

# Tips: Maximising participation of all children

## Engaging with specific groups of children

Children are not a homogenous group so it is important that your engagement activities recognise their diversity. Different skills are required to engage with teenagers and young children, just as different approaches are needed in relation to ethnicity and children with disabilities.

Children in New Zealand have unique experiences based on their culture, gender, age, ability, community and individual living circumstances. You may find it appropriate to work with specific groups of children to ensure their ideas and interests are heard.

While much of the information in *Listening2Kids* will work for all children, there are some considerations for working with particular groups of children. Below are some of those groups, the issues relevant to them and ways to support their participation.

## Engaging with different ages of children

Children as young as 3 years can communicate their views, as long as you use the right methods. You should choose a method that will work for the particular ages of the children you want to engage with.

Generally, most children can read and write by age 8 and so can respond to written surveys on their own. But remember that different children will have different learning abilities and variable capacities to participate in your engagement, regardless of how old they are. Assistance may need to be provided.

For the purposes of engaging with children, we tend to consider three age groups:

- young children aged 3 to 7 years
- children aged 8 to 13 years, and
- older children aged 14 to 18 years.

There are a few considerations that apply to all age groups to ensure effective engagement:

- Be mindful of height difference and body language: to avoid any 'power imbalance' this signals. Sit down with children, squat down to their height or camp on the floor with them (but don't sit behind a desk).
- Speak in a calm, clear voice and use language they understand: technical terms and inaccessible language closes down responses. Your tone also matters and a question boomed out in a loud voice is likely to make children nervous.
- Value their time and contribution: if children are giving up their time to serve your purposes, then you should consider appropriate ways to show you value them. For example, offer prize draws for completing surveys; give vouchers or cash for focus group participants.

## *Young children aged 3 to 7 years*

There are many issues to consider when engaging with young children. They may be shy around unfamiliar adults, even afraid, so it is important to find ways of making them feel safe and secure. As well as the general points mentioned above (height and language), when engaging young children you need to consider the following:

- Time of day: young children get tired easily, so late afternoon may not be the best time to talk to them. They are also less likely to communicate if they are hungry so try not to schedule discussions with young children before their meal times.

- Length of engagement versus attention span: children have short concentration spans so frequent, short interactions are better than long interviews.
- Consider play-based approaches: if you want to find out how young children feel about something you can elicit their views through pretend play and role play; dress-up, puppetry, or art and drawing. Sorting games can provide information on preferences, when pictures of different options are put on different cards.
- Even if most 5-7 year olds have limited reading and writing, they can still respond verbally to questions on a range of topics, so interviews and face-to-face surveys can work well with them.
- Child-led tours also work for young children. Children walk you through a physical environment they know (e.g. a pre-school or kohanga) and tell you what they like or dislike about the space.

### *Children and young people aged 8 to 13 years*

Children in these middle years can participate in engagement methods that require independent reading and writing, and they can also work well in groups. Adults often underestimate the abilities and sophistication possessed by children in this age range.

Points to consider when engaging with children in this age group are:

- Time to respond: while they are able to respond, the time they need to type or write responses or give a verbal response may be longer than an adult, so be prepared to allow sufficient time.
- Group dynamics: the maturity level will certainly vary, and any engagement with groups of children will need clear ground rules and the facilitator will need to be able to manage different responses in the group.
- Make it fun: remember that children have shorter attention spans than most adults and lower boredom thresholds. Talk can be exceedingly boring for children. Engagements that employ game-based methods are likely to be more fun and effective.

### *Young people aged 14 to 18 years*

Engaging effectively with older children presents some of the greatest challenges. By their teenage years, young people are becoming more independent, forming their identities and developing their peer groups. As an adult, it can be difficult to break into these circles. Points to consider when engaging with older children are:

- Fit their schedule, not yours. Arrange engagement activities at places and times that fit into their worlds and their crowded schedules. Go to locations they feel more comfortable in (e.g. meeting at a youth centre, café or sports club rather than their school).
- Communicate on their terms. They are a digital generation. Consider if your engagement might be via social media or text responses. Sending a text is often the quickest and most efficient way to reach a young person. Messaging through Facebook groups can also be a useful way to organise group activities and responses.

## Māori children

As for all children, any engagement with mokopuna Māori must first and foremost do no harm to them. After that, the aim should be to make the process meaningful for them and where possible, meaningful for their whānau, hapu and iwi, and for the best interests of all Māori.

### *What cultural expertise do I need to engage with mokopuna Māori?*

It is important to recognise that mokopuna Māori and their connections to their culture vary. Some may be very disconnected from their culture, some may be bi-cultural and comfortable to engage in both a Māori and mainstream world, and some may be fully immersed in te ao Māori (the Māori world). Mokopuna Māori and their connection to their culture will determine the level of cultural expertise you will need to engage with them. For mokopuna Māori who attend a mainstream school, your information, consent forms, ethical processes and engagement methods might be very similar for them as it is for all children. However if you want to engage with mokopuna Māori at a kura kaupapa (Māori immersion school) you will need to understand the kawa (protocols) and uphold those before, during and after any engagement process.

In addition to following the general consent and ethics guidelines, the planning guidelines, and the instructions for each of the six engagement methods, there are minimum standards that we recommend you follow if your target participants are mokopuna Māori:

Māori children are tangata whenua. The Treaty of Waitangi recognises their right to partnership with the Crown. For government departments in particular, engaging with Māori children and using their views in your decision-making is an expression of that partnership.

### *Before initiating any engagement methods with mokopuna Māori:*

- Engage in a conscious discussion about the potential impact of your engagement on mokopuna Māori, their whānau, hapu and iwi. Ask: will your work support the greater good of all Māori?
- Understand as much as possible about the cultural environment that your target group operates in, to determine the level of cultural expertise and time that are required to engage with them.
- In some environments you may need to first develop and maintain strong trusting relationships with mokopuna Māori, their whānau, hapu and iwi before any engagement can occur.

### *During your engagement with mokopuna Māori:*

Whilst you may not need to be fluent in te reo Māori (Māori language) and tikanga (Māori values and practices) knowledge about Māori culture is important to engage with mokopuna Māori (particularly those in a mainstream world). It is important that you recognise their cultural identity and their position as tangata whenua when you engage with them. This may include the following:

- Incorporate te reo Māori into some of your written material i.e. surveys.
- Use images that promote Māori culture e.g. children participating in kapa haka.
- Incorporate Māori games and waiata (songs) into ice breakers during focus groups or advisory group meetings.
- Hold meetings on marae to enable mokopuna Māori to be exposed to their culture.
- Open and close meetings with karakia (Māori prayer).

For mokopuna Māori who are bi-cultural or immersed in te ao Māori we recommend that you:

- Use facilitators or interviewers who can build the trust and confidence of mokopuna Māori.
- Use facilitators or interviewers skilled in te reo Māori and tikanga.

### *After your engagement with mokopuna Māori*

There will be some follow-up work that you need to do for all children you engage with. For mokopuna Māori you may need to:

- Refer them to resources that will support them to learn more about their culture if they request it.
- Report back on your findings using images and language that are relevant to Māori culture.

In the [resources](#) section we provide a link titled *The Guidelines for Māori Research Ethics: A Framework for Researchers and Ethics Committee Members*. This resource goes into greater depth around the ethics of engaging with Māori and the level of engagement that might be required. It outlines the range of engagement requirements from minimum standards, to Māori centred, to kaupapa Māori practice.

### **Pacific children**

In New Zealand the biggest Pacific population groups are Samoan, Cook Island Maori, Tongan, Niuean, Fijian, and Tokelauan. Each group has its own unique language, customs, values, and practices. In the 2013 Census, Pacific peoples remained the major ethnic group with the highest proportion of children at 35.7 percent (aged 0–14 years).

Pacific children have diverse cultural experiences. Some Pacific children are born in their Pacific homeland and have a strong understanding of their culture, whilst other Pacific children are New Zealand born with varying degrees of cultural knowledge.

Here is some information about Pacific children that you should know:

- Most Pacific children live in urban areas with over 2/3 living in Auckland City
- 81% of Pacific children under 15 years were born in New Zealand
- Samoans are the largest Pacific group making up half (49%) of the total Pacific population. This is followed by Cook Island Maori 21%, Tongan 20%, and Niuean at 8%
- 83% of Pacific people affiliate with a religion.

We recommend that you follow a similar planning and implementation process as the one we have suggested for mokopuna Maori keeping in mind the diversity of Pacific children.

### **Children from other ethnic groups**

Children from ethnic groups include those whose ethnic heritage distinguishes them from most other people in New Zealand. They include children who were born in New Zealand and who identify with their ethnic heritage, as well as those who are recent migrants or refugees.

You will need to consider the diversity between different ethnic groups, and be aware that in some cultures it is not usual (nor welcomed) to seek the views of children independently of adults. Empowering children to speak can sometimes lead to conflict with their parents.

The most important thing is to be respectful of any cultural practices that are relevant to your engagement processes while offering children the opportunity to give their voice.

You can support the participation of children from ethnic groups:

- Use existing ethnic organisations and networks such as regional ethnic councils, refugee and migrant associations, churches and other places of worship (for example, mosques and temples) to get their ideas about involving children.
- Provide information in appropriate formats and languages.
- Use translations and interpreters where appropriate.
- Acknowledge that single-gender groups may be more appropriate than mixed gender groups.

### **Children with disabilities**

When thinking about your engagement process, you should consider any barriers to participation for children with disabilities, and make an effort to ensure your process is as accessible and inclusive as possible.

There is a range of disabilities – physical, intellectual and psychiatric – that mean some children will need the support, care or interpretation of adults (or other children, such as a sibling) to participate. You can support the participation of children with disabilities by identifying any barriers to participation, providing individual solutions to support people, or arranging for specific accessible engagement activities.

### **Vulnerable children**

Vulnerable children are those children who are at significant risk of harm now or in the future as a consequence of their home environment, or in some cases, due to their own complex needs. Factors that influence child vulnerability include not having their basic emotional, physical, social, developmental and/or cultural needs met at home or in the wider community.

Some examples of vulnerable children are those:

- in State care or receiving care and protection services
- involved in the youth justice system
- receiving support from Children's Teams
- children living in severe and persistent poverty.

Children who have had difficult life experiences may be less likely to have the confidence and self-esteem to participate. You can support their participation by:

- negotiating contact with them through the agency responsible for their care or other community agencies and networks
- ensuring that processes are sensitive, respect privacy and build confidence
- making sure the setting is accessible and provides participants with a sense of psychological as well as physical security.

*Remember, all children have the right to have a fair say, and no-one should take that right away from them.*