4. Children’s participation in policy and practice to prevent child sexual abuse – Developing empowering interventions

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Introduction

Child participation is an important component in the development of policies and practices that impact on child care services. All children and young people can play an important role in shaping the services that are designed to support them. This includes children and young people who have been sexually abused and who have experienced sexual violence. A central premise of the Council of Europe campaign to stop sexual violence against children is the involvement and participation of children and young people in establishing and maintaining the campaign. This chapter gives two examples of how sexually abused children and young people have been instrumental in developing effective services to prevent sexual violence and to support victims.

What is child sexual abuse?

It is important to understand that child sexual abuse is when a child or young person is used sexually by another who may, or may not, be known to them. The child or young person may be pressurised, forced or tricked through physical or non-physical contact into taking part in any kind of sexual activity, including being forced to view pornographic materials. The abuse may take place through use of technologies such as the Internet or mobile phones and the child may or may not be aware that the abuse is taking place. The abuser
may be a family member, may be someone holding a position of trust (such as a religious figurehead or a professional), or may be from rival communities or enemies in time of war. The abuse can take place within all racial or religious cultures and the abuser or victim may be male, female or transgender. Child sexual exploitation, where a child or young person willingly or unwillingly, knowingly or unknowingly, swaps or exchanges sexual activity for payment or reward, is also a form of child sexual abuse. Although there is some consensus between cultures, religions and different legislative frameworks across the world about what constitutes child sexual abuse, there are differences in the legal age of the child’s consent to sexual activity, the appropriate levels of supervision of children and the “treatment” of offenders. Despite these variations, there is considerable overarching agreement that child sexual abuse is a serious and underreported crime. In addition, there is increasing awareness of older young people as both victims and perpetrators of sexual abuse, raising intricate questions for practitioners about the relationship between welfare and justice interventions. In these cases, as in all others, the central message that comes from research in the field is that the victim is not to be blamed for the sexual abuse or exploitation they have experienced.13

Therapeutic work with victims of sexual violence can focus on helping the victim to acknowledge that the abuse was not their fault. This can be a long and complex process supported by the active participation of children and young people through child participation work. Once the young person begins to understand that they are not at fault for their abuse, they can be encouraged to take an active role in providing child-centred definitions of their experience, suggesting resources that might help and playing an active role in raising public awareness of the issues concerned. Two examples given below explore this in more detail. But first we need to explore what “child participation” is and why and how it has developed, considering the strengths and

13. For further clarity about forms of child sexual abuse, see Pearce, 2010; Sedlak et al., 2010; <http://www.nationalworkinggroup.co.uk>; and Council of Europe, 2008: Articles 18-23; Palermo Protocol, 2000: Article 3.
opportunities as well as the inherent problems in its employment as a method of working with sexually abused children and young people.

**What is child participation?**

The participation agenda “has its roots within international development work ... promoting the involvement of individuals and communities in all aspects of development” (Warrington, 2010:64). Participation recognises that those directly affected by issues are among those most able to define their problems and contribute to the development of appropriate solutions.

But what is participation, how is it affected and is it appropriate for children who have been sexually abused? Is participation an exclusive and tokenistic gesture or is it a genuine attempt to give real control to all young people, including those who may be vulnerable and abused? Can participation place an additional burden on an abused and damaged individual who needs therapeutic support rather than involvement in policy and practice decision-making procedures? Research has demonstrated that these questions are essential considerations for any service planning to develop child participation and that the full scope of participatory activities needs to be considered (Kirby et al., 2003:41). Providing a generic framework for these different interventions, Hart (1997:41) has produced a “ladder of par-

![Hart's Ladder of Participation](https://www.earthscan.co.uk)

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participation” which identifies different levels of young people’s involvement. He argued that participation is “the process of sharing decisions which affect one's life and the life of the community in which one lives. It is a means by which democracy is built and it is a standard against which democracies should be measured” (Hart, 1992:5).

While this ladder is helpful, the formulaic approach can falsely create a fixed hierarchy resulting in practitioners being fearful of failing to reach the ultimate aim at level 8. In contrast, it is helpful to look at the developing relationships between children, young people and adults as they negotiate their different positions of power and need. Coleman (2010) contrasts an “imperialist model” of relationships between adult and child (where adults assume power) with a “partnership” model where the bi-directionality of the interaction between child and adult is recognised. The partnership model notes a two-way process of power sharing, where the adult impacts on the child but also where the actions of the child impact on, and change the behaviour of, the adult. Principles of participation need to recognise both aim and process: the aim of reaching levels 5 to 8 in Hart’s model above and the process of how to achieve this through genuine “partnership” based interventions.

With this understanding it is helpful to consider the final question: is participation relevant for all young people, including those who have been sexually abused? The explanatory memorandum of the Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse notes that policy “must of necessity be informed by children’s own views and experiences in accordance with their evolving capacity”. It also recognises that the needs and welfare of the child are paramount, and that in many cases children and young people who have been sexually abused or exploited demonstrate significant mental, physical and sexual health problems and are in need of continued protection from abuse. Research into interventions with children and young people who have been victims of sexual violence argues that there are times when it would be inappropriate to ask or expect the victim to participate in service
development. Indeed, there are times when the responsible professional has to take control of the situation and relieve the child from the burden created by the abuse they have experienced (Hilarski et al., 2008).

However, all too often the “victim” label is used to prevent children and young people from being active agents in their own development and recovery. Many victims of child sexual abuse are motivated to use their experience to improve service delivery for themselves and others. They welcome the opportunity to participate in the development of services and indeed see this participation as part of the therapeutic process facilitating their recovery. Whilst it is helpful to ensure that a thorough risk assessment is carried out on the child or young person to ensure that they are ready and able to participate, and to determine the appropriate level of participatory activity, it is also important to ensure that the opportunity is available to all, irrespective of previous experiences of sexual abuse or violence. The two examples below illustrate this in practice.

“Out of the box”: developing training / awareness raising materials with and for young people

“Out of the box” is a booklet produced by young people for young people (Pearce, 2009). The need for the booklet arose from two events. Practitioners noted at a UK conference that there was a dearth of child friendly descriptions of what sexual exploitation and sexual abuse is, of what victims may feel and how they may challenge the abuse and remove themselves from abusive situations. In addition, an outreach sexual health and youth work NGO called Street Reach, based in a northern town in the UK, was celebrating some of their young people’s achievements. These young people were asking for the opportunity to participate in training other young people to recognise indicators of abuse. The need for the “Out of the box” project was, therefore, shared between adults and children with a joint aim: providing a foundation for partnership on the agreed task of producing a booklet written by young people for young people aiming to prevent sexual abuse and sexual exploitation.
The project staff and children and young people agreed that participation with the “Out of the box” project was dependent upon a joint risk assessment to determine whether participation may place a young person in danger. A support service ran alongside the project providing therapeutic intervention for cases where unresolved or undiagnosed problems came to the fore throughout the duration of the work. Young people were given financial support to enable them to attend meetings, and, in some cases, were taken by project workers to and from their home so that they were not placed at risk of harm whilst undertaking journeys across the city.

In total 18 young women and one young man aged between 14 and 18 took part in the project, each undertaking different roles depending upon their stage of development and their availability. Regular consultation and planning meetings were held on both an individual and group basis ensuring that the young people took equal control in the development of the work. This included developing policies to ensure confidentiality and safety that considered how much personal information was appropriate for the young people to share in their stories, poems and drawing, and ensured accountability processes if any concerns about further harm or abuse were identified. As the project developed, the young people simultaneously refined writing and drawing skills, becoming more aware of the need for shorter, sharper messages both about the harm that sexual violence can cause and the positive ways that young people can remove themselves from danger. The young people decided with graphic designers what the booklet should look like, how many pictures and words should be on each page and where the booklet should be launched.14

A number of important lessons were learnt from this process. Genuine consultation and participation through partnership work meant that the project took longer than had been budgeted for or expected. The project extended from the planned 18 months to 36 months. The project team had to be flexible, adapting to meet

14. See <http://www.nationalworkinggroup.co.uk> for more information.
changing circumstances and vulnerabilities of the young people concerned. During these 36 months a core group of six young people remained as regular attendees, while others experienced changes in their home placements or schools, or experienced further relationship problems. One young woman became pregnant during the work of the project, resulting in the need for child care provisions to support her attendance. Two young people went missing from home or care, causing a feeling of depression and anxiety amongst the remaining group. Finally, potential conflict between children and practitioners needed resolving when planning dissemination of the booklet at conferences in cities unfamiliar to the young people. Practitioners rightly expressed concern about whether they should limit the opportunity for young people to travel and speak about their work for fear of the young people becoming too “visible” and for fear that they may be targeted by perpetrators for further victimisation. Discussing these concerns with the young people resulted in a selection process to identify and train “speakers”, and to ensure that all were safeguarded from undue exposure. These invaluable lessons were repeated in a different participatory project described below.

The young people’s advisory group for the child trafficking advice and information line

The young people’s advisory group for the National Child Trafficking Advice and Information Line (CTAIL) is a project run by the National Association for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children Project (NSPCC), a UK NGO offering advice and information to practitioners in their work with trafficked children and young people. This includes those who have been trafficked into and within the UK for the purpose of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse. Alongside its aim to offer advice and information, it runs two young people’s advisory groups: one male (membership 5 young men) and one female (membership 15 young women). All are aged between 14 and 23 and were trafficked into and within the UK, experiencing sexual violence, abuse and exploitation.

The young people’s advisory groups were established for two reasons. Firstly it was recognised that trafficked children and young
people were, by the nature of the abuse, separated from each other. They needed a forum to share their experiences, develop understanding of what had happened to them and convey this information to service providers. In addition, CTAIL recognised the need for young people's participation in determining the direction of CTAIL service development.

A professional multi-agency group exists to oversee the development of CTAIL services and representation from the young people's advisory group is included. Before each meeting the advisory groups prepare contributions that are collated into a progress report. This report is submitted to the multi-agency professionals meeting and two young people are selected to present the report.

This process has enabled vulnerable and marginalised groups of young people to meet and develop a shared identity. They have raised hitherto unrecognised concerns. For example, they identified shared experiences of poor and unsafe accommodation following placement in local authority care, leading to a review of supporting housing provision for trafficked and, in particular, for sexually exploited young people. They have increasingly played an important role in delivering training to practitioners, giving child-centred definitions of exploitation. In addition, two young people have requested that the work they carry out with CTAIL be accredited, giving them “awards” through a “UK youth achievement award” programme for their role in participating with the development of service delivery and training. As a result, two young women have taken part in the programme, each participatory activity being identified as one of eight “challenges” needed to achieve a final award. These awards will be the first formally recognised and accredited achievement that the young women can use on their developing curriculum vitae.

**Conclusions**

As with “Out of the box”, the CTAIL young people’s advisory group has shown that sexually abused and exploited young people can gain skills, knowledge and confidence through participation programmes
that are carefully planned and supported. Young people taking part in a participatory project need advanced awareness of the importance of safeguarding. They need training and support to speak to large audiences and advice about managing inappropriate questions about their experiences. There have been dilemmas in maintaining boundaries between practitioners and young people when both are simultaneously working as “partners” together in the delivery of training. These lessons carry important considerations which, with further discussion and commitment, will advance the scope for children and young people to advance their own progress through contributing to the development of child-centred services. Victims of child sexual abuse, exploitation and violence should not be denied this opportunity. While there are necessary steps to be taken to safeguard vulnerable children and young people from abuse, the label of “victim” should not be a reason to prohibit them from having a say in the development and delivery of services that aim to meet their needs.

**References**


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