

A Systematic Review of Children's Participation in Child Protection Decision-Making: Tokenistic Presence or Not?



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Introduction

Research indicates that participation in decision-making results in beneficial developmental effects (Runeson et al., 2001; O'Hare et al., 2016; World Youth Report, 2003). Involving children has the potential to improve decision-making processes and outcomes by ensuring that decisions are more inclusive, responsive and tailored to specific needs (Vis et al., 2011; McCafferty, 2017; Bouma et al., 2018). Despite policymakers, researchers and practitioners being increasingly focused on the participation of children in decision-making in the child protection system (Sanders and Mace, 2006; Hinton et al., 2008; Franklin and Sloper, 2009; van Bijleveld et al., 2015; Alfandari, 2017; Pålsson, 2017; Bouma et al., 2018), children's right to participation in decision-making remains challenging in practice (Mateos et al., 2017; Ruiz-Casares et al., 2017; Kosher & Ben-Arieh, 2019). Existing research indicates that children are not able to participate in decision-making processes often enough and their voices are either not being heard or not taken seriously (Connolly and Masson, 2014; McCarthy, 2016; Collins, 2017; Pert et al., 2017; Ruiz-Casares et al., 2017; Sæbjørnsen and Willumsen, 2017; Husby et al., 2018; Kosher and Ben-Arieh, 2019; Moran-Ellis and Tisdall, 2019; van Bijleveld et al., 2019).

Findings

Findings suggest that children reported little to no participation in and feeling excluded from decisions made about their situations:

- Children's contact with their worker was limited or non-existent, which minimised opportunities to express views regarding their situation.
- Children were often talked about rather than talked to.
- Child-worker contacts lacked dialogue.
- Children voiced their experiences of not being informed of or understanding the process or decisions made about their lives.
- On many occasions, children were only told about the decision to remove them shortly beforehand, which did not allow them much time to prepare.
- Children were quite explicit that not participating has negative implications, e.g., confusion, anger.

Children would like more opportunities to participate and be informed about what is happening. Studies indicate that positive relationships are central to achieve children's participation.

Findings, based on Lundy's (2007) child participation model, suggest that contact with the worker was limited or even non-existent (*space*), which minimised opportunities to express views regarding their situation (*voice*); child-worker contacts lacked dialogue, information about the 'process of intervention' and trusting relationships (*audience*), generally meaning that without a voice, children are not engaged in making decisions (*influence*).



Aim

This study aimed to examine children's views on and experiences with participation in decision-making in the child protection system.

Keywords

Child participation, child protection, systematic literature review, decision-making, children's rights

Participation model

Lundy (2007) developed a four-interrelated-element model to understand the process of participation in relation to UNCRC Article 12 consisting of *space* (opportunity to express views), *voice* (facilitation to express views), *audience* (listening to the child) and *influence* (decisions based on the voice, as appropriate).

Conclusion

This review shows that, in general, children have few opportunities to participate in decisions that impact their lives regardless of their willingness to participate. Research indicates that children's participation in decision-making is not systematic, but random. Although studies included in the review spanned 15 years, recent studies in the sample did not show better participation results than earlier studies. As children are experts and active participants in their lives, it is crucial to learn from children themselves what allows for more active participation in decision-making.

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Method

The systematic review follows the PRISMA guidelines and includes 12 peer-reviewed articles published in academic journals from 2006 to 2017, see Table 1. A total of 185 articles were identified in the initial sample, from which 23 articles were duplicates, 92 articles that did not meet the inclusion criteria (combination of the search terms either in the title, abstract or keywords). The 70 other articles were read in full to make the final eligibility assessment from which 58 articles were deemed ineligible. The criteria for selection in the final sample was related to reporting of primary research on child participation in decision-making in the child protection system. Thematic analysis of the articles' main findings was conducted, consisting of generating initial codes before searching for, reviewing, refining and labelling themes. Six main themes emerged from the analysis: participation in decision-making, expressing views and voicing opinions, *lack of information and limited understanding for making decisions, feelings related to non-participation and views not being heard, children's wishes regarding participation, and relational aspects of participation.*

Table 1. Overview of the Articles Included in the Analysis.

Study	Country	Sample Size	Age	Method	Study domain	Key findings relevant to the present study
Balsells et al., 2017	Spain	30	12-20	Semi-structured interviews, discussion groups	Family reunification	The opinion and participation of children have little or no incidence in the decision-making process of child protection.
Bessell, 2011b	Austria	28	NA	Interviews and group discussions	Out-of-home-care	The young people felt they had almost no opportunity to participate meaningfully in decisions made about their lives.
Boylan and Braye, 2006	UK	39	8-17	Individual interviews, focus-group interviews and workshops	Statutory reviews	Exclusion was a dominant theme in children's experience.
Cashmore and Parkinson, 2008	Australia	47	6-18	Interviews	Family law disputes	Over half the children indicated that they had little or no say. Children felt being acknowledged would ensure more informed decisions.
Cosser et al., 2016	England	26	6-17	Activity-based interviews	Participation in CPS	Experiences report inadequate information provided to children; children felt not listened to.
Fitzgerald and Graham, 2011	Australia	13	4-13	Semi-structured in-depth interviews	Family law decision-making	Almost every child reported the decision had been made without their involvement.
Franklin and Sloper, 2009	England	21	5-18	Interviews	Disabled children involved in social service	Children had few opportunities to express their views; limited understanding of the information.
Graham and Fitzgerald, 2010	Australia	12	7-18	Interviews, focus group interview	Family law disputes	Children were disappointed for not having feedback to inform them as to what arrangements had been agreed upon.
Holland and O'Neill, 2006	UK	25	6-18	In-depth interviews	Family group conference	Young people generally felt that they were listened to and supported.
McCarthy, 2016	Ireland	6	12-18	Semi-structured interviews	Residential care	Young people had a satisfactory level of participation in the practical issues in residential centres, but experiences varied in terms of their involvement in broader decisions about their lives.
McNeilly et al., 2015	Ireland	18	6-28	Individual interviews	Disabled children/young people in social care	Disabled children and young people do not have the information they need to participate meaningfully in decisions.
Roesch-Marsh et al., 2017	England	26/10	12-18	Mixed methods: survey and interviews	Looked after review process	Some young people were not sure if their participation in the review made a difference and some of the time they felt that their participation did not make a difference to decisions.

Questions raised ...

Some important questions emerge for practitioners, policy-makers and other relevant parties when shifting the theoretical values of children's participation as discussed in the article:

- First, are children competent enough to know what they want or ...?
- Second, is engaging children in participation protecting children or causing harm?
- Third, where do we go from here?

Article reference

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