

# social work now



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FEBRUARY 2012

Te Hautaka ako te Tari Āwhina  
i te Tamaiti, te Rangatahi, tae  
atu ki te Whānau

*The Practice Journal of Child, Youth and Family*

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*The stone that features on the cover was created by a young person  
at one of our care and protection residences.*

## Guest editorial – children and young people’s participation

By *Lagi Tuimavave*

Life for a child or a young person in any society is so different when compared to an adult. However I believe that it shouldn’t matter whether I am an orphan, a foster child, a child with divorced parents, or living every child’s dream of the perfect family and the perfect life. What should matter is that I am given a chance. What matters is that I count in this society, a society that diminishes divisions and counts on the opinions and ideas from children and young people. *Social Work Now* has given me this valuable opportunity to take part and represent the voices of my sisters and brothers: the children and young people of New Zealand. New Zealand has shown me that it carries certain attributes, for example it is accepting of difference, open to experimentation and provides various opportunities for young people. In keeping with this ethos, this collaborative edition of the journal focuses on the limited yet significant role of the future generation of Aotearoa. It symbolises a desire to partner with young people and I foresee this will be a trend that will continue to develop in the future. Hopefully, every child and young person in Aotearoa will stand with me to celebrate this special recognition. I sincerely thank and credit *Social Work Now* for recognising the importance of children and young people’s participation because, at the heart of it all, we are the future of New Zealand.

First and foremost, participation now is important because we need to look beyond the present. New Zealanders need to consider how their country ought to endure. Who will be the Prime Minister, Governor-General, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Countdown CEO or All Blacks coach, just

to name a few? Opportunities in New Zealand present themselves in different colours, but participation now will only better our chances in finding suitable professions tomorrow. We therefore need to have the right mentality, and to be emotionally prepared and physically strong for the future. Every child has a dream. Every young person has a goal. They range from teaching to coaching, nursing to reinforcing, drop kicking to shooting hoops, legislating to judging, cleaning to operating, farming to fixing and the list goes on. It is very important that children are reassured that any dream is possible. Our involvement now as mere embryos of the labour force can help us as

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*We, as children and young people, need to feel that our involvement in any walk of life is noticed and valued.*

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individuals and will contribute to our growing society. New Zealand today will be a different place tomorrow, so why not prepare us now to optimise our chances of survival.

In addition, my participation as a young person is vital because it gives me strength, it encourages me to battle on, it makes life worth living and most importantly it motivates me to strive for the impossible. We, as children and young people, need to feel that our involvement in any walk of life is noticed and valued. It is simply to help us develop and grow. No child or young person should ever have to feel vulnerable and intimidated. To avoid this, allowing us to take part results in self-satisfaction and a positive approach to the future.

Children and young people have a great awareness of their strengths and weaknesses in life. They can succeed (within their capabilities), but with support they can excel beyond expectation. Children learn slowly but in great quantities. They imitate the things they see and hear. They do not risk themselves but if they do, they are

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quick to reassure themselves first. Children don't start counting in tens they begin at one and from there they start climbing and learning. They are so intelligent. They are always sure and never doubtful. I have seen so many confident, composed and willing children. No one knows them better than they do and they find joy and happiness in everything they do. Their contribution brings a different perspective because they are still children, not young adults or adults. They are so honest and purely innocent and that's what I find fulfilling in witnessing how children hold, carry and transform themselves.

For young people, life is more than just searching for ways to participate. There are so many obstacles, distractions and problems that surround them, yet they know how to categorise everything so that every morning is a new morning and every day is a brand new start. Young people go through phases where they may not take on advice or where advice might not help to solve their issues, but it may give them valuable time to work out how to be happy citizens. Young people need space and patience. Some are more outspoken than others but in saying that, every individual has an opinion. They are such a diverse group of people that their perspectives should be treated as valuable because you never know when an opinion could spark an idea that could become monumental. They bring quality and diversity and that is what our society has been built on. Children and young people understand where they stand as future stars and their ideas should be appreciated.

The 2011 Rugby World Cup opening ceremony was, for me, a celebration of the influence children and young people can have on a nation. As a young person myself, I felt proud at the sight of children and young people dancing and singing, and most specifically Ethan Bell. Children and young people are strengthened by seeing people of similar ages participating. For the whole world to see children and young people play such an important role in the ceremony satisfied me. Listening to some of them in interviews revealed their excitement,

confidence and acceptance. It is incredible and I am happy with how New Zealand takes into account our existence. Although everyday I look forward to adulthood, for now, we are equally as important as every other citizen and our wellbeing should be emphasised and our participation should be valued.

New Zealand is no stranger to creating opportunities for children and young people. In my attempt to outline different ways children can participate, I am confident in suggesting that they enjoy hands on activities. They enjoy interacting with others and forming groups. Because they are young, verbal activities might bore them but looking at illustrations, reading books, and partaking in practical activities and anything that requires involvement will suit them. As for young people they need exposure to gain experience, assistance in order to be reassured, guidance to the right path and teaching to correct their wrongs. This requires more resources to help enhance their individuality and

build their self-confidence. Children and young people need a lot of encouragement from their families, their schools, their work places or any other institutions. By being offered incentives, children and young people will be more willing to participate. Most importantly, I believe there is a need to set up programmes that are relevant for each age group. In this sense, each level will be enhanced and strengthened. It is therefore vital that every young person and child's individual interests are recognised and that activities planned for them are relevant.

In this edition of Social Work Now I am pleased to present a number of interesting articles that discuss ways of working creatively with children and young people and encouraging their participation. The first article features a number of brief pieces by various Child, Youth and Family frontline workers, including Jackie Williams, Stacey Simmers, Craig Hughes, and Asenati Toilolo. These authors share some encouraging stories of how they are working with children,

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*Young people need space and patience. Some are more outspoken than others but in saying that, every individual has an opinion.*

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young people and their families. Jill Devlin shares her experience of creating a words and pictures story for a child about why she entered care and she encourages this practice to be used more widely. The next article is by Danielle Domanski from the CREATE Foundation in Australia. She provides an overview of the work done to set up an independent body to represent children in out-of-home-care in Australia. The last two articles focus on the importance of children and young person's participation. Paul Nixon and Kathleen Manion summarise some of the key discussions on participation and talks about how to get it right. Finally, Debbie Sturmfels and Kathleen Manion outline Child, Youth and Family's strategy for encouraging children and young people's participation throughout the whole organisation. I hope this collection will provide you some food for thought and encourage you to support our participation.

Finally, I am at a loss as to how I should end this editorial but one thing is for sure: I am thankful to this edition for considering our participation. I have attempted to represent every child and every young person out there but if I haven't, I sincerely apologise. I thank those who have previously enhanced and encouraged our participation. In the meantime, New Zealand needs to plan ahead as today's children and young people will soon be the next generation of leaders, parents and workers. ■

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*Lagi Tuimavave* is currently studying for her Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Laws while working part time. She is 20 years old and the oldest of her four siblings. She is a former William Wallace Award winner and hopes to pursue her passion for helping people into the future.

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# From our readers: survey results

Last year we sent out a survey to ask you, our readers, what you like about this publication and how you would like to see it develop in the future. We thank everyone who took the time to fill out the questionnaire. The data collected will inform how we improve this journal to best meet your needs.

Overall the support for Social Work Now was fantastic. The vast majority of survey participants suggested they:

- ⋮ liked the current layout and design of the publication (91%);
- ⋮ found the content useful to inform and guide practice (95%);
- ⋮ liked the themed editions (86%);
- ⋮ found the number of editions per year met their needs (65%); and
- ⋮ found the length of the publication useful (95%).

This suggests to us that we need to tweak our presentation of the journal, rather than radically change anything.

The survey showed that readers enjoy having access to both e-copies and hard copies of the journal, so we will continue to offer both.

Based on the survey results, it appears that readers peruse a breadth of other printed and electronic material within the fields of child welfare, social work and social policy, adoptions and youth justice from Aotearoa and abroad.

Survey results show that readers most appreciate contributions from, (in order): frontline social workers from Child, Youth and Family; children, young people and their families; academics and key thinkers; and frontline social workers and other professionals from other agencies and fields. Similarly, readers articulated that they most appreciated content that was directly from Child, Youth and Family, followed closely by other New Zealand content. Articles from outside New Zealand were deemed somewhat important. We

have been increasing our Child, Youth and Family and New Zealand content and, based on this feedback, will continue to do so.

In terms of the most important type of content respondents suggested that, (in order): best practice guidance, stories from the field and innovative practice showcasing, followed by practice prompts and other tools were the most helpful. The topic areas people suggested they most appreciated included, (in order): current thinking in theory and practice, reflective pieces, policy and legal directions and research. Less important were features beyond youth justice, care and protection, adoption and book reviews. Again, Social Work Now has slowly been moving to articles that include more practical advice and given these results, we will continue to encourage the areas suggested above.

When asked what they would like to see more of, readers gave a diverse range of answers. Suggestions included: covering success stories and case studies, more Maori specific content, information for social work students and continued professional development and more New Zealand, best practice and other empirical research. There were also suggestions for topics ranging from disabilities, care, adoptions, impact on brain development, legal notes, mental health and children with complex issues. In the coming years we will endeavour to include as many of these topics as we can.

Overall the comments regarding the value of the journal were positive. Comments on this included:

*“As an international reader, it gives me great perspective into social work in New Zealand. Keep up the innovative, progressive work. You are world leaders.”*

*“It is very important to social work students as it is, along with the website, their first exposure to CYF practice and issues”*

*“provides useful and easy to read information about current social work issues”*

*“refreshing practice and the amount of guidance I get is invaluable”*

*“I enjoy the articles in Social Work Now – they are relevant, practical and promote thinking and discussion”*

*“I use the articles in training, supervision, case consults, court work and when developing new ideas to be more creative with casework”*

*“it is the opportunity to read what works, or could work. It takes me out of my local practice and allows me to focus on wider issues.”*

We have already tried to incorporate some of your suggestions, most specifically including a greater range of articles from frontline workers and more content directly from children, young people and their families. I hope this edition will attest to this. As we move forward we will continue with this trend, but we will also continue to also offer a variety of authors from academia in New Zealand and other jurisdictions and frontline practitioners from allied fields where we think they can inform the thinking and work of our readers.

Thank you again for providing us with your insight into Social Work Now and thank you for your continued interest in this publication. ■

# Finding the best way to work with children and young people: Good engagement and giving them a voice

*Jackie Williams, Stacey Simmers, Craig Hughes and Asenati Toilolo (and Joshua, Aundrea, Jaymae, and Beyonce\*<sup>1</sup>)*

## Abstract

*Frontline Child, Youth and Family social workers discuss the meaning and reality of engagement with young people. This key skill encompasses such strategies as allowing a young person to speak for himself, understanding the specific needs of the young person, and exploring ways of engagement and participation with the young person.*

In anticipation of an edition of Social Work Now focusing on how to bolster children and young people's participation, we<sup>2</sup> asked Child, Youth and Family staff for their examples of how they work with children and young people. Relationship building and engagement are key social work skills, but they are also the foundation of providing opportunities to children and young people to have a voice and participate. This article provides the stories of four innovative approaches to providing children and young people with a voice or engaging them, and what young people have to say about it.

### **Vignette 1 – Utilising the power of a young person's voice**

*The first example is from Jackie Williams, a youth justice social worker in the South Island and a young person she was working with named Joshua (a pseudonym). As a result of Joshua's family group*

*conference (FGC) plan, Jackie asked if he would be willing to write about his experience of having attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and autism spectrum disorder (ASD) to help raise awareness about both disorders, to help others better understand him and to build his confidence in writing. The timing coincided with the lead up to Mental Health Awareness Week, and Jackie asked Joshua if he might like to write something that could be published in the local paper. Joshua stood up to the challenge and wrote a very moving and effective account of his experience, which was a powerful tool for informing those who attended the FGC to better understand his behaviours and his point of view. The following is the letter Joshua wrote for his FGC. He has some profound messages for those working in the helping professions.*

*Relationship building and engagement are key social work skills, but they are also the foundation of providing opportunities to children and young people to have a voice and participate.*

### **How it is to have ADHD**

ADHD (Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) and ASD (autistic spectrum disorder) are conditions found mainly in youth and are mostly diagnosed in childhood. I live with these conditions daily. Some of the ways in which I am affected are that I have to take medication, and every six months I have to have meetings with psychologists.

When I was younger I would have trouble understanding people's emotions. I find it difficult to read non-verbal cues, like body language and people's facial expressions. When I

<sup>1</sup> Pseudonyms

<sup>2</sup> The editors of Social Work Now



was younger I wouldn't know when people were taking the piss. As I've gotten older I've learned to emulate people's emotions and expressions and have learned to understand people's feelings better. Although I don't notice a difference in my behaviour others do, and because they don't know/understand it makes things difficult for me. Some teachers understand I'm a bit different and some don't believe it because it is not physical or verbal which means I don't walk or talk differently. And because people don't understand that I'm different it often results in them not liking me or being bullied.

Sometimes I do bad stuff because I have trouble thinking things through beforehand or don't think of the consequences at all. When this happens I get in trouble and I feel unhappy. Sometimes I get varying levels of anxiety which can result in having trouble sleeping because I'm worrying about things. Some of my fears are irrational fears. That means thinking about stupid things that wouldn't/couldn't happen but I worry about them anyway.

Over the years we've tried a variety of places to get help. I've had to deal with meeting lots of people; having heaps of meetings; and lots of tests. People say a lot of empty words and say stuff will happen to help me, but it never does. This makes me feel frustrated and like I've wasted heaps of time. I would like it if they did what they said they would and I could get more help. It is always hard to ask for help but it is worse when you ask for help and no one does.

I hope that I can finish my education with the little bit of help and understanding I need.

I have spent heaps of time on this. Hope you like it :-)

## **Vignette 2 – What participation and engagement means**

*The second vignette is by Stacey Simmers, a care and protection social worker from the North Island, and three of the young women she works with. We*

*were given positive feedback about the natural way Stacey engaged with young people. When we approached Stacey to see if she could write a brief article, she immediately identified some of the young people she works with and asked them to help her put this paper together. This illustrates how young person-centred Stacey is. After her conversations with Aundrea, Jaymae and Beyonce (pseudonyms), she composed the following piece. It is often difficult to articulate the intangible mechanisms of good relationship building, but Stacey, Aundrea, Jaymae and Beyonce provide us with some brilliant insight into how young people like to be treated in order to build lasting trust.*

Aundrea, Jaymae and Beyonce are three girls; Aundrea is aged 12 and the twins are 15. They have been in Child, Youth and Family care since May 2007. Since April 2008, they have been living with non-kin caregivers after attempts to return home or to find a whānau placement failed. The goal for them is progression towards independence. Over the years they have had about seven social workers. Prior to writing this, I spoke with Aundrea, Jaymae and Beyonce to get their view on what participation and engagement is, what it means to them, and what they have liked and disliked about social work approaches. From this conversation, three themes arose: listening, including, and doing things together.

### ***What does participation mean?***

*It means including yourself, joining in, playing as a team.*

### ***What does engagement mean?***

*It means being together, joining in and engaging in activities.*

For me as a practitioner, listening is important as it allows me to get to know the girls and for them to know that I am interested in and value what they have to say. Relationship building is about listening in an understanding, responsive, relaxed and encouraging way that encourages them to feel

comfortable in my presence and more willing to talk candidly about the issues that are important for them. Listening in this way also gives a sense of control back to them, by giving them the power to steer the direction of the conversation. For these three girls, listening in this way made them feel comfortable, made it easy for them to express their feelings, made them feel like their opinion was being heard, and made it easier for them to communicate with me.

The second theme they highlighted was 'being included'. Listening is a key precursor to being included because you cannot include a person in an effective way unless you know what it is to include them about. Again, valuing what they have to say and giving control back to them are important elements in ensuring they feel included. 'Including' was identified by the girls as being an important element to both participation and engagement. Recently the twins found themselves in trouble and planning meetings were held to help rectify the situation. In reflecting back about what happened, they felt that it was important that they were part of the meetings, that what they said was taken into consideration, and that they were given chances and opportunities to make changes.

***If you were participating with your social worker what would you be doing?***

We would be doing activities, like eating ice cream! She would be talking to me, including us and we would be working together.

***If you were engaging with your social worker what would you be doing?***

We would be being friends, building a relationship and connecting.

The last theme identified was 'doing things together'. This can be as simple as going and getting an ice cream, going for a walk in the park, or dropping the girls off at soccer practice. Doing things such as this is part of the ongoing maintenance of the relationship and demonstrates that you care.

Aundrea, Jaymae and Beyonce also said that they felt more comfortable when social workers had a

nice voice, a nice personality, and a good vibe. The one thing that they did not like was changing social workers when they had become used to them, and the changeover of social workers. They think this could be made better by having a visit with their old social worker and their new social worker where they can all get to talk. This process that they have described is part of best practice but is obviously not occurring as it should.

In conclusion, these three girls have a clear understanding of the elements and qualities they like in social workers. A clear example of engagement and participation was highlighted by Beyonce when she was asked to give an example about what makes good engagement and participation, she said "Right now, what you are doing now". This shows how important it is to listen, to include and to do things together.

***What are your likes and dislikes when working with your social worker?***

We like a social worker who has a nice personality, is cool to talk to, is understanding, goes to the park or to get ice cream and makes us feel comfortable. We like it when our social worker lets us talk and our opinion is heard. It is good when our social worker talks in a fun way, has a nice voice – that is not angry, mean or scary and when they have a good vibe and can become friends and not strangers. This makes it easier to communicate.

For example you made us milos, showed us where the kitchen was and told us to help ourselves. Also last term you gave us a chance and an opportunity, included us in the meetings, took in what we said. Listening to us now [for this article] made us feel included, writing down what we are saying and being understanding.

We don't like it when we have to change social workers after just getting to know them. Or not meeting the new social worker with the old one – it would be easier for us if the old social worker and new social worker got to talk and introduce us. It's good though if we get sick of the old social worker!

### Vignette 3 – Understanding the individual needs of each young person to get the best outcome

*The third vignette in our series is by Craig Hughes, a youth justice social worker in the residences in the South Island. Craig was recommended as a good person to ask to take part in this edition on children's participation. When we first asked Craig to contribute, he was not sure what he could write about because building relationships with young people was just something he did and he said it was dependent on the individual needs of each young person. We asked Craig to write an article based on what advice he would give to new social workers about responding to those individual needs, particularly where young people are presenting as difficult to engage. This is precisely what he has done. Using the example of David, a young person Craig works with, this article outlines how, with perseverance, he was able to break down the barriers and form a good working relationship with David.*

To get some children and young people to engage and work with you as a newly introduced social worker requires an eclectic set of skills. As social workers, we all know the importance of listening, empathy and applying strengths-based practice to our young people and their families and whānau. However, it is important to recognise those clients that initially may need more intensive input. Typically, those clients will benefit from your dedication and effort. I am often told by other professionals and families that it is good to have a social worker involved with a young person. There are usually a couple of reasons for these comments, but the most important is that they often see social workers as the main change agents to help 'fix' or solve their young person's issues.

The young person I have chosen as a case study is David (a pseudonym). David is now a 16-year-old with no criminal convictions but who had previously come to the attention of the police. He was reluctantly involved with his mental health provider and not attending school. In fact, when

I met with David he had been stood down from his school nine times in six months because of his verbal abuse and threats towards teachers and students.

David has been diagnosed with ADHD, anxiety, and attachment disorder. Although he has supportive parents and grandparents, he was not able to live in the family home due to his aggressive behaviour towards his mother and her partner. David was in the custody of the Chief Executive of Child, Youth and Family. At the time I became involved with his case, David had been charged with assault with a weapon on his caregiver. He had been temporarily placed back with his grandmother as no other suitable placements were available for him.

My first meeting with David was one week before he was due to have his youth justice family group conference (YJ FGC). Prior to meeting with David, I had met with his mental health social worker and his support person from Group Special Education in order to gain some information on his history.

I met David at his home along with his grandmother and her partner. In my opinion it was critical to ensure that David and his family were able to ask as many questions about my role, what their expectations were and how best we could all achieve the goals set. The sharing of information between everybody at this point is vitally important. It was critical that David and his family were clear on possible scenarios (in terms of consequences for his offending and understanding the YJ FGC process) and what I also expected of them.

During this first meeting David would not make eye contact with me and continued to play games on his computer during my visit. I wasn't too bothered about David's lack of wanting to be involved at this point as I had learned from the other professionals that this is often how David handled meeting new people and that although he would not look at me, he would be listening to what I was saying.

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*It was critical to ensure that David and his family were able to ask as many questions about my role, what their expectations were and how best we could all achieve the goals set.*

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My next meeting with David was at his YJ FGC. He was able to cope with this process well. I believe that this occurred because he was aware of the process and the advantages he would gain by contributing to it. Again this was around making sure he was fully informed of the process around the YJ FGC. This was made clear to him by me and by the YJ FGC co-coordinator previously.

It was clear from the YJ FGC that David had a number of care and protection issues that needed to be addressed urgently, along with his offending that was mainly to do with his anger.

While David agreed to his plan, he was reluctant to meet with other professionals around his anger and schooling. The pressure at home on David's grandmother was also taking its toll as he was refusing to leave the home. He would rather play on the computer or PlayStation.

In order to relieve some of the pressure on the family home, a resource worker was employed for four hours a day to get David out of the home and engage him in some proactive activities. Through this process I learned that he was a keen movie addict and that he enjoyed fishing and mountain biking, and of course McDonald's. This was the catalyst to moving forward on David's plan, setting some goals, and playing to those strengths that would hopefully result in a successful outcome for David.

I made an agreement with David that I would initially meet with him once a week, until I was sure that he was keeping agreed appointments and discussing any issues he had. If he kept on task then I agreed to have at least one of our meetings in the next fortnight at McDonald's. David was aware that I had made this plan with the agreement of his family and the other professionals involved with him. David had asked me if I could take him to his first appointment with his anger management counsellor. I agreed to this as David's anxiety would play a major part in any future engagements with other professionals. I ended up attending a number of meetings with David to help with his anxiety and after a while

he began to trust the people he was working with and to accept my assurance that it was OK for him to go on his own.

While David required a considerable amount of my time to start off with, I believe that without this initial input his progress would not have been as successful. I had the support of my supervisor who understood David's needs, and I was still able to manage the other young people on my caseload.

As time progressed, I gradually spent less and less time with David. He was confident enough to attend appointments on his own and was even able to use the bus service to get himself around. David also re-engaged with an alternative education programme (AEP) until he turned 16 years of age. AEP were also able to help David find full-time employment. While this was going on, David also completed his YJ FGC plan and received a discharge without conviction from the Youth Court. David's success with his plan has also

had a follow-on effect with his placement at his grandmother's. David's grandmother has also learned new skills and has a grandson who is lot happier.

The challenge for me when working with young people who are particularly difficult to engage with is making sure that you involve as many family/whānau members and professionals as possible to make sure that you are able to share important and relevant information. Without this support, and most importantly the 'buy in' from the young person, you will struggle right from the start. It is important that the young person is fully informed of what is required of them, which means you need to double-check that they understand and that they are clear on the boundaries and limitations you have as a social worker.

All young people I have worked with require different levels of input or attention. Some are quite capable of completing tasks and goals set for them with minimal support. Others, like David, who have more complex needs, require more intensive monitoring and input. However, the

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*While David required a considerable amount of my time to start off with, I believe that without this initial input his progress would not have been as successful.*

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rewards of seeing the positive changes for that young person are more than satisfying.

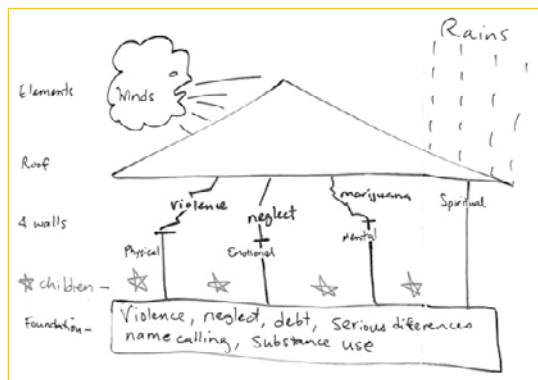
#### Vignette 4 – Picture the children in the Family Group Conference

Our final instalment of vignettes that showcase engaging children and young people and providing them with a voice is provided by Asenati Toilolo, a care and protection coordinator in the North Island. We were sent an email highlighting the fantastic work a South Island social worker and Asenati Toilolo had done on preparing for and holding an FGC for some children who were relocating. Intrigued by the case, we asked Asenati to write it up for this edition of *Social Work Now* and luckily she agreed. Asenati provides a synopsis of how she illustrated to the family at the FGC what was happening for the children and what the consequences would be if change was not made. She uses Mason Durie's *Te Whare Tapa Whā* model to great effect.

Following the February 2011 earthquake in Christchurch, a family of four children were being relocated to the North Island. They had an eight-year history with Child, Youth and Family. Some of the concerns included domestic violence, substance use/abuse, transience, and neglect, to name a few. Over the eight years, many attempts to address these concerns were made but none were sustained. The FGC was another intervention by Child, Youth and Family to address the chronic issues, but this time we needed to do something a little bit different if we wanted to see a lasting change.

To put the children at the centre of the FGC, I often use an illustration to summarise the ongoing worries. I generally use an adaptation of the holistic health model created by Mason Durie, *Te Whare Tapa Whā* (Durie, 1994). Using this model I am able to illustrate to a family the strengths and areas that need improvement in a way that is tailored for those who are visually literate. The model shows a house with four walls symbolising an individual's health, including psychological health (*Te taha hinengaro*), family health (*Te taha whānau*), physical health (*Te taha tinana*) and spiritual health (*Te taha wairua*).

**Figure 1: The family whare, showing strengths and challenges to the structure**



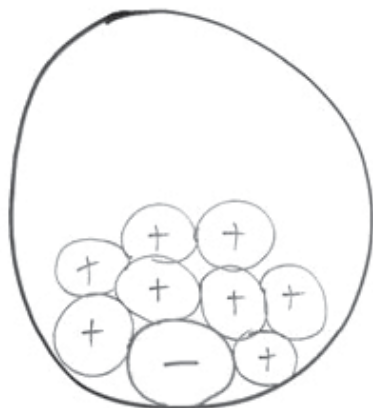
This family's house (whare) is shown in Figure 1.

These children's life is pictorially summarised with the foundation at the bottom, the children, the four walls, the roof and the elements. The concerns are written inside the foundation frame. The children in the house are symbolised by the stars. In this adaptation, the four walls depict the family's emotional, mental, physical and spiritual health. As shown in Figure 1, the mental, emotional and physical walls (straight vertical lines) do not reach the roof as marijuana, violence and neglect hinder the wall's structure. The spiritual wall touches the roof and appears to be the strongest wall holding the house up – the children are alive! It is easy to understand that one good wall will not sustain the roof when the winds and rains of life strike. This illustration helped the family to see that the opportunities for the children to grow, develop, and sustain their physical, emotional, mental and spiritual health were hampered while they lived in this house. Without attending to the structure of the house, this family will likely build a home like the one they already knew.

In an FGC, the next step is often to use another simple image to portray the impact on the children of different decisions. Figure 2 captures a sense of hope for the children and puts the issues into perspective.

The big circle represents the children's whole life. The small circles within it represent aspects of the children's life: the circles with plus symbols represents positive aspects of their lives and the

**Figure 2: Circles representing the children's life**



circles with minus symbols represent negative aspects of their lives. Without minimising the seriousness of the situation, the coordinator explains to the family that the FGC focuses on the circles with a minus symbol. To help the family realise the impact of the decisions they are making for the children, they are told they have two choices:

1. blow the negative circle up until it fills the big circle, or
2. allow themselves to up-skill and to accept the healthy supports, options and choices available so that they can begin to fill the children's life circle up with positive aspects.



**Figure 3: The family whare, reflecting positive change**

The next step is usually to add another version of the house (whare) where positive change has been made. Figure 3 illustrates how the house and its foundation can be strengthened by adding positive things into the picture, for example, accepting support or help that is available, attending parenting courses, stopping violence, alcohol or drug use, etc. This is an interactive exercise and the family add what they want to the picture.

Lastly, for this family the emotional, physical and mental walls could be extended vertically until they reached the roof and the crooked lines could be removed to show what the FGC intended to occur in order for the children to achieve all their potential (four walls).

By the time a family goes into their family time, they are clear about the children's situation and the type of house they want their children to grow up in. This is often one with all the four walls touching the roof and holding itself up, despite the elements. I have found that families are much more likely to grasp what is being asked of them and what the concerns are in an FGC when we undertake this exercise. ■

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# Telling a child's story: creating a words and pictures story book to tell children why they are in care

*Jill Devlin*

## Abstract

*Open Home Foundation, an organisation that works with children and young people in care uses a story book approach to help them to understand why they were placed in care. The book is developed with input from caseworkers, family, and Family Court and Child, Youth and Family records, and uses age-appropriate language and illustrations. This account tells how one child's story was developed and shared with her.*

A young woman sits across from the interviewer talking about her experience of being placed in care in her early teens. This vivacious young woman who is now a mother herself has agreed to talk about this very painful part of her growing years.

As the interviewer draws out her story of being placed in care, the young woman's demeanour moves from exuberance and confidence to that of distress, with a sense of overwhelming sadness. She stutters over her responses and gets a "far-away look" in her eyes as she tries to put words to those long ago feelings.

She begins by trying to describe it as a "huge emptiness" then adds "shock and confusion" and as her distress increases she whispers that "it was quite a traumatic event". Her distress increases when she is asked about her understanding of why she was placed in care. Her response is a slow stuttered whisper, "No. No, not definitively. No, I still do not have definitive answers."

If we could claim that for children and young people who are or have been in care that the story above was the exception and not the rule, then

we could just move on, thinking it was a very sad story.

In 2006, the Open Home Foundation interviewed ten young people who had been placed in care as children. What we found was that this young woman's story was not the exception but rather the general rule.

One young person talked about the shock they experienced at 15 years of age when they read their Child, Youth and Family file and discovered the record of what had happened in their family prior to being placed in care at the age of six. This young person had no recollection or memories about this time in their life. Another young person said they were probably told, "but in all the jumble of what was going on, it got lost in our minds. In one ear and out the other, just make sure that the kids understand as well. I mean it's a big thing, a lot to take in as a kid."

With what we heard from young people who had been in care as children, it would seem that the 'words and pictures' story book could go some way to bringing understanding and alleviating the trauma of not knowing why. Explaining to children is not enough – they deserve a collaboratively developed account that gives them a record of these events.

As an organisation, the Open Home Foundation was faced with the question: "What do we need to do differently so that children have a clear understanding of why they aren't living at home with their parents?" Part of the answer to the question came when the book *Working with Denied Child Abuse: The Resolutions Approach* by Andrew Turnell and Susie Essex (2006) was

published. Chapter 5 of the book presents a process called 'words and pictures', which is an illustrated storyboard steeped in the Resolutions Approach of creating a foundation of openness with family.

## What is it?

The 'words and pictures' story book process is not to be confused with what is commonly known by social workers as 'Life Story' books. These are usually a record of a child's life that includes significant information and events for a child to refer to when they are older or while they are growing up, such as a description of their birth family, where they were born, significant people in their lives, and their care history. Life Story books are vital for children who are in care as they may experience many changes of social workers and foster parents and as a result, information about them and their family history can be lost if it is not carefully and purposefully recorded.

The purpose of the words and pictures story book is to take a snapshot of a very difficult time in a family's life when it was necessary for the child to be placed in someone else's care. The development of the story book requires all the adults involved to work collaboratively to develop a child-centred and age-appropriate record of those events.

Parents and social workers work together to develop the shared story for the child. Integral to the process is that everyone comes to an agreement about how to express the "worries, struggles and difficulties" that the family were having in providing for the needs of their child and why it was necessary for the child to be placed in care.

The process of all the adults working together to record the story creates an opportunity for them to focus on the child's needs, and view the situation from the child's perspective. This requires the adults to put aside their own needs and perspectives. As the story is agreed to by

all those involved, the risk of children hearing differing versions of events is lessened.

The story provides the child with a record of "why", and gives parents, caregivers and professionals a resource to refer to when assisting the child to make sense of these events. Although the words and pictures story book is developed to inform the child about the "worries, struggles and difficulties" that led to them being placed in care, it also gives a balanced perspective of what was happening in the family, by interspersing difficult messages with happy and positive memories.

The story book always begins with a happy event, which gives a contextual introduction to the story for the child, for example, "Mum and Dad met and fell in love".

The story is the story and contains the blended perspectives of those adults involved during the difficult time. It is written in a way that even the youngest child in the family group can understand. Parents, caregivers, social workers, other family

members such as grandparents, and the child all have their own copy.

The completed story ensures new social workers, caregivers and adults entering the child's world will be able to become quickly and accurately acquainted with the child's story. It ensures the child does not need to keep

repeating and reliving their story and that the story does not change over time.

## When?

Ideally the words and pictures story book is developed with parents when the decision is made for the child to leave their care or very shortly after the child is placed in care. If the development of the story book occurs at this time, it can form part of the intervention plan, explaining the things that need to be addressed before the child can return to their parent's care.

Although a words and pictures story book is best created when a child enters care, it is still

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*The purpose of the words and pictures story book is to take a snapshot of a very difficult time in a family's life when it was necessary for the child to be placed in someone else's care.*

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an extremely useful process for any child who has spent any length of time in the care system. However, the longer the child has been in care, the more complex it is to gather all perspectives. Social workers have moved on and the parents of a child are often full of grief and anger with the system and what has occurred. Despite how angry they may be, most parents will jump at the opportunity to have a say in the story that is created for their child. They would rather do this themselves than have someone do it for them.

The social worker who undertakes the development of a words and pictures story book must be prepared to build collaborative relationships with the child's family and any professionals or agencies who were involved. They need to listen to all the different perspectives and take the time to blend and negotiate those perspectives into an agreed shared story for the child. When undertaken some time after the event, the amount of time it takes to complete can be significantly longer.

The steps in the process are:

- ⋮ explaining, and engaging parents and professionals/agencies involved in the process of the child coming into care
- ⋮ gathering information and drafting the story
- ⋮ refining the story and gaining agreement to the story
- ⋮ taking the child through the story.

The structure and content of the story book includes:

- ⋮ an age-appropriate record of events that resulted in the child being placed in care
- ⋮ positive events that have occurred in the family
- ⋮ the worries and concerns held for the children in the family
- ⋮ who held those worries and concerns
- ⋮ what assistance was given/is being given to the parents to combat those worries and concerns.

## An account of developing a words and pictures story book

The Open Home Foundation was approached by Mary and Bob, permanent foster parents of Grace, aged seven. Grace had been with them since she was eight months old. They had heard about the words and pictures story book and were very keen to have Grace's story recorded. Bob and Mary felt this would be a way to answer lots of the questions Grace was asking about why she didn't live with her "Tummy Mummy".

When Grace was placed in care, her four older siblings were already in care. Her two younger siblings subsequently also came into care.

At the time Bob and Mary approached the Open Home Foundation, Grace had been in their care for over six years, she was achieving well at school, had lots of friends and was generally doing well. She had begun to ask more often about why she did not live with her Tummy Mummy. Bob and Mary had been reluctant to answer her questions as they did not know the full story and didn't want to give her wrong information. In not knowing her story, Grace began to create her own stories about her family and those events.

When children do not have a clear and consistent explanation of events, they often make up an imaginary account, and take on the responsibility for those events.

As Grace had been taken into care by Child, Youth and Family, they were approached to access the information they held on Grace and her care history. It is important that all the different perspectives are sought when developing the story, especially from the agency that holds the official record of what occurred. Fortunately the Child, Youth and Family social worker who was working with Grace's family when she was placed in care was available and able to work with us to develop Grace's story.

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*When children do not have a clear and consistent explanation of events, they often make up an imaginary account, and take on the responsibility for those events.*

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The social worker accessed Grace's file and obtained the information regarding the investigation, the worries and concerns held for Grace at that time, details from the family group conferences and other meetings, and her own recollections. One strand of Grace's story was now available.

Bob and Mary were able to source a recent address for Grace's birth mother, and contact was made with her. Her initial reaction was one of indignation and anger: she thought it was "a real cheek" to ask her to be involved in this process when Grace had been removed from her. She had concerns that becoming involved may take her back into the Family Court system, an experience she described as a "war zone". That it would "open up things" for her again, given that she had done a lot of work on herself and had tried to put this in the past.

Grace's birth mother had a strong mistrust and dislike for the Family Court system and Child, Youth and Family, so a large part of early engagement with her was to give her the space and time to talk through her long-held thoughts and feelings.

During this time of engagement, she was able to come to a place where she was willing to consider doing something for Grace. When the story was completed, she was asked what had happened that made her feel like it was worth taking the risk of being involved. She said it was when she realised that the Open Home Foundation social worker "actually wanted to help me and Grace and recognised me as a mum". The impact on her being referred to as Grace's mum was huge and she felt that it acknowledged that she did love Grace.

Grace's older two sisters were now living with their mother and initially did not want to be involved in the process and had strongly advised their mother not to get involved. However, they slowly became involved in the development of Grace's story and encouraged their mother to remain involved. Seeing their mother being treated with

respect and her story being listened to in a non-judgemental way had such a positive effect on her that they wanted to be part of developing the story for their sister.

After the story was completed and they were asked what they thought would be the likely impact of Grace having her story, they thought that knowing the reasons she was in care would help her, as they had both found not knowing why they were in care very difficult. They believed that the story would take away the secretiveness and allow Grace to ask questions, something they had felt was frowned upon when they were in care.

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*One of the things they had longed to hear as children in care was "Your mum stills loves you, that's all we needed to hear, your mum still loves you".*

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It was their experience that it was not okay to ask questions. As a result of this, they listened into adult conversations and often interpreted things they heard incorrectly. Her eldest sister felt Grace would probably experience "a lot less angst as a teenager, a lot less 'I hate the world'", and they

were pleased that Grace would know that she did have a family that loved her. One of the things they had longed to hear as children in care was "Your mum stills loves you, that's all we needed to hear, your mum still loves you", and Grace was going to hear this important message.

Grace's mother reported that knowing that Grace's foster parents had initiated the development of the story for Grace had made an impact on the way she thought about them. She felt that they had a lot to lose by Grace knowing her story and yet they had "put their own stuff, how they felt, whatever their feelings were aside" and that in doing this they were giving Grace the opportunity "not to carry unanswered questions and unnecessary baggage through to the rest of her life". Allowing Grace to have her story showed Grace's mum that they actually really cared for Grace and her wellbeing.

Grace's mum and sisters were shown an example of a words and pictures story book and the process and purpose for the development of story was explained. Grace's birth family's input had

been added so that Grace's story could now be developed.

The words for Grace's story were crafted together taking in both accounts of that time and submitted to both the Open Home Foundation social worker and the family for comment. Changes were made, things were added with each draft being negotiated until agreement was reached that it was an accurate and age-appropriate account of the situation and the family's circumstances that led to Grace being placed in care.

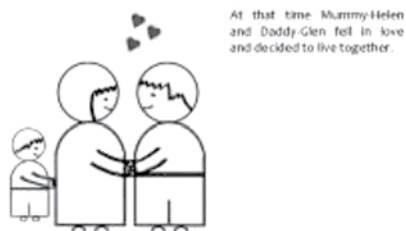
This was an exacting and at times a very painful experience for Grace's mother, but with great courage she continued to work on the development of the story for her daughter. Although the process opened up a lot of feelings for her, she reported that it had brought her much healing. She said that the process had done more for her than all the counselling she had undergone, and the best part was it had given her the opportunity to give something to Grace personally from her heart.

With the narrative agreed to it was time to put pictures with the words. For Grace's story I drew the pictures to go with the words and also included photographs so that when Grace was presented with her story the book would be complete, though she could colour the pictures and add to them if she wanted to.

There is no right or wrong way to do this – it entirely depends on the situation. It may be appropriate once the narrative is agreed to by the adults for the children to draw the pictures as they are told their story or for the person presenting the story to draw them at that time.

## Examples from the story

The story should always begin and close with a positive event and have a logical flow.



The worries and who had those worries are clearly outlined.

Mummy-Jean was often unwell and very tired and was finding it very hard to manage and to look after Grace and Adain. Baby Grace had feeding problems and needed medicine to help her as she would 'sick up' all the time. Daddy-Glen found it difficult to know how to help.



Dr Smith was Grace's special children's doctor at the hospital and he was very worried about Grace so he talked with a Social Worker called Pam about these worries.

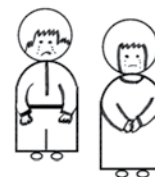


The people and things that were tried to help the parents combat the worries are recorded, along with who was involved in making the decision to place the child in care.

This meant the Judge had to decide what would happen. After listening to what everyone had to say, the Judge decided it would be best if Grace stayed with her Foster Parents Martha and John.



Very sadly Mummy-Jean and Daddy-Glen gathered together Grace's clothes and medicines and her favourite little purple dog so she would have her things with her at Martha's and John's.



The story book finishes with something positive about the child and their current circumstances.

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## Presenting the child with their story book

The decision about who is present when the child hears their story depends on the situation and what is in the child's best interests. In Grace's case, Bob and Mary and her Child, Youth and Family social worker were present. In other situations the child's parents and grandparents and other significant people may also be present.

It is important that the child receives their story in an environment where all the adults present are in agreement to the story. Given that the story is written in an age-appropriate way, it will not always contain all the details of what occurred but it needs to provide enough information to answer the child's wonderings and questions they currently have and give them a platform to ask more questions as they grow older.

The story is delivered to the child at their pace so they are able to control the situation. Using child-friendly tools such as 'traffic lights' – stop, slow down and go – and feeling cards (for example, bear cards from St Lukes Innovative Resources) assist in making the delivery of the story child-centred.

The traffic lights tool is very useful when working with children, especially when you are giving them serious information. For Grace's story I made up three little signs like the pedestrian signs used at a school crossing. Red for stop, orange for slow down, and green for go. Grace had control of these signs and was able to use them to manage the flow of her story. When she wanted to stop the process all she needed to do was hold up the red card and so on. The bear cards can be used as a simple non-verbal way of communicating what a person is feeling. A range of the cards were set out beside Grace and she was encouraged to stop the process of her story being told at any time, and if she wanted to communicate how she was feeling she could select the appropriate card.

Grace made use of both of these tools while she listened to her story.

Grace was excited to receive her story and was very engaged throughout the process. She was given the responsibility of turning the pages as the story was read to her and asked questions as we worked through the story.

Just how much Grace wanted to know about the detail of her early life and who was involved became apparent when we came to the page that talked about the Family Court involvement in her life.

Throughout the book the names of the adults had been given e.g. Grace's paediatrician, her social worker, those who had attended the family group conference, but when it came to the Family Court

judge, I had omitted their name. Grace stopped the reading at this time and enquired what the judge's name was. I told Grace their name, and she added this information into her book later. Children want to know why and who was involved. They want the detail of their lives.

The final paragraph in Grace's story is very significant. It is a statement that her mother wanted in the book. This statement displays the therapeutic impact for Grace's mum of being involved in the development of a words and pictures story book for her daughter:

*“Mummy-Mary loves Grace very much and is really proud of her. She knows that her foster parents love and care for Grace and even though she misses her precious Grace she is glad to know that Grace has her foster parents as her second Mum and Dad.”*

After reading this Grace asked “Did she actually write that?”, and gave a little giggle when I said yes.

Grace then became very still and thoughtful and after a time I asked her if she could tell me what she was thinking or feeling. She immediately turned to the bear cards, chose three cards very quickly, and threw them one after the other into a pile. The

cards included a baby bear sitting down crying, a baby bear sitting down and covering its eyes and shaking, and a big grumpy bear. Grace remained silent and after a short period of time she went to where her foster parents were sitting and cuddled into them. When her foster mum asked her how she was feeling Grace returned to the bear cards and chose the happy baby bear. In a short space of time, Grace experienced a range of powerful emotions. She also said that she felt “pretty good because it gives me some memories back”.

Five months after Grace received her story, her foster parents reported some subtle differences in her. Initially she became very clingy and needed to be close to them. The story provides the child with a written record of “why”, and gives parents, caregivers and professionals a resource to refer to when assisting the child make sense of these events. Grace wanted the book read to her most nights. Slowly the need to hear the story so often diminished and now she only picks it up every now and then. Grace took her words and pictures story to school.

Bob and Mary reported that they had got a lot more than they expected from the process. Grace not only had her story, but they had a resource to help them assist her to make sense of why she now lived with them, and they felt that what Grace’s mother wrote at the end gave permission to Grace to be with them and to love them.

The Child, Youth and Family social worker said that her best hope for Grace receiving her story was that she would have an understanding of who her mother is, and where she had come from, without the fairytale view that she was developing. Watching Grace receive her story “was one of the nicest things I’ve done for many years really, just watching her look at that and things unfolding and her asking relevant questions about the situation was really great”, she said.

When asked what she would say to other parents whose children were being raised by other people,

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*Watching Grace receive her story “was one of the nicest things I’ve done for many years really, just watching her look at that and things unfolding and her asking relevant questions about the situation was really great”*

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Grace’s mother said “I would say that as hurt as you are and as hard as it is, give it a chance, because it may be the best thing that ever happened to you”. She also asked if it would be possible for her other children to receive a story book about their early lives. The Family Court recently directed that a words and pictures story book be completed for two of Grace’s siblings.

Grace’s older sisters would also encourage families to be involved in the development of a ‘words and pictures’ story book for children who are not in their care. “It might be difficult at first, but give it a shot, an open mind. When you open your mind, you open your heart. And then just think of your brother or your sister or your daughter or your son and think about how they’re going to feel, how they’re going to grow up differently if they know that you’re there, that you love them and care about them.”

## Future picture – hopes and dreams for children placed in care in New Zealand

Just as the Three Houses tool (Weld & Greening, 2004) has become part of our social work process in gaining children’s views and contributing to the families intervention plans, our hope is that the development of a words and pictures story book would occur for every child entering care. For those children already in the care system, we hope that the development of their words and pictures story becomes a high priority.

The Open Home Foundation believes that in all cases where permanent care orders are being sought, a words and pictures story should be developed and presented to children prior to those orders being made. Children deserve to know their stories and when we are making life-impacting decisions, such as placing them permanently in another family, they have a right to accurate information presented in an age-appropriate way. ■

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## Acknowledgements

Our development of using the 'words and pictures' story book approach has been influenced by:

- ⋮ the voices of young people who have been in care
- ⋮ Grace's foster parents, her birth mother and older siblings
- ⋮ Child, Youth and Family social worker
- ⋮ social work practitioners within the Open Home Foundation
- ⋮ authors such as Hiles et al. (2008), Turnell and Edwards (1999), Turnell and Essex (2006), and Weld and Greening (2004)
- ⋮ Andrew Turnell who supervised the work undertaken with Grace's words and pictures story book.

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Jill Devlin is National Manager of Care Services for the Open Home Foundation a Child and Family Support Service offering services throughout NZ. She has a wealth of experience and understanding, both as a foster parent and social worker, of working with children in care. She has a strong belief that children knowing and understanding their story of why they are not in their parents care is a vital component to their wellbeing.

# Participation and the CREATE Foundation – Creating a better life for children and young people in care

*Danielle Domanski, National Policy Officer*

## Abstract

*An Australian non-government organisation is empowering young people in care by helping them to connect with one another and to engage in discussions around policy and services. Their programmes build self-esteem and confidence in those with a care experience, and facilitate dialogue with adult stakeholders working in the area of out-of-home care.*

For many, 'participation' can be an elusive and confronting concept and practice. Discussions on the topic have increased in the community and government sectors since the 1980s, with a particular focus on the challenges and innovations in translating the concept of participation into everyday practice.

Often participation can be described in a simple sentence, such as:

*"the process of sharing decisions which affect one's life and the life of the community in which one lives" (Hart, 1992, p.5).*

However, behind the brief descriptions is an evolving, complex and multi-layered concept which can be articulated in a variety of ways. Most contemporary models of child and youth participation have their foundations in a rights-based agenda (drawing directly on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child), and are influenced by the sociology of childhood, which challenges

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*These organisations recognise the need for children and young people in care to connect with each other, and also promote the importance of children and young people participating in advocacy processes to improve the care system.*

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traditional constructions of childhood, recognises the power status of children and adults, and promotes children's place in society as active citizens. Given these foundations, discussions around participation often focus on strategies that facilitate participation amongst vulnerable or powerless individuals in our communities. As the peak body representing children and young people in out-of home care in Australia, it is this focus which concerns the CREATE Foundation (CREATE).

This paper will showcase some of the initiatives undertaken by CREATE since its inception, the ways that children and young people have participated in these initiatives, and the resulting outcomes. First, it is useful to provide some context about CREATE, out-of-home-care and participation practice in Australia.

## CREATE Foundation's role

CREATE was founded in 1993 to provide an independent voice for children and young people with an out-of home care experience (foster, kinship and residential care). Beginning as a network of state and territory-based organisations driven by young people in care or with a care experience, CREATE evolved into a national peak organisation. With an office in each state and territory across Australia and a national team that provides support and strategic direction to the organisation, CREATE retains a connection with local systems

whilst providing a national profile for the needs of children and young people in care.

CREATE is the only organisation in Australia established to advocate for children and young people in care. Similar organisations have been established internationally and have broadened their base for a number of years, most notably, The Who Cares? Trust UK (established 1992), Foster Club USA (established 1999), and Youth in Care Canada (established 1985). These organisations recognise the need for children and young people in care to connect with each other, and also promote the importance of children and young people participating in advocacy processes to improve the care system.

CREATE's mission is 'Creating a better life for children and young people in care' which is achieved through:

*Connecting* children and young people to each other, CREATE and their community.

*Empowering* children and young people to build self-confidence, self-esteem, and skills that enable them to have a voice and be heard.

*Changing* the care system, in consultation with children and young people, through advocacy to improve policies, practices and services, and increasing community awareness.

Guiding this mission is a set of seven principles, the first of which states that 'Participation is the cornerstone of best practice'. Children and young people with a care experience can provide information about their experiences, and also have insightful ideas about how the out-of-home care system can be improved. As the peak body it is CREATE's role to ensure that those ideas are heard and that children and young people have opportunities to participate in developing and implementing solutions. CREATE differs from other peak representative groups in Australia. It does not represent paid member organisations, but is funded by state and territory governments

to represent all children and young people in care as a group.

CREATE uses several strategies to consult with children and young people with a care experience and to promote their participation including the Young Consultants Program, Youth Advisory Groups (YAGs), the National Youth Advisory Council (NYAC), Be.Heard or other consultations, and CREATE Report Cards. CREATE aims to improve the care system in partnership with key child and family welfare stakeholders including the state, territory and Australian governments, foster carers, community organisations, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander agencies, and church and welfare organisations.

## A snapshot of out-of-home care

As is the case with many countries, the history of out-of-home care in Australia began in institutional settings such as orphanages, homes, industrial or training schools. From 1997 to 2004 the Australian Senate undertook three major inquiries that focussed on groups of Australians in care. The findings of these inquiries were published in *The*

*Children and young people with a care experience can provide information about their experiences, and also have insightful ideas about how the out-of-home care system can be improved.*

*Bringing Them Home Report* (Commonwealth of Australia, 1997), *The Lost Innocents Report* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2001) and *The Forgotten Australians Report* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2004).

The reports highlighted the long-term impact on individuals who experienced placements that were negligent, sometimes dangerous, abusive, or lacked nurture and affection. The reports also highlighted the sense of powerlessness experienced by many who had been in care and the lack of opportunity for them to have a meaningful say during their time in care. Collectively, these groups were denied the opportunity to develop the skills and confidence that can result from positive participatory experiences.

Although this is only a snapshot, having knowledge of past out-of-home care practices is important to



understand the current out-of home care sector and also partly explains the stigma and negativity that still surrounds children and young people in care. Understanding how past practices have had such negative consequences also explains why out-of home care in Australia is now focussed on providing stable and supportive environments in which children and young people receive care and protection.

A current and widely accepted definition of out-of home care can be found in *Child Protection Australia 2009–10*, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare's (AIHW) annual report on child protection:

*“Out-of-home care (OOHC) is one of a range of programs provided to children and young people under 18 years of age who are in need of care and protection. This program provides alternative overnight accommodation for children and young people who are unable to live with their parents. These arrangements include foster care, placements with relatives or kin and residential care. In most cases, children in out-of-home care are also on a care and protection order of some kind.” (AIHW, 2011: 44)*

At 30 June 2010, the out-of home care population in Australia was made up of over 35,895 children and young people. Of these children:

- ⋮ 93.7% lived in family-based arrangements (including foster or kinship care)
- ⋮ 6.2% lived in alternative non-family-based arrangements such as residential care and independent accommodation
- ⋮ 31.8% identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.

Despite a lack of a nationally consistent explanation or analysis of the reasons why children and young people come into care, the AIHW notes that some children in care require a protective environment, while others are placed in care when their parents or family are experiencing conflict or are unable to provide adequate care (AIHW, 2011: 44, 49, 55).

Child protection and out-of home care practices in Australia are based in state and territory

legislation and the laws, policies and practices impacting on children in care are based on historical and local factors across eight jurisdictions. Some notable consistencies exist across jurisdictions. For example, ‘permanency planning’ and stability for children in care, the commitment to the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle, and the commitment to children’s participation in decision-making are enshrined in legislation in every state and territory. Despite these similarities, variances across jurisdictions remain. Most notably the differences lie in the day to day case management and administration of placements, whether placements are managed by the government or non-government sector, and the accreditation or monitoring standards applied to organisations providing out-of home care. Differences across jurisdictions mean that the quality of care varies across the eight state and territory jurisdictions, and that monitoring outcomes for children in care is difficult.

Nationally, some studies focusing on the status of children and young people in care have shown that this group is particularly vulnerable when compared to the broader population. In 2007, the Australian Institute of Family Studies undertook a review of research investigating the outcomes for children and young people in care and showed that significant groups experience poor physical and mental health, complex psychological and behavioural problems, instability and frequent placement changes and disrupted education (Osborn & Bromfield, 2007). Other Australian studies such as the *Longitudinal Study of Wards Leaving Care: four to five years on* (Cashmore & Paxman 2007) and *Pathways from out-of-home care* (Johnson, et al, 2010) have also indicated young people who exit care have poorer outcomes than young people in the general population. The issues facing children and young people in care are clearly serious and complex.

In recent years, variations across out-of home care jurisdictions and a lack of information about outcomes for the care population have made it clear that there is a need for a more coordinated and centralised approach to out-of home care. In 2009 The Australian Government released

*Protecting Children is Everyone's Business: National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009–2020*. The framework outlined the need for a more unified approach to responding to the needs of children in care and included a commitment to develop and implement a set of National Standards for out-of-home care. (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009). The overarching principles for the National Standards for out-of-home care include two important statements about participation.

*"Children and young people in out-of-home care have their rights respected and are treated in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child", and*

*"Children and young people living in out-of-home care are provided with opportunities for their voice to be heard and respected and have the right to clear and consistent information about the reasons for being in care" (Commonwealth of Australia, 2011:6).*

These principles, as well as those referred to earlier in state and territory legislation, clearly reflect the right-based agenda that underpins participation, and shows a commitment on the part of Australian governments to uphold the concept of participation. The inclusion of these principles in out-of-home care legislation and policy provides an excellent opportunity for individuals, organisations and advocates to ensure participation in practice is a reality.

## Promoting participation in practice

As previously mentioned, principles focused on participation have underpinned child protection and out-of-home care legislation for a number of years at a state level, and now nationally. In child protection, where children and young people are the legal responsibility of a system and are deemed as needing 'care and protection', the shift from viewing them as dependent to one

where they are considered as active participants can be a particularly challenging one to make. For adults and practitioners, this shift requires taking a step further than being 'child-focused' or 'child-centred', toward supporting children as active participants rather than passive subjects. The following excerpt from *Building a Culture of Participation: Involving children and young people in policy, service planning, delivery and evaluation (Research Report)* (Kirby et al, 2003:20) provides poignant commentary on the adjustments that are required.

*"In recognizing participation rights, adults must take on a different role from simply being protectors and providers. This requires working with children and young people rather than working for them; understanding that accepting responsibility for someone does not mean taking responsibility away from them" (Kirby et al, 2003: 20).*

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*For adults and practitioners, this shift requires taking a step further than being 'child-focused' or 'child-centred', toward supporting children as active participants rather than passive subjects.*

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Bell, Vromon & Collin (2008), and Blanchard, Metcalf & Burns (2008) highlighted the benefits for participants and organisations when the principle of participation is implemented in organisations. Their research work also identified the barriers that potentially impede active participation and involvement. A summary of their findings is outlined in Table 1. Benefits and barriers to participation.

CREATE has recognised that shifts in adult attitudes and behaviours are necessary before the barriers to active participation by all children and young people in care will be a reality and benefits can be achieved. This recognition has informed CREATE's development and its work as a peak body now targets those with influence as much as it is focused towards engaging children and young people directly.

A suite of programs that promote and facilitate participation have brought about a range of results and benefits. Details of each of these programs can be found in the web-based document Australian Association of Young People in Care to

**Table 1. Barriers and benefits to participation.**

Potential benefits	Potential barriers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>⋮ The right for children and young people to participate in decisions that affect them is upheld</li> <li>⋮ Service decisions and programs are relevant and responsive to the individual needs of children and young people</li> <li>⋮ Children and young people build their skills and confidence through exposure to new experiences</li> <li>⋮ Expectations and stereotypes about children, young people and workers can be challenged</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>⋮ Attitudes and culture of organisation and communities do not embrace participation or create structures and systems that are unappealing or inappropriate for children and young people</li> <li>⋮ Personal circumstances, motivations and characteristics of children and young people, such as having difficulty trusting adults, experiencing current hardship or low self esteem, and managing competing priorities can impede their personal ability to participate</li> <li>⋮ Not knowing how to take action or how to identify strategies to include children and young people, on the part of adults and children alike</li> <li>⋮ A lack of time and resources to effectively support children and young people to participate</li> </ul>

*Compiled from: Bell, Vromon & Collin (2008), and Blanchard, Metcalf & Burns (2008)*

CREATE Foundation: History & Milestones, 1993 to 2009. Initiatives at CREATE that have promoted the participation of children and young people are outlined in the following section.

## It started with a Bill of Rights

In September 1994, the Australian Association of Young People in Care (now CREATE) hosted a national conference of young people in care. The conference brought together 140 young people from across the country and culminated in a Bill of Rights for Children in Care in Australia. The Bill collectively named the rights and expectations that young people in care believed they should be afforded. The Bill of Rights was presented to the Association of Children's Welfare Agencies (ACWA) Conference. The impetus for change and the positive impact of young people participating in important discussions about out-of-home care in Australia had begun.

Over the coming years, positive impacts emerged for individual children and young people connected with CREATE. Young people participated

in state-wide conferences and training days that developed their skills in group work, media, technology, presentation and facilitation. Young people were exposed to new opportunities with a few young people having the unique opportunity to participate in conferences and forums abroad.

At a practice level, organisations and governments benefited from access to information about working effectively with children and young people. CREATE developed training packages and conferences for workers and carers in the sector, and delivered these alongside young people with a care experience.

Throughout these processes, CREATE recognised that while young people with a care experience had inherent skills and knowledge to contribute, the organisation also had skills and ideas that could assist young people in their role as advocates. Literature on participation widely acknowledges that often the barriers to participation include unwillingness by organisations and adults to re-structure their ways of working, and a gap in confidence and experience on the part of children and young

people (OOGCYP, 2008). Providing training and development is one way that organisations can empower and provide some benefits directly to young people, while demonstrating their commitment to participation.

## Young Consultants, Youth Advisory Groups and the National Youth Advisory Council

In 2000, along with a suite of new services tailored to connect, empower and change, CREATE launched the Young Consultants Training program. Since then, CREATE has regularly trained young people aged 15-25, equipping them with the necessary skills to participate in and deliver programs alongside CREATE staff.

Young consultants now have a long history of facilitating activities, programs and consultations for other children in care, participating in consultations and research, advocating in the out-of-home care sector, speaking in public about their experiences in care and providing training to adults. Working from a strengths-based and solutions-focussed perspective, young consultants often benefit directly from their work as they are able to view their experiences in care constructively, and frame their feedback to workers in ways that motivate change. In 2010/11 alone, young consultants supported over 60 departmental worker training sessions reaching just over 1000 participants.

*“Young people need to be empowered to feel it is okay to speak out. CREATE has a unique frame in working with young people to assist them to learn how to effectively speak for themselves” (Children’s Commissioner/Guardian, CREATE Stakeholder Survey, 2008).*

*“The perspective of the young consultants who have been in care offers a real account, which helps us, as caseworkers, realise how far reaching our decisions and interactions have (been)” (Caseworker Training Evaluation, 2010).*

In addition to supporting the delivery of CREATE programs and training young consultants and other young people in care can also participate in state Youth Advisory Groups (YAGs), and the National Young Advisory Council (NYAC). YAGs are state and territory based groups with an open membership of young people aged between 12-25 years old with a care experience. YAGs discuss state and territory care issues, explore solutions and provide advice on how CREATE can best represent the opinions and views of children and young people in care at a state level.

To harness the ideas and momentum generated by YAGs and to give young people a stronger voice at a national level, CREATE established NYAC. The aims of NYAC are to:

- ⋮ improve the care system, and the lives of children and young people with a care experience,
- ⋮ inform CREATE and governments on legislation, policy and practices, and
- ⋮ identify issues that inform CREATE’s advocacy and strategic direction.

CREATE hosts a NYAC Summit each year which brings together three Youth Delegates from each state and territory to discuss issues in out-of home care, identify ways to address those issues and develop an action plan that incorporates strategies for moving forward. The opportunity for young people to participate as delegates is one that is highly valued. The following excerpts from the 2011 NYAC DVD help to highlight the sentiments of young people involved:

*“These issues are very well known but then again not very well spoken about. They are very well heard, but not very well acknowledged” (Youth Delegate, Northern Territory, 2011).*

*“If everyone knew about these problems then everyone could commit to trying to change them and it would be a lot easier” (Pip, Youth Delegate, Victoria, 2011).*

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*The opportunity for young people to participate as delegates is one that is highly valued.*

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*"They actually listened to what we had to say, and it got me so excited"* (Kat, Youth Delegate, Western Australia, 2011).

In 2011, delegates developed an action plan and key projects focussing on three priorities: transition from care planning; housing and homelessness, and health and wellbeing. These priorities inform CREATE's policy and advocacy work for 2011/12 and contribute to the work of out-of-home care sector stakeholders.

## Policy and advocacy

The unique relationships that CREATE maintains with children and young people in care means that the organisation is able to undertake prompt and effective advocacy when policy issues arise. Several state governments and NGOs fund CREATE specifically to consult with children and young people in care.

*"CREATE is vital to translate bureaucratic speak with young people and engage them on topics about which the department wants input"* Government department representative, (CREATE Stakeholder Survey, 2008).

The benefits of engaging in consultation with children and young people and facilitating opportunities for them to develop ideas and resources have been evident over a number of years. For example, previous consultation processes have directly informed policy development in out-of-home care, and have resulted in practical resources such as life story work books for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children in New South Wales and Charters of Rights resources for children in seven of eight states and territories. More recently, the consultation on 'How Australia protects and provides for its children' informed parts of the *Listen to Children, 2011 Child rights NGO Report Australia* by the Child Rights Taskforce, which was presented to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in Geneva, Switzerland. This presentation was supported by a delegation of adults and young people, including a CREATE Young Consultant.

*"This incredible opportunity came as a real surprise for me and everything happened very*

*quickly! I feel very fortunate to be selected to be a member of a delegation that is going to the United Nations in Geneva in October...I want to keep dedicating my time to ensuring that the life outcomes for children and young people are positive"* (Krystal, Young Consultant, 2011).

CREATE also runs a participatory consultation process called Be.Heard. Be.Heard provides a suite of options to connect with children and young people utilising face-to-face, online and remote engagement options. The Be.Heard tool is child-friendly and includes the use of interactive characters, voices and avatars from various cultural backgrounds. Since 2005, over 500 children and young people in care have had their say through a Be.Heard consultation. As with other CREATE initiatives, young consultants provide the perspectives of children to practitioners. This training is highly effective, offering real data, stories and experiences to motivate change.

*"Be.Heard is probably one of the more useful projects, as it is a structured mechanism to get the feedback from children and young people in a particular patch"* Government department representative, (CREATE Stakeholder Survey, 2008).

In 2000, CREATE published the first national Report Card titled *"The Status of Children and Young People in Care"*. This laid the foundation for an ongoing series of research projects providing a status check on important out-of-home care issues. Report Cards identify, via survey or interview, the supports put in place by governments and the perceptions of children and young people about the services they receive. In 2011, 605 young people participated in the Report Card survey. The most recent titles in the Report Card series (2008, 2009, 2011) have focussed on transitioning from care.

As a result of the advocacy positions taken by CREATE and informed by the Report Card findings, several notable developments for care leavers in Australia have been achieved:

- CREATE developed and consolidated information for care leavers via the CREATE Your Future website, program and workshops, informed by

young people and funded by corporate and government supporters.

- ⋮ In 2008, the *Report on the Special Commission of Inquiry into Child Protection Services in NSW* included three formal recommendations relating to care leavers and made direct reference to the CREATE written submission as well as a meeting held with young consultants.
- ⋮ In 2009, the Queensland State Government committed to fund Transition from Care Kits for all young people aged 17 in care in that state. The kits were developed with input from young people and have benefited 420 young people in the first year. CREATE is currently seeking to expand this initiative to all states.
- ⋮ In 2010, CREATE was funded to identify young people's solutions for improving transitioning to independence nationally. The report included information from 37 young people to directly inform transition from care planning models under the *National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children*.
- ⋮ In 2011, the Australian Capital Territory Minister for Community Services announced increased supports to care leavers until the age of 25, specifically acknowledging the importance of CREATE's advocacy in the development of these changes.

## Continuing our work to promote participation by children and young people in care

Since CREATE was established in 1993, the landscape of the out-of-home care system in Australia has changed significantly. As an organisation CREATE has also changed and evolved in ways that ensure the voices of children and young people in care are heard at a systemic level.

Some examples have been highlighted in this paper that demonstrates ways that CREATE actively facilitates children and young people's participation in the Australian out-of-home care system.

CREATE programs and services have benefited and contributed to:

- ⋮ developing the skills and confidence of children and young people with a care experience
- ⋮ facilitating an active dialogue between children and young people with a care experience and the adults stakeholders who work in the area of out-of-home care
- ⋮ real policy and practice improvements that are informed by the ideas and experiences of children and young people in care.

The variation across state out-of-home care jurisdictions, the lack of information about outcomes for the care population and the reforms foreshadowed in the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children mean that significant opportunities still exist to improve the situation for children and young people in care. For this reason, CREATE is committed to pursuing its mission into the future to improve the lives of children and young people in care. ■

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# Listening to experts: Children and young people's participation

By Kathleen Manion and Paul Nixon

*The most important thing the social worker did was listen to us and not go overboard about caring (young person).*

Social workers who want their practice to be more child centred must learn to find new and better ways to listen to children and young people and involve them in decision making. This is important not only because it will create better decisions and practice, but also because children have a fundamental right to participate in matters that affect their lives.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC), ratified by New Zealand in 1993, provides us with a clear imperative to listen to children. Article 12 says children have “the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child” (UNICEF, 1989, Article 12).

Although UNCROC and associated national legislation gives children the legal right to participate, social, cultural and economic barriers to children's involvement in decision-making persist. As we increasingly hear the vernacular of the rights and voices of children within international child welfare and youth justice arenas (Coad & Lewis, 2004) more evidence that suggests some of the barriers may be shifting. However, we must push harder and go further to give life to the rights of children.

At the heart of this transformation is our ability to change the way we think about children. Participative methodologies are diverse and scattered across the spectrum of interventions with

children and young people. This article argues for embedding changes that support appropriate and effective means of including children in decision-making processes and supporting children to be future advocates, activists, leaders and decision-makers. This paper also recognises that respecting, eliciting and utilising the views of children requires a culture shift that repositions children as active agents rather than passive recipients of policy, programmes or research. The first section of the article focuses on theory. The second part advocates ways to ensure their voices are heard and acted upon and provides practical hints for implementation.

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*Respecting, eliciting and utilising the views of children requires a culture shift that repositions children as active agents rather than passive recipients of policy, programmes or research*

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## Part I – The role of children

Although Article 12 is arguably one of the core articles in UNCROC, it is also one of the most controversial (Lundy, 2007). Children's participation is central to a democratic notion recognising children and young people as individual human beings with inherent rights, irrespective of intellectual or developmental abilities. Although UNCROC clearly places responsibility for children's care with parents or legal guardians, it also challenges traditional concepts of adult power, advancing the idea of children having a say in their own right (Dalrymple, 2002; Smith, Gallop & Taylor, 2000). Article 12 assumes children have rights as autonomous citizens, which contravenes some long held notions of children's place in society. Unpicking this assumption requires an examination of the attitudes about children and the political, economic, cultural, legal and social factors that shape these beliefs.



The way in which adults have defined and understood childhood throughout history has profoundly shaped the way we listen to the view of children. Social constructions of 'children' and 'childhood' generally refer to dichotomous perceptions of innocent or evil children who are either nurtured or corrupted by society (Rock, Karabanow & Manion, 2012). This matrix may not reverberate as strongly today, but a similar arrangement occurs where adults find themselves somewhere between two ideological positions, either seeing children as naive and vulnerable subjects who should be protected in a benign and paternalistic way or people in their own right with their own choices, whose rights must be asserted or upheld. Similarly social welfare texts often focusing on either children's needs or children's rights, belies the complexity and interrelationship between the two. Inattention to children's needs may make it hard to uphold their rights and vice versa.

Understanding children's multidimensional role in society, with both needs and rights provides a better foundation for recognising and advocating for the rights of children to participate. As such Corsaro's (1997) more sophisticated theorisation may provide a better platform for children's participation. He suggests children are not passive agents onto which societal norms are attached, but rather active citizens who shape the world around them.

## The legal and societal framework

Within the international setting, UNCROC requires that children have "freedom of expression, to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas" (UNICEF, 1989, Article 13) and demands that children have a "right to active participation in the community" (UNICEF, 1989, Article 23). The central weakness of UNCROC is that it has no robust mechanism to ensure that governments uphold or implement these rights, particularly as children lack economic power or the right to vote.

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*Understanding children's multidimensional role in society, with both needs and rights, provides a better foundation for recognising and advocating for the rights of children to participate.*

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The legal mandate is ineffectual (Freeman, 2000) and as a result children's participation is rarely high on the political agenda. King & Trowell (1992, p. 113) suggest "the rights rhetoric is covering up vast areas of human experience which the law is ill equipped to tackle."

Within Aotearoa New Zealand the Children, Young Persons and their Families Act (1989) was created to respond to local needs, acknowledge and tackle institutional racism and honour Māori culture pertaining to family and cultural decision making. At its core this methodology was based on a fundamentally different approach and was centred on the use of family group conferences (FGCs). While the Act (1989) promotes family centred decision making, it also advocates child centred practice. For Child, Youth and Family this is further articulated

in the Practice Frameworks as child or young person centred and family/whanau led practice (see <http://www.practicecentre.cyf.govt.nz/knowledge-base-practice-frameworks/index.html#OurPracticeFrameworks1>).

A pivotal argument is that child participation should not be conducted at the expense of family involvement in decision making. Any version of child participation which envisions the individual child as more important than their whānau or iwi is at odds with a Māori approach (Pitama et al, 2002) and undermine the potential outcome of good participative methodologies. Embracing concepts of 'child participation' in New Zealand necessitates ensuring that it adheres to the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi and respects the child's place within his whakapapa. Realising the child's voice within this context means ensuring that participation (and negotiation) also occurs with wider groups i.e. whānau, hapu and iwi (Matahaere-Atariki, 2000). Regardless of the ethnicity or cultural heritage of the child, participation needs to be mindful of the cultural context of each participant, their family and their community.

A more challenging continuum to tackle in the context of child participation is between family led and professionally led decision making. At the global level the last twenty years have seen increasing rhetoric around child centred practice, but it could be argued that in reality this has further entrenched professionally-led practice. Within child protection, agencies have traditionally been hesitant to include children in decision making because they tend to be the most marginalised children in society. The fear of further exploitation through participation often blocks the implementation of participative methodologies, but the most traumatised children are, paradoxically, also the most invisible (Atwool, 2000). While gatekeepers may wish to protect children they may also be inadvertently furthering their disempowerment. As a result, initiatives to involve children have been almost exclusively professionally led and children ostensibly have their “participation” managed. The increasing bureaucratisation of practice has meant social workers and children have their relationship governed by factors beyond their control. Attesting to this Oliver, Knight & Candappa (2006) found that there has been an overreliance on proceduralisation and a concurrent professional resistance to children’s participation.

*Initiatives to involve children have been almost exclusively professionally led and children ostensibly have their “participation” managed.*

advocacy, lobbying, design of information, services, policy, the use of resources and budgets, staff selection, training, quality assurance, supervision, inspection, research development and evaluation (Nixon, 2007).

Adding slightly more detail Townsend (2000) discusses the different levels of participation

in terms of where participation can happen:

1. At the systems level (state) – e.g. informing government policy and legislative decisions.
2. At the local level (regional) – e.g. influencing regional strategies and initiatives addressing regional issues.
3. At the service level – e.g. affecting programme and policy developments and service evaluations.
4. At the individual level – e.g. impacting on decision making affecting their own lives.

Texts often distinguish between listening to and acting on children’s views. For instance Boyden & Ennew (1997) suggest there are two types of participation: a passive participation where a participant is included but it is unclear to what end and active participation where it is clear that the participant is being heard and that their contributions are acted upon. Atwool suggests adults, including professionals, have a poor record of listening to children and are often blinded by ‘appearing to be the expert’. She also argues that adults often overlook the multidimensional aspects of a child’s experience or action and instead focus on a one-dimensional interpretation of their trauma. Adults interpret the child’s responses based on adult perspectives, thereby losing their specific expertise.

Hierarchical structures are commonly cited in relation to participation typologies. One of the most commonly cited schemas is Hart’s ladder of child and youth participation (MYD, 2009) which is represented by the following hierarchy starting from most collaborative to least:

## Conceptualisations of participation

Historically there have been a number of conceptualisations of child’s participation. Little consensus exists about what participation of children and young people is (Adams, 2003) and this has complicated implementation. At its most basic child participation in social work entails two levels:

- ⋮ The individual level; where children directly inform referrals, assessments, decisions, services, reviews and/or evaluations.
- ⋮ The collective level; where children impact services or organisations more widely through

8. Child-initiated, shared decisions with Adults
7. Child-initiated and directed
6. Adult-initiated, shared decisions with children
5. Consulted and informed
4. Assigned but informed
3. Tokenism
2. Decoration
1. Manipulation

Similarly Lansdown (2009) looks at the point and level of engagement, suggesting that there is a continuum which includes adult consultative participation, collaborative participation and child-led participation.

Lundy (2007) provides a more holistic and pragmatic conceptualisation. She argues that being heard is not enough to give effect to Article 12, but rather effective participation requires four key components:

- ⋮ a safe space for their voice to be heard,
- ⋮ support to have their voice heard,
- ⋮ someone to actively hear (or see) their opinions and ideas, and
- ⋮ have their ideas acted upon and influence change.

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*Recognition of children and young people's rights can also better utilise their knowledge and skills, create a sense of belonging, promote democracy and bolster self esteem.*

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## Considerations

### Benefits

Children are citizens with an innate stake in the policies, programmes and research that surround them. Although work with children and young people requires special deliberation and increased ethical scrutiny (particularly for vulnerable children and young people), the value of seeking their views and experiences is reciprocally beneficial. Listening to and utilising children's voices, requires considerable investment.

The potential benefits include hearing the perspectives from the experts and preparing them for adulthood (Hart et al, 2004). Recognition of children and young people's rights can also better utilise their knowledge and skills, create a sense of belonging, promote democracy and bolster self esteem (MYD, 2009). Whitfield (2002) also argues that participation is a driver of connectedness and resiliency.

Lansdown (2009) articulates the benefits thusly:

- ⋮ it provides information and insights to inform legislation, policies, budgets,
- ⋮ children can be active advocates to realise their own rights,
- ⋮ children acquire skills, knowledge, competencies and confidence,
- ⋮ it leads to better protection, and
- ⋮ it promotes civic engagement, active citizenship and good governance.

When children have a say, individually or collectively, in the services they use, they are more likely to get the services that they want and need. The services are also more likely to be relevant, open and accountable. Children and young people often want greater say and influence, but they are frequently underestimated. When they are provided the opportunity they can make significant contributions (Lansdown, 2009).

Hart et al's experience of programmes in various countries, (2004) suggests that where participative processes have been implemented, children and young people (particularly girls) gain self confidence, positive outlook and increased sociability. They also found that participants were more likely to have a greater understanding of the issues facing their families, modify their behaviour accordingly and advocate for their families to become more involved. More fundamentally they found that it leads to more effective and efficient decision making.

## Barriers

Projects that are poorly planned and implemented can reinforce a child's sense of powerlessness. The risks to children's participation must be identified, justified, minimised and weighed with the potential benefits of the work. If not managed well, some participants may develop a false sense of security and be placed in a position opposing their parents, family or community. Children suggest some of the barriers to sharing their opinions include feeling inhibited to speak up in front of family, lacking confidence to get their views across, being worried about repercussions from the meeting, and lacking an understanding about the discussions (Clarkson & Frank, 2000). Involving children and young people in policy, programme, research and evaluation design must not cause harm and must be done in a way that is respectful and ensures their dignity. This requires putting in support mechanisms where sensitive topics are being discussed.

There are also significant risks if children's views are heard but not taken into consideration or misunderstood. Adults often have poor perceptions of children and young people's capacity and capability (Calvert, Zeldin, & Weisenbach, 2002). The paternalistic model assumes that adults know what is best for children, especially if those adults are trained professionals, and those children are classified as "at risk," "dependent," or even "dangerous." These assumptions have the effect of undermining concepts of children's strengths, abilities, and rights which can lead to objectification of children (Nixon, 2002). Mayall (2000, p137) argues children's behaviour (including wheedling, lying, demanding and refusing) often stems from a reaction to adults perceptions of them, but it also reinforces adult prejudices and further marginalises their voices.

Many stigmatizing and devaluing assumptions about children's abilities can restrict children's participation. Disabled children, for example, may not be considered as able to participate because of negative assumptions about disability, or because

of the inability of professionals to engage or work effectively with them.

While there is an increasing rhetoric within social work about listening to children, young people often say that social workers fail to do this (Morgan, 2005, 2006). Children coming into contact with social workers do not know the criteria social workers use to make decisions, or how they can influence those decisions. They do know, however, that social workers have the power to fundamentally change their lives and, through the courts, even restrict their liberty (Nixon, 2007).

Professional practice aspires toward partnerships with citizens, but the parameters of this are set by agencies and professionals (Braye & Preston-Shoot, 1995). The delegation of power to service users is even less common and often limited. The 'right level' of children's participation is nearly always determined by adults – professionals, organizations, and parents – rather than by the children themselves.

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*Many stigmatizing and devaluing assumptions about children's abilities can restrict children's participation.*

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## Part II – Key practice questions

Family decision making models, particularly family group conferences have the potential to both enhance and diminish children's voices, but the level of participation is variable. While some international research suggests children feel they are involved and have their say (eg Crow, 2000; Lupton & Stevens, 1997; Merkel-Holguin, Nixon, & Burford, 2003), others have found that children's contributions are overlooked (e.g. Sieppert and Unrau, 2003) or they remain invisible (Heino, 2003). Rasmussen (2003) even indicated that children and young people felt increasingly vulnerable. This suggests a strong organisational mandate is needed to support child participation for it to succeed.

Good participation requires flexibility and adherence to democratic principles, as well as clarity of purpose and definition of participation.

The key areas to avoid include:

- ⋮ building unrealistic hopes
- ⋮ overburdening participants
- ⋮ disrupting family and community relations
- ⋮ ignoring risks to security and well being.

*In mitigating the risks of participation there are a number of areas that should be considered, including the following:*

#### ***Informed consent and confidentiality***

Participation should always be by choice. The purpose and nature of the activity must be explained to the child and their guardian in a way that is understandable to them and it should be made clear that they can opt out at any time. Informed consent must be given by the child and/or their guardian and the issue of confidentiality must be clearly set out to the participant and adhered to. Even if the participant gives permission to be identified, the researcher should carefully consider the implications and ensure their safety in doing so.

#### ***Diversity and age***

At what age children are able to participate is contentious. Many authors argue that given the right methodology all children can participate, but others are more conservative. Clark et al (2003) found few studies have taken the views of children under five years old into account and fewer still have done so with children with disabilities. When participation occurs it is generally more heavily weighted to older young people who are able to articulate their ideas easily. However, children and young people constitute a diverse range of the population and good participation needs to take into account this diversity. For some groups, for instance younger children, or those most vulnerable, involving them in participative activities may require more forethought and greater skill in making them comfortable and eliciting their views (Chapman, 2010). This suggests that the barrier to participation for younger children largely lies in the skill level of the facilitator.

#### ***Using advocates***

Listening to the choices of children can happen in a number of ways, including indirectly, through child advocates, support people or materials. Child advocacy is underpinned by a “belief that children and young people should be recognised as citizens in society” (Dalrymple & Hough, 1995). Children interviewed suggested that: “It helps if someone stays with me during the meeting”; “I would like someone there who will tell my family the difficult things I need to say about them” (children quoted in Clarkson & Frank, 2000).

#### **How to achieve good participation**

##### ***Policy***

Non-tokenistic participation and consultation requires a culture shift. In order to do it well the system, skills, culture and environment needs to be built to support it. Child participation should always be voluntary, informed, meaningful, respectful and safe (Steinitz, 2009). It requires organisations and personnel to respect the opinions and rights of children and young people and believe in their wisdom on matters that are important to them. Listening to the voices of children should not be a single occurrence but rather systemically embedded. Jenkins (1995) suggests adherence to the guidelines set out in the UNCROC requires P.R.A.I.S.E.:

- ⋮ Political will
- ⋮ Resources
- ⋮ Agencies with power base
- ⋮ Investment in information and education
- ⋮ Support networks
- ⋮ Engagement with key issues.

Activities that can be initiated to foster children and young people's participation can sit anywhere on the continuum between designing child friendly, understandable, and useful information, through to child or youth led projects. Children could even be involved in the design of the former and the latter could easily be supported through advice, financial assistance or other resources (eg information technology or

meeting space). Consideration should be given to how sustainability can be encouraged and how the successes can be disseminated and publicised more widely (MYD, 2009). When designing child participation there are a number of questions that should be considered:

- ⋮ Do children want to play an active role?
- ⋮ How can they be involved in the design of the service?
- ⋮ How can children best be supported to participate, and how is diversity of experience represented?
- ⋮ How could children select and train staff?
- ⋮ How might children manage budgets or oversee the use of resources?
- ⋮ How prepared are we to put this into action?
- ⋮ What do we want to achieve and how will we know when we have been successful?

Further it is important to consider if participation can pass the following tests outlined by Lansdown (2009). Is the participation:

- ⋮ transparent and informative
- ⋮ voluntary
- ⋮ respectful
- ⋮ relevant
- ⋮ child-friendly
- ⋮ inclusive
- ⋮ supported by training for adult
- ⋮ safe and sensitive to risk
- ⋮ accountable?

Some of the ways we can begin to better integrate children's participation methodologies into our everyday practice might include:

- ⋮ funding/resourcing children's consultation
- ⋮ articulating the purpose of participation

- ⋮ promoting standards of practice, a good practice guide, and a participation policy and organisational framework
- ⋮ examining attitudes and values about children's involvement
- ⋮ allowing for diversity of voices
- ⋮ working with children to improve practice and children's rights
- ⋮ exploring various methodologies for participation, including the use of information technology
- ⋮ producing a good practice guide for staff
- ⋮ involving children in: research, evaluation, monitoring, design and implementation, staff recruitment, appraisal and training
- ⋮ developing political forums for children to have collective action and lobby politicians (Nixon, 2007).

### Practice

Working with children requires flexible methods of communication, excellent listening skills and imaginative ways of involving children in the process. This requires time, skill, effort, openness, honesty, respect and good communication and listening skills. Good communication requires a willingness to use jargon-free, child-friendly language and the assurance that everyone has a shared understanding of what has been said. Maintaining trust means not raising unrealistic or false expectations.

Creativity and innovation are needed to foster good will and support good participation. Some ideas for helping children to express themselves in

different ways include:

- ⋮ using a "spider-gram" chart to depict family networks,
- ⋮ using the Three Houses (see Weld & Greening, 2005), Words and Pictures (developed by Susie

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*Working with children requires flexible methods of communication, excellent listening skills and imaginative ways of involving children in the process.*

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Essex, John Gumbleton & Colin Luger) and the Safety House (developed by Sonja Parker) (see Brennan & Robson, 2010),

- ⋮ involving them in drawing, role play and drama,
- ⋮ having them design invitations,
- ⋮ digitally recording their messages for their conferences if they do not feel comfortable attending, and
- ⋮ having them write letters about how they feel.

A robust participation methodology should ensure it includes elements of the following:

- ⋮ giving information
- ⋮ consulting—have a continuous dialogue
- ⋮ preparing
- ⋮ taking account of child's agenda
- ⋮ considering child's needs
- ⋮ facilitating independent support
- ⋮ treating children with respect
- ⋮ giving feedback (Lansdown, 2009)

### Research, Monitoring and Evaluation

Participative research has been developed with disempowered populations, but they are largely adaptable to children and young people (Laws & Mann, 2004). These methodologies predominantly use visual exercises, such as mapping, ranking, scoring, model building and role playing exercises, but they are also flexible enough for children to set the agenda, provide the context for analysis and act as co-researchers/evaluators (O'Kane, 2000).

When planning children's participation methodologies, time needs to be allocated to eliciting and receiving feedback on achievements. To date measurement of the success of participation methods have been relatively poor. There are no agreed indicators and outcomes tend to be qualitative, with few quantitative examples (Lansdown, 2009).

One simple way to measure progress may be to set out a simple evaluative form to track progress and measure feedback. The example below is adult-centred, but explores the achievements of a participation project, but it could be adapted to suit a variety of projects.

Evaluation of Children's Participation		
Part A	Describe the project:	
	What was the project trying to achieve?:	
	What has happened as a result of the project? (include any impact on the child):	
Part B	On a scale of 1-10 rank how well each of the areas below were achieved (1 = not achieved and 10= fully achieved)	
	We consulted with children and young people	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
	Participants understood the purpose of their participation	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
	We took what their opinions into account in our plans/ implementation Provide Examples and Children's Quotes:	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
	We act on the advice provided? Provide Examples and Children's Quotes: :	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
	We followed up and let participants know how their information was used?	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
	We shared decision making with participants?	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

## Conclusion

Ultimately we are looking for behaviour change, where adults start to see children as partners, change makers and future leaders. Children are experts on childhood and the effect of the services they receive. Their unique perspective places them in a valuable position to provide feedback and engage in decision making and design. Wouldn't it be great if in future children and young people were able to be fully involved in consultation, advocacy, programme design and delivery, staff recruitment and evaluative feedback in a way that was respectful, timely, meaningful, consistent, reciprocal, and integrated into general approaches.

The next article sets out Child, Youth and Family's strategy for embracing child and young person's participation. We know we need to push further and harder to reach our vision. We also know participation will change in the years to come and we need to ensure that we are well equipped to embrace these changes. ■

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# Giving children a voice: Paving the way for Child, Youth and Family's participation strategy

*Debbie Sturmfels and Kathleen Manion*

*"When the social worker listened to me, I felt important and valued."* (Young person)

Child, Youth and Family is an organisation about children and young people and their families. In order to have the most robust and effective organisation we need to continually improve our child and young person-centred practice. This article suggests that we should increasingly be providing children and young people with the tools to effectively voice their opinions and influence the organisation that claims to be about them. This includes providing: support to speak their mind and effectively contribute; information that is accessible and age-appropriate; and a safe and trusted person to speak with and advocate for them. Furthermore, we need to offer an environment and a means for children and young people to participate in a variety of ways.

In exploring how Child, Youth and Family can create a framework to give children and young people a voice, we have begun by looking internally. As specified in the last article there are many benefits of children and young people's participation, but there are also barriers and pitfalls. One of the main pitfalls can occur when participative methodologies are not well thought through or executed and children and young people who participate are left disillusioned with the process when actions are not completed or promises are broken. This is why, as a first step, we have begun by ensuring we set our policy at the right level and we have the organisational support

to see through our intentions. We have done this by setting an initial statement of intent to develop a participation strategy with children and young people. This article outlines our initial thoughts on the formation of this strategy and clarifies our position on how we intend to work with children and young people into the foreseeable future.

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*We need to offer an environment and a means for children and young people to participate in a variety of ways.*

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## Statement of Intent

*"It's important to build trust, and that takes putting the time in, talking to us, keeping in contact, doing the groundwork that builds a foundation to work from."* (Young person)

In our statement of intent we have articulated our intention to:

- provide opportunities for children and young people to be active participants, not passive subjects in the decision-making processes that affect them,
- work 'with' not work 'for' children and young people
- increase the participation of children and young people at the individual, local, service and systems level.

This is the beginning of a conversation, but it is our intention to work towards making a quantum leap forward in the way we work with children and young people. Some of our staff are already doing magnificent work in supporting children and young people to participate, but we are embarking on a journey to bring the rest of the organisation along this path. This year we will

start this journey by creating a strategic plan with children and young people on their participation.

## Ensuring quality

*“The most important thing the social worker did was listen.”* (Young person)

In late 2011, Child, Youth and Family’s Executive Committee agreed four key priority areas to focus on in 2012: quality social work practice; children’s voices; connecting communities; and responsiveness to Māori. Given each of these priority areas, it would seem the time is right to ensure we have a meaningful focus on children’s participation.

The mandate to do so is strongly enshrined in legislation. Section 5 of the Children, Young Persons, and their Families Act (1989) states that wherever possible a child (and their family, hāpu, iwi and family group) should participate in making decisions that affect them (s5a) and:

*“that consideration should be given to those wishes of the child or young person, so far as those wishes can reasonably be ascertained, and that those wishes should be given such weight as is appropriate in the circumstances, having regard to the age, maturity, and culture of the child or young person.”* (s5d)

Further, Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (ratified by New Zealand in 1993) gives children the right to participate and to have their views heard, considered and taken seriously.

The benefits of giving children a voice are considerable. As an agency working in the arenas of child protection, youth justice and adoptions, we do tricky work and we certainly have much to learn from those with the most direct experience.

Participation that ensures a child or young person has a voice also benefits them by helping to construct a more positive sense of identity, support confident and assertive development, and potentially decrease the vulnerability to abuse and neglect. Conversely, if children/

*If our children are our future, then they need to develop the skills necessary to shape that future.*

young people do not receive the opportunity to participate in the decision-making process, they are less likely to ‘own’ the decisions that impact on them. Children and young people have to live with the consequences of decisions that are made on their behalf, so it is sensible that they have some input into these decisions. Furthermore, if our children are our future, then they need to develop the skills necessary to shape that future.

For Child, Youth and Family, the most likely consequence of taking children and young people’s views on board will be more successful interventions and better outcomes.

Benefits for the child or young person
5. It means better decisions and outcomes
6. It builds self-esteem and confidence
7. It promotes placement stability
8. It develops decision-making skills
9. It promotes positive health and a sense of wellbeing
10. It meets a basic human right

Benefits for the service
⋮ It means we make better decisions that lead to better outcomes
⋮ It helps services better align to the needs of young people
⋮ It means we can be confident advocates
⋮ It meets our responsibilities

## What the research tells us

*“Somehow we began to trust him [the social worker].”* (Young person)

According to Bromfield and Osborn (2007), participation creates a sense of power and control for children and young people and provides them with a voice with which to describe their experiences and perspectives on what is important for them. Furthermore, children and young people

appear to fare better when they are participants in decision-making, rather than being passive recipients of decisions about their lives (Wilson et al., 2004).

Within the resiliency debates, Benard (2004) suggests that the development and promotion of self-efficacy is a key factor in promoting resilience in children and young people. One way children and young people in care can develop a sense of efficacy is by their being encouraged to define their own outcomes and involving them in planning their care (Bostock, 2004). Hart et al. (2004) goes on to suggest that participation prepares children and young people for adulthood and allows them to be heard and to share their unique experience. As one young person suggested “grown ups think they should hide it and shouldn’t tell us, but we want to know; we want to be involved and we want people to talk with us about what they are going to do – we could help make decisions”.

## Defining participation

*“The social worker talked to me out about my strengths, worries and hopes and dreams. I think that’s helped her understand me a little more.”* (Young person)

There are a number of different ways to define children and young people’s participation, which makes it all the more important to specify how we define it for ourselves. Effective participation requires an intentional process that progressively grows the capacity of children and young people’s ability and willingness to contribute. It is a process, rather than a specific event or project. For us,

what is most important is that it includes a variety of avenues that allow children to be involved in both the services they are directly involved in (and the decisions that impact on them) and the wider policy and programme development for all children.

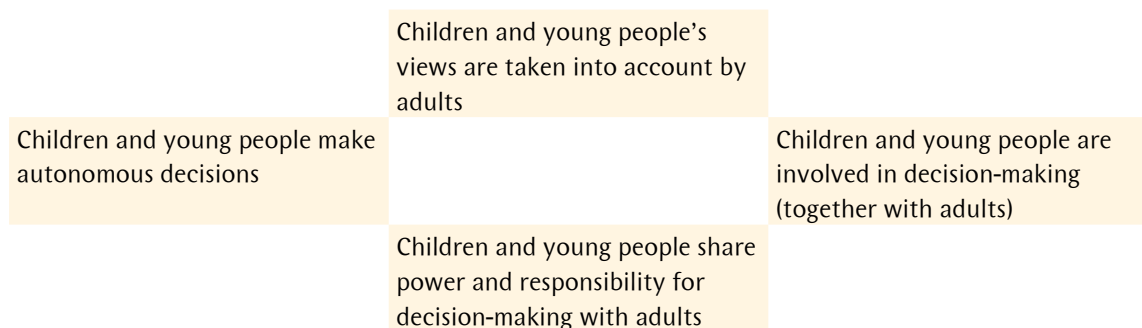
The impact of the different levels of participation is much like ripples on water after a stone is thrown in. The ripples begin in the middle with the individual child, their input can impact on those decisions and actions made directly around them and about them. Moving out from the centre, a child or young person’s input can impact on services, actions or programmes made within the context of their wider family or community. And finally, moving further out, their input can impact on services or policies for other children like themselves and the wider system as a whole.

## What participation involves

*“We are equally as important as every other citizen, therefore our wellbeing should be stressed and our partaking be valued.”* (Young person)

The level and nature of participation can vary. Boyden and Ennew (1997) suggest that participation can include both passive and active participation, i.e., where children or young people take part and are present during discussions, or where someone is actively listening to their opinions and acting on them. The two are manifestly different. The latter can help children and young people learn about democratic principles and empower them, while the former can lead to disenfranchisement.

**Figure 1. Model of the level of participation**



Kirby et al., 2003, p. 22

Shier (2001) articulated five stages in the pathway to the development of effective participation: being listened to; being supported in expressing views; having their views taken into account; involving them in decision-making; and finally sharing power and responsibility with them. Kirby et al. (2003) modified this concept by providing non-hierarchical levels or types of participation strategies as summarised in figure 1.

Based on these two formulations, we strive to ensure that participation involves:

- ⋮ listening to children and young people
- ⋮ supporting children and young people to express their views
- ⋮ taking children and young people's views into account
- ⋮ involving children and young people in decision-making processes
- ⋮ sharing power and responsibility with children and young people.

Ultimately, our goal is to help develop children and young people to be advocates, activists, leaders and decision-makers.

## Building a culture of participation

*“You need the ability to work through the unspoken word and help the young person express themselves – not just accept a ‘grunt’.”* (Social work professional)

For many, giving children and young people a voice necessitates a subtle but profound shift in thinking. Embedding the shift across an organisation as large as Child, Youth and Family is a complex task. The Ministry of Youth Development (MYD) recently published *Keepin' it real – a resource for involving young people in decision-making*, which offers a model to help organisations to assess their readiness for effective youth participation practice and to help with strategies to implement them. MYD (2009) stresses the importance of organisations asking themselves how ready they are to affect change. For instance, following on from Shier's (2001) ideas about utilising openings, opportunities and

obligations, MYD (2009) suggests organisations ask these questions:

- ⋮ Openings – Are you ready to listen?
- ⋮ Opportunities – Do you work in a way that enables you to listen?
- ⋮ Obligations – Is it a policy requirement that young people must be listened to?

The principles of effective participation practice should be predicated on changing ourselves in order to create space and opportunities for children to participate and show leadership. Organisational commitment requires intent and belief that participation is the right thing to do, as well as agreement about how to put it into effect. It will require resourcing, including staff time, skills, and financial support, but it will also include assessment and evaluation of the effectiveness and value of including children and young people's voice. This necessitates a commitment to the philosophical belief behind child participation, which will mean we need to ensure we are promoting the efficacy of participation throughout the organisation.

By amalgamating various conceptualisations of levels and avenues of participation we formulated our own stairway to effective participation. This is articulated in Figure 2.

**Figure 2. Stairway to Effective Participation**

	<b>Creating space</b>	<b>Building the environment</b>
<b>Affirming our resolve</b>	opportunity	relationships
intention and belief	given a voice	understanding
resources	someone to listen	agreement
action	someone to	support
evaluation	act	

## Affirming our resolve

Being committed also means involving children and young people from the outset. This is why we have committed to consulting with and engaging children and young people in formulating the strategic plan. We, as adults, have some

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preconceived ideas about what participation may look like and what we may need to do to create space for effective participation. We have articulated that in this article, but our strategic plan will be guided more by the children and young people themselves and where they suggest we need to go in the future. This also means trying to give staff the space and support to facilitate participative approaches and get them to understand the benefits of doing so.

Starting with intention and belief, we will work towards ensuring we are adequately committed to providing resources to the endeavour, acting on what we say we will do and taking the time to determine if it is working. This requires resourcing, and things to participate on that are useful and meaningful to children and young people, including setting the objectives and evaluating the effectiveness of our actions.

## Creating space

The key to ensuring we have an effective strategy will be to create the space in which children and young people can have a voice and be heard, and create an environment where staff support the developments and innovations needed to sustain effective participation. This means providing opportunities and mechanisms for children and young people to be heard in a variety of ways, maintaining a child-centred approach and providing children and young people with information in age-appropriate and interesting ways. We also need to create the habit of encouraging children and young people to express their views freely so that their voices can be heard in a variety of settings. In some instances this may mean we support independent representation or advocates.

Child, Youth and Family works with children and young people from a variety of backgrounds, ethnicities, abilities, and beliefs. It is critical therefore for us to consider how we can cover

this diversity while respecting individual cultural beliefs and values. We will undoubtedly be confronted with some resistance to participation from children and young people, but we will need to be creative enough to entice a diverse range of children and young people to participate. Advice from a range of sources can help us provide the right platforms to encourage a range of children and young people to be involved in a number of different, easy and accessible ways. Ultimately, once we have advice from children and young people, we need to act on it.

## Building the environment

In order for our staff to systematically create the space for children's voices to be heard, we need to support staff throughout the organisation to develop strong, healthy relationships with children and young people. Key components of this are developing trust and giving them respect. This is core to the work we already do. Treating children and young people with respect creates opportunities to ensure children and young people understand the issues and decision-making processes that are occurring around them, that they are provided with opportunities to be a part of decision-making processes, and are also offered opportunities to participate in fora that will inform programme and policy development and system changes. This will require us to provide a variety of opportunities that offer child- and youth-friendly environments to attract the widest range of participants. Further, we need to support children and young people by training and informing staff to build their confidence and skills in participative methodologies.

Eventually we would like to see children and young people feeling safe and secure in engaging in participative activities and more comfortable in having Child, Youth and Family act on their behalf, because they know their voices have been

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*We will undoubtedly be confronted with some resistance to participation from children and young people, but we will need to be creative enough to entice a diverse range of children and young people to participate.*

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heard and acted upon, and they have been given the opportunity to share in the decision-making process. If we want to have this as an ongoing activity we need to do it right from the beginning by modelling good communication skills. This means being clear in how and why we are asking children and young people to be involved and ensuring we provide them with feedback on how their advice is being used.

## Our readiness

*“Without that trust, we wouldn’t be where we are now.”* (Young person)

We will start our journey by:

- ⋮ seeking the views of children and young people known to Child, Youth and Family
- ⋮ creating space for them to have an independent voice
- ⋮ developing a set of communication tools with children and young people that is appropriate to a variety of ages and stages
- ⋮ establishing a youth advisory group
- ⋮ asking children and young people what they want in the action plan.

Although we have a long way to go, we are not starting from scratch. We are already doing some great work with children and young people. We have provided frontline workers with practical supporting information on the Practice Centre, for instance, *Engaging with Children and Young People and Gathering Information to Support Good Case Work*. Within the residences, we have begun an initiative to ensure young people hold regular discussions, via video link, with one another, the General Manager for Residences and the Chief Social Worker. We are a member of the Care Café, which is seeking a way to provide an independent voice for children in care. We have also instigated a programme to reinvigorate family group conference practice, which is putting child and young person participation at the fore. Already we are seeing examples of co-ordinators and social workers using unique and tailored ways to ensure children and young people’s voices are

heard in their family group conferences in a way that best meets their needs. We have produced a DVD in which children and young people themselves describe what works best for them in the family group conference.

## Moving forward

*“It’s good to have someone there who you know is on your side and who can help you get your point across.”* (Young person)

We have articulated our intentions. In the coming year we intend to move this work forward by talking with children and young people about what they would like to see in a strategic plan on children and young people’s participation and work towards forming a children and young people advisory group. We will continue to consult with our adult partners who have a vested interest in children and young people’s participation and have some experience in the area, including the Office for the Children’s Commissioner, the Ministry of Youth Development, the Care Café, and the Ministry of Education. We will work with the Child, Youth and Family Māori Leadership Group to make sure we do it in a way that is culturally appropriate. ■

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# Book review

Social work under pressure – how to overcome stress, fatigue, and burnout in the workplace

*Kate van Heutgen*

Published in 2011, Jessica Kingsley Publishers

## *Reviewed by Emma Craigie*

For those of us who have enjoyed a break from work over the summer holidays, workplace stress may seem like a less present factor in our lives than two or three months ago. Armed with New Year's resolutions to better manage work and home life balance to benefit our clients, our families and ourselves, the prospect of work-related stress may seem well under control.

In *Social work under pressure – how to overcome stress, fatigue, and burnout in the workplace*, Kate van Heutgen explores the uniqueness of the social work profession and how this entails a particular type of work-related pressure: high workloads; the human cost of professional error; poor public image and tendency for public and political criticism; and value conflicts between the worker and their organisation. She uses the individual testimonies of fourteen New Zealand based social workers and the concepts of models and theories to provide a context within which stress experienced in a social work role can be better understood and managed.

The excerpts from interviews with social workers about their experience of stress and the strategies they use to cope with its impact provide a very human element to the higher level concepts and theories. They also present opportunities for practice-based learning.

In her discussion, the author switches from a practitioner to an organisation and system-level perspective, bringing a macro and micro lens

to the cause and effect of stress on individuals and organisations. She also offers points in the chapters when the reader can pause and reflect on some key areas. Each chapter concludes with a list of resources for further reading and research.

The book is well balanced in providing both a sound evidence base for the rationale and exploration of stress in the field of social work

and offering opportunity for the reader to build strategies to manage stress. The book can be used as a self-help type text or as a team or organisational resource to strengthen and develop a healthier workplace environment and culture where stress is proactively managed.

The author highlights one finding from research that illustrates how organisations

with a change management culture that includes staff consultation and participation can alleviate the risk of stress caused by alterations to working conditions. Thinking about social work practice with clients, the benefits of early intervention and participation are themes that consistently emerge as best practice, so it stands to reason that we use the same skills to manage our own professional practice.

Van Heutgen notes the opportunities the social work profession has to positively manage work-related pressures and stress, recognising a 'head start' gained through life experience and reflective education. At Child, Youth and Family, strengths-based practice underpins the organisation's core values. Working out and mobilising the individual,

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*The book can be used as a self-help type text or as a team or organisational resource to strengthen and develop a healthier workplace environment and culture where stress is proactively managed.*

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whānau and community strengths around a child or young person to mediate against risk and harm are central features of social work practice. In the same way, reflective social work practice and supervision can be used to identify and build a practitioner's strengths as part of managing the inherent stresses of working with people in distress.

Whether your interest or motivation for reading this book is at a personal and professional level or with a focus on developing knowledge and skills

to take to a manager or policy role, it will have something of value for you.

As a closing note, I am reminded of a conversation I recently had with a young person about what advice they would give to social work managers in providing their staff with the right environment and tools to do a good job. Their reply was about managing social workers' hours, and making sure they spend time with their families and stay connected to the people who are important to them. ■

# Social Work Now

## – Information for contributors

Child, Youth and Family, a service of the Ministry of Social Development (MSD), welcomes submissions for Social Work Now on topics relevant to social work practitioners and social work which aim to promote professionalism and practice excellence. Social Work Now is a publicly funded journal which is available free of charge and submissions published in the journal are made available on the Child, Youth and Family website ([www.cyf.govt.nz/SocialWorkNow.htm](http://www.cyf.govt.nz/SocialWorkNow.htm)) and through electronic library databases.

### Submissions

We seek articles from knowledgeable professionals. Each edition of social Work Now focuses on a specially selected theme. Submission may include:

- ⚡ **Substantive articles:** Substantive articles of around 3,000 – 4,000 words focusing on a theme are generally requested by specific invitation to the author by the editor or the Chief Social Worker. If you would like to submit an article, please contact the editor on (04) 918 9446 or email [nova.salomen001@govt.nz](mailto:nova.salomen001@govt.nz)
- ⚡ **Practice articles:** Contributions for practice articles are welcomed from social workers, other Child, Youth and Family staff and professionals working within the wider field. Articles can include accounts of innovative workplace practice, case reports, research, education, review articles, conference and workshop reports, and should be around 1,000 – 2,000 words.
- ⚡ **Reviews:** We also welcome book reviews and these should be around 500 words.

We appreciate authors may be at varying levels of familiarity with professional journal writing and for those less used to this style, we hope this won't be a barrier to approaching Social Work Now. We are always available to talk through ideas and to discuss how best to present your information.

If you would like to submit an article or review to Social Work Now, or if you have any queries please contact Nova Salomen, manager professional practice, Office of the Chief Social Worker.

Submissions may be sent by email to [socialworknow@cyf.govt.nz](mailto:socialworknow@cyf.govt.nz)

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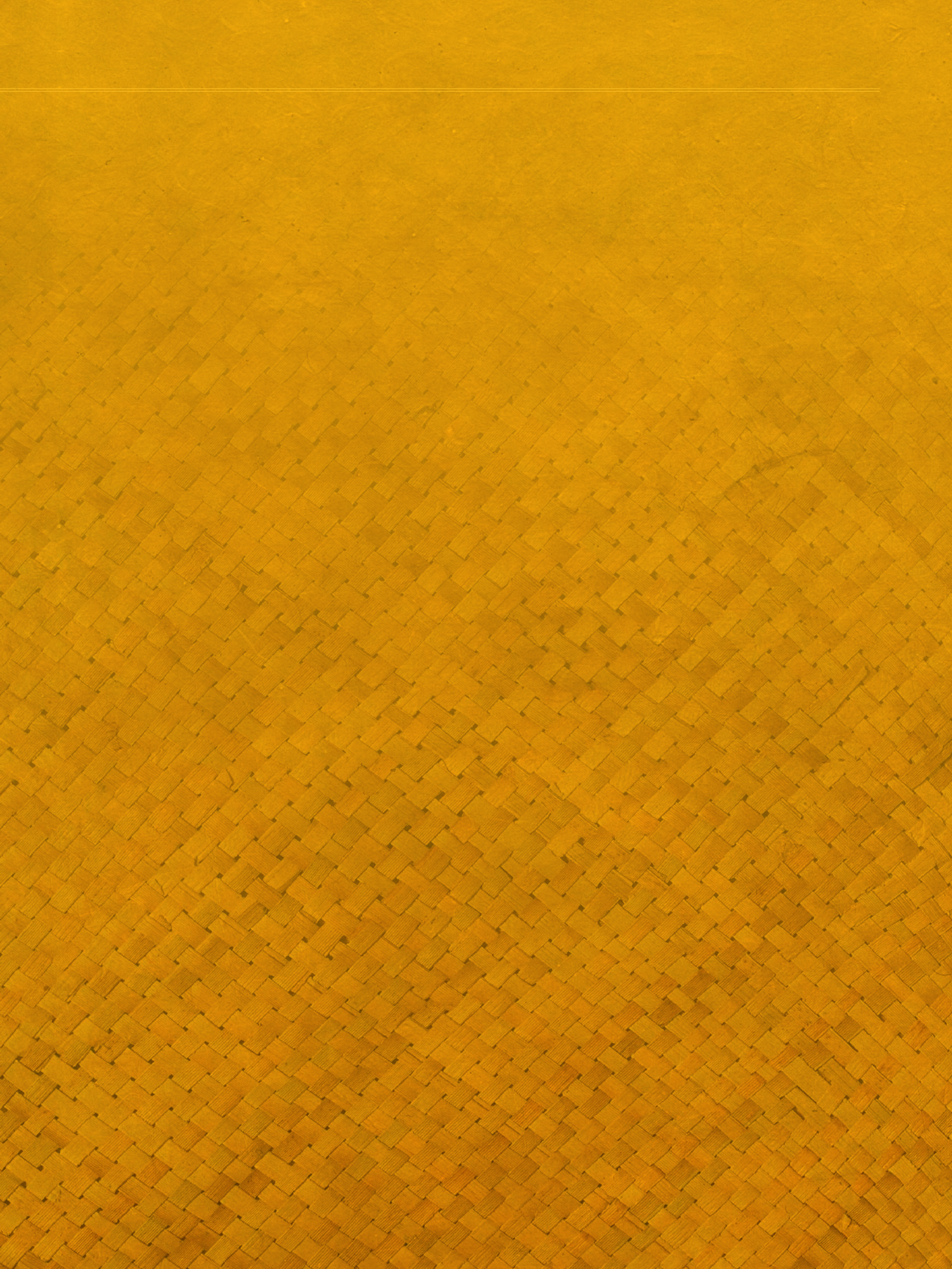
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# Social Work Now – Aims

*Social Work Now* aims to:

- ⋮ provide discussion of social work practice in Child, Youth and Family
- ⋮ encourage reflective and innovative social work practice
- ⋮ extend practice knowledge in any aspect of adoption, care and protection, residential care and youth justice practice
- ⋮ extend knowledge in any child, family or related service, on any aspect of administration, supervision, casework, group work, community organisation, teaching, research, interpretation, inter-disciplinary work, or social policy theory, as it relates to professional practice relevant to Child, Youth and Family and the wider social work sector.







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