

# Tips: Maximising participation of all children

## Engaging with specific groups of children

In addition to children and young people having a right to have a say in matters affecting them as part of the UN Children's Convention, children's perspectives can add significant richness and new ideas into planning and policy development across a range of areas.

Once the need to engage with children and young people has been established, there will often be a particular group of children and young people whose needs must be considered. We always recommend partnering with the communities in which children belong in order to connect with them within their whānau and wider community. If there are no existing relationships with the group of children or young people, best practice is to partner with a trusted organisation, or adult in their life, in order to maximise participation. A good engagement team draws its strength from diversity of skill. A great writer isn't always a great facilitator, and great facilitators may not have strong skills in capturing and communicating the views of young people in a way that portrays the young person's intended meaning.

Children are not a homogenous group and require different approaches during engagement in order to achieve maximum participation. When engaging with children and young people it is important to recognise the diversity within different groups. A facilitator must approach all engagements with an openness to learn about a child or young person's views, recognising their experiences will be their own, and different to anyone else's.

While much of the information in *Listening2Kids* will work for all children, there are some additional considerations for working with particular groups of children. Below are some of these groups, the issues relevant to them and ways to support their participation. We recommend carrying out a [Child Impact Assessment](#) for any engagement activities with children and young people.

Some children will have experienced significant trauma or challenges in their life. Some examples of circumstances (present or past) to consider are:

- living in State care or receiving care and protection services
- involved in the youth justice system
- receiving support from iwi social services or other social services
- children living in severe and persistent poverty
- children experiencing family separation.

Children who have had difficult life experiences may be reluctant to participate due to previous less positive participatory experiences, or if they do not have the confidence and self-esteem to participate and will particularly benefit from having trusted adults who are part of their community with them during any engagement.

## Engaging with different ages of children and young people

All children and young people have the right to share their views and be heard. Very young children can communicate their views through engagements, as long as the right methods are selected. Consider the ages and abilities of the children involved when selecting any engagement method.

Generally, most children can read and write by age 8 and so with help can respond to written surveys that are designed for their reading level. That said, different children will have different learning abilities and variable capacities to participate in an engagement, regardless of age. With all methods it is important to ensure assistance is available if necessary.

For the purposes of engaging with children and young people, we tend to consider these age groups:

- young children aged 3 to 5 years
- 6-8 years old
- 9-12 years old
- 13-14 years old
- 15 to 18 years old.

N.B: We use the term children for those aged under 13 years, and young people for those aged 13-18 years.

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

- Be mindful of unintended power dynamics. In many contexts, adult-child relationships have a clear power dynamic. It is important to establish a neutral setting in which children feel comfortable to contribute. Small changes such as sitting at the same level as children and young people can help overcome these barriers. Be mindful to assess body language or the feeling in the room. Some topics can be sensitive for different children and young people; if children and young people involved are feeling uncomfortable they may disconnect from the conversation. Adults who know the children well are able to gauge how they are feeling more easily, and can be great supports in group discussions on sensitive topics.
- Speak in a calm, clear voice and use language appropriate for the group: avoid technical jargon and inaccessible language. Tone also matters; a question boomed out in a loud voice is likely to make children nervous.
- Value participants' time and contribution: if children are giving up their time, then consider appropriate ways to show them their time is valued.

### *Young children aged 3 to 7 years*

Young children may be shy or feel afraid around unfamiliar adults, so it is important to find ways of making them feel safe and secure. As well as the general points mentioned above, when engaging young children consider the following:

- Young children can be easily affected by factors such as tiredness and hunger, so aim to book engagements earlier in the day, after a meal. Parents or guardians know their children well, seek advice from them.
- Younger children have shorter concentration spans. Frequent, short interactions are better than long interviews.
- Play-based approaches are useful to find out how young children feel about a range of different issues. Examples include pretend play, role play, dress-up, puppetry, or art and drawing. Sorting games can provide information on preferences, where pictures of different options are put on different cards.
- Most 5-7 year olds can respond verbally to questions on a range of topics, so consider interviews and face-to-face surveys.
- Child-led tours are where a young child walks a facilitator through a physical environment they know well (e.g. a pre-school or kohanga) and can show what they like or dislike about the space. This can be a successful approach for children as young as 2 years of age.

### *Children aged 8 to 12 years*

This age group can typically participate in engagement methods requiring independent reading and writing, as well as working well in groups.

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

- 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 allow sufficient time.
- Group dynamics: maturity, ability and interest levels will vary, and any engagement with groups of children will need the facilitator to be able to manage different responses in the group.
- Make it fun: Children do have shorter attention spans than most adults and lower boredom thresholds. Presentations that do not have opportunities for participation can be exceedingly boring for children. Engagements that employ game-based methods are likely to be more fun (for both the facilitators and the participants!) and effective.

### *Young people aged 13 to 18 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 this age group 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).

### **Consider gender in engagements**

Facilitators need to consider gender when designing engagements. Some young people may feel more comfortable opening up to a person who identifies as the same gender as them. Gender can also be an important cultural consideration.

### **Tamariki and rangatahi Māori**

We acknowledge there is no one view of all tamariki and rangatahi Māori. The lived experiences of tamariki and rangatahi Māori are diverse and largely influenced by their whānau, cultural connectedness, hapū, iwi and community.

In addition to the general guidance provided on our website for engaging with children, there are minimum standards we recommend if participants are tamariki and rangatahi Māori. An understanding of tikanga and the kawa of the community being engaged with is essential. As with all engagements with children and young people, partnering with a trusted person within the community who can guide and support engagements to make it a positive experience for their tamariki and rangatahi.

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 hearing their views in your decision-making is an expression of that relationship.

### *Before initiating any engagement methods with tamariki and rangatahi Māori:*

- In most environments it is essential to first develop and maintain strong trusting relationships within the support networks of tamariki and rangatahi Māori, their supporters, their whānau, hapū and iwi before any engagement can occur. You should partner with those who know the

children and young people best in order to carry out genuine engagement and create participation opportunities.

- Seek the advice of whānau, hapū, iwi, communities and schools; in our experience, questions about how best to engage with children and young people, are generally welcomed by the community.
- Understand as much as possible about the cultural environment of the children and young people you are about to engage with, and seek this guidance from their community.

### During engagement with tamariki and rangatahi Māori:

Knowledge of Māori culture is essential when engaging with tamariki and rangatahi Māori. Commitment to correct pronunciation of te reo Māori (Māori language) and genuine understanding of tikanga (Māori values and practices), is essential. It is important to recognise their cultural identity and position as tangata whenua when engaging.

It is also important to be sensitive to rangatahi who may feel whakama or shame when they do not have a deep understanding of te ao Māori.

### 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. The Pacific population is the largest growing youth population.

Pacific children have diverse cultural experiences.

We recommend following a similar planning and implementation process as the one we have suggested for tamariki and rangatahi Māori, keeping in mind the diversity of Pacific children.

### Children from a diverse range of cultures

Consider the diversity between different cultures, and be aware that participation in decision making happens differently across cultures.

Be respectful of any cultural practices relevant to the engagement processes while still offering children the opportunity to give their voice.

Support the participation of children by:

- Using existing relevant 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. Always have community involvement and robust consent processes.
- Providing information in appropriate formats and languages.
- Using translations and interpreters where appropriate.
- Acknowledging that single-gender groups may be more appropriate than mixed gender groups.

## Children with disabilities

Children and young people may have a range of disabilities that can have an impact on their ability to have their say. Take a strengths based approach to facilitation, and seek guidance from those with an understanding of the child, and their needs. This means learning about the child or young person to be engaged with, and supporting them to choose a method of engagement that suits them best. Consider any barriers to participation for children with disabilities, and ensure the process is accessible and inclusive. Offer a range of opportunities for children and young people to share their views, this could include providing individual solutions to support people, or arranging for specific accessible engagement activities. Partnering with those who know the child best is always a good starting point. From there, it is your responsibility to create a strengths based approach that will maximise the young person's participation.

*All children have the right to have a say.*