

BENEFITS
OF
CHILD
PARTICIPATION



Child participation is one of the core principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. It acknowledges a child's right to be consulted and for the child to freely express their opinions on matters that concern them.

Child participation may be defined as an ongoing process of children's expression and active involvement in decision-making at different levels in matters which affect them. It involves sharing information and creating a platform for a mutually respectful dialogue between a child and an adult. Through this dialogue, the child's views on matters that concern him/her are considered. It is important to note that the entire interaction is facilitated by taking the child's age and cognitive development into consideration.

A child's right to participation is connected to fulfilling the right to information, a prerequisite for participation to be relevant and meaningful. When children are provided with the necessary information about their options, and the consequences of the choices, it enables informed decision-making and also helps them gain skills, confidence, and maturity to express their views. The principle of child participation not only allows the child an opportunity to speak but also makes it obligatory for the adults to listen. Hence, child participation is the child's right to speak as well as to be heard.

Benefits of Child Participation

This document is an effort by Prerana to share the benefits of child participation as understood, observed, and implemented in its field interventions.

When children's right to participate is upheld, it allows children to access their other rights. Following are some of the benefits of child participation that we have observed through our work -

1. Child participation also encourages children to be more inquisitive and innovative without fear. In our work, we have observed that when children are asked for their perspective, they are keen to respond and come up with novel solutions for the challenges and concerns shared. One of the residents of Prerana's Naunihal Home for Girls emphasized the importance of having safe spaces within their residential facility. She suggested allocating a designated room which the residents may access to vent out any overwhelming emotions.



2. Besides gaining political and social knowledge, children also become aware of their rights and responsibilities when asked to participate. In our Night Care Centers, and the Children's Home the daily menu is prepared in consultation with the children, where we seek their suggestions on the kind of food that must be prepared. The process is led by the adults but the children are included in the decision-making.



We share the available budget, along with the menu as suggested in the rules of the Juvenile Justice Act 2015 with them. This helps them understand the available resources, their responsibilities, and the rules and expectations set by external bodies, further aiding the children to give informed suggestions. The menu is reviewed once every quarter and we involve children in the decision-making. Through this exercise, they experience a sense of belonging, learn to responsibly respond to situations, and also listen to others' points of view.

3. Child participation enhances the likelihood of children reporting abuse or exploitation as they may feel that they have a safe and inclusive space to share their concerns and issues, and will be heard respectfully.

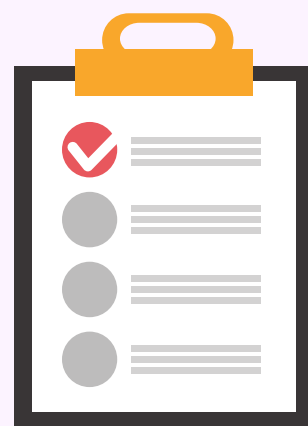
A few years ago, some children who attended our Night Care Center informed the staff about a child who lived alone on the streets, asking if he could be enrolled in the Center for his care and protection. After due consideration, the child was admitted to the Night Care Center and this happened only because the children informed trusted adults about the situation, and thus helped a child get access to safe shelter and nutrition.



Similarly, sometimes when children are distressed, they approach us seeking to talk to the counselor for assistance, as they feel their concerns will be addressed and heard. In February 2020 an 11-year-old girl who was enrolled in the Night Care Centre overheard a conversation where an elderly woman was offering her mother money to sell her daughter. This child immediately reported the matter to the social worker at the NCC and was provided with the necessary help.

4. Involving children in programme planning offers a way of protecting them from harm and preventing them from being invisibilized from the plans, policies, and services or decisions that affect their lives.

The means to achieve this can be small too. At our Night Care Centers and our Naunihal Home for Girls, there are children's committees for various concerns like Child Protection, Health, Nutrition, Cleanliness, etc. The children volunteer to be a part of the committees and help in making decisions related to that area. The membership in these committees is on a rotational basis, and all children get to experience various concerns, roles, and how to respond to different situations.



In the NCC, the nutrition committee once raised the issue of too much oil being used in cooking food. They addressed this issue with staff, involved other children, and this eventually led to better policies in this matter. Similarly, we have observed that the children in our Night Care Centers are quite vocal about not being referred to as children 'from the red-light areas'. They have shared with us that they do not want this label to be a part of their identity, and it hinders their quest to move beyond this aspect of their lives. Through participatory processes, children feel comfortable addressing such issues.

5. Child participation fosters civic duty. Children learn how to be active and responsible citizens.

- a. It fosters tolerance and mutual respect for others. Child participation is an introduction to democracy for children where their voices and opinions are heard and respected. When we started the first Night Care Centers over three decades ago, we initiated monthly meetings with the mothers of the children who attended the Center, and this practice continues to date. These meetings are platforms for women to share and give suggestions and also for Prerana to put forth ideas and co-create rules to run the center. A few years later the children suggested that they would also like to have similar meetings. This idea eventually evolved into Ekta Gat meetings, which are now routinely held for children to share their concerns. Ekta group is for children above 6 years. Next, we had children below 6 years wanting us to also “involve” them and “talk” to them and “listen” to them, this is how they approached us and a separate children’s group for this age group was initiated.
- b. It also nurtures democratic leadership skills among children. We have observed that when children are asked for their opinions, they regularly practice the same behavior while interacting with their peers. In Naunihal if children want to change their bunk beds, they bring it up for discussion in the Children’s Committee meetings. Similarly, if they want a textbook from another child they will approach the child and seek consent. In our annual celebration, Balak Utsav, we share suggestions on the themes with the children and let them decide what theme they would like to follow. Subsequently, the music and performances, the costumes, etc for the event also involve the children’s feedback and suggestions.
- c. Child participation fosters cognitive development. Children learn best through daily experiences and interactions with warm, caring adults. It allows children an opportunity to learn in real-time through trial and error. The adult caregiver plays the role of an observer often and over the years has found that the children ensure every child is encouraged to speak. We have heard children say things like “there are no right or wrong questions”, “you will not be judged” do ask questions”

6. As mentioned earlier, child participation is linked to effective decision-making.

When children are presented with different concerns, they can critically analyze them, identify and communicate solutions. They can recognize and choose the most effective option out of the ones available. A feedback session was conducted among the residents of Prerana’s Naunihal Home for Girls, about the changes they would like to see implemented in Naunihal. One of the residents noted that a cause of conflict among the residents had been the shared space for their lockers. The resident suggested that one way to avoid such arguments was to modify the structure of the rooms. She suggested that each room could have 5 girls - 2 senior girls and 3 younger girls. They could be allotted their respective lockers, and the 5 girls would be completely responsible for the same.



Furthermore, the senior girls could act as mentors and resolve any complaints that may arise among the younger ones. Thus, through this structure, the girls would be able to learn how to take on responsibility and be good leaders. In our shelter Home, such suggestions are regularly revisited, feedback is discussed and the cycle of participation continues.

7. The right to participate enables the children to hold caregivers accountable.

It ensures that caregivers behave in a way that is respectful to the children, and acknowledge their rights as well as needs. In our Night Care Centers (NCC) as well Naunihal Home for Girls, the children have reported if they found any of the staff wasn't mindful in their interaction with their children. In both the services, the children are vocal that caregivers should not refer to a child's past "mistakes" while discussing their current behavior.



8. Child participation also promotes the development of self-esteem, confidence and builds a consent culture.

- a. Children learn and understand the importance of choices, opinions, feelings, and emotions when they are asked to share their inputs. When making care plans for children, we often provide suggestions but never pressure the child to decide. We help them understand the consequences of their choices and ensure that they are involved in their rehabilitation process.
- b. When participation is encouraged and fostered, children feel that they are important and valued. Feeling valued is important in the growth and development of the child.
- c. They also develop a sense of agency. It empowers them to recognize the control they have over their external environment, and hence, can foster a positive view of the world.
- d. Children gain a sense of achievement and an increased belief in their ability to make a difference.

When we initiate conversations on consent, they learn to respect boundaries. This helps develop healthy boundaries and relationships throughout their lives. When 14-year-old Renuka was asked if she would like to give an orientation of the rules of the study class, she was very happy to take on the role. In her orientation to two newly admitted children she shared about the timings of the study class, the activities, the resources available, and also added *"When you want anything from the center ask for it. Please don't take anything without seeking permission. If you want to step out of the class, inform the concerned person and take consent and then step out. The teacher must know that you are out of her class as this is also linked to your safety"* A participatory culture fosters leaders who enable a similar culture for their peers as well.

10. Working together helps develop positive relationships between children and adults. It promotes a positive image of children within their communities, among professionals, and among their peers. In one of the redlight areas we work, Suraj is known to be a child who is sensitive, well informed, and a good listener so there are times when women approach him to discuss their children's admission process, exam schedule, online safety, etc. Participation leads to children being more responsible.



In all our services, we give importance to seeking children's participation. Children are considered to be experts in their everyday living environment and indispensable in analyzing and finding solutions for their problems.

In our work with children in the Juvenile Justice (JJ) system, child participation is quite important. If practiced in the right spirit, it leads to the smooth transition of children from the JJ system to the community and promotes effective rehabilitation. Child participation is also significant as it prevents restoration of children without their opinion, which could lead to further violation of their rights and put them in unsafe situations. It can cause the children to re-enter the JJ system due to disruptions in the rehabilitation plan.

Thus, as adults, we must consciously seek children's inputs on all matters that concern them. An important tool for assessing the effectiveness of child participation is regularly consulting **Roger Hart's ladder of child participation**. However, while seeking child participation, we must be mindful of the child's age and stage of social, cognitive, and emotional development. Furthermore, while eliciting participation, we should work to create a safe and trusting environment for the child. The child should have access to all relevant information about the options as well as the consequences of each option. The child must be presented with this information in a child-friendly manner and have access to resources to safely and effectively execute their choice.

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