

Understanding and supporting children and young people's participation



Acknowledgements

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Foreword

This guide has been developed to help organisations understand the value of involving children and young people in decisions that affect them, and to walk you through aspects to consider when involving children and young people in decision making processes that affect them.

Like all people, children and young people have a right to express their views when decisions are being made that affect their lives. Participation is more than just giving young people in our community a say. It is about listening to their views, taking them seriously and wherever feasible, putting their ideas and suggestions into effect. Children and young people are a great resource in our community and organisations can benefit from the qualities they bring.

Children and young people are experts in their own lives. They have knowledge and experiences that are unique to them. They often look at the world differently to adults. They can be more creative and flexible in their thinking. Because of this, they can help adults to see things differently. Children and young people want to be recognised as people in their own right and to have their views respected.

The advantages to organisations and government include better and more responsive service delivery, greater engagement and increasing awareness. Programs designed for children and young people are much more likely to succeed if children and young people have been involved in planning, developing and implementing. The benefits for children include greater confidence, increased connectedness and learning skills including expanding their problem solving skills.

Children and young people are often more creative and flexible in their thinking... they can help adults to see things differently.

Andrew Johnson
NSW Advocate for Children and Young People

1. Benefits of involving children and young people

Benefits for Organisations

- Making more accurate and relevant decisions, based on the input that children and young people provide
- Gaining new insights and perspectives on a variety of issues, by better understanding children and young people's opinions and ideas
- Developing more effective policies, services and resources based on the needs and issues and barriers identified by children and young people
- Developing services that are better at engaging with children and young people, making your organisation more relevant to them
- Building stronger relationships between adults and children and young people involved in your organisation.



Benefits for Children and Young People

Children and young people also benefit from participating. These benefits can include:

- Developing the skills needed to take part in groups and democratic processes
- A greater understanding of different points of view and learning to compromise
- Developing and expanding their problem-solving, negotiating and communication skills
- Improving their relationships with adults and with other young people
- Being empowered to make a difference
- Developing their ability to get involved and act on issues that are important to them
- Learning the skills needed to participate in other decisions that affect their lives, and in society as a whole
- Developing a greater awareness of their knowledge, understanding, values and insights
- A better understanding of their own wants and needs, and how these can be expressed to adults
- Realising their views are respected, valued, and can contribute to the knowledge and understanding of others
- Being recognised as citizens and feeling included, giving children and young people a sense of responsibility to the wider community

Stronger organisations and communities are developed by tapping into the energy and creativity that children and young people bring.

2. Principles of participation

The following principles provide a basis for involving children and young people in decisions that affect them:

1. Children and young people are capable of contributing to decisions that affect their lives
2. Children and young people are capable of taking part in a wide range of decision making activities within organisations and government
3. Children and young people have the right to participate. The United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child, of which Australia is a signatory to, states that children and young people have the right to have their opinions taken into account on matters that affect their lives
4. Children and young people's participation must be their own choice, and this should not be overly influenced by adults. In other words, children and young people also have the right not to participate
5. Children and young people's participation needs to be properly resourced and supported by your organisation
6. Children and young people should have an equal opportunity to participate.



In addition to these principles, there are a number of factors to keep in mind when involving children and young people:

- Children and young people need to be informed about how they can participate, what will be involved, and what will be required of them. Explain the information you need from them clearly and simply, and why it is important. This will allow them to make an informed choice about whether or not they want to take part
- Do everything possible to make sure that children and young people's participation will not lead them to any harm
- Organisations wanting to involve children and young people should have a plan to deal with any ethical issues that may arise during their participation. This plan should be flexible enough to deal with anything unexpected things that may come up
- Think about your own beliefs, values and attitudes towards children and young people - both as individuals and as an organisation - and how these might influence their participation
- Address any power imbalances between children and young people and adults. This includes things like choosing a venue where children and young people feel comfortable, and speaking with children at their height level rather than standing over them
- Children and young people are diverse - they don't all have the same views, experiences, attitudes, likes and dislikes, any more than adults do
- Children and young people should participate in ways that allow them to be properly heard, so that the diversity of their views and opinions can be captured.

3. Building capacity for participation

Part of supporting and improving the participation of children and young people in your organisation is building the capacity of those who will be involved - both adults and the children and young people.

‘Capacity building’ is about developing new skills, attitudes and ways of working to help meet challenges and overcome any barriers to children and young people’s participation. This can involve challenging existing attitudes, providing training and supervision and offering information and other forms of support.



Capacity building for adults

The following will help to build the capacity of adults in your organisation to support children and young people's participation.

Choose champions for participation

Leaders or senior staff in your organisation need to act as 'champions' for children and young people's participation. Participation is likely to be ineffective if the senior people see it as a low priority, rather than part of the core business of your organisation.

Champions can reinforce the culture of participation by meeting with the children and young people involved, listening to what they have to say and showing a high level of interest in their involvement. When busy executives make the time to listen, they show other staff that children and young people's participation is important.

Provide training for staff

Your staff may need training to support children and young people to participate in your organisation. This training should cover issues similar to those outlined in this guide. Children and young people should be involved in the delivery of the training to your staff whenever possible. This will develop over time as their confidence grows, and is a great way to model your organisation's commitment to participation and highlight the capabilities of the children and young people involved.

Provide information, support and advice

As well as providing staff with training, staff will also need ongoing information, support and advice about children and young people's participation. This may include regular updates about the ways children and young people are involved, how their information is being used and support to consider how this has a practical impact on the organisation.

Challenge beliefs and assumptions about age

It is important to challenge the beliefs that adults hold about children and young people's abilities to participate. This is an important part of building their capacity. Do not assume that children and young people have limited abilities. Instead, think about what support your organisation can provide, or how you can do things differently to enable them to participate to the best of their ability. For example, young children may find it hard to take part in larger group discussions, but may be comfortable expressing themselves through drawing their ideas and talking about their pictures.

Capacity building for children and young people

Children and young people also need support in order to participate effectively. The following will help to build their capacity to be involved in your organisation.

Provide training for children and young people

Children and young people may also need training to help them fully participate. The contents of this training will depend on a range of factors, including age, experience of the children and young people, types of decisions they will be involved in, methods you use to involve them, the length of their involvement and so on.

Your organisation can also encourage children and young people to develop new skills and build their capacity to participate, by sponsoring them to attend conferences, seminars and training courses on skills and issues that interest them.

Encourage children and young people to lead training and consultations

Involving children and young people in training their peers is a great way to develop their organisational, communication and facilitation skills. It allows children and young people to learn from people their own age and see participation in practice. They can also be involved in training adults and conference and workshop presentations.



Provide clear information

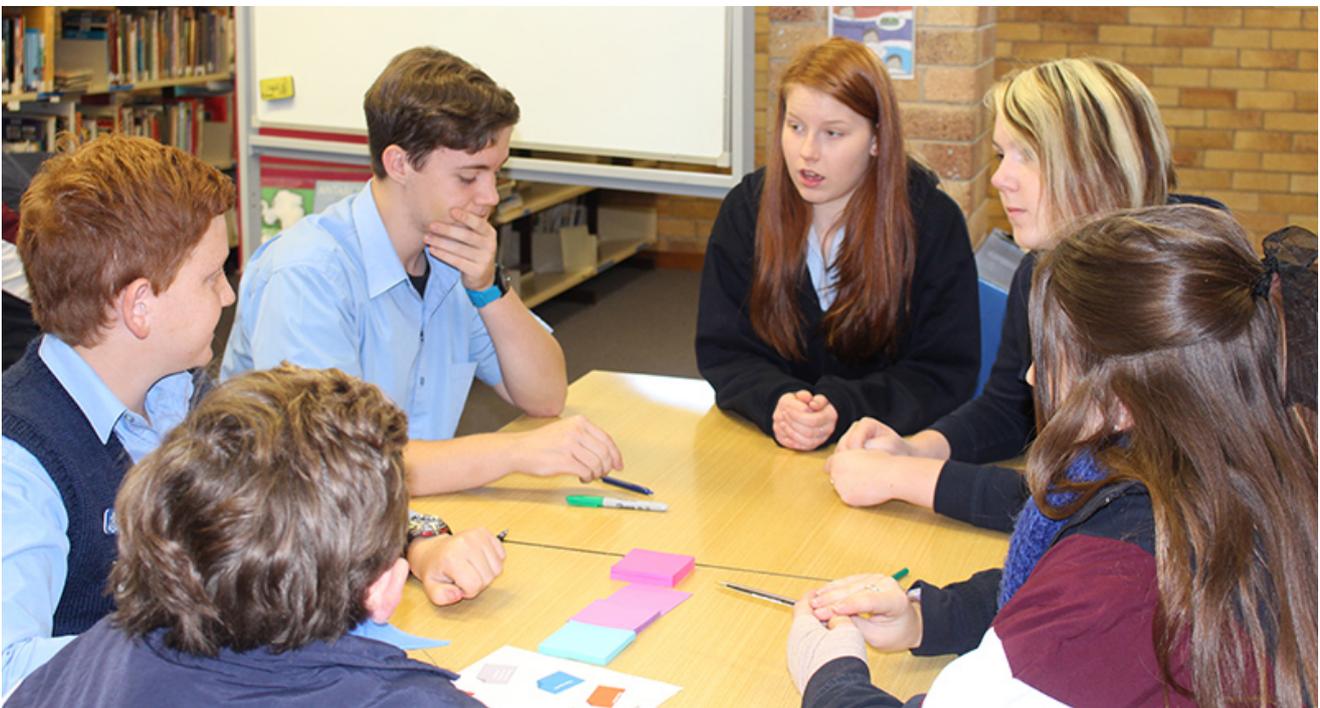
Provide the right information to children and young people so they understand the purpose of the project or activity they will be involved in, and feel comfortable with what is involved.

Build up the group

If children and young people will be involved in group activities, you need to help them develop group work and team building skills. This includes providing information and support about how to negotiate and make shared decisions, show respect, support each other, resolve conflicts and feel comfortable expressing their thoughts and feelings.

Provide support from staff

Ongoing support from one or more staff members is vital for building children and young people's capacity to participate. This support can be both practical and emotional. You might need to employ a children's or youth worker in organisations where there is no staff member with these particular skills, or support existing staff to develop their skills and confidence in this area. Be aware that it might take time to build trust amongst the children and young people involved, and between children and young people and adults.



4. Embedding participation within your organisation

There are a number of things that you can do to make this a central part of your work, and show your commitment to including children and young people's voices.

1. Participation is part of the organisation's culture

For children and young people's participation to be effective, it needs to be part of the belief system of the organisation. This highlights the importance that your organisation places on children and young people, and in giving them a say in decisions which affect their lives. Think about ways you can do this, such as writing it into key documents (annual reports and strategic plans) and including references to participation in your policies and procedures. This also helps to ensure children and young people's participation becomes a regular and ongoing thing rather than a one-off exercise or project.

2. Children and young people have a place in decision making

Organisations need to ensure children and young people understand their role in decision making, and that the organisation itself is clear about this role. Think about ways you can make this is clear, and regularly discuss ways this can be improved with children and young people.

3. Adults adapt to children and young people's ways of working

Things that work for adults may not suit the needs of children and young people. More often than not, organisations try to fit children and young people into decision making processes and activities that were designed by, and for, adults.

To make the most of children and young people's contributions to decision making, organisations should create an environment in which children and young people feel safe and comfortable to participate and fits with their ways of doing things. This might include having regular breaks in meetings, using relaxed venues, wearing casual clothes, and using informal, jargon-free language.

4. Build respectful relationships

The stronger and the more respectful these relationships are, the easier and more actively they can participate in the world around them. The more the adults in your organisation are able to engage children and young people, the more successfully your organisation will achieve its aims regarding their participation.

5. Participation rewards children and young people and your organisation

If children and young people are to stay enthusiastic about participating, they must find the experience enjoyable, challenging and fun. They need to feel that their time and effort is valued. It is also important that the organisation benefits from their involvement, to make the time and energy invested worthwhile. Think about ways to enhance these rewards, such as giving certificates of appreciation, having an annual celebration, or inviting children and young people to special events.

Organisations should create an environment in which children and young people feel safe and comfortable to participate, and fits with their ways of doing things.



5. Barriers to involving children and young people

Although there are many benefits to involving children and young people, there are also barriers that may prevent them from being included in decision making.

Barriers for organisations

Organisational barriers

Many things that happen in organisations are not familiar or friendly to children and young people. This includes long and formal meetings, using unfamiliar words and jargon and not taking time to explain things in simple and approachable ways. It is not always easy to change traditional ways of doing things and decision making in organisations. However, new ways of doing things will be vital for children and young people to play a real part in your organisation.

Time constraints

Involving children and young people in your organisation takes time and commitment. Many staff members will already have a challenging workload.

Staff may find it difficult to provide the time needed to support children and young people to become involved in decision making in your organisation. Make sure a suitable amount of time is made available to staff who will be involved in supporting children and young people's participation, so that children and young people can engage with issues, develop an understanding of what is required of them, and feel comfortable and confident in expressing their views.

Lack of resources

There are costs involved in children and young people's participation, such as transport to meetings and events, training, resources needed to develop programs and materials. All of these need to be factored in to your planning for participation to be effective.

Lack of training

In many organisations there is a lack of understanding of what participation means and what it involves. Adults need training on what participation is, and the specific set of skills needed to meaningfully engage and involve children and young people.

Barriers for Children and Young People

Children and young people also face their own barriers to participation. **When asked about the barriers they face, their answers included:**

“The uncertainty of what I can and cannot do and say”

“I live in a community where there aren’t many opportunities so I often have to travel to participate”

“I believe the main barrier for any youth participating meaningfully and effectively is the stigma surrounding young people that older people have. Young people are often viewed as being too young to be valuable and able to contribute toward the discussions, and ultimately the decision making of the organisation.”

“Organisations and individuals not being willing to shift positions and policies”

“More than once I have been unable to participate because I have been unable to afford the train fare to the venue”

6. What to involve children and young people in

As a starting point, here are 10 ways you can involve children and young people:

1. Provide advice to management, elected members or staff of your organisation
2. Provide input and ideas through surveys and focus groups, social media
3. Get feedback on how to improve your programs
4. Help to organise projects and events
5. Help to plan and run projects such as surveys and forums
6. Become members of your board or advisory committees
7. Organise events and activities for other children and young people in their communities
8. Produce information and resources or train other children and young people
9. Have input in policies and plans for your organisation, such as strategic planning and local government social planning
10. Act as ambassadors by representing your organisation at events or being champions for your work.



7. Levels of participation

Children and young people can participate in decision making in a range of different ways and on a variety of levels.

Different levels of participation will be appropriate for different projects and events, depending on a number of factors. These include:

- The purpose of the project
- How much of the project will be of interest to children and young people
- The amount of time you have
- The resources available
- The amount of previous experience your organisation has in involving children and young people
- The type of feedback or input you are seeking.

There are also a range of factors that will influence the level of involvement that a child or young person will wish to have, such as:

- How interested they are in the project or issue
- How much time they have available
- What else is going on in their lives at the time
- What benefits or rewards they might get from being involved.

There are a number of theoretical models that describe the levels of involvement children and young people can have in decision making. These include models developed by Roger Hart (1992) and Phil Treseder (1997). Each of these models describes the level of responsibility that children and young people have in the decision making process, compared to the level of responsibility maintained by the adults involved. Processes that give young people less of a say in decision making are seen as being at a lower level of participation than those which place more or all of the responsibility for making decisions with the children and young people involved.

Wherever possible, you should involve children and young people from the beginning of a project.

However, it is important not to view the lower levels of participation as 'bad' and the higher levels as 'good'. As we mentioned earlier, there are a whole range of factors that determine how much involvement children and young people might have, and how much they want to be involved in a project or event. The opportunities that your organisation offers to children and young people to participate should be mindful of the factors mentioned above, including the purpose, available resources and timeframes.

Ideally, there should be a range or 'menu' of opportunities for young people to participate, so that they can choose their own levels of involvement based on their interests, availability and competing pressures.



8. Methods and approaches for participation

There are a range of different methods and approaches you can use to gain the views and opinions of children and young people, and involve them in decisions about things that affect them.

When planning how you will involve children and young people, it is important to remember that they are not all the same. They have different views, experiences, beliefs, background likes and dislikes and abilities - just like adults do. They also differ in their personal circumstances and their interests and abilities change as they grow older. The methods you choose for seeking children and young people's participation need to consider all of these factors, as there is no single approach that will work for all children and young people.



Some ways of involving children and young people will attract particular groups - often those from similar backgrounds, or with similar interests or skills. To make sure the input you receive reflects the broad range of children and young people in your community, organisations should aim to involve a diverse group of children and young people. Unless you are only seeking the views of a particular group.

Some approaches work especially well with children and young people at particular ages:

- **Young children from two to eight years** - respond well to activities such as role play, pretend play, storytelling and puppetry, games and physical activities, art and craft activities and one-to-one or peer interviewing
- **The middle years of childhood from nine to 14 years** - game-based methods are likely to be effective. They may also enjoy individual or group-based interviews or focus groups. Some children and young people in this age group may prefer these approaches to game-based ones, as it gives them a sense of feeling more 'grown-up'. Some children and young people in this age group will be interested in joining ongoing participation activities, such as being a member of a board, advisory group or committee
- **Middle and late adolescence from 15 to 17 years** - focus groups are effective. Surveys can also work well with this age group. Online surveys and forums work well with this age group. Many young people in this age group will be interested in more ongoing and in-depth participation activities
- By the time young people reach 18 years their ability to take part in decision making processes and activities are similar to older adults. They will now have the right to vote, which changes their ability to take part in more formal democratic processes. When working with young adults, be mindful of the things that might limit their participation, such as competing demands of work, study, relationships and so on.

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The above ideas are only a guide. It is important to remember that age is only one of the factors that influences how likely young people are to take part and share their views, the types of activities that they will enjoy and the issues they are interested in.

If you are mixing young people of different age groups in your participation events and projects, be mindful of their different experiences and abilities. This will influence the language you use, as well as the visuals you use to promote your event, as different approaches will attract different age groups. If your participation project or event involves face-to-face meetings with children and young people of varying age groups, be mindful of ensuring children and young people are given equal opportunities to share their views and are not dominated by older young people in the group.

Organisations should aim to involve as diverse a group of children and young people as possible.

9. Starting to plan the participation process

Once your organisation has made the decision to involve children and young people, it is time to start planning what you need to do to make this happen.

In this section we outline key things to consider when you are ready to start planning the details of children and young people's participation in your organisation.

Get commitment from your organisation

Make sure your organisation is committed to involving children and young people, and that all the people who will be affected have a reasonable idea of what is involved.

Be clear about why you want to involve children and young people in decision making

Think about why you want to involve children and young people, and how it will benefit both the organisation and the children and young people involved.

Have clear aims and objectives

Think about what you want to achieve by involving children and young people. Your aims should be SMART – Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time-framed.

Set realistic timeframes

Involving children and young people can take a fair amount of lead-time to plan and put into place successfully, especially if your organisation is new to working in this way.

Work out what resources you will need

Be clear about the resources you need to involve children and young people, including staff time, money and equipment. You will need different resources depending on the methods you are using to involve children and young people in your organisation.

Decide who will run the participation process

All staff directly responsible for working with children and young people need to have a good understanding of, and commitment to, the principles of participation, as well as having suitable knowledge and skills to communicate effectively with children and young people.

It is also worth considering engaging a child or young person to facilitate or co-facilitate your participation meeting or event, as young people are often more comfortable talking with other young people. This person will need appropriate training and support.

Think about types of support that children and young people will need

The methods of participation you will be using to involve children and young people will influence the type of support they will need. For example, including young people on a selection panel for hiring new staff requires a different type of support, compared to being involved in a focus group to discuss mental health services for young people, or an online survey to seek children's views about play equipment in local parks.

Reaching harder to reach children and young people

All children and young people have the right to participate in decisions that affect them. This includes those with high levels of understanding about issues and a strong capacity to take part, right through to children and young people who may feel more left out, or who face greater barriers in having a say.

Harder to reach groups of children and young people include those with disabilities or mental health issues, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, children and young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds, those who are in out-of-home care or the juvenile justice system and children and young people not involved in education, employment or training.

Different approaches may be needed to include young people from these groups, such as working in partnership with specialist services, or promoting the opportunity to participate in different ways. You will also need to check if the children and young people from these groups have any particular support needs for their involvement.

Depending on the topic or issue you wish to engage with young people about, it may be important to include specific groups of children and young people, such as those who use a particular type of service, or who live in a particular community.

Choosing a location for your project or event

If your participation project involves meeting with children and young people face-to-face, it is important to choose the right setting. Children and young people are much more likely to express their views honestly and openly when they are in an environment that feels safe and comfortable for them. If possible, use informal spaces with lounges or bean bags, rather than formal meeting rooms or classrooms.

Choose a venue where young people hang out such as a local park or playground, a youth centre or cafe. Make sure the venue is suitable for the activities you will facilitate, and the type of event you plan to run, as well as being safe and accessible. You also need to think about privacy and confidentiality.

Timing

It is important to consider the timing of your participation projects and events. This will depend on the groups of children and young people involved, the methods you use and so on. If you are planning a face-to-face meeting or event, it will need to be held in the evening, on a weekend or during the school holidays. This is unless you are working in partnership with a school, or are only looking to attract children and young people who are not in education, training or employment.

Make sure you allow time for word to spread about your project or event. If you are involving children and young people through surveys or online consultations, ensure the survey or consultation period is long enough to capture a wide range of views. This is especially important when involving children and young people from harder to reach groups. Children and young people will often need time to fully understand what their participation will involve. It is important they do not feel rushed or pressured to make a decision. They may need time to decide whether they feel comfortable expressing their views and opinions.

Attracting children and young people

There are a range of ways your organisation can attract children and young people to participate, from making contact through youth organisations to using paid advertising. The effectiveness of these approaches will depend on the budget you have available for promotion and the existing relationships you have with service providers.

Children and young people will often be giving up their free time to take part, so make sure their involvement is fun, interesting and challenging.

Communicating with children and young people

Choose ways of communicating with children and young people about events that best meet their needs and lifestyles. Text messages or messaging via social media can be faster and more effective than emails, letters or phone calls. If possible, ask the children and young people themselves what works best for them. Make sure the expectation of their involvement is clear from the start, to avoid problems developing down the track.

Think about the specific communication needs of the children and young people involved. Using visuals such as charts, graphs and pictures can also help to get your message across, especially with children and young people who may not be good at reading.

Giving feedback

Providing children and young people with clear and honest feedback on their input and how it has been used, is an important part of their experience of participating. Inform them of what has been done with the information and ideas they provided, and any limitations you have with regard to implementing their ideas. Children and young people understand that it is not always possible to act on their suggestions, as long as you take time to explain the reasons to them.



Reimbursing and rewarding children and young people

Children and young people should be reimbursed for any out-of-pocket expenses relating to their participation, such as travel costs. You may also wish to reward them for their time, through money, gifts or other forms of recognition. Many organisations offer gift vouchers for things like movies, food or music downloads. Other ways to acknowledge children and young people's involvement is giving certificates of recognition or holding a thank you dinner or awards night. However, make sure the children and young people realise that receiving some form of recognition should not have any impact on what they have to say or any feedback they wish to give.

Measuring and evaluating the outcomes

Check the participation processes you use regularly, to make sure they are meeting the needs of the organisation, and are positive and appropriate for the children and young people involved. Time should be set aside at meetings and events or after consultations to discuss any issues and to allow the children and young people who have taken part to give their feedback on the project or activity.

10. Ethical issues

There are a number of ethical issues that need to be considered when working with children and young people, in order to avoid them any harm as a result of their participation in your organisation.

Duty of care and minimising harm

Care must be taken to minimise the risk that children and young people might be harmed, either physically or psychologically, as a result of their participation. They can be at risk in a number of ways, including:

- Sharing personal information that causes them distress or anxiety
- Harm caused by adults involved in the participation process.

Your organisation needs to consider the possible dangers of involving children and young people and have procedures in place to minimise these risks.

Be familiar with legal requirements that exist to protect children and young people from harm and abuse. In NSW, the Working With Children Check acts as a way of screening adults so that unsuitable people are prevented from working in roles where they have direct, unsupervised contact with children and young people.

Addressing power imbalances

It is important to consider and address power imbalances between children and young people and adults, especially when children and young people are taking part in adult-led processes such as being members of boards or committees with adults. If you do not address this, children and young people will often just tell you what they think your organisation wants to hear, rather than what they think.

Respecting privacy

Children and young people have the same rights to privacy and confidentiality as adults do. Take time to explain this in practical terms to the children and young people involved, in language they can understand. Sometimes children waive this right, for example when a child may feel uncomfortable being interviewed alone by someone they do not know as part of a research project, and they decide they would prefer having someone they know present.

Suitable venues

When meeting face-to-face, choose a venue that allows privacy, but at the same time is accessible, safe and comfortable. The level of privacy needed will very much depend on the types of participation activities you will be doing, and how sensitive or private the information you are seeking from young people might be.

Confidentiality

Information provided by children and young people should be kept confidential, especially if it is in any way sensitive. Children and young people may be harmed if their confidentiality is broken.

Children and young people should not be identified in project outcomes, reports and presentations when the information gathered is sensitive. Pseudonyms should be used instead.

Consider confidentiality issues among the children and young people. When a group of children and young people participate together, agree to ground rules at the start - that topics discussed are kept confidential between the group members.

There are also specific issues around confidentiality and privacy for some groups of children and young people, such as those who are in care, or in juvenile justice institutions.

Safety issues

In certain circumstances, confidentiality may need to be broken. This could happen if:

- A child or young person reveals they are in a situation where they could be seriously harmed
- A child or young person discloses physical, sexual or emotional abuse or neglect
- It is necessary to involve someone else to look into a particular situation, such as a medical condition.

It is important that you make clear to children and young people these limits to confidentiality at the start of their involvement in participation projects and events.

Mandatory reporting of abuse and neglect

Some professions are legally required to report any reasonable grounds they have to suspect that a child or young person under 16 is at risk of significant harm from abuse or neglect. However, anyone who has reasonable grounds to suspect that a child or young person up to the age of 18 is at risk of significant harm can make a report to the Child Protection Helpline on 132 111. Concerns about physical, sexual or psychological harm, neglect, self harming or serious risk-taking behaviours should also be reported.

Storing personal information

If you are collecting sensitive information from children and young people, for example when you are interviewing them as part of a research project, you need to carefully consider how you will store the information.

- Store it in a secure place
- Protect electronic information with a password
- Back up data and keep the backup stored separately from computers.

There are privacy laws regarding the collection, use and storage of personal information. These laws cover things such as what information can be collected, what information children and young people should be given, what the information can be used for, how the information should be stored, and what access children and young people should have to information about them.

Gaining Consent

It is important to have the consent of children and young people that you wish to have participate, and in most cases you will also need the consent of a parent or guardian. There are a few things you need to be aware of regarding consent, namely:

- Consent must be informed. Children and young people need to understand what they are getting involved in
- Consent must be voluntary. Children and young people have the right to choose whether or not they wish to participate
- Consent must be up to date. If you are involving children and young people in an ongoing participation project, check in with them regularly to ensure they are still happy to be involved.

Be mindful of when you need to gain consent of parents or guardians. Although this is not always legally necessary, it is a good idea for you to seek consent whenever you are involving children and young people under the age of 16.

Take a look at our website for a range of information about children and young people's participation, both for organisations and for children and young people including:

- **Tool kits**
- **Fact sheets**
- **Case studies**
- **Games and activities**
- **Forms and templates**

Visit acyp.nsw.gov.au

