

Are young people really being listened to?

Is the participation of young people simply something that is talked about, or is it actually happening?

There is currently much debate over whether or not young people's views are listened to and to what extent they should be allowed to participate in decision making processes.

It's not a new debate and questions about it have been asked for decades but Children's Express reporters find out what young people today are thinking and whether there has been any progress made towards children being heard.

Recently we were invited to speak at a conference on children's participation and how to encourage them to be involved in youth services. The conference was attended by many youth workers and other professionals, so we took the opportunity to interview a few of them about their thoughts on children's involvement in decision making.

One participant Carolyn Willow, National Co-ordinator of the Child Rights Alliance for England said, "I am really surprised that adults still find it so tricky and so puzzling that children should be involved in decisions and how to do this". And so we decided to see if this was the case.

Our Research

Through our research and preparation for the conference we learnt more about the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, an international document that has been around since 1990. In it Article 12 tells us that children have the right to say what they think should happen when adults are making decisions that affect their lives, and to have their opinions taken into account. Yet often young people feel that they are not viewed as productive members of society and not allowed their say.

So why is it that young people are still not being taken seriously in today's society? We spoke to both young people and adults to find out what they thought about this issue.

During our research, it became obvious that most people didn't know much about the subject: almost half the adults and young people interviewed didn't know what children's participation actually meant. It was also interesting that two-thirds of the young people we interviewed told us that they had experienced situations in which their views and ideas had been ignored, such as Gemma, 17, from Nottingham: "Oh, it really makes your blood boil because people ask you for your opinions, but they really don't even want to know."

Being Heard at Home

Maybe the lack of interest in children's participation is because young people's views are not being listened to by their parents. Some young people told us that their views weren't even valued at home. 'I feel that I have been listened to least in situations with my family...' expressed one young person. Maybe this is because older family members with more life experience than us are listened to first.

We went out onto the streets of London to see what some adults thought and 34-year-old Frederick said: "It is up to the family how much children and young people participate". Perhaps this is due to the fact that at home the adults have the authority to have the last word.

Despite these experiences we were surprised to find that nearly half of the young people we interviewed felt that their views were being considered most when it comes to their education. This is possibly because many schools do now have school councils and forums.

So what's the point?

So, why do young people feel it's so important that their views should be heard? Melissa, 14, explains: "Young people should have the opportunity to have their views heard because we too live in society and so we should have a say in what goes on in that society...young people also think differently from adults so they have to have their views heard".

The difficulty is that outside of the education system there is little opportunity for young people to have their voices heard and even when they are given a voice, adults do not seem to act on what they hear.

England's Children's Commissioner Al Aynsley-Green was quoted recently in Young Minds magazine as saying children's participation is "not just consultation which ... means adults ask questions, children answer, and adults make the decisions. Participation is when children are part of the decision-making process".

But for this to become a reality adults have a lot of work to do. Until we are given more than just an occasional opportunity to speak for ourselves and until adults see us as equals who have a valuable opinion and something really worth listening to, things will remain the same for several more decades.

This story was produced by Chinwe Izamoje 14, Ebony Goodwin 14 and Crystal Lenford 12. It was published on the [Reach for the Sky](#) website.

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