

Acknowledgements

The Ministry of Social Development would like to thank the government agencies, local authorities, non-government organisations and individuals who supported and contributed to developing this guide.

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Published by:

Ministry of Social Development

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New Zealand

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Copies of this guide are available from the Ministry of Social Development and on the website www.msd.govt.nz

ISBN 0-478-25137-8



INVOLVING CHILDREN

A guide to engaging children in decision-making

Ministry of Social Development





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Introduction

Participation is more than just asking children for their ideas and views. It’s about listening to them, taking them seriously and turning their ideas and suggestions into reality.

Involving children in decision-making means they can influence some of the things that affect them, and offer a different perspective from adults. It helps adults understand children’s issues, helps make sure policies and services are in tune with children’s needs, and acknowledges children’s important role in society. It also helps children and young people to gain new skills and knowledge and build their confidence in other processes, including democracy.

This is a practical guide for organisations, government departments, community groups and individuals who want to engage children up to the age of 18¹ in effective decision-making. The Ministry of Youth Affairs has developed a companion guide, called *Youth Development Participation Guide: “Keepin’ It Real”*², on how to increase youth participation in policy development, programmes, services and organisations. We hope you’ll use both publications when you and your organisation are involving children and young people in decision-making.

¹This guide refers to children as everyone under the age of 18 years, the definition used by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC). However, we recognise that many older children identify as “youth” or “young people” and that their issues are likely to differ from those of younger children.

²*The Youth Development Participation Guide: “Keepin’ it Real”* (2003) is available on the Ministry of Youth Affairs’ website: www.youthaffairs.govt.nz.



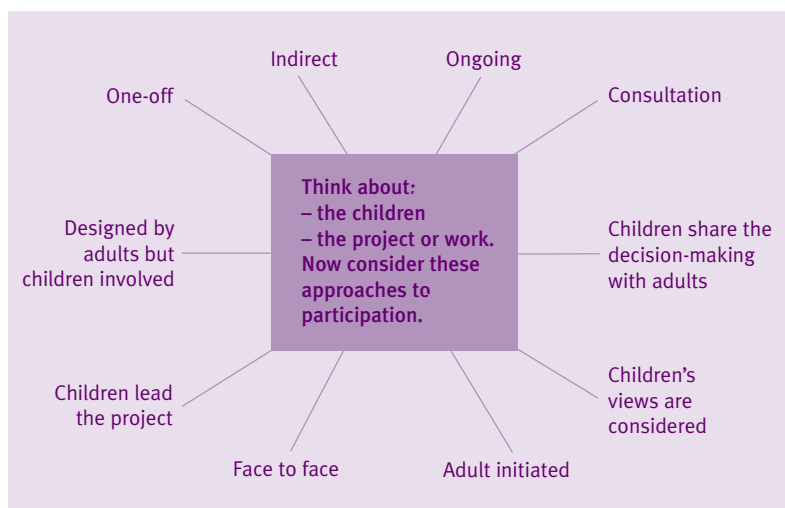
Involving children in decision-making

Encouraging children to participate means involving them in all aspects of society. It includes recognising and supporting their contribution to their communities, involving them and giving them a say in decisions that affect them.

Participation is more than consultation. Consultation is one form of participation – there are lots of others. Genuine participation happens when adults share decision-making with children and children feel they “own” the particular policy, service or programme.

Different types of participation

Children can participate in decision-making in many ways. The type of participation you choose will depend on the specific project and the children involved.



Participation can be very straightforward if you learn from your experiences and the children's experiences of decision-making. As you and your organisation develop the skills to involve children in your work, you'll be able to experiment with different types of participation.

The principles of children's participation

Appropriate and effective children's participation is guided by a number of principles.

It is important that you:

- understand and believe in the importance of giving children a say in decisions that affect them
- have realistic expectations about participation and how long it will last
- make sure your participation method is suitable for the children who will be involved
- make sure the children understand their role in the process
- make sure the children find the experience enjoyable and rewarding
- see participation as voluntary
- respect children's views
- recognise that children, like adults, may have different views about an issue and make it clear that you appreciate their individual views
- only ask children about issues that are meaningful to them
- have the attitude "I can learn from children"
- be honest and upfront about limits and boundaries
- use safe and ethical processes
- acknowledge different cultures and values
- address the specific needs of children with disabilities
- avoid tokenism.

EXAMPLE

A non-government organisation (NGO) sets up a children's reference group to advise it on a range of issues. At its first meeting, the reference group decides how it will operate, how many meetings it will hold each year and the topics and issues it will discuss. The group decides it needs training on the NGO's role and how its contributions will help, as well as regular social events to enable members of the group to get to know each other and develop friendships.



Barriers to children’s participation

Barriers to children’s participation include:

- thinking that children lack the experience to participate
- not valuing children’s views
- a lack of resources and time
- thinking that it’s not appropriate to involve children in decision-making
- not knowing how to contact children
- concerns about safety and ethics
- thinking that children don’t want to participate
- language and cultural barriers
- not knowing how to involve children and how to discuss issues with them
- thinking that the processes are too complex and time-consuming
- financial constraints.

Before involving children, you may need to address these barriers – this guide provides some advice.



Why and when to involve children

Why involve children in decision-making?

Participation is a right

In 1993 New Zealand ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC). UNCROC obliges New Zealand to recognise the right of children to have their opinions given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity.

Article 12 of UNCROC requires that children have the right to express their opinions freely and to have that opinion considered in decisions that affect them. Article 13 recognises the right of children to seek, receive and give information and ideas of all kinds³. In New Zealand the Children, Young Persons and their Families Act 1989 also requires children’s participation and their views to be heard.

Benefits for groups and organisations

Many organisations do work that involves or affects children in some way. Having children participate in decision-making offers a number of benefits:

- it’s an opportunity to understand children’s issues and needs better, because children bring new perspectives and knowledge
- you can develop more effective policies, services and programmes by including children’s perspectives in their design, planning and delivery/implementation
- you can build a more positive, democratic organisation
- you can decide where to use your resources (like money, people and time) more effectively
- you can promote positive attitudes towards children.

³United Nations (1989), United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Geneva.



Benefits for children

Children, both individually and as part of our nation, gain a lot from participating in decision-making – such as by:

- increasing their confidence, skills and knowledge
- improving their understanding of decision-making processes and how organisations work
- getting more effective and appropriate services and policies that address their needs
- considering the effects of their decisions and deciding which alternatives are best
- learning to debate, negotiate and communicate with groups and act as facilitators and leaders
- developing relationships with other children as well as adults
- becoming aware of their rights in society
- feeling satisfied about their participation
- feeling they “own” the service
- bringing about changes that are good for children.

Benefits for society

Society as a whole also benefits through having children participate in decision-making because it:

- encourages co-operation between different age groups in society
- reinforces the benefits of participation and the value of contribution
- builds a positive, democratic society.

When to involve children in decision-making

Children can participate in decision-making on a wide range of topics.

If you’re making an important decision, consider engaging children just as you would any other interested people or groups. Remember, it may not always be appropriate to involve children; it depends on the issue and the children’s maturity.

The following questions – and their answers – may help you decide whether it’s appropriate to involve children:

- why do you want children to participate?
- what will they gain from it?
- what will the policy or service gain?
- what will your organisation gain?
- are you and your organisation committed to effective participation?
- where in the decision-making process will you involve children?

- are there enough time and resources to do the participation exercise properly?
- can your organisation provide an appropriate facilitator, support for and feedback to the children?
- does the facilitator have the right level of skills?
- how will you measure the effectiveness of the participation process?

EXAMPLE

A rural school involves students in developing its vision and motto. Different classes brainstorm their ideas and present them to the Board of Trustees. A small group of children from each class is also invited to decide with the adults on the final vision and motto.





Ethics, consent and confidentiality

Ethics

You must make sure that all contact with children is ethical.

Children must understand the purpose and nature of the participation process, and know that their participation is voluntary. If their participation won't be confidential and anonymous, you need to explain clearly why and whether there are any possible implications and risks.

Ethical considerations include:

- making sure that participation will not cause any harm to a child, and that they are not placed at risk through their contact with adults or other children
- having good reasons for why you have excluded any child or group of children
- making sure that participation happens without force or pressure
- giving children the opportunity to opt out at any time
- making sure facilitators know what to do if they see or hear something that raises concerns about a child's safety
- having procedures for when problems arise, for example, letting children know of at least two people they can go to for help and advice
- involving more than one adult to avoid unsupervised contact
- making sure that any participation exercise that involves talking to children individually is done openly and visibly
- making sure that adults dealing with children are experienced and trusted
- giving children choices on how they participate and with whom
- making sure children have the information they need to decide on whether they want to participate
- providing parents/caregivers with information about the exercise and children's participation
- letting children know how they can access the information they provide, any feedback and the results of the exercise – such as details about any changes in the organisation that have resulted from their ideas and suggestions
- acknowledging the children's contribution of time and expertise, such as with a certificate or book token
- meeting transport or other expenses.

Confidentiality

Before you invite children to participate, let them know whether their individual contribution will be treated as private and confidential or may be

published or shown to others (and, if so, whether their names or other identifying information will be revealed).

If the media are likely to be at a participation exercise or event, let the children and their parents know. Clarify any confidentiality and privacy issues with them and the media.

Consent to participate

Consent is an important issue for child participation. It is preferable to get consent from parents and guardians of children under 18 years old and essential for younger children. When obtaining consent, think about the ways children will be participating, the information they will be providing and their family and community backgrounds.

It's a good idea to get consent from children (and their parents and families where appropriate) because:

- it shows you are taking their participation seriously
- it avoids situations where the parents' consent is taken as permission when the child may not want to participate
- it means the child knows and understands:
 - why they are participating
 - who is involved
 - what their involvement is all about
 - that they can choose not to participate or decide to stop participating at any time
 - that they can access the information they give and the results of decisions from the exercise
 - the upsides and downsides of participating
 - how confidential their information will be kept.

Remember, you may also need to get consent to record children's names in any report or publication, to quote their words or to show their images in photos, video or other records.

EXAMPLE

As part of its work to reduce pollution in a local stream, a council undertakes consultation with a nearby school. It sends letters to the children and their parents about the consultation and how it will use the children's contributions. The council gains consent from the children and their parents, and invites the children to make individual or group submissions on response sheets or through drawings, posters and videos expressing their ideas.



Beginning the participation process

Which children to involve in decision-making

Different projects require participation from different groups of children. You need to identify which children will be affected by the policy, service or programme you're developing.

Try to invite a wide range of children to participate and, where possible, include groups of children who are often overlooked, such as children from ethnic groups and children with disabilities. Always invite children who are eager to be involved, but also encourage children who lack confidence to participate.

Remember that if a group of children is speaking on behalf of a much larger group, they need to represent the larger group as much as possible.

Contacting children

You can contact children through places such as schools, early childhood education centres, community organisations, churches, sports and cultural groups, social services, activity groups and advocacy agencies.

You could also consider other ways to invite children to participate, such as:

- radio
- magazines
- email and the internet
- newsletters and pamphlets
- television
- newspapers.

EXAMPLE

A community group produces a newsletter on local issues, which it posts to all households in the region. It includes articles written by children and invites children to send in their ideas for addressing local issues.

Different participation mechanisms

You can involve children in a number of ways – such as through:

- face-to-face discussions with small groups of children, including hui, fono and focus groups
- interactive websites

- written questionnaires and feedback forms
- art, posters, drama and interactive exercises
- videos and audiotapes
- happy mats/sad mats (for younger children)
- brainstorming sessions
- child representation on advisory boards
- graffiti boards
- external reference groups
- adopting the subject as a project for a school class or other existing group.

If the children you're inviting to participate haven't worked together before, provide opportunities for them to get to know each other and share ideas before the participation exercise.

EXAMPLE

A district health board wants to promote dental services in its area. It asks a group of children to draw pictures about going to the dentist, showing their likes and dislikes. It records the children's descriptions of their drawings and uses them in designing a public education campaign about the importance of dental hygiene.

Keeping children involved

Participation often involves dealing with the same group of children several times, and it can be a challenge to keep them involved and interested.

It's important to let them know they are making a real and positive difference. Emphasise the benefits they are gaining through the experience. And maintain momentum – if you cancel, can't deliver on promises or are uncommitted and unprepared, you'll disappoint the children involved.

Children may also drop out part way through. It may be a good idea to work out in advance what you'll do if a number of participants decide to pull out.

You can help keep children interested and involved by, for example:

- sending regular updates about what's happening
- sending personalised "thank you" letters at particular stages of the process
- getting their feedback on how they think the process is going – for example, what they have liked and what could be improved. You can do this through focused phone calls or emails after meetings, then using the children's feedback to make positive changes.



Practical issues

A number of practical issues need consideration before you begin a participation exercise.

Topics or issues

Topics or issues need to be real and relevant. Children provide more reliable information when they're talking about things that interest them or are part of their everyday experiences. Always ask children what issues are important to them.

Group size and structure

If you're working with children in groups, small groups of five to six with a narrow age range are most successful.

If you're encouraging children to work together in a group, make sure all members of the group have an equal opportunity to participate. Remember, group size and structure may restrict communication about some topics – unless you're discussing general topics, single-sex groups may be a better idea.

Timing

Involve children as early as possible, and provide them with the time they need to make informed decisions.

Children have busy lives – it's important to arrange meetings around school and extracurricular activities, such as sport and music practice. Consider school holidays and exams as well as dates of cultural significance, such as Ramadan and Passover. Keep meetings short, take regular breaks and provide food and refreshments appropriate for the children.

Settings and venues

Children are more likely to express their views openly and easily in settings they have chosen. Wherever possible, choose child-friendly venues and always consider the children's emotional and physical safety. Rooms arranged by adults can sometimes isolate children.

Facilitators

Working with children requires skills, training and unique personal attributes. Always use facilitators who are:

- experienced in working with children and compatible with them

- good listeners and listen with an open mind, as there should be no right or wrong answers in participation
- culturally knowledgeable and aware
- aware of the specific needs of a particular group and consider individual children's needs, personalities and attention spans
- committed to enabling children to take the lead as much as possible in the roles of chair, facilitators and group leaders
- good at making sure everyone gets a turn to speak and that children with quieter voices can be heard
- flexible, creative and focused on making participation fun
- trained to deal with safety issues.

Where appropriate, make sure children have access to support, such as by arranging for the facilitator or another appropriate adult to be available before or after meetings to answer questions. A particular topic may be sensitive for some children, while for others it may be the first time they have been involved in such an exercise.

Information and language

Children need clear and accessible information and language. Always use common, everyday, jargon-free language. Be clear and straight to the point and avoid language that may be patronising or confusing.

Try to express messages in a way that includes, rather than excludes, children. For example, send information directly to children as well as adults once they have given their consent. Distribute information in advance, so that children are prepared for the participation exercise.

Payment and acknowledgement

You may need to plan for monetary payments, koha and gifts for the children. Certificates and letters of acknowledgement can also show them you have valued their contribution.

You may also need to meet expenses such as transport, food and other items to support the participation process, such as translators for children from ethnic groups and interpreters for deaf children.

EXAMPLE

The organising committee for a community event invites a group of children to help design and organise the event's publicity material and entertainment. After the event the committee sends thank you letters and certificates to the children involved.



Working with specific groups of children

Children in New Zealand have unique experiences of life based on their gender, age, ethnicity, religion, ability, locality and individual living circumstances. You may find it appropriate to work with specific groups of children to ensure their ideas and interests are heard and to avoid ignoring their differences.

Tackle diversity sensitively. Although many considerations for working with children are important for all groups, a number of key issues are specific to particular groups.

Below are some of those specific groups, the issues relevant to them and ways to support their participation. Note some children will be represented in more than one of these groups. It's important to work with both adults and children from specific groups to get their ideas on how to involve children.

Māori children

Māori children are tangata whenua. The Treaty of Waitangi recognises their right to partnership with the Crown. For government departments in particular, involving Māori children in decision-making is an expression of that partnership.

You also need to consider a number of broader cultural issues – for example:

- children are considered part of their wider whānau and should not be viewed in isolation
- there are differences between Māori children who live in urban settings and those who live in rural settings
- not all Māori children have ongoing associations with iwi.

You can support the participation of Māori children by:

- using facilitators who have the trust and confidence of the group of Māori children, their whānau and their community
- using facilitators skilled in tikanga and te reo when appropriate
- working with the Māori community, including iwi organisations, social service and educational organisations and cultural groups to ensure appropriate participation processes
- providing for whānau and support people to be present, if appropriate.



Pacific children

The number of Pacific children in New Zealand is growing rapidly. You need to remember that:

- Pacific communities see their children as an integral part of the family and community
- there is considerable diversity between different Pacific cultures as well as within them
- there are differences between Pacific-born and New Zealand-born Pacific children.

You can support the participation of Pacific children by:

- working with established networks, such as community organisations and church groups, to get their ideas about involving groups of Pacific children
- arranging single-sex groups (this will often be more appropriate than mixed-sex groups)
- recognising that some Pacific children may prefer to work in their own language.



Children from ethnic groups

Children from ethnic groups include those whose ethnic heritage distinguishes them from most other people in New Zealand. They include children who were born in New Zealand and who identify with their ethnic heritage, as well as those who are recent migrants or refugees.

You will need to consider:

- the diversity not only between different ethnic groups but also within them. For example, there may be differences between children of long-term migrant families and those who are recent migrants and refugees
- that some ethnic groups have important tribal, kinship, religious or racial groupings
- that in some cultures it is not usual to seek the views of children independently of adults. Empowering children to speak can sometimes lead to conflict with their parents.

You can support the participation of children from ethnic groups by:

- using existing ethnic organisations and networks such as regional ethnic councils, refugee and migrant associations, churches and other places of worship (for example, mosques and temples) to get their ideas about involving children
- providing information in appropriate formats and languages
- using translations and interpreters where appropriate
- acknowledging that single-sex groups may be appropriate.

Children with disabilities

The New Zealand Disability Strategy sets out the Government’s commitment to children with disabilities. Objective 13 is to “enable disabled children and youth to lead full and active lives” and action 13.7 undertakes to “introduce ways of involving disabled children and youth in decision-making and giving them greater control over their lives”.

If your participation process involves children with disabilities, you need to adopt an “ability approach” rather than focus only on their impairments.

You will need to consider that:

- there is a range of disabilities – physical, intellectual and psychiatric
- some children with disabilities need the support, care or interpretation of adults or other children, such as a sibling or a young adult who works with them.

You can support the participation of children with disabilities by:

- recognising that some children with disabilities may choose to be in groups with others of the same ethnicity, age or gender
- including children with disabilities in decision-making on the same range of topics as other children
- providing information well in advance and in appropriate formats
- working with people skilled in communicating with children with disabilities eg: blind and deaf children use Braille and signing
- encouraging participation within a physically and emotionally safe setting
- identifying any physical barriers and removing or minimising them.

EXAMPLE

A government department involves children in planning and designing a strategy for children and young people. To make sure it gets the views of a wide range of New Zealand children, it holds specific focus groups involving children with disabilities and children in youth justice residences. Before the focus groups, the department sends information to the children to help prepare them for the focus groups. It uses skilled facilitators who understand the children’s needs and abilities to create a supportive environment during the focus groups.





Very young children

Even very young children (aged two or three years) can be involved as long as you carefully plan and support their participation.

You will need to consider:

- the children's cognitive and social development
- the safety and familiarity of the situation where participation will take place
- the availability and proximity of parents and caregivers.

You can support the participation of very young children by:

- making sure topics are practical rather than abstract
- discussing things that relate to the place where the child lives rather than at a national level
- working with facilitators experienced in working with the age group, and preferably who the children know and trust
- using imaginative techniques such as persona dolls, brainstorming, art and speech bubble messages to communicate.

EXAMPLE

An early childhood education centre consults its children about new play equipment. Together, the staff and children look at pictures of equipment. Staff ask the children what equipment they enjoy and feel safe using, and to draw pictures of how they would like their playground to look. They record the children's conversations and preferences.

Vulnerable and marginalised children

Vulnerable and marginalised children include those who are receiving care or have recently received services from care and protection or youth justice. They have a right to be heard in a way that is appropriate to their age, ethnicity, gender, stage of development and personal circumstances.

You will need to consider that:

- children who have had difficult life experiences may be less likely to have the confidence and self-esteem to participate
- you may need permission from social service agencies to work with this group of children.

You can support the participation of vulnerable and marginalised children by:

- negotiating contact with them with the agency responsible for their care or through community agencies and networks
- ensuring that processes are sensitive, respect privacy and build confidence
- making sure the setting is accessible and provides participants with a sense of psychological as well as physical security.

Children who live in rural areas

Children who live in rural areas may have fewer opportunities to participate than those living in more urban areas.

You will need to consider:

- accessibility and transportation issues
- a possible sense of geographic isolation.

You can support the participation of children who live in rural areas by:

- addressing transport issues
- removing accessibility issues to activities and programmes
- using inclusive forms of communication such as email and phone calls.



Feedback and evaluation

Feedback

Feedback is important to children because it makes them feel their views have been taken seriously. Sometimes it lets them know that action is being taken on their ideas and decisions.

You can provide feedback in many ways, such as:

- holding follow-up meetings
- using websites and email
- sending letters
- posting information and copies of reports.

Valuable feedback must be provided quickly. Where appropriate, end meetings by summarising what you've discussed and the decisions reached, and provide the children with information about the next steps. Once action has been taken, follow up with information on how their participation has affected the project. If their contribution has been acknowledged in a report or publication, send them copies.

Always keep children fully informed about changes in policies, practices, structures or services as a result of their contribution.

Children don't expect all of their ideas to be taken on board. Don't be afraid to give feedback because you don't want to tell the children involved that you haven't accepted all of their suggestions.

Evaluation

Evaluation enables children to express their ideas and feelings about the process and raise any concerns. They need to feel safe about the evaluation process so that they say what they really think, not what adults want to hear.

Evaluation will also let you know which aspects have worked well and what you need to work on. In some cases, it might be useful to evaluate more than the participation process – for example, you can gather interesting information by evaluating the value you place on children's views, the impact of these views and adult responses to the participation exercise.

Evaluation methods include:

- verbal and/or written feedback at the ends of meetings
- written forms, such as surveys
- giving children the opportunity to evaluate as a group and choose how they present their evaluation.

EXAMPLE

A government department establishes an interactive website for children. The website aims to engage children on policy issues that affect them. It's also a way of updating children on policy developments and how their ideas have been used. Every year a children's evaluation form is posted on the website and their feedback is used to improve it.





Checklist

Project name
Brief description of the project (Is the project a whole-organisation approach, a policy project, research, a new or existing programme, service or event, or a child-focused resource?)
Describe the purpose and objective for involving children (Why are children being involved?)
Describe the participation mechanisms to involve children Consider participation mechanisms including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ same process as adult involvement ■ separate parallel process ■ one-off or ongoing ■ face-to-face methods – focus groups, hui, fono ■ written methods – surveys, submissions, web-based or email feedback.
Describe the children who will be involved and how they will be invited to participate Consider: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ target group of the project ■ the range of children (different age groups, genders, ethnicities, abilities) ■ how to find and contact them.
Describe the practicalities of involving children Consider: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ the process and timeframe ■ where, when and how often ■ the resources required – people and financial ■ who will facilitate meetings and how ■ ethics and informed consent ■ the topics or issues to be discussed ■ the group size or structure ■ communication with the children ■ payment and acknowledgement.
Describe how information received will be recorded, analysed and fed back to the children
Describe how the children's participation processes will be evaluated (Including how children will be involved in evaluation)

Some useful resources

Ministry of Social Development, 2002, *New Zealand's Agenda for Children: Making Life Better for Children*, Ministry of Social Development, Wellington.

Ministry of Social Development, 2002, *Increasing the Participation of Children, Young People and Young Adults in Decision-Making – A Literature Review*, Ministry of Social Development, Wellington.

Ministry of Youth Affairs, 2002, *Youth Development Strategy Aotearoa*, Ministry of Youth Affairs, Wellington.

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Ministry of Health, 2001, *The New Zealand Disability Strategy: Making a World of Difference – Whakanui Oranga*, Ministry of Health, Wellington.

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Save the Children, 2000, *Children and Participation: Research, Monitoring and Evaluation with Children and Young People*, Save the Children, London.

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Smith, A., Taylor, N. and Gollop, M. (Eds.), 2002, *Children's Voices: Research, Policy and Practice*, Longman, Auckland.

Hart, R., 1992, *Children's Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship* (Innocenti Essays No 4), UNICEF International Child Development Centre, Italy.



Website addresses

Ministry of Social Development:
www.msd.govt.nz

Ministry of Youth Affairs:
www.youthaffairs.govt.nz

Office of the Commissioner for Children:
www.occ.govt.nz

Department of Child, Youth and Family Services:
www.cyf.govt.nz

Te Puni Kōkiri – Ministry of Māori Affairs:
www.tpk.govt.nz

Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs:
www.minpac.govt.nz

Office for Ethnic Affairs:
www.ethnicaffairs.govt.nz

Office for Disability Issues:
www.odi.govt.nz

NSW Commission for Children and Young People:
www.kids.nsw.gov.au

UNICEF:
www.unicef.org

Website for government officials who engage with communities:
www.participate.govt.nz

Appendix 1: New Zealand’s *Agenda for Children and the Youth Development Strategy Aotearoa*

This guide supports and stems from *New Zealand’s Agenda for Children* and the *Youth Development Strategy Aotearoa*. Both were developed in conjunction with children and young people.

New Zealand’s Agenda for Children

The Agenda is a government strategy aimed at improving the lives of New Zealand’s children. It includes a new ‘whole child’ approach to child policy and service development and a programme of action for the Government. The Agenda is mainly for people who develop policies and those who provide services that affect children – in the public service, in local government and in community and voluntary organisations.

When the Agenda refers to ‘children’ it means everyone under the age of 18. This is the UNCROC definition of children. However, we also recognise that many older children identify as young people (aged 12 to 24 years) and their issues are likely to differ from those of younger children.

What is the ‘whole child’ approach?

The Agenda promotes a ‘whole child’ approach to addressing children’s issues, which means:

- focusing on the big picture – on the child’s whole life and circumstances, not just isolated issues or problems
- focusing from the outset on what children need for healthy development, rather than simply reacting to problems as they arise
- looking across the whole public service at what can be done to support children’s healthy development, instead of looking for single-sector solutions.

A ‘whole child’ approach recognises that:

- children largely depend on others and are sometimes vulnerable, but they are also continually learning and developing the skills they need to look after themselves and make responsible decisions
- children are shaped in part by the settings in which they live, but they also shape their own lives through their thoughts and actions

- children are citizens in their own right, but also need to be seen within their environment – with their parents, family and whānau, with friends and peers, in school, their communities and in other important social and cultural settings
- with growing ethnic diversity in New Zealand, children's roles in the settings in which they live may differ culturally.

You can get more information about, and copies of, *New Zealand's Agenda for Children* at: www.msd.govt.nz.

Youth Development Strategy Aotearoa

The *Youth Development Strategy Aotearoa* (Ministry of Youth Affairs, 2002) sets out how government can work with families and communities to support young people to develop the skills and attitudes they need to take part in society. Involving young people in meaningful ways is a very important part of youth development. It enables young people to increase their control over what happens to them and around them.

Youth development principles

The *Youth Development Strategy Aotearoa* describes youth development as:

- shaped by the "big picture" – the wider community and influences on all our lives
- about young people being connected – with many social groups
- based on a consistent strengths-based approach – resisting "risk" factors and enhancing "protective" factors and skills
- happening through quality relationships – being heard and responded to
- needing good information – finding and sharing
- triggered when young people fully participate – helping to control what happens to them and around them.

Putting these six principles into action can help young people gain a:

- sense of contributing something of value to society
- feeling of connectedness to others and to society
- belief that they have choices about their future
- feeling of being positive and comfortable with their own identity.

You can get more information about, and copies of, the *Youth Development Strategy Aotearoa* at: www.youthaffairs.govt.nz.