

Tips and advice

Children's participation in practice

Below we suggest some of the essential principles to ensure meaningful participation. In addition to our experience with a number of participatory research and educational development projects, the formulation of these principles has been inspired by R. Hart (1997), C. O'Kane (1998), and G. Lansdown (2005).

The list is not exhaustive and should serve as a starting point for Shape Up staff to promote thoughtful consideration, discussion and the development of conditions conducive to genuine participation and the substantial influence of children and young people on the project. The principles include:

- **Understanding and choice**
The aims and objectives of the project, as well as its organisational structure and the international dimension, should be explained to children and young people from the outset.
- **Safe and empowering environment, sensitive to children and young people's needs and aesthetics**
Shape Up staff recognise the right of the children and young people to be protected from all forms of violence, manipulation and abuse and to consider potential risks to which children may be exposed in participative processes.
- **Balance between guidance and independence**
Thoughtful consideration should be given to providing a sensitive balance between guidance and support on the one hand, and creating room for children and young people's independent work on the other.
- **Power mapping**
Power relations in the project's organisational structure should be made transparent and clear to children from the outset so that they can identify the realistic sphere of their influence.
- **Shared rules**
The project communication rules should be established and negotiated through dialogue. This does not mean that teachers and adults must not impose any rules; this is an inevitable reflection of power relationships and different responsibilities of teachers and adults in any society. However, the rule-establishing process should be clarified and any member of the group should be able to request the discussion of any rule at any time.
- **Inclusiveness**
Children and young people should have a wide range of opportunities to participate according to their interests, experience and abilities. Special attention should be paid to ensure that the participatory structures are in place to support marginalised or disadvantaged (for any reason) children. A variety of choices for participation should be provided which are sensitive to differences in children's age, sex, ethnicity, religion, etc.
- **Ongoing information and transparency**
The entire process of the project should be transparent and regularly updated as the project develops. The relevance and importance of each phase should be discussed with pupils. Children with different abilities, experience and skills may choose to participate in different phases; while this should be respected, a balance should be reached for other different considerations and educational aims. Again, transparency, democratic principles and dialogue are appropriate strategies for making decisions of this kind.
- **Community, professional and family links**
Parents need to be fully aware of the aims or objectives of the project; the project incorporates local structures and traditions supportive to children and young people.