



CHILD PARTICIPATION

A Guide to Encouraging Child Participation



This guide was developed in collaboration with:

Ștefan COJOCARU, Luminița COSTACHE,
Daniela COJOCARU, Simona APOPEI, Anda IONESCU, Diana PRICOPE, Alexandra SASU

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Dear Readers,



Child participation is not just a theoretical concept but an essential reality for their harmonious development and for building an inclusive society. This guide, *Child Participation: A Guide to Encouraging Child Participation*, is addressed to everyone who has the responsibility and privilege of supporting children in expressing their opinions, making decisions, and actively engaging in their lives - be it parents, educators, community members, or professionals from various fields.

From explaining the basic principles of participation to highlighting the difference between authentic and formal participation, this guide offers a clear and well-structured approach. It explores key contexts such as the family, educational institutions, and local communities, reflecting the complexity and diversity of the participatory process.

By promoting children's rights and encouraging a respectful and inclusive approach, the guide provides the tools necessary to create safe spaces where children feel heard, valued, and involved. It is a valuable resource emphasizing that child participation is not only a right but also an opportunity to build their confidence, autonomy, and ability to influence the world around them.

We hope this guide will inspire and guide each of us in creating an environment where children can truly participate, thereby contributing to the development of stronger, fairer, and more prosperous communities.

With respect and gratitude for all those investing in the future of children,

Prof. Dr. Ștefan Marian COJOCARU
President, HoltIS Association

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Ștefan Marian Cojocaru'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the left.

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WHO IS THIS GUIDE FOR?

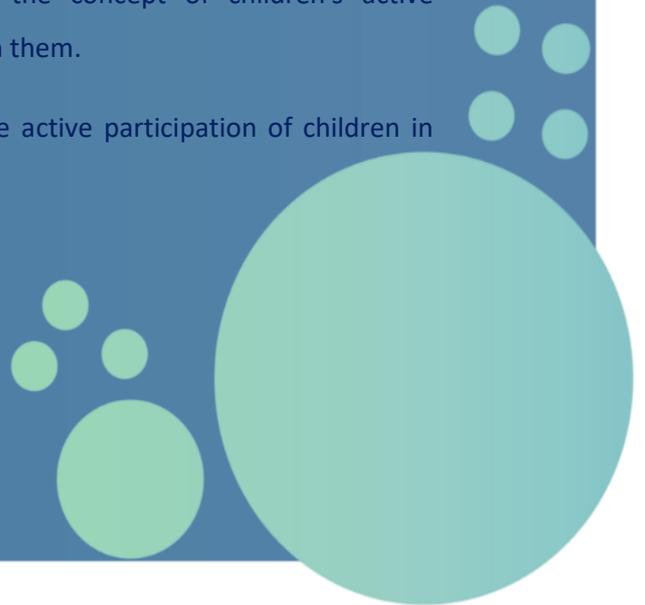


This guide is intended for teachers and professionals who interact with children.

The guide contains useful information about the active participation of children in decisions and actions that affect them. It is meant as a tool to promote the active participation of children in family, school and community life.

This guide contains useful information regarding the concept of children's active participation in the decisions and actions that concern them.

The guide aims to become a tool for promoting the active participation of children in family, school and community life.





MOTTO



“The proper education of the young does not consist in stuffing their heads with a mass of words, sentences, and ideas dragged together out of various authors, but in opening up their understanding to the outer world.”

(John Amos Comenius)

KEY MESSAGES



- A child gains a sense of responsibility and self-confidence through their participation and involvement in decisions and activities according to their developmental stage, starting from an early age.
- The opinion of a child is just as important as that of an adult.

OBJECTIVES



By the end of this session, teachers will:

- Know the legal framework on child participation.
- Know the basic principles of participation.
- Understand the importance of children’s involvement and participation in decisions and activities that affect them.
- Become aware of how they involve children in different activities.
- Learn new ways to involve children in different activities and decisions.
- Understand the importance of building a positive relationship with the child.
- Know the difference between real participation and false participation.



WHAT IS PARTICIPATION?



In Lewis Carroll's "Alice in Wonderland", we find Alice on her way through the Tulgey Wood, talking to the Cheshire Cat at a crossroads:

- "Cheshire Puss, would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?"
- "That depends a good deal on where you want to get to", said the Cat.
- "I don't much care where," said Alice.
- "Then it doesn't matter which way you go," said the Cat.
- "...So long as I get somewhere", Alice added as an explanation.
- "Oh, you're sure to do that", said the Cat, "if you only walk long enough." (Lewis, 2010).

When a parent or a teacher is asked "How would you want your child to be like when they grow up?", some of the most common answers are: "determined", "independent", "full of initiative", "capable of making the right decisions", "responsible", etc. That is the end of the road according to the adults who raise and educate children. Once you have set your destination, it is much easier to start off in the right direction. If you want the future adult to be "responsible", "determined", "independent", "full of initiative", "capable of making the right decisions", you need to take the road that gives your child the opportunity to develop these skills and abilities, namely the road on which they are allowed to express themselves, to be heard, to try, to learn to accept the consequences of their decisions, to be supported and encouraged to carry on after a disappointment and, very importantly, *to actively participate in their life journey*.

If you know where you want to get, it is easy to decide which way to go.

The child's participation in the actions that affect them builds the road that the adult has to take with the child to reach the "destination" that will allow the child to grow into an adult who can live as an independent, responsible individual who respects the rights of others. For today's child to turn into an adult who has these qualities, they need to learn how to negotiate, to accept the consequences of a decision, to express their thoughts and feelings without fear, to carry out activities that help them understand the logic of things, etc. Paradoxically, although adults want their children to fight for what they want, when the latter try to negotiate the number of cartoons they can watch, adults don't even try to meet them halfway and they make the decision on their own: "You can only watch one cartoon, because I'm your mother and I know what's best for you". Or they don't let the child experiment in the kitchen because they are in a hurry and don't have the patience to clean up after the child. It is not fair to



ask the child to do things “right” if you haven’t had the time, the patience and the willingness to teach them.

Participation is a way of being.

Participation is a way of being, cultivated through a lot of exercise and constant practice. A 3-year-old child can have brilliant ideas and the adult can see that if they just listen to the child carefully.

According to UNICEF¹, “child participation involves encouraging and enabling children to make their views known on issues that affect them. Put into practice, participation is adults listening to children — to all their multiple and varied ways of communicating. It ensures their freedom to express themselves and takes their views into account when coming to decisions that affect them. Engaging children in dialogue and exchange allows them to learn constructive ways of influencing the world around them.”

There are two traditional approaches to child and youth education. On the one hand, the child is seen as vulnerable, helpless, and needing protection from the dangerous world of adults. This means that, in order to become a well-balanced and responsible adult, the child has to have a carefree childhood, without responsibilities (Hart, 1992, p. 5). On the other hand, the child is seen as a passive and immature creature, an empty vessel to be filled, needing to acquire the right skills, competencies, and knowledge in order to survive in the adult world. According to De Winter, these approaches are based on the paradigm of deficiency (1995, p. 143) and focus on what the child is NOT capable of doing and what the adult can do for the child.

In contrast to this perception, participation is viewed as an alternative to traditional education, focusing on what the child can do, on their potential and how it can be used and developed. This approach sees the child as a human being who shows potential and specific abilities as well as specific needs and interests. The child’s abilities, competencies and skills are key features of their potential and help them identify and meet their own needs and interests, without outside intervention or the presence of adults to define their needs and interests. The adult’s perspective has a great influence on the child’s participation. Focusing on problems and inabilities only exacerbates them, while focusing on strengths and abilities leads to positive participation experiences, encourages the repetition of participatory processes, and yields the desired results (Cojocar, 2005).

¹ <http://www.unicef.org/sowc03/contents/childparticipation.html>;



Participation reflects the child's interests and needs.

Children's participation and active involvement in solving the problems that affect their lives involve fostering their ability to identify and cover their needs and interests (Masschelein & Quaghebeur, 2005).

This idea is also supported by Flekkøy (1999), who argues that babies are capable of at least "rudimentary ways of expressing" themselves to make themselves heard, even if their "opinions" or "feelings" are more difficult to understand. He claims that this rudimentary communication is not just a way of expressing oneself, but the beginning of the decision-making, planning and problem-solving process. The baby's participatory potential or ability is also understood as reflecting both a need and the child's desire to express their point of view, to practise making choices in their interaction with others. Because of this need or desire for competence – as Hart (1992, p. 23) calls it – that the child displays, participation is considered as necessary as an irrevocable right (Masschelein & Quaghebeur, 2005). The literature on participation promotes the idea that there is a general set of abilities, like self-reflection and self-expression, that help each individual function or perform. Other approaches look at the ability to take perspectives, at social and communication skills enabling the understanding and interpretation of environments, at the abilities to construct and negotiate meanings (Van Gils, 2001, p. 26), to influence one's own behaviour and others' behaviour (Flekkøy, 1999, p. 50), to learn from experiences, to actively practise decision making, to identify problems, to reflect and act as experts upon our own lives (Hart, 1992, p. 29; Van Dinter, 1999, p. 48). From this perspective, participation is a tool that allows children to achieve performance and function at their best.

Participation is a way of raising children who are adapted to the current social context.

In the communist society, characterised by the lack of social classes and by social equality for all members, the policy of uniformity imposed a type of child education that would deter any attempts to break the rules or the pattern. Adults would pass on information to children and promote the type of citizen that the state wanted: an obedient, compliant, loyal and dependent individual. Capitalist society promotes competitive markets and therefore builds creative, resourceful, independent members who have as much as they deserve. Still, paradoxically, although the system fosters this individual typology, today's family dynamics, the resignification of domestic life, the profound changes in parenthood and the social construction of childhood and the institutionalisation of parental functions place children at the heart of institutional rhetoric; yet interventions targeting children and child participation opportunities



are insufficient (Cojocaru, 2008). So, if we want independent children who can manage in the current social context, it is necessary to promote and practise child participation as an educational tool. Roger Hart highlights the connection between participation and the concept of manipulation or domination, seeing participation as “an important antidote to traditional educational practice which runs the risk of leaving youth alienated and open to manipulation” (Hart, 1992, p. 43).



WHY IS CHILD PARTICIPATION IMPORTANT?

The World Health Organisation defines participation as “the nature and extent of a person’s involvement in life situations” and looks at it in terms of mobility, information exchange, social relationships, education, work and employment, community, school, and family. This is a broad definition that includes children’s involvement in school and leisure activities (World Health Organisation, 2001). Getting involved in activities is considered a vital part of children’s lives (Hendry, 1983; Larson, 2000). Participation is important to children’s well-being. The way in which children are involved in school, family or community activities influences their quality of life (Felce & Perry, 1992). Lack of opportunities to participate prevents children from exploring the social, intellectual, and emotional worlds and hinders their development. It is important to understand the factors and processes that enable children to engage in activities, because if you grasp the importance of participation, you can encourage participation and remove barriers to children’s involvement (Brown & Gordon, 1987). Participation contributes to children’s success and is crucial to their emotional and psychological development (Larson & Verma 1999; Larson, 2000; Forsyth & Jarvis, 2002; Simeonsson et al. 2001). Participation in activities outside school – for example, interacting with family members and friends – is recognised as the most important enabler of learning and prosperity (Larson & Verma, 1999). Child participation is also important for the following reasons:

- It boosts the child’s self-confidence.
- It channels the child’s energy in a direction that is useful for the parent and creative for the child.
- Children accept more easily the things that need to be done.
- It helps increase the child’s self-esteem.
- It helps the child create their own style.
- It reduces the child’s dependency on parents.
- It develops the child’s ability to cooperate with others and to work in a team.
- It develops children’s ability to listen to other people’s opinions.
- It gives parents the opportunity to identify certain problems and address them in a timely manner.
- Children feel they are in control.
- It is a way of making children more accountable.
- It develops the child’s ability to reflect.
- It allows the child to find answers to certain questions on their own as a result of the analytical process they have to go through to perform certain tasks or to make decisions.
- It develops children’s decision-making skills.
- The child’s opinion can offer a new perspective that the parent hasn’t considered.



- The solution adopted after hearing the child’s views may be more adapted to their needs.
- The child has the chance to stretch their imagination and creativity.
- The parent has the opportunity to get to know their child through the choices they make.
- It makes the child-adult relationship more harmonious.
- It strengthens the relationship between the adults and the child by building trust and communication and through the activities they do together.
- It makes the adult’s job easier as the child can help with small tasks.
- Overall, children’s participation in decisions and actions that affect them fosters development and progress.

Every child and every young person like to feel important, appreciated, meaningful to society. Accountability can build self-confidence, self-respect, and a sense of solidarity (De Winter, 1995, p. 12). Obviously, participation needs a balanced approach. To produce the desired effects, it is important to follow the rules that make it an effective tool. Involving the child more than they can handle turns into abuse. In conclusion, participation is recommended as an individual investment in the development of children’s skills and abilities. Participation impacts individuals, making them act on their own interests as self-determining, self-controlling, self-reliant, competent, and autonomous actors (Masschelein & Quaghebeur, 2005).

CHILDREN’S RIGHTS. GENERAL ASPECTS.

Children’s rights are defined as basic rules that allow children to live in dignity and develop in a healthy manner. The document that sets out these rights is the Convention on the Rights of the Child², an international agreement stipulating a clear set of fundamental rights for all children and young people under the age of 18. It was unanimously adopted by the UN General Assembly in November 1989 and, so far, it has been ratified by 191 countries. These countries are bound by international law to fulfil the rights of their children. The Convention on the Rights of the Child has 54 articles and 42 of them refer strictly to children’s rights. These are classified as:

- Protection rights.
- Development rights.
- Participation rights.

²<http://legislatie.resurse-pentru-democratie.org/legea/conventia-cu-privire-la-drepturile-copilului-1989.php>



Protection rights – Considering the physical, intellectual, and emotional vulnerability of the child, protection rights aim to provide the necessary framework for protecting the child from risky situations. Below are some of the rights specified in the Hague Convention which fall into this category.

- The right of the child to be protected by his or her parents, the local community, or the state from any form of violence, abuse, exploitation; safeguards for refugee children, for those who are deprived of their family and for children with disabilities; and the right of children adopted abroad to special care and protection from all forms of exploitation harmful to any aspect of their well-being.
- The right to identity.
- The right to be protected from economic exploitation and from any work that might pose a threat or affect their health.
- The right to get protection from the state against involvement in drug trafficking or sexual exploitation and/or violence.
- The right of the child to be protected from direct involvement in an armed conflict before the age of 15 years, etc.

The Romanian legislation guarantees these rights under Law No 272/2004 on the protection and promotion of children's rights, republished in 2014³. Regarding these rights, it is very important to mention children's right to be raised by their own parents and not be separated from their parents against their will, unless expressly prescribed by law (Article 38), children's right to alternative care (Article 39) as well as the right to maintain personal relations and direct contact with parents, relatives, and other persons to whom the child is attached.

Development rights – They refer to the availability of and access to all types of basic services, such as education and health care. These rights are specifically stipulated in the Hague Convention on the Rights of the Child and are mainly covered by the Romanian Law No 272/2004 as well as by other regulations:

- The right to health and access to health care and rehabilitation services.
- The right to education.
- The right of the child to rest and leisure, to participate freely in cultural and artistic life, according to his or her age and abilities etc.

³ http://www.dreptonline.ro/legislatie/legea_protectiei_copilului.php



Participation rights – They regulate children’s involvement in decisions that affect them. Participation rights are closely linked to the child’s mental and moral development. In other words, they provide that children can make different decisions at different ages, depending on their mental and moral development. This category includes the following rights:

- The right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them.
- The right to be heard in all proceedings affecting them.
- The right to seek and receive any relevant information, to be consulted, to express their views and to be informed about the consequences of their views, if taken into consideration, as well as about the consequences of any decision that affects them.
- The right to freedom of expression.
- The right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion.
- The right to freedom of association in formal and informal structures and freedom of peaceful assembly within the limits of the law.
- The right to lodge a complaint on their own when their fundamental rights are violated.

Law No 272/2004 on the protection and promotion of children’s rights, republished in 2014, sets forth the right of the child to freedom of expression – Article 28(1) – and the right to freely express their views in all matters affecting them – Article 29(1).

The Convention on the Rights of the Child is based on *four fundamental principles*⁴:

- *Non-discrimination*. These rights apply to all children “irrespective of the child’s or his or her parent’s or legal guardian’s race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status”.
- *Best interests of the child*. Children’s best interests must be a primary consideration in all decisions and actions affecting them, regardless of who makes the decision (a public authority or the family).
- *Survival and development*. Children have the right to survive and to reach their potential in all aspects of life: physically, mentally, emotionally, cognitively, socially, and culturally.
- *Respect for the views of the child*. Children need to be accepted as active participants in the events that affect their lives and allowed to freely express their views on those matters. They have the right to be heard and taken seriously.

⁴ http://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conven%C8%9Bia_asupra_Drepturilor_Copilului#cite_note-2



The fourth principle, concerning the right of the child to participate, is best expressed in Article 12 of the Convention and provides that the child who is capable of forming his or her own views on all aspects of life affecting him or her has the right to express those views freely.

According to the National Authority for the Protection of Children's Rights and Adoption⁵, participation rights allow children to have a say in their lives. They give children the opportunity to express their views, to talk about the issues that are important to them and to seek and receive information that is relevant to them. In some cases, Romanian law explicitly allows children to have a say in specific matters after a certain age.

For example:

- Children who have reached the age of 10 have the right to express their views in any judicial or administrative proceedings affecting them.
- Children have the right to choose their own religion at the age of 16, while their religion cannot be changed without their consent even before the age of 14.
- Children who have reached the age of 14 can request the court to change the type of their vocational training.
- Children can develop income-generating services with their parents' approval.

Certain European countries have set up local children's councils attached to their local or county councils. Local leaders and children attend the meetings of these councils and discuss the issues that affect the children in their community. Thus, children not only learn to work as a team and take on responsibilities, but they also develop their civic spirit. Moreover, thanks to their age, they offer a unique perspective, which can be very useful in taking appropriate action to address problems that affect children. Also, in order to learn to look at things from someone else's perspective, it is important for them to be involved in a two-way process, that is, to also be allowed to express their own perspectives.

Another example is Ireland, where "a Code of Children's Advertising was developed. This was done by the National Children's Office from Ireland in cooperation with the Broadcasting Commission of Ireland, with the active participation of more than 80 children aged 8 to 17. The children expressed their views and ideas about advertising and its effects. When they drafted the Code, the authorities took into consideration many of these views"⁶.

⁵ http://www.copii.ro/drepturi_participare.html

⁶ http://www.mdpl.ro/documente/publicatii/2005/ghidul_parintilor.pdf



Children are the most wasted and misused natural resources in the civilised world.

Apart from these examples, there are many other ways in which children can make themselves useful. Research shows that *children are the most wasted and misused natural resources in the civilised world*. With so many wonderful ideas, so much energy and unfettered idealism, they have a tremendous power to push their views (Clark, 2005). Children's ideas, opinions and influence are worthy of consideration (Prout & James, 19979; Mayall, 2002). At home and in school, it is important for parents and teachers to discover children's strengths early on and give them the chance to harness them. The changing social context requires a shift in the way we treat children. At the macro level, since the late 1980s, scholars, politicians and members of the public have been increasingly advocating for educational practices that include children, citizens, students, parents, and teachers. For the first time in history, the Convention on the Rights of the Child treats the child as a person with rights rather than a person that parents have to protect. This new perspective impacts not only children but also those who raise and educate them. Therefore, it is the adults who have to alter their attitudes towards children so as to ensure their legal rights (Males, Kusevic, & Siranoviv, 2014).



KEY PRINCIPLES OF PARTICIPATION



To ensure the meaningful participation of children, *four key principles* should be followed, as proposed by Save the Children International in *Practice Standards in Children's Participation* (2005).

- *An ethical approach: transparency, honesty, accountability.*

The adult who raises and educates the child should take transparent actions and be honest in their relationship with the child so that the latter can gain a sense of responsibility. This means informing the child about the purpose of the actions, the steps that need to be taken and the benefits and consequences of those actions. Accountability requires the adult to be well aware of the child's developmental stage and to involve the child in developmentally appropriate activities.

- *A child-friendly environment.*

The safer and friendlier the environment in which the child tries out new things, the more actively involved they will be in those activities.

- *Equality of opportunity.*

Participation has to provide equal opportunities to all children, without discrimination based on religion, sex, ethnicity, economic status etc.

- *Participation promotes child safety and protection.*

Children should be involved only after a safe environment has been secured for the proposed activities. Risks cannot be fully minimised with some activities and the child will have to learn how to manage even in more challenging situations.



LEVELS OF PARTICIPATION



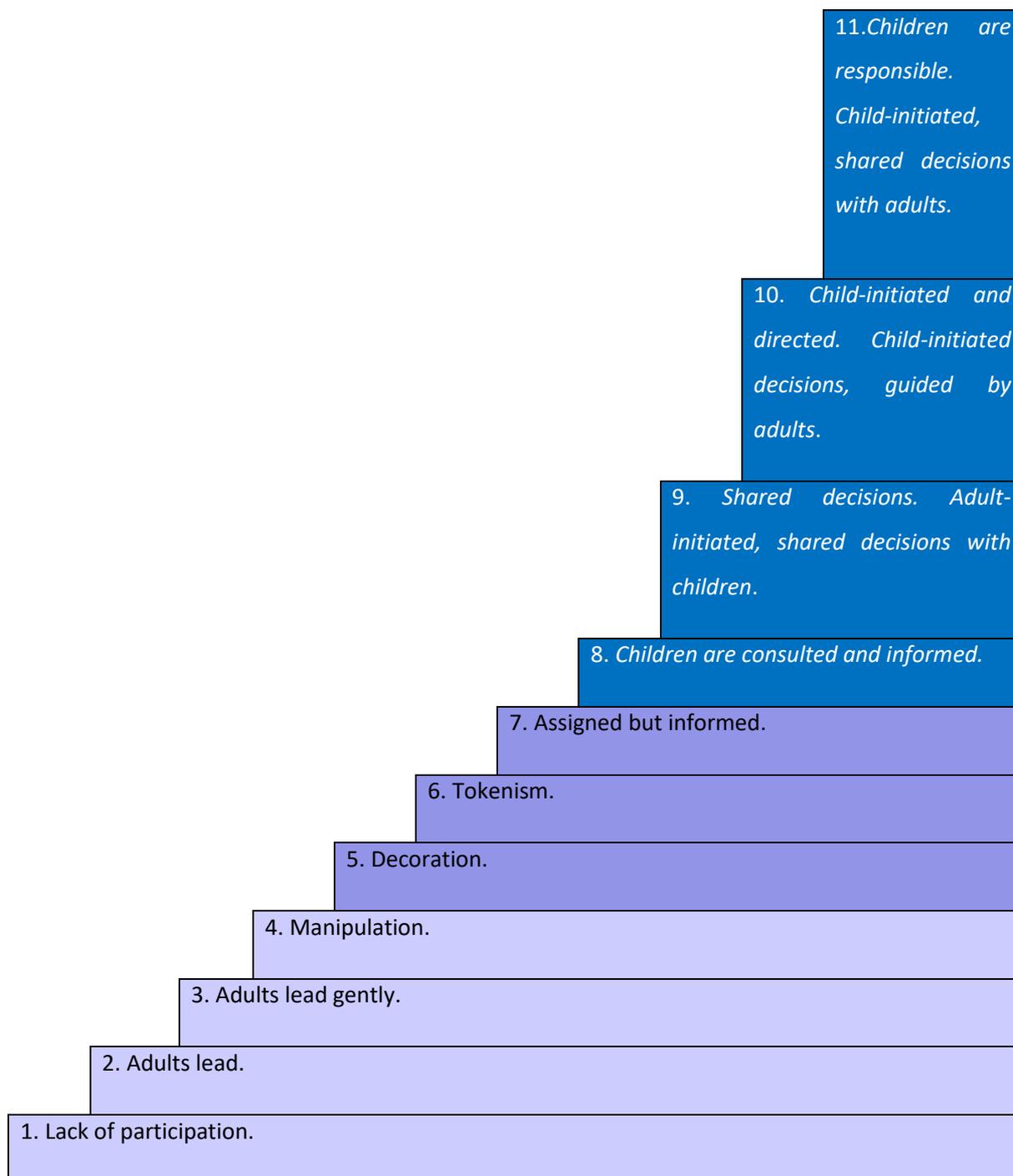
Children's involvement in the decision making is a process that takes place gradually, according to the child's developmental stage. Hart (1992) developed an instrument for analysing the level of children's participation in projects, called the "Ladder of Participation". This is a model for involving children in activities in which they have to work with adults. He sees participation as a three-level process:

- Non-participation.
- Basic participation.
- Participation.



In turn, each level has several rungs.

This is how the “Ladder of Participation” designed by Roger A. Hart (1992) looks like:



Rungs 1, 2 and 3 reflect the non-participation of children and young people in the activities. Here, the only ones leading are the adults, while children are not allowed to make any decisions or get involved in activity planning and evaluation as they are merely the beneficiaries, with others doing all the work. Children are passive because they are not encouraged to engage as they are considered helpless,



immature and having nothing important to say to the adults who know everything and “know better” what the child needs.

The lowest rung of basic participation – Manipulation (Rung 4): Children do not understand the essence of the project and the purpose of their own actions. Such manipulation under the guise of participation is hardly an appropriate way to introduce children to democratic processes. This is sometimes due to the fact that adults are not aware of children’s capabilities.

Decoration (Rung 5) is close to manipulation, but in this case the adults do not pretend that the children initiated the activity. They simply use the children to support and “embellish” an activity.

Tokenism (Rung 6) means making a symbolic effort, reform for the sake of reform. The term can describe the way in which children are used during meetings, conferences, and other public activities. Articulate, charming, good-looking children, selected by adults, participate in discussions on subjects in which they have no competence. Moreover, no explanation is given of how these children were selected and whose interests they represent. Regrettably, no matter how theatrical their speeches are, they will not only receive applause – a symbol of formal approval – but also leave the impression of real participation.

Assigned but informed (Rung 7). In order to ensure real participation at this level, the project has to meet several requirements:

- Children understand and agree with the aims and tasks of the project.
- Children know who is making the decisions concerning their participation and why.
- Their role is meaningful and clear to them, they are not merely decorative in adults’ actions.
- Children get involved in the project of their own free will after they have understood its purpose.

Participation builds motivation that increases competence which, in turn, sparks the motivation to participate in future projects.

Consulted and informed (Rung 8). Children can be valuable consultants to adults. No one can explain better what is wrong with a shoe than the person whose foot that shoe has hurt. At this level, ideas, goals, and tasks are all set and analysed by adults, but children are involved in the process as they are consulted in the design stage and their views are taken seriously. The product is adjusted based on their evaluation and recommendations. Nevertheless, adults have the final say.

Shared decisions (Rung 9). Decisions are made with the children on the initiative of the adults. Although the activity is initiated by the adults, decisions are shared with the children.



Child-initiated and directed (Rung 10). Child-initiated decisions, guided by adults. We can think of many instances where children invent their own games or leisure activities: from sand castles to role-playing. Unfortunately, it is hard to find examples of child-initiated social projects, although children are often much more sensitive to the needs of others. This is due to the fact that adults don't support their initiatives. Even when they allow children to draw on walls, adults can hardly refrain from giving them directions.

Through their effective participation in projects that involve solving actual problems, children develop their critical thinking skills and the ability to compare different views, which are so important for their self-assertion. This has a dual benefit: the child's self-expression and the democratisation of society.

The highest level of participation – *child-initiated, shared decisions with adults (Rung 11)* – describes the almost ideal way of involving children in the decision making. This type of decision-making puts adults and children on the same level as their views are equally respected; decisions are negotiated by two actors in similar positions and each one of them has a valuable contribution to future actions.

The “Ladder of Participation” can contribute to increasing child and youth participation, but it should not be considered a tool for measuring the quality of activities since there are many factors that influence the extent to which young people participate, including adults' attitudes to participation (Hart, 1992).



FALSE PARTICIPATION VERSUS REAL PARTICIPATION

In order to get a clear picture of what it means for children to really participate in the actions that affect them and to make sure we don't confuse real participation with false participation, we propose a "Real Participation Checklist" (European Youth Exchange Moldova, 2004). The proposed model can be used to analyse children's participation in family, school, and community life.

Real participation	False participation
It is voluntary. Real participation is something a child wants to do.	It is coerced. Children are forced to participate against their will; they are compelled to "voluntarily" get involved in the activities.
It is fair. Real participation is inclusive – it encourages everyone to get equally involved. There is no discrimination on the basis of gender, income, geographical area, place, ethnicity, disability etc.	It is unfair. Practically, the activities are only accessible to children from rich families or from the city; only boys or excellent students are selected for the meetings.
It is appreciative. Real participation means that everyone involved, including children, is valued, heard, and taken seriously.	It is unappreciative. Children are present, but they are given few opportunities to participate. When they do participate, they are not really listened to, they are laughed at or their views are not taken into consideration.
It is respectful. Real participation means that participants have a caring and respectful attitude towards each other, without mockery and superiority.	It is disrespectful. The adult ignores the children or talks to them in a way which shows them that their presence and ideas are not appreciated.
It is meaningful. With real participation, the little ones understand the meaning of the activity.	It is meaningless. Children are simply told what to do, but they don't really know or truly understand why they do it.
It matters. Real participation happens when the topic or issue discussed is important and interesting to children.	It is insignificant. Children are forced to take part in activities that don't really interest them and they



	thus get the impression that they are wasting their time.
It changes something. Real participation means that children’s contribution has an influence on the matter and changes the way things are.	It is formal. Children are not allowed to influence processes or are asked to come up with ideas that are later ignored.
It creates a physical environment that is appropriate for participation. It matters a lot how participants are seated.	It has no regard for children’s comfort. Adults sit on chairs, while children sit on the floor in the back of the room.
It uses child-friendly language. Real participation makes children feel competent and comfortable in the communication environment.	It uses sophisticated language. Discussions are held in a foreign language although they take place in a rural region, or the manner of speaking is very formal and full of “fancy words”.
It sets fair rules for all. Real participation creates the conditions for everyone to participate equally and comfortably. Children are often involved in the rule-setting process.	It is discriminatory. Some adults dominate the discussion, while children are not allowed to speak or are interrupted too soon. They are forced to express themselves in a manner they don’t know or don’t like.
Participants are adequately informed and prepared. Real participation means that children have had enough opportunities, support, and time to prepare.	It does not bring everyone up to speed. Adults come in with experience and information, while children are included in a hurry, without understanding what is going on and with no time to prepare.
Roles are assigned fairly. Responsibilities are distributed fairly, and participants are given every opportunity to take on the roles they can play.	Responsibilities are not balanced. Parents or teachers make all the decisions and set the rules, while children just answer questions.
It is ongoing. Real participation is clear and transparent about how it will continue and how it relates to other processes. Many times, the aim is to institutionalise participation to make it sustainable.	It is unstable. Young people are actively involved in significant work, but it is not clear what will happen next or how their contribution will be used. The activity report is neither shared with the whole group nor checked with the children.



PARTICIPATORY CONTEXTS



As mentioned above, since the late 1980s, scholars, politicians and members of the public have been increasingly advocating for educational practices that include children, citizens, students, parents, and teachers. Child participation is a process that starts in the family at a very young age. It continues with children's active participation in the life of the school and, later, in the life of the local community. Hart (1997) also mentions children's active participation in the life of the state and of the international community.

CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION IN THE FAMILY

Family is the first social context in which children can practise taking part in activities or decisions. The way in which they are involved contributes to their future development as adults. In the family setting, they can have a say in simple matters, such as choosing which homework assignment they want to do first, or in complex matters, like choosing the parent they want to live with if their parents get a divorce. Ways in which children can get involved in family activities and decisions that affect them:

- They are listened to, like any adult in the house, when they express their views about an activity affecting the whole family: a purchase, what to cook for dinner, their holiday destination etc.
- They need to be consulted about decisions that affect them: which kindergarten/school, high school, college/university to attend, what clothes to wear today, how they want their room to look like etc.
- Involve the child in setting the family budget – how much money is allocated and for what purposes – so that they can better understand the things they can afford, the priorities etc.
- Talk to them about the problems that the family sometimes goes through, but within certain boundaries so as not to burden them with adult problems too early; this will make them realise that they are not the only ones who have problems.
- Negotiate rules with them: their bedtime or when they have to come back from the playground, how much time is reserved for play/meeting with friends, the days when they are on kitchen duty etc.
- Choose a family activity to frequently carry out together, as agreed by all family members.
- Provide alternatives and give the child a choice: "Would you rather practise the piano for 10 minutes in the morning and 10 minutes in the evening or for 20 minutes at a time?".
- Parents should always show interest in what children are doing at school.



- Have at least one family meal a day and involve the child in preparing the meal or clearing the table.
- Help the child cope with any challenging situations which may arise.
- Adults should frequently mention the joy of being their children’s parents.
- It is important for adults to smile when they see their child.

CHILDREN’S PARTICIPATION IN THE LIFE OF THE SCHOOL

School is an institution with its own structure and rules, where formative and educational processes are being implemented. This means that, on the one hand, it is an educational establishment, and, on the other hand, it is a social institution, a legal entity and a workplace. School builds the knowledge, skills and competencies on which society’s cultural system is based. In discussing educational practices and institutions, De Winter (2002) argues that they have been “raising *big* children by keeping them *small*” for too long. He refers to the prevalent ideas and practices embraced by parents and teachers, who raise children without giving them the opportunity to express themselves or involving them in their own education, thinking that they are too young and inexperienced to be able to make decisions about their own lives.

Regardless of educational practices, students *want* to decide on everyday school matters like: what food they are served, how the school is set up, which classmates they want to work or sit with or what homework they have to prepare.

The teacher’s role is to facilitate and “support” children’s participation in the learning process. In school, the rules and regulations, the timetable and the curriculum can determine the extent to which ideal participation is achievable; also, the activities have to be adapted to existing conditions (Centre for Educational Development and Innovation, 2006). Student participation in school and community life should not be understood as involving exclusively extracurricular activities or decision making. It also means information, reflection, taking a stand on a matter or an opinion, consultation, cooperation, starting an action and getting involved in the decision making. In the light of this, we can split the concept of participation into actual behaviours based on the following elements (Centre for Educational Development and Innovation, 2006):



				<i>5. Action</i>
			<i>4. Dialogue and decision</i>	Students propose solutions; start action; involve others; help those around them; join their schoolmates actions when they agree with their purpose and the way in which they are carried out; action starts from "little" things: respect, solidarity, honesty, responsibility etc.
	<i>2. Reflection</i>	<i>3. Attitude</i>	Students talk to those around them; argue their opinions; listen to what others have to say; respect the views of others and their right to an opinion; take responsibility; get involved when decisions are made; become aware of their own responsibilities.	
<i>1. Information</i>	Students filter the information; consider what is "good" or "bad"; ask for "reliable" information from trustworthy sources; consider all options available; estimate the consequences of an action.	Students adopt a certain attitude towards specific events or matters; express their points of view; argue; explain.		
Students read; seek information; know what is going on in school, in their community, in their country; ask questions; listen.				

Ways of encouraging children's participation in the life of the school:

- Involve young children in the planning of classroom activities.
- Provide opportunities for all children to participate.
- Assign tasks according to each child's capabilities.
- Foster a participatory climate in all classes.



- Transparently promote participation. Children need to be encouraged to get involved.
- Give children the opportunity to decide what homework they want to do (e.g., “You can write an essay on topic A or on topic B”).
- Encourage them to take part in administrative activities at school (cleaning activities once a month).
- Involve them in decisions about extracurricular activities.
- Give them homework assignments they can do as a team/group.
- Give them the opportunity to deliver presentations on subjects they are passionate about.
- Make sure that the child’s educational path reflects first and foremost their personal interests.
- Have children make a list of suggestions about how they could make their school friendlier and get them involved in putting their suggestions into practice.
- Contribute to the development of school projects by expressing their needs and solutions.
- Allow them to evaluate their teachers and ensure that action is taken according to the results.
- Encourage children’s creativity in various tasks.
- Ensure the involvement of student representatives in school boards, at least as observers, or in other bodies – student councils etc.

CHILDREN’S PARTICIPATION IN THE LIFE OF THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

The local community includes the neighbours, the school, the playground, the neighbourhood, or the whole locality. The current tendency is to individualise actions and to institutionalise the responsibilities that were once held by community members: the elderly and the sick are the responsibility of institutions alone, with community members rarely looking after them; cleaning is the responsibility of professional companies rather than a task for people in the community etc. (Hart, 1997). When adults are no longer involved in taking care of their community, there is no positive role model to pass on to children. Learning to respect one’s community and getting involved in its life are prerequisites for societal development. “Participating in the life of the community at all levels depends on the willingness and capacity of individuals to engage with each other” (O’Shea, 2002). “An individual learns about participation through participation rather than learning about participation” (O’Shea, 2002).

Children can be involved in the life of their community in different ways, such as:

- Get to know their community.
- Make a portfolio of places that are worth visiting in their community.
- Get to know the names of all the children in their building.
- Read a book about their town/village.



- Come up with ideas to render their community more beautiful and put at least one of them into practice.
- Make a sightseeing map of the community for potential visitors of similar age.
- Pay regular visits to an elderly or sick person nearby.
- Plant a tree/flower with their mother/father and take care of it.
- Donate toys/books/clothes to underprivileged children.
- Help a schoolmate with homework.
- Pick up paper with other children in their building or on their street once a month.
- Organise an annual flea market where children can exchange things they no longer need.



TAKEAWAYS!



Children's participation should be according to their age and developmental stage.

Children's participation in activities and decisions which affect them should consider the abilities they have at that moment. A very young child with insufficiently developed motor skills will be engaged only in activities involving the use of safe objects and under adult supervision. Also, the decisions that can benefit from the child's opinion have to consider the child's reasoning capacity. The same rule applies for children's participation in the life of the school and in the life of the community. Children with disabilities can be involved using methods that are adapted to everyone. It is very important to respect the uniqueness of every child, to build on their strengths and to avoid comparing children both at home and in school (Simeonsson et al. 2001). By giving children doable tasks, adults can encourage them to get involved more often. They will be thrilled to feel useful and satisfied that they have accomplished something and that their opinion concerning a decision has been taken seriously. Responsibility builds over time, but the process starts at home with apparently small things.

Children's involvement and participation should increase as they grow and develop. Taking part in activities that respond to their needs provides the right context for developing skills and abilities while shaping their self-identity, creativity, and purpose in life (Desha & Ziviani, 2007). Hence, they will develop and grow into well-balanced, self-confident adults, capable of taking responsibility and making decisions on their own. As they grow up, children are more capable of fulfilling certain responsibilities. It is important to give your children new responsibilities so that they can understand better what it means to get things done. Children who are given tasks they can do are more likely to feel more part of the family and believe that they are making an important contribution to their own lives. As a parent, you need to be careful not to set unrealistic expectations regarding the responsibilities your child can take on (Kohn, 2013). Any tasks you give to your child should be according to their development, abilities, and age.

The child should be involved in a certain activity at the right time.

Involving children in an activity, especially when they are older, always comes with some risk. It is the adult's duty to assess whether the child can manage that risk and find the right moment for each participatory experience.



Engaging the child in an activity for which they are not ready yet can have the opposite effect to what is intended. Thus, the frequent inability to fulfil the tasks leads to a lack of self-confidence and a sense of failure (“I can’t do anything right”).

Participation starts with listening.

In order to find out children’s views, no matter what age they are, adults need to listen carefully and abandon the preconception that they know best because they have more experience. Precisely the lack of experience and patterns in the child’s thinking may help them come up with simple and right ideas.

Tips for effective listening (Holt Romania, 2011, p. 78):

- *Decide to listen.* If you consciously decide that you are ready to listen, that can help you become a better listener.
- *Make time for listening.* This is a precious gift. If right now is not a good time for you, set aside some “time for listening”.
- *Use body language to show you are listening.* Make eye contact, lean forward, nod, make simple sounds like “hmmm”, “ah” or “yes?”. With your children, get down to their eye level or bring them up to your eye level (e.g., lift them up on a chair or another piece of furniture).
- *Allow the speaker to express their feelings, regardless of their nature.* This does not mean that you have to accept the other person’s perceptions, only that you have to accept that this is how they feel at that moment. Feelings are real – they are not good or bad, right, or wrong.

Nevertheless, listening to the child is not enough to ensure their real participation. Their ideas and views need to be used, tested, and followed by feedback that gives them the confidence to continue to actively participate.

Participation demands availability from the adult.

Availability means time on the part of the adult as well as a certain state of mind.

Physical *time* is needed to listen to the child and understand their views, to monitor the activities they do – which they may carry out at a different pace, depending on their age – so that you can step in during the stages they are unable to complete, especially with younger children (for example, if you let a younger child get involved in making dough cakes, you might need more time to clean up afterwards). Time is also needed to learn the lessons that help them develop.



Availability also translates into a state of mind – a certain tranquillity, the desire to teach the child, the patience to explain the logic of things.

Participation is a gradual process.

Involving children in activities and decisions that affect them starts with the simplest matters and continues with increasingly difficult matters. A young child can be involved in simple, risk-free decisions, such as choosing what clothes to wear – “Do you want the green blouse or the yellow one?” – or which games to play – “Would you like to play with the cars or with the plane?”, “What colour do you want us to use for this part of the drawing?” etc. If we take children’s views into consideration and help them believe that they can make good decisions, they will eventually get involved in increasingly more difficult and riskier actions such as: household chores, shopping, school projects, different community actions etc.

Children are not perfect.

Children are not perfect, neither are adults. They should be accepted and praised for their intentions, initiatives, and efforts. They also need guidance and support in carrying out the tasks as well as an acknowledgement of their progress.

Child participation requires trust and tolerance.

Children can feel it when adults do not trust them. An adult can build trust in the child’s capabilities through practice, choosing the right time for certain tasks and involving them in tasks that are appropriate for their age and developmental stage. It is important for the adult to start by trusting the child and later validate that trust rather than wait for it to be earned ONLY after the child’s action.

Participatory experiences are better when they take place in a positive, appreciative context.

Participation is more effective when it happens naturally, not as another “assignment” that the child *must* do. For the child to want to do that again, it needs to be carried out with joy and pleasure, with patience on the part of the adult, building on the child’s strengths and acknowledging progress. In a



pleasant atmosphere, the child can relax and grasp much more information than when they are under stress.

Just looking is not enough to learn.

All individuals have three filters through which they perceive reality: the auditory filter, the visual filter and the kinaesthetic filter. In order to learn how to do something new, it is important for children to receive information through all the three sensory channels. Thus, to successfully teach a child how to cook an egg, we explain to them how to do it (auditory), we show them how to do it (visual) and then we let them cook it (kinaesthetic). Disregarding any of these three channels increases the time needed to learn the process or decreases the quality of the action. Just looking may be enough to learn how to do it. But, in order to gain self-confidence and independence, the child needs more than that: they need to actually participate in the action (Larson, 2000).



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