

Introduction to child participation

1.1 A biblical view of children

In many cultures children are undervalued. However, God values children as much as adults. All human beings are made in his image.

BIBLE STUDY

God's view of children

- Read Genesis 1:26-27
 - *What do these verses say about the value of people in God's eyes?*
 - *Does he value children any differently from adults?*
 - *How do these verses encourage us to respect adults and children?*
- Read Deuteronomy 7:11-14
 - *What do these verses tell us about the way God values children?*
- Read Psalm 127 and Psalm 128
 - *What words are used to describe God's view of children in these Psalms? Discuss what these words mean.*
 - *Do we always view children as a blessing?*
- How are children viewed in our culture?
- In what practical ways can we encourage those around us to view children in the way that God views them?

God recognises that children are dependent and uses this to teach adults about the kingdom of God.

BIBLE STUDY

Jesus' attitude to children

- Read Matthew 18:1-6 and 19:13-15
- These verses show that Jesus had a positive attitude towards children. However, the point of these verses is even deeper.
- *What is the difference between children and adults in terms of dependency?*
 - *When we sin we turn away from God and want to go our own way. Why then do we need to become like children to enter God's kingdom?*
 - *What is Jesus' warning to those who misguide children?*

The Bible places the responsibility for the raising of children on the family. Ideally this should be within the immediate or extended family, but where this is not possible, the family of believers (church) should take on the responsibility (Exodus 22:22; James 1:27).

BIBLE STUDY

Holistic child development

■ Read Luke 2:40-52

These verses describe the way Jesus grew up and shows perfect human development from childhood to adulthood.

- *What does this passage say about Jesus' development: intellectually, physically, spiritually, socially?*
- *Do we always think of child development in these terms?*
- *What roles did adults play in Jesus' childhood?*

■ Read Matthew 21:14-16

- *What does this passage say about children's ability to recognise who Jesus is and to respond to him?*
- *Do we always see these abilities in children in our church?*

What can we do to encourage the development of children in our own families or communities?

The Bible teaches that relationships between adults and children should be loving, just and based on respect. Parents or guardians are urged to discipline children in their care. This allows children to explore their environment within a set of safe and healthy boundaries.

BIBLE STUDY

Nurturing children

There are many things we should consider when we seek to nurture children:

■ Read Deuteronomy 4:9-10; 6:5-7; Proverbs 4; 22:6; Ephesians 6:1-4

- *What is the benefit of teaching children about God's character, about what Jesus has done for us and how to live as the people of God?*

■ Read Hebrews 12:7-11; Proverbs 13:24, 29:15 and 29:17

- *Why does God discipline us as his children?*
- *What benefit does discipline have for our children?*
- *How can children be given discipline that nurtures rather than abuses them?*
- *What forms of discipline are used in our culture? Which of these do we think are appropriate and why?*

■ Read Colossians 3:21

- *How can we avoid discouraging children?*
- *In what ways can we encourage children?*
- *In what areas of their lives can we encourage them?*

In summary, children are a blessing from God. They should be nurtured in a protected environment, ideally within a family situation, to enable them to gain independence, to serve God and others and to reach their God-given potential.

1.2 Why child participation?

In order to encourage children to serve others, we need to ensure that they can participate in family, church and community life.

In addition to remembering the biblical basis for involving children, we should be aware of the legal and logical reasons for encouraging child participation:

- Under international law, children have the right to be consulted in all decisions concerning their lives. Most countries have signed up to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. According to Article 12 of the Convention, children must be asked to give their opinions about all matters affecting them, including in legal and administrative proceedings. This should take into account the 'age and maturity of the child'.
- Children know a lot about their own lives. Often, decisions are made about children's lives based on information provided only by adults. Yet adults cannot think, feel and see life as a child does. Adults often make assumptions about what information children are able, or not able, to provide. If adults do not listen to children, the decisions that they make for children may have a negative, rather than a positive, impact. Methods can be designed that make it easy for children to provide information. Information provided by children can be used alongside information provided by adults.

Children's natural environment for growth and well-being is the family. However, due to pressures on families around the world, many children grow up with one or no parent or in situations of abuse and neglect. This can result in children taking on responsibility to provide for their brothers and sisters, or being forced to live on the streets to avoid domestic violence and poverty. These children have to become independent earlier than other children. Participation in community life becomes particularly important for these children. They need to be able to make good decisions and protect themselves.

Development organisations have a role in ensuring that children are given an opportunity to participate. This might involve:

- empowering families to care for, and listen to, their children
- giving children an opportunity to participate in community life, such as helping them to set up a children's club or council
- involving children as stakeholders in all types of community development projects
- developing projects with children who may not have families to care for them
- enabling children to represent their concerns in conferences or consultations at local, regional and international levels.

All children should be given the opportunity to participate, but some children are often excluded due to their gender, physical disability or ethnic group. For example, girls should be given as much opportunity to participate as boys.

1.3 **Examining participation**

In order to involve children in the planning and implementation of projects and in community life, we need to examine ourselves and our roles in relation to children. We should ensure a balance between the type and quality of participation that occurs. Children should be involved in a way that respects and supports their roles as decision-makers. This is not an easy task. We will first look at the appropriate type of participation for different aspects of our work with children. We will then look at the 'Wheel of participation', which helps us to think about the elements needed for effective, good quality child participation.

TYPES OF PARTICIPATION

There are many different types of participation. The diagram below shows what these are. Tokenism is the lowest level of participation, where children are involved in some way, but not very meaningfully. The fifth type of participation is the most genuine participation by children, where they take a leading role. This means they have clearly defined decision-making powers within an agreed structure, such as a children's club. It does not mean that they are in charge and in a position to ignore advice from adults which is in their best interests.

It may take time for children to feel comfortable at a higher level of participation. Some may not want to take on this responsibility and agree to let adults take the lead at different times. We may decide to work at different levels of participation for different activities. However, it is important that staff and children work together to bring change.

5 TAKING A LEADING ROLE 'Action by'

CHILD-INITIATED AND DIRECTED Children set the agenda and are active politically.

4 COLLABORATION AND PARTNERSHIP 'Action with'

ADULT-INITIATED, SHARED DECISIONS WITH CHILDREN Adults have the initial idea, but children are involved in every step of the planning and implementation.

CHILD-INITIATED, SHARED DECISIONS WITH ADULTS Children and their organisations invite adults to collaborate with them. Roles are defined together.

JOINTLY INITIATED BY CHILDREN AND ADULTS Children and adults work in partnership to agree, and work together towards, common goals.

3 CONSULTATION 'Action with / by'

CHILDREN ARE CONSULTED AND INFORMED The project is designed and run by adults, but they use the suggestions and concerns of the children. Children are informed so that they can make good decisions.

2 INFORMING 'Action for'

CHILDREN ARE GIVEN A TASK AND TOLD WHAT IS REQUIRED OF THEM Children are informed of, and in agreement about, actions that affect them. They might be able to choose to carry out the task.

1 COERCION 'Action on'

MANIPULATION Children do or say what adults want them to, but have no real understanding of the issues. Alternatively children may be asked what they think, and adults then use some of the ideas without telling the children what influence they have had on the final decision.

DECORATION Children take part in an event, such as singing or dancing, but have no influence over how it is organised.

TOKENISM Children are asked their opinions but have little choice about the way that they can express those views or the range of ideas they can express.

Reflection

- Think of examples we have seen of child participation at each of these levels.
- What could have been done differently to enable children to participate more fully?

THE WHEEL OF PARTICIPATION

The Wheel of participation helps to ensure that children's participation is effective. A wheel is constructed from supportive spokes attached to a hub. The spoke must be balanced and keep the wheel perfectly round if it is to roll smoothly. The Wheel of participation consists of three 'spokes': the principles of opportunity, responsibility and support. Each of these spokes is necessary to support children in the process of participation as the diagram below shows. The hub represents respect, which forms the basis of the three principles.

If respect, opportunity, responsibility and support are not always provided to children, their participation will be unbalanced and slowed down, just as a broken spoke or a flat tyre will affect the movement of a bicycle. When children are given respect, opportunity,

responsibility and support, they will be able to participate in a way that increases their capacity and effectiveness in decision-making. This in turn will enable them to participate meaningfully.

The Wheel of participation



The hub and spokes of the Wheel of participation are described below. It can be useful to prayerfully reflect on the principles. Then think about practical ways in which they can be applied to specific work with children.

Give children respect

Respect is essential because it provides support for the three principles or spokes that complete the Wheel of participation. If there is no respect it becomes difficult for the three principles to be put into action. Respect can be shown by listening to what children say, asking for opinions, explaining decisions and actions, and giving all children equal treatment regardless of their ability, language and skills.

It is often difficult for people who consider themselves ‘professionals’ or ‘experts’ to ask children for ideas or solutions. This may be because of negative attitudes and experiences and is a major obstacle for organisations wishing to facilitate child participation. To overcome this obstacle and grow in respect for children, we must look for, and appreciate, their strengths and successes.

Give children opportunity

Children should be given **opportunities** to use their God-given ability to respond to issues affecting them. One of the biggest obstacles to the application of this principle is the attitude of some adults towards children.

Children can be given opportunities to participate in various stages of the project cycle. For example:

- **PROJECT IDENTIFICATION** Involve children in conducting needs assessments of their situation
- **PROJECT DESIGN** Gather ideas and information from children about responses to problems

- **IMPLEMENTATION AND EVALUATION** Support children as they participate in project activities, monitor and review their progress and assess their impact
- **CELEBRATING SUCCESS AND LEARNING LESSONS** Allow children to reflect on, and record, what can be learned from the project.

At each of these stages, children can be given the opportunity to share their views and actively participate. The type of participation could differ. For example, it could move between **consultation** and **collaboration** as needed, and as appropriate for their age, experience and abilities. Children could direct their own needs assessments at the Project Identification stage. At the Project Design stage, adults could consult children for ideas on possible activities and responses.

In all cases, child-friendly methods should be used. For example, the use of creative arts such as drawings, photographs and role plays are very effective in allowing children to share their ideas and opinions about issues affecting them in a fun, non-threatening way. Section 4 looks at the project cycle and child-friendly methods in more detail.

Give children responsibility

If children are given **responsibility**, they will gradually become empowered as decision-makers. Allowing children to make decisions and to share in the consequences helps their growth and experience in influencing or directing project activities or community action. It is crucial for the growth and well-being of children that they learn how to respond actively to issues affecting their lives, both on their own and with other children.

The types and levels of decision-making and accountability should be realistic and appropriate for the children's age and maturity, increasing over time as the children grow older and gain experience. Children should fully understand the consequences of their decisions. They should agree their responsibilities with adults before the project or activity begins.

Give children support

The third principle needed to ensure effective child participation is **support**. When children are respected enough to be given the **opportunity** to influence or direct activities and **responsibility** to make decisions, they must be **supported** if they are to be successful.

Participation is a process that takes time and confidence for children to learn about and join in with. As a result they must be supported in various ways. This may be especially true for children who lack maturity or experience, who have physical or learning disabilities or who are facing serious emotional difficulties.

Most children will need several types of support. These usually include providing new or additional information, skills and material or financial resources. Children cannot take informed decisions without up-to-date information presented in ways that they can understand. Books, tape recordings and posters can be used to present information to children. Children themselves can play an active role in collecting information.

It is important to meet emotional needs as well. Adults should provide children with comfort, encouragement and praise in order to develop a sense of pride and achievement. The atmosphere in which children participate should be friendly and relaxed. This enables those who are shy or fearful to find ways of expressing themselves.

What children’s participation does and does not involve

Despite the rewards of involving children in project planning, it is not an easy solution to designing successful projects. In 2002, working children and programme managers in Asia came together to define what had been learned about child participation in their region. The following table is a useful summary of what they jointly agreed regarding children’s participation.

Taken from Regional Working Group on Child Labour (2003)

CHILD PARTICIPATION	
INVOLVES	DOES NOT INVOLVE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • recognising the value of children’s knowledge and contributions • sharing experience and expertise with children • learning from children • finding ways to make it easy for children to make decisions and implement them • helping children and adults to understand their rights and responsibilities • sharing power with children • working towards respect for the rights of younger citizens. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • suggesting to children what they should think or say • thinking adults have nothing to learn • devaluing adult’s experience and expertise • using children to do adults’ work • no rights for adults and no responsibilities for children • handing over all power to children • keeping things the way they are now.

Reflection

- Do we agree with the statements about what child participation does and does not involve?
- How often do we put the positive statements into practice in our work?
- Are there additional statements that we could add?