FOR PARTICIPATION

TOY4PARTICIPATION TOOLKIT

How to promote child participation and democracy in formal and non-formal early childhood settings

July 2025 | ICDI

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Table of Contents

TOY4PARTICIPATION TOOLKIT 1

Part 1 | Understanding Participation 7

Introduction: Why Participation, Why Now? 7

What is this Toolkit about? 7

Who is it for? 7

The TOY4Participation Project 8

A Working Definition of Participation in TOY4Participation 8

How to Use this Toolkit 10

Foundations: Participation as a Pedagogical and Democratic Practice 11

Child Participation as a Right 11

Why Participation Matters in the Early Years 12

Why Engaging Families in Participatory Practice is Important 12

Participation as a Foundation of Child-Centered Pedagogy 13

Participation and Democratic Pedagogy 16

Ethical Considerations and Children's Participation 22

Adults as Co-Learners and Enablers 22

Community Engagement 23

The Importance of a Collaborative Approach 24

Participation of All Children 24

Ways to Support Participation for All Children: 25

Part 2 | Participation in Practice 27

Understanding Participation Across Age Groups 27

0–2 Years | "I Interact, Therefore I Belong" 27

3–6 Years | "I Explore, Therefore I Decide" 29

7–10 Years | "I Imagine, Therefore I Influence" 30
Participation in Everyday Practice 31
From Routines to Rights-Based Practice 32
Creating Choice-Rich Environments 33
Using Conflict and Negotiation as Democratic Moments 34
Group Activities vs. Individual Voice 35
Non-Verbal and Pre-Verbal Communication 36
Building Inclusive Cultures: Language, Disability, Trauma, Migration 37
Connecting Children's Participation to Family and Community Decisions 38
Participation in Research, Monitoring and Evaluation 42
Wild Pedagogies* and Young Children through the Mosaic Approach 43
Children's voice and agency in research study about Intergenerational learning 44
From Daily Participation to Community Voice 45
Part 3 | Deepening Practice: Reflection, Resources, and References 47
Reflection and Evaluation Tools 47
Everyday Spaces Checklist 48
Self-Reflection Journal Prompts 49
Team and Family Conversation Starters 50
Child- and Family-Friendly Feedback Tools 50
Participation Planning Matrix 51
Resources and Further Learning 53
UN Convention on the Right of the Child (UNCRC), Article 12 53
The EU Children's Participation Platform 53
The Lundy Model of Child Participation 54
Toolkit for including children from birth to 5 years in participation in decision making 54
Listen-Act-Change Handbook on children's participation 54
Country-specific resources 55
7. References 56
8. Annexes 57

Annex 1 - Glossary of Key Terms 57

Annex 2 - Child Participation Checklist for practitioners in formal and non-formal ECEC Settings 59

Annex 3 - Case Studies from the Field 63

Annex 4 - Training guidelines 64

Part 1: Understanding Participation

Part 1 | Understanding Participation

Introduction: Why Participation, Why Now?

What is this Toolkit about?

Participation is a way of relating to children that recognises their right to be heard, their capacity to contribute, and their place as active citizens in the here and now — it isn't an "add-on" or a special project.

This Toolkit is designed to support practitioners working with young children in non-formal early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings to embed meaningful participation into everyday practice. Whether you work in a Play Hub, a parent-child group, a mobile outreach van, or an intercultural community centre, this Toolkit is for you. It is also a valuable resource for practitioners working in formal ECEC settings who want to deepen their knowledge and understanding of child participation and find inspiration on how to promote it in their daily work with young children and families.

Participation in this Toolkit includes:

- Everyday decisions (what to play, how to solve problems, how to set up a space)
- Group decisions (how to resolve conflicts, what rules we use, what stories we tell)
- Community input (what children think about parks, schools, transport, or safety)

Participation happens in many forms — through movement, drawing, gesture, sound, play, silence, and words. It is shaped by relationships, environments, and opportunities.

Who is it for?

This Toolkit is for anyone directly working with children and families in non-formal ECEC settings, including:

- Community-based educators and facilitators
- Family support workers and outreach staff
- Volunteers and assistants in informal learning spaces
- Practitioners in play-focused, intercultural, and intergenerational settings

You don't need to be a "participation expert". This Toolkit helps you build on what you already do — observing, listening, playing, and caring — and shows how these everyday actions can become powerful tools for inclusion, agency, and learning.

The TOY4Participation Project

The Toolkit was developed as part of the TOY4Participation project, a European initiative coordinated by International Child Development Initiatives (ICDI). The project brings together partners from Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Slovakia, Latvia, Slovenia and Ukraine. It aims to strengthen meaningful child participation in decision-making from birth to 10 years of age, particularly in non-formal ECEC settings. TOY4Participation promotes inclusive, intergenerational, and intercultural approaches, ensuring that even the youngest children and those from marginalised groups are supported to express their views and influence their learning environments. The project is co-funded by the European Union through the CERV (Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values) programme.

A Working Definition of Participation in TOY4Participation

Based on the theories, values, and practices presented in this Toolkit and discussed amongst the TOY4Participation partners, the working definition and approach to participation in TOY4Participation is as follows:

Participation is:

- **Inclusive and relational:** rooted in warm, reciprocal interactions between children and adults, including their families
- **Verbal and non-verbal:** respecting the many languages of expression, from crying and pointing to drawing and storytelling
- **Everyday and ongoing:** embedded in daily routines, rituals, and spontaneous encounters, not limited to special projects
- **Embedded in both structured educational settings and informal, community-based spaces:** such as Play Hubs, drop-in centres, or home-based group gatherings

This definition recognises that participation is not about giving children power over adults, but rather about creating meaningful opportunities for children to be heard, taken seriously, and involved in shaping their experiences, with the active involvement and support of their families.

Therefore, in non-formal ECEC, practitioners support participation by:

- Creating warm, trusting relationships
- Observing children's cues, rhythms, and routines
- Inviting ideas through open-ended questions and materials
- Documenting and sharing what children express
- Advocating for children's voices within the broader service or community.

As this Toolkit will demonstrate, participation can happen through a choice about a toy, a group project about a local park, or a drawing that sparks community dialogue. What matters most is that adults believe children have something valuable to say and create the conditions for their voices and relationships to flourish.

How to Use this Toolkit

This Toolkit combines theory, practice, and tools. The main body of the Toolkit is organised in three parts:

Section 1 introduces and defines the concept of participation in early childhood

Section 2 explores the pedagogical and rights-based foundations of participation

Section 3 defines developmentally appropriate approaches to participation by age group (0–2, 3–6, 7–10)

Section 4 shares everyday practices for embedding participation in your routines

Section 5 includes tools to reflect, evaluate, and plan participation

Sections 6–8 offer case studies, resources, references, and training suggestions.

This is not a manual to read cover to cover. You can dip into sections, print out activity cards, reflect with colleagues, or adapt tools for your own setting.

Foundations: Participation as a Pedagogical and Democratic Practice

Child Participation as a Right

Child participation is the active and meaningful engagement of children in decisions, activities, and initiatives that impact their lives. It is a fundamental right outlined in Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989). This states that children must have the right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them, with their opinions being given due weight according to their age and maturity.

UN Convention on the Rights of the Child - Article 12

Every child has the right to express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them and to have their views considered and taken seriously. This right applies at all times, for example, during immigration proceedings, housing decisions or the child's day-to-day home life.

Article 12 provides an important foundation for practice, policy and research, including in fields of formal and non-formal early childhood education and care (ECEC). It recognises children as holders of rights from birth, affirming:

- that children are not passive recipients of care and education
- that their perspectives matter
- and that adults have a responsibility to listen and respond.

Consequently, young children are viewed as competent social actors and rights-holders who can express their views, influence their learning environments, and contribute to shaping their communities in ways appropriate to their age, ability, and cultural context.

Why Participation Matters in the Early Years

When young children are meaningfully involved in decisions and daily life, they gain important skills and a stronger sense of self. Participation supports:

- **Learning and thinking** – Children develop curiosity, creativity, and problem-solving skills through exploration and decision-making.
- **Language and communication** – Talking about choices and sharing ideas helps build vocabulary and social skills.
- **Confidence and well-being** – Being heard makes children feel safe, valued, and respected.
- **Social and emotional development** – Participation builds empathy, cooperation, and resilience.
- **Inclusion and equity** – All children, including those with disabilities or from marginalised groups, have space to contribute and feel they belong.
- **Stronger relationships** – Participation deepens trust between children, families, and educators.
- **Active citizenship** – Early participation builds habits of fairness, responsibility, and engagement — preparing children to be active members of their communities.

Starting from birth, even in small ways, participation helps children grow into confident, capable, and caring people.

In summary, respecting and engaging families in participatory practice enriches children's opportunities to share their voices across settings.

Why Engaging Families in Participatory Practice is Important

Young children's participation in ECEC does not occur in isolation. It is deeply embedded in relationships with their caregivers and family members. Therefore, respecting children's right to participate also means recognising the role of families as interpreters, mediators, and protectors of children's evolving views, particularly for the youngest and most vulnerable.

This means that when supporting participation, practitioners must listen not only to children but also to the knowledge and insights of their families. This three-way listening relationship between children, caregivers, and practitioners provides the emotionally safe, continuous, and cultural grounding children need to express themselves and participate meaningfully

*See also subsection **Adults as Co-Learners and Enablers***

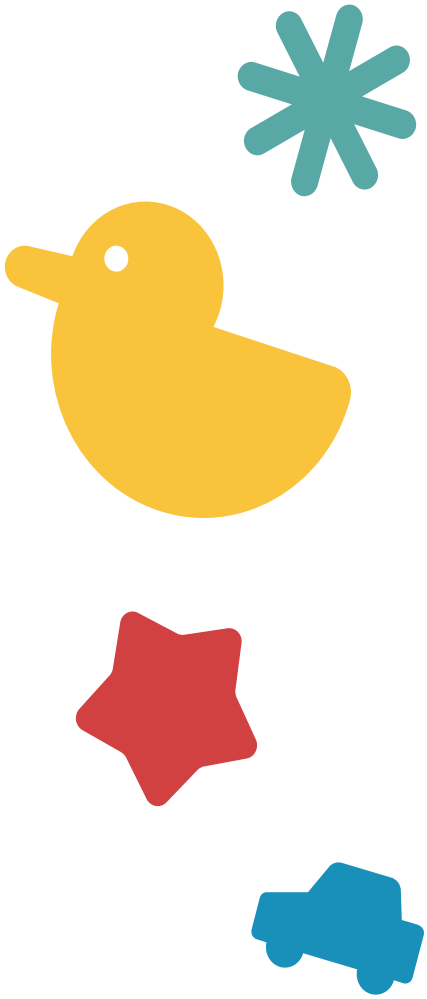
Participation as a Foundation of Child-Centered Pedagogy

Participation in early childhood is not merely about listening and voicing opinions but is connected to how children explore, make sense of, and interact with their world. Pedagogical theories that emphasize participation view active engagement in social and cultural practices as a driver of children's learning and development.

We highlight a few of the most prominent of these theories and approaches.

Lev Vygotsky - Socio-cultural theory

The Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) was one of the first to emphasize that children's learning and development begin through social interactions and later become internalized as individual thought. He also highlighted play as an essential learning source. Vygotsky's *Socio-cultural Theory* proposed that children learn through guided participation with more knowledgeable others, such as teachers or peers. It inspired a shift toward relational and dynamic teaching approaches that highlighted co-construction, dialogue, and participation. These features are evident in many ECEC curriculum frameworks and approaches (see box below) (Hedges & Cullen, 2011).



Alison Clark - Mosaic Approach

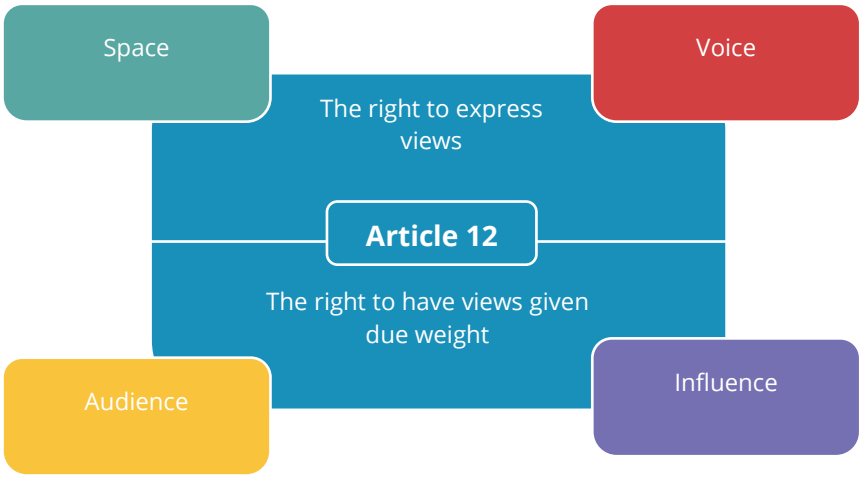
The education researcher, Alison Clark, developed **the Mosaic Approach** (Clark, 2017) in England at the end of the 1990s. It recognises that young children engage best through play-based methods, participatory storytelling, and structured dialogues that respect their evolving capacities. The approach offers a creative framework of listening to young children's perspectives in early years settings through talking (structured dialogues), walking (walking tours of services to identify favourite places to play), making, and reviewing together.

See Pedagogical Card 3: The Mosaic Approach

Laura Lundy - The Lundy Model of Participation

The Lundy Model of Participation, developed in 2007 by Laura Lundy (Lundy, 2007), Professor of Children's Rights at Queen's University Belfast, is widely used across Europe. It offers a practical lens for implementing Article 12 also in early years settings. The model outlines four components:

Lundy's Model of Participation

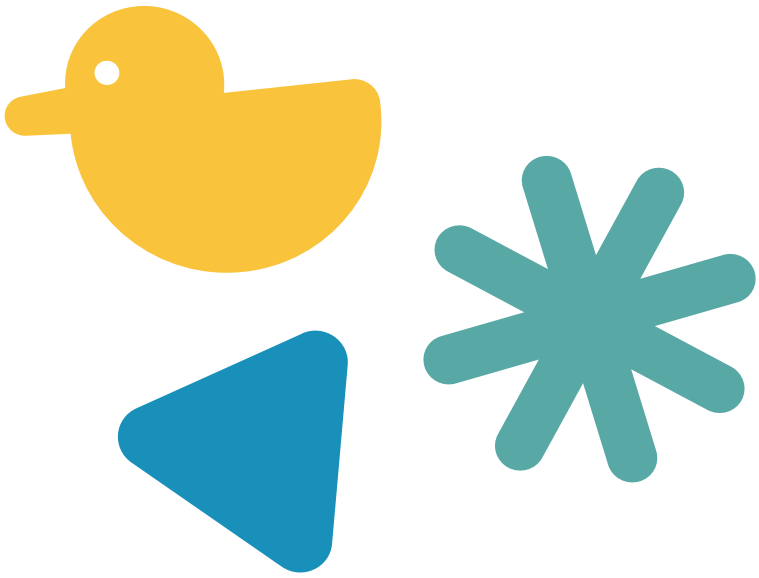


This model provides a way of conceptualizing Article 12 of the UNRC which is intended to focus educational decision-makers on the distinct, albeit interrelated elements of the provision. The four elements have a rational chronological order:

- **Space:** Children must be given safe, inclusive opportunities to form and express their view
- **Voice:** Children must be facilitated to express their view
- **Audience:** The view must be listened to
- **Influence:** The view must be acted upon, as appropriate

1. **Space:** Children must be given safe, inclusive opportunities to form and express their views. This could be a corner with open-ended materials, a quiet space to think, or flexible time in group activities.
2. **Voice:** Children need support to communicate their ideas. This means using different media (drawing, movement, storytelling), acknowledging non-verbal cues, and adjusting for language or developmental differences.
3. **Audience:** Children's expressions must be actively listened to by adults with the power to act. This includes creating rituals of listening, documenting children's voices, and sharing their ideas with families and decision-makers.
4. **Influence:** Participation is meaningful when children's ideas lead to visible change. This might mean adapting a room layout, choosing the next group project, or seeing their drawings influence a community event.

In the early years, this model is best understood as a cycle, not a checklist. The four dimensions reinforce one another and evolve with practice. In non-formal settings, these dimensions are most effective when families are also invited into each step, as co-creators of the space, supporters of children's voices, and partners in reflecting on and responding to children's contributions.



Participation and Democratic Pedagogy

As is evident in the theories and models described above, participation is an expression of democratic pedagogy in early childhood. In ECEC practice, this is reflected in agency, belonging, and co-construction:

Importantly, participation is not a task (or an activity) to check off, but a stance that adults take.

See subsection Adults as Co-Learners and Enablers

It demands that educators see children as capable of contributing and they shape the ECEC environments and the relationships with families accordingly.

These values are reflected in many **ECEC curriculum frameworks**, some of which are briefly described below.

The Reggio Emilia Approach (Italy)

The **Reggio Emilia Approach** is an educational philosophy based on the image of the young child with strong potential for development and a subject with rights. In the education space, both children and adults are given the opportunity to grow, collaborate, and thrive—realizing their full potential as intelligent, creative, and holistic individuals. Learning is viewed as a shared journey of discovery, expression, and possibility, grounded in mutual respect and a belief in human potential.

Key components include:

- **The 100 languages of a child:** the belief that children can realise their potential in multiple ways when they have access to appropriate learning environments. Self-expression is a paramount value. Children are supported in representing their experiences symbolically and artistically.
- **Environment as the *"third teacher"*:** the learning setting is perceived as educational and is designed to be aesthetically and intellectually stimulating. The materials and objects available are enticing and stimulate engagement and exploration. Educators are encouraged to provide '*Provocations'*, open-ended enhancements that provoke children's curiosity and imagination and stimulate ideas, thinking, and imagination.

Te Whāriki Early Learning Curriculum (New Zealand)

Te Whāriki Curriculum is Aotearoa's (New Zealand) early childhood curriculum, grounded in Māori values and a holistic, socio-cultural vision of learning. First published in 1996 and revised in 2017, it provides a bicultural framework that positions children as competent and confident learners who actively shape their own learning journeys.

Participation is a core principle, embedded in both philosophy and daily practice. Children choose learning pathways based on their interests, supported by educators as facilitators. Relationships with peers, educators, and families are central, with learning co-constructed across generations and cultures. A distinct Māori Indigenous Learning Pathway, *Te Whāriki a te Kōhanga Reo* (the Māori language curriculum that guides the educational foundations, approach and practices of Kōhanga Reo), supports Māori immersion settings.

Key components include:

- **Empowerment (Whakamana):** The curriculum promotes autonomy and values children's active participation in shaping their learning journeys. It acknowledges their right to express views and make decisions in matters affecting them.
- **Holistic development (Kotahitanga):** Children's development is viewed in its totality—spiritual, emotional, physical, intellectual, and cultural—with participation seen as interwoven into all aspects of their growth.
- **Family and community (Whānau Tangata):** Families are seen as partners in learning. The curriculum invites them into the pedagogical process, co-constructing learning with children and educators.
- **Relationships (Ngā Hononga):** Respectful, reciprocal relationships are foundational. Children are encouraged to engage in shared decision-making, dialogue, and collaborative play.

Aistear, Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (Ireland)

Aistear is Ireland's national early childhood curriculum framework for children from birth to six years. Used across preschools, crèches, and playgroups, it is grounded in the view of children as competent, curious, and active participants in their own learning.
First introduced in 2009 and updated in 2024, Aistear supports child-led learning through everyday experiences, with educators acting as facilitators who guide, observe, and respond. The framework is built around four interrelated themes: **Well-being**, **Identity and Belonging**, **Communicating**, and **Exploring and Thinking**, all of which promote participation, self-expression, and agency.

Key components include:

- **Child-led learning:** Children initiate and direct their own play and exploration, supported by a rich, responsive environment.
- **Role of the adult:** Educators create inclusive, democratic spaces where children's voices shape learning experiences.
- **Holistic themes:** Learning is integrated across emotional, social, cognitive, and communicative domains, rooted in children's everyday lives.

Child-Centered, Democratic, Pre-school Classrooms: The Step by Step Approach

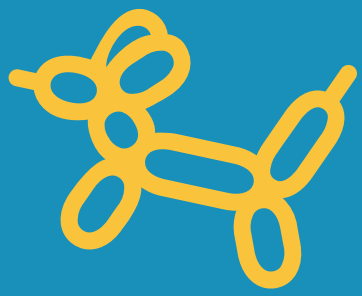
The Step by Step Approach developed by the Open Society Foundations, promoted by ISSA and implemented in Europe, Asia, and the Americas, supports the development of child-centred, democratic preschool classrooms. It is grounded in the belief that young children are active, capable learners and that quality early childhood education must be inclusive, participatory, and respectful of diversity.

The approach promotes shared decision-making, open communication, and critical thinking from the earliest years. Teachers act as facilitators and co-learners, working in partnership with children and families. Classrooms are designed to foster autonomy, collaboration, and reflection, encouraging children to take initiative, express their views, and participate in group life.

Key components include:

- **Democratic learning environments:** Classrooms operate as communities where children's choices, voices, and rights are central to everyday practice.
- **Family engagement:** Families are seen as partners in the educational process, contributing to planning and reflection.
- **Reflective teaching practice:** Educators engage in continuous professional development focused on equity, participation, and child agency.

Examples of Participatory Practices from the Step-by-Step Approach



1. Morning Circle: A Daily Ritual for Voice and Belonging

The Morning Circle is a structured yet flexible daily gathering that opens the preschool day. It provides a safe, predictable space where each child is **seen, heard, and valued**, promoting a strong sense of **belonging and community**. It reflects the core democratic principle that **every voice matters**.

Implementation Practices:

- Children greet each other and the teacher in a culturally respectful manner
- Use of **"talking objects"** (e.g., a soft toy passed around to signal turn-taking)
- Teachers pose open-ended questions, encouraging dialogue
- Children contribute to planning the day and reflecting on previous activities
- Shared decision-making (e.g., choosing songs, selecting helpers)

Morning Circles create a climate of **respect, emotional safety, and agency**. Children learn to **negotiate**, express preferences, and develop empathy. Over time, it nurtures **critical thinking**, **communication**, and **collaboration**—all essential skills for lifelong democratic engagement.

2. Families in the Classroom: Building Trust, Sharing Power

This practice involves inviting parents and caregivers to actively participate in the learning environment, not just as visitors, but as **co-educators and cultural contributors**. It strengthens the **home-school connection**, reinforces learning, and models inclusive, respectful partnerships.

Implementation Practices:

- Organizing **"Family Fridays"** where parents lead activities or share traditions
- **Open classroom doors** for observation or informal drop-ins
- Parents contributing to storytelling, cooking, or crafting activities
- Co-designing thematic projects (e.g., heritage week, nature walks)
- Using home visits and surveys to gather input on interests and needs
- Involving families strengthens **mutual trust** and **respect**, while reflecting diverse identities in the classroom. It helps children see their families as **valued knowledge holders**, promotes **cultural continuity**, and deepens the commitment of parents to children's learning. For educators, it transforms planning and curriculum into a **dialogic and inclusive** process.

Ethical Considerations and Children's Participation

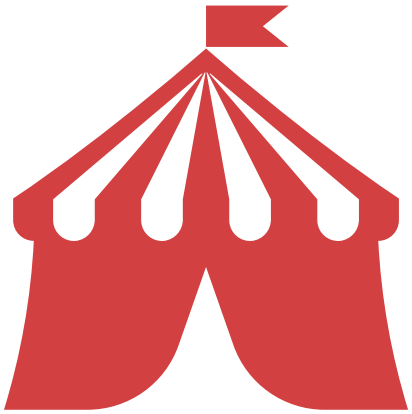
To ensure that participation is safe, inclusive, and respectful, the Council of Europe outlines nine ethical standards:

1. **Transparent and informative:** Children and families should know what participation means and how their views will be used.
2. **Voluntary:** Children must never be forced to participate. Consent can be expressed through interest, engagement, or choosing not to join.
3. **Respectful:** Adults value what children say and show. This means responding without ridicule or dismissal.
4. **Relevant:** Children are engaged in issues that matter to them — from snack time choices to neighbourhood safety.
5. **Child-friendly:** Participation methods must suit children's age, development, and cultural background.
6. **Inclusive:** All children, regardless of ability, background, or language, must be able to take part.
7. **Supported by training:** Adults need support to develop participatory skills like listening, facilitating, and reflection.
8. **Safe and sensitive to risk:** Safeguarding must be embedded. Participation should never expose children to harm.
9. **Accountable:** Feedback matters. Children should know how their input influences decisions and be part of the follow-up.

These principles guard against tokenism and help embed participation in ethical, reflective practice. They also offer a framework for engaging with families in a participatory way, ensuring transparency, inclusion, and responsiveness to their concerns and perspectives.

Adults as Co-Learners and Enablers

Participation in early childhood hinges on the attitudes and behaviours of adults (practitioners, teachers, parents, and caregivers). They are not passive observers or detached experts; they are co-learners, co-designers, and co-reflectors. Being an enabler means recognising when to step back, when to scaffold, and when to act. It requires humility, curiosity, and courage to share decision-making power with children, and also with families. When practitioners work in partnership with families, they enrich the context of children's participation and create a consistent, caring environment across home and community spaces.



In fact, parents and caregivers are children's first and most significant enablers of participation. Their involvement strengthens children's sense of agency and encourages participation at home and in the community. Parents enable children's participation by:

- Encouraging decision-making at home, allowing children to choose activities, during meals, and during routines.
- Supporting participation in early learning environments, working alongside educators to create child-centred approaches.
- Acting as advocates for their children's involvement in school councils, ECEC settings, local initiatives, and extracurricular activities.
- Actively participating in events and building relationships with ECEC providers, teachers and volunteers through parent-teacher associations.

Community Engagement

Community members, including local leaders and decision makers, librarians, teachers and cultural workers, also contribute to child participation by:

- Providing public spaces where young children can play, interact, and engage in decision-making.
- Including children's perspectives on urban planning and community development and ensuring that playgrounds, parks, and communal spaces reflect their needs.
- Fostering intergenerational participation, where older community members engage with young children in discussions and collaborative projects. This interaction can be through a

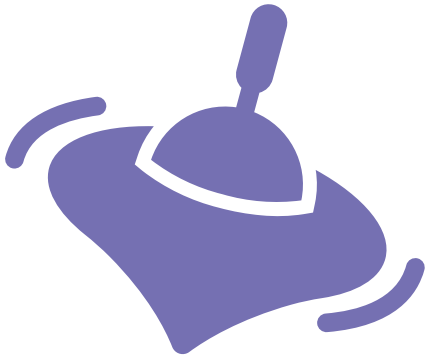
series of activities such as arts and crafts, skill-building like gardening, and solving puzzles (TOY in Action, 2014).

The Importance of a Collaborative Approach

For child participation to be effective, there must be synergy between professionals, families, and communities. Schools, early childhood centres, and community organisations must work together to:

- Develop shared strategies for involving children in meaningful decision-making.
- Establish feedback mechanisms where children see the impact of their contributions.
- Promote a cultural shift toward valuing children's voices in all aspects of social life.

By embedding participation across multiple domains, adults can ensure that young children's perspectives are recognised, valued, and acted upon in both everyday experiences and broader decision-making processes.



Participation of All Children

All children have the right to participate, but some may face more obstacles than others. That's why special attention should be paid to children who are often excluded — not because they lack ability, but because the environment, systems, or attitudes around them don't yet support their full involvement. By adjusting ways of working, it becomes possible to create spaces where all children are included, respected, and heard.

Children who may face extra barriers — and why:

- **Children with disabilities** may be excluded if spaces, tools, or communication methods aren't accessible. They might not be offered the time, tools, or trust they need to show their ideas and preferences.
- **Children from low-income or marginalised backgrounds** may not have access to the same resources or safe spaces. Economic stress and social stigma can limit their participation or make them feel unwelcome.
- **Refugee and migrant children** often face language barriers, unfamiliar routines, or cultural differences. Some may be coping with trauma or instability, which affects how and when they feel safe to express themselves.

- **Girls** may face cultural expectations that limit their freedom to speak up or take part in leadership, especially in public or group settings. In some communities, they may be expected to take on adult-like responsibilities too early.
- **Very young children (0–5 years)** are often left out because they cannot yet speak clearly. But they do communicate — through play, movement, facial expressions, and other cues — and they have ideas and preferences worth listening to.

Ways to Support Participation for All Children:

- Use visuals, gestures, and objects to include children who are non-verbal or still learning the language.
- Create safe, welcoming spaces where every child feels they belong.
- Invite families to share cultural practices, stories, or home languages to build trust and connection.
- Make time for one-on-one conversations or quiet reflections, especially for shy or overlooked children.
- Challenge gender stereotypes by offering equal chances to lead, explore, and express ideas.

- Use play, music, movement, and drawing as ways for very young children to express thoughts and feelings.
- Work in partnership with families to understand each child's needs, strengths, and preferred ways of communicating.

This is the end of Part 1 of the Toolkit. You have been introduced to definitions of participation and why it is important in all children's lives. The foundational principles of participation in non-formal and formal ECEC and how they are linked to pedagogical and democratic practice have also been outlined. The focus of Part 2 of the toolkit is participation in everyday practice with children of different ages and as part of daily routines in non-formal ECEC.

Part 2 | Participation in Practice

Part 2 | Participation in Practice

Understanding Participation Across Age Groups

Participation in early childhood must be developmentally appropriate and grounded in the child's relationships, especially with their immediate environment. Children from birth to 10 express themselves, relate to others, and engage with their environment in vastly different ways depending on their age, experience, and individual needs. At all stages, their ability to participate is supported by the security, trust, and scaffolding offered by their families and caregivers.

This section outlines how meaningful participation can look across three age bands: 0–2 years, 3–6 years, and 7–10 years.

Each age group section includes:

- Developmental considerations
- Core communication forms
- Adult and family roles

Inspired by the information and research presented in Part 1: Section 2, each age band is described by a statement that illustrates the participation capabilities of children at each stage.

0–2 Years | "I Interact, Therefore I Belong"

Developmental Considerations:

At this stage, children are building the foundations of trust, attachment, and communication. Brain development is rapid, and learning is driven by sensory exploration and responsive relationships with familiar adults. According to General Comment No. 7 of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, even the youngest children are capable of forming and expressing views and should be supported in doing so, often with the help of their primary caregivers.

How Children 0-2 Participate

Through crying, babbling, laughing, vocalising and, for some, beginning to use words.

Through facial expressions and body movements

By exploring objects with their senses and directing attention

By seeking and responding to familiar caregivers

In co-regulated routines and shared activities.

Role of the Adult and Family

Follow the child's lead in play and everyday interactions

Observe attentively to interpret signals and expressions

Co-regulate routines with the child, reinforcing security and predictability

Offer simple, binary choices using gestures, pictures, or objects

Mirror and label emotional states

Share observations with families and invite their insights.

Note: Families are essential partners in understanding very young children's cues. Participation includes co-listening to babies and toddlers between the practitioner and the parent or caregiver.

See Activity Cards Age Group 0- 2 for examples and strategies

3–6 Years | "I Explore, Therefore I Decide"

Developmental Considerations:

Children in this stage are developing language, imagination, and autonomy. They increasingly seek to make choices, express preferences, and engage in social negotiation. According to Aistear (Ireland's ECEC curriculum framework), children aged 3–6 flourish in environments where they are supported to lead, explore, and express.

How Children 3-6 Participate

- Through storytelling, drawing, pretend play, and songs
- In turn-taking, role negotiation, and peer problem-solving
- In having a say about group rules, transitions, and learning environments.
- By expressing preferences in materials, play, and routines
- By reflecting on experiences with both words and symbolic representation

Role of the Adult and Family

- Provide time and space for self-directed exploration
- Document and revisit children's ideas together with families
- Support verbal and symbolic expression
- Invite family stories, traditions, and home experiences.
- Pose open-ended questions and offer meaningful choices

Note: Practitioners and families should work together to notice children's emerging agency. Conversations with families can provide deeper insight into what matters to them.

See Activity Cards Age Group 3 – 6 for examples and strategies

7–10 Years | "I Imagine, Therefore I Influence"

Developmental Considerations:

Children in this age range begin to think more logically, empathise more deeply, and express greater interest in fairness, rules, and collaboration. They also begin to see themselves as part of a wider world.

How Children 7-10 Participate

- By initiating and leading group projects
- Through discussions, storytelling, mapping, and negotiation
- Through drawing, photography, performance, and writing.
- In evaluating and redesigning spaces, routines, or group norms
- By providing feedback and participating in decision-making mechanisms.

Role of the Adult and Family

- Facilitate collaborative projects and problem-solving
- Connect children's contributions to community action
- Encourage critical thinking and reflection
- Involve children and families in co-evaluation and feedback loops (See Section 6)

Note: Families can support older children's participation by reinforcing their contributions at home, advocating with them, and bridging between the child's voice and broader systems.

See Activity Cards Age Group 7 – 10 for examples and strategies

The following section, **Participation in Everyday Practice**, describes the many ways that participation can be embedded in daily life, routines and relationships focussing on non-formal

ECEC settings. You will find tips, strategies and examples from which to choose for different situations.

Participation in Everyday Practice

Child participation in non-formal ECEC does not need to be a special event or separate activity. It can and should be embedded in the daily rhythms, routines, and relationships that define a child's world. In this section, we look at how participation happens through ordinary moments and everyday practices, especially in **non-formal and community-based settings** like Play Hubs, where children and families attend together.

This approach is based on relational pedagogy and a rights-based framework that sees young children as competent, meaning-makers, and their families as partners in participation. In Play

Hubs and similar non-formal settings, participation is not only about individual expression, but about the dynamics between children and their families, and how they co-create, reflect, and engage in shared decisions with practitioners.

From Routines to Rights-Based Practice

Routines provide predictability, safety, and structure, but they also offer meaningful opportunities for participation, which becomes more powerful and effective when it is embedded in everyday practices (Horgan, 2024). Knowledge that is gained through experience has a stronger impact on children's development. When routines are viewed as participatory moments rather than merely functional, children are empowered to co-construct their daily experiences.

Examples include:

- Greeting rituals where children choose how to say hello
- Snack times where children help prepare, distribute, or choose items
- Refreshment stations where children choose when and what to drink throughout the day
- Goodbye circles where children reflect on what they enjoyed or learned during the day.

Families can reinforce these routines at home and share valuable insights about children's comfort zones, sensory preferences, or emerging interests — enhancing consistency across settings.

See more about what child participation is and — what it is not in Pedagogical Card 2

In the Step-by-Step programme, children are involved in daily routines like morning circles, class meetings, and project-based learning, where they co-create rules, vote on activities, and reflect on shared experiences, fostering a strong sense of voice and agency and cultivating democratic values and routines. (More information on the Step-by-Step Programme can be found in the Case studies - Annex 3).

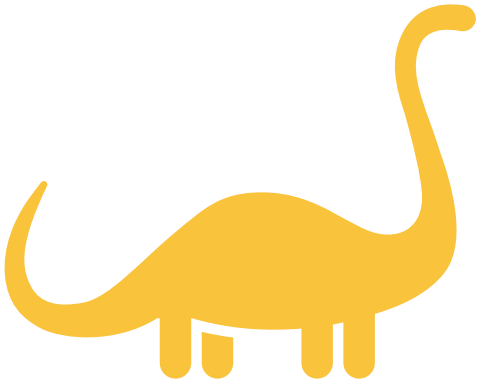
Creating Choice-Rich Environments

Participation flourishes in environments that offer genuine and meaningful choices. These environments allow children to select materials, direct their play, choose companions, and shape the use of space. Every environment can promote children's participation if it is adjusted to their needs and age-related skills. The provided choices by the environment should also ensure accessibility to marginalized children, as well as those with disabilities, including both physical and mental limitations.

Ideas include:

- Labelling accessible shelves with symbols or photos
- Creating zones for different activities (quiet play, messy play, construction, etc.)
- Offering a wide selection of open-ended materials and loose parts
- Using child-initiated play as a planning source for future activities.

Educators and families can co-create these spaces, ensuring cultural relevance and familiarity. Children's contributions — drawings, names, stories — can be visibly integrated into the learning environment.



The environment in TOY for Inclusion Play Hubs around the world has been designed to facilitate child-centred and child-initiated activities, attentive to the needs of multiple age groups. The TOY for Inclusion Play Hub in Zagreb, for example, promotes child participation through joint setting of rules, joint planning of the Play Hubs activities, materials and toys (More information on the TOY for Inclusion Play Hubs can be found in the Case studies - Annex 3).

Using Conflict and Negotiation as Democratic Moments

Conflicts and disagreements are natural incidents among people and offer powerful learning opportunities for democratic participation. With the right orientation and the appropriate techniques, conflict can empower children to increase their agency and establish their role in their community by becoming mediators and facilitators of peace and cooperation.

Ways to support participatory conflict resolution:

Role-play and puppets

Peace corners with calming tools and emotion cards

Visual rule charts co-created with children and families

Language scaffolds like sentence starters, and emotional words

Communication scaffolds like non-violent communication, constructive dialogue and active communication

Emotional regulation techniques

Peer support groups

Families can co-create shared rules and values. For example, they might be invited to contribute a “home rule” or family value to a visual group agreement, creating consistency across settings.

In Hungary, Partners Hungary Foundation developed a conflict resolution programme, where trained professionals and educators create a safe, non-judgmental environment in which conflict is seen as a natural part of children's social development and focus on helping them express emotions, understand others, and find their own solutions. (More information on the Partners Hungary Foundation’s approach to conflict resolution can be found in the Case studies - Annex 3).

Group Activities vs. Individual Voice

While group activities foster collaboration and social learning, participation also requires attention to the individual voice of each child. While developing or implementing group activities, facilitators should foster opportunities for equal individual self-expression. Group dynamics should always be taken under consideration in order to avoid overshadowing less expressive children.

Families can offer insight into how their child prefers to engage. Individual learning plans can incorporate participation goals specific to the child's style and comfort level.

Tips

- Alternate between large group, small group, and one-on-one formats
- Allow children to opt out or participate in their own way
- Use materials that allow self-expression without verbal communication (music, pictures, videos, games)
- Document individual contributions, especially from quieter or non-verbal children.

In Moldova, in the *Playgrounds for Children in the Community* initiative, children express their opinion both individually and in groups. Discussion sessions and debates are held, where children can share their thoughts, needs and desires as a group and at the same time they share their thoughts and needs individually, through opinion surveys, questionnaires, and visual activities like posters and drawings (More information on the *Playgrounds for Children in the Community*, including for Refugees from Ukraine can be found in the Case studies - Annex 3).

Non-Verbal and Pre-Verbal Communication

Children who are non-verbal, pre-verbal, or use alternative forms of communication must be fully included in participatory processes. In a suitably developed environment, children who have not acquired the skills to articulate their opinions due to their developmental stage (preverbal), as well as children who do not choose speech as a medium for communication due to psychological and mental factors or traumatic events (non-verbal), can still participate in decision-making processes.

Practices include:

- Using choice boards or photo cards
- Utilizing physical movement
- Using digital tools
- Offering sound-making tools or musical cues
- Gesture-based games
- Interactive stories with props and tactile elements.

Families can help practitioners understand which tools and cues work best for their child and co-create visual or sensory aids.

In Hungary, *Project Pedagogy* includes music and movement activities to allow children to create their own rhythms and songs without the use of verbal language.

In Italy, *TAU: The Children's Voice* uses desire boxes where children can insert their proposals, and their ideas are documented through drawings, photographs, and videos.
(More information on *Project Pedagogy* and *TAU: The Children's Voice* can be found in the Case studies - Annex 3).

Building Inclusive Cultures: Language, Disability, Trauma, Migration

Inclusive participation means recognising and adapting to children's diverse abilities and needs, ways of self-expression and backgrounds.

Strategies:

- Use multilingual signage and storytelling
- Incorporate culturally familiar objects and songs
- Offer trauma-sensitive responses and quiet retreat spaces
- Develop intergenerational activities, engaging family and community members
- Provide visual timetables and tactile supports for neurodiverse children
- Inclusion is co-constructed with families who share knowledge about their child's history, identity, and support needs. Participation becomes a shared language of care and recognition.

In Moldova, *Playgrounds for Children in the Community, including for Refugees from Ukraine* organises workshops that allow children to explore cultural diversity and learn about the traditions and customs of other cultures, promoting mutual respect.

The *Together Old and Young (TOY) Intergenerational Learning Project* promotes participation of older adults in play, learning and creative activities with children, which benefit all generations. See this example of a TOY-inspired initiative in Ireland https://www.toyproject.net/2023/09/immeasurable-gains-intergenerational-learning/

(More information on *Playgrounds for Children in the Community*, including for Refugees from Ukraine and *TOY- Together Old and Young* can be found in the Case studies - Annex 3).

Connecting Children's Participation to Family and Community Decisions

Participation shouldn't stop at the ECEC setting gate. When children's voices influence decisions at home and in the community, they develop a sense of ownership and belonging, they feel empowered and included.

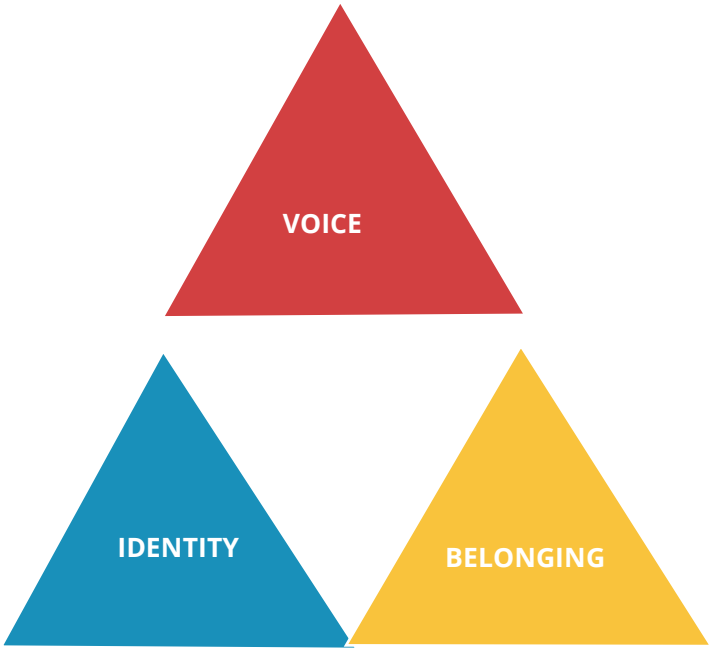
Tips for Families

- Let children help plan meals, choose clothes, or decide weekend outings
- Involve children in setting family rules or choosing books and stories
- Ask for their input when visiting a park, shop, or cultural site
- Include children in family chores like cleaning, hanging laundry, and preparing meals to promote participation and shared responsibility.

Tips for ECEC

- Organise family-child projects (e.g., photo diaries, storytelling)
- Host participation-themed family events
- Invite children and families to co-create community exhibitions or events.

This home-ECEC-community 'triangle' strengthens voice, identity, and belonging.



In Hungary, the *Child Citizens Project* aims to increase child participation and empowerment of children, parents, and professionals in local communities of a Budapest district. It involves children as active partners in decisions and programmes that affect them at the local level, working in local kindergartens in a district with a high concentration of Roma, immigrant families, and low-income families. One outcome of the project is, with input from local children, the creation of a district map which encourages children to explore their neighbourhood and mark areas where they feel safe or believe improvements are needed.

(More information on the *Child Citizens Project* can be found on https://eurochild.org/news/child-participation-in-early-years-a-case-study-from-the-child-citizens-project-in-hungary/)

Examples of Real-Life Decisions Children Can Influence

Daily Decisions

- Which materials to use in play
- How to set up a play area
- What snack to choose or help prepare
- How to transition between activities.

Collective Decisions

Participation becomes real when children see that their contributions matter and shape shared life.

- What new story or theme to explore
- What celebration to plan for a seasonal event
- What rules to use in group time
- Which songs or languages to include in circle time.

In Bulgaria, the *Little Architects of Change* Project organises child-centred workshops to involve children as key decision-makers in the development of early childhood spaces. Through using creative techniques and play-based learning (role-playing, storytelling, sensory engagement techniques), they encourage children to voice their needs and preferences in designing spaces that are ideal for them.

(More information on *Little Architects of Change* can be found in the Case Studies – Annex 3).

Participation in Research, Monitoring and Evaluation

Young children not only have the right to participate in everyday decisions, but also in the processes that evaluate, research, and improve the services and environments they experience. Monitoring and evaluation (M&E), as well as research activities, are often designed by adults for adults, but can and should be adapted to meaningfully include young children's perspectives.

In line with the UNCRC and emerging practice in early childhood studies, involving children in M&E respects their evolving capacities and contributes to more relevant, responsive, and equitable programming.

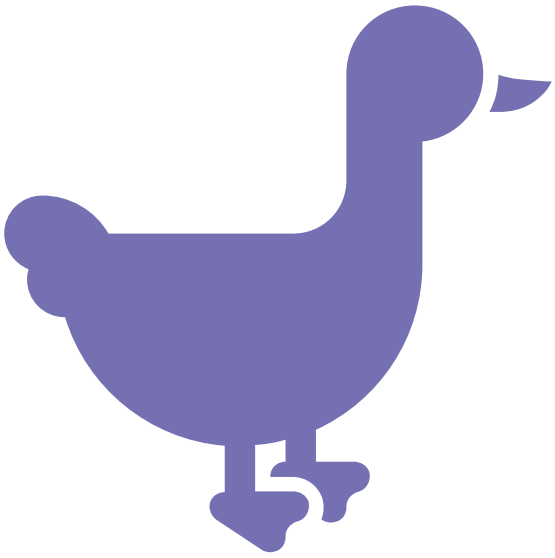
Involving children in research and M&E can include:

- Visual and play-based consultations (e.g., "draw your favourite part of the day")
- Emotion tools (e.g., using emoji cards or colour tokens to show preferences or reactions)
- Observation and documentation of child responses to changes in routine, space, or materials
- Child-led photography or tours of their favourite places in the setting
- Shared reflection rituals with families to interpret children's cues and build narratives around their experiences.

Including children in research and M&E processes not only ensures their voices inform improvements but also builds critical thinking, belonging, and accountability. It communicates that what children notice, feel, and say matters — even when it is expressed through play, gesture, drawing, or, as in the example below, what they capture using GoPro cameras.

Wild Pedagogies* and Young Children through the Mosaic Approach

This research study explored 5- to 7-year-old children's agency and perspectives on outdoor learning over a school year, with a particular focus on how they used sticks from trees in their self-guided learning – symbolically or physically. The outdoor activities were child-led. The researchers followed the three stages of the Mosaic Approach (Clark, 2017). **Stage 1:** Data collection phase. The children collected their data using the GoPros and during observed conversations. **Stage 2:** The analysis and interpretation phase. **Stage 3:** Application of results and action phase.



Findings illustrated how sticks and the forest were essential elements in children's Wild Pedagogies and helped children connect with Place. Children used sticks to construct structures, build houses, craft tools, make weapons, brooms, musical instruments, and even currency. The study stressed the importance of young children connecting with familiar and personal places and getting to know the flora and fauna in their own local places.

Source: Beattie AE, Scott S, Adler D. Wild Pedagogies and Young Children through the Mosaic Approach. *Australian Journal of Environmental Education*. Published online 2025:1-12. doi:10.1017/aee.2025.31

* *Wild Pedagogies* examines relationships with places, landscapes, nature, and the wild in education. It also challenges the dominant versions of education which assert rigid control over educators, learners, the curriculum, and the Earth.- Reference Jickling, Blenkinsop, Timmerman and De Danann Sitka-Sage2018

Children's voice and agency in research study about Intergenerational learning

This study explored the role early childhood educators play as enablers of children's voice and agency in research. It was part of a PhD study about Intergenerational Learning as a pedagogical strategy in early childhood education services in Ireland, which grew out of the international Together Old and Young (TOY) project.

Two main strategies were used when consulting with the 70 children who participated: 'draw-and-talk' and 'talk-and-listen'. Draw-and-talk method allows children to explore issues that they themselves identify as relevant and to communicate their understandings of those issues. 'Talk-and-listen' involved educators listening with intent in informal and naturally occurring interactions between children and educators over time. Parents were also asked to invite their child to talk and/or make a drawing about their IGL experience and for the parent to then note the child's comments on the drawing.

Important findings of the research were:

1. The importance of educators' belief in children having a democratic right to and competence in co-constructing meaning in their lives
2. The value added to the research of educators' knowledge of the child and their contexts
3. The additional meaning added through parents' contributions
4. Educators' expertise in scaffolding children through the research process using multimodal approaches.

According to the research of Anne Fitpatrick, these findings point to the strengths of positioning children as central in knowledge production and educators as skilled researchers tapping into the potential of both to enhance the lives of children in ECE services.

Source: Fitzpatrick A & Halpenny, A M. Educators as enablers of young children's voice and agency in research: messages from an Irish study on Intergenerational Learning. Published online 2025: 1-17. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 1–17. doi:10.1080/1350293X.2025.2541327

From Daily Participation to Community Voice

Everyday participation can extend beyond the room or play space, especially when families are engaged as partners.

Examples include:

- Projects where children and families identify favourite or unsafe places in the community
- Visual exhibitions showcasing what children want in their neighbourhood
- Children contributing to policy design and decision-making processes.

In Ireland, the *HUB na nÓg* Project offered a toolkit for professionals and practitioners working with young children to help involve them in decision-making on matters that affect their lives. It contains guidance, advice, and examples of good practices on how to promote children's agency by encouraging them to make everyday choices and take on age-appropriate responsibilities – ultimately increasing young children's visibility and influence in policy and practice.

(More information on *HUB na nÓg* can be found in Case Studies – Annex 3).

This is the end of Part 2 of the TOY4Participation Toolkit. Part 3 provides a range of tools and resources that can be used for training purposes, as a support for practice and in monitoring and evaluation.

Part 3| Deepening Practice: Reflection, Resources, and References

Part 3 | Deepening Practice: Reflection, Resources, and References

Reflection and Evaluation Tools

Reflecting on and evaluating participation practices is essential for growth, accountability, and continuous improvement. In non-formal ECEC settings, where practice is fluid and relationship-based, tools that support structured reflection help practitioners, teams, families, and even children themselves to understand and strengthen their participatory culture.

Young children's participation is closely linked to their relationships with caregivers and families. In Play Hubs, where children and families attend together, it is especially important to reflect on how participation is experienced not only by individual children but also within the context of family routines, values, and communication. To ensure participation is meaningful and inclusive, it must consider the child's context and include families as both informants and co-facilitators of participation.

It is also important to recognise that some families may be unfamiliar with or hesitant about the concept of child participation, especially when framed in terms of children's rights, decision-making, or autonomy. Acknowledging these concerns with empathy and clarity can help build trust and shared understanding. Participation does not challenge the family's role; it enhances it by promoting connection, learning, and respect.

This section, therefore, includes tools that encourage reflection not only on child-practitioner interactions but also on how families are engaged, respected, and included in participatory processes.

We provide five practical tools to support you in this kind of work:

- An **Everyday Spaces Checklist** to assess participation opportunities in your environment
- A set of **Self-Reflection Journal Prompts** for individual educators
- **Team and Family Conversation Starters** to inspire dialogue and shared learning
- Child- and Family-Friendly Feedback Tools to close the participation loop

- A **Participation Planning Matrix** for designing or adapting activities with participation in mind.

Everyday Spaces Checklist

This quick tool helps teams assess how their environment and routines support meaningful child participation, including how families are welcomed as part of that culture. Use it during programme planning and evaluation reflection or peer observation. It is particularly helpful when preparing for a team meeting, a family consultation, or as a conversation starter during mentoring supervision.

Instructions: Mark each item as: [✓Consistently], [— Sometimes], [**X** Rarely/Never]. Then, reflect on how these practices can be strengthened or adapted.

Aspect	Checklist Item
Welcoming Environment	Children and families are greeted personally and offered choices in how to engage
Materials	Children can freely access open-ended materials suited to different interests and abilities
Routines	Children and families are involved in decisions about daily routines (e.g., songs, stories, transitions)
Display	Children's voices, artwork, and decisions are visible in the space, alongside family contributions
Listening	Staff document and revisit children's and families' ideas to inform planning
Inclusion	The space reflects cultural and linguistic diversity and is physically accessible to all
Feedback	Children and families see how their input has influenced change

An expanded Child Participation Checklist for practitioners in formal and non-formal ECEC Settings is available in Annex 2[1]. This is designed to support practitioners to reflect on and enhance how

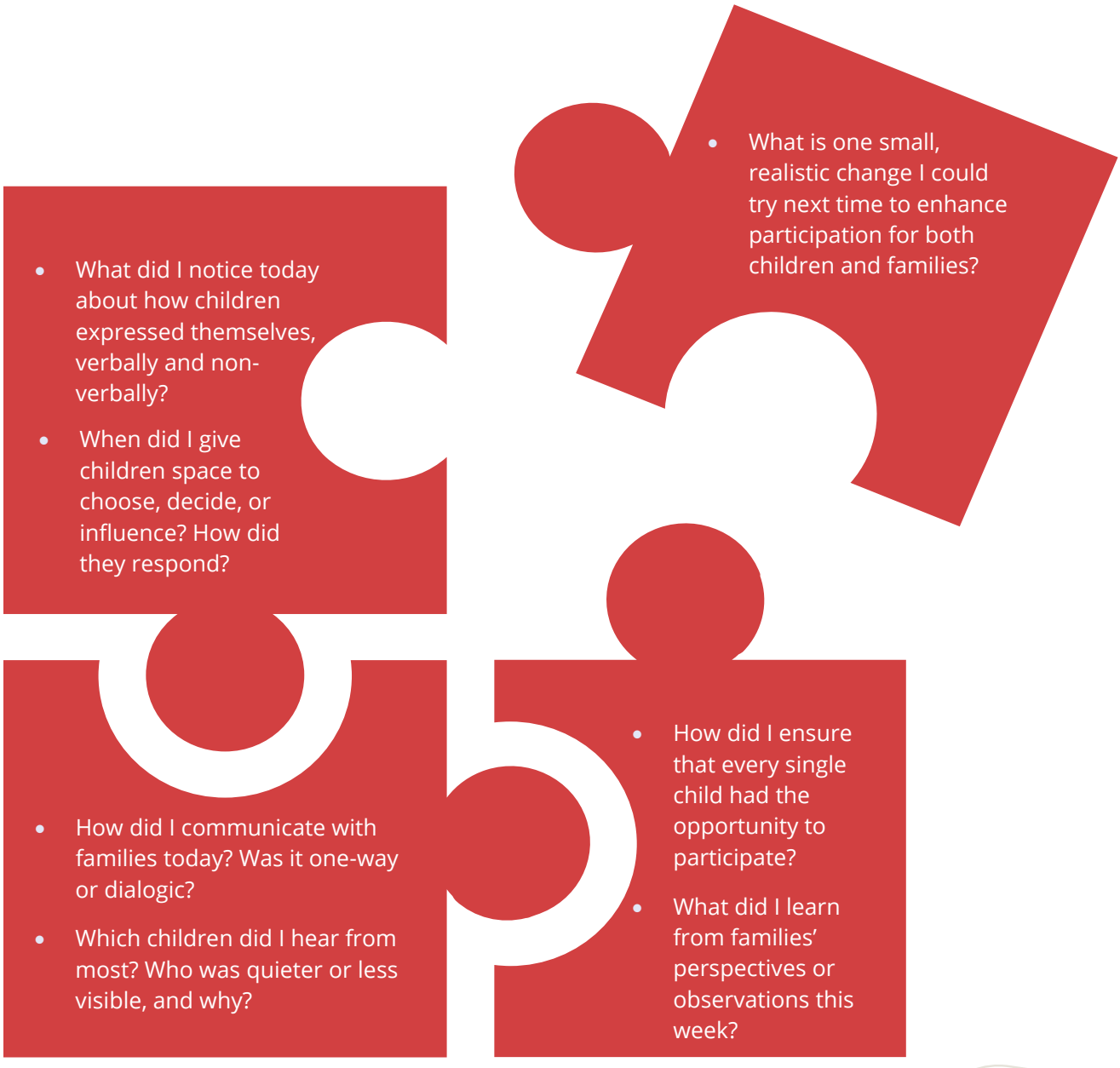
[1] For more information on the Lundy Model and Tools, please see Pedagogical Card 4

participation is embedded in everyday environments, relationships, routines, and decision-making.

Self-Reflection Journal Prompts

These prompts support educators in observing and reflecting on their day-to-day participation practices. Reflection can be done individually or shared with a mentor or peer to gain deeper insight and include other perspectives.

Tip: These open-ended prompts can be used in team development, reflective supervision, and family gatherings



Team and Family Conversation Starters

These open-ended prompts can be used in team development, reflective supervision, and family gatherings. They help bring participation from theory to shared daily understanding.

For Teams

What does meaningful participation look like in our setting for a child aged 0–2? 3–6? 7–10?

How do we use conflict or problem-solving moments as participation opportunities?

What decisions do we regularly make *for* children that we could begin making *with* them?

What are we doing to make sure families feel invited to contribute to decisions?

What snacks can we let them choose or help prepare?

With Families

How do you see your child expressing preferences or ideas at home?

How would you like to be involved in decision-making in our setting?

What kinds of choices would you like your child to have in our setting?

What are some things your child talks about or reacts to after attending this programme?

Child- and Family-Friendly Feedback Tools

Feedback should be regular, simple, and inclusive. These tools can be used in everyday moments or at the end of sessions, and they ensure that families and children feel their contributions are seen and valued.

- **"You Said / We Did" boards**: Display how ideas have been implemented using symbols, photos, or bilingual text.
- **Emotion cards**: Provide a range of emotion faces or icons (happy, calm, frustrated, tired) for children and parents to reflect together.
- **Opinion lines**: Children and families place tokens or stand along a line to indicate preferences, e.g. about an activity or snack.
- **Feedback jars or boxes**: Provide space for anonymous feedback using tokens, notes, or drawings.

Participation Planning Matrix

This template ensures that participation is considered from the start of any planning process. It also allows for dialogue with families as co-creators of programming.

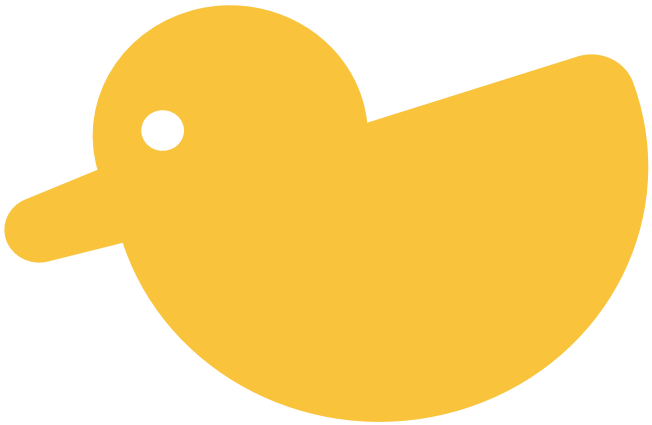
Participation Element	Planning Questions
Space	Where and when will children and families have room to express their views? Are there quiet, group, and creative areas?
Voice	What methods will allow all children and families to participate (drawing, speaking, gestures, surveys, photo sharing)?
Audience	Who will listen and how will children and families know they've been heard? Will there be visible outcomes or follow-up?
Influence	What decisions can children and families actually shape? How will we share the story of their impact (e.g., via photos, newsletters, storytelling)?

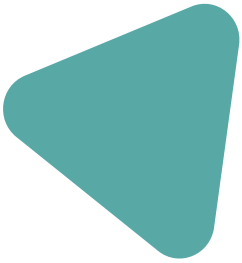
Tip

Print the matrix and use it during team meetings or planning sessions. Invite families to review it and offer additions or alternatives.

This tool is inspired by the Lundy Model and supports thoughtful, age-appropriate planning.

It is flexible and can be adapted to your local context. Most importantly, they create a culture of reflection, accountability, and shared responsibility in making participation a lived reality — one that includes not only the child but also their trusted adults and broader community.





Resources and Further Learning

UN Convention on the Right of the Child (UNCRC), Article 12

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is an important, legally binding agreement signed by 196 countries which outlines the fundamental rights of every child, regardless of their race, religion or abilities. The UNCRC is built on four core principles: non-discrimination, the best interests of the child, survival and development, and respect for the child's views. It consists of 54 articles that cover a wide range of rights, including the right to education, play, food, health, housing, privacy, freedom from violence, and the right to be heard.

Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) focuses on the right of children to express their views and have them taken seriously in matters that affect them. General Comment No. 12, issued by the Committee on the Rights of the Child, provides further guidance on how to interpret and implement this right. It emphasizes that children, regardless of age, possess the right to participate and have their opinions considered, taking into account their evolving capacities.

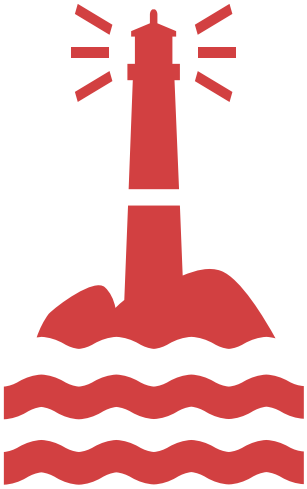
The EU Children's Participation Platform

The EU Children's Participation Platform was established as part of the EU's Strategy on the Rights of the Child to ensure children's right to participate in decisions that affect them. The Platform is a space where children and teenagers under 18 in the EU can express their views and opinions on matters that affect them and contribute to European Union decision-making processes. It aims to amplify children's voices and ensure they are heard in discussions and decisions that impact their lives.

The platform connects children with policymakers and other stakeholders, facilitating communication and the inclusion of children's perspectives in EU policy and decision-making. Organizations working with children can join the platform, allowing children within those organizations to participate. The platform includes a Children's Panel, an Advisory Board, and a Secretariat, all working together to ensure meaningful child participation.

The Lundy Model of Child Participation

The Lundy model was developed by academic Laura Lundy, Professor of international children's rights at the School of Education at the Queen's University of Belfast. Her model, detailed in a 2007 publication in the British Educational Journal, provides a way of conceptualising a child's right to participation, as laid down in Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. It is intended to focus decision-makers on the distinct, albeit interrelated, elements of the provision. The four elements have a rational chronological order: space, voice, audience, influence. The Lundy Model of Participation was prominently featured and endorsed by the Irish Department of Children and Youth Affairs in their recent *National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making (2015 – 2020)*.



Toolkit for including children from birth to 5 years in participation in decision making

This toolkit is about how to listen to babies, toddlers and young children and involve them in decision-making on matters that affect their lives. It is published by Hub an nÓg, Ireland's national centre of excellence and coordination in children and young people's participation in decision on behalf of the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY).

Accompanying resources include:

- A one-page tip sheet for Including children from birth to 5 years in decision-making
- A Literature Review on Methodologies for Consulting with Children Aged Birth to 5 Years (2024).

Listen-Act-Change Handbook on children's participation

The Listen-Act-Change handbook is a practical guide designed to help professionals meaningfully implement children's participation in decision-making processes across various settings. The handbook was developed by the Children's Rights Division of the Council of Europe. It provides a structured, step-by-step methodology for involving children in decisions that impact them, including vulnerable and marginalised children; this covers preparation and planning, building trust and connection with children, identifying relevant issues, gathering and acting on children's views, and evaluating the process.

Country-specific resources

•

7. References

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8. Annexes

Annex 1 - Glossary of Key Terms

Term	Plain-Language Definition
Age-appropriate	Something that matches a child's stage of development, understanding, and needs. It means using words, activities, and expectations that make sense for a child's age and ability.
Agency	A child's ability and right to make choices, show preferences, and influence what happens to them.
Child-centred pedagogy	A way of working with young children that puts their ideas, interests, and ways of learning at the centre. It means letting children make choices, express themselves, and learn through play. Adults support children by listening, observing, and creating safe, rich environments where every child can take part and feel valued.
Child-led	When an activity or idea starts from the child — and the adult follows their lead or supports their decision.
Child Participation	Involving children in decisions, activities, and routines that affect their lives. Even babies and toddlers can participate through gestures, play, and expression.
Child rights	The rights that every child has simply by being a human being under the age of 18. These are protected by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and include the right to be safe, to be heard, to learn and play, to express themselves, to grow in a supportive family or community, and to have their best interests respected in all decisions that affect them.
Co-construction	Children, families, and adults working together to shape learning, routines, and environments.
Decision-making	The process of making a choice between options. In the context of participation, it means giving children real opportunities to influence what happens — from small daily choices to big group decisions.

Democratic Pedagogy	An approach to teaching and caregiving that values children's voices, gives them real choices, and treats them as capable citizens.
Everyday Participation	Participation that happens naturally during daily routines — like choosing snacks, arranging play areas, or picking stories.
Feedback Loop	A way to show children and families that their ideas were listened to — and what was done as a result.
Genuine and meaningful choices	Choices that are real, not pretend. They give children the chance to make decisions that matter to them — like what to play with, who to play with, or how to do something. The adult respects the child's choice and follows through. These choices help children feel confident, listened to, and involved.
Inclusive Participation	Making sure every child, no matter their ability, background, or language, has a chance to join in and be heard.
Non-Verbal Communication	Ways of expressing ideas without using words, such as body movements, facial expressions, sounds, or drawings.
Play-Based Participation	Using play as the main way for children to express themselves, solve problems, and make choices.
Reflection	Time to think back on what happened, how children felt, what they learned, and what could be better next time.
Relational Practice	Building trust with children and families through warm, respectful relationships — the foundation for real participation.
Routines	Routines are the regular, repeated parts of a child's day — like arriving, eating, playing, resting, or going home. They give children a sense of predictability, safety, and structure. Routines are also rich moments for participation, as children can take part in decisions, help with tasks, and express their preferences in everyday ways.
Scaffolding	The support adults give to help children try new things, take part in decisions, or express themselves more fully.

Annex 2 - Child Participation Checklist for practitioners in formal and non-formal ECEC Settings

Purpose: This checklist supports early childhood practitioners to reflect on and enhance how participation is embedded in everyday environments, relationships, routines, and decision-making. It is suitable for use individually, in teams, or with family/community partners.

Instructions: For each item, mark your current practice:

P Yes, consistently — Sometimes X Rarely or never

Use the reflection prompts to guide your team discussions and improvement plans.

1. Environment & Atmosphere

Checklist Item	Reflection Prompt	✓ / — / X
The physical space invites exploration and choice.	Can children freely access materials that interest them?	
The environment reflects children's and families' cultures, languages, and identities.	What elements in the space represent who the children are?	
There are displays showing children's and families' ideas and contributions.	Do we make visible what children say, make, or choose?	

2. Listening and Communication

Checklist Item	Reflection Prompt	✓ / — / X
Children are regularly asked about their views, likes, and ideas.	How do we gather children's input beyond casual comments?	
Adults listen attentively and respond meaningfully.	Do we change anything based on what children express?	
Visual, gestural, or sensory methods are used to support expression.	How do we ensure all children (e.g., non-verbal, multilingual) are heard?	

3. Relationships and Power Sharing

Checklist Item	Reflection Prompt	✓/ — / X
Children are treated as capable and competent partners.	Do we trust children to make meaningful contributions?	
Families are included in conversations about children's participation.	How do we communicate about participation with families?	
Practitioners reflect on their own power and decision-making roles.	When do we step back and allow children to lead?	

4. Choice, Play and Initiative

Checklist Item	Reflection Prompt	✓/ — / X
Children have choices in play, routines, and transitions.	How often do children choose what, where, and how to play?	
There are opportunities for child-initiated activities.	Are children's ideas shaping what happens today?	
Play materials and spaces support open-ended exploration.	Do we allow children to use things in ways we didn't plan?	

5. Shared Decision-Making

Checklist Item	Reflection Prompt	✓/ — / X
Children influence decisions about rules, routines, and activities.	What recent decisions involved children's input?	
Voting, group discussions, or planning boards are used.	Do we regularly use participatory tools (e.g., voting jars, choice boards)?	
There is follow-through on decisions children helped make.	How do we show children the impact of their voice?	

6. Feedback and Follow-Up

Checklist Item	Reflection Prompt	✓ / — / X
Children receive feedback when they express views.	Do we say "thank you" or "we used your idea"?	
Tools like "You Said / We Did" or reflection circles are used.	What visible signs do we have of child input?	
Families are informed about children's contributions.	Do we involve families in celebrating participation moments?	

7. Inclusion and Accessibility

Checklist Item	Reflection Prompt	✓ / — / X
Participation tools are adapted to developmental, sensory, or language needs.	How are we removing barriers to expression and choice?	
All children are encouraged to participate, not just the most verbal or confident.	Who might be missing from our participatory moments?	
Diverse forms of communication are accepted and valued.	Do we value drawing, gestures, or movement as much as words?	

8. Transitions and Daily Rhythms

Checklist Item	Reflection Prompt	✓ / — / X
Children help design or choose aspects of transitions (songs, signals, helpers).	How do transitions support autonomy and reduce stress?	
Adults prepare children for changes using visuals, stories, or discussion.	Do we check in with children before something changes?	
Children can reflect on the day's rhythm.	Do we involve children in shaping the flow of the day?	

9. Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning

Checklist Item	Reflection Prompt	✓ / — / X
Children are invited to reflect on what worked or what they enjoyed.	When do we ask children what they liked — and why?	
Evaluation tools include visual, play-based, or story-based methods.	Do we adapt our feedback tools to different ages?	
Families co-reflect on children's participation and its impact.	Are parents part of our "learning loop" with children?	

10. Capacity Building and Professional Growth

Checklist Item	Reflection Prompt	✓ / — / X
Staff receive training or support on participation methods.	When was the last time we learned something new on this topic?	
Teams have space to reflect on bias, power, and inclusion.	Are we comfortable exploring how our assumptions affect participation?	
Participation is discussed in staff meetings and planning.	Do we plan with participation in mind, not just for the sake of it?	

Annex 3 - Case Studies from the Field

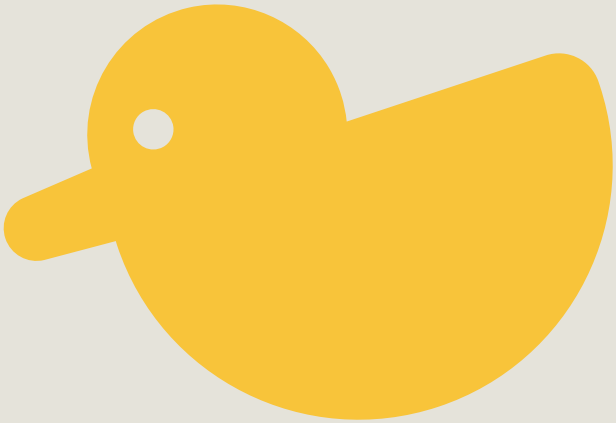
In this section of the TOY for Participation Toolkit, we describe 16 educational practices and initiatives that showcase child participation, the majority from different countries in Europe (and one example from outside Europe). Whilst their context, format, and delivery may differ, they share the common ambition to foster meaningful child participation in early learning environments. Most of the featured initiatives have already been implemented for several years and have led to positive and tangible outcomes for children and their families.

We are grateful to all the organisations who shared these child participation examples. We hope they will inform and inspire other initiatives to incorporate child participation into their practice and decision-making processes. Contact information for each initiative is provided if you need more information from the promoter or implementer.

To view the case studies, see: TOY4Inclusion (2025). TOY4PARTICIPATION Toolkit: Annex 3 - Case studies. Leiden[2]

[2] Direct URL link: https://www.reyn.eu/resources/toy4participation-case-studies-from-the-field/

Annex 4 - Training guidelines



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