CHILD PARTICIPATION STANDARDS

TRANSPARENT & INFORMATIVE
1. Children should understand their right to express their views freely and their views to be given due weight;
2. Children should understand how their participation will take place, its scope, purpose and potential impact;
3. The above information should be given to children in a way that is easy for them to understand.

SUPPORTED BY TRAINING
Both adults and children should be fully prepared!

CHILD-FRIENDLY
Environments and working methods should be adapted to children's capacities!
1. Children should be well prepared for participation, so that they can have the confidence and opportunity to share their views;
2. Adults should consider the fact that children will need differing levels of support and forms of involvement according to their age and evolving capacities.

INCLUSIVE
Everyone should be involved!
1. There should be no discrimination. Children should not be a homogenized group. Participation opportunities for marginalized children should be encouraged; both girls and boys;
2. There should be equality of opportunity for all;  
3. Programmes also need to ensure that they are culturally sensitive to children from all communities.

RELEVANT
Children can express their views on what matters to them!
The issues on which children have the right to express their views must be of real relevance to their lives and enable them to draw on their knowledge, skills and abilities.
**Voluntary**
Children should be free to express their views!

1. Children should never be coerced into expressing views against their wishes;
2. Children should be informed that they can cease involvement at any stage.

**Respectful**
Adults and children should respect each other!

1. Children’s views have to be treated with respect;
2. Children should be provided with opportunities to initiate ideas and activities.

**Safe and Sensitive to Risk**
Children should feel safe to express their views!

1. Adults have the responsibility towards the children with whom they work;
2. Adults must take every precaution to minimize the risk to children of violence, exploitation or any other negative consequence of their participation;
3. Adults should develop a clear child-protection strategy which recognizes the particular risks faced by some groups of children, and the extra barriers they face in obtaining help;
4. Children must be aware of their right to be protected from harm and know where to go for help if needed;
5. Families and communities should be well informed of the value and implications of participation.

**Accountable**
A commitment to follow-up and evaluation is essential!

1. In any research or consultative process, children should know how their views have been interpreted and used. They should also be able to challenge and influence the analysis of the findings.
2. Children should know how their participation has influenced any outcomes.
3. Wherever appropriate, children should be given the opportunity to participate in follow-up processes or activities. Children should be able to take part in the monitoring and evaluation of children’s participation.
It is hard to realize child rights...

Come, I will show you real life stories!
REAL STORY in the Family Setting

“As the child is getting more and more independent, and as everyday he takes a step further away from us, we are actually preparing for the future when he becomes a fully independent person who has a life and a story of his own.”

Engaging the child to choose his first school

Nowadays, kindergartens provide N classes for kids to try before formally registering to enter the school. Elaine and her husband let their son try the N class at a local kindergarten and an international kindergarten for a few months respectively, then they let him to choose from the two afterwards.

ELAINE CHENG
A working mother with a three-and-a-half-year-old boy. She has grown up with a lot of child rights education and experience. Currently, she is developing few educational projects in Mainland China. She also actively engages in voluntary projects related to children.

His opinions and feelings fluctuated at times. We needed to give him plenty of time to express his true feelings. But at last he chose the local one, because he realized that, while the toys at the international school can easily be substituted by the toys he has at home, the friendship and teachers he had in the local school are unreplaceable. Thus, in the process of thinking through the two options, he found out what is truly important to him.

Engaging the child to prepare his free time

While we allow him to choose what he likes to do in the free time, what’s more important is to engage him in the preparation so he knows that he has a role. For example, if he chooses to go to the beach, we would ask him to pack for himself. He would usually take his swimming suit, sand toys, anti-insect spray, a big towel... He would even take with him a new set of clothes! Then we would tell him what he has missed, such as water, mat, shoes, soap and snacks. He really enjoys the process of preparation and wouldn’t just rely on us to prepare for him. He learns to become a more independent person.
REAL STORY in the Family Setting
case #2

Mom’s view: How to engage a child in the process of decision-making?

IT IS IMPORTANT FOR THE ADULT TO...

- Allow plenty of time for the child to develop his opinions;
- Remember and seriously consider what the child says every time;
- Ask for the reasons of his opinions to encourage him to think deeper;
- Guide the child to weigh between different factors;
- Use stories and games to engage the child so he feels easy to visualize the situation, and;
- Consider themselves as facilitators rather than decision-makers in the process.

The process is important, because it helps the child to prepare for the final decision. If the parents abruptly make a decision, the child may feel unhappy and may have a hard time accepting the consequences of the decision made. However, the parents should make the final decisions after considering the opinions of the child, as the child may feel pressure in actually making a decision.

HER RECOMMENDATIONS ON ENGAGING CHILDREN IN THE FAMILY SETTING

- Close your ears to the noises of the world. Slow down and listen attentively to your own child.
- It is more important to inspire the passion and curiosity in the child than to force him/her to memorize a lot of information, because if the child is curious and free to pursue his/her interests, he/she would naturally excel in his/her passion.
- We need to have serious parent education and support network for parents who wish to engage their children better in the daily life. “Parents nowadays are facing a lot of anxiety. They don’t have the faith and skill to begin with. But once they begin, the child would actually lead you through.”

Engaging the child in decision-making has actually improved our husband-and-wife relationship, as we no longer find the need to lobby each other or to argue for what is the best for the child. The child is the one who guides the decision-making. And since the child is considered to be an independent person, we still get to preserve a world just between the two of us.
REAL STORY in the Parental Divorce Setting

“The voice of children are usually the missing puzzles from what have been described by the conflicting adults. Their views are also helpful for the court’s consideration and decision.”

Engaging children to find out their views on parental divorce

In cases of divorce, as the divorcing couples are in a conflicting situation over their rights and wealth, the best interests of their child/children are often overlooked. Children’s voice is easily subsumed under the divorcing parents.

The intervention of Dennis as a lawyer:

In cases where meeting the child is necessary, Dennis will put down his gown as a serious lawyer. He usually meets the child for the first time at a place comfortable for the child, e.g. pizza house, café etc. The purpose of the first meeting is to get to know each other, build trust, and find out about the child’s life and his understanding of the parents’ divorce. He does not go into the legal questions straight away. It is only until the following meetings that Dennis discusses the important legal questions with the child when he/she is ready and allows him/her enough time to think before coming to any decisions. Very often, the voice from the child in question would assist the court in coming to a decision, which may take into account of the child’s concerns unless it is against the child’s interest to do so.

Dennis Ho

A lawyer practicing family law since 1997, and has been representing children in legal proceedings in the past.

Engaging children can ease the mistrust between divorced couples

Children still long to meet and spend time with both parents even after their divorce. The mistrust between the separated parents, however, makes things complicated.

In one case, the elder suspect that the mother has brainwashed their son into not liking and not meeting him. The father denies it and explains that it is because of his ill habits that his son doesn’t want to see him, but does not believe in it.

LAI WONG

SUI WING

A registered social worker with more than 20 years experience, qualified family mediator with about 10 years’ experience, 8 years’ experience in parenting coordinator.

When parents consider the feelings and voices of their child as the top priority of the whole issue, the situation becomes less a conflict. It becomes more about how the parents can better work for the well-being and interest of their child.
REAL STORY in the Parental Divorce Setting

con’t case #2

The intervention of Wing as a Parenting Coordinator:
1. Educates the parents the importance of considering the needs of the child and having a child-focused perspective as the prime concern to resolve the issue.
2. Contracts with the parents, stating that her meeting with their son would be private. The child could choose whether to permit Wing to release his views to the parents. In addition, the parents should not let the child suffer from any consequences for expressing his views.
3. Teaches the parents how to prepare the child for the meeting. They would tell the child the purpose of meeting and the fact that they have been learning the skills about parental coordination with Wing.
4. In the meeting, Wing states the purpose of the meeting and allows the child to use verbal or any other ways that he feels comfortable to explain his feelings towards the issue mentioned by the parents. The son in the end lists out the “10 sins” that he doesn’t like about his dad on a paper, including smoking and gambling. He explains that he is unhappy about his father spending the weekend with him at home while he is watching TV on horse racing. He only sees him once in a week and he doesn’t count this as a companionship. He also tells Wing that he prefers meeting his father on Sunday than on Saturday as he has his own activities too.
5. The child permits Wing to relay this information to his parents.
6. Wing prepares the child for the possible consequences of expressing such views to his parents. The child also knows that if he suffers from any consequences for expressing his views, he could tell Wing about it.
7. In the end, the father admits that he has some bad habits and promises to change. He realizes that his ex-spouse has not prevented their son from seeing him. The mistrust between the parents are resolved as a result of the child expressing his views in a child friendly way.

THEIR RECOMMENDATIONS ON ENGAGING CHILDREN IN THE PARENTAL DIVORCE SETTING

- It may not necessarily be a good thing to involve the child in complicated legal procedures and let him/her meet too many professionals, as this usually means that he has to repeat his story for many times. It would also bring tremendous pressure upon the child.
- If the child doesn’t want to express his/her views or meet any professionals, they should not be forced to do so.
- Child-related professionals should consider the age and maturity of the child when communicating with him/her.
- Child-related professionals should meet the child at an environment that is comfortable to him/her.
- Child-related professionals, such as judges, lawyers and social workers, should receive adequate training to prepare, to talk and to meet with children.
- Education should be provided to both parents and children, so the best interests of the child and their right to be heard can be honored.
- The channels for children to make their voice heard should be made more visible with professional support in the community.
REAL STORY in the School Setting

“Child participation is a unique experience. It cannot be replaced by the efforts of teachers and adults. We can only take a supporting role. Children learn in the process and develop the ownership.”

Engaging school children in service learning projects

**PONG YUK CHEI**

An experienced teacher with over 30 years of teaching experience in both secondary and primary schools. She is now a Student Guidance Teacher of a primary school in Sai Kung.

Primary school children as young as 10 to 12 years old are running their service learning projects in a sophisticated way. They have served the elderly, people with down syndrome, children with mental disabilities, children in hospital and those in need in the community for many years. They decide their own service targets, research the social problem, communicate with the NGOs directly, conduct learning visit, design and revise the project content, and implement the project with their own hands. What’s the most important is, they conduct serious evaluation of their own job!

Through active participation, they have developed deep understanding of the disadvantaged communities as well as empathy for the others. These kids tend to care more about justice and voice their concerns more. They are courageous kids.

People are amazed at why primary school students in our school could run a service learning project in this way. The beneficiary organization workers said that they are doing much better than the secondary school students because they are passionate and treat it as their own business. They always want them back to re-run the services.
Teacher’s views: What are the benefits of engaging children in participation?

STUDENTS TEND TO HAVE...
- Better self-esteem;
- Better social and leadership skills;
- Better responsibility;
- Better problem-solving skills;
- Empathy for the others, and;
- Courage to voice out and fight for the justice.

UNEXPECTED OUTCOMES FOR SCHOOL...
- The school environment has become more inclusive.
- The sense of belonging to the school has increased.
- Teachers are more ready to listen to students and consult their views.
- The teaching mode has become more interactive.
- The school has allowed more flexibility to accommodate students’ needs. “I converted a counseling room into a small play room for school children. Later on, the game room was moved to a dance room which is the size of two classrooms. If they have done some good deeds, they could earn tokens to enter their wonderland.”

If a student comes to me and ask me to start a new project or a new activity, I will ask him why he thinks it is important and ask him to do the ground work preparation before he comes back again with his researched findings and reasons. They need to learn the balance between Rights and Responsibilities, and they have developed the habit.

HER RECOMMENDATIONS ON ENGAGING CHILDREN IN THE SCHOOL SETTING
- We need to allow our students to try!
- The school should allow teachers to cut down some of their work, so they could communicate more with students and support them in their child-led initiatives.
- Child participation is preventive work. If we have good preventive work, we don’t need to waste efforts in putting down the fire.
- We need to do more promotion on the positive outcomes of child participation, so that others would follow and have the incentive to start trying.
REAL STORY in the Hospital Setting

“The communication with young patients before the medical procedure with child friendly means is very important. The child turns the negative experience into a positive one and feel empowered.”

**case #1**

**Engaging child patients in Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) examination for child patients**

In usual practice, child patients have to use tranquilizer in order not to struggle during the MRI. In some hospitals, hospital play specialists communicate with the child patients to understand their anxiety, and play with them to prepare them for MRI.

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**BONNE KWOK**

A registered nurse at the beginning, received training in Britain, and has become a qualified hospital play specialist in hospital in HK since 1994.

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The child plays the role of an astronaut, and in order to achieve his mission, he cannot move in his spaceship.

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**What are the benefits of engaging patients in medical procedures?**

- The child learns how to deal with stress. He also feels more comfortable and become more cooperative throughout the entire process.
- The child also does not have to suffer from the side effects of using tranquilizer (dizziness, nausea) and can leave immediately after the examination. He does not need to rest at the hospital and wait for the side effects of tranquilizer to pass.
- It is also beneficial to both the parents and the hospital as they can save time and medical cost. Hospital can also save resources to treat more patients.

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We would also familiarize the child with the sound he would hear during MRI by recording the real sound of it.
REAL STORY in the Hospital Setting

Engaging child patients in setting up intravenous access for drug administration or fluid replacement

The child patient can also choose whether to conduct the procedure on his right hand or on his left hand. He can also choose the cartoon bandage that he likes!

What are the benefits of engaging patients in medical procedures?

- The communication before the medical procedure with child-friendly means is very important. The child turns the negative experience into a positive one and feels empowered.

- It is common for child patients to think that the needle remains underneath their skin after intravenous access is set up, so they don’t move their arms and feel uncomfortable. As a hospital play specialist, we will ask about the child patient’s worries and explain to him/her the procedure with dolls and toy equipment through play. It greatly releases their anxiety.

DR. CHOW
CHUN BONG
A paediatrician for over 50 years of experience mainly in public hospitals, and has chaired many children related organisations in Hong Kong related to their rights and health.

THERM RECOMMENDATIONS ON ENGAGING CHILDREN IN THE HOSPITAL SETTING

- It is crucial to consult kids directly to understand their feelings in the hospital instead of through their parents.
- Consultation of child patients about their experience in hospital should be done on a regular basis instead of a one-off event.
- Systematic and sustainable education should be provided to health professionals (doctors, nurses, hospital administrators), so that they could understand the importance and benefits of listening to child patients.
- It is important to generate systematic and reliable data to allow the community and the government visualize the positive outcomes as a result of meaningful child participation in the hospital setting.
REAL STORY in the Community Setting

“I just want her to know, her story is worth telling.”

**Engaging children as tour guide in their living environment**

To Kwa Wan is a district facing a lot of massive redevelopment projects. While adults and ‘kai fung’ (kids) are expressing their views about the impacts of redevelopment in their life, children are seldom involved in the discussion. However, children also have their feelings and views facing all these changes and they need suitable platforms to voice their views. In this regard, Sze Ming and a few other community organizers have piloted a project by engaging children as tour guide and tell their stories to people who feel interested about the district.

It all began with a ten-year-old girl Chau Tsz Ching who has been anxiously following the guided tours catered for adults. She made jokes that she could also be a tour guide, and Sze Ming allows her to design and lead her own guided tour to introduce “her community” to the others. Unlike the usual guided tours, participants (all adults) got to know the name and characters of the cats in different shops. Tsz Ching also brought participants to what children called their “secret bases”. They included a spot where participants could see the kindergarten kids from a window, and a school which is opened to kids on Sunday for free time, play and learning.

When we take what the children say and do seriously, then they will take us seriously. This is what I have experienced in engaging the children.

LUI SZE MING
A young teacher and a volunteer in community work in To Kwa Wan.

It takes time to engage and understand a child. Sometimes she is too shy from telling her own story and feelings because she lacks confidence. Instead, she would cater to the adult world by suggesting to bring the tourists to the shopping malls. I have to ask her questions to help her reflect about her life. I just want her to know, her story is worth telling.

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**Engaging children to voice out on issues related to themselves**

EVA LAI SHAN
A registered social worker and community worker with over 20 years of experience working with children and families in deprived circumstances.

Children from poor families are usually not aware of their rights and do not know how to voice out for themselves. As a consequence, children are caught in very deprived circumstances. For this reason, Sze Lai Shan and her colleagues of her organization have helped to establish a children’s group in 2001, the children’s group was set up with the aim of empowering the children. Initially the group had some 30 children members.
REAL STORY in the Community Setting

con’t case #2

Now it has grown to roughly 1,800 children members. They were recruited from street stands and the regular family visits of her organization. Most of them come from Sham Shui Po.

Every year, 20 Children Ambassadors are elected among the children members to coordinate their own activities. They also have their own Chairman and Vice-chairman, and are divided into action groups. The social workers give them training on children’s rights as well as guidance and support in their activities ranging from street stands, exhibitions, children surveys, to social actions (such as petitions, peaceful demonstrations, press conference, and initiating meetings with government officials) to bring their attention into issues children concerned.

At first the government was not used to meeting with children and did not want to meet with them. Even with the participation of children, the government tended to talk only to adults, ignoring the opinions of children. But more and more, they get used to having children participate during meetings and are more open to their ideas. Children also feel more empowered and confident in giving their views.

Children’s participation or children’s right to be heard is a concept that has not been accepted by the community. Once they see children engaging in social actions, even if the children are only involving in very peaceful ones, they will start attacking and they forget the real issue behind. Children also have their right to be heard like everyone else, don’t they?

THERE RECOMMENDATIONS ON ENGAGING CHILDREN IN THE COMMUNITY SETTING

○ We need public education on Children’s Right to be Heard and Right to Participation, and this education should begin with adults.

○ We need trained professionals and adults to support the children, in particular younger children in voicing their views.

○ We need more resources and facilities, such as appropriate venues, for children to come together for meetings and discussions.

○ The government shall have an official but child friendly system/platform to collect children’s views on policies and laws related to them.
What the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the UN Committee say about children’s right to participation

The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child notes that, in most societies around the world, implementation of the child’s right to express her or his view on the wide range of issues that affect her or him, and to have those views duly taken into account, continues to be impeded by many long-standing practices and attitudes, as well as political and economic barriers. While difficulties are experienced by many children, the UN Committee particularly recognizes that certain groups of children, including younger boys and girls, as well as children belonging to marginalized and disadvantaged groups, face particular barriers in the realization of this right. The Committee also remains concerned about the quality of many of the practices that do exist. There is a need for a better understanding of what Article 12 entails and how to fully implement it for every child.

In 2009, the UN Committee issued the General Comment No. 12 “The right of the child to be heard”. The General Comment seeks to provide guidance and recommendations for the interpretation and implementation of Article 12 and all other provisions namely: Articles 2 “non-discrimination”, Article 3 “best interests of the child”, Article 5 “parental guidance”, Article 6 “the right to life, survival and development”, Article 13 “freedom of expression”, and Article 17 “access to appropriate information” that are closely related in the Convention. The General Comment also highlights the implementation of the right to be heard in different settings and situations, such as in the family, in alternative care, in health care, in education and school, in play, recreation, sports and cultural activities, in emergency situations, and many more.

In order to fulfil these obligations, the UN Committee states that States parties should adopt the following strategies:

- Review and withdraw restrictive declarations and reservations to Article 12
- Establish independent human rights institutions, such as children’s ombudsmen or commissioners with a broad children’s rights mandate
- Ensure appropriate conditions for supporting and encouraging children to express their views, and make sure that these views are given due weight, by regulations and arrangements which are firmly anchored in laws and institutional codes and are regularly evaluated with regard to their effectiveness
- Combat negative attitudes, which impede the full realization of the child’s right to be heard, through public campaigns, including opinion leaders and the media, to change widespread customary conceptions of the child.
- Provide training on Article 12 for all child-related professionals working with and for children, including lawyers, judges, police, social workers, community workers, psychologists, caregivers, residential and prison officers, teachers at all levels of the educational system, medical doctors, nurses and other health professionals, civil servants and public officials, asylum officers and traditional leaders.
How to kick off a meaningful child participation process?

A SIMPLE 5-STEP APPROACH

According to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child - General Comment No. 12 “The right of the child to be heard” announced in 2009, there are 5 simple steps that can help you better listen to children’s voice in our everyday communication, thereby enhancing their participation in various aspects of decision making.

1. Before you start to collect the views of the child/children, make sure...

STEP 2: THE HEARING

1. Adults should encourage the child to participate, and should show that we are willing to listen and seriously consider what the child has decided to communicate.

2. There should be two-way communication between adults and the child. Adults should not one-sidedly ask for or express opinions.

3. Adults should respect the privacy of the child.

STEP 3: ASSESSMENT OF THE CAPACITY OF THE CHILD

1. Good practice for assessing the capacity of the child has to be developed.

2. If the child is capable of forming his/her own views in a reasonable and independent manner, the decision maker must consider the views of the child as a significant factor in the settlement of the issue.

STEP 4: INFORMATION ABOUT THE WEIGHT GIVEN TO THE VIEWS OF THE CHILD

1. The decision maker has to respond to the child and explain how he/she would follow up the child’s suggestion. The child should be informed about the impact that his/her expressed views will have on the outcome.

2. The decision maker’s response is a guarantee that the views of the child are not only heard as a formality, but are taken seriously. This may prompt the child to further response or action.

STEP 5: COMPLAINTS, REMEDIES AND REDRESS

1. The decision maker should establish clear complaint procedures and guidelines to guarantee children’s right to be heard and for their views to be given due weight.

2. Children should have a process by which they can turn to when their right to be heard and for their views to be given due weight is disregarded.

3. Complaint procedures must be reliable and confidential, so that the child will not face violence or punishment as a result of his/her complaint.

Situation varies, and guidelines above may not apply to all settings. However, when the child is invited to give his/her views in a formal occasion or proceeding on matters affecting him/her, then these 5 steps are required to be taken in order to effectively realize the rights of the child to be heard and for their views to be given due weight.
“It’s not Charity to listen to children, it’s that you have something to learn”
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