



Evaluation Technical Notes

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Children Participating in Research, Monitoring And Evaluation (M&E) — Ethics and Your Responsibilities as a Manager

The trend of involving children more actively in M&E programmes as part of their right to participate brings many practical challenges and raises ethical considerations.

The ethical issues are complex and no straightforward guidelines exist. Children's rights are established in international law, where children are defined as those up to 18 years old, but the reality and meaning of childhood throughout the world differs. The context (cultural, political etc.), the capacities of each child, which in turn vary with age and stage of development, and the corresponding possibilities for participation all vary; so, too, then, will the response to ethical challenges in research and M&E practice (Boyden and Ennew, 1997).

The responsibilities lie with researchers/evaluators, those technical professionals involved in design of research, monitoring and evaluation activities and directly in data collection. However, **managers commissioning such activities are equally responsible for ensuring that ethical issues are identified and resolved in methodology design.**

This Evaluation Technical Note article explores the child's right to participate, related concepts and their implications for research and M&E activities. It also outlines key ethical considerations about whether and how children participate in research and M&E, and provides a checklist of questions for research and M&E managers.

Guidance from the Convention

The Convention on the Rights of the Child provides clear initial guidance for children's participation in programmes, and in research and M&E:

- All rights guaranteed by the convention must be available to all children without discrimination of any kind. Equity and non-discrimination are emphasised.
- The best interests of the child must be a major factor in all actions concerning children. This puts the onus on researchers and evaluators who encourage children's participation to consider carefully how this supports the best interest of each child.
- Children's views must be considered and taken into account in all matters that affect them. They should not be used merely as data from subjects of investigation.

The four articles related to participation further establish the parameters:

- **Article 12** states that children who can form their own views should have the right to express those views and have them taken into account. However, the right to participate and freedom of expression are not equated with self-determination. Each child's views are their "reality", which must be considered, but also must be weighed against the best interests of the child in any decisions eventually taken.



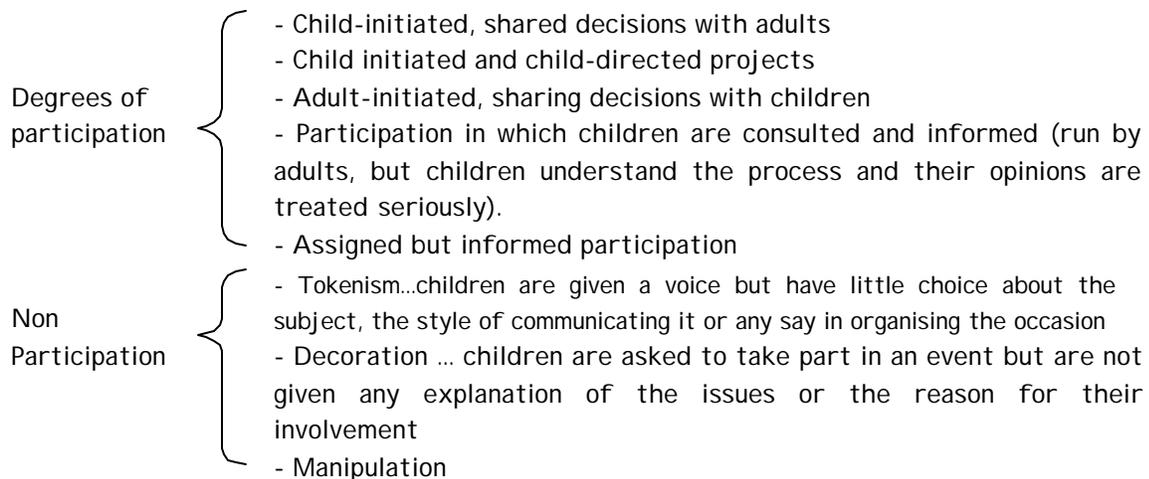
- **Article 13** states that children have the right to freedom of expression, which includes seeking, receiving and giving information and ideas through speaking, writing or in print, through art or any other media of the child's choice. Their participation is not a mere formality; children must be fully informed and must understand the consequences and impact of expressing their opinions. The corollary is that children are free to not participate, and should not be pressured. Participation is a right, not an obligation.
- **Article 14** establishes that State parties must respect children's right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, as well as parents' or guardians' role in their exercising this right. Research and M&E activities seeking to involve children must clearly acknowledge and ideally seek to build on these respective roles.
- **Article 15** establishes that the States parties must recognise children's right to freedom of association and of peaceful assembly. As children's capacities evolve, they will increasingly participate and seek the representation of their perspectives in wider fora — at community, sub-national, national and global levels. Research and M&E activities can help this evolution along.

The Convention establishes that participation should be seen as both a process and an end in and of itself; that the very act of participation should be seen as contributing to the development of the children involved. This suggests highly participatory approaches to research and M&E where children are involved from design to the use of results.

What is participation?

While the Convention establishes a right to participate, M&E experience shows that "participation" is many things to many people — true for the participation of adults as much as for children. "Participatory" approaches to M&E range from those that survey the opinions of "beneficiaries" or primary stakeholders, to those where primary stakeholders are placed at the centre of the process, from design to implementation, to analysis and follow-up of M&E exercises. The premises and limitations of the model and methodology must be clearly stated — we must call it what it is.

Several different angles can be taken to define the nature of children's participation. Roger Hart (Hart, 1992) used an eight-degree scale:





Efforts that fall under tokenism, decoration and manipulation not only fail in their objective to foster the participation of children, but can also discredit the effort and the organisations involved, ultimately undermining the meaning of the right to participate.

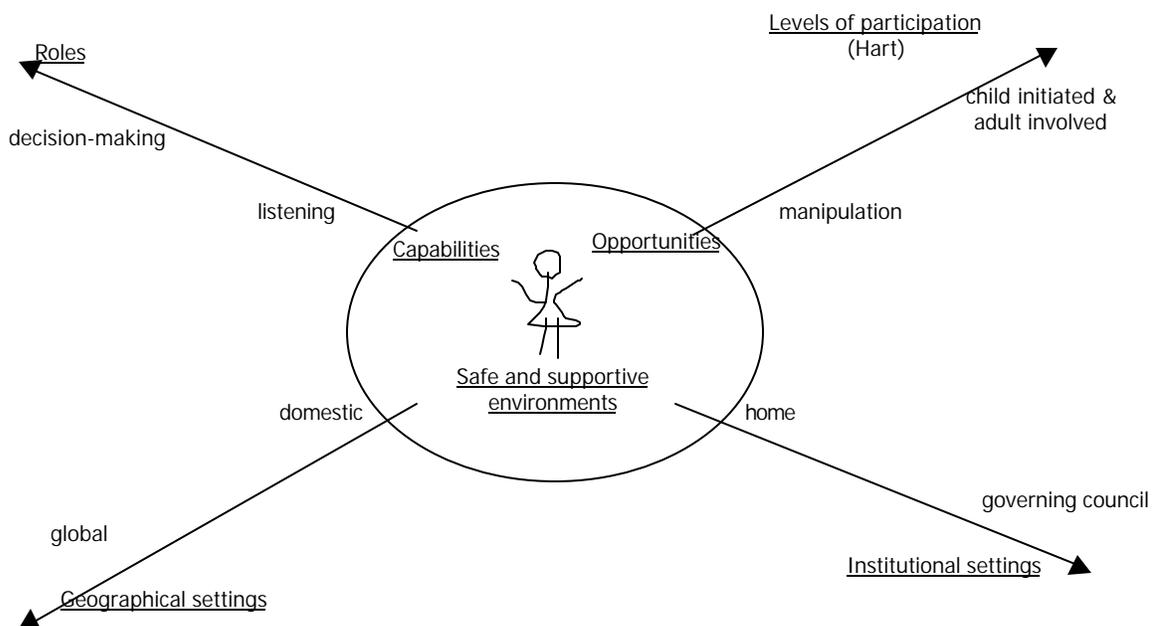
This ladder includes the *relationship* between children and adults (Rajani, 2000), be they programme managers or researchers, which is important. The increasing degrees of participation suggest increasingly evolved capacities of children *and* corresponding capabilities of adults towards encouraging the participation of children.

Context is also important. Political, social and economic contexts will have their own institutional norms and practices at different levels (national, sub-national, community, family), and in different fora will favour (or limit) participation to different degrees. Analysing context can reveal how it limits participation, as well as how participation can be increased.

Rakesh Rajani's "Framework for Promoting Effective Adolescent Participation" (see page 4) links the above two aspects — context and the relationship between children and adults — with a other factors to define the nature of participation.

It illustrates children's roles from listening to active decision-making roles, and the different spheres in which they participate, both in terms of geographical and institutional settings. Three key contributing factors underlie these facets of participation: the individual capabilities of children, the supporting environment and the opportunities created for participation. Programme interventions that strive to build children's (adolescent's) participation must do so by trying to influence and change these contributing factors

"A Framework for Promoting Effective Adolescent Participation" (Rajani, 2000: 13)





These two frameworks are not only good for designing programmes, but for defining the participatory activities for research and M&E exercises as well, i.e. where children will participate, in what role and through what type of interaction with adults. If the M&E activity itself is designed to build participation, then managers and evaluators must specify how the activity will influence children's capabilities and their supporting environment and therefore their opportunities for participation.

Ethical issues

Several complex ethical issues emerge around children's participation in research and M&E without a guideline on how to respond to any of them. They include:

- **Accountability.** Since researchers and programme managers are accountable to a wide range of stakeholders (including *primary stakeholders*, i.e. those intended to benefit from programme interventions), and the involvement of primary stakeholders in research and M&E activities is an expression of this accountability, then research and M&E should also involve the participation of children. Their participation is relevant not only where planned interventions and issues specifically affect them, but also where they, as members of the wider community, are affected (e.g. in relation to safe drinking water). It must be clear in initial research and M&E design proposals what role will children play and how will they be involved.
- **Protection of children's best interests.** This has very clear and powerful implications for the *process* of research and M&E as well as for the *dissemination of its results*.
 - Children **must not be exposed to risks** if there is no benefit to them. These include the psychological effects on the individual child of participating in the activity (for example, in cases of abuse where the fears and pain of past experiences re-emerge); the social costs of participating such as negative effects on family and community relations; more acute threats such as reprisals by people who feel threatened by children's participation; and misuse of information, ranging from sensationalist media attention or to more sinister uses in situations of conflict and humanitarian crisis. Weighing these risks against possible benefits requires careful judgement, particularly where risks to individual children are done in the name of broad sometimes incremental societal changes.
 - Those leading and carrying out research and M&E activities are also responsible **for protecting children from placing themselves at risk**, even where a child might be willing to participate and voice their views (Boyden and Ennew, 1997; Boyden 2000).
 - The responsibility to protect children may also entail **withholding information** from children where that information may place them at risk (Boyden and Ennew, 1997). Children may not always be able to cope with the implications of information received or may not be able to judge adequately when and with whom to share that information.
 - Research and M&E activities must be able to ensure **confidentiality**. However, information may at times reveal that a child is at risk or is a risk to others, which is why design of research and M&E activities must include **guidelines for breaking confidentiality and intervention**, including defining what follow-up and referrals can be made. Children must be made aware of the limits to confidentiality and possible intervention based on what is in their best interests.



- **Informing children.** Research and M&E managers are responsible for ensuring that children receive the information they need to form and express their views as well as to decide whether they choose to express them at all. To “inform” should be understood as meaning more than simply providing information. How information is conveyed must be appropriate to the context and to children's capabilities. How informed children are affects how their views can be interpreted.
- **Informed consent.** The focus of most ethical guidelines is on research in the West, this has often involved signed consent forms to ensure that participants in research are aware of any potential implications of their involvement (by the same token to protect researchers from liability). Researchers must respect the consent regulations of the countries in which they are working, however, parental consent is not an adequate standard in light of the rights of the child. Informing children of the potential implications is required. Further, consent should not be a one-time event in the course of a child's participation. It should be a negotiation of the parameters and limits of his/her participation, an ongoing exchange in which a child's views and best interests are paramount (Alderson, 1995). All issues of negotiating consent and encouraging children to express themselves must be carried out with clear recognition of the natural power imbalance between children and adults.
- **Equity and non-discrimination.** Those involved in research and M&E must ensure that *selection* of those children who participate and the *processes and methods* used serve to correct, not reinforce, patterns of exclusion. This requires attention to socio-economic barriers including gender and age discrimination as well as to the different ways and capacities in which children express themselves.
- **Respect of children and their views.** Those involved in design must choose methods and processes that best facilitate children expressing their views. Methods will most often be qualitative, and processes will likely be capacity building or participatory. However, respecting children's views does not mean allowing them to dictate conclusions. A child's input, like that of any other stakeholder, must be weighed as one perspective and interpreted in light of his/her experience, interests and evolving capacities. Assumptions and frameworks for interpreting information must be appropriate to the children involved and transparent to ensure credibility with users of research and M&E results.
- **Ownership.** Children must be informed of the results of the research. And since children will likely express themselves by diagramming and drawing, they should also be given rights of ownership of the research “data”.
- **Methodological limitations.** It is unethical to carry out data collection if the design will not achieve the research objectives or respond to evaluation questions. Methodological limitations must be considered carefully, including the potential effects of power relations between children and adults. In order to increase children's participation, methodologies will likely tend towards the more qualitative with more specific adaptations for the children involved, and findings will be representative of narrower populations. Those involved in initial research and M&E design must balance degrees of participation of children with the credibility and breadth of application of research and M&E results.



Questions For Managers Of Monitoring, Evaluation & Research Activities:

The following is adapted¹ from P. Alderson (1995), "Listening to Children: Children, ethics and social research", Barnardos, primarily from "Ten Topics in Ethical Research" (p.2-6) with detailed extracts on key issues in boxed text. While the original questions refer to research, they are equally relevant for UNICEF monitoring and evaluation work.

UNICEF offices are responsible for ensuring that these questions are considered in the design of the monitoring, evaluation and research activities in which they are involved.

1. Purpose

- Is the topic worthwhile? How are the findings likely to benefit children? How will they add to what is already known?
- If the findings are meant to benefit certain children, who are they and how might they benefit?
- Assuming findings are to be used to facilitate decision-making, who do they target? Is children's role in decision-making facilitated by this activity?

2. Costs and hoped-for benefits

- What contributions are children asked to make, such as activities or responses to be tested, observed or recorded? Is this a one-off contribution or, as in the case of some monitoring activities, will this be repeated?
- Might there be risks or costs — time, inconvenience, embarrassment, intrusion of privacy, sense of failure or coercion, fear of admitting anxiety? Also, consider retribution in contexts of conflict.

"Are attempts made to avoid or reduce harms? Such as rehearsing with children a way of saying 'no' when they do not want to reply, assuring them that this will be respected and they will not be questioned about why they say 'no', or ensuring that children who feel worried or upset about the research can talk to someone about it afterwards? It can be useful to try to find out gently why young people want to refuse. Does the research seem boring or irrelevant? Could it be improved with their help?" (Alderson, 1995 -19)

- Might there be benefits for children who take part — satisfaction, increased confidence or knowledge, time to talk to an attentive listener, an increased role in decision-making processes affecting them?
- Are there risks and costs if the research, monitoring or evaluation activity is not carried out?
- How can the researchers or managers of research and M&E promote possible benefits of the work?

¹ Questions were rephrased and adapted, and a very few additions made, to apply to both monitoring and evaluation as well as to make the list more appropriate to developing country contexts. Some sections considered less relevant to UNICEF work have been deleted.



- What is planned to prevent or reduce any risks? What is the guidance regarding data collectors/researchers response to children who wish to refuse or withdraw? What will be the procedure with children who become distressed (e.g. if they simply feel uncomfortable, or if participation requires them to relive or experience emotional or psychological trauma) on the spot and in terms of referrals and follow-up? What steps are taken to ensure the protection and supervision of the children involved, including against bad practices by data collectors/researchers?
- Are the methods being tested with a pilot group? Will risks and costs be reassessed after piloting and what protection is offered to children involved in the pilot?

3. Privacy and confidentiality

- How will the names of children be obtained, and will they be told about the source?
- Does the selection method allow children and parents to opt into the activity (e.g. to volunteer for selection)? Is the selection method intrusive or coercive?
- Will interviews directly with individuals be conducted in a quiet, private place?
- Can parents be present or absent as the child prefers?
- In rare cases, if front line researchers/evaluators think that they must report a child's confidences, such as when they think someone is in danger, will they try to discuss this first with the child? Do they warn all children that this might happen? Who will they report to and who/how many people will be involved? Who will guide this process?
- Will personal names be changed in records and in reports to hide the child's identity? What should be done if children prefer to be named in reports?
- Will the data collection records, notes, tapes, films or videos, be kept in lockable storage space? Who will have access to these records, and be able to identify the children?
- When significant extracts from interviews are quoted in reports, should researchers/evaluators first check the quotation and commentary with the child or parent concerned? What should be done if respondents want the reports to be altered?
- Is there some verification that the field researchers in direct contact with the children do not represent a risk to children, i.e. have the appropriate values, attitudes and skills to deal with each child ethically and compassionately?
- Should records be destroyed when the research or M&E activity is completed or when related programme activity ends?
- Will the children be re-contacted at different points during the course of the programme for ongoing monitoring or evaluation, or is it ethical to ask the same children to take part in another research activity? In either case, how will the list of contact names be managed, stored?



4. Selection, inclusion and exclusion

- Why have the children concerned been selected to take part in the activity?
- Have efforts been made to reach marginalised, indigenous or disadvantaged children? Are issues of accessing these children satisfactorily dealt with in the methodology?
- If some of the children selected do belong to disadvantaged groups, have the researchers made allowance for any extra problems or anxieties they may have? Does the methodology accommodate their differing capacities?
- Have some children been excluded because, for example, they have speech or learning difficulties? Can the exclusion be justified?
- Are the findings intended to be representative or typical of a certain group of children? If so, have the children in the study been sufficiently well selected to support these claims?
- Do the design and planned numbers of children to be involved allow for refusals and withdrawals? If too many drop out, the effort may be wasted and therefore unethical. Consider also the possibility of withdrawals at different points in repeated monitoring activities.
- If the issue or questions being investigated are about children, is it acceptable only to include adult subjects?

5. Funding

- Are the children's and parents' or carers' expenses repaid?
- Should children be paid or given some reward after helping with the activity? Does the role of the children play a factor in whether or not they are paid, i.e. if children are active decision-makers as opposed to interviewees?
- How do these practices compare to those of other organisations working in the same region?
- How do the practices of paying children compare with payment of adults involved (e.g. parents, teachers, other community members)?

6. Process of review and revision of ToRs and methodological proposal

- Have children or their carers helped to plan or comment on the methodological proposal ?
- Has a committee, a small group or an individual reviewed the protocol specifically for its ethical aspects and approach to children?
- Is the methodological design in any way unhelpful or unkind to children?
- Is there scope for taking account of comments and improving the design?
- Are the researchers accountable to anyone, to justify their work? Are researchers', managers' and other stakeholders' responsibilities vis-à-vis ethical practices clearly established?
- What are the agreed methods of dealing with complaints?



7. Informing children, parents and other carers

- Are the children and adults concerned given details about the purpose and nature of the research or M&E activity, the methods and timing, and the possible benefits, harms and outcomes? If children are not informed, how is this justified?
- Does a researcher/evaluator also encourage children and adults concerned to ask questions, working with an interpreter if necessary?
- If the research is about testing two or more services or products, are these explained as clearly and fully as possible?
- Are key concepts, such as 'consent', explained clearly?
- Are children and/or adults given a clearly written sheet or leaflet to keep, in their first language? If literacy is an issue, how is this handled in terms of ensuring children and their carers can access and review information provided about the activity at a later time?
- Does the leaflet give the names and address of the research/data collection/ evaluation team? How can children contact someone from the team if they wish to comment, question or complain?

One balance to consider is between over- and under-informing subjects, in either case preventing them from making a well-founded decision. A core of basic information in a leaflet, with suggested questions and further discussion can help to achieve a reasonable balance. This can combine what the reasonable researcher would tell, what a prudent subject would ask, and what the individual subject wants to know. (Alderson, 1995 - 20)

8. Consent

- As soon as they are old enough to understand, are children told that they can consent or refuse to take part in the activity?
- Do they know that they can ask questions, perhaps talk to other people, and ask for time before they decide whether to consent?
- Do they know that if they refuse or withdraw from the activity this will not be held against them in anyway?
- How do the researchers/evaluators help the children to know these things, and not to feel under pressure to give consent?
- How do they respect children who are too shy or upset to express their views freely?
- Are parents or guardians asked to give consent?
- How will the situation be handled if a child wants to volunteer but the parents refuse?
- Is the consent written, oral or implied? What is legally required and appropriate in the context?
- If children are not asked for their consent, how is this justified?



9. Dissemination

- Will the children and adults involved receive short reports on the main findings or other forms of feedback?
- Are the capacities of children and their preferences for how they receive feedback taken into consideration?

10. Impact on children

- Does the research, monitoring or evaluation activity have any impact on children's capabilities, on the degree to which their environment is supportive of their participation (e.g. a change to attitudes of parents or other adults, to customs or to laws) or on future opportunities for participation (e.g. a change to practices in schools or other fora where children may participate; the creation of new fora, organisations etc.)? Was any such impact planned for in the design?
- Have children involved been realistically prepared for the expected impact, whether small or large?
- Besides the effects of the activity on the children involved, how might the conclusions affect larger groups of children?
- What models of childhood are assumed, e.g. children as weak, vulnerable and dependent on adults; as immature, irrational and unreliable; as capable of being mature moral agents; as consumers? How do these models affect the methods of collecting and analysing data.
- Is the approach reflexive, in that those involved in data collection and analysis critically discuss their own prejudices?
- Do they use positive images in reports and avoid stigmatising, discriminatory terms?
- Do they try to listen to children and in children's own terms, while aware that children can only speak in public through channels designed by adults?
- Do they try to balance impartial assessment with respect for children's worth and dignity?

“What will the intended and possible impact be on children? How will the research be done? And, in some cases, should it be done at all? These questions entail taking account of the status of children in society. An 'impact on children' statement for each research proposal would examine the likely effects of the research questions, methods and conclusions on the child subjects and on all young people affected by the findings. Will the research reinforce prejudice about children's inabilities and faults by portraying them as victims or villains? Or will researchers examine these beliefs and devise methods which investigate children's capacities and their needs and interests from the children's points of view? ”
(Alderson, 1995 - 41)



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General

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