

Guidelines for Promoting Child Participation

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The right to child participation is one of four foundation principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Child participation is also built into the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child plus many other international conventions, including Namibia's Plan of Action for Orphans and Vulnerable Children.

"We have been listening to the voices of children who are vulnerable because of their different life experiences. They are children haunted by uncertainty brought about by HIV and AIDS. How do we as adults assure them of hope? Simply by giving them love, care and understanding and by listening to what they say"

Nahas Angula, Prime Minister of Namibiaⁱ

Although the term "children" generally refers to young people below age 18 and "youth" from 18-20 or 18-24, the concept of child participation spans both groups.

Why promote child participation?

In addition to having the right to participate, young people have a lot to teach usⁱⁱ:

- Hearing what children and youth have to say often gives adults new understanding about their wishes and needs. Who knows more about what life is like for vulnerable children than these children themselves? Greater public understanding can lead to constructive changes in public policies and give children more protection from stigma and discrimination.
- Involving children and youth builds their own self-esteem and helps them find ways to support themselves and others. Giving them the opportunity to share their thoughts and feelings can result in a better and more sustainable support-plan. As one example, inheritance rights are less likely to be violated as a result.
- When children and youth feel they are taken seriously and respected by others, they gain more control over their lives and develop hope for the future. This increases the likelihood that they will choose behaviors that help them to avoid HIV infection and other dangers.
- Children and youth can influence the behavior of their peers and others in the community. Respecting children by including them in decision-making can help ensure that this influence is positive, rather than negative.

How do you select the children to be involved?

Children's participation cuts across all programs and should take place at all levels: in the home, in the community, within organizations, and across government and as a part of international forums. When working directly with children and their families in the community, the input and opportunity for expression and leadership should come from the children who are directly affected – for example, in the home or at an after-school program – in accordance with the decisions that have to be made, the needs and resources available, and the

child's developmental age. By contrast, when planning a new program, seeking input for a policy change, or conducting an evaluation, input may be sought from only a representational sample of children – usually selected via community contacts, non-governmental organizations, schools and clinics, etc. . . . In order to ensure maximum representation and participation, the selection of children should be broad (e.g. from different geographic regions, ethnic groups, population subgroups, children with special needs, etc), including those whom community leaders consider as the most vulnerable, such as street children or child-headed households.

How should the children give their input?

In part, this depends on their age and the type of activity you are considering. Very young children may not be able to express themselves in words, but if you put out a series of games and toys for them to play with, they will definitely be able to show you which ones they prefer. Junior-primary school children may be able to express themselves more easily about what they like and don't like – but rather than answer questions directly, they may find it easier to draw a picture or take some photographs and then describe what their picture is about. With older children, generally age 10 and up, a variety of techniques may be applied, including role-plays and drama, drawing, small group discussions, written surveys, radio-call in programs, smsresponses, and video-film.

One typology that is often used to describe children's participation is Roger Hart's adaptation of Sherry Arnstein's *A Ladder of Citizen Participation*.ⁱⁱⁱ At the bottom of the ladder are three types of involvement that involve children but are non-participatory, and are therefore undesirable (manipulation, decoration and tokenism):

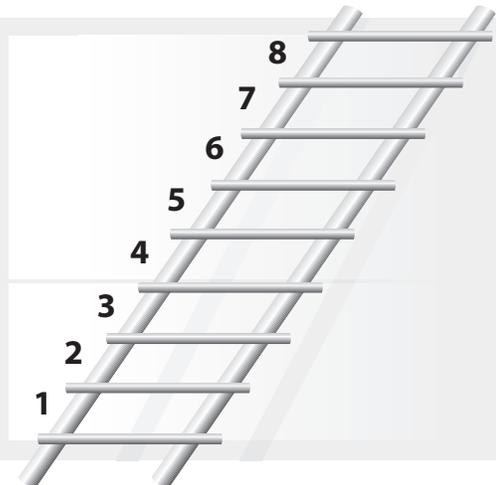
- (1) In "**manipulation**," children and youth don't understand the project and its aims. Two examples would be pre-school children carrying political placards, or older children being involved in research that was never properly described to them.
- (2) With "**decoration**," adults ask children to perform at an event (e.g. sing, do a drama, or recite poetry), but do not explain the reason for the event, involve them in its organization, or give the children the opportunity to excuse themselves from the performance.
- (3) "**Tokenism**" is not much better. Children and youth are seemingly given a voice, but in fact have little or no choice about the subject or the style of what they are communicating, and little or no opportunity to formulate their own opinions. An example is the token use of children on conference panels, where they are basically echoing what adults want them to say.^{iv}

Starting with the fourth rung of Hart's ladder, child- and youth involvement becomes more participatory. Each of the following types of participation is consultative, and then shared:

- (4) In "**assigned but informed**," adults decide on the project and children volunteer to become involved. The children understand the project – that is, they know why they are involved and who decided to involve them – and they have a meaningful role for which they are respected.

Ladder of Child- and Youth Participation ^v

8. Child/youth-initiated, shared decision with adults
7. Child/youth-initiated and directed
6. Adult-initiated, shared decisions with children/youth
5. Consulted and informed
4. Assigned but informed
3. Tokenism
2. Decoration
1. Manipulation



- (5) When children are “**consulted and informed**,” the project is still designed and run by adults, but with the full understanding and consent of the children, and their input and opinions are taken seriously.
- (6) With “**adult-initiated, shared decisions with children**,” the adults own the initial idea for the project, but young people are involved in the planning and implementation. Their views are considered and they are involved in making the decisions.

In the final two degrees of participation, children and youth initiate and direct more of their involvement in partnership with adults with whom they work:

- (7) With “**child-initiated and directed**,” the children or youth have the initial idea for the project and decide how it is supposed to be implemented. Adults are available for support, but do not take over. One example is use of media (film, still photography, and performance) by the Children’s Voices project of Positive Vibes in Namibia (www.positivevibes.org).
- (8) Finally, there are projects characterized as “**child-initiated, shared decisions with adults**,” where the children or youth have ideas for the project and also initiate it themselves. They may seek advice, discussion and support from adults, at their own discretion. Similarly, the adults provide their expertise for the children or youth to consider, but do not impose their will.

Rule of thumb:

Children’s participation should first and foremost benefit the child or children who are involved. If others gain from what the child has shared (as they likely will), that is the bonus. But it is only a secondary goal.

— Jane Shitywete, Lifeline-Childline, Namibia

What rules must always be followed?

Regardless of the type of children's participation you seek, certain basic rules must always be followed for the children's safety and for the integrity of your program.

Staff and volunteers should be properly trained to work with children, and ensure a safe and child-friendly atmosphere. Venues should be clean, with healthy snacks or meals. Depending on the particular activity, it is usually best to separate age groups within a 3-4 year range (e.g. 6-9, 10-13, 14-17, 18+), and aim for 8-15 children per facilitator. For out-of-town events, first-aid kits should be provided along with trained personnel, safe transport and appropriate chaperones.

In the event that a child becomes injured, extremely upset or reveals information that requires follow-up support, the facilitators must have the proper resource-contracts at hand: for example the phone number of the nearest health facility, counseling center, Ministry of Gender Equality and Child Welfare social worker, and the 24-hour hotline service of Lifeline/Childline: 061 -23 22 21.

Never do anything to pressure a child, make a child feel badly or manipulated, or result in the child feeling more vulnerable than he or she did before participating.

Children's participation should always be:

- 1. Voluntary:** Children should never be forced to participate, which means that they don't have to answer any questions or join in any activities if they don't want to. This should be made clear to them at the beginning of the program. Written consent by the child and his/her guardian ensures this principle (see below).
- 2. Informed:** Children and their guardians (for children under age 18) should know the background, purpose, risks and possible outcomes of their participation, before they can decide whether or not to participate. This can be provided through explanation, texts, tape recordings, visual media, posters and presentations. Sample information and consent agreements are attached as an appendix.
- 3. Meaningful:** Participation should have a realistic and constructive purpose that benefits vulnerable children.
- 4. Respectful:** Participating children should feel that their contributions are valued and their comments are listened to. This also means that information provided by children should only be shared with other people with clear consent, on how and with whom it is shared.
- 5. Safe:** The activities, venue or methodologies used should not put children or adults in danger of physical, psychological or emotional harm.

What preparation is required?

Children's participation requires good planning to ensure that these guidelines are met. Efforts should be made to include all children equally with techniques and activities that are appropriate for the children and will also provide the input required. If children have input into the agenda, that is the best of all! Thus:

1. The best interest of the child should be the primary consideration at all times.
2. Programs should prepare children for participation by assessing their stage of development, their emotional stability, level of vulnerability, and what support structures (local resources in case of follow-up) are available to them.
3. Children must first voluntarily consent to the process, and know they have the right to withdraw at all times.
4. Programs should adhere to the country's laws concerning child-protection during all child participation activities and (if applicable), NGO-approved child protection guidelines.
5. Gender sensitivity is essential. Children's opinions should be heard, respected and considered equally for girls and boys. If barriers exist to either boys' or girls' participation, appropriate interventions should be implemented to address this imbalance.^{vi}
6. All children participating should understand and be able to converse in the language used for their participation. If translations are needed, they should well-done, so no child is at a disadvantage. Efforts should be taken to also ensure equal participation by children from minority groups or with special needs.

Consent forms are required for children's participation, in accordance with local laws and customs. In keeping with the principles of child participation it is good to have the child co-sign the form along with their guardian/parent. The agreement (in the vernacular language, and read aloud for persons who are not literate) should address the following questions:

- Why are the children being asked to participate, and what organizations are involved?
- What is expected of them in terms of commitment, time and other inputs?
- What are the possible outcomes of their participation – positive and negative?
- How will confidentiality be protected, in terms of any private or sensitive information that is shared?
- What are the dates and location of the event/s?
- How will the children be protected from physical, psychological, and/or emotional harm during their participation?
- Where and when will the participation activities take place and how will transport, chaperoning, and other logistical issues be handled?
- What kinds of material, financial and human support can children expect from the sponsoring organization or its partners, if any, for their participation?
- During the participation activities, how can the child be contacted in the case of an emergency? How can the parent/guardian be contacted in case of an emergency?
- Does the child have special (medical) needs that the staff/chaperones should know about? If so, what are they?

A separate form is usually necessary for permission to take photographs, videos, and or quotes from the children, with a description or checklist of how this material may – and may not – be used.

How do you evaluate children's participation?

Always be sure to give children feedback on their input, by explaining how their participation and ideas were received and what will happen next. Sample questions to ask children some weeks after their participation, as part of monitoring and evaluation, include:

1. Did they feel that they were listened to?
2. Are there some processes or activities they would have liked to participate in but were not given the chance?
3. Are they in agreement with the outcomes of actions and decisions? Why or why not?
4. If their suggestions or requests were not followed, did the adults explain the reasons to them, and do they understand those reasons?
5. Has the process been respectful and supportive?
6. Did they feel safe and protected at all times during their participation?
7. How have their lives changed since the participation: Are they participating more in family and community life? Do they feel more self-confident as a result of their participation?
8. What recommendations do they have for future child-participation programs/ activities? How can the process be improved?

Finally, you can ask the children what M & E questions they want to add, and what other comments they would like to make. (After all, even this exercise is a good opportunity to practice what we preach about children's participation!)

For further reading:

Child Participation Guidelines, no date. World Vision, Kenya

Ehlers, Louise and Cheryl Frank, 2008. *Child Participation*. Chapter in Julia Sloth-Nielsen, ed, *Children's Rights in Africa: A Legal Perspective*, Ashgate: Hampshire, England and Burlington, VT. pages 111-128

Family Health International, *Ethical Approaches to Gathering Information from Children and Adolescents in International Settings: Guidelines and Resources*, August 2005.

International HIV Alliance (no date). *Children's participation in HIV programming*. Queensberry House, 104-106 Queens Road, Brighton BN1 3XF, United Kingdom Tel: +44 1273 718 900 Fax: +44 1273 718 901 E-mail: mail@aid-salliance.org Website: www.aidsalliance.org

International HIV Alliance, 2004. *A Parrot on your shoulder – a guide for people starting to work with orphans and vulnerable children*. Queensberry House, 104-106 Queens Road, Brighton BN1 3XF, United Kingdom Tel: +44 1273 718 900 Fax: +44 1273 718 901 E-mail: mail@aid-salliance.org Website: www.aidsalliance.org

Save the Children UK: *Practice Standards in Children's Participation*, 2005. London, with the support of the Ministry of Development Cooperation, Government of the Netherlands, and *OVC Participation Report: Best Practice Guidelines from the Field*, no date. Save the Children UK (series of resource pamphlets)

Schenk, Katie & Jan Williamson, 2005. *Ethical Approaches to Gathering Information from Children and Adolescents in International Settings: Guidelines and Resource*. Washington, DC: Horizons/Population Council and Impact/ Family Health International

Vatsia, Usha, 2007. *Child and Youth Participation in Programming for Children Affected by HIV: A Literature Review of the Evidence*, Washington, DC Christian Children's Fund, Inc. & Joint Learning Initiative on Children and HIV/AIDS.

Reference endnotes:

- i From the brochure featuring the Children's Voices project of Positive Vibes, Namibia, 2008. www.positivevibes.org.
- ii International HIV/AIDS Alliance, *Children's participation in HIV/AIDS programming* (no date). Queensberry House, 104-106 Queens Road, Brighton BN1 3XF, United Kingdom Tel: +44 1273 718 900 Fax: +44 1273 718 901 E-mail: mail@aid-salliance.org Website: www.aidsalliance.org; also Save the Children-UK, *OVC Participation Report* (no date), Resource Sheet 4 "Best Practice Guidelines from the Field".
- iii S Arnstein, "A Ladder of Citizen Participation", *JAIP*, Vol 35, No 4, July 1969, pp 216-224.
- iv International HIV/AIDS Alliance (2004), *A parrot on your shoulder: A guide for people starting to work with orphans and vulnerable children*. Queensberry House, 104-106 Queens Road, Brighton BN1 3XF, United Kingdom Tel: +44 1273 718 900 Fax: +44 1273 718 901 E-mail: mail@aid-salliance.org Website: www.aidsalliance.org.
- v Adapted from http://www.mcs.bc.ca/ya_ladd.htm and from "Background Handouts" in *Youth Participation Guide*, YouthNet Project, Family Health International, USAID, 2005.
- vi *National Guidelines and Standards of Practice on Orphans and Vulnerable Children*, 2007, Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development, Federal Republic of Nigeria, Abuja, Nigeria.