

**INCREASING THE PARTICIPATION OF  
CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND YOUNG  
ADULTS IN DECISION MAKING**

**A LITERATURE REVIEW**

**A REPORT FOR THE  
MINISTRY OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT  
AND  
MINISTRY OF YOUTH AFFAIRS**

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**MINISTRY OF  
SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT**  
*Te Manatū Whakahiato Ora*



**YOUTH AFFAIRS**  
*Te Tari Taiohi*

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This report was prepared by Alison Gray for the Ministry of Social Development as part of its joint work programme with the Ministry of Youth Affairs to enhance the participation of children, young people and young adults in public life. The report reflects relevant literature up to June 2002. Its purpose is to inform the Ministries’ further work in this area. Therefore, the opinions expressed in the report do not represent the official views of the Ministries of Social Development and Youth Affairs.

# 1. Background

This literature review has been undertaken as part of the Ministries of Social Development and Youth Affairs' Action for Child and Youth Development work programme that combines work on the implementation of the Agenda for Children<sup>1</sup> and the Youth Development Strategy Aotearoa<sup>2</sup>.

A particular emphasis of this work is on increasing the participation in decision-making processes of children, young people and young adults who are Māori; those from Pacific or other ethnic groups; and those with disabilities. The work covers issues specific to children, young people and young adults (0 to 24 years inclusive).

A key component of both the Agenda for Children and the Youth Development Strategy Aotearoa work is increasing the participation of children, young people and young adults in government policy and programme development and implementation. This is in line with New Zealand's obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC). Article 12 requires that children have the right to express their opinion freely and to have that opinion considered in decisions that affect them. Article 13 protects the right of children to seek, receive and give information and ideas of all kinds.

## 1.1 Objectives

The aims of this paper are:

- to review national and international literature and resources, including good practice principles, practical guidelines and specific mechanisms for involving children, young people and young adults in decision-making processes
- to identify appropriate practices for increasing the participation of children, young people and young adults generally and from different age groups
- to identify appropriate practices for increasing the participation of children, young people and young adults who are Māori; of those from Pacific or other ethnic groups; of those with disabilities; and of those who are vulnerable and marginalised.

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<sup>1</sup> *New Zealand's Agenda for Children: Making life better for children* was released in June 2002.

<sup>2</sup> *The Youth Development Strategy Aotearoa* was released in February 2002.

## **1.2 Methodology**

This paper updates a previous literature review, which focused on consulting with marginalised and vulnerable young people. This review includes generic material on participation of children, young people and young adults in decision making, and focuses on literature published in 2000 and 2001. It is based on:

- a search carried out by staff at the Ministry of Social Development Information Centre
- feedback from consultations with children and young people on the Agenda for Children and the Youth Development Strategy Aotearoa
- consultations with government agencies, including Te Puni Kōkiri, Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs, Ministry of Health, Office of Ethnic Affairs, Ministry of Youth Affairs, and Ministry of Social Development
- consultations with the Office of the Commissioner for Children
- consultations with local government officials, non-government organisations, community groups and individuals.

## **2. The context for participation in decision-making by children, young people and young adults**

### **2.1 Definition**

The distinction between consultation and participation in decision-making needs to be noted. *Consultation* entails asking children directly about their views. *Participation* refers to the extent of children's involvement in decision-making. This is discussed in more detail in Section 2.5 below.

Consultation may be undertaken without regard to participation but may equally be accompanied by efforts to promote children's involvement in decisions. (Borland et al 2001:3).

Children, young people and young adults can take part in decision-making or be consulted for legal, organisational or social reasons. They may be involved when individual decisions are being taken about their lives, when services are being developed or where national policies are being developed or evaluated.

Much of the New Zealand literature focuses on consultation rather than participation in decision-making. Consulting children, young people and young adults on policy issues has been described as a *consumerist* approach and focuses on the needs of policy makers. It uses participation as a means to an end, as opposed to an *empowerment* approach, which focuses on the needs of children, young people and young adults and sees participation as an end in itself (Cairns 2001, Save the Children 2000).

### **2.2 The legal context**

The literature on the participation of children, young people and young adults in decision-making is generally based on and refers to one of two United Nations initiatives: UNCROC and the United Nations Lisbon Declaration on Youth Policies and Programmes in 1998 (the Lisbon Declaration). In New Zealand, the Treaty of Waitangi is also relevant. Māori need to establish the way in which rangatahi can best participate in decision-making. The Christchurch City Council is an example of an organisation that explicitly includes the Treaty among the principles underpinning its Youth Strategy:

The Treaty of Waitangi provides a constitutional foundation to enable Māori to reach their full social and economic potential. The Council recognises the Treaty of Waitangi and the practices of partnership. It will recognise and respond to the aspirations of all people: Māori and tauwiwi. (Christchurch City Council 1998b:3).

The UNCROC had its beginnings in the International Year of the Child 1979 and came into force in September 1990. Its 54 articles cover a wide range of rights relating to provision, protection and participation for children. The most important article in the context of this review is Article 12, which addresses the right of children to express their views and opinions. It states that:

1. States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her 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.

2. For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, whether directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law.

Article 13 is also important, stating that the child:

Should have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any media of the child's choice. The exercise of this right may be subject to certain restrictions, but these shall only be such as are provided by law and are necessary: (a) for respect of the rights or reputations of others; or (b) for the protection of national security or of public order or of public health or morals.

Article 42 of the UNCROC confers a duty on states that ratify it to inform and educate children about these rights. New Zealand is a signatory to the UNCROC.

The United Nations also adopted the World Programme of Action for Youth to the Year 2000 and Beyond as a framework for nations to increase their capacities to address youth needs and issues. The Lisbon Declaration followed, in which government leaders, including those from New Zealand, committed themselves to:

- ensuring and encouraging the active participation of youth in all spheres of society and in decision-making processes at national, regional and international levels
- promoting education and training in democratic processes and the spirit of citizenship and civic responsibility of young women and young men with a view to strengthening and facilitating their commitment to, participation in and full integration into society
- facilitating access by youth to legislative and policy-making bodies
- upholding and reinforcing policies that allow independent and democratic forms of associative life
- giving higher priority to marginalised, vulnerable and disadvantaged young women and young men
- giving priority to building communication channels with youth
- encouraging youth voluntarism as an important form of youth participation (Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific [ESCAP] 1999:10).

Despite these initiatives, the process of involving children, young people and young adults in decision-making and consulting with young people is still in its infancy, as evidenced by the number of articles calling for further action in this area (for example, Brown 1991, Campbell 2000, Robinson 1997). Ruxton (1998) notes that in the European Union, serious attempts to involve children as active citizens in policy and planning are



few, although some examples, such as children's councils and school committees, do exist at the national and local levels. He cites a report by the Council of Europe on its four-year "Childhood Policies Project", which concludes that it should be a requirement for policy makers to seek out actively the wishes and feelings of children on policy issues that are important to them.

### **2.2.1 Definitions of children, young people and young adults**

Definitions of children, young people and young adults vary considerably depending on the legal, social or political context. Even the UNCROC and the Lisbon Declaration pertain to different groups of young people. The UNCROC applies to everyone below the age of 18 years, while the Lisbon Declaration covers young people aged 15 to 24 years.

This paper covers children, young people and young adults up to the age of 25. Children aged 0 to 11 are referred to as "children", those aged 12 to 17 are referred to as "young people" and those aged 18 to 24 are referred to as "young adults". For the sake of readability, the term "young people" is used in this document on occasions to include all three groups covered by this review: children, young people and young adults.

The term "youth" is commonly used both in everyday speech and in international literature. The age range it covers is not always explicit, but it generally refers to young people between the ages of 12 and 18 to 24. In this document its use is limited to quotes or extracts from documents and to expressions such as "youth culture", "youth forums" and "youth weeks" that are in common use or are accepted descriptions of jobs or services.

It is important to remember that many cultures adopt concepts other than age to define maturity levels for young people. For example, in a paper discussing Pacific children's participation in research, Suaalii and Mavoia (2001) note that:

Samoans, Tongans and other Pacific communities differentiate between child and adult according to life stages, often including rites of passage such as sexual or marriage unions or engagement in official public activities. (Suaalii and Mavoia 2001:40).

### **2.3 The organisational context**

Organisations gain a number of benefits from involving young people in decision-making (Department of Education, Training and Employment [DETE] 2000, Hando and Schuermann 1999, Willow 1997). These include opportunities to improve services, obtain a better understanding of young people's issues and needs, strengthen democracy and ensure that the same group of people does not make decisions without being challenged. Particular advantages are that:

- young people can be consulted on their own social and cultural conditions
- young people can bring new perspectives, influencing outcomes in new and unexpected ways
- participatory mechanisms for services can be tailored to be more responsive to, and understanding and considerate of, young people

- policies and programmes incorporating young people in their design and delivery are likely to be more efficient and effective
- active and productive youth involvement can improve the image of youth and challenge negative stereotypes of young people perpetuated in the community (ESCAP 1999:15).

Jamison and Gilbert (2000:186) argue that until children's views are incorporated into the policy development process, especially as far as policies that impact directly on children are concerned, decision-makers do not have the benefit of:

- understanding children's perspectives of the problem
- hearing children's suggestions about how the problem might be solved
- receiving information from children about the impact that each suggested option for solving the problem may actually have on children
- knowing what children think should happen.

#### **2.4 The social context**

Children, young people and young adults themselves can benefit from participating in decision-making by:

- being able to exercise their rights in society
- gaining an improved understanding of social policy and decision-making processes
- increasing their connection to communities
- developing increased confidence, skills and knowledge
- gaining experience that can be put to use in future employment and an extended social life (Save the Children and the Children's Rights Office 1997:27 ESCAP 1999:5, Kirby 1999:15, Willow 1997:3).

Taking part in decision-making not only gives children, young people and young adults a degree of influence over services and policies that affect them, it also helps them become clear about their own wants and needs.

In exercises that are truly participatory, children, young people and young adults learn to appreciate the realities of decision-making. They gain a better understanding of the social, political, economic, cultural and personal aspects of issues that affect them. They also learn to prioritise alternatives and to consider the implications of their decisions.

At an individual level, participants gain skills and confidence. They learn to debate, negotiate and communicate within groups and to act as facilitators and leaders. They also make social contacts and develop relationships with other young people as well as with adults. These skills and contacts may lead to their taking initiatives and tackling issues on their own.

#### **2.5 Purposes of participation**

As noted above, children and young people can participate in decision-making for different purposes. These include taking part in decisions or being consulted about:

- policy making at the local or central government level
- developing and evaluating services for children and young people

- management - through advisory boards and committees
- their personal situation, for example through reviews of residential care options or medical or judicial decisions
- research, where children and young people are the subjects of the study.

The focus of this paper is on decision-making processes relating to policy making and service development at the local or central government level. It must be noted that much of the literature comes from the United Kingdom, which has been active in promoting participation by children, young people and young adults in decision-making, both through legislation and in practice.

## 2.6 Levels of participation

Levels of participation also vary. Several authors have developed models of children’s and young people’s involvement in decision-making. The best known is Hart’s *ladder of participation*, first published in Hart (1992) and set out below. The ladder describes eight types of “participation”, although Hart describes three of these – manipulation, decoration and tokenism – as non-participation. Save the Children and the Children’s Rights Office (1997:7) suggest that the other five levels can each constitute good practice and be appropriate, depending on the particular decision-making environment, the decisions under consideration and the reasons for involving children.

<b>Hart’s ladder of participation</b>	
8. Child-initiated, shared decisions with adults	Children and young people have the ideas, set up the project, and invite adults to join them in making decisions.
7. Child-initiated and directed	Children and young people have the initial idea and decide how the project is to be carried out. Adults are available but do not take charge.
6. Adult-initiated, shared decisions with children	Adults have the initial idea but children and young people are involved in every step of the planning and implementation. Their views are not only considered but they are also involved in making the decisions.
5. Consulted and informed	The project is designed and run by adults but children and young people are consulted. They have a full understanding of the process and their opinions are taken seriously.
4. Assigned but informed	Adults decide on the project but children and young people volunteer for it. The children and young people understand the project and know who decided they should be involved and why. Adults respect their views.
3. Tokenism	Children and young people are asked to say what they think about an issue but have little or no choice about the way they express those views or the scope of the ideas they can express.
2. Decoration	Children and young people take part in an event, e.g. by singing, dancing or wearing t-shirts with logos on, but they do not really understand the issues.

1. Manipulation	Children and young people do or say what adults suggest they do, but have no real understanding of the issues, OR children and young people are asked what they think and adults use some of their ideas but do not tell them what influence they have on the final decision.
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With levels 4 to 8, there are a number of preconditions for the successful involvement of children and young people. These are that the children and young people have:

- access to those in power and to relevant information
- a genuine choice between distinctive options
- a trusted, independent person to provide support
- a means of redress for an appeal or complaint (Save the Children and the Children’s Rights Office 1997:8).

Hart’s model has been widely used by organisations to help them recognise and eliminate categories of non-participation from their practice. It has also been the basis of further development as other writers have modified or expanded it for different purposes. Shier’s (2001) adaptation is particularly useful. His five-stage model can help individual workers and organisations clarify where they stand and identify the steps they need to take to improve their performance. The five levels in his model are:

- children are listened to
- children are supported in expressing their views
- children’s views are taken into account
- children are involved in decision-making processes
- children share power and responsibility for decision-making.

Shier associates a range of openings, opportunities and obligations with each level. An *opening* occurs when an individual worker makes a commitment to operate at that level. An *opportunity* occurs when the organisation provides appropriate resources and structures to enable the worker to act. An *obligation* is established when it becomes the agreed policy of the organisation that staff should operate at this level. The model is set out in tabular form below. Note that Schier uses the term “children” but the model is equally applicable to young people and young adults.

<b>Schier’s pathways to participation</b>			
<b>Levels of participation</b>	<b>Openings</b>	<b>Opportunities</b>	<b>Obligations</b>
5. Children share power and responsibility for decision-making	Are you ready to share some of your adult power with children?	Is there a procedure that enables children and adults to share power and responsibility for decisions?	Is it a policy requirement that children and adults share power and responsibility for decisions?
4. Children are involved in	Are you ready to let children join in your	Is there a procedure that enables children	Is it a policy requirement that

decision-making processes	decision-making processes?	to join in decision-making processes?	children must be involved in decision-making processes?
Level 3 is the minimum to endorse the UNCROC			
3. Children's views are taken into account	Are you ready to take children's views into account?	Does your decision-making process enable you to take children's views into account?	Is it a policy requirement that children's views must be given due weight in decision-making?
2. Children are supported in expressing their views	Are you ready to support children in expressing their views?	Do you have a range of ideas and activities to help children express their views?	Is it a policy requirement that children must be supported in expressing their views?
1. Children are listened to	Are you ready to listen to children?	Do you work in a way that enables you to listen to children?	Is it a policy requirement that children must be listened to?

## 2.7 Adults' responsibilities

Shier suggests that whatever level they work at, workers need to clarify their own views and receive training in listening skills, how to facilitate participation or involvement, how to use age-appropriate techniques, and communication skills for working with children with disabilities and children whose first language is not English.

Others agree. In its publication, *Taking Participation Seriously*, the New South Wales (NSW) Commission for Children and Young People (2001) places as much stress on the importance of adults and organisations adapting their own behaviour as it does on techniques for reaching children and young people. Like Shier, it emphasises the need for organisations to:

- believe in the importance of giving children and young people a say in decisions
- make sure that children and young people understand their role in the decision-making process
- make children and young people feel comfortable in taking part in discussions
- develop strong relationships with children and young people
- ensure that involvement is enjoyable and rewarding for both participants and the organisation.

Indeed, the literature on the involvement of children, young people and young adults is forthright about the need for adults to clarify their own beliefs, feelings, knowledge and behaviour about the involvement of young people before they engage in the process (Alderson 2000, NSW Commission for Children and Young People 2001, Shier 2001). In

other words, adults need to “put on their own masks” before they turn their attention to children, young people and young adults.

## **2.8 Broader principles for consulting children and young people**

The literature includes several examples of high-level principles for participation by children, young people and young adults in decision-making. Three underlying principles are:

- recognising participation as legitimate
- being inclusive
- having realistic expectations.

### **2.8.1 Recognising participation as legitimate**

Children’s, young people’s and young adults’ participation should be a recognised and legitimate element within the decision-making and policy environment. Such involvement can improve services and decision-making by:

- incorporating new perspectives
- providing opportunities for new solutions
- gaining greater buy-in and a sense of ownership of policies and services
- enabling more efficient and cost-effective services (Davies and Marken 2000).

The argument is that:

What young people lack in experience, they make up for in creativity, energy, and fresh perspectives. Youth possess unique ideas that relate specifically to that stage of their lives. Unlike other groups within society, there is a continual turnover among the people who make up the youth category. If government is interested in making policy that resonates with the younger generation, it must work to bridge the generation gap by including youth in the policy-making process. (Haid et al 1999:4).

The involvement of young people in consultation and decision-making has been presented as a new and radical concept, particularly by government bodies, despite the fact that there are long traditions of such involvement and community development in youth work and related fields (Gale et al 1999:259). Involving young people does not in itself guarantee that there will always be constructive and positive outcomes, especially when adults take no account of power and accountability issues. Indeed, adults’ willingness to engage with young people can often outstrip their ability to do so in an accountable manner. This can have unfortunate outcomes.

Steps in legitimate participation are:

- to acknowledge that children, young people and young adults are competent – that is, they are able to draw on information, experience and support to make a relevant and useful contribution
- to give children, young people and young adults appropriate information
- to clarify the expectations adults have of young people

- for adults to consider how they will carry out instructions or incorporate the information young people provide (Jamison and Gilbert 2000:190, Simms 2000:23-26).

A commitment to involving young people is likely to lead to different ways of working and different structures that “more fully acknowledge the wisdom and skills of young people and allow them to shape decisions” (Gale et al 1999:259). Adults, individually and in organisations, need to be prepared to make those changes.

### **2.8.2 Being inclusive**

Most guidelines include some reference to the need to be inclusive and fair. Here are three examples:

The opportunity to participate should be available to children and young people across all abilities, ages, ethnic and religious backgrounds, social classes and personal circumstances and behaviour. (Willow 1997:98).

A fair and democratic selection process recognizes the diversity of the youth population and provides broad-based access to leadership. (Simms 2000:24).

Do not limit yourself to consulting via mainstream representative bodies. Think how and when young people may be excluded, and make sure you are reaching all young people, not just those with the confidence to speak out in an adult setting. If possible, involve people and organisations young people talk to and trust, for example, youth workers. Think about who you involve from ethnic communities; again, are young people’s views and experiences fully reflected by representative bodies for ethnic groups? Young Asian women, for example, say they find it difficult to get their voices heard in the responses of wider community groups. (Home Office 2000:59).

### **2.8.3 Having realistic expectations**

Some professionals expect more from the involvement of children, young people and young adults than they do from any other group (Save the Children and the Children’s Rights Office 1997:55). The most common concern of professionals is whether the participating or consulted group is truly representative and not just an elite few. But “representative” groups of young people are no different from representatives of any other user group. They should not be expected to speak for everybody. Nor should they be rejected immediately just because they do not precisely reflect the gender or cultural balance of the larger group. Some argue that it is more important for groups to be able to represent others through their own information-gathering activities than to be “truly” representative in themselves – in other words, they *can* even if they *don’t* represent.

Adults also need to be realistic about the level of commitment from young people. Adults have a responsibility to develop young people’s capacity to participate by stimulating their interest through new input and ongoing training (Save the Children and the Children’s Rights Office 1997:55). Appropriate partnerships involve:

Giving young people the opportunity to fully develop a project, program, service, group or idea with as much control as they feel comfortable without setting them up to fail. (Stone cited in Gale et al 1999:265).

## **2.9 Summary**

There are legal, social and organisational reasons for involving children, young people and young adults in decision-making. Participation can also take place at several levels, ranging from manipulation or tokenism to full involvement of children and young people with a high degree of power sharing by adults. Genuine participation will be inclusive and realistic and adults will see it as a legitimate part of the decision-making process.

Overall, successful strategies and initiatives for participation by children, young people and young adults will:

- have clear objectives
- have clear boundaries about how much power and decision-making will (or can) be shared with children and young people
- treat children and young people as individuals and acknowledge that not everyone will want to get involved
- take active steps to include children and young people not traditionally involved
- prepare well by carefully considering the different options for meeting their objectives
- involve adults in a supportive or advisory capacity
- broadcast the benefits widely
- link general policies and strategies with particular projects and initiatives
- avoid looking for a single solution or quick fix
- involve children and young people at the earliest stage possible
- constantly evaluate and learn from experience
- respond quickly to children's and young people's requests and demands and prioritise, informing them of outcomes and consequences (Willow 1997:97-98).



### **3. Aspects of participation by children, young people and young adults in decision-making**

#### **3.1 Topics or issues**

Involvement by children, young people and young adults in consultation or decision-making is most likely to be successful when the young people see the topics or issues as real and relevant to them. Just like adults, they are most likely to offer reliable information when they are talking about events that are part of or related to their own interests or part of their everyday experience (DETE 2000:15, ESCAP 1999:22, Solberg 1996:177).

Within that framework, it seems that as long as adults use appropriate participatory techniques, there need be no limits on what they can discuss with children, young people and young adults. The selection of a topic may in fact be less important than having clear objectives for involvement and explicit boundaries about how much power and decision-making adults are willing and able to share (Willow 1997:97).

Whether or not children, young people and young adults are competent to make decisions depends on what the issue is:

...and how effective the adults are in creating a situation in which children can be competent, because the competency of children is quite variable across context, particularly across styles of adult interaction (Garbarino 2000:53).

Garbarino points out that both adults' and young people's behaviour contributes to competency.

##### **3.1.1 What children, young people and young adults want to discuss**

Much of the literature on the involvement of young people relates to local government and the topics typically discussed reflect this. An Australian survey (Department of Local Government [DLG] 1998:20), for example, found that young people particularly wanted to discuss the provision of recreation and entertainment facilities and services for young people, but they also wanted to discuss broader topics such as employment and unemployment, health issues including drugs, alcohol and suicide, public transport, and community safety.

Young people who organised a conference for young people in England drew up a programme that included discussions of:

- alcohol and drug misuse
- crime
- sexual health
- domestic violence
- the environment
- life after school
- bullying

- child abuse
- black people in society
- the role of county and city councils (Willow 1997:42).

Children, young people and young adults have been involved in neighbourhood redevelopment, designed events, discussed and evaluated health and education services as well as broader policy issues and taken part in decisions relating to residential and custodial care (Christchurch City Council 1998, ESCAP 1999, Lyon et al 1999).

### **3.1.2 When to discuss**

One way to decide where the involvement of young people is relevant is through a process of “stakeholder” analysis. The following guide is based on a model proposed by the World Bank and involves asking:

- who might be affected (positively or negatively) by the development concern to be addressed?
- who are the “voiceless” for whom special efforts may have to be made?
- who are the representatives of those likely to be affected?
- who is responsible for what is intended?
- who can make what is intended more effective through their participation or less effective by their non-participation or outright opposition?
- who can contribute financial and technical resources?
- whose behaviour has to change for the effort to succeed? (World Bank 1996 cited in ESCAP 1999:12).

### **3.1.3 Cautions and constraints**

While most topics can be discussed given the appropriate setting and careful planning, it is important to remember that many ethnic groups restrict communication about some topics. For example, there may be taboos on children and young people talking about sexual matters with people outside the family, even with adults of the same sex (Garbarino et al 1989:97).

Single-sex groups are a good idea in many instances and are particularly important for children, young people and young adults from some ethnic backgrounds (Home Office 2000). These issues are discussed further in Sections 4 to 9.

## **3.2 Timing**

If young people are to be involved in decision making, it is important that they are involved in the process as early as possible. For example, children, young people and young adults can be involved in:

- planning outings or events
- designing or redesigning streets or neighbourhoods or facilities
- planning and facilitating conferences for children, young people and young adults
- gathering information from their peers through surveys, interviews, forums, discussion groups, radio programmes, electronic contact and other avenues
- consultation on the need for policies or services

- scoping, planning and analysing projects on various topics
- assessing plans for implementing new services or initiatives
- designing and implementing policies and programmes
- reviewing and evaluating policies, services and programmes
- governance or advisory bodies or reference groups
- ongoing forums or councils with an established role in the decision-making process
- staff training and development exercises (DETE 2000:13, ESCAP 1999:12, Murray 1999).

More than one approach may be needed for any particular task. The key point is early involvement:

It is just as important to obtain children's and young people's views when developing strategies and policies as when services are being developed, designed or evaluated. (Willow 1997:19).

### **3.2.1 Enough time**

Increasing children's and young people's involvement takes time and the development of policy and services needs to allow for this. If organisations want a speedy response from children, young people and young adults they may have to accept a less than satisfactory process. They should be aware that early involvement is likely to make subsequent involvement more positive (Ward 1997).

At the same time, expectations of and responsibilities for children, young people and young adults should be commensurate with their abilities and competence, just as they are for adults. Young people should not be asked to make decisions that properly belong to professionals or paid officials:

Officers have information and knowledge for policy analysis and are employed to take lead roles in policy and service development, which young people's involvement should modify but cannot negate. When these responsibilities are played down, young people may be consulted too early, at too superficial a level and before the organisation has thought through its objectives. (Davies and Marken 2000:31).

Obviously, young people's ability to contribute effectively can be increased with training, information and support.

### **3.3 Settings**

Settings that enable children and young people to express their views on a topic or issue more easily and openly are likely to be ones they have chosen themselves (Willow 1997).

Adults need to make an effort to meet young people on their own territory where they feel comfortable, and at a convenient time. The surroundings and chemistry should be conducive to youth culture and lifestyle. Care should also be taken to avoid formality and

official bureaucratic processes, which can hinder creativity (DETE 2000:15-16, ESCAP 1999:22-23, Home Office 2000).

All too often, meetings with children take place at a venue where professionals feel comfortable, even though children are more likely to feel at ease on their own territory. As it is children who most need confidence in this new situation, it is up to the professionals to make this concession. (Save the Children and Children's Rights Office 1997:23).

### **3.3.1 Safety issues**

Children's, young people's and young adults' emotional and physical safety should also be considered. During involvement a child or young person may disclose abuse, either in their family or in the community. Facilitators must be trained to deal with such disclosure and appropriate procedures need to be in place.

Similarly, children and young people should not be placed at risk through contact with adults as part of their involvement. Protocols and training can protect both young people and adults (Fajerman and Treseder 2000, NSW Commission for Children and Young People 2001).

### **3.3.2 The needs of particular groups**

Save the Children and the Children's Rights Office (1997:28) urge facilitators to consider the specific access needs of people with disabilities, and the needs of those from different cultures, young women, young gay men and lesbians, children with special needs, working-class children and disaffected young people.

An Australian research project (DLG 1998:iii) on how young people wanted to participate indicated a much greater preference for face-to-face mechanisms, such as committees or meetings, than for non-face-to-face mechanisms such as self-completed surveys and telephone interviews. The young people thought that it was easier to develop a sense of trust between them and whoever was seeking their views in face-to-face situations.

## **3.4 Selecting people to undertake consultations**

While much of the literature assumes that adults will facilitate participation by, or consultations with, children and young people, the advantages and disadvantages of using young people as facilitators or consultants are also discussed.

### **3.4.1 Young people as facilitators**

Kirby (1999:20) lists six advantages of using young people to gain data from respondents in a research context. The advantages are:

- age, with children and young people being able to relate more easily to people closer to their own age
- speaking a common language
- knowing others who may be persuaded to take part
- sharing common experiences

- being “on the same side”
- being able to discuss topics that may be taboo with adults.

She acknowledges that some young people may not want to be interviewed by their peers, either because they do not think the outcomes will be taken seriously or because particular topics may be more sensitive with peers than with adults.

Adult respondents to the Ministry of Youth Affairs’ consultation document (Ministry of Youth Affairs 2001b) were in favour of equipping young people to become peer educators, mentors and “youth leaders”. They thought this could be achieved through training in meeting processes and language, running workshops, media presentation and facilitation.

There are numerous examples of young people facilitating decision-making activities. Some examples include young people facilitating or chairing meetings (Willow 1997). In one example the facilitators were aged 16 to 18 years and had received training in mediation and conflict resolution. In another, young people led a forum for disabled people aged 15 to 25 years. The forum discussed issues related to people with disabilities and liaised with decision-makers. Detached youth workers who have established relationships with disaffected young people have also been used as facilitators with some success. (Murray 1999, Willow 1997).

### **3.4.2 Adult facilitators**

There is no secret formula for working with a group of children or young people, although success or failure often rests on professionals’ ability to assess their own performance (Save the Children and the Children’s Rights Office 1997:38). Garbarino et al (1989:121) caution that professionals often overestimate their ability and overvalue their hypotheses. Their views about the meaning of childhood experiences are drawn from their own experience as well as prejudice.

Listening to children and young people may mean that the adult hears things that are uncomfortable, while many children believe adults to be insincere. Children, young people and young adults may suppress comments they think adults don’t wish to hear. Their decision on whether or not to disclose or reveal the truth will depend on their perception of how the information will be received (Garbarino et al 1989:125).

Children need adults who make them feel safe, not just in the physical sense, but also in the sense of psychological security. Adults need to be trustworthy, not act without consulting the child and thus allow them a measure of self-determination. This includes adults respecting and keeping confidences and not allowing their own needs and fears to dominate the relationship. (Middleton 1999:96).

In particular, adults working with children and young people should:

- be honest
- listen to criticism
- be open and approachable

- keep a sense of humour
- treat children with respect
- not patronise
- not prejudge
- be non-judgemental
- learn from their mistakes
- take account of young people's needs
- be flexible
- not expect children to lavish them with thanks (Save the Children and the Children's Rights Office 1997:39).

Adults who are effective recipients of information from children are sensitive to non-verbal cues. Garbarino et al (1989:115) suggest that women are, on average, more adept at interpreting non-verbal cues than men. The ability to use appropriate language is also important. A group of young people taking part in a decision-making process initiated by a local body in Britain criticised the jargon used in written and verbal communication:

Adults in the meeting were obviously very committed to working with children and young people but this commitment meant little if they could not communicate using language everyone in the room understood. (Willow 1997:36).

Willow notes that there can be advantages in contracting out participation in decision-making or facilitation to specialist organisations. However, this can mean staff within the host organisation do not develop their own skills and confidence. There is also a danger that involvement will be seen as something external to the organisation rather than an integral part of organisational practice.

### **3.4.3 Facilitation with specific groups**

The facilitation needs of particular groups are discussed in Sections 3 to 7. They include the need for culturally appropriate facilitators, male or female facilitators in specific circumstances with particular groups, and facilitators who have shared similar experiences to the children and young people taking part.

## **3.5 The participation process**

### **3.5.1 Preparing for participation by children, young people and young adults**

Several steps will set the scene for good quality involvement by children, young people and young adults. Firstly adults need to define the benefits for participants. It may be enough for the involvement to be enjoyable, educational or productive. In many cases, adults should consider offering incentives for taking part, such as cash or gift vouchers in recognition of the time and expense involved (DETE 2000:15-16, ESCAP 1999:22-23).

Secondly, everyone needs to understand the aims and level of the discussion and the type of outcome required (McNeish 1999).

Thirdly, participation needs to be genuine, with children, young people and young adults having real power to influence decision-makers so that they see some purpose in their efforts. As far as possible, the young people should have the autonomy to decide their own agenda and processes for involvement. This will help them feel that the work being done belongs to them. At the same time, they need to adhere to democratic principles such as personal choice, fairness in the political process and respect for minorities and ethnic groups (Allard 1996, DETE 2000:15-16, DLG 1998:9, ESCAP 1999:22-23, Jamison and Gilbert 2000:19).

Fourthly, the process needs to be adequately resourced, including having sufficient time, space, information and funding. These resources should be incorporated into the normal budgeting process and may include food, a regular venue with which children and young people are comfortable and to which they can get easily, recording and transcription equipment and a consistent support and liaison person (Bentley et al 1999:135-138, DETE 2000:15-16, ESCAP 1999:22-23).

Participants also need to have an opportunity to develop their skills, both to raise their awareness of the social, political, economic, cultural and personal aspects of the issues affecting them and to enhance their ability to respond (Willow 1997:104).

Finally, young participants need adequate support and supervision. This needs a commitment from all parts of the organisation involved in policy or decision-making, not just those in direct contact with the children and young people. In order for the participation in decision-making to be effective, adults as well as children and young people may have to overcome preconceived attitudes (Littlechild 2000, McNeish 1999).

### **3.5.2 Allowing time**

It is important to allow adequate time for preparation and relationship building before the participation or consultation process takes place (Taylor et al 2000:13).

This is especially important when working with Māori and Pacific participants, children, young people and young adults from other ethnic groups and children, young people and young adults with disabilities. Contact organisations need time to negotiate access and consent with appropriate children, young people and young adults.

An Australian handbook on involving young people on boards and committees expands on this, stating that effective involvement requires:

- adequate preparation, so that issues that need to be explored are clearly identified, and sufficient time is available to promote the consultation
- appropriate promotion so that a wide range of young people is reached. This means using youth rather than adult networks, and youth-friendly techniques such as the internet
- priority to be given to young people participating without adult intervention (DETE 2000:10).

Potential participants should be given an idea of the total time commitment involved including the time needed to develop trust. Bentley et al (1999:135-138) found that because of the unpredictability and importance of other issues in young people's lives, facilitators had to be flexible about attendance, punctuality and level of commitment.

### **3.5.3 Building rapport**

Participants should be given the chance to “gel” in an informal setting before any more formal consultation or decision-making begins. This might involve an informal get-together, a residential weekend or a pre-meeting to clarify issues, explore some possible solutions to present in the later meeting, read papers, interpret acronyms, identify the role of other organisations and find out about each other. One report suggests that:

Residential training events are perfect for creating a close group but where these are not possible, good assertiveness training and work on group decision-making is essential. The ratio of children to adults must be carefully balanced because, if there are too many adults, the children will not feel in a strong enough position to speak freely. (Save the Children and the Children's Rights Office 1997:23).

In one research project in which marginalised young people were consulted, facilitators and young people worked together over several months to allow opportunities for feedback, support for the groups in policy analysis and understanding background material, and review of earlier session material.

Many of the young people involved in the consultation, given their backgrounds and life experiences, approached the discussions with caution. Devoting time to building up trust between group workers, researchers and the young people was vital to the success and accuracy of the consultation. Although some of these groups had well-established bases in their local areas and members knew each other well, others had none of this background, and developing trust, shared understanding and communication was essential. This can only take place with sustained, regular sessions and perseverance from both workers and young people. (Bentley et al 1999:138).

The young researchers undertaking Save the Children research on care leavers and mental health felt that it was important to meet with any group two or three times in advance, in order to gain their trust. The researchers also attended some group work sessions conducted by the Leaving Care Support Team of Newcastle Social Services, and became acquainted with a number of young people who were currently going through the process of leaving care. (McKeown 1999).

In a project researching the needs of Asian young people in Christchurch, a small group of Asian students contributed significantly to the design and structure of the research. The authors commented that:

The importance of the preliminary work cannot be overemphasised. Owing to the sensitivity of the issues and the target population concerned, an enormous amount



of groundwork had to be laid before the project could proceed smoothly. In particular, an extensive amount of networking had to be done among the various community wards, school administrations and Asian community groups to gain their trust and commitment to participate in the project. As a result of the extended consultation, several of the directions, scopes and objectives of the research were modified and refined. (Christchurch City Council 1998a:7).

Another project used residential weekends with homeless young people to explore how best to get their views and experiences across. The success of this initiative depended on having “a group of young people who wanted to be involved and are concerned about the issue and at least one worker with enough skill and courage to work with young people on what they want to do or say.” (Allard 1996:166).

### **3.5.4 Practical issues**

#### *Accessible information*

The use of jargon, including “policy speak”, can prevent children, young people and young adults understanding information and stop them feeling part of an organisation’s decision-making structure. Information needs to be clear and accessible and expressed in a way that actively seeks to include children, young people and young adults. The best approach is to write information material in consultation with the kind of young people at whom it is aimed, and to avoid language that is patronising or confusing (Ward 1997:24).

The material may need to be produced in a range of languages and young people with disabilities may need information in large print or Braille or on audio- or videotape.

All correspondence including feedback material should be addressed directly to the young people, and not mediated through their parents, carers, teachers or other adults (Save the Children and the Children’s Rights Office 1997:23).

#### *Timing and other arrangements*

Ask the proposed participants when the best time for them to meet is. Most young people have busy lives and meetings will need to be arranged around sport and music practices, bus and train timetables and work commitments. Participants should also be able to say what sort of food they would like and give their preferences for how long the meeting should be and what size and composition the group should have.

Issues of payment need to be considered. Expenses need to be paid, for example for safe and convenient transport, and participants should receive some recompense in acknowledgement of their contribution. For one-off or occasional meetings this may be a gift such as a book or CD voucher. Where a group meets regularly, tax issues may need to be considered and the status of participants will need to be clarified.

#### *Sensitivity to children’s and young people’s stage of development*

The Home Office good practice guidelines (2000:55) stress the importance of paying attention to children’s and young people’s:

- emotional, social and cognitive development
- ethnic cultural, and religious background
- ability to trust adults and understand confidentiality
- level, if any, of disability or learning difficulties that may affect communication
- likely attention span and concept of time.

Organisers also need to pay attention to the timing of discussions and how that might affect children's and young people's involvement and willingness to communicate.

### ***Methodologies***

Methodologies need to be appropriate to the group and can be developed in consultation with group members. In all cases, participatory activities should be fun, relaxed, relevant and challenging (DETE 2000, ESCAP 1999, Jamison and Gilbert 2000:19).

Methodologies suited to different groups are discussed in Sections 3 to 7.

### ***Group size and structure***

Small groups of five to six with a small age range are most successful. With all but the most general topics, single-sex groups are preferable. In some cultures, parents will not allow young women to take part in group discussions with young men, and they may even feel the same about younger children as well. Facilitators may need to balance participants' preferences with the desires of their parents (Costley 2000:168, Hill et al 1996:143, Home Office 2000:59). The Home Office report says that:

...to draw out the differences in young people's views, consultation in small groups is effective. Working in single sex groups allows more open and honest discussion of the issues, especially sensitive topics such as sex and relationships. This may be particularly important for young people from some ethnic backgrounds. (Home Office 2000:59).

The *Raw Deal* project started off with groups of 6 to 12, but smaller groups were often beneficial in allowing everyone a chance to have their say. There were also times when the participants worked in single-sex groups. The authors concluded that giving young people the opportunity to decide for themselves how they want to participate is vital. Others argue that young people should be given time alone without adults, preferably in small groups. This gives quieter members of the group an opportunity to express their ideas. (Bentley et al 1999:135, DETE 2000:15-16, ESCAP 1999:22-23).

In the *Raw Deal* project facilitators found that free-flowing discussion worked best when people knew each other relatively well and were used to meeting with each other. More focused and structured sessions worked better where people were less used to communicating with each other in a social context. Some groups split into smaller groups on occasion, for example interviewing each other. (Bentley et al 1999:135).

### ***Multiple methods***

It is always useful to avoid relying on a single method of involving children and young people. Children and young people can be on committees and boards. They can also take

part in forums for young people, advisory structures that include young people, workshops or single events. A website for young people can be structured simply to provide information to young people (one-way flow) or to provide an opportunity for young people to have a say about an organisation's activities, as well as to receive information (two-way flow). (DETE 2000:9).

### **3.6 Providing feedback**

Feedback needs to be provided at the end of sessions and as soon as decisions are made or there is some progress towards a decision. Prompt feedback is very important to young people. Children's and adults' views of time may vary, which usually means that children like to have quick feedback from what they have said or done (DLG 1998:9, Henderson 2000b).

Sessions in which children, young people and young adults take part in decision-making should end with a summing-up, formulation of recommendations, and information about what will happen next (DLG 1998:9).

As soon as possible, participants should receive information about how their input has affected a decision; for example by being sent copies of any reports, in which their input is acknowledged.

Feedback is covered in the Australasian Evaluation Society guidelines (1998:7) under Clause 18:

The results of the evaluation should be presented as clearly and simply as accuracy allows so that clients and other stakeholders can understand the evaluation process and results. Communications that are tailored to a given stakeholder should include all important results.

Young people can make a valuable contribution to the analysis of project findings and in the final stages of putting the material together. This may take the form of commenting on drafts or helping prepare reports. (Ward 1997:15-17).

In the *Raw Deal* research project, for example, the researchers produced summaries of the analysis relatively quickly for circulation to groups. This gave the young people a chance to see what other groups were saying and to correct misrepresentations of their own discussions. A draft of the whole project was also fed back, although it was sometimes hard to contact people. (Bentley et al 1999:137).

### **3.7 Ethical issues**

Most of the literature on ethical issues concerns young people and research. These issues are somewhat different from those relating to children and young people taking part in decision-making or being consulted about policies or services. Research frequently involves gathering information about individuals or individual situations, whereas consultations are about policies that apply to groups of people. Nevertheless, there are

important ethical considerations to be taken into account when involving children and young people in participatory processes.

These include being sure that participation will not result in any harm to any young person; being able to justify any exclusions of young people; ensuring that participation has been without coercion or pressure; ensuring that young people fully understand what they are getting involved in and the role expected of them. Finally it means ensuring that young people have the opportunity to opt out of participatory processes at any stage. (McNeish 1999:202).

While the literature on participation is clear that young people should be informed about what is involved and should not be forced to participate, it is not clear on whether or not parents or carers should be informed or required to give their consent (DETE 2000:15, ESCAP 1999:22).

There is little debate about the right of young adults aged 18 and over to decide for themselves whether or not to take part, although in some circumstances, for example where young adults have severe disabilities, adults are in a guardianship role until the young adult turns 20. The situation in relation to 16 to 18 year-olds is more vexed. Some argue that parents' or carers' permission should be sought for all young people under 18 to participate in individual or group activities. Others believe that 16 to 18 year-olds are young adults and therefore entitled to make decisions for themselves (Fajerman and Treseder 2000, France et al 2000:155). An Australian study found that the young people who were surveyed, all of whom were aged 15 or older, did not rate informing parents or families as an important aspect of young people's involvement in decision-making or consultations. (DLG 1998:9).

With children and young people under 16, adults raise issues of competence and rights, with some agreeing that in work done through schools it is generally acceptable to inform parents and ask them specifically to "opt out" if they do not want their children to take part. Others suggest that it may be time to develop a category between informing parents or caregivers and requiring their consent. Some studies and exercises have adopted the technique of requiring parents to opt out rather than opt in to involvement. That is, they are asked to send back forms if they do *not* want their child or young person to take part. Advocates for involving young people in consultation or decision-making recognise that adults can sometimes act as gatekeepers, and prevent children and young people who may wish to take part in discussions from having their say. More discussion needs to take place as to how far adults protecting children from outsiders should take precedence over children's right to participate in the decision. (Hill et al 1996, Thomas and O'Kane 1998:138).

Very few codes of ethics for research actually mention children, other than to say that consent should be obtained from adults. Clause 12 of the Australasian Evaluation Society guidelines (1998:5) is an example. It states:

The informed consent of those directly providing information should be obtained, preferably in writing. They should be advised as to what information will be sought, how the information will be recorded and used and the likely risks and benefits arising from their participation in the evaluation. In the case of minors and other dependants, informed consent should also be sought from parents or guardians.

Alderson (1995:22) agrees the long debate over whether or not parents can consent to *research* on children continues. Because she makes no distinction between research and participation in decision-making, the following comments refer only to consent in research:

No one is sure what the courts would decide if there were a legal case... The safest course, though it can also be repressive, is to ask for parental consent and also to ask for children's consent, when they are able to understand. When a local authority is looking after a child, and there is a care order on a child, the authority has parental responsibility, and will delegate this in writing to a social worker or foster parent. Guidelines advise respect of foster parents' views.

Involving children with limited means of conventional communication in decision-making poses additional problems with regard to gaining explicit consent (Ward 1997:22). A significant number of disabled children and young people live, or spend much of their lives, away from their family homes.

Negotiating access to such children in order to discover whether they wish to participate in projects will demand particularly careful attention. (Ward 1997:23).

Views on what consents are required are likely to vary, depending on the children's and young people's age, their gender and cultural background, the topic being discussed, the setting and methods used and the agency seeking to involve them in decision-making.

Confidentiality issues also need to be addressed, with participants having a clear understanding of how their contributions will be reported. In the *Raw Deal* research, confidentiality was a high priority, particularly for those living in small, rural communities who felt they could easily be identified in any report (Bentley et al 1999). This is a reminder that children and young people should be clearly consulted about how data is to be collected and how confidentiality and anonymity can be assured. If a breach of confidentiality is necessary, it should be undertaken in full consultation with the young person.

### **3.8 Summary**

- Topics for discussion need to be relevant to participants.
- It is up to adults to present topics appropriately, in an appropriate setting using appropriate techniques.
- Children, young people and young adults should be involved as early as possible in the decision-making process.

- In particular, children, young people and young adults should choose the setting where the discussions will take place.
- Facilitators should consider the specific needs of children, young people and young adults from different cultures, children, young people and young adults with disabilities, and those in custodial or protective settings.
- Adults need to take responsibility for safety issues and develop appropriate protocols.
- With appropriate training and support, children, young people and young adults can be effective facilitators of participation exercises.
- Adult facilitators should be honest, trustworthy, open and non-judgemental, and have a good sense of humour.
- Participation should be well resourced, with adequate time for relationship-building, exchange of information and skill development if necessary.
- Having a nominated adult to provide support, liaison and advocacy can be beneficial.
- Information should be made available well in advance, be free of jargon and produced in a form that is accessible to all the young people involved.
- Methods for consultation or participation should be appropriate to children's, young people's and young adults' age, gender, stage of development and circumstances.
- Adults should work alongside or engage facilitators who are experienced in working with the children, young people and young adults whose views they are seeking.
- Groups should be small and with a limited age range.
- Single-sex groups are generally preferable to mixed-gender groups.
- Participants should receive feedback at the end of sessions and as soon after the exercise as possible so that they know what decisions have been made and how their input contributed to the outcome.
- Participants can often contribute to the analysis of data and writing up reports. Any publications or other productions should acknowledge the young people's contribution.
- Adults need to adhere to ethical principles in involving young people in decision-making. These include honesty, inclusiveness, voluntary involvement and a commitment to reporting back. Adults also need to consider carefully whose consent they need to obtain and how best to do that.

## **4. Participation in decision-making by children, young people and young adults from different age groups**

### **4.1 Lower age limits**

Overseas, children as young as two have taken part in consultations or decision-making exercises (Alderson 2000, Fajerman and Treseder 2000). Successful participation depends on:

- allowing enough time
- using adults with appropriate skills who are committed to the process
- using appropriate methods
- discussing policies and/or services that are relevant to the children concerned.

Young children have had their say on issues ranging from the way in which hospital and health services are provided to children to the provision of local facilities and their likes and dislikes about their neighbourhood (Willow 1997).

Children are thought to be competent to assimilate and report their views, and have cognitive capabilities from a young age – some say two or three; others like Scott (2000:101) argue for seven to nine. The Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB) in Britain (1997:2) notes that:

At the age of 9 children are beginning to think more widely than the immediate and may be thinking about what is happening around them, in the media and being done by others. They might also start taking into account the views of other people.

Children's development depends primarily on age, but also on the gender, socio-economic background, and ethnicity of the child. Young children can and do talk about themselves, but many have also mastered the art of impression management and, like adults, will tend to edit their answers. By adolescence Scott (2000) believes that young people are wary of revealing their secrets to adults, particularly those they do not know. On the other side of the debate are those who question the extent and age at which children can articulate a perspective other than that learned from parents. Nesbitt (2000:141) suggests that a child's response might be more strongly conditioned by the setting than an adult's response would be.

In a related context, the broadcasting network CNN in the United States has developed some broad guidelines for journalists in deciding whether or not to interview children for news stories. The guidelines include their age and maturity, the degree of violence involved in the story, the child's connection to any victims, the presence of parental permission and whether the footage is live or taped. While no organisation stipulates an age at which a child becomes a reliable source and it is left to journalists to exercise judgement in individual cases, several journalists felt that 12 to 14 years was an appropriate cut-off point (Stone 1999).

## **4.2 Working with children, young people and young adults of different age groups**

### **4.2.1 Children**

As with any other group, adults working with children need to establish rapport, ensure confidentiality, and use materials, techniques and settings that are familiar to participants.

Appropriate activities include play and drawing, response to stories, vignettes, keywords, pictures or photographs, conversations with “persona” dolls or cartoon characters, and descriptions about activities in which they are involved. With support, even quite young children are able to chair meetings and set agendas and timetables (Fajerman and Treseder 2000, Save the Children 2000).

Facilitators need to be experienced in working with this age group and have enough skills to “cross the cultural and communicative divide that has characterised the paternal adult-child relationship” (Hazel 1995). They also need to take into account the wide range of cognitive and social development they are likely to encounter (Hill et al 1996).

With very young children, it is helpful if adults:

- sit on an equal level with the children
- do not interrupt them
- are honest
- acknowledge their feelings.

Adults also need to explain any financial or other limitations in advance, give children the information they need and respect their decisions. Information can be presented in poster form, through videos, websites, tape, large print and in different languages.

In consultations in relation to the Agenda for Children, facilitators of group discussions with children aged 6 to 10 used brainstorming, graffiti boards on which children could write comments, drawing, painting and written replies to gather children’s views. The facilitators were experienced in working with children in this age group and were able to manage dominant and shy individuals and disruptive or over-enthusiastic behaviour. Boys sometimes dominated sessions either with their disruptive behaviour or by having more to say than others. Consent for the children to take part was obtained from both the children and their parents or caregivers.

Submissions were also received from kindergartens and other early childhood services, usually in the form of drawings, sometimes with the children’s comments recorded by an adult.

### **4.2.2 Working with young people**

As with other groups, those seeking the involvement of young people aged 12 to 17 need to take account of the diversity of backgrounds and experiences within this age range. Some may need more support than others to feel there is value in contributing to group discussions or workshops, or joining reference or advisory groups. Several writers comment that if they have a good experience at this age, young people may be more



willing to be involved in decision-making as adults. For example, Canadian Elder Marques (1999:1) argues that:

Even in cases where participation mechanisms have been implemented, they have often been seriously flawed. This may be worse than having no mechanisms at all because poorly designed models of youth participation reinforce cynical attitudes about the political process and fuel the apathy they were meant to dispel.

Marques uses the example of student trustees on school boards to illustrate his point. His views are supported by similar research in New Zealand (Nairn 2000). Marques notes that:

- legislative and regulatory limitations on student trustees and the absence of standards are barriers to meaningful involvement
- many selection models reflect a lack of faith in the ability of youth
- most school boards fail to provide orientation to their student trustees
- student trustees are often excluded from the debate and compromise that are part of decision-making
- most student trustees do not have adequate consultation mechanisms (Marques 1999).

To overcome young people's reluctance to be involved, young people themselves have suggested offering:

- the ability to participate indirectly through questionnaires, email, the internet and quizzes
- "taster sessions" to give young people a sense of how systems work
- a membership scheme, incentives and competitions to make young people feel part of an organisation (Pick 1999).

Other methodologies and strategies to involve young people in decision-making include:

- focus groups
- sessions using flipcharts, key words, sentence completion and graffiti boards
- role plays, vignettes and dramatic presentations
- videos and magazines, brainstorming
- physical models as the basis for discussion
- workshops where young people develop solutions to a particular problem
- young people's conferences (Save the Children 2000, Walker 2001).

In an example of working with vulnerable young people, researchers on the leaving care project in England devised a game aimed at promoting discussion. The game consisted of a set of cards with the following sentence: "When I was leaving care I remember feeling...". The researchers completed some of the sentences from their own experience while participants were able to complete others. Participants chose a card and used it to describe their own experience. This worked extremely well as a technique to promote discussion. However, follow-up individual interviews and a planned focus group were not successful. Young people repeatedly broke their appointments, and despite various inducements and arrangements for the focus group, only one person turned up. The report comments:

Gaining access to this dispersed population with, it has to be said, chaotic lifestyles was no easy task. The problems encountered during the process of this research would suggest that the population under study is not coping well with the transition to independence. (McKeown 1999:11).

In Australia, an exercise in participation on local government issues used a range of techniques, including:

- street-level surveying
- consultation in schools
- talking to “at-risk” young people on the street (through youth workers)
- internet surveys
- video interviews
- audio interviews with aboriginal youth (using Aboriginal Radio interviewers)
- focus groups for non-English-speaking-background youths (working with the Migrant Resource Centre) (Murray 1999).

Murray notes that:

Some of the strategies were more successful than others. A short video of consultations with young people was produced which has been a very powerful tool in raising political and community awareness of the issues. However, consulting successfully with significant numbers of Aboriginal and at risk youth was difficult and it was necessary to use published sources of information and surveys to provide additional supportive evidence. (Murray 1999:3).

In New Zealand consultations in relation to the Agenda for Children, group consultations with older students sometimes involved young people from different classes who did not know each other well. This inhibited discussion to some extent, suggesting that with a one-off consultation, groups with members who know each other may be preferable to a group meeting for the first time.

Young people involved in the Ministry of Youth Affairs’ consultation on what should be in the Youth Development Strategy Aotearoa were asked to respond to the same discussion document as adults as well as a smaller consultation pamphlet. A resource kit was also provided including group response forms, an information sheet on how to run small group discussions and a facilitator’s guide to help with responding. Approximately 1,450 young people throughout the country either attended consultation meetings or contributed a written response. The Ministry of Youth Affairs considers that information received from the young people’s responses was equal in value and usefulness to responses received from adults. It is an example of how, when asked in appropriate ways, young people can make a significant contribution to the policy process.

Secondary-school-aged young people responding to the consultation document  
*Supporting the Positive Development of Young People in New Zealand: A discussion*

*document for consultation on a Youth Development Strategy* (Ministry of Youth Affairs 2001a) suggested using:

- student radio stations
- holiday programmes and weekend programmes
- youth forums
- workshops
- suggestion boxes
- school councils with a more active role
- youth councils in local government
- opportunities to meet with government members.

They also wanted more publicity about opportunities to participate, including:

- publicity about the Ministry of Youth Affairs' website
- publicity through television, radio and newspapers
- fliers and pamphlets
- billboards and youth weeks.

They stressed the need for feedback and a serious commitment by government. As one respondent commented:

We feel that even if the Government does include young people in their decision-making they will not take the comments or recommendations seriously. Even if they say they will, what is the guarantee that they actually will? These goals have been set before but they have not been followed through. (Ministry of Youth Affairs 2001a).

Research shows that young people prefer mechanisms such as youth councils, youth forums and youth weeks to general mechanisms such as surveys, questionnaires or street or telephone interviews. The younger the participants the less likely they are to consider a survey to be necessary and the shorter the time scales in which they expect something to happen. Young people also prefer face-to-face contact and one-to-one or small group discussions rather than large groups. For young people to express their views it is important there is a sense of trust between the young people and whoever is seeking their views and this is easier with face-to-face contact (DLG 1998, Evison 2000, Paterson 1999).

#### **4.2.3 Working with young adults**

As with other groups of young people, plans to involve young adults in decision-making need to take into account young adults' diverse educational, cultural and employment situations, as well as ensuring a geographic and gender balance. Young adults may be recruited through tertiary institutions, workplaces, sports clubs and cultural groups, youth networks and community organisations, and youth branches of organisations such as unions, political parties, service and women's groups.

Research suggests that local-level involvement is "the arena that creates commitment and teaches participation techniques for young people" (Office of Youth Affairs 2000). The

Queensland youth development strategy proposes encouraging involvement at the local level as a way of building to greater involvement at the national level.

Methodologies with young adults include all of the options for younger people as well as:

- youth councils or forums
- membership of youth sub-committees and reference groups
- youth elections
- the development of youth networks
- residential weekends
- participation on governance bodies
- using young adults as peer educators, advisors, trainers and facilitators.

Youth councils and youth forums are commonly used to involve young adults in decision-making, but they vary in type, origin and purpose. Matthews (2001) identifies six different types of youth councils:

- feeder organisations, which are characterised by a commitment to engage young people in decision-making and are planned and resourced to fall within the orbit of a local authority. They feed or contribute to ongoing strategies
- shadow organisations, which are parallel bodies that mimic existing adult-based organisations
- consultative organisations, which have a strong local focus
- issue-specific organisations, which are typically initiated by community bodies such as the police or health authority with the intent of engaging young people in agendas which are organisationally led
- group-specific organisations, which represent groups of young people who share a common identity, either through a common interest or through their marginalised position within society
- community-specific organisations, which encompass a wider range of aspects of young people's environment and their relationship with the local community.

The different types of organisations share a number of common problems. These include:

- lack of time to get things done
- lack of power
- lack of a sense of purpose
- being too bureaucratic or tokenistic
- not always being well integrated into structures for decision-making
- having too much adult control of the agenda and process
- lack of subsequent action
- being too homogeneous or unrepresentative, with members often being self selected or hand picked
- not being accountable in any sense to a wider group of young people
- needing more support and resources
- participants needing more formal training than they usually receive (Fitzpatrick et al, no date, Matthews 2001, Nairn 2000).

Matthews makes similar points to Marques (1999), concluding that more attention needs to be paid to the initiation of youth councils as well as to processes and outcomes:

If not appropriately constituted and carefully developed, there is a danger that youth councils simply confirm the posturing of adult decision-makers rather than opening up new opportunities for the integration of young people. Indeed, poor participatory mechanisms are very effective in training young people to become non-participants in the future. There is a concern too, that youth councils become the only means by which young people's ideas are fielded, so excluding other routes and the participation of a broader youth constituency. (Matthews 2001:314).

### **4.3 Summary**

The key principle for working with children, young people and young adults of different age groups is to use techniques appropriate to the age of participants and facilitators who are able to establish rapport and trust.

- Even very young children can contribute to decision-making if the topic is relevant and appropriate and the facilitator experienced and sensitive.
- Those working with children need to take account of the cognitive and social development of the participants and be prepared to represent their views fairly.
- Adults seeking the views of young people aged 12 to 17 need to offer a range of opportunities and avenues to participate so that all young people feel comfortable being involved.
- Young adults need to be recruited through varied means, because they have moved beyond compulsory attendance at school.
- Where they are taking part in more formal structures such as youth councils, youth forums, advisory and reference groups and governance bodies, their role needs to be clearly articulated, well supported and well integrated into the decision-making process.

## **5. Participation in decision-making by Māori children, young people and young adults**

### **5.1 General issues**

Māori see the involvement of rangatahi in participation and decision-making as an expression of partnership in terms of the Treaty of Waitangi. They see their right to participate as different from the rights of other children, young people and young adults in New Zealand.

Several organisations, such as the Waitakere City Council, have developed guidelines for consulting with the Māori community. Very few specifically mention consulting with Māori children, young people and young adults or their participation in decision-making. The key principles in consulting with adults are that the consultation should:

- be kanoahi to kanoahi (face to face)
- be meaningful, i.e. at an early stage in the project rather than when many key issues have been determined
- be supported by information that is accessible, easy to understand and free of jargon
- aim for consensus, with grievances or conflicts resolved before projects progress
- be flexible
- include a system for reviewing consultation principles and processes
- allow for mechanisms appropriate to the Māori community
- be well supported and resourced (Waitakere City Council 2001).

Awekotuku (1991:18) includes among her principles for undertaking research in the Māori community, the need to convey the aims as well as the anticipated outcome of investigations, as clearly as possible to the people studied. Participants in research have the right to know what will become of information they have volunteered, and its possible use and application. She asserts that the people studied also have an absolute right to exercise control over the information they have volunteered and the right to restrict access to it or to withdraw it from the project findings.

Māori working with rangatahi stress that while they should have input into policy that affects them, it is important for the process to be genuine and empowering, with adults supporting rangatahi to express their views and lead discussions.

### **5.2 Settings and methodologies**

Irwin (1994:37) points out that the tangata whenua have the power to define how researchers (and consultants) conduct themselves while in their area. Because Māori have a preference for working with people they know, it is important to make face-to-face contact. This will require asking someone local, known and trusted by their networks to set up the first face-to-face contacts.

Where involvement does seem appropriate, the setting for participation by rangatahi needs to be culturally appropriate and chosen by those taking part. Those wishing to

facilitate participation or involve rangatahi in decision-making will have to negotiate entry to the community with which they wish to work.

Face-to-face methodologies will also be appropriate. Some Māori communities may not support their rangatahi being consulted or participating in decision-making independently or without the support of the wider whānau.

### **5.3 Topics**

The literature does not identify any particular topics that might be unacceptable to raise with Māori children and young people, and Māori young people have contributed to projects ranging from looking at ways to increase Māori expectations of achievement to youth suicide. The Health Research Council *Guidelines for Researchers on Health Research Involving Māori* (1998) include a requirement to consult Māori on topics that concern them, or where Māori are to be involved as participants.

Adults responding to the Ministry of Youth Affairs' consultation documents on *Supporting the Positive Development of Young People in New Zealand: A discussion document for consultation on a Youth Development Strategy* (Ministry of Youth Affairs 2001b) noted that Māori young people may not be willing to speak up and challenge their elders, even when the opportunity is available.

### **5.4 Facilitators with Māori children and young people**

As with other groups, facilitators need to be skilled and appropriate. As well as being acceptable to the rangatahi, they need to be skilled in their tikanga, in process issues and in managing group dynamics.

Adult respondents to the Ministry of Youth Affairs' consultation documents for a Youth Development Strategy (Ministry of Youth Affairs 2001b) stressed the importance of having appropriate facilitators, for example having Māori facilitators for Māori young people.

### **5.5 Summary**

Māori, including rangatahi, have a right to be consulted about and participate in decision-making and policies that affect them. Members of the Māori community are the best people to manage the involvement of rangatahi in such consultation or decision-making. Agencies that wish to involve rangatahi need to:

- be committed to the process and prepared to share power
- know and use Māori networks
- use facilitators who have the trust and confidence of the Māori community as a whole and of rangatahi in particular
- use facilitators who are skilled in their tikanga as well as in working with rangatahi
- provide information early and in an appropriate format
- commit enough resources such as time and money to enable the exercise to be carried out appropriately

- provide feedback early enough to allow rangatahi to comment on or contribute to drafts
- compensate those involved appropriately.



## **6. Participation in decision-making by Pacific children, young people and young adults**

### **6.1 General principles**

The Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs has developed guidelines for consulting with Pacific peoples (Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs 2001). The guidelines do not refer specifically to children, young people and young adults or to their participation in decision-making but they provide a useful starting point for discussion. The guidelines stress the need to:

- set out a proposal early in the process before it has been decided on
- approach the process with a genuinely open mind
- give all the information that participants need, presented in a way that is right for them
- allow enough time, on their terms
- reach a final decision in light of what they have said, without raising false expectations
- explain the final outcome to people so that they can see how their involvement contributed
- be clear about what is negotiable and what is being presented just for information purposes.

### **6.2 Participation by Pacific children, young people and young adults**

The guidelines recognise the need for sensitivity to Pacific values. These include seeing the individual as part of family, community and society, recognising spiritual and holistic dimensions of policy issues and taking time to come to a consensus view. At the same time, participation exercises need to acknowledge the diversity among Pacific peoples and the complex situation where communities are dealing with intergenerational and cultural transformation.

While long-established communities may be open to their young people taking part in decision-making on matters that affect them, newer arrivals may be more reluctant for their children, young people and young adults to be consulted independently of the family and community. The views of both groups need to be respected through a partnership approach, in which families are fully informed of the project, parental consent is sought and adults have an opportunity to contribute if they wish.

### **6.3 Making contact**

Young people can be reached through a range of avenues, particularly schools and tertiary institutions, but also through churches, youth groups, youth centres and youth workers. With consultations or participation exercises on sensitive topics, it is helpful to meet formally and talk with key people, including elders and ministers (Douthett 1998).

### **6.4 Topics for discussion**

Pacific young people share many of the same concerns as other young people, including concerns about education, employment, recreation and health. They also experience

pressures relating to their identity, and having to operate in a number of different and often conflicting settings. Feedback from the Pacific young people taking part in the Agenda for Children consultations indicated that children and young people were most interested in discussing issues that arose from their own experiences, such as issues relating to family and the church. The discussion process highlighted gender differences, supporting the view that single-sex groups are preferable to mixed-gender groups.

Some topics may be particularly sensitive. Suaalii and Mavoia (2001:41) for example, point out that children may not have the right to share either collective or individual knowledge with researchers without the consent of other family and community members. They note that the high value placed on such knowledge determines the types of information that can be readily proffered and to whom. They also discuss the relevance of shame in a Pacific context. Their discussion is in relation to research but can be extended to include participation in decision-making:

If research topics or methodologies have the potential to shame a community, issues of child consent become quite pronounced. There is greater potential for participation and disclosure of information to cause shame when research topics are highly sensitive (e.g. child abuse).

Adults responding to the Ministry of Youth Affairs' consultation documents on *Supporting the Positive Development of Young People* (Ministry of Youth Affairs 2001b) noted that like Māori young people, Pacific children and young people may not be willing to speak up and challenge their elders, even when the opportunity is available. This underscores the need for sensitive facilitation.

## **6.5 Culturally appropriate methodologies**

The first step in setting up a participation exercise is to find the appropriate facilitator. This is likely to be a community person who is familiar with the young people and can make contacts, decide on the appropriate methodology and run the sessions. That person should be given enough time and resources to plan and carry out the project.

The facilitator will work with the group to establish the process. This is likely to be a group rather than an individual process. For particular topics it is culturally appropriate in some Pacific ethnic groups for males and females to be consulted separately. In various cultures there are topics that young males and young females are not to discuss openly together. There are however other situations where it is appropriate to combine the groups.

The size of the group will also depend on the topic of consultation. The Youth Affairs' consultations for the Youth Development Strategy involved a combination of large and small group discussions. It can be helpful to have young people of similar ages in the same group. For example, there may be 8 to 12 year-olds in one group, 14 to 17 year-olds in another and 18 to 24 year-olds in another.

Depending on the topic, facilitators may choose to work with groups who share a common affiliation, such as the same ethnic background, a similar upbringing, or membership of the same church group or street gang. Groups can provide a safety net for children, young people and young adults. For example, when young people report back to a group including adults, some of whom may be their parents, an individual speaks on behalf of the group rather than speaking for themselves. Adults are able to hear what the young people have to say so that they come to a greater understanding of each other's positions.

Ideally, the participation process will take place in a setting that is familiar and comfortable for those taking part. Feedback from the Pacific young people who took part in the Agenda for Children consultations reinforced the need to allow enough preparation time to establish rapport with the group, check out the facility and create a friendly environment.

Material needs to be presented in English and the languages of other nations and should be checked out in advance with some individual Pacific people. It should be clearly written and accompanied by face-to-face discussion in English (Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs 2001).

The guidelines for consulting with Pacific adults recommend a multi-method approach, including:

- focus groups, possibly using organisations that specialise in Pacific peoples' consultation through focus groups
- key informant interviews, although these may not represent the views of the wider community
- fono, which are time consuming and may be more appropriate for older than younger Pacific participants
- media such as Pacific radio.

With young people, involvement is likely to be less formal and make greater use of workshops, music, physical activities, games, humour and food. Confidentiality and safety issues need to be addressed and young people should be offered transport to and from venues.

Like other young people, Pacific participants need prompt feedback, including the ability to comment on drafts of any reports prepared following their involvement.

## **6.6 Facilitators with Pacific children, young people and young adults**

As with other groups, facilitators need to have a good rapport with, and be well respected by, the young participants. Skilled youth workers and educators can often fill this role. Facilitators need to be well prepared for their task and should be appropriately compensated for their time and skill.

## 6.7 Summary

The participation of Pacific children, young people and young adults in decision-making is best mediated through members of the Pacific communities. Those who wish to involve Pacific young people need to:

- be familiar with the consultation guidelines prepared by the Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs
- be sensitive to the concerns of Pacific adults, who see their young people as an integral part of the family, community and society
- make contact with young Pacific people through facilitators who are familiar with and have the trust of the community and of the young people in particular
- allow enough time and resources for the exercise to be successful
- be prepared to discuss topics of importance to Pacific young people
- be aware of the sensitivity and private nature of some topics
- contract or work with facilitators who can plan and run a participation exercise appropriately
- give feedback promptly and allow participants to comment on draft reports
- compensate facilitators appropriately for their time.

## **7. Participation in decision-making by children, young people and young adults from different ethnic groups**

### **7.1 General issues**

Over recent years, New Zealand has become more and more culturally diverse, with an increasing number of long-term migrant communities, new settlers and refugees. Sensitivity to cultural differences is essential when eliciting information from children, young people and young adults. Some researchers believe that children as young as three can have well-developed attitudes about their own and others' ethnic or cultural group (Garbarino et al 1989, Solberg 1996).

Major variations within cultural groups need to be recognised by those who want to consult with them or involve them in decision-making (Lynch and Hanson 1992). Acculturation<sup>3</sup>, patterns of adaptation to New Zealand society and culture and ethnic identification are important variables in understanding ethnic youth, and may be responsible for important intra-group differences. First and subsequent generations of New Zealand-born youth can have a complex ethnic identity related to both their traditional ethnic culture and heritage, and those more dominant in society. Research indicates that these patterns of adaptation often reflect a synthesis of cultures.

### **7.2 The relationship between adults and young people**

Many cultures have a strong "collectivist" base and see the family and the community as the main unit of wellbeing for all members relying on that unit. They would consider the division of family and community into "young people" and "adult" issues to be inappropriate. These cultures, which include Pacific, Asian, African and Middle Eastern cultures, often have a strong emphasis on hierarchical systems based on age, which makes young people's involvement in decision-making difficult or inappropriate. For example, many cultures do not see adolescence as a time to develop an identity independent of the family. Rather they see identity formation and role definition occurring within the bounds of the family. Legal issues around informed consent may be at odds with or different from cultural value systems related to the concept of family and the relationships between adults and young people. In these situations, a family- or community-based approach may be useful to obtain consent or community support for the project.

### **7.3 Making contact**

Given the sensitivity required to work appropriately with children, young people and young adults from different ethnic groups, it makes most sense to work through agencies or organisations that are familiar with and have the trust of the groups concerned, both to gain access and to run the actual consultation or decision-making exercise. Schools and tertiary institutions, ethnic organisations, refugee and migrant groups, ethnic youth groups and sports clubs and churches may be useful avenues for contacts. They may also have appropriate people to act as facilitators. It is also important to gain the support of community leaders.

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<sup>3</sup> The adoption of the values and traits of another culture.

#### **7.4 Topics for discussion**

Children, young people and young adults from ethnic minorities share many of the same concerns as other young people but they have some additional concerns. These include:

- difficulties associated with acculturation, culture shock and long-term settlement
- lack of culturally appropriate services
- lack of knowledge of what services are available
- intergenerational conflict
- racism
- lack of support for different cultural values in schools, tertiary institutions and other institutions and services
- different perceptions of gender roles.

#### **7.5 Culturally appropriate methodologies**

The style of involvement needs to be appropriate for the group. There will be some issues that children, young people and young adults from different cultures find very difficult to discuss in a group situation, especially in a group of young people from their own community. Research indicates that cultural behaviour patterns can depend on context (Ballard and Ballard 1977, Sawicka 1995, Taft 1973, 1977). Thus the context of the consultation (venue, facilitators, etc) may influence the responses elicited.

Groups need time to familiarise themselves with the material and the issues if they are to feel comfortable enough to voice their real opinions and preferences. In discussing a research project with American Indians, Dennis and Giangreco (1996:110) describe the importance of allowing enough time:

Interviewers who give themselves just one hour per visit, refuse any refreshment, and maintain a professional distance, overlook important cultural expectations of interpersonal behaviour... Native people may use stories to answer questions. Rushing people through answers may lead to (a) the questions not being fully answered (b) a feeling of being discounted and (c) a loss of important information.

Their suggestions for interviewing can be adapted to relate more generally to involvement by young people from different ethnic groups. They include:

- seeking help from “cultural interpreters” in advance of the participation exercise
- having someone from the community determine whether the discussion guidelines “fit” in the community
- becoming aware of the social interaction norms of the community, so that initial impressions are appropriate
- carefully ascertaining the literacy and language status of participants
- adjusting the style for non-readers and -speakers of other languages
- considering that young people may not be literate in their native language or English
- considering working with an interpreter
- involving young people in planning a participation exercise
- choosing an appropriate location

- adjusting the number of facilitators to suit the occasion
- being prepared to spend time before and after the participation exercise
- carefully examining the nature of the topics covered. Participants need to know why topics are being discussed, especially with subjects that may be personal or spiritual.

Adults need to take responsibility for understanding the cultural meaning of behaviour (Solberg 1996:94). For example, the style of discussion needs to take account of different cultures' perceptions of eye contact, direct questioning and taboo subjects, with different cultures having different emphases and interpretations. Furthermore, cultural patterns change over time, making the behaviour of new and longer-term immigrants, including children and young people born in the host country, harder to predict. Sometimes they may respond according to the old culture, and sometimes adopt the new one. Adults need to be aware of parental concerns about assimilation or culture loss, including conflicts around language and values. Parents are often particularly protective of girls and young women, who are considered the primary guardians and transmitters of culture.

Confidentiality and safety are also important. Many young people will not contribute if they fear the information they give will get back to their family or community. At the same time, consent should be sought from both the parent and the young person, with both being aware of the nature of the involvement, and the arrangements for confidentiality and safety.

## **7.6 Facilitators with children and young people from other cultures**

Young people from different cultures can be interviewed either by someone from their own culture or by someone from another culture who is competent cross-culturally. It is essential for the facilitator to be age, gender and culturally acceptable.

Lynch and Hanson (1992:356) describe cross-cultural competence as:

- awareness of one's own cultural limitations
- openness, appreciation, respect for cultural difference
- having a view of intercultural interactions as learning opportunities
- an ability to use cultural resources in interventions
- acknowledgement of the integrity and value of all cultures.

Where interpreters are used, they need to understand the cultural nuances of spoken language and body language. The onus is on the interviewer or facilitator to deal with any communication "problems" (Dwivedi 1996:155, Garbarino et al 1989:105).

Facilitators also need to be aware of how children and young people are expected to be in their own culture, including in their gender roles. If they are not assumed to be competent, this may affect their perceptions of themselves.

## **7.7 Ethical issues**

There are a number of ethical issues involved in working with children and young people from other cultures or ethnic groups and whose English skills are not well developed. Care should be taken to ensure that informed consent has been obtained and that the work

conforms to ethical and professional standards. In addition to this, due attention must be given to ethnic and cultural factors that may be appropriate and specific to the group to be consulted.

### **7.8 Administrative arrangements**

A number of practical issues need to be considered in organising consultations, including the safety of participants and the costs associated with participating. Transport needs to be arranged, especially with school-age or younger children, and their costs met.

### **7.9 Giving feedback**

Giving feedback to the youth and community as a whole must be handled carefully and with some sensitivity given that the youth consulted may have reported issues that are sensitive or not acceptable to adult community leaders. The feedback process and use of findings also needs to consider the impacts on the affected youth and their community after the consultation process and reports have been produced.

### **7.10 Summary**

Adults who wish to involve children, young people and young adults from different ethnic groups in decision-making need to be aware of the complexity of their task. In particular they need to:

- consider the diversity not only between groups but within them
- recognise the importance of negotiating access through appropriate channels
- recognise adults' preference for a "whānau-style" consultation and be prepared to work with the community to determine the best approach
- use facilitators who are known to and trusted by the children, young people and young adults concerned
- be prepared to discuss topics that are of concern to the children, young people and young adults
- use culturally appropriate methodologies
- provide information in a suitable format
- be clear about confidentiality and safety issues
- gain consent from parents as well as young participants.



## **8. Participation in decision-making by children, young people and young adults with disabilities**

### **8.1 Who to include**

The New Zealand Disability Strategy (Ministry of Health 2001) sets out the right of disabled people to say what they think and talk about their experiences. The term “disability” covers a wide range of abilities and impairments. As with other children and young people, participation exercises with children and young people with disabilities need to acknowledge their gender, ethnicity, social circumstances, age and sexuality as well as their disability or impairment. When setting up such exercises, a working group of children and young people with disabilities can be established to look at the specific task of how to involve everyone (Christchurch City Council 1998, Willow 1997:82).

In a consultation project in England, given appropriate tools and support, all children, including those who were labelled as having “severe or profound disabilities” and “challenging behaviour”, were able to express their views, wishes and feelings (Stone 2001). With multi-media tools, young people and facilitators learned the necessary skills quickly and could contribute effectively.

### **8.2 Making contact**

In making contact, commentators generally suggest working through existing groups, noting that there is currently a wide range of groups working with young people with disabilities, including those where people with disabilities advocate on their own behalf. Some schools and tertiary institutions have special units, designated and experienced staff members or disability co-ordinators who may also be able to help. It is important that the young people are able to work with people with whom they are familiar and whom they trust.

### **8.3 Obtaining consent**

In general, informed consent needs to be obtained from the young people concerned and from parents or caregivers for those under 18.

For some young adults, particularly those with an intellectual disability, the consent of parents should be obtained for participants up to the age of 20. The young people should be asked if they want to take part.

Some advocates are of the view that with young people and young adults who are competent to make decisions, there needs to be some process for informing parents but allowing the young people to make up their own minds about whether or not to participate. The arguments for this view are that on the one hand, parents can act as gatekeepers or speak on behalf of their children, thus denying the young people their right to speak on their own behalf. On the other hand, there is a need to monitor the young person’s willingness to be involved where there are difficulties getting informed consent and this has to be balanced against not excluding them from the process.

#### **8.4 Topics for discussion**

Many commentators argue that society needs to develop a relationship with children, young people and young adults with disabilities in which the young people are not excluded as having “special needs” but are seen as having a range of hopes, wishes and dreams like any others.

What is crucial for the social inclusion of disabled children is that their impairment does not become a negative factor. Their rights to make decisions should reflect those of their siblings, even if the means by which they signal their choices may be different. (Middleton 1999:122).

Young people agree, suggesting that too often the focus is on their impairments and not on the adults who do not listen and do not try to communicate. They would prefer an “ability” approach, with discussion focusing on social attitudes, how people treat them, and the way the environment works for them, rather than on their disabilities. Stone (2001) reports that in her study, disabled children and young people had strong views on how they are treated, the services they receive, their education, health and leisure.

Like other young people, children, young people and young adults with disabilities can learn participation skills and young people with disabilities who are regularly involved in decision-making at all levels will be more confident and competent when major decisions are required (Russell 1996:110).

#### **8.5 Settings for participation**

Careful attention should also be paid to appropriate times, venues, transport and other arrangements (Ward 1997:13). Venues need to have wheelchair access and people who understand the needs of young people with disabilities and know how to offer assistance (Save the Children and the Children’s Rights Office 1997:27). They should also be quiet and without distractions, with accessible facilities like toilets. If food is provided, facilitators will need to check out whether participants have any particular dietary requirements or constraints.

The setting needs to be safe emotionally as well as physically. Annison (1999:5) believes that the environment is particularly important when interviewing people with an intellectual disability, and informants should be allowed to choose the interview site wherever possible. Having a safe environment may mean having familiar people present to give confidence to the people taking part in the discussion, if the facilitator is unknown to them.

Facilitators also need to consider the timing of the meeting and think about when participants are likely to have the most energy. Meetings may need to be reasonably short or have frequent breaks. With a complex or intense discussion it might be better to have completely different sections on different days.

## **8.6 Methods for involving children and young people with disabilities**

As with other groups, methods for involving children, young people and young adults with disabilities in decision-making need to work for the young people, not for the adults. The “rules” need to be the young people’s rules, not adult rules, but the facilitator may need to offer guidance and explanations to begin with. Suggestions may include taking turns, listening to each other without interruption and signalling that they want to speak.

Activities need to be optional and fun. Activities might include using storytelling instead of asking questions, and incorporating music, cartoons and games as well as discussion to convey ideas.

As with other young people, group sizes need to be kept small with a maximum of 7 to 10 people. Where there are more than 10 people, work in two groups with separate facilitators. The facilities will need to be suitable for this.

### **8.6.1 Information and language**

As with other groups information should be presented clearly and in natural language, using concrete examples rather than abstract concepts and using graphic illustrations to supplement the written word. IHC New Zealand routinely produces pictorial and easy-to-read versions of documents (see Ministry of Health/IHC New Zealand 2001a and b) and can give good advice on how to adapt material to suit young people with disabilities. Any information should show positive images of people with disabilities and may need to be produced in large print, Braille, video or audio form.

### **8.6.2 Time**

Adults need to allow enough time for the exercise. Participants need time to become familiar and confident with each other, particularly where sensitive topics are to be discussed. They also need time to communicate. It can take some young people several minutes to write a single sentence or to communicate their thoughts through a speech board. With some young people, including those with an intellectual disability, facilitators will need to be prepared to go back to a previous section of the discussion, to allow for participants who have taken time to process information and put their thoughts together.

Some young people may not speak in complete sentences, but rather in phrases or single words and the facilitator needs to be able to explore the meaning of this, through further questions and observing body language. Time is also needed to discuss issues specific to each participant’s impairment. It can be useful to have a note-taker to record comments so that the facilitator can stay focused on the discussion.

### **8.6.3 Group or individual discussions**

Young people also need to have the option of taking part in group activities or discussions or having a one-on-one meeting with someone who comes to their home. Transport can be a major barrier and limit young people’s ability to contribute. Children, young people and young adults with disabilities should also have the option of taking part in mainstream groups as well as or instead of in groups composed entirely of young

people with disabilities. As with others, there should be different groups for younger and older children, with an option of having single-sex groups.

In some cases, young people may appreciate having a trusted adult who can act as an interpreter where the young person's language is not easy to understand or where they use sign language, communication boards or other means of communicating. Support people need clear instructions about interpreting only what the young people say and not influencing responses. The facilitators for the Agenda for Children consultations suggested that in some cases, it would have been easier to undertake the consultations over a period of time, using the classroom teacher as facilitator.

This would have allowed the children's interest to be maintained, greater discussion to be generated and other methods of feedback, such as drawings. Trying to maintain children's interest and enthusiasm to complete all the sections in one session was difficult. With the children's discussion pack not being available in alternative formats, great care had to be taken to explain what was required without influencing the children's responses in any way. (Unpublished notes, Agenda for Children consultation).

Where facilitators have a group who use different methods and have different levels of communication, it is important not to spend a disproportionate amount of time with those who can communicate more easily. Young people with moderate learning difficulties may lack confidence and self-esteem, and facilitators may need to spend time with them prior to the discussion to put them at ease (Save the Children and the Children's Rights Office 1997:27). Costley (2000:171) suggests using an observer to note interactions and non-verbal behaviour. Another possibility is to use 'talking' computers (Romer et al 1997). This gives participants privacy and may produce less "socially acceptable" answers, but does not allow opportunities for discussion.

A key point in discussions with young people with disabilities is that:

When communication is difficult, the challenge is for those who cannot understand to adapt rather than expecting disabled children and young people to change the ways they express themselves. (Willow 1997:82).

#### **8.6.4 Feedback**

Feedback needs to be provided promptly and in an accessible form, using language that is familiar to the participants. Summaries in illustrated leaflets, cartoon form, or on audio- or videotape may be useful ways of providing feedback. Like other young people, children, young people and young adults with disabilities want to know what will happen following the exercise and want to see some change as a result of their input.

Participants should be rewarded for their contribution with a gift, for example a toy or a book, a gift voucher or a CD voucher.

## **8.7 Facilitators with children and young people with disabilities**

Facilitators need to be experienced in working with people with disabilities. It can be difficult for people unaccustomed to working with children with disabilities to see past the disability and to treat the individual as a person and not a disease (Russell 1996). Facilitators should be familiar with the task, have the necessary background knowledge and come to the meeting well prepared. Some young people with disabilities have commented that they would prefer facilitators to be relatively young and to have a disability themselves.

Children and young people with disabilities need, as far as possible, to be given a choice of support person where they need an interpreter to facilitate communication (RNIB 1997:10, Ward 1997:35).

Facilitators should be appropriately recompensed for their skill and time.

## **8.8 Summary**

Those who wish to involve children, young people and young adults with disabilities in decision-making activities need to:

- include children, young people and young adults of different ages, gender, ethnicity, social circumstances and sexuality as well as those with a range of abilities and impairments
- make every effort to enable young people to speak for themselves
- work through existing networks, particularly those established by people with disabilities or who work directly with young people with disabilities
- cover the same topics as for other children, young people and young adults as well as giving participants the opportunity to discuss topics that are of concern to them
- ensure that the venue is appropriate and that all necessary practical preparations are made well in advance
- provide information in accessible formats, using simple language, graphic illustrations and specific examples rather than abstract concepts
- allow enough time for the participation to be relaxed but comprehensive
- offer participants options as to how the exercise should be run, including the option of one-on-one contact
- provide appropriate support for participants so that they can communicate effectively
- provide feedback promptly and in an accessible form
- reward participants for their contribution
- use facilitators who are known to and trusted by participants, preferably those who are young themselves and who have a disability or impairment.

## **9. Participation in decision-making by vulnerable and marginalised children, young people and young adults**

### **9.1 Who is involved**

Vulnerable or marginalised children, young people and young adults include those who are receiving or have recently received services from a care and protection or youth justice organisation or from an iwi or other social service agency. Particular care needs to be taken in participation processes with marginalised or vulnerable children, young people and young adults. The barriers to involvement that exist for all children, young people and young adults are magnified for those who experience additional disadvantage.

### **9.2 Making contact**

Making contact with marginalised or vulnerable children, young people and young adults almost always requires negotiating access through the agency that is responsible for their care. This may be the Department of Corrections for young people in custody, on parole or doing community service, or the Department of Child, Youth and Family Services or an iwi or community social service agency for those in care and protection.

It may be possible to contact marginalised or vulnerable young people and young adults who are no longer in care or custody through youth services, including drop-in health services for young people, community services and youth workers.

### **9.3 Obtaining consent**

Little has been written on involving young people in care or custody in decision-making relating to policy or service development, but there is a considerable literature on taking their views into account in decisions relating to their personal care. Some of these issues also apply to their involvement in decision-making in general. They include gate-keeping by adults, discounting of young people's competence, manipulation by adults and lack of appropriate support. Henderson (2000b), Tapp and Taylor (2001) and Kaltenborn (2001) are among those who argue for greater involvement by young people in vulnerable situations as long as there are appropriate safeguards:

It is necessary to establish appropriate social and legal contexts or 'ecologies' which promote the children's agency and prevent suffering. (Kaltenborn 2001:110).

Given the prevailing climate, obtaining young people's consent to take part in decision-making can be difficult. Adults may need to be convinced of the validity of the exercise and of young people's right to have their say before they are prepared to allow the young people to decide whether or not to take part. Generally, the consent of a representative of the agency that is responsible for the young person is required before children, young people and young adults can take part.

Children, young people and young adults who have had difficult life experiences are less likely to have the confidence and self-esteem to participate. Furthermore, if their views have not been taken into account in the past they are less likely to be motivated to take

part in the present. The young people who volunteer the most quickly will tend to be the loudest, most assertive or most confident (McNeish 1999:200). To ensure real equality in involvement, strategies must be developed that will give marginalised children and young people the space, time and resources to be confident and interested enough to participate.

The young people need to know that involvement is voluntary and that even though they have agreed to take part, they can withdraw at any time.

#### **9.4 Topics for discussion**

Vulnerable and marginalised children, young people and young adults will share many of the same concerns as other young people but they should also have the opportunity to discuss issues of particular concern to them. In the consultations for the Agenda for Children, young people in the youth justice system were most interested in discussing their experiences within that system, including their rights, their relationship with authorities and the perceived shortcomings of the system. Those in residential care for care and protection wanted to discuss their experiences within the residences, with particular concerns about their freedom of choice (unpublished notes, Agenda for Children consultation).

#### **9.5 Processes with vulnerable and marginalised children, young people and young adults**

##### **9.5.1 Genuine consultation**

It is especially important to be clear about what commitment is being made in setting up consultations with marginalised or vulnerable children, young people and young adults. If their views are not acted on, it is important they have an explanation and understand why that has happened (RNIB 1997:9).

##### **9.5.2 Sensitivity to circumstances**

There are likely to be *additional* issues for some groups of marginalised or vulnerable children, young people and young adults. Many of these young people are likely to have experienced sexual or physical abuse or neglect, witnessed domestic violence or have health, behavioural and learning difficulties. Their particular needs and associated ethical issues will need to be addressed.

##### **9.5.3 Processes**

Consultations with all children and young people take time and need adequate preparation and resources. Because of their preference for face-to-face contact, involvement should generally be through meetings/workshops. In all cases, facilitators should pay particular attention to building trust, which may mean that the process should be spread out over several meetings, with the early meetings being devoted to establishing a relationship.

Facilitators also need to consider young people's need for privacy and confidence in the process and allow for the power differentials between adults and the young people. Confidentiality issues should be discussed frankly, with ground rules for both adults and

young people being set at the outset and reiterated at the close of the process. Lyon et al (1999) found that young people in a custodial setting sometimes censored their contributions in focus groups to avoid repercussions from peers, staff or carers.

Separate meetings may be needed for Māori children, young people and young adults. Consideration should also be given to holding separate meetings when involving Pacific children and young people in decision-making, recognising their different cultural backgrounds and gender roles.

Participation activities will need to be carefully planned, with thought being given to their location, timing, the composition of groups, who should facilitate and the processes to be used. In some cases, it may be preferable to hold meetings away from the environment in which the young people live. Information should be prepared specifically for the consultations in an appropriate form.

#### **9.5.4 Feedback**

Feedback should be prompt and ongoing, including progress reports to let the participants know what, if anything, is happening. The feedback should be addressed directly to the participants and not to the adults who are responsible for them.

#### **9.6 Facilitators**

It is essential that the facilitators are credible to the participants and able to establish a trusting relationship with them. This may mean that they are gender and culturally appropriate and are familiar with the environment in which the children, young people and young adults are either currently or were recently living. In one example, Save the Children (2000) used the peer research method to gain information from young people. This involved recruiting and training a small group of field researchers from the community to be studied. The research explored the needs of young people leaving care and four young people aged between 19 and 26 years were recruited to undertake the research. All had been in local authority care for a large part of their childhood and all received training before undertaking the research.

#### **9.7 Summary**

- Marginalised and vulnerable children, young people and young adults include those who are receiving or have recently received services from care and protection or youth justice services.
- Contact with these young people will usually need to be negotiated through the agency in whose care they are.
- Those wishing to involve marginalised and vulnerable children, young people and young adults in decision-making may need to convince adults of the young people's right to participate.
- The young people themselves may need encouragement to take part, particularly if their views have not been taken into account in the past.
- The young people should have the opportunity to discuss topics of interest to them.
- Processes need to be sensitive and allow enough time to establish rapport and trust before the decision-making exercise itself begins.



- Issues of privacy and confidentiality need careful attention.
- Group composition needs to reflect gender and cultural sensitivities.
- Feedback should be prompt and addressed directly to participants.
- Facilitators need to be experienced and credible, and gender and culturally appropriate.

## 10. Conclusion

The idea that children, young people and young adults should have the opportunity to participate in decision-making when policies and services that affect them are being developed is becoming more widely accepted, particularly as organisations' understanding of their obligations under the UNCROC increases.

The literature on how to involve children and young people in decision-making has grown with that understanding. One of its key elements is the need for organisations themselves to review their commitment to and beliefs about such involvement. How far are they prepared to go? How much power are they willing to share? How many resources are they prepared to commit to ensuring that the process is thorough, fair and appropriate? How much notice will they take of young people's views in revising policies and services? This review is a challenging exercise but a necessary precursor to embarking on any participation exercise.

Adults within organisations also need to challenge their own beliefs and feelings about the participation of children and young people in decision-making, and identify their level of skills and training needs. They will also need to develop relationships with appropriate groups of young people with whom they might work.

Organisations and local and central government agencies are unlikely to have staff with the appropriate skills and connections to undertake all the tasks involved in setting up participatory processes, especially with children, young people and young adults of different ages, from different cultural backgrounds or who have disabilities. Knowing who to approach for support and guidance in working with children and young people is an important skill in itself.

The involvement of children, young people and young adults should be an empowering process, with participants being given the support to grow and develop as well as having the opportunity to make their views known. If their confidence in the process is to be maintained, their involvement needs to be genuine and respected, and their contribution acknowledged both in reports and in outcomes.

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