

# Factsheet #5: Involving children & young people in formal meetings



For many children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), being invited to attend a formal meeting is an empowering experience which gives them a literal seat at the table alongside professionals. However, in order to make sure that this involvement is meaningful, steps should be taken to ensure that children and young people feel comfortable and confident in the meeting, and that their input is valued and respected.

This Factsheet provides some guidance on establishing a positive environment for children and young people with SEND in formal meetings, as well as some next steps for acting on their input.

“Professionals need to adapt meetings to make young people feel confident to take part.”

## Before the meeting

### Laying the foundations

Allow sufficient time for approaching the meeting as a participation activity, including all stages of the participation process:

- Establishing the purpose of the meeting
- Recruiting children and young people
- Planning the meeting
- Holding the meeting
- Evaluating the meeting, its outcomes, and the role taken by children and young people

For more information on the Participation Process, please see [Factsheet #3](#)

**Give children and young people an opportunity to plan or comment on the agenda in advance.** This will help them to stay engaged during the meeting by keeping discussions relevant, as well as ensuring there are ample breaks and ‘energisers’.

## Considering who to invite and why

**Even formal meetings should be fully inclusive.** It may be easiest to invite children and young people who are the most articulate or are the easiest to contact, but the meeting should be planned in such a way that it is accessible to all. Issue invitations based on children and young people’s relevant experiences and interests, rather than their capacities.

For more information on overcoming barriers to participation, please see [Factsheet #4](#)

**Ensure that your purpose is fully established before inviting children and young people to attend.** Communicating the purpose clearly to children and young people means they will know what to expect from the meeting and its outcomes, and enables them to give informed consent.



## Logistics

**Work with children and young people to ensure that they are able to attend the meeting.** Talk through any barriers to attending and offer solutions. These may include:

- Providing transport or covering travel costs
- Choosing an accessible venue
- Arranging the meeting at an appropriate time
- Offering incentives
- Setting expectations

For more information on overcoming barriers to participation, please see [Factsheet #4](#)

**Be clear if you want children and young people to attend as individuals or as representatives of wider groups.** This will enable them to prepare their own thoughts on the topic, and seek the views of others. They may wish to prepare some materials to share in advance (drawings, presentations, videos etc.).

**Give an idea of what the next steps will be after the meeting.** Children and young people often expect to see change much more quickly than professionals are able to achieve. These expectations can be managed by giving them an overview of where the meeting sits in the timeline of activities, and when they can expect feedback. Be realistic about providing feedback, and follow through with updates.

## Providing information

**Make sure that children and young people have any information that they will need well before the meeting.** Many children and young people with SEND need time to process new information, and a formal meeting can add additional pressure. To mitigate this, share relevant information in advance. This might include:

- Accessible papers and agendas
- Information shared in a variety of forms (video, audio, Easy Read etc.)
- Jargon buster for unavoidable jargon and acronyms

## During the meeting

### Keeping children & young people engaged

**Ensure there are regular breaks, energisers and refreshments.** Children and young people will need opportunities to refresh their minds and bodies, as well as to process the meeting content.

**Use a range of activities.** Everyone processes information in different ways, and children and young people in particular enjoy using a range of activities. Consider:

- Small group/ pair discussion
- Individual reflection
- Artistic activities (drawing, poetry etc.)



- Using visual prompts

## Everyone is equal

**Be aware of power dynamics.** When coming to a formal meeting, children and young people are entering an adult-dominated space. Make sure the atmosphere is open and welcoming, and that children and young people are treated as equal partners. This includes:

"Giving young people a voice should start here, at the meeting where they're under discussion."

- Offering a child or young person the role of co-chair.
- Giving children and young people ample time to consider questions or suggestions before responding.
- Ensuring seating arrangements promote equality.
- Being explicit about how everyone will have a fair chance to speak and how this will be managed. Children and young people may not feel confident enough to just speak up, and may need a clear invitation.

"Don't put young people under pressure."

"Give everyone a chance to speak."

### **Welcome different communication needs and styles.**

Generally, language should be kept clear and simple, avoiding jargon as far as possible. Any unavoidable terminology should be explained clearly. Consider jargon bells or traffic light cards for children and young people to indicate when they do not understand something.

"No jargon!"

In addition, be aware of:

- Specific speech and language access needs (such as Makaton, BSL, Talking Mats, PECS or technological resources).
  - \* These communication methods may take more time than conventional speech, so take this into account when setting the agenda.
- Non-verbal communication (body language, facial expressions).
  - \* For some young people, this is their primary form of communication. Ensure they are supported by someone who knows them well, but also find out if the child or young person has a pupil passport or similar to explain their communication.

Even articulate young people may not say exactly what they are thinking because of pressure, confusion or embarrassment. If they seem hesitant or withdrawn, find other ways of explaining an issue or expressing thoughts.

For more information about involving children and young people with speech, language and communication needs, please see [The Communication Trust's Brief Guide to Effective Participation](#)

**Remain open-minded.** Children and young people are likely to bring innovative and unusual suggestions to the table; this is one of the things that makes their input so valuable. Be honest with them about feasibility, but do give their ideas serious consideration.

“Good professionals want to hear what young people have to say.”

**Be open to criticism.** Children and young people’s input is also valuable because their lived experiences give an insight into how things are really going. They may raise unexpected issues and have strong emotional responses.

- Acknowledge issues and feelings.
- Respect lived experiences, even when they contradict other information.
- Be aware that children and young people may not be as diplomatic as other stakeholders!

## Staying on track

**Keep the meeting focused.** Children and young people rarely have a chance to meet the professionals who make strategic decisions, so they may see formal meetings as an opportunity to raise concerns or address unexpected topics. When meetings stray off-topic:

- Remind everyone of the purpose of the meeting. Ideally have it displayed somewhere in the room.
- Keep a ‘car park’ board or flipchart where other issues can be noted and addressed at a later date.
- Signpost children and young people to sources of information and/or support relating to the issue.
- Inform children and young people of other work going on related to the issue.

**Be concise.** Children and young people can lose track of long, complex points, so be brief or summarise after a long period of speaking.

“I understood all the words, but they started talking and got into their train of thought and I wasn’t sure when they had actually made their point.”

## After the meeting

### Maintaining contact

**Share summaries of the meeting in good time.**

Consolidate the discussions and actions in a clear, accessible manner while the meeting is still fresh in children and young people’s minds.

**Be open to contributions at a later date.** Children and young people may have further input to share after the meeting, once they have had time to debrief and reflect on how it went.



**Give good quality, regular feedback.** As well as initial feedback on the outcomes of the meeting, keep children and young people updated about the steps that are being taken regarding the issues discussed. This includes being open about delays or challenges.

**Invite feedback.** Give children an opportunity to share their thoughts on the meeting itself. Consider:

- Content
- Accessibility
- Inclusiveness
- Understanding of next steps



This resource is part of the Making Participation Work programme, a joint partnership between the Council for Disabled Children and KIDS, and funded by the Department for Education. For more information about the Making Participation Work programme, visit us at <https://councilfordisabledchildren.org.uk/our-work/participation/practice/making-participation-work>