

# Factsheet #4: Barriers to Participation

All children and young people have the right to have their voice heard, regardless of their age or support needs. However, there are many barriers to young disabled people participating in meaningful decision making.

This resource will identify some of the common barriers children and young people have identified at different stages of their participatory involvement, and propose some solutions.



## Initial involvement

There are numerous barriers which prevent children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities from being involved in participation opportunities. These barriers occur across all levels of participation and engagement methods.

### Barriers

### Solutions

Young people are unaware that they have the right to participate, or underestimate the value of their own voice.

Young people suffer from anxiety or a lack of self-confidence, and feel unable to share their views.

Adults do not create space for participation because there are no structures to report and respond to children and young people's opinions and ideas.

Adults are unwilling to listen and act in response to children and young people's views.

because individual adults are unable to respond to children and young people's views.

Professionals need confidence about how to include young people in the right way.

Young people should be made aware that it is their right to participate and be included.

Encourage young people to take a meaningful role in decision-making from an early age, in line with their evolving capacities.

If young people don't have the experience or confidence to take part then there needs to be trust built - this is the professional's responsibility.

Ensure all staff/ supporters are aware who is leading on and accountable for participation, as well as what their own individual responsibilities are in supporting and promoting young people's voices.

Equip staff/ supporters with the knowledge, tools and skills to promote and support participation.

Ensure that young people are familiar with the adults who are responsible for delivering participation opportunities and with those who have the authority to respond to their views.

## Barriers

Formal opportunities (such as groups or meetings) are inaccessible due to location, transport, cost, or other factors.

Opportunities are in conflict with school or college commitments.

Organise the delivery of service so they make time to understand children and young people's needs.



Young people may not be aware of existing participation opportunities:

- Gatekeepers (parents, teachers or supporters) may filter which young people are included
- Young people may not be considered eligible for inclusion due to their disability, age or other factors
- 'Seldom Heard' young people may not be made aware about opportunities.

Young people may not have the support they need to participate fully, either in terms of access needs or the support required to engage in an activity.

## Solutions

Select the right venue at the right time:

- Seek young people's input
- Ensure the venue is comfortable, relaxed, and welcoming
- Easy to get to and fully accessible
- Remember that accessibility does not just mean getting into the building, but also that everyone's needs are accounted for once they are there –appropriate bathroom facilities, quiet spaces and signage are just a few examples for the venue, as well as considering the full range support for young people to join in with the activities and tasks.

Go to the young people rather than have them come to you.

Facilitate transport.

Remember that young people do not have to be in formal meetings, they can input in other ways, for example:

- Via clubs or schools
- By sending in videos or photos
- Via social media

Ensure all children and young people's right to be heard is respected.

Make appropriate arrangements to take into account access needs.

Build positive relationships with gatekeepers so that they understand the importance and value of supporting all children and young people to have their voice heard.

Actively seek out children and young people from seldom heard groups and make the necessary adjustments to ensure that they can participate in a way that works for them.

## Once involved

Once they have chosen to take part in a participation opportunity, there are additional barriers which prevent young people from having a full and meaningful role.

### Barriers

Young people do not have all the information required.

Young people do not understand why they have been involved in the activity.

Adult voices carry more weight than young people's.



Access needs are not taken into consideration. Some examples:

- Communication
- Sensory impairments
- Processing time
- Personal care

### Solutions

Provide young people with information on the context and purpose of the work.

Provide timely information in a format accessible to the young person. Use Easy Read or social stories if appropriate.

Make sure everyone is clear on what you aim to achieve and why the information is being gathered.

Acknowledge and respect that this is children and young people's opportunity to have their say, and that they deserve an equal opportunity to be heard. It is their right to share opinions, even if they are in contrast to adults'.

Create a space where children and young people feel secure to share their views. Make it an adult-free zone (apart from the facilitator) if need be.

Educate people offering services so they know where to get support and/or expertise to include children and young people.

Ensure young people have an opportunity to input into which environment, delivery methods and support they need to be able to fully engage.

## Barriers

Young people are not fully engaged in the activity and find it boring.

The language or materials used are not accessible to the young people.

Young people feel shy and are concerned about being judged for their opinions or questions.

Young people are not given opportunities to ask questions.

Young people do not feel comfortable or safe during the activity, either because of the environment or because of the atmosphere.

Young people are in the minority in a group setting, and feel uncomfortable and isolated as a result.

## Solutions

Make meetings less formal, with an element of fun.

Invite young people to input into how they would like to participate. Remember that it does not have to be in a formal meeting.

Be flexible.

Build relationships with young people so they feel supported and comfortable.

Consider language and communication methods carefully. Avoid jargon, and use Easy Read and alternative communication methods such as signing, drawing or Talking Mats when appropriate.

Try positive risk taking  
– be creative, listen and support us.

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



## Outcomes and feedback

A young person's involvement does not end when the activity ends. The follow-up from the activity and next steps can create barriers for a young person's future involvement, or there may be barriers related to the outcomes of the activity.

### Barriers

Insufficient resources or a lack of workforce capacity mean that decisions made through the participation process do not come to fruition.

A lack of feedback and/or demonstrable change may leave young people feeling disappointed and reluctant to engage in the future.

### Solutions

Be honest about what you can achieve. Limitations and obligations need to be built into the planning process and identified outputs and outcomes should be shared with the group at the start of their engagement.

Manage young people's expectations regarding what is feasible early on in the participation process. However, do not use this as a justification not to seriously consider young people's views and explore the suggestions they make.

Provide timely feedback to the young people involved on what is going to happen next, and decisions made related to the activity.

It is recognised that young people often expect decisions to be made and changes to come about more quickly than is possible in reality, however simple feedback including thanks, who will see the information and what they will use it for demonstrates appreciation for the work the young people have done. If possible, include a timeframe for when young people can expect to receive more detailed feedback.



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>