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| Young voices |
| What to consider when running a participation activity |
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# Participation activity with children and young people

There are things you need to think about when you want to run a participation activity with children and young people.

# Safety, wellbeing and the rights of children and young people

## Safety

Participants have the right to be assured their participation will be safe, respectful and meaningful.

Victoria’s Child Safe Standards require organisations to implement policies and procedures to prevent, respond to and report allegations of child abuse.

Child safety has physical, psychological, reputational and cultural dimensions. Child safe approaches make sure participation:

* does no harm
* does not cause discomfort or distress
* maintains the privacy of participants.

We can’t always know what content will be triggering but we can make efforts to avoid unnecessary, potentially triggering content and to handle sensitive topics with care. Pay attention to participants’ emotions during participation and plan for appropriate supports to be on hand. Engagement should be trauma informed.

## Cultural safety

Cultural safety is a fundamental human right. A safe environment empowers and supports people within that environment to participate and to contribute meaningfully.

Aboriginal cultural safety is about creating environments where Aboriginal people feel safe, where there is no assault and each individual's identity and experience are neither denied nor challenged. The best way to understand an Aboriginal child or young person's individual cultural identity and cultural safety needs is to engage with them openly, respectfully, with acceptance and to listen.

We regard Aboriginal cultural safety as everyone's business. We all have a role to play in improving the cultural safety of our services and practices. This includes collaborating with Aboriginal communities, Aboriginal organisations and Aboriginal staff across the department.

## Privacy and confidentiality

Children and young people have the same rights to privacy and confidentiality as adults do.

There are privacy laws for collecting, using and storing personal information. These laws cover things such as:

* what information can be collected
* how it can be used
* what information children and young people should receive
* how information should be stored and accessed.

Information provided by participants should be kept safe and confidential. Children and young people should not be individually identified in reports or presentations. Information on privacy and confidentiality should be explained to participants in practical terms and in language they can understand. It should also cover confidentiality between participants.

## Mandatory reporting

In certain circumstances confidentiality may need to be broken. For example, if a child or young person indicates they are in an unsafe situation or they disclose physical, sexual or emotional abuse or neglect. These limitations to confidentiality should also be explained to participants before they participate and space given for children and young people to change their minds about being involved.

Anyone who forms a reasonable belief that a child has suffered or is likely to suffer significant harm because of abuse or neglect can make a report to child protection.

In Victoria, any adult who holds a reasonable belief that a sexual offence has been committed by an adult against a child must report that belief to police, unless they have a reasonable excuse for not reporting. A reasonable excuse may include fear for safety or where the information has already been reported.

Find more information on the [Criminal offences to improve responses to child sex abuse](https://providers.dffh.vic.gov.au/criminal-offences-improve-responses-child-sex-abuse) <https://providers.dffh.vic.gov.au/criminal-offences-improve-responses-child-sex-abuse> on the Providers website.

## Informed consent

Children and young people have the right to clear information on what participation will involve, in a format suitable to them. This includes:

* purpose of participation
* what process will be undertaken
* participants’ rights and responsibilities
* how participants can ask questions or request changes to the planned approach
* how to opt out or withdraw consent (making sure participants understand that participation is always voluntary, they have the freedom to withdraw at any time and there will be no negative consequences should they choose not to participate)
* recognition, reimbursement or remuneration
* how information will be handled, including how it will be stored
* process for raising issues or complaints.

Get consent to participate from the participant and their parent or guardian where appropriate. Find out who they’d like to have support them in deciding about consent.

Give children and young people enough time to understand the information.

Consent must be current. This means checking in regularly with children and young people involved in longer-term participation to make sure they are still happy to be involved.

## Empowerment

There’s a natural power imbalance between organisations and clients, particularly when the clients are children and young people, and when they are participating in adult-led processes.

A power imbalance may mean participants are unwilling to challenge adult authority and knowledge or to speak up about the participation process. Layers of marginalisation and intersectionality can increase this.

The power imbalance can be shifted by creating environments that promote shared decision making and by engaging in mutual and respectful relationships with children and young people, where they are truly listened to.

Facilitators can help mediate power imbalances by:

* acknowledging children and young people are the experts in their lives and their honest feedback is needed
* acknowledging there have been times when dealings with the department or government have not been positive
* assuring participants what they talk about will not be used against them but acknowledge that if participants say they are not safe in their lives, then the department has an obligation to act
* letting participants know they are in control of their contributions and can leave the room or withdraw consent at any time without explanation
* telling participants of feedback loops so they understand the next steps and outcomes of their involvement.

# Support and training

## Support

Give children and young people the supports they need before, during and after engagement activities. This helps them participate fully while also ensuring their safety and wellbeing and supporting their development generally.

This may be in the form of orientation, supervision, training, mentoring and access to relevant supports for health and wellbeing. Consider how to make these opportunities continue beyond the current engagement.

Supports should be tailored to individuals depending on:

* age
* experience
* types of decisions or participation they will be involved in.

A parent, carer, experienced practitioner or agency may be needed for supervision, briefing and debriefing, coaching or mentoring.

Ongoing practical and emotional support from one or more staff members is recommended to help build children and young people’s confidence, their ability to participate and to support their development generally.

*Victorian Youth Congress has taught me how government works in a way that allows me to be more effective in pitching my ideas and implementing plans that make a difference to the communities I care about.*

Jack, 20 years old, Mildura.

If children and young people are to participate in group activities, they may need support around group work and team building skills. Give them guidance on setting and adhering to boundaries, and the considerations for sharing personal information.

## Training

Participation may be a professional or other development opportunity for a young person. So, they are likely to be in the early stages of their career development. Consider opportunities for training and development in other general skill areas, such as policy writing, public speaking or facilitation.

Staff or committee members responsible for working with children and young people should have the necessary skills and experience to support the young person to succeed in their role. They may need some level of upskilling or training to do so.

Not having the necessary skills in co-design shouldn’t be a barrier to participation. It’s our responsibility to bring this skill into the team while simultaneously developing this capacity in themselves.

# Diversity, inclusion and communication

## Diversity and inclusion

Intersectionality refers to the ways in which different aspects of a person's identity can expose them to overlapping forms of discrimination and marginalisation. Attitudes, systems and structures in society and organisations can interact to create inequality and result in exclusion. An inclusive system is demonstrated by attitudes, behaviours, policies and practices that enable full and equal participation for everyone.

Every child and young person is unique in their viewpoints and their capacity to participate.

Consider participants’ unique histories and life circumstances as these may affect their capacity to participate and influence the type of participation that is suitable.

Children and young people may:

* be Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander
* be from refugee or migrant families
* be from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds
* identify as LGBTQIA+
* have experienced systemic socioeconomic disadvantage
* have a disability or mental health issue
* have experienced family violence
* have histories of trauma or other adverse life experiences
* be in out-of-home care or have had contact with the child protection system
* have alcohol and other drug issues
* have experienced the juvenile justice system
* have a combination of the previous.

## Strategies for engaging hardly reached people

*Young people who experience systemic oppression are often labelled as ‘hard to reach’ and ‘not engaged’. We intentionally seek to challenge this because we know we aren’t hard to reach – spaces just aren’t made for us.*

Beyond giving voice, Y-Change’s submission to the Victorian youth strategy, 2020

Different strategies may be useful for engaging children and young people who are hardly reached, such as:

* be willing to change the ways we work to be responsive and engaging
* partner closely with parents, carers or advocates who know the child or young person and can help develop effective strategies to work with them
* connect with trusted community groups
* use personal connections and networks where community trust may already be established
* use social media platforms
* build the trust of young people who are connected with government.

## Respectful communication

Child- and youth-friendly communication is central to good child and youth participation.

Children and young people need to feel they can understand and trust the participation process and the people undertaking it. When children and young people understand, it helps them feel less intimated and builds confidence in sharing their views.

Use age-appropriate communication in plain English and without jargon. Consider non-conventional ways of communicating, social media and other alternatives that might be more engaging and enjoyable for children and young people.

Where appropriate, use interpreter services to ensure participation is inclusive and accessible for all.

# Viability

Meaningful and respectful participation relies on children and young people being engaged early in and throughout the process.

You may be able to use established relationships with youth organisations, practitioners or schools to recruit participants in shorter timeframes. Make sure children and young people are given enough time to make an informed decision about their participation.

Wherever possible, develop terms of reference with participants before starting that outline the:

* skills a child or young person will need and how you will support them to gain those skills
* primary means of communication
* scope of the project and likely time commitment
* expected outcomes and consequences of participation
* process for withdrawing participation
* recognition, reimbursement and/or remuneration and any other expected benefits
* roles and responsibilities of all participants.

Make clear upfront:

* how children and young people will be engaged and supported throughout the project
* processes for managing conflicts of interest, complaints and issues that may arise
* how the privacy of participants will be maintained.

The views of children and young people need to be captured authentically through methods that are suitable for children and young people and that are truthfully represented by adults.

Care must be taken not interpret or misrepresent voices. Children need genuine feedback about their input and to understand how their input has been used – even if this means explaining that a different outcome has been chosen and why.

# Recognition, reimbursement and remuneration

## Recognition

Paying people for their contribution is one of the ways to recognise the valuable, specialised and expert contributions made by participants.

Government agencies and community services are expected to pay representatives with lived experience for their time and expertise.

Sometimes payment may not be possible or suitable. There are other ways to recognise contributions. A formal thank you is standard for any participation activity.

Apply the following considerations from the client voice framework to help achieve meaningful engagement and appropriate recognition:

* people should experience benefit from sharing their expertise
* everyone involved should agree about what reasonable payment and reimbursement is
* provide clear, accessible and transparent information as soon as possible about what people are being asked to do and what the resource limitations are, so people can make an informed decision about whether to take part
* consider the impact of power imbalance and individual circumstances to ensure people are not pressured to take part in any exchange that may disadvantage or harm
* have clear policies and procedures for recognising client expertise and support staff to understand and implement these
* experiences should be positive – make every effort to ensure people feel respected and valued, that their time hasn’t been wasted and that they have been listened to.

## Remuneration and reimbursement

The level of remuneration will depend on the participation activity, considering:

* nature of the work or role
* time commitment
* degree of accountability, complexity and responsibility
* basis of the participation – whether it is voluntary and once-off or ongoing such as being a member of a working group.

For time-limited and low-cost engagement it might be appropriate to offer a non-monetary benefit. In cases where repeat engagement or formal representation on a stakeholder group is requested and a high level of input is being sought, payment for time and expertise as well as reimbursement of reasonable out-of-pocket expenses is likely to be the most appropriate option.

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