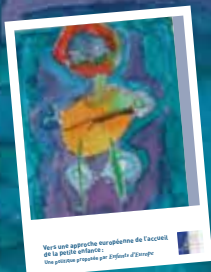


# Young children and their services: developing a European approach

A *Children in Europe* Policy paper

principle ④

## Participation: an essential value



This dossier is elaborating on one of the principles in the *Children in Europe* Policy paper 'Young children and their services: developing a European approach'.



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## Young children and their services: developing a European approach

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### Participation: an essential value

Services should embody participation as an essential value, as an expression of democracy and as a means to combat social exclusion. Participation requires pedagogical work that supports the development and upbringing of each child. Participation means the active inclusion of the entire community: all young children and adults, including parents, professionals of all kinds working in services, and other citizens. Participation enables all of these groups to contribute to the construction of a common project and to every aspect of the life of the service including helping in many ways and active involvement in management, decisions and evaluation.

## What does this principle mean?

Participation in early childhood education and care (ECEC) is a multifaceted concept, including policy, management, pedagogy, curriculum and evaluation. It involves different stakeholders, primary among these being:

- children;
- parents, and other family members who are involved in children's care, education and wellbeing;
- practitioners in ECEC services;
- the entire community, a wide social network (OECD, 2012) consisting of all the stakeholders in the local neighbourhood, including other services and citizens.

Participation does not mean involving parents (or, indeed just mothers) in ECEC services as passive users or as assistants to fulfil practitioners' requests or as deficient people needing instruction on how to become competent; nor restricting their presence just to certain times, activities or specific and restricted projects. Participation means the active and responsible inclusion of citizens - adults and children - able to reflect, decide and act upon children's education: they interact and cooperate as partners who contribute to setting up a common and democratic project of education, development and well-being for all children and families and for the communities in which they live. This idea of participation involves a shift from acting "on" or "for" others to being and doing "with" them (Rayna and Bouve, 2013), paving the way to possibilities of exchange and sharing of ideas, but above all a powerful reciprocity both between adults and children and among adults (Guerdan, Bouchard and Mercier, 2002; Henderson, Mapp, Johnson and Davies, 2007; Milani, 2008; Guerra and Luciano, 2009, 2014; Rayna and Rubio, 2010; Musatti and Rayna, 2010; Rayna and Bouve, 2013).

Participation means creating conditions so that every child and every family feel they are included, belong to and are supported by the service they use; that their diversity, experience and perspectives are welcomed and respected; that they are listened to and can actively contribute to the life of the service. This means that the service itself is not viewed simply as a provider of day care or narrow education for children, but as "a public institution, a forum and a children's space, a site for encounter and relating, where children and adults meet and commit to something, where they can dialogue, listen and discuss in order to share meanings" (Dahlberg, Moss, Pence, 2013).

## What is the basis of Principle 4?

Participation is a necessary condition for other *Children in Europe* principles, in particular diversity, choice and democracy (Principle 6) and participatory, democratic and transparent evaluation (Principle 7). Family participation facilitates children 'settling in' and their learning and achievements (Harris and Goodall, 2006; Powell et al., 2010; Sylva et al., 2004). More generally, it is a powerful catalyst for well-being, development and change - for children, adults and communities, for fostering innovation in services themselves, and for services to contribute to continuous democratic renewal of civil society as a whole.

The importance of participation is also underpinned by recent disciplinary and political developments. Over recent decades, the emergence of a new sociology of childhood has placed increasing emphasis on the role of children as active subjects, social and political protagonists, experts in their own lives, with the capacity to express views and preferences and to participate in decision-making, even from a very young age (Qvortrup, 1987; James and Prout, 1990; Mayall, 2002; Corsaro, 1997; James, Jenks and Prout, 1998). Researchers in many countries have made children not only the object of scientific research but have recognised them as actors involved in heuristic processes, by giving value to their ideas and perspectives on the world (Christensen and James, 2000; Lewis and Lindsay, 2000; Smith, Taylor and Gollop, 2000; Lewis et al. 2003; Freeman and Mathison, 2009).

Politically, participation has been central to movements supporting the rights of the child. For example, Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child focuses on respect for the views of the child, asserting that when adults are making decisions that affect children, children have the right to say what they think should happen and to have their opinions taken into account. General Comment no.12 on the right of the child to be heard (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009), recommends that the States Parties take measures to give children the opportunity to express their views and that due weight must be given to these views in relation to various issues. The Committee also states: "In all educational environments, including educational programmes in the early years, the active role of children in a participatory learning environment should be promoted" (para.107).

Participation has emerged as an important theme in the recent work on ECEC by the OECD. *Starting Strong*, its comparative study of early childhood policies in member

states, has emphasised the importance of defining, ensuring and monitoring quality through a participatory process involving staff, parents and children, and of encouraging family and community involvement in early childhood services. With the aim to foster positive dialogue between families, services, and communities, the *Starting Strong* reports place particular emphasis on valuing the knowledge that parents have of their own children, training educators in listening to families, the need to ensure equitable representation and participation of families from different socio-cultural contexts, and viewing centers not only as service providers but as spaces for partnership with families and for their democratic participation (OECD, 2001, 2006). More recently, engaging families and communities has been identified as one of the five key policy levers for promoting quality in ECEC services (OECD, 2012).

## What is the EU position?

The EU supports the importance of participation both in general and in the specific context of ECEC systems. A recommendation by the Committee of Ministers (1998) on children's participation in family and social life states the need to ensure that school curricula at all levels promote acquisition of the skills and knowledge children need in order to be able to express their views on issues that concern them, and encourages all early childhood education and care facilities to listen to the opinions of children and to promote their participation in decision-making processes and their active citizenship. A subsequent recommendation (European Committee of Ministers, 2006) on policies to support positive parenting further highlights the centrality of parent participation, underscoring both their rights and responsibilities in regard to the care and education of children. It stresses the relationship between the quality of children's education and care and the participatory processes of an entire community. The recommendation also encourages respect for the principles and rights of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Developing this theme, the 2012 European Commission Communication 15.2.2011, COM(2011) 60 final about the rights of children has a section on child participation and raising awareness of children's rights among children themselves.

The European Parliament's 2011 resolution on Early Years Learning in the European Union stresses that parents, both mothers and fathers, are equal partners in early childhood education and care. This resolution recognises that ECEC

services should be fully participative, involving all staff, parents, and where possible children themselves. It also refers to the importance of innovative services that are "local in character and bring together community members from the health, social, education, cultural and other sectors"

The Communication of the European Commission "Early Childhood Education and Care: Providing all our children with the best start for the world of tomorrow" of 17.2.2011 proposes a number of issues for policy co-operation among Member States, including access to a universal and inclusive ECEC system and encouraging the participation of children and families in situations of disadvantage. This proposal stems from the awareness that the ECEC system can give all children tools to develop their talents and potentials and can therefore contribute - in line with the European 2020 strategy - to reducing early school leaving and the number of children and adults at risk for poverty and social exclusion.

Similarly, the European Commission Recommendation of 2013 "Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage" extensively cites participation in relation to children's access, in particular children from disadvantaged families, to ECEC services and to play, recreation, sport, and cultural activities; participation of parents in the labour market and in social activities that improve their parenting skills and foster positive family communication; and approaches to participation that build on the potential for community volunteering and foster solidarity between generations. In addition, the 2013 Recommendation mentions - among community-led local development strategies - preschool education and reducing early school leaving.

Most recently, the Report of a Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care under the auspices of the European Commission (European Commission 2014), emphasises that "the involvement of parents in decision-making processes regarding the curriculum gives an explicit expression to the values of democracy and participation which stand at the core of the social function of ECEC services and are necessary conditions for inclusiveness". Furthermore, it refers to the "child, as a citizen with rights, [needing] to be placed at the core of any educational initiative" and that "[i]nclusive practices are grounded on an ethical commitment to social justice and respect for diversity that become concrete through the expression of values such as citizenship, democracy and social solidarity."

## How do we work with participation?

Participation is a value and practice that should inform every aspect of early childhood education and care. Child participation can take place through the teaching-learning processes that place children's experience at the centre, encouraging their interests and their explorations through the 'hundred languages' (Edwards et al., 1993) and also promoting their learning dispositions, that is, all the strategies by which children learn how to learn (Carr, 2001). It can also take place through enabling them to contribute directly and actively to the design of the spaces, materials and activities of their everyday life (Edwards et al., 1993; Clark et al., 2005). In this way, children can become co-authors of their own learning and express themselves in a never-ending doing, undoing, constructing and exploring. Listening to children, including a pedagogy of listening, becomes a powerful means of promoting their participation and their protagonism in shaping their own lives and inspiring the educational contexts they live in on a daily basis (Clark et al., 2005; Rinaldi, 2006; Clark and Moss, 2011).

There are many possibilities for effectively promoting family participation in ECEC services, in ways that move beyond a model of experts informing, instructing and educating deficient families; the challenge today is to build a model of participation of families in ECEC services as a real educational alliance. This can be accomplished in different ways and at different levels: management and decision-making, education and evaluation. Currently, a number of specific practices that are increasingly prevalent in ECEC services in various countries offer possible ways to involve parents in services, with attention focused less on parents' supposed inadequacies and problems and more on the competencies they bring to services and creating opportunities for all participants to get to know each other, to have dialogue and exchange and to do, be and learn together. These practices include, for example, the information-gathering interview prior to enrolment; home visits made by teachers; the "settling in" process seen as a delicate phase of transition from home to the centre or school; daily moments of welcome in the morning and reunification in the afternoon that mark the opening and closing of the educational day; individual meetings during the year that provide a special moment of exchange with each child's family members; group meetings - collective meetings for all the families of the centre or school or the specific class, for discussion and dialogue on educational topics that may also be open to all families of the community in which the service is located; workshops for

parents and/or grandparents to construct materials; events for play or reading open to all; parties and celebrations; and communication initiatives via newsletters and the media.

The participation of family members in the ECEC system is also possible and desirable through the engagement of their own resources and perspectives in the evaluation of both the children's learning and the quality of the service (Musatti, 2012).

Participation by the community involves all those who live in the neighbourhood of ECEC services, fellow citizens with a responsibility for and interest in education; but also all community services (Litjens and Taguma, 2010). In the latter case, as suggested in *Starting Strong III*, community participation calls for co-operation between ECEC services and other services as well as other levels of education, including "non-governmental organisations, private foundations, religious organisations, libraries and museums, sports centres, police and other social services." (OECD, 2012). Individual children and/or families in vulnerable situations (e.g. due to abuse, disability, social exclusion, illness, and so on) often provide a pretext and an opportunity to build a relationship of dialogue and collaboration amongst parents, educators and other local professionals (social workers, psychologists, therapists, doctors, administrators).

Relationships with the communities in which a service is located cannot simply be an exception, something «extra» or incidental. Instead, participation should be an intrinsic part of the pedagogical project of the service so that professionals are able to confidently handle problematic situations that require special attention to relationships with families, but also to relationships with community stakeholders and other services. In addition, independently of situations of risk and vulnerability, ECEC services should be open to the community on a daily basis, to learn to dialogue with children and adults from other cultures (Vandenbroeck, Roets and Snoeck, 2009; Bove, Mantovani and Zaninelli, 2010), and with other all other types of services (for children and for families, for adolescents, for people with disabilities, for elder people...); but also more generally with all stakeholders who, at different levels and in different roles, belong to that same community, which can and must become an educating community and promote social and shared responsibility for the education and care of children.

An example of participation at work is pedagogical documentation, providing opportunities for a wide range of protagonists (children, families, teachers and other professionals, citizens etc.) to participate in evaluation, research, personal development and educational choices - and the promotion of a culture of childhood and of participation, democracy, and inclusion (OECD, 2006; Malavasi and Zoccatelli, 2012; Dahlberg et al., 2013; Guerra and Luciano, 2014). Pedagogical documentation enables children's learning (and other experience) to be made visible (Giudici, Krechevsky and Rinaldi, 2001) and subject to analysis, dialogue, reflection and interpretation, always in relationship with others; it means giving collective attention to real, concrete things, and enables everything to be discussed with everyone.

## Some experiences of participation

### LA CITTÀ DEI BAMBINI IN ITALY

The project "La città dei bambini" (The City of Children) aims to promote children's autonomy and participation. It was launched in Italy in May 1991, and from the start assumed a political motivation: to work towards a new philosophy of city governance. It was concerned primarily with creating a different and better city for all, so that children too can share the experience of being autonomous and participating citizens. The first city to join up to the project was Fano, which was then joined by a number of others. In 1996 the Institute of Cognitive Sciences and Technologies (ISTC) at Italy's National Research Council (CNR) in Rome formed a research group, known as the International Laboratory, to provide support and co-ordination to the cities participating in the project, including managing the project via the website [www.lacittadeibambini.org](http://www.lacittadeibambini.org).

### CRÈCHES PARENTALES IN FRANCE AND BELGIUM

*Crèches parentales* are services for children under 3 years co-managed by parents and teachers and based on an organisational model in which mandatory family participation is an intrinsic part of the identity of the service: so parents become, in effect, partners with teachers. Starting in the 1960s, *crèches parentales* are widespread in France, and now also appear in Belgium. ACEPP (*Association des Collectifs Enfants Parents Professionnels*) in France and RIEPP (*Réseau des Initiatives*

*Enfants-Parents-Professionnels*) in Belgium are active in promoting participation of families in the life of these services, especially families from different socio-cultural backgrounds, so as to foster exchange between different ways of being parents and families.

### THE FATHERS GROUP AT THE FAMILY CENTRE OF STEINMETZSTRASSE IN THE SCHÖNEBERG DISTRICT OF BERLIN

When the Pestalozzi-Fröbel House (PFH) was opened and the Family Centre (*nachbarschaftszentrum*) of Steinmetzstrasse was established in 2004, the social fabric of the Schöneberg district of Berlin was fragmented, with high rates of poverty and unemployment, large families living in inadequate housing, low education levels and linguistic barriers. Such difficult living conditions often had a negative impact on the well-being of families and the safety of the neighbourhood. The Fathers Group established at the Centre is focussed primarily on the experience of immigrant fathers whose situations are particularly fragile, and offers a place for meeting and exchange to promote parenting skills and greater responsibility in the education and care of their children. Discussions, meetings, common and shared activities (between fathers with similar issues, with the children and/or open to other parents) on topics related to child-rearing and education help to raise awareness of the culture of childhood and to build broader inclusion and participation of all in the life of their community.

### LEARNING STORIES

Learning Stories are a form of documentation and assessment of children's learning that is close to their real experiences and offer an alternative to the more traditional approaches to assessment using checklists. Drawing inspiration from psychology, sociology and the culture of education, the Learning Stories approach developed by Margaret Carr (2001) shows how children develop "learning dispositions" such as persisting with difficulty and uncertainty, expressing ideas with confidence, and confronting problem-solving in a reflective and collaborative way.

Learning Stories start from "observations in everyday settings designed to provide a cumulative series of qualitative 'snapshots' or written vignettes of individual children" (ibid., p.96). The approach allows children to

participate in the assessment of their own learning through both self-assessment and the choice of the adults (parents and teachers) they want to work with. Learning Stories also offer families an opportunity to participate: they are one of the voices of the “chorus that contributes to the assessment of the child’s learning dispositions”, with each member offering his or her own perspective. Parents collaborate with teachers in processes of reflection on children’s learning, and are asked to write Learning Stories about their own children in various everyday situations, as well as to comment on the Learning Stories taking place within the early childhood centre and developed by the teachers.

studies have highlighted the strategic importance of training in specific skills that are useful for fostering the participation of children, adults and communities in ECEC services and in schools in the most constructive way (OECD, 2006, 2012; Van Laere, 2013).

Thirdly, participation needs to be a coordinated priority of all those institutions and workers with an interest in early childhood, manifested through what has been termed a “competent early childhood system” (Urban et al., 2011).

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## PARTICIPATION OF FAMILIES AND CO-MANAGEMENT OF SERVICES IN DENMARK

ECEC policies in Denmark highlight the importance of parental participation, including Parents Councils in each centre, which by law have decision-making power in management, including budget appropriation and allocation, pedagogical criteria and personnel hiring. Each council is composed of parent representatives and a coordinator.

### Next steps

While there is widespread rhetorical support for the principle of participation – by children and adults – in ECEC services, to become a more widespread reality constant and rigorous attention must be given to defining and implementing the conditions necessary for active and inclusive participation.

Firstly, commitment is required at multiple levels - on the part of services, schools, local and national governments as well as the European Union - to experiment, evaluate, disseminate and make visible experiences of participation. In this way, policy-makers, administrators, professionals, and all citizens can not only see the beauty and success of certain participation-oriented educational, cultural, and political choices, but also receive a clear message about their feasibility, validity, reliability and transferability to other contexts. This requires investing in educational research and the dissemination of its results, providing a powerful source of knowledge and deep understanding of the issues.

Secondly, it is essential to make increasing investments in staff development in relation to participation. Numerous

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