



Guidelines for quality participation of children in public policies and decision- making



PUBLISHER: UNICEF Office for Croatia

EDITOR: Marijana Muhić

AUTHORS: Ivana Borić, Arijana Mataga Tintor

LANGUAGE EDITOR: Alisa Kichl

GRAPHIC DESIGN: Dijana Kasavica

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UNICEF CO for Croatia Children's
Participation Advisory Board

GUIDELINES FOR QUALITY PARTICIPATION OF CHILDREN¹ IN PUBLIC POLICIES² AND DECISION- MAKING

¹ The Convention on the Rights of the Child defines a "child" as every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier, Art. 1).

² It is important to emphasize that the largest and key part of children's participation takes place in the family, which is the basis for learning and encouraging all rights, including participatory rights. However, these Guidelines refer to the participation of children in the public life of institutions, local communities and the participation of children at the national level, i.e. participation in public policies and decision-making. Public policies are adopted and implemented through various programme, strategic and normative documents, and they deal with topics that are important for living in a community (local, institution, etc.). These are the policies of public establishments, institutions and other organizations, in the adoption of which children and young people want and can participate (e.g. work programmes in educational institutions, programmes of public needs in local communities, strategies at local, county and state level, laws, ordinances and similar acts related to the life of children and young people).

WHAT is child participation?

In the **broad sense**, child participation is a common umbrella term that refers to all activities of children's participation and expression of children's opinions, children's well-being and active citizenship.

In the **narrow sense**, child participation refers to the exercise of a participatory group of rights prescribed in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989), most notably **Article 12**, which states that the **child has the right to freely express his or her own views in all matters affecting the child**.

In addition to the rights referred to in Article 12, the participatory rights of children also concern other key civil rights, such as the *right to freedom of expression (Art. 13)*, the *right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion (Art. 14)*, the *right to freedom of association (Art. 15)* and *access to information (Art. 17)* and the *right to the protection of privacy (Art. 16)*.

TO PARTICIPATE MEANS:

- to receive and share information
- to be asked and consulted on matters concerning the child's life
- to participate in children's representative bodies
- to participate in decisions that are important for children and their lives
- to propose and implement own ideas and projects,

all this with the support and respect of adults and peers and in accordance with own interests and opportunities.

PRINCIPLES OF CHILD PARTICIPATION: voluntariness, appreciation, inclusion of all children, clarity and sincerity, involvement of children in relevant topics, child-friendly working methods, timely and adequate feedback, adequate resources and support.³

³ More on the principles of child participation can be found in Gerison Lansdown, "Every Child's Right to be heard: A resource guide on the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child General Comment No. 12", Save the Children UK and UNICEF, 2011.



Child participation is a process, not a one-time event!

Child participation is meaningful when it is achieved through dialogue and cooperation with adults!

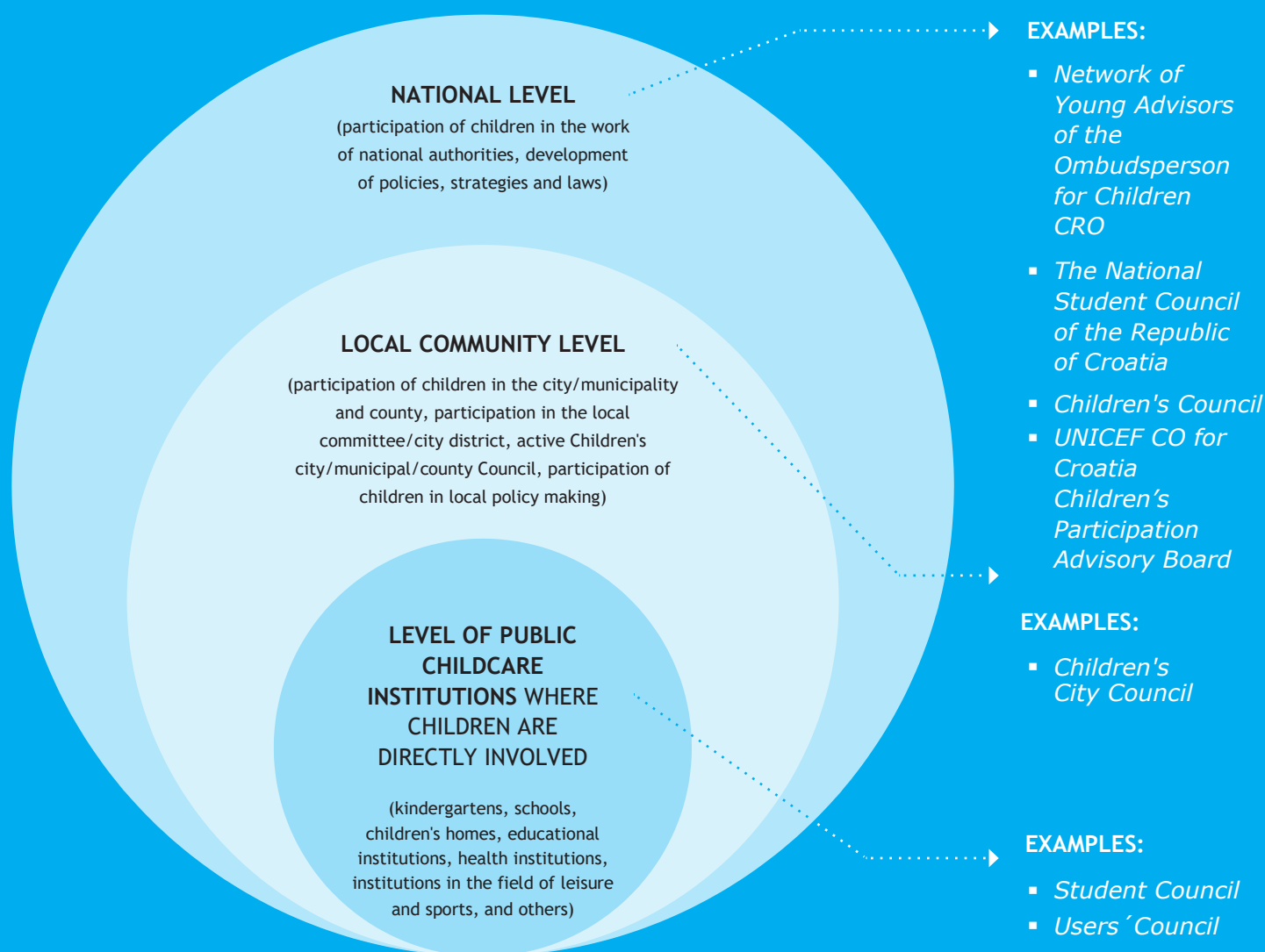
Child participation becomes important to children when they have reason to believe that their participation will bring about changes!

Every child will independently choose when, in what way and to what extent they want or do not want to participate. Child participation is not an obligation, but the right of every child!

The ways and the extent to which children participate must be adapted to the children who participate, their characteristics, background and culture.

Participation must be safe for children! In the process of participation, adults and children must ensure each other's safety and trust for all involved. Children must know and believe that their participation will be well-received, and such conditions for participation must be provided that do not expose children to unnecessary stress, judgement, rejection or resentment from their environment.

WHERE can children participate?



WHY should children participate?

Because participation is a fundamental human (civil) right, as well as a child's right, and at the same time it is a way to exercise all other rights. Child participation contributes to better and more democratic processes and decisions, improves services intended for children and enables better protection of children.

By participating, children improve their social skills, gain greater self-confidence and a better understanding and respect for others. Participation of children from early childhood develops awareness and desire for active participation in the future.



HOW can children participate?

PREREQUISITES FOR SUCCESSFUL PARTICIPATION OF CHILDREN

REFLECT ON THE PURPOSE AND BENEFITS OF CHILD PARTICIPATION!

Understand and discuss the purpose of child participation:

- **legal** – because it is required by laws and regulations
- **moral** – because we feel and want children's participation to be part of a community's culture
- **practical** – because we believe that the community can benefit specifically from children's participation (the benefit is manifested in better services, relationships, community reputation...).

Adults, be honest and authentic in relation to children's participation because all attempts and actions of adults who are not honest and authentic are easily recognised by children and this does not motivate them to participate.

LET THE CHILDREN PARTICIPATE IN THOSE TOPICS THAT THEY RECOGNIZE AS IMPORTANT, NOT JUST IN THE SO-CALLED "CHILDREN'S TOPICS"!

It is common for adults to involve children and ask for children's opinions in those topics that they consider to be important to children, i.e., the so-called "children's topics" (such as, what will be on the menu, what colours will the walls of a school be, where they would like to go on a trip...).

Children want and are ready to participate in all topics that are important to them for life and development, both in the present moment and in the future. Therefore, it is important to **inform children** about topics and activities in the communities where they live and **invite** them to engage and participate according to their own interests and experiences.

For example, children are interested and can make an important contribution to discussions and decision-making on school curricula and ordinances, on local urban planning, on the quality of public care in the field of health, social welfare and justice, on planning environmentally sustainable development and nature conservation, etc.

INCLUDE ALL CHILDREN - MAKE PARTICIPATION INCLUSIVE!

Participation must be enabled for **ALL CHILDREN WHO WISH TO PARTICIPATE**, regardless of their age, gender, the language they speak, their background, school grades and other specific characteristics. Every child must be encouraged to participate in the same way, because every child is valuable.

Participation is not subject to an age limit. Children of early and preschool age can also participate (verbally and non-verbally – drawing, painting, playing, etc.). Educators in kindergarten know and can organize a participatory process adapted to children.

It is particularly important to include children whose voice is rarely heard, such as children with developmental disabilities, children of minority ethnic origin, children in the health care system, children in the social welfare system, children in the justice system, children living in isolated communities, children living in conditions of poverty, etc.

It is important to find a way in which all children, who want to, can participate, and not just the selected child representatives. In doing so, it is advisable to take into account both unconventional and innovative methods and ways of participation – drawings, activity through social networks, photo journals, video contributions, etc.

PREPARE THE CONDITIONS FOR CHILD PARTICIPATION!

Child participation is not a programme or project or leisure activity – it is the dominant philosophy of an establishment or institution, it is embedded in the value systems of all employees, in all documents and is visible in all areas of work with children.

The desire and intention to participate is only the first step on the way to active participation of children. In order to achieve children's participation, it is important to **prepare communities, children and adults.**



Community preparation includes planning and providing resources to support children's participation:

- assign adults in the community who will mentor and guide children in the process of participation and ensure that this task is recognized as their working hours
- provide spaces for children to gather and work in
- provide financial resources (travel money, money for children's accommodation, money for initiatives and projects proposed by children...).

Leaders/mentors in charge of children's participation are motivated adults, open and ready for learning (in kindergarten and school: expert associate, educator, teacher; in city/municipal/county administration: expert associate, advisor in the administrative body dealing with children and young people).

Adult preparation involves systematic and continuous education on children's rights, participatory rights and their practical realization. Adults should also be educated about specific ways of working that encourage children's participation.

Child preparation involves continuous dialogue and cooperation between adults and children, whereby adults serve as a model for children in the exercise of participatory rights. It is important to prepare children:

- by informing them of their rights
- by informing them on participation opportunities (topics and ways of participating)
- through learning and strengthening communication skills
- by encouraging and inciting participation in everyday situations.

PRACTICAL ADVICE

for child participation

- Child participation will not happen on its own, at least not in a systematic and continuous way.
Plan children's participation: include the principles of child participation in the organization's work programme and inform children and adults about it.
- **Decide how and in which activities children's participation will take place in your organization:** whether it will be information, consultations, participation in decision-making or some other form. Inform everyone involved about the form and range of child participation.
- **Do not forget to inform important adults of the children** – their parents and guardians. In some cases, it is also necessary to obtain their consent that the child may participate in some activities; sometimes they will accompany the child to some activities, and sometimes they will get involved through some concrete contribution (e.g. transportation of children).
- **Define the plan and programme of work in relation to the participation of children.** Distribute activities evenly over the months to ensure continuity in operation. Arrange the work plan and programme together with the children, carefully considering their suggestions and opinions.
- **If you want (or need) to have a children's representative body in your organization (such as children's council, student council, users' council),** ensure the following things:
 - » accurate information on the work of that body (what its purpose is, how often it meets, how many members it has, who can be a member, how members are elected...)
 - » motivated and educated adult leaders (mentors)
 - » inclusion and democracy in the choice of children's representatives: it is important that all children have the opportunity to engage in the work of the body and that they have the opportunity to be elected on equal terms
 - » the way of communication between children's representatives and other children in the organization.



Participation is important because children know better what they need than adults. It is good because you learn how the city works and how decisions are being made and you are responsible.

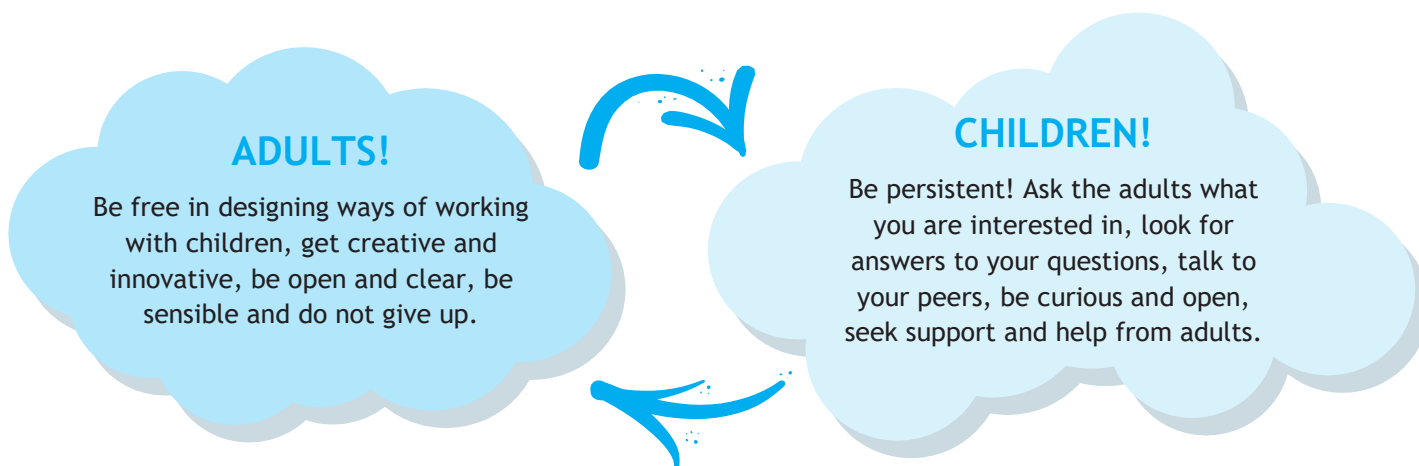
– Children's Councillors



- **Children love to learn from their peers!** Allow children to be mentored by peers who have experience with participating. Peer experiences can motivate and encourage participation, and at the same time give children some concrete examples of child participation.
- **When planning meetings and working with children,** pay attention to the following:
 - » Provide an environment that will be acceptable and comfortable for children (e.g. sitting in a circle or in smaller groups, a space that is less formal).
 - » Make sure that the ratio of children to adults at a meeting or working group is balanced. It makes no sense to include only one child in work meetings, as this can be a very isolated and exposed position. Include at least two children (for mutual support), and if possible, balance the number of adults and children. The more children in the group, the more their voice will be heard.
 - » Adapt the duration and mode to children: make meetings shorter or divide them into smaller separate units between which you can offer some interactive content or games.
 - » Adapt communication to children: use simple, child-friendly language. Ask the adults involved in these meetings to adjust their communication so that the children are also involved. Be careful not to use a method of communication that would demotivate children. Keep the communication clear for everyone.
 - » Make sure to also include the more withdrawn children in the work and discussion, to enable them to express their opinion as well.
 - » Also take into account that some children just want to be present at meetings and events and that their active contribution may not always be great, but their participation and willingness to get involved is equally valuable.
 - » In some cases (e.g. public policy work) it is necessary to prepare and adapt work materials to be understandable to children. For this purpose, you can also organize preparatory meetings for children, where children will have their work materials clarified and be prepared for participation in working meetings.
- **Open alternative and modern communication channels** for communication with children: social networks, closed forums, etc. Ask children to suggest ways of communication and encourage adults to be prepared to use such means of communication. Children can be great teachers and mentors in this regard.
- **Provide and design ways to engage all children** (including children who are rarely heard) which are **constantly available and regularly checked:** mailboxes (physical or digital, such as e-mail) for

children's opinions and suggestions, online forums for discussion and suggestions, specially created groups on social networks, etc.

- **Provide an opportunity for conversations and meetings of children with decision-makers** (head teachers, mayors, county mayors and other heads). Prepare both children and adults for these meetings – it is important that everyone knows what to expect.
- **Be prepared to negotiate with children about their ideas and suggestions.** Children are aware that not all their suggestions and wishes are necessarily achievable, but it is important that you talk to them and discuss with them.
- **CRUCIAL! Always give children feedback on their participation:** inform them in a fair way about what happened, what decision was made, etc.
- **Allow children to give up activities, projects and participation.** Respect the decision of every child; participation is a right, not an obligation.
- **Evaluate the process, manner and outcome of children's participation in your organization:** identify the conditions that facilitate participation, as well as those that hinder it.



PARTICIPATION IS A PROCESS, DIALOGUE AND COOPERATION BETWEEN ALL STAKEHOLDERS OF SOCIETY.
PARTICIPATION IS A VALUE THAT IS PASSED ON AND SHARED BETWEEN ADULTS AND CHILDREN.

