



Participation and
consulting with children

Children and young people's right to participate in all matters affecting them is enshrined in Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). When given the opportunity to participate, young people are also given the opportunity to make change – personally in their lives, in their communities and globally.

In Wales, the children and young people's participation agenda has developed in a distinct and unique way. These developments are set within the framework of the Welsh Government's commitment to the UNCRC, now formally adopted as the basis of all its work regarding children and young people (Rights to Action, Welsh Government, 2004).

What is participation?

Participation in the playwork context is about 'the process of sharing decisions which affect one's life and the life of the community in which one lives' (Hart 1992). It's an ongoing process about real situations and has real consequences. It is not the same as consultation, which is about finding out what children think and feel about specific issues.

Children have a right to take part in decision-making processes that affect them. They also have a huge interest in playing – in having time to play and quality places and freedom to play in their own way. We know this because play comes high up on children's list every time we ask them what is important to them.

Safer local areas with more places to play was among the top priorities voiced by over 7,000 children and young people taking part in the Children's Commissioner for Wales' Beth Nesa | What Next? (2016) consultation. 'More places to play' was the highest priority (49%) for almost half of children aged three to seven which reflects the importance of play for children.

Usually, when we talk about participation we are talking about engaging children in decision making about an adult agenda that will affect children. However, when we talk about

participation in the context of play, we need to recognise that we are engaging with the child's agenda.

Play is children's priority, it is their agenda. When we support their right to play, we support their agenda. We collaborate with them and this implies that we work alongside them – we offer ideas, we support their ideas, we have a common goal with them.

The Playwork Principles define play as freely chosen and personally directed by those who are playing. From a playwork perspective, if we intervene in children's play we need to do so with sensitivity using continuous risk-benefit evaluation to make sure that we adulterate their play as little as possible, through our attitude and belief system, the decisions we make, and the actions we take.

The UK Government ratified the UNCRC soon after it was adopted by the UN in 1989 – it is part of a range of government commitments to human rights. As well as Article 31 (the child's right to play) Article 12 is also important to playworkers:

Article 12

1. States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the

views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

Given that play is so important to all children, we need to be careful that any participation they have in decision making is meaningful and does not unnecessarily curtail their time and freedom to play.

We can do this by:

- sensitively observing how children behave, where and how they choose to play, and how they use the environment where they are playing.
- listening and using our knowledge of children's play and our experience to reflect on what they might want or need to enhance their play. They have shown us what they want – they didn't need to go through the effort of filling in a form, or sticking a red dot on a chart, or even coming to tell us, and their play isn't interrupted at all.
- respecting children's judgement. When children participate in decision making processes, we make sure that we respect their contribution, act upon it and feedback to them.
- making sure we take a considered approach; that we are asking the right questions and that children can make informed choices. For instance, we ourselves cannot make a choice between a trip to the seaside and a day in a forest if we have no idea what either experience offers. Similarly children will struggle to choose how to equip a new playground if their only experience is swings and slides. This is particularly important for some groups of children: they can be left out of decision making processes because historically others may have made decisions for them. As a consequence they may not have experience of making

choices and because of this it may take more time and effort to find out their opinions; or because they have a narrow range of experiences.

There are children and young people's participation standards for Wales and a set of eight Blast Off guides to good practice that can be downloaded at:

www.uncrcletsgetitright.co.uk/index.php/blast-off-guides-2

Consultation

Playworkers work in a way that encourages children to participate, to make decisions about their play environment, and they collaborate with children to meet their play needs.

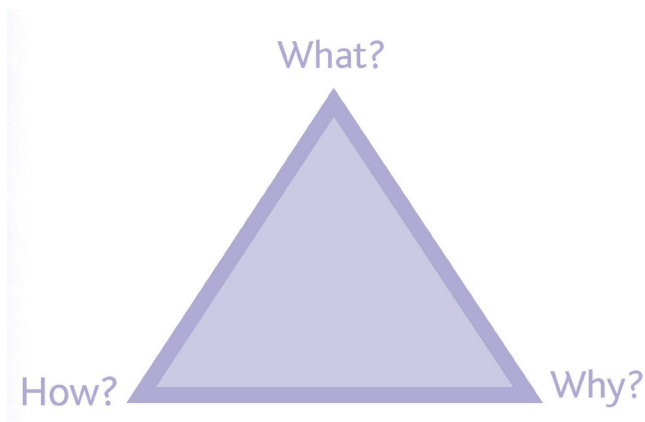
Consultation is about seeking children's views and gaining their advice. If children were playing on their own without adults there would be no need for consultation – they would negotiate and make decisions among themselves. We need to be aware of this when consulting with children.

So consultation is part of a range of tools we use to ensure that children are able to participate within a play setting.



Design Triangle

We need to be sure we are consulting for the right reasons, in an effective and meaningful way: the design triangle is a useful tool.



What - what do we want to find out?

Why - why do we want to find this out?

How - how are we going to find this out?

We answer all three questions before we start. It is as important to know why we are consulting children, as it is to know what it is we are trying to find out.

Why do we consult?

There are many possible reasons why we may need to consult – but first we need to be sure that we are consulting for valid reasons and that the children will see the results of the consultation whether their views are respected or not.

We consult with children on issues that affect their play because:

- they are the experts in their own play
- the play space exists for the benefit of the children: it is their space
- they have the right to be consulted about things that effect them (UNCRC Article 12).

How do we consult?

We can consult informally (for instance by chatting with children to find out what they think) or if there is a decision to be made where evidence will be needed of children's wishes and ideas, we may need to consult more formally and create records of the process to show to others.

Sometimes, visual evidence of the process whether it be drawn, filmed, sprayed on a graffiti wall, or written on post it notes, is invaluable in establishing what the children said, what they enjoyed, what they did not like and their reactions to proposals.

We need to be aware that generally children are very eager to please and that their ideas will be limited by their experience. Therefore they need to know and experience all the options available to them so they can make an informed choice. Inspiration could come in the form of collage making with pictures of the options that are available, model making, trips to other play settings, visits to art galleries, museums, the countryside, and more. We use as many unobtrusive methods and playful activities as possible and ask questions in different ways.

A sound knowledge of play theory and quality play environments is necessary to interpret the children's designs or decisions.

We always consider the communication needs of children of varying ages, skill and understanding and we give all children a meaningful opportunity to participate. We never choose to solely concentrate on those best able to communicate their views.

We remember to include everyone, even if this makes consulting more difficult.

We take care to choose methods that suit the children and the situation where we work.

The children and young people taking part must be able to express their likes and dislikes in a variety of ways.

We use clear language that doesn't patronise.

Children are encouraged to own the process and the result, which develops their authority over their play and their environment.

Play and participation

The children of Wales have a right to take part in decision-making processes that affect them. They also have a huge interest in playing, in having time, quality places and freedom to play in their own way.

Given that play is so important to all children, we need to ensure that any participation they have in decision-making is meaningful, not tokenistic and does not unnecessarily curtail their time and freedom to play. Active and meaningful participation is an enabling right – empowering children to influence decision-making and bring about real change, for themselves and their friends.

Play is children's priority – their agenda. When we support their right to play, we support their agenda. We collaborate with them and this implies that we work alongside them – we offer ideas, we support their ideas, we have a common goal.

References

Children's Commissioner for Wales (2016)
Beth Nesa | What Next? The Findings.
Swansea: Children's Commissioner for Wales

Hart, R. (1992) *Children's Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship.* Florence: UNICEF

UNICEF (1989) United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Svenska: UNICEF Kommitten

Welsh Government (2004) *Rights to Action.*
Cardiff: Welsh Government





June 2016

© Play Wales

www.playwales.org.uk

Play Wales is the national organisation for children's play, an independent charity supported by the Welsh Government to uphold children's right to play and to provide advice and guidance on play-related matters.

Registered charity, no. 1068926
A company limited by guarantee, no 3507258
Registered in Wales