

CHALLENGES AND POSSIBILITIES REGARDING CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION

Brief for practitioners



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Introduction

The aim of the PANDA project is to promote the participation of young children (aged 12 years and under) in decision making in a transnational context through strengthening professionals' collaboration with young children known to social services, especially in child welfare and child protection.

Led by 8 partner organisations comprising social workers, managers, policy officers, academics and trainers from four countries, Belgium, Spain, Norway and Northern Ireland, the project has three objectives:

- to increase the skills and knowledge of professionals by creating a media library;
- to support organisations to create the conditions necessary for participatory social work with young children by providing a framework for policy officers and managers to support the implementation of a participatory approach;
- to provide trainers with new tools and methods in this area.



Figure 1 PANDA concept (2022)

A number of challenges and possibilities are associated with the task of enabling children to access their participation rights. These are shared by professionals working in different capacities with children, in different contexts and in different countries. This brief for practitioners focuses on our shared challenges and possibilities. There are already a significant number of publications mainly on barriers to participatory work with young children. The possibilities are discussed in less detail in the literature. Both are focused on in this brief and the work of the project more broadly.

1. The concept ‘participation’

From the outset one of the challenges we all face is what we mean by the term ‘participation’. We often talk about participation. The importance of participation is endorsed by policymakers, organisations and practitioners. In practice, however, we notice that this is an ambiguous term that is often interpreted differently. Is participation a right, an activity, a relational process? How far does participation go? Is it primarily about informing, letting children decide? Or is it more contextual whereby children’s participation rights occur within a context (for example, a learning democracy), and within relationships and where terms such as partnership, collaboration and cooperation are more accurate?

The UNCRC (see the PANDA Practitioner Brief on shared legal frameworks) provides the basic definitions and understandings of children’s participation rights. As noted, professionals need to be aware of the content of the UNCRC and its supporting Guidelines, General Comments and Convention regarding the rights of children with disabilities. But professional knowledge alone, is not enough.

There are regulations, there are instruments and procedures that should support the right to participate. However, too many documents, if misunderstood and/or not applied accurately, can lead to sham participation, or evolve towards coercion, in which the child *has to* participate. In other words professional practice can veer towards a ‘box ticking’ exercise far too easily with no guarantee of effective participation. And then what happens to what a child brings? What impact can the child have effectively? (Bessart & Broadly, 2014).

It is important for professionals to think beyond participation as ‘what’ (i.e. *a task* that has to be completed) and instead to think about the ‘why’ and the ‘how’ (i.e. *a contextual, relational process* that evolves over time). Assumptions about children, children’s wider contexts (families, cultures and communities), where practice takes place (organisations) and societal issues (social structural considerations) are important. The ecological model of communication from the Talking and Listening to Children (TLC) Project that emphasises the child’s individual identity, immediate family and community circumstances and their wider social setting offer a helpful holistic perspective on the context and content of participation (Figure 2).

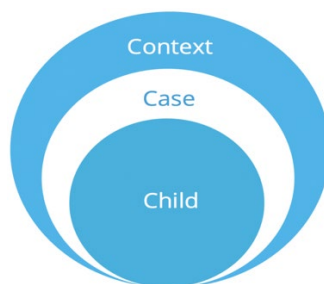


Figure 2 Model from Talking and Listening to Children (The TLC Project)

Furthermore, in order to participate, as outlined in the UNCRC and supporting General Comments, children themselves have a right to information in the first place. All too often children, especially in youth care (also known as alternative care, out-of-home care) are not aware of their rights. As a result, they lack essential information to participate effectively.

It is important for professionals to think about and record how and in what ways they continually inform children about their participation rights in general (and specific rights when in youth care, alternative care).

It is also important for professionals to think about how, when, where to involve children in participatory processes which are tailored to their needs. These include the child's choices and preferences, their development, their competence and capacities, their age, gender, disability, sexuality, religion, ethnicity, language, culture and heritage and their context.

Professionals also need to consider how and where they keep a record of what views are shared and how, and in what ways, these were acted upon or had an impact on decision making.

Lastly, it is important, with regards to participation, that professionals are aware of regional organisations that provide assistance to children including advocacy and bespoke support materials.

2. The perception of 'the young child'

Another challenge we face is our assumptions about and attitudes towards young children. In the Panda project, we aim to involve 'young children', which means children from 0 to 12 years. Importantly, the way we, as adults, perceive and assess young children has an influence on the ways we let them participate.

According to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the child is seen as a subject and no longer, or not only as, an object. Parents themselves also expect a professional to recognize their child as an actor and a unique individual, a subject with their own opinion (Juul and Dahlø Husby, 2019). This means that children also have active rights such as the right to participate. We note that the younger the child, the more challenging the barriers are in enabling children to fully access this right.

Professionals rightly take into account the development of the child, both cognitively and socially-emotionally. The pitfall is that we mainly start from what the child is not yet capable of, from what is not yet successful. In this way there is a chance that we underestimate a child's competences.

As a result, especially the most vulnerable children run the risk of not being able or allowed to participate, for instance disabled children, children from disadvantaged families, whose first language is not that of the country they are living in, children with different cultural, ethnic, religious

backgrounds. We still too often invoke incompetence as the rule instead of ability as the rule and incompetence as the exception (Bessaert & Broadly, 2014). Professionals should therefore assume that the child is competent and only use 'incompetence' as an exception to the right to participation.

On the other hand, we also have to take into account the fact that the development of children can be endangered precisely because of a child and/or context-related vulnerability. Apart from the fact that we must always prioritize resilience and competence, it is also important for professionals from youth care and protection to consider whether they are sufficiently trained to adequately assess vulnerable children who possibly also have other underlying problems.

More generally in working with children regarding their participation rights, professionals require well developed communication skills including verbal skills, non-verbal skills, playfulness, comfortableness in getting close to the child, use of touch, gestures, noises, facial expressions as well as skills in working with the whole family. Professionals need to consider whether they have access to relevant training and/or whether a child may benefit from an advocate from a relevant counselling organisation or child right's friendly organisation to help guarantee the child's participation rights.

3. The child in the context of their family and community

Another challenge can be to keep in mind that all children are part of a family system. Approaching children and allowing them to participate also means always considering the context of the child, especially the parents/carers in their family and extended families. It can be a challenge for professionals to allow the child as a subject to fully take their place in terms of accessing their participation rights, while at the same time taking into account how this might affect the parents and the parent-child relationship.

It is important for professionals to take into account the existential loyalties of the child, in order to avoid, as far as possible, the child ending up in a situation where there are conflicts of loyalty between the professional and the parent(s) (Boszormenyi-Nagy, 1986). Professionals need to be aware that the child should always be seen as part of a family system. Every action by the professional affects the family and mutual relationships.

This statement is particularly important regarding the participation rights of the youngest children especially infants (0 to 4 years). The younger the child, the more they speak through their body. Take the example of babies, who communicate through noise, emotions, gestures, facial and body movements. Children have a great need for contact and interaction, for responsive behavior from their caregiver. A first phase in social-emotional and relational development versus brain development is linked with warm, loving, positive contacts and care. These are vitamins for growth. Prolonged stress in this area can be toxic to a baby and negatively affect development.

It is useful for professionals to consider the phrase, 'There is no such thing as a baby', which means that no baby exists apart from its context i.e. who they are, how they are seen is as much to do with their context (i.e. relationships) as it is with their. Also, if taken another way, it is important for professionals to consider the point that, 'You can only take care of the baby by taking care of the context' (Vliegen, 2021).

The question of how we can get infants to participate is pertinent. We see an increasing focus on the infant target group across different sectors, whether or not under the explicit name of 'participation'. For example: not only parental but also child participation in pre-school childcare, infant mental health and the establishment of infant psychiatry within mental health care, the question of whether and how the youngest toddlers can also have a voice in the children's parliament within schools / education, focusing on the parent-child relationship from the very beginning and even before conception within (residential) youth care, the importance of the first 1000 days and the influence on further development in policy documents, ... These recent developments indicate that we pay attention to the place of infants in society. The fact that this target group is given a place on the agenda can already be seen as an indirect form of participation. Furthermore, the challenge remains to investigate what the participation of infants means, what the needs are to work participatively with infants and how policy can support this. There are opportunities in collaboration across the sectors. The tendency to work in a family-oriented way is positive. At the same time, this can create a tension between the best interests of the child and the interests of the parent(s) and the wider family. Do the best interests of the child always come first? What is the place of the interests of the child within the interests of the family as a system, in which other children with their own interests may also be growing up?

It is important for professionals who are seeking to promote the participation rights of children that children are always seen as both individuals and also as people situated in unique contexts with unique relationships, circumstances, and experiences. The step-by-step plan for the importance of the child provides professional practitioners in Flanders (Belgium) with a good guideline (Knowledge Center Children's Rights, 2021).

Lastly, professionals should be aware that when thinking about the participation of individual children, the following points from General Comment No. 12 The Right of the Child to be Heard (UN, 2009, para 29) are the guiding principles, '*Children's levels of understanding are not uniformly linked to their biological age. Research has shown that information, experience, environment, social and cultural expectations, and levels of support all contribute to the development of a child's capacities to form a view. For this reason, the views of the child have to be assessed on a case-by-case examination*'. This should take account of the individual and unique characteristics of the child including their age, gender, disability, preferences and choices, culture, ethnicity, language, sexuality, religion and their context.

4. The context in which social work takes place

4.1. The specificity of child and youth care and child and youth protection

A further challenge for professionals in enabling children to access their participation rights can be the organisational contexts in which they work. The right to participation takes place in the specific context of child/youth care and child/youth protection. Here we see a tension between the child and what the child wants and the social mission of the social worker (justice, social research and so on). Ultimately, the legal powers invested in an authority shape the decisions made. In these situations, professional transparency is important. Professionals need to remember to be clear about their role, what is possible and what is not, and what space is available for the child to be involved in decisions, to what level and in relation to which issues.

Professionals work as members of organisations. Research tells us that children's and young people's views about what they need to participate effectively differ from the perspectives of professionals. For children, the attitude of, and their relationship with, the social worker is crucial (Eerdeken, Raes, Vandenbussche).

Professionals refer to their responsibility to protect the child and often indicate that they lack tools to realise participation within this complicated process. Tools that children have developed themselves appear to be mainly focused on who talks when, with whom and how, and not on what they want to say (van Bijleveld, de Vetten, Dedding, 2020). An important message for professionals is that it is equally as important to listen and pay attention to the 'how' something is said and not just the 'what' (van Bijleveld, 2013).

Also, and as important, is the need for professionals to be clear how they will act upon what has been said and how they can they gain confidence in participation (van Bijleveld, 2013). This is because it can be challenging for the child to engage when they are not clear about what will happen with what they say. This is very important to get right because children often experience situations of insecurity and instability, and adults that are not always there for them.

Moreover, participation in youth care and youth protection takes place within specific and diverse social work contexts: residential settings, day care or therapeutic settings, schools, judicial contexts, family replacement contexts such as foster care. The context of the setting implies different mandates, working methods, up to ways of interacting with children and their families. Participation, methods and tools always require a translation to the specific organisation from which you work.

4.2. From legal, policy and organisational frameworks to practice

The government develops practices and procedures to guarantee participation. However, there is a gap between legislation and regulations (which includes participation) and the daily practice of it. What is outlined as best practice in legal frameworks and policy documents does not always lead to

what is intended, namely more and stronger participation (Bessart & Broadly). Furthermore, often does not lead to an effective impact on decisions that are made.

In child care and child protection, and the younger the child, the more there is a justified focus on safety often at the cost of participation. This is exacerbated by procedures in organisations to limit risks which sometimes means that less attention is paid to participation. Professionals need to know that the UNCRC outlines that it is not possible to protect children without given cognisance to their participation rights; they are intertwined.

Furthermore, professionals should be aware that there are frameworks and tools that show that participation is also possible in a situation of possible insecurity. For example, Signs of Safety¹ is a participatory way to establish a safety plan with the active involvement participation of the child.

It is important to note that reinforcing the participation of young children requires a government policy that facilitates and stimulates this. Organisations also have the task of creating the necessary preconditions so that practitioners can work effectively in a participatory manner. There are a number of preconditions that are often insufficiently met to strengthen participatory work with young children: high caseload, managerialism, lack of specific training and peer learning. These are aspects that have an impact on the meso and micro level. In order to make visible the extent and effectiveness of participatory practices with children organisations should use children's rights indicators to implement and monitor their participatory work with young children. In so doing it provides a evidence to hold policymakers to account when adverse preconditions prohibit the implementation of such positive participatory practices.

5. Participation as a relational process

We highlight five aspects with which we can connect possibilities and opportunities to the perspective of participation as a relational given: the role of the professional, skills, time and space, tools and methods, and values.

5.1. The role of the professional

If we consider participation as a relational fact at the level of the child and the professional, there is a power imbalance within the care relationship. For children this is even more pronounced because a child is dependent (to varying degrees) on an adult, and a minor in relation to an adult. That is an immutable fact.

¹ <https://www.signsofsafety.net/>

However, the role and attitude of the care provider towards the child is crucial: is the professional positioned as the one who checks whether the child is safe, whether the child is behaving well? Or is the care provider the one who stands next to the child and helps? Or is the professional positioned as a confidante, a friend, an advocate, someone with whom decisions are shared? It is even possible that the professional takes on different roles alternately or simultaneously. It is helpful in that regard that roles are compatible or complementary.

Professionals need to be aware that in order to involve into a reliable care relationship with the child, it is important that the care provider is transparent, honest, and clear with the child about which role(s) they takes on, in which circumstances, or sometimes has to take on, and why. This also implies that the professional has insight into the possibilities and the limits of their role.

To assist in these processes, professionals should be aware of and confident in the use of techniques such as connecting to the language of the child, paying attention as to how they present to the child including: use of voice, tone, words, body position, gestures; use of tools and materials, displaying creativity and so on. Lastly, it is important that professionals should be motivated by believing that investing in a positive relationship with the child is important in its own right (van Bijleveld, 2013).

5.2. Skills

As already indicated, social workers often experience participatory work with young children as a challenge. It requires the necessary attitudes and skills. Professionals need to be aware that there is no one specific methodology that facilitates this but rather that they need to adopt a participative basic attitude and use creativity (Bessart & Broadly, 2014). This means paying equal attention to non-verbal communication as to verbal communication and observing. It also means use of gestures, noises, touch, gestures, to start from and engage with the world and perception of the child (Grünwald & Thiersch, 2009).

5.3. Time and space

Enabling children to access their participation rights causes challenges with regards to time and space for several reasons.

First, professionals have a strong will to work participatively with young children, but there appears to be a mismatch between theory and practice. Professionals are confronted with structural challenges, for example when the necessary trust relationship between child and care provider takes shape, the case has to be transferred from a more generalist to a more specialised form of care, and thus again to a new professional. There is a need for continuity of care, but also for material conditions (a child-friendly environment, low chairs and desks and so on) that make it possible to communicate with children (Seim en Slettebø, 2017).

Secondly, it takes time to build a relationship of trust and to get to know the child, but this is necessary for effective participation. The perceived pressure to (also) want to protect the child can influence professional actions with the focus on participation subconsciously threatening to shift to 'getting the job done' as quickly as possible, namely shifting the focus to collecting as much information as possible and acting accordingly (van Bijleveld, Bunders-Aelen, Dedding, 2020).

Thirdly, high caseloads mean that professionals often have little time. Within this limited time, however, the child is not always prioritised. For example, during home visits, time is mainly spent on adults (Ferguson, 2016; Winter et al., 2017). It is essential that organisations, teams, and individual professionals create time and space as necessary preconditions to enabling children to access their participation rights.

5.4. Tools and methods

Many tools and methods exist. The challenge and opportunity to professionals is to a) gain easy and free access to them b) have opportunities to see their use in practice c) grow in confidence in trying them out in their own relationships with the children they are working with d) have reflective supervision to explore and develop their participatory practice with all children by growing in self-awareness of barriers and opportunities. See also brief 'Methods and tools'.

5.5. Values

All professionals need to respect and value the unique characteristics of every child which include their choices and preferences, their development, their competence and capacities, their age, gender, disability, sexuality, religion, ethnicity, language, culture and heritage and their context.

6. Challenges and opportunities

The description of the challenges and opportunities is not exhaustive. The most important elements based on our findings in the project so far have been selected. A useful model depicting these is summarised below:

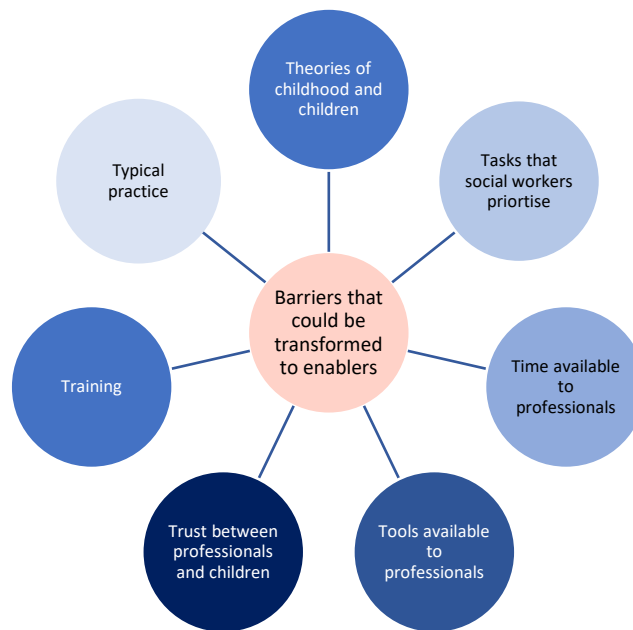


Figure 3 Barriers to communicating with and involving children (Winter, 2009, 2010)

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