



Youth participation

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Introduction

Just like us, when no one listens to them, youth feel powerless and vulnerable. Listening to children and young people is not always easy, but it is very important to their positive development. That's why the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child has described being given a voice in matters that affect them, as a fundamental right for all those under the age of 18 years. Like all rights, participation is subject to reasonable limits, and like all rights in the Convention, it is subject to parental guidance, and the age and capacity of the child.

Research in child development consistently has shown that from infancy through to late adolescence, children benefit greatly from participating in their families, schools and communities. Having a say and being heard makes children feel valuable, it increases their self-esteem and their motivation to succeed. Children who participate in their family life grow to be confident, responsible, and good decision-makers. Children who participate in their classrooms and schools are highly engaged in school, have good peer and teacher relationships, and high levels of achievement. Children who participate

in their communities have a sense of worth, belonging, and being respected. Without these positive developmental characteristics, children are more vulnerable to negative influences such as substance use and gang membership. And those voices, wishes, and goals are suppressed are also vulnerable to depression, anxiety, and antisocial behaviors.

Participation in the family can start early with limited choices of food, toys, books, and clothes. As children grow they can be included in many areas of family decision-making—meals, movies, and vacations, and later budgetary decisions. And where needed, children can have a voice in foster care, adoption, and custody issues. What is important in each area is that parents and guardians listen to their children and

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take their thoughts into account in decision-making. It can be challenging, especially when children's views are not what we want to hear. But they can be carefully heard and taken seriously in decision-making. It's having a say that matters for children, not having their way. Participation in school is, unfortunately, not often provided for in Canada. But parents can help by being involved in their child's schooling, and by allowing some self-direction in choices of sports, books, elective courses, and future educational and career goals.

Parents can also encourage schools to provide opportunities for children to participate in school—through school councils and newspapers, and by having student representatives on all school committees. Having just finished a ten-year study of schools I have seen the incredible differences in children's engagement and achievement in school when their thoughts are listened to and respected, and when they are provided a voice in their classroom activities and on school committees.

Participation in the community, particularly for adolescence, can be limited by the stereotypes of youth that sometimes are held by adults. And too often, communities cater only to very young children and adults. It is important that every community provide social and recreational facilities for all ages. Children and young people can participate in their design and upkeep. Youth can also participate in their communities through volunteer work, representation on regional and municipal councils, and in local media—for example opinion pieces in local newspapers, or on local radio or television stations. It can be challenging to include our children and to really listen to them—but participation is a right and it is a key ingredient of personal and community health and of effective adult citizenship.

