the guise of 'inexpert' so that she could listen and learn from the children.

Clark used a variety of different tools including the familiar methods of observation and informal child group interviews. Additionally, she gave young children disposable cameras to take photographs of things that were important to them. They talked to her about what they had photographed and why. She invited them to take her on a tour of their nurseries so that they could describe it as they showed her around. Pulling all the pieces of the mosaic together, Clark was able to construct a richly informed, child's-eye view of their nursery environments.

Waller's research (2006) about young children's outdoor play environments discusses participative approaches to engagement with young children that acknowledge their agency and develop a concept of "children's spaces". Waller's approach is to involve young children as co-constructors of knowledge from the outset. Armed with video cameras they generated some wonderful data – as is evident from Waller's article title *Don't come too close to my octopus tree* – to illuminate issues about outdoor play environments.

Effective methods of engaging with children in the middle years

A tendency with age labeling is particularly noticeable in middle childhood. How children must tire of adult engagement that is premised with 'and how old are you?' It would appear a child cannot belong to a gender or ethnic group, be a keen cricketer, a fan of Black Eyed Peas, have ginger hair or body piercings until he or she is first 'aged'. And once 'aged' there is a seemingly endless procession of comparisons to endure: 'she's rather small for eight'; 'he doesn't eat much for ten'; 'she's a marvellous reader for seven'; 'goodness, hasn't he got big feet – and only nine!'

There are two messages to take away from this. The first is that we habitually underestimate children and apply too prescriptively the notion of developmental stages. Waksler (1991) suggested that it is more helpful to think in terms of children's competence as being 'different' not 'lesser'.

The second is how much children dislike being patronised. The challenge is to question assumptions and practices that exclude or potentially denigrate children.

Speaking in relation to research, but relevant to other forms of engagement, Mauthner (1997) considers individual interviews and self-completed instruments to be more suited to older children and small group discussions to be more appropriate for younger children. Middle childhood spans them both and so particular attention needs to be given to the interview techniques employed.

The 'conditioning' to which children are exposed in many primary schools may prompt children to respond to adult questioning even when they don't know the answer. For a child to offer the response of 'I don't know' risks him or her being thought cheeky, awkward or inattentive. This has particular

implications for individual child interviews where the power imbalance is acute, such as in schools.

If a professional's role becomes blurred with that of a teaching role, children may expect more guidance and direction to frame their responses and therefore not be as forthcoming. Adults with little or no experience of talking to children may also underestimate the length of time children commonly take to answer a question.

All of the guidance suggested in the section on effective engagement with young children (power relations, body language, use of language etc.) applies to middle childhood but their older age and superior language skills makes longer and deeper one-on-one engagement more feasible.

Again, understandings of research methods used with children can also inform other kinds of engagement. Let's, for example, consider interviewing techniques.

There are four types of interviews that might be used. Structured interviews consist of a series of pre-determined closed questions that enable adults to ask simple questions. This approach is particularly useful if you want to collate a number of responses from a large number of children and/or make comparisons between and across groups of children.

Unstructured interviews have no pre-determined questions and function more like conversations around a topic. Semi-structured interviews are a mid-way point between the two. They have about six core questions but allow for additional, unscripted questions, probes and follow-ups.

Focus group interviews are completely different as they involve several children together. Here, group dynamics play a significant part. One child may respond to an adult facilitator in a way that prompts another child to think about something in a different way. Sometimes the response of one child may awaken the subconscious thoughts or feelings of another, thus enabling that child to convey ideas which he or she has not been able to express previously and is then able to articulate this for the first time.

Although it is important to neither patronize nor underestimate children, we still have to remember that children are children. They have shorter attention spans than most adults and lower boredom thresholds. Talk can be exceedingly boring for children. Engagement that employs games-based methods is likely to be more effective.

Methods of engaging with young people

Perhaps the most challenging communication for adults is with young people. By their teenage years, young people are beginning to flex their power and independence muscles, have a stronger identity and a sophisticated peer culture which celebrates adult-free zones.

Focus groups with young people are still an effective communication tool but we have to be willing to arrange these at places and times that fit into their worlds and their crowded schedules. A focus group facilitated at a youth centre, café or sports club is more likely to access authentic youth voice than one organised at a school which, while it has the convenience of a captive audience, is overlain with power dynamics.

Young people develop their own youth culture with their own youth language. They are a digital generation who have grown up in cyber environments and have made mediums of social networking and second life fantasies their own. If we are to communicate effectively with them we have to be prepared to do this on their terms (Badham and Wade, 2005).

Most young people have mobile phones and are prolific texters. Sending a text is often the quickest and most efficient way to reach a young person and texting can be a useful way to organise group activities and group responses.

Internet chat rooms and blogs are a fruitful source of interchange with many young people. Some parents actually use social networks as a way of communication with their own offspring and of keeping up-to-date with what their current interests are. Photo posting is popular on sites such as Facebook and MySpace and parents can find it illuminating to be able to share in this exchange.

On the other hand, the thought of parents sharing their personal cyber space is anathema to some young people who want to keep their cyber life adult-free. This needs to be respected as long as adults have communicated with young people about internet-safety measures to protect against grooming and other internet crime.

So far we have only touched on mode of communication. Let us now consider some of the operational issues around engagement with young people. The first of these is valuing young people's time (Hartas, 2008).

With the pressures on school performance, the prevalence of part time work and their packed extra-curricular programmes, today's youth are intensely busy people. This brings us to the issue of payment for participation. If the time that young people afford us serves adult purposes and brings little or no benefit to young people, e.g. seeking opinions on how popular a sitting government is with young people, then there is a strong argument that their time and/or expenses should be recompensed.

If consultation is going to benefit young people directly, such as consulting over how funds should be spent on youth leisure facilities then the converse would apply. Where payment is deemed appropriate, what form should it take?

Store vouchers are popular with adults who fear young people might spend money inappropriately. However, many young people find vouchers condescending and childish and would prefer their contributions to be valued on a pro rata basis with adult contributions. The counter argument is that if a monetary reward for participation is set too high it may attract young people for the wrong reasons – although this applies equally to adult participation.

Respect is the byword of effective engagement with young people. A non-judgmental approach that values what young people say and feel and does not allow dress, mannerisms or language to detract from the worth of their contribution is highly recommended.

Methods of engaging with marginalised children and young people

In contemporary society there is no excuse for confining some groups of children and young people to the 'too difficult pile' or of only engaging with them by proxy through adults (Monteith, 2004).

Marginalised children are those who are hardest to reach such as Indigenous children, asylum-seeking children, minority ethnic groups and those with severe and complex disabilities. Engaging with children and young people and accessing their perspectives cannot be genuinely inclusive if it only involves readily available populations.

The first barrier to overcome is locating hard to reach groups (Hart, J., 2009). They are unlikely to be found in typical suburban classrooms. They can be reached through intermediaries or advocates and then snowballing techniques employed whereby children and young people can recommend others in similar circumstances. It is even more important with marginalised groups to engage with them at their level and on their terms.

We have to accept that this form of communication is going to be more time consuming and costly so care has to be taken to allow sufficient resources. It is not acceptable to exclude marginalised groups on cost grounds if we are claiming to be inclusive.

If the marginalised group you want to engage with are Indigenous children and young people, migrants or have English as a second language then the employment of translators and key-workers is likely to be a pre-requisite which has to be planned and costed. Collaborating with translators is helpful in progressing effective engagement with minority ethnic groups and it is vitally important to include indigenous youth populations in all consultation exercises.

Similarly, if sign language is the only way to communicate with deaf children then signing needs to be built into any engagement plan.

Communication is especially difficult for children and young people who have severe learning difficulties and non-verbal techniques may be the only effective means of connecting with them.

Once again, respect is a key factor. Some consider engaging with a 15-year old boy who has severe learning difficulties in ways one might communicate with a toddler to be demeaning and age inappropriate.

My own view, supported by authors such as Ware (1996) is that far from being demeaning it is deeply respectful to begin from where someone is rather than where you would like him or her to be (or are more comfortable with him or her being). Forms of intensive interaction (e.g. Nind and Hewett, 1996, Caldwell 2010) have been shown to be effective in communicating with such groups of young people and in facilitating meaningful participation in matters that affect them.

Advocacy has a major role to play in successful communication with marginalised groups. However, advocacy should support communication with hard to reach groups and not replace it. Too often, parents or advocates have been interviewed in lieu of children themselves (Monteith, 2004) when, with a little more effort and resource, the views of the children themselves could have been explored.

Professional practice contexts

Engagement with children and young people requires different emphases and approaches in various professional practice settings. Engagement with children in a medical environment will have different characteristics and requirements from engagement with young people in, for example, a school classroom or a faith-based setting (Foley and Leverett, 2007). However, some generic principles apply universally across practice contexts.

First and foremost is the imperative to have a clear understanding of why you want to engage with a particular child or group of children and young people. The reason for the engagement needs to be clear not just to yourself and fellow professionals but to the children and young people whom you seek to engage. Why do you want to communicate with them? What is it you want to find out? Are they aware of the whys and the whats?

Other universal principles to address include respect, inclusion and power dynamics. Beyond this, different professional groups develop appropriate methods to achieve optimal engagement to suit their practice contexts. These nuanced approaches are evident in larger professional domains such as education, health, social care and family law.

Within professional practice arenas there are three considerations that warrant noting. Firstly, there is a need for team work to ensure that all members of your professional discipline are actively implementing engagement protocols (once these have been agreed).

Secondly, it is important to evaluate and review how these protocols are working and whether they need to adapt to changes in contemporary society in order to remain effective.

Thirdly, the biggest step towards achieving optimal engagement with children and young people is to share practice experiences, good and bad, across disciplines and to collaborate on developing integrated approaches that draw together the best of the best. This is not just about effective engagement with children and young people, it is also about effective engagement between professionals to improve how we communicate with the younger generation.

Future directions

Before concluding this Background Briefing on engaging with children and young people, I would like to plant a few seeds for reflection and some consideration of future directions.

The second decade of the 21st century presents some unique challenges. The periods of childhood and youth are radically different from those we remember ourselves. It is not possible to future-proof our engagement techniques with children. In ten years time the world will be a different place yet again. Who would have thought fifteen years ago that parents might be communicating with their children through Facebook or that smartphones would enable children to have instant access to the global web while waiting at the school bus stop?

There is nothing quite as constant as change. Change is inevitable, so it is really important to embrace change and be prepared to be flexible in the ways we engage with children and young people now and in the future. Awareness and adaptability are keys to continued effective engagement.

Perhaps one of the greatest challenges we face in developing effective engagement with children and young people is managing expectations. Children expect that listening and consulting involves some form of action otherwise it is empty tokenism. Active participation and sharing of the issues and questions – as opposed to just the solutions – can make a big difference. The more we work towards children and young people as partners in decision-making processes the easier this challenge will become.

The ink is not yet dry on research around effective engagement with children and young people. There are many gaps still to plug and opportunities for professionals in the field to contribute to emerging debates.

We readily talk about effective engagement with children and young people but have not sufficiently progressed a pluralistic approach. More field research is needed on developing skills and building critical knowledge which will advance communication with Indigenous and marginalised groups of children and young people. Professionals are at the cutting edge here and have the potential to make a real difference to policy and practice.

We have only scratched the surface in illuminating the complexities of adult-child power dynamics. Even the most enlightened research still has an implicit message that we *invite* children and young people to the consultation table. If we are involving them by *invitation* then we need to remain critical regarding whether the table is already set and adult agendas already pre-determined.

An area of exciting future research is how to draw adults and children together around an *empty* table where children are involved from the outset in choosing what dishes to consume and what utensils to select. This is another domain where professionals can lead the way and construct a body of practice case studies that explore grass roots issues.

One other research gap to consider is how we are going to draw on the potential for peer involvement in effective engagement with children and young people. We willingly involve an adult Indigenous key-worker or an adult advocate of a child with complex disabilities, recognising the need for bridging expertise, but rarely employ young people themselves as bridging experts in our engagement with children and young people. There is much practice to explore and policy to develop around how we can better use peer bridging to enhance the efficacy of our engagement.

The past decade has brought children's rights firmly into the spotlight. Such empowerment brings its own challenges. There are those who consider a more potent child voice to be threatening and subversive.

This presents a very real danger that a rearguard faction will emerge which seeks to reverse the progress made in children's rights agendas and adult-child power relations. This is noticeable in negative - at times toxic - media vilification of young people and a degree of resistance to pupil voice in some schools.

It is all the more important, therefore, for those who work with children and young people to articulate, practise and extend *effective* and *sustainable* engagement so that there is sufficient momentum across professions for good practice to prevail.

Professionals have the opportunity to lead the field. Indeed, for those vocationally-inspired individuals there is a moral imperative to stand firm against any potential erosion of children's rights and weakening of effective engagement. This is best done by seeking collaborative common ground and strong inter-agency liaison to fortify and disseminate best practice.

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About the Centre for Children and Young People

The Centre for Children and Young People (CCYP) was established at Southern Cross University in 2004. The CCYP works collaboratively with organisations, particularly in regional and rural areas, to enhance policy and practice related to the well-being of children and young people.

The Centre has three priority areas: Research, Education and Advocacy.

For more information about the CCYP, visit
ccyp.scu.edu.au

About the Course

The Graduate Certificate, Graduate Diploma and Master of Childhood and Youth Studies are awards which have been developed collaboratively by the Centre for Children and Young People and the School of Education at Southern Cross University, Australia. The awards meet a recognised need, expressed by a range of professionals, for contemporary knowledge and skills to assist them to work more effectively with children, young people and their families.

The course seeks to be an innovative, professionally relevant, practical and interdisciplinary qualification for people working, or intending to work, with children, young people and their families. Applicants can enrol in any one of the awards or complete individual units as professional development.

Units are delivered externally so that students can successfully study at a distance. Each unit has authentic and professionally relevant assessment and the five core units involve optional but highly recommended summer/winter intensive workshops of 2 days duration. Students who are unable to attend are able to engage with workshop content and processes live online or via recorded formats.

The course incorporates innovative and appropriate use of technology to support students' learning, opportunities for regular engagement with tutors and fellow students and (where appropriate) multimedia elements.

The course is underpinned by a deep respect and regard for children and young people and for their views and perspectives. It also incorporates an understanding that children and young people can benefit immensely from positive relationships with adults – parents, teachers and the myriad professionals with whom they may engage over the course of their childhood. The course embraces multidisciplinary perspectives in the belief this can enhance service provision and lead to improved outcomes for children and young people.

For more information about these awards, visit
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