Children's Voices

A principled framework for children and young people's participation as valued citizens and learners

Pauline Harris & Harry Manatakis

Government of South Australia

UniSA

This document contributes to the work of the State Government's Every chance for every child strategic priority.

Government of South Australia

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For further information about the research on which this principled framework is based, please refer to the following book, which is due to be published in December 2013 (see www.routledge.com/books/details/9780415714006/ for more details):

Harris, P. & Manatakis, H. (2013) Children as citizens: *Engaging with the child's voice in educational settings*. Routledge, London.

A note about the 'Children's Voices' Framework

Children's Voices: A principled framework for children and young people's participation as valued citizens and learners has been developed through a research partnership led by the de Lissa Chair in Early Childhood Research, Professor Pauline Harris.

The de Lissa Chair in Early Childhood Research is funded through the de Lissa Trust Fund as a unique partnership between the Public Trustee, University of South Australia and the Department for Education and Child Development. The Chair is a joint appointment between the department and the university and provides a valuable opportunity to link research, policy and practice. The general function of the Chair is to provide leadership in the development and promotion of an early childhood research culture in early childhood development, care and education in South Australia.

The research base and principled approach to engaging children outlined in this document has resulted from research in early childhood education linked to the Australian Early Years Learning Framework. It has also been trialled successfully in a number of communities with older children. This includes primary and secondary schools, family day care and out of school hours care settings through the *My time, our place – Framework for school-aged care*. As civics and citizenship are core learning areas of any modern learning framework, including the new Australian Curriculum for schools to be implemented across Australia from February 2014, these principles are considered to be equally applicable to curricula across education and learning settings within and outside of Australia.

For ease of reading, the term 'child' or 'children' is used throughout this document, which is also reflective of the original research base referred to throughout this framework. However, as emphasised in the title, this principled framework is applicable to children and young people of all ages, having been applied successfully with children as young as three (or slightly younger in some cases) and young people up to the age of 18. In fact, the principles reflected within form the basis of any respectful engagement process regardless of age – applicable to children, young people and adults alike.

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1. Introduction: What is our research base? Who are these tools and resources for?

This collection of tools and resources are designed to support and empower children and young people's participation as active citizens and learners. They are rigorously informed by a research study of South Australia's statewide consultations with 350 young children across diverse regions and localities (Harris & Manatakis, 2013a, 2013b; Appendix 1). These consultations set out to document children's views on what was important to them in their communities and what they wished for in their lives, and was used to inform a review of South Australia's Strategic Plan in 2010. The same model of participation of children and young people developed through this study has been used in 2011-12 to inform the City of Campbelltown's Social Plan and also in three communities (Campbelltown, Gawler and Onkaparinga) in 2013 as part of Child Friendly SA 'child/student-led asset audits' of their communities.

This study provided rich insights into factors that contributed to the success of these consultations, challenges that arose, and ways in which the processes might be further enhanced. These insights came from interviews, observations, document analyses, and artefacts created by children, all of which took stock of the voices and perspectives of all who were involved – children, educators, families and policymakers.

This study resonates with research conducted elsewhere in Australia and overseas, while providing fresh insights into the processes involved in consulting with young children.

Those who will find this collection of research-based tools and resources useful include:

- educators and other early childhood colleagues who seek to fully engage with young children's voices and perspectives in their early childhood programs and activities, and foster children's active citizenship and learning
- policymakers who seek to engage with young children's voices and perspectives to inform their policy directions and decisions
- researchers who wish to use participatory techniques in their engagement with children as researchers.

2. Children as valued citizens and learners

In 2009, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) launched its National Early Childhood Development Strategy, framed by a vision that "all children have the best start in life to create a better future for themselves and for the nation" (COAG, 2009, p. 13). Underscoring this vision is the recognition that:

"Children are important. They bring their own value and influence to the world, as well

as being shaped by the world around them …Children are also important for their future contribution to society, as the next generation of leaders, workers, parents, consumers and members of communities … in a global society." *(COAG, National Early Childhood Development Strategy, 2009, p. 7)*

Sharing this view in this collection of tools and resources, we recognise children as competent humans who have the inherent right and capability to contribute to decisions that affect their lives. Children are key informants and experts on their own lives (MacNaughton et al, 2003) and, indeed, are our best source of advice for matters affecting them. Well and long have we known from early childhood theories, research and practice that children are active constructors of meaning with voices to be heard and capacity to express their views with wisdom and insight.

"Experiences of relationships and participation in communities contribute to children's belonging, being and becoming. From birth children experience living and learning with others in a range of communities. These might include families, local communities or early childhood settings. Having a positive sense of identity and experiencing respectful, responsive relationships strengthens children's interest and skills in being and becoming active contributors to their world."
(Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia, Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), 2009, p. 25)

2.1 Key mandates

We have developed this set of tools and resources for those involved in children's participation as active citizens and learners. Three key documents frame this collection:

Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (DEEWR, 2009, p. 25)[1]

Learning outcome two is especially relevant to children's participation as active citizens and learners: 'Children are connected with and contribute to their world.'

This outcome includes:

"Children develop a sense of belonging to groups and communities and an understanding of the reciprocal rights and responsibilities necessary for active community participation" (DEEWR, 2009, p. 26)

It should be re-emphasised that civics and citizenship are core learning areas of any modern learning framework, including the new Australian Curriculum to be implemented across Australian schools from February 2014, however, the emphasis of the Early Years Learning Framework is a reminder that active citizenship is just as relevant to our very youngest children as it is to older children and young people.

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)[2]

The Rights of the Child recognises that children's rights are part and parcel of human rights. Australia ratified these rights in 1991. Article 12, 'Respect for the views of the child', is particularly relevant to children's participation as active citizens and learners:

"When adults are making decisions that affect children, children have the right to say what they think should happen and have their opinions taken into account."

UNICEF's Framework and Vision for Child Friendly Cities[3]

A 'child-friendly city' is committed to the fullest implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. It guarantees among other rights, the right of every young citizen to:

- influence decisions about their city
- express their opinion on the city they want
- participate in family, community and social life
- be an equal citizen of their city with access to every service, regardless of ethnic origin, religion, income, gender or disability.

3. Engaging with Children's Voices

Children's voices lie at the heart of consulting with children. By 'children's voices' we mean children's expression of their meaning through talk and other ways, such as visual arts, dance, movement, song, music, poetry, photography, drawing, drama and writing – the "hundred languages of children", to quote Loris Malaguzzi[4] (see also Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 2012). We seek to ensure that children's voices are channelled through multiple modes so that children might express their meanings as fully and richly as possible.

Through whatever means children use, it is children's voices that matter when consulting with them about issues affecting them. It is important not to impose our adult frames of reference or put words in children's mouths. Children are insightful human beings, as anyone who has had the privilege of really tuning into children knows. To listen to a child with all our senses is to wholly encounter the child in all their fullness of being and richness of thought.

Consulting with children is more than a one-off event – it involves sustained engagement over time. What occurs before and after the consultations is as important as the consultations themselves. Accordingly, we have organised this collection of tools and resources around six key stages of the journey taken when consulting with children (see Figure 1):

- Planning and preparing children's consultations to ensure the consultations are: adequately resourced in terms of material, time and people support; effective for all concerned stakeholders; and appropriate for the children who engage in the consultations
- Providing professional development workshops to ensure all who are facilitating the consultations are supported with principles and strategies for consulting with children, and have opportunity to tailor approaches to their particular children and contexts
- Implementing the consultations, involving sustained engagement over time and multiple means of expression
- Documenting the consultations, including ongoing documentation as the consultations occur and final documentation of children's key messages
- Analysing, synthesising and reporting children's messages in ways that are authentic and true to children's meanings while speaking to an official audience
- Tracking uptake and consequence of children's messages and providing feedback to children and other stakeholders of these follow-on effects over time.

We provide a guide to each of these stages but not in a prescriptive or lock-step fashion, for we believe that to be prescriptive or formulaic would be to disempower children and adults alike. Rather, we see this guide as a conceptually coherent set of tools and resources for managing each stage of this highly important and deeply rewarding engagement – remaining open to the many possibilities that arise therein.

Figure 1. Before, during and after children's consultations: Six key stages in engaging with children's voices.

4. Planning and preparing children's consultations

"The wider the range of possibilities we offer children, the more intense will be their motivations and the richer their experiences. We must widen the range of topics and goals, the types of situations we offer and their degree of structure, the kinds and combinations of resources and materials, and the possible interactions with things, peers, and adults."

Loris Malaguzzi (1920-1994), Italian early education specialist. Quoted in Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1998, p. 79)

4.1 Guiding principles

There is no magic recipe for engaging with children's voices. There are, however, a number of key principles that guide our actions in this space. The important thing is to get the principles right, understand how they may be translated into meaningful action, and the rest will follow. These principles include:

- Viewing the child as a valued citizen and social actor

We view children as experts on their own lives. They are our key informants and best source of advice on matters affecting their lives (MacNaughton et al, 2003).

- Appropriateness

Young children are wiser than many might think; under the appropriate circumstances they have the capacity to express their views powerfully and often simply (Christensen & James, 2000; MacNaughton et al, 2003; Moloney, 2005). Appropriateness includes engagement being pitched fittingly to children in terms of age, individuality and culture. Engaging with children, educators and families can help ensure appropriate action, as too do the ideas presented throughout this guide.

- Respect for the child

Consultations are founded on respect and reciprocal relationships with children. Handing the floor to the child does not diminish adult responsibilities toward the child (Woodhead & Faulkner, 2000). It is important that adults ensure a safe and secure context in which the consultations occur, and demonstrate a genuine interest in what the child is expressing.

- Shared understanding

Shared understanding is essential to effective and respectful consultations with children. This includes developing an understanding about why and how the child is being invited to take part, what the purpose is, and how the child might contribute to shaping the way the consultations occur. Shared understanding is not a one-off event – it needs to be monitored and honed as the consultations unfold.

- Handing the agenda to the child

Working with the child requires techniques such as projection. That is, asking questions that explicitly invite children's views – such as 'Tell me, what do you think about…?'; 'How do you feel when…?'; 'What do you like about…?'; 'What makes you think that?'; 'What makes you feel that way?'; and so on. Asking lead questions is important, accompanied by concrete stimuli and hands-on experiences in which children can explore and express their ideas, while others carefully observe and document. Clarifying what children are expressing and prompting them to elaborate on their ideas, can help to further support the child's expression.

- Being mindful of power

Power is a key consideration when engaging with children's voices – after all, whose voices count? It is important to be mindful of power differences between children and adults and not to put words in the child's mouth (Mayall, 2000). Power dynamics can also occur among children; if working with children in a group setting it is important to be sensitive to such dynamics and hence the child who may dominate and the child who might not have opportunity to contribute. Small social groups often work best.

- Ethical considerations

It is essential to respect and honour the ethical rights of children and their parents or legal guardians. Key ways of doing this include providing clear information about what a child's involvement entails; and seeking informed consent from the child and their parents or guardians to participate, with an understanding that if they choose not to participate, there will be no negative consequences for that decision. Voluntary participation is the key, and even if children agree to take part, they have the freedom to withdraw at any time without penalty. Children also have the right for their privacy and confidentiality to be maintained, including agreement to any publications arising from consultations. Finally, children have the right to be assured that their engagement will be worthwhile and enjoyable.

4. 2 Initiating a ‘children’s voices’ project

One of the greatest challenges in any undertaking is often the initiation and commencement. Where to start can be a daunting task, particularly if it is an undertaking such as a ‘Children’s Voices’ project which has not as yet been valued and embedded into the standard practices of our culture.

4.2.1 Identifying purpose

Before commencing a ‘children’s voices’ project it is crucial to ensure the purpose is clear. Consultation with children without a clear outcome in mind or opportunity to translate children’s views into action, despite the best intentions, may appear tokenistic in nature and instil a lack of confidence by children in the democratic nature of society. It may also perpetuate the misnomer that children are not able to meaningfully contribute to the same extent as adults.

In identifying the purpose or desired outcomes from the consultation, consider opportunities ranging from:

- improving child-specific settings – Seeking children’s views in relation to new (or reviewing the practices of existing) child focussed services, programs or facilities
- Including children in existing community consultations – Facilitating the inclusion of children’s views in existing public consultation processes in which adults are ordinarily consulted to ensure children also have a voice and are recognised as equal citizens
- Initiating new community consultations – Creating new opportunities to consult with children on issues they have identified as important to them in their communities and seeking community action as a result.

4.2.2 Engaging non-traditional partners

A significant challenge in the commencement of a ‘children’s voices’ project may be attracting the involvement of non-traditional partners, being those individuals or organisations not traditionally engaging directly with children, but whose policies or decisions impact on children’s lives and contribute to the conditions in society children and their families are faced with.

Changing attitudes and cultural perspectives is not easy. Efforts are often best concentrated on (i) seeking out individuals within organisations or sectors that value and understand the benefits of the ‘children’s voices’ project and (ii) establishing strong relationships with them in order to influence greater cultural change across the organisation or sector over time through demonstrated successful practices.

4.2.3 Pragmatic considerations

There are a number of pragmatic questions to be addressed when planning and preparing children's consultations:

- Who do we involve?
- How do we want people to be involved?
- How will we support their involvement?
- How will we foster meaningful relationships among those involved?
- How many children are involved?
- Will we engage with educators and if so, in what ways and with whom?
- What expertise is available on which we can draw?
- What support is provided to implement the consultations (eg, time, equipment, expertise, materials, other), and who will provide this support and how?
- How will we implement and document the consultations?

4.2.4 Themes

This last question brings us to processes for implementing and documenting how we consult with children.

When undertaking consultations with young children it is important to frame the questions as themes to be explored and allow adequate time for exploration of the subject matter. On-the-spot questioning is not likely to engage young children or give them opportunity to express their views in the most authentic or meaningful way.

It should be kept in mind that young children may not have prior experience or understanding of the theme being explored. Therefore a process whereby children are able to develop an understanding and a view on a particular matter is the key to a consultation process. The subject matter should be broken down into its various elements to be explored to ensure a deeper understanding of the issues.

The best way to demonstrate this process is by way of example taken from the recent consultations described in Appendix 1. The central theme explored by children as part of these consultations was: 'what is important to children in their communities and what do children wish for in their lives?'

When exploring this theme, it was important to keep in mind that communities are not only the geographical location where children live, but places they visit and groups of people with similar interests that they associate with. A child can be part of many communities such as their neighbourhood community, preschool community, sporting community and the community where their grandparents live. As a starting point for these consultations, educators and children hence explored the following questions: what is a community and what communities are they part of?

The theme was further broken down into various elements, eg:

- Where are the various places children go in their everyday lives?
- What activities do children enjoy doing at these places?
- Who do the children like to spend time with at these places?
- What things do children like seeing or experiencing at these places?
- How do children feel when they are: at these places; with these people; or undertaking these activities?
- What places would children like to visit, or things they'd like to see and do that they've never done before?

Educators and children also discussed places where children do not like to go and things they do not like doing eg, some children did not like going to restaurants with their families, because there were no children's activities at these locations. When conducting consultations regarding these matters, care should be taken to ensure children are comfortable with discussing things they do not like and ensuring the themes explored are not likely to cause any distress. In any setting with children please keep in mind child protection guidelines.

4.2.5 Processes and strategies for consulting with children

Developing effective consultation strategies draws on current understandings about the multiple ways in which young children express themselves – including talking, drawing, painting, information technology, photography, construction, music, dance, drama, collages, sculptures, movement, storytelling, pretend play and socio-dramatic play.

For example, in the consultations described in Appendix 1, in which children were consulted about their views about what was important to them in their local communities and what they wished for in their lives, educators used a focal strategy around which they built a suite of experiences. This allowed for children's sustained engagement in an intense burst for several days or more prolonged and staggered engagement over a number of weeks. These strategies included the following approaches:

- **Engaging children through movement and role play**

  Performing artists worked with children's services educators to develop short performances which demonstrated children's views about a child friendly community

- **Engaging children through photography and information technology**

  Children expressed views about things they like and don't like in their house and/or community, through the use of digital cameras and information technology. This strategy was intended to encourage participation of children with severe disabilities in remote and rural locations and promote the role of parents/grandparents and guardians in encouraging children to have an active voice in their communities

- **Engaging children through art**

  Children expressed their views through a visual artistic medium. A range of options were suggested to the participants including the painting of a mural, a sculpture or woodcarving (dependent on the interests of the children)

- **Engaging children through music, dance and song**

  Children were encouraged to express views through song and/or dance, with the assistance of a music/dance teacher, working with children to develop their performances.

- **Engaging children through themed drawing and painting**

  Children expressed their views through diagrams, pictures, drawings and paintings. Adults were encouraged to include a short written description on the drawing or painting of what the picture represents, capturing the children's explanation of their drawing in their own words

- **Engaging children through story telling**

  This approach focused on children's participation through story telling and use of narratives with a range of options suggested, including children and adults participating in a walking tour/treasure hunt in their local community and developing narratives about their experiences.

The above strategies leveraged off the strengths of the community, available resources and the interests of the children and students. For further insight into adapting these strategies into practice, a short documentary and animation are available from recent consultations with Ocean View College Children's Centre and Out of School Hours Care.

'A Child Friendly SA' documentary: www.youtube.com/watch?v=K0NFqe5AcQk

'Places and Spaces' animation: www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nz0fSDJv11k

4.2.5a Engaging children with additional needs

It is of high importance that the consultation strategies are inclusive of all children, including children with additional needs. It is therefore imperative to adapt strategies to best suit the needs of all children participating.

The involvement of families and staff that know the children well is the best approach in ensuring the development of effective strategies. In the case of non-verbal children, it is useful to interview more than one adult who knows the child well to confirm that observations of what the child is expressing is consistent and hence represents a true reflection of the child's voice.

Specific considerations and strategies for consulting children with additional needs are identified in the 'Useful resources and links' section at the back of this document.

4.2.6 Australia's national early childhood frameworks

As identified in the opening sections of this guide, the principled framework to children and young people's participation has been developed and refined based on research in early childhood education and care settings. This principled approach has been applied successfully, however, to multiple age groups and services guided by other learning frameworks. As civics and citizenship form part of any modern curriculum framework analogies are able to be drawn from the observations below of the research in the early years with other education and care settings.

4.2.6a Belonging, Being and Becoming – The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia

In planning appropriate strategies for consulting with children in the early years, consider Belonging, Being and Becoming – The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (DEEWR, 2009) and exploring the consultation strategy and theme within this curriculum in partnership with early childhood education and care services.

Although this resource kit is not intended to provide comprehensive professional development on the links between the Early Years Learning Framework and a 'children's voices' project, consider the observations from Kerryn Jones in Appendix 2, a contributor to the Children's Voices Research Study outlined in Appendix 1.

4.2.6b National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care

'Children's voices' projects also link with the new National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care. Specifically, the National Quality Standards identify seven quality areas:

1. **Education program and practice**
   - An improved learning framework informs the development of a curriculum that enhances each child's learning and development
   - Educators and coordinators are focused, active and reflective in designing and delivering the program for each child.

2. **Children's health and safety**
   - Each child's health is promoted
   - Healthy eating and physical activity are embedded in the program for children
   - Each child is protected.

3. **Physical environment**
   - The design and location of the premises is appropriate for the operation of a service
   - The environment is inclusive, promotes competence, independent exploration and learning through play
   - The service takes an active role in caring for its environment and contributes to a sustainable future.

4. **Staffing arrangements**
   - Staffing arrangements enhance children's learning and development and ensure their safety and wellbeing
   - Educators, coordinators and staff members are respectful and ethical.

5. **Relationships with children**
   - Respectful and equitable relationships are developed and maintained with each child
   - Each child is supported to build and maintain sensitive and responsive relationships with other children and adults.

6. **Collaborative partnerships with families and communities**
   - Respectful and supportive relationships with families are developed and maintained

- Families are supported in their parenting role and their values and beliefs about childrearing are respected
- The service collaborates with other organisations and service providers to enhance children's learning and wellbeing.

7. Leadership and service management

- Effective leadership promotes a positive organisational culture and builds a professional learning community
- There is a commitment to continuous improvement.

More information about these seven quality areas can be found at www.acecqa.gov.au

4.2.7 Practical matters

4.2.7a Information for parents/guardians and seeking consent

To ensure a truly democratic process, it is essential that children's participation be voluntary and parent/guardian consent is sought for access to photos, audio or visual footage, children's artistic works and views. If, however, information obtained is used to improve the service of a provider, then consent is not required– eg, if a preschool consults with its students about potential improvements to the preschool and the resulting information is retained for internal use only.

Appendix 3 includes a sample letter that can be adapted to 'children's voices' projects as well as a sample consent form (in multiple languages) in use by public education and care services in South Australia.

4.2.7b Children without consent

Should some parents/guardians not wish to provide consent for their children's images, artistic works, views or other information to be shared, it is important to ensure that children are still provided with the opportunity to participate in the activities, particularly as the activities align with the learning framework of children's education and/or care settings.

4.2.7c Invitations to children

The views and information provided by children through the consultations are not the only reasons it is valuable to provide opportunities for children to have a voice, participation itself demonstrates to children that they are valued citizens. In order to further foster that mutual respect, it is important that children's participation is voluntary and for children to be invited rather than expected to participate in the consultations.

It is suggested that site leaders, staff and educators coordinating consultations provide children with a formal invitation to demonstrate choice and respect. A template that could be adapted is provided in Appendix 3. The adults coordinating the consultations should explain to children, particularly those that are unable to read, what the invitation says, what activities the children might be involved with, and how the information children provide will be used.

5. Providing professional development

"We need to take time to think about why and how we are doing child participation before rushing ahead on the one hand and at the same time we need to be 'brave' enough to try it, trusting that we will learn as we go along, particularly if we listen to the children and young people involved." (Bray & Clacherly, 2009, p. 6)

5.1 Benefits of professional development

Professional development workshops are a valuable means of ensuring success of a 'children's voices' project. It provides an opportunity for participants and partners to: gain a deeper understanding of the role, opportunities and constraints each is faced with; align outcomes, strategies and resources; take ownership in jointly shaping the project; and address any issues or concerns that may arise. The in-person nature of the induction workshop also facilitates a stronger grounding for the relationships between those attending and creates a stronger network of support between those individuals and organisations. It also importantly supports individuals to grow their knowledge and skills.

Even those well versed in the subject matter are able to benefit through self-reflection to gain a deeper understanding of their own knowledge and practices, and then challenge themselves to become an innovator in exploring new methods and approaches.

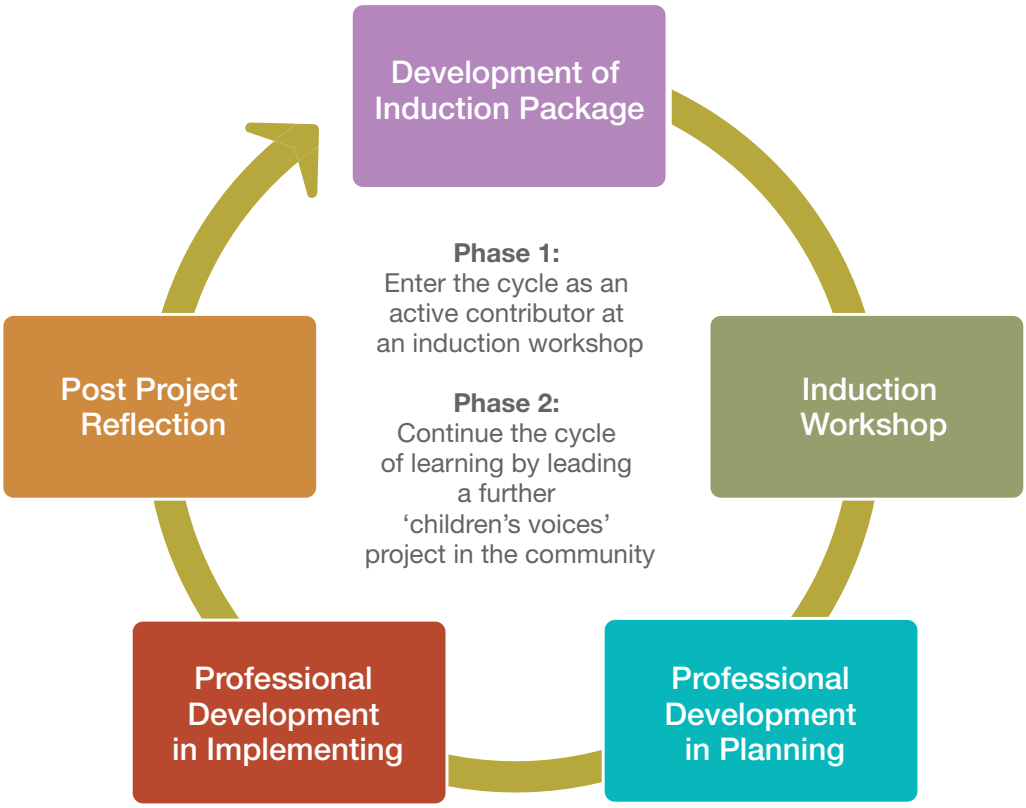
In the context of children's voices and participation as active citizens and learners, professional development and the coming together of various individuals/groups becomes even more valuable as the consultation process on its own is limited in its significance if children's views are then not reflected within the community. In most cases those with the skills, expertise and established relationships to most authentically engage with children are not directly involved in public policy decisions or practices. Likewise, those with responsibility for public policy are generally not best placed to facilitate engaging and meaningful consultation processes with children. Professional development hence provides an opportunity to come together across disciplines and fields of expertise to develop a common understanding, and take ownership in linking a meaningful consultation process with public policy and practices that reflect children's authentic voices within their communities.

5.2 A continuous cycle of learning

Although for practical reasons professional development is best facilitated by individuals or a project team with expertise in children's consultation and participation, it is important to recognise that all contributors have individual skills and knowledge to contribute to the learning process. Hence, facilitators and participants alike will continue to share and grow through a cycle of continuous learning. The skills and expertise gained through the process are then able to be shared further within the community and facilitate further projects and processes involving children's voices and active participation.

Figure 2 highlights the continuous cycle of learning associated with professional development, as well as the recommended key stages at which professional development should continue to be supported. Each of these stages is explored in further detail in the following sections.

Figure 2. A continuous cycle of learning



5.3 The workshop

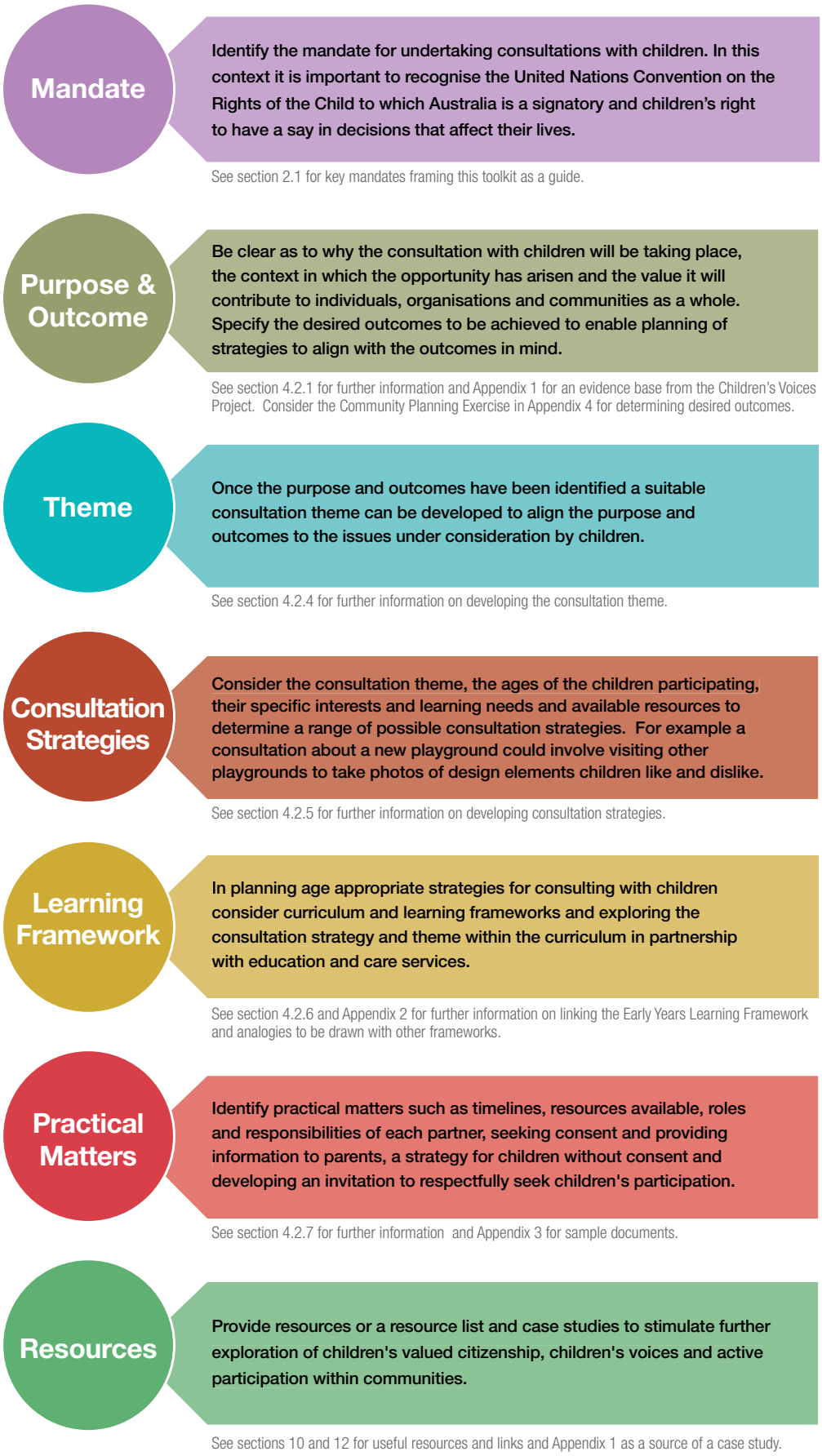
5.3.1 Development of the induction package

In order to support an engaging and successful induction workshop, the development of an induction package to guide the content of the workshop and to provide a resource for reference and guidance following the workshop is highly beneficial.

A successful induction will be consultative and inclusive of the rich diversity of views and expertise of those attending so the induction package should not be overly prescriptive in its nature. The induction package is intended to provide guidance to stimulate further conversation and to ensure a joint understanding of the purpose, desired outcomes and non-negotiable matters such as those of consent and privacy.

In developing the induction package, consider addressing (i) the planning and preparation steps for consulting with children and (ii) the suggested content in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Providing professional development – Content to be considered in the development of an induction package



5.3.2 Linking research, policy and practice: who to invite?

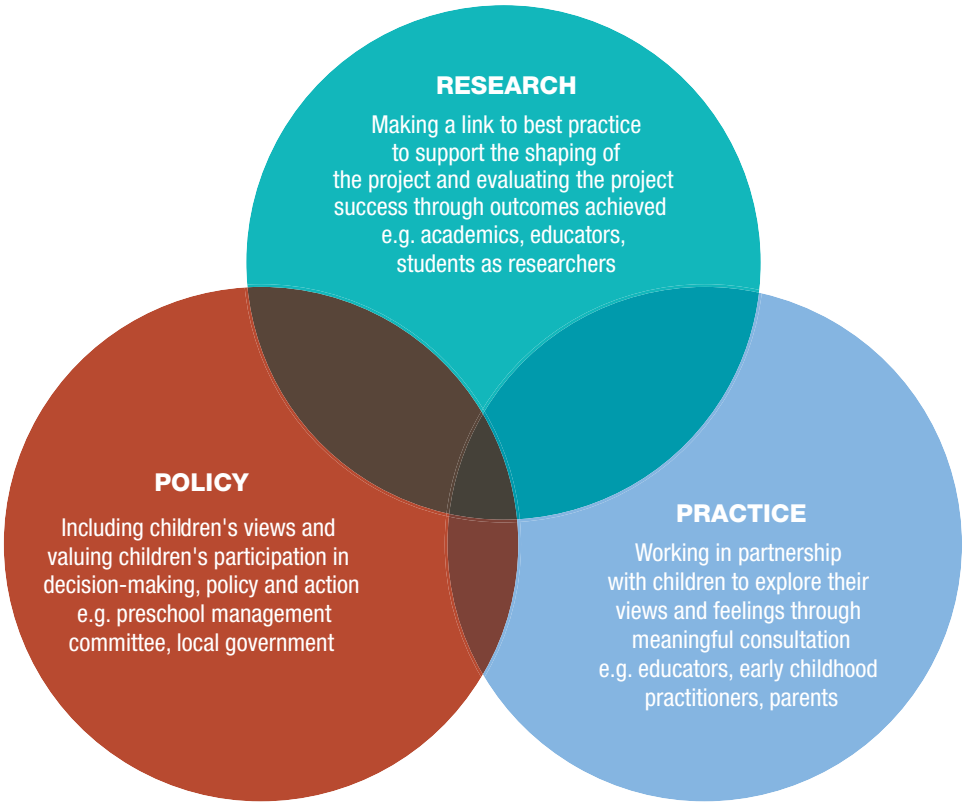
It is important that the participants at the induction workshop reflect the link between research, policy and practice outlined in Figure 4 in order to ensure that not only the consultation process itself is a success, but that children's views are taken seriously and translated into action that benefits the whole community. In determining who to invite, consider the role each individual will play and ensure all aspects associated with the project's success are reflected collectively within the roles of the individuals attending. For example, consider the relevance of the following functions to the success of your project:

- **Project manager** – Regardless of the collective expertise of partners and participants to the project, an individual or organisation needs to take the role of project manager to coordinate the planning and make the links between the various aspects, including fostering meaningful relationships between the partners involved.
- **Project sponsors** – Those individuals or organisations who are supporting the project in terms of staff time, resources, promotion or other support, are the project sponsors. It is important that they are part of the process so that they can gain a deeper understanding of the value of the undertaking, and the process and outcomes achievable. This ensures a greater likelihood that children's views will be followed through into action and also increases the likelihood of the sponsors embedding 'children's voices' practices within their organisations rather than simply being one-off projects.
- **Local champion** – Often it will be of benefit to identify a local champion to participate in the project who has influence and the respect of the wider community, or is able to promote children as valued citizens to others in the community not directly involved with the project. This may be a mayor, journalist or local business person.
- **Mentor** – Figure 2 identifies the cycle of continuous learning associated with professional development. It highlights the benefit of a mentor, an individual or organisation, that has been involved with a previous 'children's voices' project also engaging with further projects to share their learning and potential pitfalls.
- **Research leader** – A research leader able to research and share best practice from other communities; take a lead role in coordinating and synthesising the data and information resulting from the consultations; and evaluate the resulting outcomes, is a valuable role in contributing to the project's quality and documenting its effectiveness to support future projects.
- **Public policy leader** – If the consultations are to look beyond the service provision of an individual child focussed service or program and impact on broader community issues, it is beneficial to have a 'public policy lead' from government

or a local council involved. Such an individual will have responsibility for public planning, policy and decision making relating to the consultation theme to ensure children's views are valued and translated into action within the community.

- **Consultation facilitators** – Key to the meaningful engagement of children will be those directly facilitating the consultations with children. Ideally the consultations will be a partnership with local child education and care services, with the facilitators being educators and staff with established relationships with the children. In some cases this may not be possible or relevant, for example, if the consultations are to engage families in remote and isolated locations then parents may be best placed to facilitate the consultations with their children. In such cases, a coordinator with responsibility for supporting the parents through the journey should be identified to attend the workshop.
- **Induction facilitator** – It goes without saying that an engaging facilitator to run the induction workshop will ensure the maximum engagement of participants. The choice of facilitator could include someone with extensive knowledge of 'children's voices' and valued citizenship, such as an academic or educator, or someone engaged in a previous project. Alternatively, it could be someone who is highly skilled at facilitating without content knowledge and able to draw on the expertise within the room for the specific knowledge required.

Figure 4. Examples of links to consider among research, policy and practice in 'children's voices' projects



5.3.3 Structure of the workshop

The induction workshop provides an opportunity to explore each of the content areas outlined in Figure 3. How the workshop is structured will depend on the time available, the preferred style of the facilitator and the existing knowledge and skillset of the participants. Regardless of the overall structure of the workshop, care should be taken to ensure an interactive approach is employed, in which the issues are discussed in a consultative manner, with all participants invited to engage, share their views and jointly shape the strategies and approaches taken.

Where possible the content should be explored in a flexible and adaptable manner to enable further innovation of ideas, with time allocated to discuss alternative views and address concerns. Likewise, the resulting strategies and ideas generated at the workshop should allow enough flexibility for further consideration, shaping and adaption with the children participating in the consultation process so that it is not only the consultation theme itself, but also the overall process that is developed in a democratic and consultative manner.

5.3.4 Materials to provide

Each participant at the workshop will have a unique and preferred learning style with some people engaging better through face-to-face dialogue and others through reading and self-reflection. It is therefore important to include written materials documenting the areas of discussion and issues considered at the workshop with contact details of a key support person to provide further advice. Activities and further information explored within the workshop should also be documented and provided to participants and partners following the workshop.

5.3.5 Personal and group reflection activities

As an effective means of engaging all participants, eliciting individual views and encouraging participation, consider allocating time to undertake personal and group reflection activities. Such activities are a valuable means of shaping the consultation process further based on specific community needs, and to draw on specific interests and expertise of individuals or opportunities present in the community.

- Self-reflection activity

In terms of self-reflection regarding the undertaking of a meaningful, authentic and engaging consultation process with children, consider providing questions to stimulate personal thought prior to discussions with the broader group. A possible set of discussion questions to explore is outlined in Figure 5.

Community planning exercise

When considering the outcomes to be achieved from the consultation process it is beneficial to adopt a strengths-based community approach in which (i) the skills, people, facilities and assets within the community are considered as a strength to draw from (ii) gaps and opportunities are identified and (iii) planning occurs to deliver outcomes that meet the needs and draw on existing strengths within the community. A possible template to facilitate and document such a group exercise is provided in Appendix 4.

Figure 5. Possible discussion questions to explore in the induction workshop

5.3.6 Documentation

As part of any professional development, learning and growth process, it is valuable for individuals to document their journey and consider what they already know and what they have learnt along the way. It is recommended that time be allocated at both the onset and conclusion of the induction workshop for self-reflection and documenting of individual thoughts.

Learning is continuous and often the growth each of us achieves over a period of time is not realised without looking back at where we started. Such self-reflection is not only beneficial to those considering themselves as novices with regards to children's participation as active citizens and learners, but is equally beneficial to those with extensive expertise in the area.

Often we take for granted the skills and expertise we have acquired over time and don't realise what we are achieving may be out of the ordinary. By taking the time to reflect and document our learning, not only can we can identify areas for further improvement, but also identify what it is we do that achieves the desired outcomes and share these findings with others to contribute to their learning and development.

In beginning the journey of documenting a 'children's voices' project consider the following:

- What do I know about the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and children's valued citizenship?
- What is my understanding of the role of children's voices and participation in valued citizenship?
- What knowledge and skills am I confident in exercising that facilitate children's voices and participation within the community?
- What areas of growth do I most need to focus on?
- How can I best contribute to the professional development of others by sharing my skills, knowledge and learning?
- How have my skills, knowledge and practices grown or changed since I last reflected on the above questions? (Consider this question in later reflections).

A highly valuable resource for assisting early childhood practitioners in their learning journey is Assessing for Learning and Development in the Early Years using Observation Scales: REFLECT, RESPECT, RELATE: www.earlyyears.sa.edu.au/pages/Resources/resource/

5.4 Professional development in planning

Following the induction workshop, participants will need to shape their ideas further and put them into practice within their services or organisations. Further information on implementing the consultations is provided in section 6. Joint planning with colleagues is not only necessary for the success of the consultation process – it also provides additional opportunities for professional development through further reflection and sharing of ideas. If not all colleagues attended the induction workshop, consider holding a staff meeting to share the information received and to discuss ideas. Invite colleagues to commence documenting their learning journey and continue to do so yourself, reflecting on the knowledge and expertise others have contributed to your learning.

It may be valuable to also consider establishing stronger links with peers outside the immediate work team (eg, others in the field embarking on a similar process) to expand the sharing of information and ideas, and to seek independent input from someone removed from the process.

5.5 Professional development in implementing

The professional development information outlined in the previous ‘Professional development in planning’ section is also applicable to the implementation of the project and so is not replicated here.

It is important to re-emphasise, however, the nature of professional development being a cycle of continuous learning and improvement, and to remind ourselves of the value of taking the time to reflect, share ideas and document our learning at multiple stages, including throughout the consultation process.

5.6 Post-project workshop: reflection

It is recommended that a post-project workshop be held at the conclusion of the 'children's voices' project to capture the learning experiences of the partners and participants. This is an important step in the professional development learning cycle (see Figure 2) that not only serves to enhance the collective learning of all the participants, but also ensures the success for any future 'children's voices' projects and practices. Again self-reflection and documentation are recommended as valuable tools to develop a deeper understanding.

Key questions to consider during the post-project workshop for those facilitating the consultations and those responsible for translating the views of children into action include the following:

- Have preconceived ideas about children's valued citizenship or ability to form views about the community changed?
- Have I learnt something new about the children participating? Why is it I didn't know this previously?
- Have my views changed on the value that consulting with children contributes to the community?
- What do I need to be mindful of to support greater voice and participation of children in the community following the consultation process?

Additional considerations for early childhood educators:

- How am I able to incorporate children's interests and views into their individual learning following the consultation process?
- What am I able to share with parents and guardians about the experience?

These questions will prompt participants to specifically consider (i) how children contribute to the professional development process and (ii) what they have learnt from the children's contributions. As well as learning and reflecting from interactions with children, it is however important to recognise that children themselves are expanding their learning about citizenship and their rights and responsibilities as children.

6. Implementing the consultations

"Respectful involvement in decision-making…requires at the very least, an assessment of (1) what the child knows; (2) what the child can understand (3) what the child's decision-making capacity is; and, (4) what the child needs to know in order to exercise her decision-making capacity." (Baylis, Downie & Kenny, 1999, p.7)

Now comes the time when the proverbial rubber hits the road – implementing the consultations. This implementation sees you enacting the key principles outlined in the 'Planning and preparing children's consultations' section of this guide; and drawing on varied ways of expressing meaning through music, song, movement, dance, drama, play, visual arts, photography, and the spoken and written word – such as we have also described earlier in this guide (see section 4.2.5).

6.1 Frames of mind for meaningfully consulting with children

The mindset taken when consulting with children is critical to success. The research documented in Appendix 1 shows the following mindsets are particularly important:

- Being prepared to look at what children can do, and seeing and making visible the competent child
- Understanding the child's perspectives by seeing their experiences and realities through their eyes
- Having meaningful conversation with and among children through give-and-take dialogue
- Exploring with children what they mean and discovering and demonstrating depth in the child's meaning
- Stepping back from doing to and for children and instead co-constructing experiences with children and providing scope for children to do for themselves, thereby letting the child's agency do its work
- Sustaining engagement with the child over time
- Making the child's voice audible and their insights visible through authentic documentation.

In implementing the consultations with these frames of mind consider the suggested approaches in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Useful hints for implementing the consultations

Build mutual respect and gain consent In order to foster mutual respect it is important for children's participation to be voluntary and for children to be invited rather than expected to participate in the consultations. For particularly young children or where photos, audio, visual footage or artistic works are to be shared publicly , it is also necessary to obtain parental consent.	**Explore questions as themes** When undertaking consultations with children it is important to frame the questions as themes to be explored and allow adequate time for exploration of the subject matter. Young children in particular may not be able to verbally articulate themselves in a way older children and adults may be able to, so direct on the spot questioning is not likely to engage young children and ascertain their views in the most authentic manner.	**Break down subject matter into its various elements** It should be kept in mind that children may not have prior experience or understanding of the theme being explored and therefore a process whereby children are able to develop an understanding and a view on a particular matter is important. The subject matter should be broken down into its various elements to ensure a deeper understanding of the issues.
The process is just as important as the outcome It is important to recognise that the consultation process is just as significant as the information received. All children should feel valued and their views listened to; and feel they are sharing their views in a safe and secure situation where those around them have a genuine interest in what they say and do.	**Involve children in the shaping of the consultation process** Provide information to children as to how and why they are being invited to express their views and provide the opportunity for them to shape the consultations in a way they would find most engaging and enjoyable. This is very important because it helps to develop shared understandings among children and adults as to the purpose of these activities; and gives children an opportunity to shape the situations in which these activities occur.	**Use visual references or visit locations being discussed** Showing photos of your community taken from the eye level of a child may be a good visual reference for children. A walk or drive around the community to discuss local landmarks, places and spaces is also recommended.

Take care to capture children's authentic views Write down what children say verbatim, in large print exactly as they say it to ensure we don't put adult spin on their words. In doing so, we need to be careful that this scribing is not intrusive and that adults can keep up with what children say without breaking the flow of children's ideas.	**Hand the tools of expression to the child** Support and enable children to express their views by asking lead questions, providing concrete stimuli (eg, photos), and handing the tools for expression to the child. These 'tools' might be a camera, paints or crayons, or having the floor to have their say. Scaffold children's views by extending and re-formulating what they say to check for shared understanding and more fully draw out what they are expressing; and prompt them to elaborate where they can.	**Use language that invites genuine input** Show you are handing the agenda to the child by expressions such as: 'Tell me, what do you think about…?' 'How do you feel about…?' 'What do you like about…?' 'What makes you think that?' 'What makes you feel that way?'
Use reflective language Use reflective language in your conversations with children – eg, 'I see you have taken lots of outdoor photos. Is that because you like doing things outside?'	**Consider messages conveyed through body language** Tune into children's body language – not just what they say but how they say it. Attend to their tone, facial expressions, gestures, gaze and so on.	**Acknowledge the power difference** Acknowledge the power difference between children and adults. Are the children expressing how they feel or what they think adults want to hear?
Consider the dynamic of children in a group setting Also acknowledge the dynamic amongst children when engaging in group discussions and activities. Are some children dominating while others sit quietly on the sidelines? Are children saying what they think or seem to be just agreeing with what their peers are saying? Are all children being given opportunity to express what it is they mean?	**Explore themes in a way that is meaningful to each child's experiences** It may be best to ask children what they like to do or would like to do in their communities rather than what facilities or services they would like. Be as concrete and specific as you can about the questions and prompts you use to engage children's views. Other examples include asking about places children like going to and any favourite places they might have; people they like seeing, talking with, playing with, spending time with, and where.	**Ascertain children's feelings as well as their views** Bear in mind, too, that these consultations also seek to find out what children might not like in their communities, so provide opportunities to find out about the 'downside' too, in specific and concrete terms as above.

Take the time to understand the real meaning behind what is being expressed If drawings are used as an artistic medium for children expressing their views then always ask for more detail on what a child has drawn. It is important not to assume we understand what has been drawn, why it has been drawn or what it represents. Children often talk as they draw, even if just to themselves, and express themselves non-verbally (such as scribbling or drawing very quickly). Tune in to the comments children make as they draw and the gestures they make, and note these down carefully for later reference to enrich records of what children conveyed.	**Provide feedback about the value of children's input** Provide feedback to children about what will happen after their participation in the consultation strategies and how their views have been important in helping to shape South Australia. To do so shows that their views are valued and respected.	**Most importantly, participation by children should be voluntary, engaging, challenging and rewarding.**

6.2 Five snapshots of how children's consultations have been implemented

Below we provide a summary of how educators at five different children's services sites implemented their part in the statewide consultations with children (see Appendix 1).

Site A used photography and information technology as its core strategy over a

four-week period. Children were provided with digital cameras with which they took photos in their local community to show what they liked and didn't like, and to act as springboards for conversations with children about their views of their community.

Educators worked collaboratively with parents and documented children's engagement when: (i) exploring how to use the digital cameras to take photos (and) (ii) talking about the resulting images. The culminating activities saw each child, in collaboration with parents and centre staff, collate his/her own favourite photos in a poster. Each child then provided captions for their poster that their parents and centre staff scribed.

There were concerns about children's developmental needs; and how children would handle the consultations. Educators worked collaboratively with parents and all learned to stand back and see how children quickly learned through their own hands-on explorations how to use the cameras and take remarkable photographs of their everyday surrounds.

Site B used visual arts as its key strategy over a six-week period, in which children expressed their views through painting. Educators initiated the consultations by holding whole group discussions in which they asked simple questions about what children liked and did in their communities. Educators then developed a survey for children based on the consultation questions and invited children to complete the survey on a one-to-one basis with educators scribing children's responses.

Children then engaged in expressing their views of their local communities through painting. Throughout this period, children and educators worked collaboratively with two artists in the local community who laid the groundwork with children about the fundamentals of painting. They explored key concepts such as movement; language used to describe these concepts; and explored oils and acrylics in terms of their uses and special effects. The artists also examined actual paintings with children, modeled how to paint, and demonstrated the tools of their trade.

Children then created their own art works, with artists and educators scaffolding their work as required. Throughout the consultations, educators: questioned children and engaged them in in-depth discussions; introduced and developed shared understanding of new terminology and the purpose of the consultations themselves; observed children; consulted with parents and colleagues about the processes they were using; drew on their knowledge of the children; provided examples to children; demonstrated key processes; and recorded children's responses.

Site C used music, movement, drama and song as their key strategies over an intensive four-day period, guided by performers from a local theatre group, including a musician, three actors and the theatre group director. This was followed by the development of two DVDs that documented the children's engagement and showed children's animations expressing their views.

On the first day of the consultations, educators and the performers set up the space in which to engage children; empty boxes, pillows and mats were set up on the floor for children and adults to engage in dramatic play. As the four days progressed and became more focused on children exploring and expressing their ideas and feelings about their communities, educators and children worked with the same materials in different ways eg, children used the boxes in various ways to explore and express themselves vis-à-vis their communities.

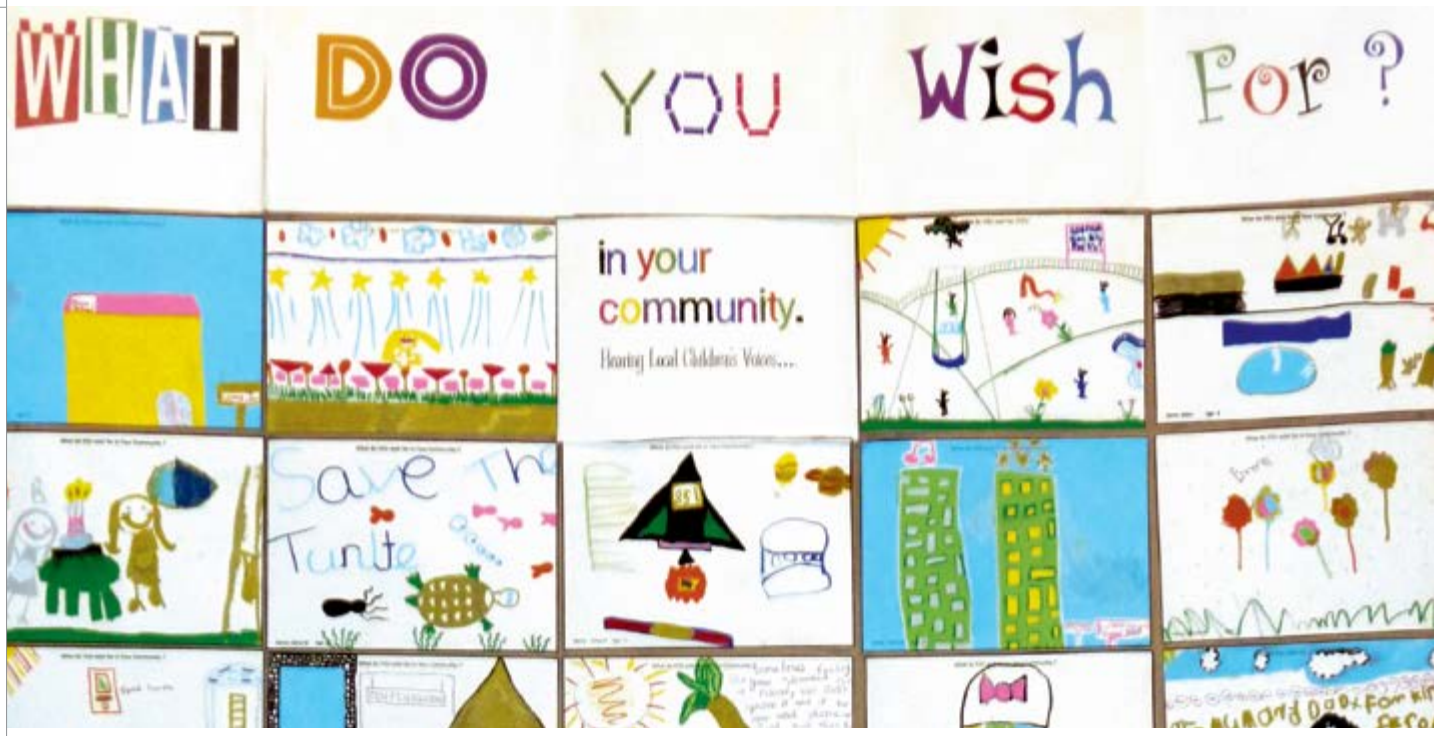
Throughout the consultations, the theatre group's director oversaw the undertaking in collaboration with the site's educators. An early childhood advisor also worked with educators and the theatre group, observing and interpreting what was happening and supporting ongoing decisions about how the consultations might unfold.

Site D used music, movement, drama and song as their key strategies over the course of a five-day week; these activities were supported by a local dance teacher. Educators began the consultations by talking with each child about what they liked in their community and what they enjoyed doing in the community.

Children were then involved in interpreting their ideas about their communities through music, dance and song with the dance teacher. As children developed their ideas about how they wished to express what they liked about their communities, educators video-recorded them. Interpretations of the children's ideas were organised into a dance performance by the dance teacher; and lyrics for the song organised by another educator based on the children's ideas of what they liked.

The dance teacher supported educators to work with the children when the dance teacher was not on-site. The dance teacher also worked with a nearby children's service to share the cost and benefits of these interactions. Educators were mindful that the dance teacher would not take control of the process or put their own interpretations on children's ideas.

Site E used drawing and painting as their key strategies over a three week period. These activities were undertaken on a one-to-one basis with children.



Educators collaboratively developed six questions to explore with children that related to the questions identified earlier in this paper and focused explicitly on what was important to children in their community and what they wished for in their lives.

Children drew what interested them, and what was important to them in their community and in their lives. Initially they drafted their drawings on paper, with ongoing feedback and discussion from their educators and peers.

When children were satisfied with their work, they rendered their final drawings onto calico squares. Each child's square was then woven into a class quilt. Two educators from the site met and planned the approach, with one educator directing the project in terms of organising and going to each site of this multi-location OSHC service to maintain consistency in their approach.

6.3 Benefits of implementing children's consultations well

Implementing consultations well benefits all those involved in a 'children's voices' project, including children, educators, researchers and policymakers alike:

- Children feel validated as citizens in a democratic society when they know they are being asked genuine questions about what matters to them and are given ample opportunity and time for sustained engagement in these interactions.
- Educators, including well experienced educators and those leaders in their field, find themselves refreshed with invigorated practices and new insights into children.
- Researchers learn from what children reveal and seeing what worked and what might be improved in eliciting children's voices.
- Policymakers, including government agency staff, see and appreciate the value and feasibility of engaging children's voices and valid contributions that children make, enabling more effective consideration of children's views in public policy.

Critical factors that assist the success of consultations are:

- using multi-modal experiences rather than just talking with children
- engaging in the consultations over a sustained period of time (eg an intense short period; a period stretched over a number of weeks) rather than on-the-spot one-off consultations
- the educator's willingness to step out of their comfort zones and reflect on the consultation process as it proceeds
- being open-minded and prepared to be surprised and notice new and unexpected information
- partnerships that involve genuine collaborations among all who are involved, including most importantly the children
- locating the consultations in the nexus of early childhood research, policy and practice, by being informed by well-established research that translates into principled action
- using these guiding principles instead of prescribing practice – and being mindful of the uncertainty that this lack of prescription can create, especially when an undertaking carries with it key accountabilities
- employing induction processes and identifying resources to prepare well for the consultations, and align objectives and processes with actions and follow-up

- providing adequate time, personnel and resource support for the consultations to be done well
- being clear about expectations for all involved, including the children.

7. Documenting the consultations

"Applying a child perspective means not just observing children and displaying visual artefacts concerning them on notice boards, but also talking with children about how they perceive visual documentation ie, applying both a child perspective in analysing what is said about children and children's perspectives capturing children's own meaning making." (Sparrman & Lindgren, 2010)

Documenting the consultations as they proceed is important and involves visible, active listening with all our senses. Accuracy is helped by audio and video-recording; and authenticity helped by capturing what it is children actually say and express.

Documentation is a challenge, but as the old adage goes, if something is worth doing, it is worth doing well. How educators chose to document the children's consultations in the Children's Voices Research Study overviewed in Appendix 1 were diverse and equally effective.

Some recorded 'snippets' around observations, while others developed a recording format. Others recorded on post-it notes or in a notebook as they talked with children, making sure that this documentation focused on the children's words.

Educators worked to remain true to the integrity of children's words through a variety of strategies such as: helping children to express themselves through further questioning, paraphrasing what children might have meant, and checking educators' interpretations with children throughout the process. Clarification with children and breaking down questions for ease of understanding, all contributed to educators' attempts to maintain children's voices without placing their own interpretations on what was seen or observed. In some cases, the documentation required editing reports several times and revisiting conversations to record what children really meant. It is important to ensure that final documentation is 'reader friendly' for the targeted audience.

By way of example, sites in the project described in section 6.2 and in Appendix 1 chose the following methods, which proved effective:

- **Site A** – A display folder containing descriptions of the site's context and consultation theme, strategy and online resources; individual profiles of each child's context and background, including the child's name, where s/he lives and interests; and photos the child took with the digital camera provided, including prints, photocopies, CDs and a collage of the student's favourite photos.
- **Site B** – A ring folder containing information about the site's context; descriptions of their consultation strategies and the central theme they used to implement their strategy; considerations they made in setting up the consultations; common themes that emerged; and children's artefacts and photos of their artistic creations (paintings and dioramas).
- **Site C** – DVDs documenting the entire consultation experience that went across an intensive four day period with the local theatre group, accompanied by commentary and children's animation of what they like and don't like in their communities.
- **Site D** – A written recount of 'teacher impressions' of the consultation process followed by summary statements of what each child expressed during the consultations about what they like and do not like in their communities.
- **Site E** – A spiral-bound book containing information about the consultation strategy they used, how it was framed and implemented; a summary statement of what the children expressed; photos of the children engaged in the consultation process; children's original drawings and captions; and a photo of the collation of all the children's works as a 'what do you wish for?' quilt.

8. Analysing, synthesising and reporting children's messages

"Stories move in circles. They don t go in straight lines.
So it helps if you listen in circles.
There are stories inside stories and stories between stories,
And finding your way through them is
as easy and as hard as finding your way home.
And part of the finding is the getting lost.
And when you're lost, you start to look around and to listen."
(Metzger, 1992, cited in Bender, 1996, p. 10)

8.1 Making sense of the data

At the conclusion of consultations with children, it is likely that an overwhelming amount of data will be available to organise and interpret. The data will likely include children's artistic or creative expression, as well as adult's written documentation of children's verbal expression. The information may also be from a range of consultations involving different staff and different consultation strategies, resulting in inconsistencies in the way in which children's voices are captured.

As a starting point, it is recommended that a small team with a minimum of three or four people commence organising the information. It is useful to draw on a range of expertise including practitioners with experience working with children (particularly those who directly facilitated the consultations with children), as well as someone with responsibility for translating children's voices into action eg, a public policy advisor.

It is useful to commence going though each piece of data one by one and discussing as a group the meaning within children's expression. Seeking to understand any underlying messages children are conveying is essential to ensure minimal adult interpretation and that children's authentic voices continue to be reflected. Input from practitioners who facilitated the consultation strategies with children is important for this purpose and any uncertainty about meaning should be clarified with those practitioners directly. Care should be taken to understand feelings children have associated with their expression as in some cases an issue may have been identified in a favourable light when in others the same issue could have a negative connotation. For example, in the Children's Voices Research Study that informs this guide, a child took a photo of his own shadow. While others were excited by the photo, the child himself became upset as he could not see his face in the photo. His educator took him to a mirror to assure him his face was still there, and so began a dialogue about people's shadows.

Grouping of expressions by children on similar matters provides a useful strategy for identifying common areas of interest and by doing so as a small team ensures greater consistency in interpretation. Once a rhythm has been established in the interpretation of the data, if there are limitations to people's availability to complete the whole process as a group, the consistent approach developed enables the continuation of this exercise by individuals.

8.2 Reporting children's views as themes

Once the information from children has been analysed and grouped into similar categories, it becomes possible to report on this information as themes. Preparing a report with these themes clearly articulated is most valuable for conveying to policy advisors/interested parties, what it is children have expressed. Providing a summary of this information within a report is likely to be more useful than simply providing the raw data for interpretation, particularly for those people who are not skilled in working with children directly. At the same time, it is important not to dilute the voices and views of

individual children, the context in which issues were raised, and the frequency in which individual children identified similar issues. It is therefore recommended to include an appendix in the report with as much detail as possible regarding the individual views of children.

In preparing a report to influence decision-making and policy, it is useful to provide some analysis as to the possible areas of influence children's views may relate to, as well as a supporting evidence base as to the possible impacts such changes may have on children and communities. For example, if the theme of a lack of public green spaces arose as a common area of interest for children it would be useful to highlight related policy areas eg, urban design and research linking children's wellbeing and physical activity to public space. By explicitly making the connection to public policy and a research evidence base it is more likely that children's views will be valued and considered appropriately.

Opportunities to influence decisions beyond the initial scope of the consultations should also be explored as a means to broaden the reach of children's views. If, for example, children are being consulted on the design of a preschool playground and views expressed indicate playgrounds elsewhere in the community are not easily accessible, it would be of value to share this information with the local council to ensure a broader range of policies are influenced (provided parental consent is given).

Following the consultations, ongoing opportunities to share children's views should also be identified. For example, there may be views expressed during the consultation with children that are relevant to upcoming community consultation projects. For example, in the Children's Voices Research Study informing this guide, children in one community frequently expressed their concern with excessive seaweed at their local beaches. Children's views could then be included in broader community discussions about the local environment, along with possible solutions. Children in another community expressed strong desire for more affordable entertainment places where families and friends could gather – another likely focus for wider community deliberations that include children.

9. Tracking uptake of children's messages and providing feedback to children

"Feedback is arguably the single most important part of the consultation exercise for the sake of successful future consultation and as a contribution to reducing negativity and cynicism of young people about the mainstream democratic process."

(Borland, Laybourn & Stafford, 2001, p. 8)

What happens next is as important as all that has gone before. Providing feedback to children and all who were involved in the consultations; tracking uptake and interpretation of children's messages; and communicating to the broader community and stakeholders, are all key elements of these final stages of meaningful consultations with children.

9.1 Translating children's views into meaningful action

As identified earlier in this guide, it is important to ensure the purpose of consulting with children is clear and that their views are taken seriously and into account in decision making. Tracking the uptake of children's messages and reporting on these publicly provides a mechanism of accountability and provides an incentive for action to be taken. It may be useful to meet with the individuals who have taken responsibility for considering children's views to understand how these views have been considered, and if they have not been adopted the reasons why.

It is clear that as a society we often overlook children's views and participation. Where possible, opportunities should be taken to share the outcomes achieved from a 'children's voices' project with the wider community through media, professional journals or through organisational networks. Tracking the uptake of children's messages and demonstrating the value of the influences they have made within the community, is an effective means of promoting similar practices by others.

9.2 Valuing children's participation through feedback

In any respectful relationship in which an individual is asked to participate or express views, they should be fully informed of the outcomes of their input. This is as important for adults as it is for children and demonstrates that children's input has been valued and that the relationship is that of a partnership.

Tracking the uptake of children's messages is a meaningful way to provide feedback to children participating in the consultations and staff facilitating the consultations. It also reinforces that the process was not a tokenistic exercise and that the expression of views is a fundamental right of our democratic society, able to influence change in the community.

A meaningful way to provide feedback to children is through the practitioners that facilitated the consultation strategies who have an established relationship with the children. Providing feedback not only on the views and outcomes of the strategy that the children were involved with, but also views of other children that participated from other services, is generally found to be of interest and relevance to children.

It may also be possible to arrange a display in a public space showcasing the artistic expression of children from the consultations, and invite children to celebrate their involvement and view what other children have expressed.

Engaging with the voices of children and young people is not an isolated exercise –it is a way of being and becoming. Building communities, programs, policies and initiatives for children is to do so in partnership with children - recognising that a society that values and respects its children is a society that values and respects all of its citizens' participation from childhood through to adulthood.

10. Useful resources and links

Under the 'Processes and strategies for consulting with children' section, reference is made to resources to assist in planning for children with additional needs. Some useful resources include:

- Consulting with children with disabilities as service users: www.tcd.ie/childrensresearchcentre/assets/pdf/Publications/consulting_exec_summ.pdf
- How to involve children and young people with communication impairments in decision-making: www.councilfordisabledchildren.org.uk/resources/cdcs-resources/how-to-involve-children-and-young-people-with-communication-impairments-in-decision-making
- Learning to listen – consulting children and young people with disabilities: www.savethechildren.org.uk/sites/default/files/docs/Learning_to_listen_1.pdf
- Parents4Kids DIY Floortime DVD resource: www.parents4kids.wordpress.com/dir-floortime-dvd-3/

11. Endnotes

1. Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia is Australia's mandatory national curriculum framework for children birth to five through to transition to school. It was published in 2009 by DEEWR, Canberra.

2. The 1989 United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child was ratified by Australia in 1991. Of particular relevance to consulting with children is Article 12, 'Respect for the views of the child', that states, "When adults are making decisions that affect children, children have the right to say what they think should happen and have their opinions taken into account." (United Nations, 1989). The charter can be found at www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CRC.aspx

3. In South Australia, the development of a 'Child Friendly SA' has been supported by the State Government since 2009. The 'Child Friendly SA' strategy expands on the UNICEF Child Friendly cities model (UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 2001) that has been adopted in many cities throughout the world. This state's approach is a more ambitious undertaking in that it is based on a network of child friendly communities and cities linking together to realise a state-wide child friendly vision, recognising the importance of children's wellbeing, participation and voice in policy decisions.

4. Loris Malaguzzi, founder of the Reggio Emilia philosophy, wrote a poem called The hundred languages of children. In the first part of the poem, he celebrates the many different ways children express themselves; and in the second part, laments schools taking most of these languages away from children. The poem can be found at www.thewonderoflearning.com/history/?lang=en_GB (retrieved 18 May 2012)

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13. Appenditces

13.1 APPENDIX 1. Overview of the Children's Voices Research Study

13.1.1 Focus and context

This study focused on early childhood educators, policy actors and researchers working together to engage young children in South Australia's statewide consultations about their local communities. The consultations set out to document children's views on what was important to them in their communities and what they wished for in their lives. Professor Pauline Harris was the adviser to these consultations and conducted the research of the consultations from planning and preparation, through to Government's uptake of children's messages.

These consultations were an instance of enacting the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), ratified by Australia in 1991, particularly Article 12, 'Respect for the views of the child':

"When adults are making decisions that affect children, children have the right to say what they think should happen and have their opinions taken into account."

(United Nations, 1989)

Upholding these rights in South Australia, the commitment to a 'Child Friendly SA' has been supported by the South Australian Government since 2009, led by the then Department of Education and Children's Services (now Department for Education and Child Development) and the Department of the Premier and Cabinet. The 'Child Friendly SA' strategy expands on the UNICEF concept of child friendly cities (UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 2001), to develop a network of child friendly communities and cities to realise a statewide child friendly vision.

These consultations were linked with Australia's Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (DEEWR, 2009), providing the curriculum context in which early childhood educators consulted with their children. Outcome 2 from the national framework states:

"Children develop a sense of belonging to groups and communities and an understanding of the reciprocal rights and responsibilities necessary for active community participation. This is evident … when children express an opinion in matters that affect them." (DEEWR, 2009, p. 26).

13.1.2 Conceptual framework

In these consultations, children's rights as active citizens were acknowledged, with voices to be heard and capacity to express their views with wisdom and insight (Formosinho & Barros, 2006; Moloney, 2005). In so doing, the consultations built upon well-established practices and research (eg, Clark, 2007; Rinaldi, 2006; Stephenson, 2009).

The study of these consultations resonates with the 'new sociology of childhood' (Noble-Carr 2006, p. 4) in which children are viewed as key informants about their own lives (MacNaughton et al, 2003).

13.1.3 Research design

In total, the State Government involved 350 young children (mainly 3-8 year olds) in their consultations across 11 State Government regions. The early childhood educators who implemented the consultations in their children's services were experienced leaders in their field.

Of the 11 services that participated in the consultations, six sites gave consent to participate in the research into these consultations:

- **Site A** – a family learning partnership program in children's homes, engaging children in the consultations through photography and information technology
- **Site B** – a kindergarten and rural care service, engaging children through visual arts
- **Site C** – a children's centre and out-of-school-hours care, engaging children through music, movement, drama and song
- **Site D** – a family day care provider, engaging children through music, movement, drama and song
- **Site E** – out-of-school-hours-care, engaging children through drawing and painting
- **Site F** – a children's centre and outreach preschool, engaging children through drawing and painting.

Using a qualitative case study approach (Yin, 2009), the study of the consultations was documented as follows:

- **Observations** – Educators' observational records, still photographs and video recordings that documented the consultations in each site
- **Interviews** – Transcripts of audio-recorded hour-long interviews with: each of the six educators participating in the study who implemented the consultations with young children; the principal policy adviser in the Department for Education and Child Development overseeing the consultations; and the Department of the Premier and Cabinet's manager for community engagement and consultations for South Australia's Strategic Plan
- **Artefacts** – Works produced by children in each of the six sites which were photographed or photocopied for this study. These include children's drawings, paintings, collages, photographs, posters with children's photos and captions, dioramas, videos of children's dramatic performances, storytelling, animations, music and song
- **Document Analysis** – Reports of the consultations, written by each educator and provided to the state government's education and child development agency, containing: a comprehensive account of the site's approach and implementation of the consultations; key messages from children in their own words and further interpreted by the site's educators; and illustrative material including children's work samples, scribed text, photographs and video-recordings of their engagement. Document analysis also involved the induction package, the report prepared by the Department for Education and Child Development for the Department of the Premier and Cabinet, and the Community Engagement Board's final report
- **Participant Observations** – The researcher used participant observation to document the planning and development of consultation strategies, and the induction workshop for educators. Participant observation data were recorded as anecdotal records and reflections kept in the researcher's journal.

Trustworthiness was enhanced by collecting data in situ where the consultations occurred. As it was not possible to directly observe in each site as the consultations were occurring simultaneously across geographically spread sites, it was particularly important to ensure trustworthy documentation through the multiple data collection methods above. Triangulation across these data collection methods contributed to the study's trustworthiness, as did triangulation across different participants and sites in the study, and the use of digital recordings (audio, video and still photography).

13.1.4 Key findings

Nine common themes were identified from the consultations and engagement with children:

- **The environment**
  The natural environment – one of the strongest themes identified by children was the natural environment, in particular, a sense of connection with nature and wanting to preserve and look after the natural environment.

  The built environment – children placed a strong importance on the built environment wishing for more enjoyable places to explore in their communities and, in particular, more engaging and better designed spaces.

- **Family, friends and people**
  Throughout the consultations young children expressed an enormous amount of importance with regards to spending more time with family, friends and people.

- **Activities and playing**
  Children throughout the consultations identified the importance of playing and undertaking activities. This was both in terms of spending more time undertaking activities with loved ones and also having more vibrant and engaging spaces to explore.

- **Animals and creatures**
  The consultations identified the importance placed by children on animals and creatures both in terms of animals in their natural environments, nurturing relationships with pets, and undertaking activities with families such as visiting the zoo.

- **Food**
  Young children identified the importance of food in terms of cooking and going places together to eat. Although identifying junk or unhealthy food regularly, young children identified these as a ‘treat’ with a good understanding of the importance of healthy eating.

- **Emotions and feelings**
  Strong importance was placed by young children on their feelings and emotions, and, in particular, feeling happy and safe.

- **Transport**
  A large number of young children identified the importance of transport, particularly public transport in accessing places and activities they enjoy. A significant number of children identified that places they enjoy visiting are simply not accessible due to a lack of a family car or public transport to those places.

- **The future**
  Young children frequently identified the future and possibilities for changes for a better future throughout the consultations.
- **Communication**
  The consultations with young children demonstrated the desire of young children to be involved in decisions and have their voices heard. This was particularly important for very young children that were unable to articulate their desires through speech alone, the large number of non-verbal children that participated, linguistically diverse children and children in remote locations.

13.1.5 What worked well

There were a number of factors that contributed to the success of the project, and benefits arising from this work, these included the following points:

- Overwhelming sense of satisfaction from each of the educators that the strategy allocated to each centre worked well with the children
- Depth and intensity of children's engagement over time
- Seeing the world from children's perspectives was enriching for educators
- Children's sense of validation, empowerment and control, fuelling deep desire to participate
- Effectiveness of one-to-one and small group interactions to ensure inclusive and meaningful participation
- Benefits of working with local experts such as artists and performing artists
- There was consensus across the sites that both time and resources were well spent not only in terms of the consultations, but also in terms of the enriching benefits to relationships with children and families, and educators own work with an increased knowledge of children. As one educator put it, 'We could hear the children's voices. We could hear their passion.'

13.1.6 Challenges that arose

Constraints and challenges that emerged throughout the course of the study included:

- Inclusion of all children who wished to be involved, including children who educators perceived had particular challenges but who showed their capabilities in fully participating
- Managing children's inclusion where large numbers of children were involved, needing to consider how other educators in the site engaged with those children not involved in the consultations by virtue of their own or families' choice
- Children's understanding of concepts such as time and the future that were integral to these consultations about what children liked in their communities and wished for in their lives now and in the future
- Ensuring visiting artists and performers did not take control over the process, while seeing the benefits of these people not having preconceived ideas about how particular children might or might not behave or respond.

13.1.7 Conclusions and implications

Educators witnessed first-hand the depth and intensity of children's involvement in these consultations. Educators saw and appreciated anew the competent child; and released children's agency to let it do its work. Fleeting conversations gave way to sustained, meaningful dialogue with and among children over time; and the act of recording observations evolved into a more complex and in-depth process of authentic documentation to capture children's voices and the meaning they conveyed (Harris, 2012).

Every child is a citizen, and engaging with the children's voices as valued, active citizens requires authentic practice. Key principles of authenticity include: engaging with children in their everyday relational contexts where there is familiarity and trust amongst those who are participating; the engagement must be meaningful to children, focusing on children's thematic concerns and interests, with shared clarity of purpose and outcomes; dialogue is enacted as multi-modal co-construction between child and adult in which children's agency is balanced with their dependency; all voices are inclusively heard and structures allow and sustain dialogue; documentation of what children do and express, is trustworthy and true to children's voices and intent; and there is consequence of children's participation in terms of uptake, transparency and accountability.

13.2 Appendix 2. Reflections on Belonging, Being and Becoming from Kerryn Jones

Kerryn Jones, a contributor to the Children's Voices Research Study project outlined in Appendix 1, made the following observations at a children's site where children and educators used socio-dramatic play and boxes to explore ideas about their local communities. Kerryn noted the following connections to the 'three Bs' of the Early Years Learning Framework and raised a number of important questions/considerations:

13.2.1 Belonging

Open-ended, adaptable materials such as boxes allowed children to assemble and reassemble their play space in imaginative ways. When adults and children co-constructed a flexible space together there was a shared sense of 'our space' and a sense of control over what happened in the space. 'Do we set up the educational play space for or with children?'

13.2.2 Being

Creative, playful adults—when adults deeply engage in children's play, the children respond with their own deep level engagement, enthusiasm and playfulness. Within the play adults were able to hear and respond to children's ideas and propositions, and take the play to another level. 'Are we skilled co-players, or supervisors of children's play?'

Children want to feel scared, brave and powerful—within the safety of the kindergarten space, children delighted in 'dangerous' and 'scary' play and storylines such as monsters, baddies, ferocious animals, darkness, etc. 'Do we actively encourage this type of play, or do we 'shut it down'?'

13.2.3 Becoming

The value of imaginative play in experiencing becoming – dramatic play ignited children's involvement, validated their ideas and experiences, and sustained their engagement for long periods of time. Children were able to re-imagine themselves as many different characters, becoming a new character by putting on a different hat, a scarf, or getting inside a box. 'Does the rhythm of the kindergarten day value imaginative play and creativity, or do routines dominate?'

(Source: South Australian Department for Education and Child Development's Spotlights on practice: How do children experience their play spaces? Consulting young children, Kerryn Jones, 2011: www.earlyyears.sa.edu.au/files/links/Consulting_young_children.pdf)

13.3 Appendix 3.

Sample documents for seeking parent/guardian consent and sample invitation to children

13.3.1 Sample letter seeking parent/guardian consent

Dear (parent/guardian name)

The *(insert service/program/organisation name)* has been invited to participate in an exciting opportunity to consult with young children to gain their views for the purposes of *(insert purpose of consultation)*, being undertaken by *(insert name of organisation seeking the information)*.

Young children will be provided the opportunity to express their views about: (insert consultation theme). This will provide a valuable opportunity for children's views, wants and needs to influence (insert information as to how the information will be used) and it will also demonstrate that children's voices and active participation in decisions that affect their lives are important.

The strategy which your child is being invited to participate in is: *(describe the consultation strategy).*

The consultations will be programmed into the normal time and curriculum of your child's service and will be led by the usual staff at the service with no noticeable disruption to the program offered for your child *(this sentence is not applicable to strategies not undertaken by educators within services).* The consultation strategy is linked closely to the new national Early Years Learning Framework – Belonging, Being and Becoming *(or state other curriculum/learning framework if applicable)*.

Should you consent to:

- your child's views and artistic works being provided to (insert name of organisation seeking the information) for the purpose of (insert information as to how the information will be used); and/or
- the possible use of your child's photographic image, audio or visual footage being provided to (insert name of organisation) for the purposes of: educational and promotional activities; newsletters and publications (if applicable), then it would be appreciated if you could sign and return the attached consent form.

If you do not wish to provide consent, then your child will not be excluded from the fun and activities, but no personal information will be divulged and their views will not be recorded.

If you have any concerns or require additional information I encourage you to contact me to discuss this further.

Yours sincerely

(Insert name and contact details).

Note: The consent form can be modified to include a section for parents/guardians to provide 'limited consent'. For example, parents could allow their children's artistic works and views to be used to inform the consultation, but not consent to a child's image being used for promotional activities.

13.3.2 South Australian Department for Education and Child Development consent forms

English www.decd.sa.gov.au/docs/documents/1/ConsentFormChild.pdf
Acholi www.decd.sa.gov.au/docs/documents/1/ConsentFormChildAcholi.pdf
Amharic www.decd.sa.gov.au/docs/documents/1/ConsentFormChildAmharic.pdf
Arabic www.decd.sa.gov.au/docs/documents/1/ConsentFormChildArabic.pdf
Burmese www.decd.sa.gov.au/docs/documents/1/ConsentFormChildBurmese.pdf
Chinese www.decd.sa.gov.au/docs/documents/1/ConsentFormChildChinese.pdf
Dari www.decd.sa.gov.au/docs/documents/1/ConsentFormChildDari.pdf
Dinka www.decd.sa.gov.au/docs/documents/1/ConsentFormChildDinka.pdf
Kinyarwanda www.decd.sa.gov.au/docs/documents/1/ConsentFormChildKinyarwan.pdf
Kirundi www.decd.sa.gov.au/docs/documents/1/ConsentFormChildKirundi.pdf
Madi www.decd.sa.gov.au/docs/documents/1/ConsentFormChildMadi.pdf
Nepali www.decd.sa.gov.au/docs/documents/1/ConsentFormChildNepali.pdf
Nuer www.decd.sa.gov.au/docs/documents/1/ConsentFormChildNuer.pdf
Oromo www.decd.sa.gov.au/docs/documents/1/ConsentFormChildOromo.pdf
Pitjantjara www.decd.sa.gov.au/docs/documents/1/ConsentFormChildPitjantja.pdf
Sinhalese www.decd.sa.gov.au/docs/documents/1/ConsentFormChildSinhalese.pdf
Somali www.decd.sa.gov.au/docs/documents/1/ConsentFormChildSomali.pdf
Swahili www.decd.sa.gov.au/docs/documents/1/ConsentFormChildSwahili.pdf
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Uighur www.decd.sa.gov.au/docs/documents/1/ConsentFormChildUighur.pdf
Uzbek www.decd.sa.gov.au/docs/documents/1/ConsentFormChildUzbek.pdf
Vietnamese www.decd.sa.gov.au/docs/documents/1/ConsentFormChildVietnames.pdf

13.3.3 Sample invitation to children

The following information could be included in a colourful and engaging poster or flyer. Educators should discuss the contents of the invitation with the children and explain the process further, including what activities the children might be involved with, and how the information children provide will be used.

What Children and Young People Say is Important

You are invited to participate in a fun activity using artistic expression to tell adults:

What is important to you?
What do you think?
What do you wish for?

Have Your Say

Let's have some fun with art and hear what you have to say.

What you say can make South Australia a better place.

13.4 Appendix 4. Community planning exercise

The following is an outline for a strengths-based approach to aligning 'children's voices' consultations with community outcomes.

Domain	What we have (What are the strengths and assets in our community?)	What we don't have (What do we need to achieve better outcomes for children and families?)	What we want to achieve (What are the outcomes and goals we are working towards?)
Play and leisure			
Participation and citizenship			

Domain	What we have (What are the strengths and assets in our community?)	What we don't have (What do we need to achieve better outcomes for children and families?)	What we want to achieve (What are the outcomes and goals we are working towards?)
Safety and protection			
Health and social services			

Domain	What we have (What are the strengths and assets in our community?)	What we don't have (What do we need to achieve better outcomes for children and families?)	What we want to achieve (What are the outcomes and goals we are working towards?)
Educational resources			
Home environment			

Consider the following questions in stimulating discussion and planning in your community:

- What data sources regarding children and families are available to support evidenced based planning in your community? Are you aware of and have you considered the Australian Early Development Index as a source? Do the results match what parents and service providers perceive to be the strengths and vulnerabilities in children's development?
- What are the strengths within your community? How do these strengths support children's outcomes? How can the community build on or promote these strengths?
  Examples might include: people/agencies with a good understanding of the community's history and needs; advocates for children's education and care within the community; advocates for community issues outside the community, such as political leaders; parks; social capital; playgroups and adequate preschool or school places
- How well does your community welcome and include families with young children, new families, families from diverse backgrounds and families with children with a disability or developmental delay?
- What are the best actions that can be taken as a community to support children and families in your area? What resources or help does the community need to undertake these actions?

- How can social capital be best promoted and developed in your community?
- How well are the views of children considered in the decision making processes for designing built environments, events, programs, services and facilities in your community?
- How can children participate in decision making within your community?
- What are the best ways to encourage children to express their views eg, through drawing, role play or other means?
- What processes can be embedded into policy frameworks to ensure children's voices and best interests are of central consideration in decision making?
- What messages are given to parents and children through the facilities that are currently provided or not provided eg, facilities for nappy changing, breast feeding, toilets, signage in community facilities, shops, cafes etc.?
- How accessible are the preschools, schools, medical centres, playgrounds sportsgrounds and libraries? Are they easy to walk to and between?
- How easy is it to walk and cycle around your community?
- How healthy are the children's menus in the local restaurants and cafes?
- Are shopping experiences as friendly as they could be for families with children? In what ways could they be improved?
- If you have young children what do they value in their local neighbourhood and what would they like to see more of?
- How easy is it for children to access natural environments in which to play?
- Are there enough supervised after school activities for children?
- Are decisions in your community based on good research and a strong evidence base?
- Is information, data and research easy to find, quick to access, reliable, accurate and relevant?
- What are the information gaps in relation to children and families that require further research?
- Are policies, programs and services adequately evaluated to determine the effectiveness of their outcomes for children in order to form new evidence bases supporting those models of provision?

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