Chapter Five: Participatory Communication with Children Young People and their Families

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Common Core of Skills & Knowledge for the Children's Workforce: Effective communication and engagement with children, young people and families.

Listening and building empathy

- Establish a rapport and build respectful, trusting, honest and supportive relationships with children, young people, their families and carers, which make them feel valued as partners
- Use clear language to communicate with all children, young people, families and carers, including people who find communication difficult, or are at risk of exclusion or under-achievement.
- Be able to adapt styles of communication to the needs and abilities of children and young people who do not communicate verbally, or communicate in different ways.
- Build a rapport and develop relationships using the most appropriate forms of communication (for example, spoken language, visual communication, play, body and sign language, information and communication technologies) to meet the needs of the individual child or young person and their families and carers.
- Hold conversations at the appropriate time and place, understanding the value of regular, reliable contact and recognising that it takes time to build a relationship.
- Actively listen in a calm, open, non-judgemental, non-threatening way and use open questions. Acknowledge what has been said, and check you have heard correctly.
- Make sure that children, young people, parents and carers know they can communicate their needs and ask for help.

CWDC (2010)

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Chapter objectives:

By the end of this chapter you should have an understanding of:

- Key participatory techniques for children, young people, and their families.
- Policy and legislative context of participatory communication.
- Theories or models that underpin the practice.
- Different agencies, services and professionals offering support.
- Tools and techniques for use in practice to support participatory communication.
- Useful resources to improve knowledge and practice.

Introduction

Effective communication extends to involving children, young people, their parents and carers in the design and delivery of services and decisions that affect them (CWDC, 2010:6).

Effective communication for children and young people is about participation. In the early seventies Pateman (1970: 1) noted that the term *participation* was used to refer to a wide variety of situations by different people. This complexity continues today. A minimalist view of participation would suggest that simply encouraging children and young people's voice is a practical precondition for effective participation. A maximalist view would see young people having power to determine both the type of decisions and the actual decisions to which they are giving voice, and that this is seen as a complete expression of citizenship for children and young people to achieve (Hart, 1992). What is not in doubt are the potential benefits that occur from children and young people's participation in decision making. In the UK these have been suggested to be:

- preservation of rights as citizens and service users;
- fulfilment of legal responsibilities related to international and national legislation;
- improvement and influence in services through better informed decision-making;
- enhancement of democratic processes;
- protection from abuse;
- enhancement of skills;
- empowerment;
- enhanced own self-esteem.

(Sinclair and Franklin, 2000)

Governments in recent times have come to believe that it is important to consult children and young people and hear their voice especially when they use and are affected by services delivered by local or national government. They also believe that it is important to consider children and young people's opinions and perspectives from the outset of their experience of a service. With effective communication comes the development of trust between the

workforce and children, young people, parents and carers, as well as within different sectors of the workforce itself (CWDC, 2010). However this stated aim has not always been recognised or granted to children and young people. In fact it is the outcome of several policy initiatives that have sought to engage them and enshrine their right to a voice in practice.

This chapter includes three discrete sections. The first explores the policies and legislation which support the engagement and participation of children and young people. The second section discusses some of the practitioner values and skills which enable and support the participatory communication of children, young people and their families. The third section pulls these together in describing a project which used some of the policies, values and skills identified previously to engage children and young people in an aspect of community safety. It is our belief that effective practice requires knowledge and understanding of social policies which support participation as well as positive values and communication skills in working with children, young people and their families.

Policy and Legislation

The first post World War Two Labour government in 1945 established the importance of state intervention as a policy choice to address urgent national needs after a long war. They developed social democratic policies to ensure they could intervene and manage the economy. They also expanded on and developed the welfare state to ensure it delivered universal services to people in need. Benefits like child benefit (formerly family allowance) were available to all. Some commentators saw these new arrangements as being paternalistic. They felt that civil society was being ignored and criticised the lack of public participation in the development of the welfare state (Hughes, 1998). In other words they felt that these services were being planned by the state without consultation with the people who were likely to use their services. Instead the power and knowledge of professionals informed both policy making processes and the delivery of services (Clarke and Newman, 1997).

Concern about youth voice and participation as a policy issue evolved in the 1960s when the *baby boomers* reached their teenage years. In this decade the growth of participation in civil society was symbolised by emerging new social movements, including feminism, the peace movement, environmentalism and the civil rights movement on both sides of the Atlantic. Universities became radicalised and new theorists and ideas emerged and became popular. This includes thinkers like Carl Rogers (see below) who talked about the importance of a humanistic and person centred approach to understanding relationships and decision making. Young people and other marginalised groups were asking for a voice. By the 1970s the state intervention approach which had underpinned the post war state came under further pressure from service users as it was increasingly seen to have failed to address the

diversifying needs and the wishes of a more informed public. The state was seen as corporatist rather than paternalistic. When the long economic post war boom ended the recession led both Labour and Conservative governments to consider more free market approaches to meet service needs. Privatisation of state services was seen as potentially more effective to meet the increasing demands for improved rights, choice and cost effective services for service users.

Involving children and young people in decision making as a policy principle had been largely ignored by successive governments. However external, international pressure led to change. In the UK the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) served as a catalyst for a broad political consensus that children's opinions and observations must be taken more seriously. Article 12 stated that children and young people should have their opinions taken into account in all major decisions affecting their lives. They should have a voice. The treaty was ratified by the UK government in 1991 and this was subsequently endorsed by many local authorities. From this time the debate about children's involvement moved rapidly from the earlier philosophical debates as to *whether* they should be engaged to *how* and for *what purpose* they should be engaged, mirroring the debates on participation within the development discipline (Gaventa, 2006).

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Have you heard of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)?
The Every Child Matters pages on the Department for Children, Schools and Families website outlines the principles of the convention. Have a look at these now and consider their implications for your own practice:

http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/everychildmatters/strategy/strategyandgovernance/uncrc/unitednationsconventionontherightsofthechild/

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Following the establishment of the convention children and young people's right to be heard began to be incorporated into legislation. The Children Act 1989 gave children and young people involved in child protection proceedings the right to have *their wishes and feelings taken into account*. This heralded a new era. This was extended by the 2004 Children Act to all children and young people in need which also replaced parental rights with the concept of *parental responsibility*. Since then the participation of children and young people has been included in seven separate pieces of legislation in the United Kingdom, including the Crime and Disorder Act 1998. The involvement of young people in the government's work received another boost with the European Community Youth White Paper (2001) which declared a stated European Common Objective on more youth participation. This led to increasing guidance and advice to service providers in local government to listen to young people's voice and engage young people in decision making.

For example the UK government's commitment to youth voice and participation was declared in the guidance on pupil participation *Working together: Giving children and young people a say for schools and Local Education Authorities* (2004).

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Activity 5.1

Identify any policy and/or procedures, in your setting, that are aimed at giving children or young people a voice in decision making. Think of a time when you involved a group of children or young people in decision making about a service they received?

Make a list of the costs and benefits of their involvement.

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The need to build children and young people's capacity to engage as active citizens has long been acknowledged. The victory of New Labour in 1997 occurred at a time when concern about youth apathy and disengagement from politics and civil society was at its height (Kimberlee, 1998). Participatory structures for youth voice were subsequently slowly developed both across local authorities and within individual services (Willow, 1999). A UK Youth Parliament was formed in 2001 and following the Crick Report (1998) Citizenship was introduced into the secondary school curriculum in 2002. The importance of this educational reform was not simply about improving young people's political literacy (i.e. learning about politics) but it offered a clear approach which sought to promote *active citizenship* amongst young people. It envisaged that young people should be taught to realise their voice, work together and take practical action, using their knowledge and understanding of citizenship to contribute to a better society. Within the education sector the importance of children and young people's engagement was acknowledged when a new duty was placed on all maintained schools in England and Wales to consider their views with the passing of the Education and Skills Act (2008). This significant legal reform substantially strengthened the legal rights of children to participate in school decision making and today it is not unusual to see young people involved in consultations around new appointees, funding bids and decision making such as food provision in schools.

While education services received a boost from policymakers to listen and positively encourage young people's voice and participation all services working with young people were forced into an assessment of their service delivery following the publication of the *Every Child Matters* (2003) green paper. This was published alongside the formal response to the report into the death of Victoria Climbié, the young girl abused, tortured and killed by

her great aunt and the man with whom they lived. With the Children Act (2004) the government provided a legislative spine for developing more effective and accessible services focused around the needs of children, young people and families. Consultation with and participation by young people was seen as an essential element if future services were going to be more effective in meeting needs.

As economies in Europe began to falter in the early 1990's support for state intervention as a solution declined and policies that led to an increased voice for children and young people were re-evaluated. While these legislative initiatives appeared to have enshrined young people's rights the effectiveness of this approach has been challenged. Policy analysts who have tracked the increase in the privatisation of state services argue that the increasing commercialisation of private life and the breaking up of the corporatist social democratic welfare state has led to a withdrawal of state support for vulnerable people. In fact it is argued that it is now increasingly difficult to sustain the idea of public interest and a public space, defined in ways which are separate from market relationships (Gamble, 1996:127). Professionals (like youth workers) delivering services have been encouraged to become target driven and to deliver cost effective services as the withdrawal of the state and increasing commercialisation has contributed towards a more diverse service and policy (Rhodes, 1997).

The extent to which the state has lost influence and power in the policy making process is contested but what commentators agree on is that public service workers and professionals working on the front line are now facing increasingly diverse and frequently contradictory pressures (Richards and Smith, 2003). Although participation and voice is encouraged it often leads to diverse voices and pressures. For some commentators *participation* has become one of the mechanisms through which the government attempts to govern (Newman et al, 2004). The *hollowing out of the state* shown in the decline of corporatism and the universal provision of welfare has led governments to adopt different governing strategies like youth participation which helps the state to reconstruct their relationships with individuals (Kooiman, 2003). This means that rights especially in relation to the welfare state and service provision have been rethought in response to external pressures from the United Nations and European Union, and internal pressures from target setting and new public management reforms under Conservative governments and the modernisation agenda of New Labour.

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Activity 5.2

There are some important words used so far with which you may not be familiar. Use a Dictionary of Sociology or Politics (see 'Further Reading') to define their meaning more precisely then re-read the previous section:

Paternalistic	Professional	New social movements
Corporatist	Privatisation	Free market approach
Civil Society	Welfare State	Social democratic

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It is only relatively recently that children and young people have been given a voice. They have entered into policy discourses. Makrinioti (1994:274) has argued that in the immediate post World War Two children and young people had *their needs articulated and satisfied only implicitly and indirectly* in social policy. Policies affecting children and young people were made without their voice. Lacking access to participatory processes, which are integral to the exercise of democratic rights, children and young peoples' experiences had always remained largely hidden from view. They were denied effective recognition as citizens (Lansdown 2000:7). New Labour policy initiatives encouraged the establishment of processes to engage children and young people and give them voice, but these may be seen as less significant than professionals striving to achieve policy outcomes. Social policies have often been output-driven, prioritising policy delivery. Targets such as reductions in child poverty and those concerning school performance have been more central to governing strategies. This might suggest that there has been less concern with enhancing young people's rights to have a voice, however other policy discourses have frequently called for *democratic renewal* and the need to build *social capital* in communities (Halphern, 2005) for example by expanding local government or through local regeneration schemes to improve local communities.

As the Coalition government seeks to promote the notion of Big Society it is perhaps in the voluntary and community sector organisations where the rights of children and young people to a voice and participation will be sustained. The British Youth Council, a charitable organization run by and for young people with an original aim of uniting young people against the forces of communism amid tense international relations just after World War Two, continue to give young people a voice and scrutinise the work of governance and service delivery. With a consortium made up of five other agencies (Children's Rights Alliance for England, National Council for Voluntary Youth Services, National Youth Agency, National Children's Bureau and Save the Children UK) they have established the Participation Works network which enables professionals and organisations to involve children and young people effectively in the development, delivery and evaluation of services that affect their lives. The Children's Rights Alliance for England seek to protect these recently won human rights for children and young people by lobbying government and others who hold power and by bringing or supporting test cases using regional and international human rights mechanisms.

Discussion for the future might focus on how organisations balance the shift to marketisation and performance indicators in service delivery with the need to develop a culture of genuine participation. John (2003; 196) highlights that there is an imbalance between children and those in power and argues that: *In the case of children, their language, whatever its forms, about their worlds is rarely recognised by the powerful.* Tool kits have been devised and used to support professionals in their work to genuinely engage young people. It is important to avoid adopting a dogmatic approach that thinks any one tool kit or approach will work for all children and young people. Participation should be informed by the belief that all children and young people are of equal worth irrespective of ability, ethnicity, gender, health, religion, sexual orientation, or social class. We have to be mindful that in the *current crisis in children's participation when the call for children's voices to be heard results in small, usually unrepresentative, groups of children being given limited access to adult forums* (van Beers 2006a: 19) then the comprehensiveness and coherence of that voice must be considered and balanced against the democratic gains achieved.

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Activity 5.3

Finding support

If you are working with children and young people and want support to empower them to give them voice and involve them in decision making you can find help and support from the Participation Works Partnership website. Here you will find toolkits for different scenarios, training opportunities and an opportunity to network with other professionals:

http://www.participationworks.org.uk/

Techniques and Tools

Policy creates spaces and defines the scope and range of activity in which practitioners can engage with service users. This section considers both practitioner values and skills which support participation. It draws on the work of developmental psychologists and advocates of 'social pedagogy' and how this can translate into practical communication skills.

Practitioners often become involved with children, young people and their families when things are going wrong. The identification of a learning difficulty, problems with behaviour, criminal or anti-social activity, difficulties within the family, impairment, illness, loss and/or exclusion typically bring practitioners into the lives of children, young people and their families. In this section we look at the ways in which professionals engage with children and young people to hear their voice and enable them to participate and affect decisions. Reference will also be made to communication tools for engaging adult family members.

Communication Roadblocks

Thomas Gordon (1974) observed that when children and young people show unhappiness or indicate that they have a problem most professionals respond with what he terms a 'communication roadblock'. This can involve the following:

Ordering/commanding	Warning/threatening
Moralising/preaching	Advising/giving solutions
Persuading with logic	Judging/blaming
Praising/agreeing	Name-calling/ridiculing
Analysing/diagnosing	Reassuring/sympathising
Probing/questioning	Diverting/sarcasm.

He argues that all of these types of response claim some form of authority or power on the part of the professional and consequently disempower the child or young person. While such responses may serve a purpose (often compliance), they are unlikely to encourage participation.

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Activity: 5.4

A 12 year old boy, Wayne, arrives in school extremely worried about his 14 year old sister, who left the family home the previous evening after a fierce argument with their father and has not returned. During registration the teacher notices his distress and asks him to wait behind as the other students leave the room. The following interaction takes place between the teacher (T) and the student (S).

T: You look a bit down in the dumps, Wayne. What's up?

S: I'm OK sir.

T: Is there something going on at home?

S: No sir – I'm OK.

T: Look, I know there's something wrong. Why don't you just tell me?

S: [*Silent*].

T: Well you either need to tell me so I can help you or else you need to cheer up and get on with the day.

S: I'm OK sir.

It is quite clear that this teacher wants to help and yet the interaction is not working. Why might the student be reluctant to disclose what is really happening?

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Values and attitudes

In considering how practitioners can encourage the participation of children, young people and families, both in one to one situations and when working with groups, this section builds on the idea that paying attention to how the practitioner constructs the relationship(s) is key. This inevitably involves consideration of the exchange of both overt and hidden messages – words and also non-verbal communication.

Gordon (1974) draws on the work of Carl Rogers in identifying a set of attitudes, values and skills which encourage genuine engagement between adults, children and young people. Rogers (1957) had identified six conditions of therapist attitude and behaviour in effective therapeutic relationships. Clearly practitioners are not usually therapists, however when children and young people are experiencing difficulties in their lives it seems logical for professionals to draw on the knowledge and skills developed within counselling and/or therapy which invite engagement and participation. This section will briefly explore two of Rogers' *key conditions*:

unconditional positive regard and

empathic understanding, and consider their application.

Within mental health services and practice, the concept of ***unconditional positive regard*** is broadly accepted. When people are experiencing difficulties in life they risk harm to their self worth – their self esteem. There is a consequent risk that damage to their self esteem can become a vicious circle. Repeated negative experiences such as being in trouble, rejection or failure provide a feedback loop which can negatively inform their self-image. The value position of *unconditional positive regard* should lead a skilled practitioner to the communication of acceptance of the other person – regardless of the current difficulties.

> *When a person is able to feel and communicate genuine acceptance of another, he possesses a capacity for being an effective helping agent. Acceptance of the other, just as he is, is an important factor in fostering a relationship in which the other person can grow, develop, make constructive changes, learn to solve problems, move in the direction of psychological health, become more productive and creative and actualise his fullest potential.* (Gordon, 1974:56)

Kwaitek et al (2005) claim that many people with learning difficulties do not experience unconditional acceptance from practitioners, or from the general public. More usually they experience unequal 'doing to' instead of 'being with' relationships. Positive regard becomes conditional – experienced when they behave in ways which meet the approval of staff

and/or parents. Perhaps this experience of conditional regard is true for many children and young people in their relationships with significant adults. *Unconditional positive regard* supports risk taking, growth and participation as positive regard is not withheld when mistakes are made.

Many of the individual children and young people with whom practitioners work may already have had negative experience of adults. Adult family members can also distrust service providers and professionals. When working with groups and seeking to encourage engagement and participation, practitioners need to communicate their belief that:

- this engagement is worthwhile and valuable
- the other person/people are 'up to' the task
- there is little risk of failure.

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Activity 5.5
Think about a situation in which you want to engage a particular child or young person into some sort of participation. How might you try to:

- convince them that their engagement is worthwhile
- communicate your belief that they will succeed and/or gain something
- remove or lessen the fear of failure.

Now think about a situation in which you want to engage a particular adult family member into some sort of participation. How might you try to:

- convince them that their engagement is worthwhile
- communicate your belief that they will succeed and/or gain something
- remove or lessen the fear of failure.

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Rogers (1957: 96) refers to ***empathic understanding*** as being:

To sense the client's private world as if it were your own, without losing the 'as if' quality.

Empathy can be described as a way of imaginatively experiencing another person's world. When practitioners achieve *empathic understanding*, they not only develop their understanding of how the other person experiences the world, they also attempt to communicate this back, with the intention of demonstrating their endeavours and perhaps encouraging the other person to further explain. At its best this can give rise to a sense of being understood, and the development of trust.

The application of *empathic understanding* when working with groups will require the practitioner to imagine the thoughts or feelings of the group and communicate this attempt to understand.

> *I would guess that you are already very busy.*
>
> *I expect some of you are worried about your exams next week.*
>
> *I'm sure that many of you would like to have more of a say in what food is available in the canteen.*

Both *unconditional positive regard* and *empathic understanding* are supported and advanced in the act of listening to children and young people. A precondition for effective listening is the ability to give one's full attention to another.

Attending

Egan (1998) discusses *attending* as a micro- skill of communication where *attending* means being with people in both a physical and psychological sense. Attending to others indicates that they are important to you and involves noticing and responding to both verbal and non-verbal cues. This is especially important when interacting with very young children and children or young people with learning difficulties, for whom spoken language may be problematic and non verbal signals may be the main means of expression. Signaling attention indicates value and invites trust. Egan recommends a set of physical skills including posture and eye contacts which indicate attentiveness. However individual practitioners can develop their own ways to communicate this. These are likely to involve smiles, eye contact, nods and quiet verbal encouragements (*oh, I see, hmm*).

> *Attending to someone means giving them your total, complete, undivided interest. It means using your body, your face, your eyes, yes, especially your eyes, to say: "Nothing exists right now for me except you." (*Kottler & Kottler 1993)

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Activity 5.6

Try to identify some of the physical skills which you employ when you want to signal your attentiveness to another person. How do these skills differ when interacting with either adults or children or young people?

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Avoiding distraction and focusing on the child or young person are paramount here. Bryant (2009) emphasises the importance of creating an environment for listening. For many practitioners this can prove difficult. Schools in particular are busy places and it can be hard for staff to find quiet spaces in which to give full attention without the risk of interruption. However even in busy spaces a skilled practitioner will use their skills to signal the importance of the other person and their best attempts to attend.

Active listening

Skilled listeners show that they are giving full attention, do not judge and work hard to try to understand the other person. They keep the *agenda* belonging to the other person, without introducing their own views or indeed, advice.

The particular skill of *active listening* starts with this emphasis on giving full attention to the message sender. It also involves practitioners in trying to show understanding by paraphrasing and feeding back or checking what they think has been communicated by the other person – both through words and also through non verbal communication. A sensitive practitioner will often pick up on the mood of another person without words being exchanged and this can be fed back; for example,

Y*ou look a bit fed up today* or

Something's worrying you.

This involves interpretation and as such there is no guarantee that the practitioner's perception will be accurate. However, at the very least this indicates concern, attentiveness and a willingness to listen. At best it may lead to a constructive interaction. Children, young people and adults are more likely to want to engage with practitioners who appear open and give the impression that they are trying to understand.

Indeed, language based interactions also involve a good deal of interpretation. If someone tells you that they are feeling fine, but the way they say this - tone, body position, facial expression, eye contact avoidance (remember Wayne) indicates something different then which do you believe? Non verbal communication often provides a clearer indication of people's emotional states than words. McNaughton et al (2008) describe active listening as a multi-step process, involving the use of empathic comments, asking appropriate questions and the use of paraphrasing and summarising. These skills indicate that the listener is trying to understand.

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Example of active listening in practice

You are a secondary school learning support assistant. You are in the drama studio getting the room ready for a class when Amanda (15 year old student) arrives a few minutes early. She has her hood pulled low over her face, avoids eye contact with you and slumps heavily into a chair. The following conversation takes place.

Amanda: *I really hate drama.*

You: *You're not enjoying drama at all.*

Amanda: *(Pause) I suppose I enjoy some of it, but I can't concentrate.*
You: *Concentration's hard.*
Amanda: *Well I definitely can't concentrate when people are bossy.*
You: *You don't like being bossed about on the course.*
Amanda: *I don't like being bossed about by Tony (another student on the course). For God's sake don't let Mrs Shah (teacher) put me in a group with him again.*

In a very short space of time a problem has been identified, however the conversation started in a different place.

- What skills/tools did you use in this interaction?
- What did you avoid?
- Why?

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<u>I-Messages</u>
Practitioners working with children or young people may occasionally need to confront, criticise or offer negative feedback when attempting to help them to change destructive behaviours. In these situations there is always a danger that the relationship between the practitioner and the child or young person will be damaged, often resulting in a loss of sometimes hard-earned trust.

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Activity 5.7
Think of a child or young person who you work with who sometimes behaves in ways which are harmful or hurtful to him/herself or others. Imagine this behaviour happening. How would you confront him or her? What would you actually say?

What response might the child or young person have to this message from you?

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In situations like these Gordon (2000) recommends the use of what he terms confrontive I-messages. These are broken down into three parts:

- A non-blameful description of the actual behaviour
- The effect that the behaviour is having
- The speaker's feelings about that effect.

This can be given a more simple structure which practitioners can adapt and use in these situations

When you… I feel... because…

Some people respond very poorly to being given an order. Notice how this method of confronting describes a problem, but does not either criticise or order the child or young person to do something. As such, it is unlikely to seriously damage a relationship or undermine trust.

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Activity 5.8
Think back to the child or young person from the previous activity. Try to construct a confrontive I-message in three parts using the structure

when you… I feel… because…

What response might the child or young person have to this message from you?

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Gordon also recommends the use of positive I-messages as a technique for praising or complimenting children or young people on their achievements. He recognises that some children find it difficult to accept praise, particularly if it sounds objective or authoritative:

Your story is very well written Jamil.

That's an excellent drawing Paula.

If Jamil does not think he is a good writer, perhaps because of previous adult criticism, and Paula is not confident about her drawing skills, they may not genuinely accept these well intentioned compliments. Indeed some children and young people will destroy their own work if they receive praise in this way.Gordon advocates that positive I-messages should include the speaker's feelings about what has been achieved. This makes a compliment more difficult to reject.

I loved reading your story Jamil.
I'd like to have your drawing on my office wall Paula.

Social Pedagogy

In terms of the practice of working with children and young people, policy makers have recently begun to advocate both the philosophy and skills associated with social pedagogy.

The history or development of social pedagogy as an influence on education, social work and youth work is contested. What seems clear is that in the early 19th century the Swiss, Heinrich Pestalozzi (cited in Heafford 1967) developed a method of holistic education which sought to engage the head, the heart and the hands of both the child and teacher in shared activity.

Petrie et al (2005:22) identify the key features for those working with children to include:

- *A focus on the child as a whole person, and support for the child's overall development;*
- *The practitioner seeing herself/himself as a person, in relationship with the child or young person;*
- *Children and staff are seen as inhabiting the same life space, not as existing in separate hierarchical domains(…)*
- *The centrality of relationship and, allied to this, the importance of listening and communicating*.

Further support for social pedagogy arrived from the Children's Workforce Development Council (2009) in its discussion paper *Social Pedagogy and its Implications for Practice*.

When planning practice with either individual children and young people or with groups which seeks their participation then further considerations would be to appeal to them on these three levels– the head, the heart and the hands – and also to follow social pedagogy's emphasis of joining in shared activities.

In contexts which allow for this, expressive arts can create opportunities for collaboration between workers, children and young people and for the holistic, mutual engagement of head, heart and hands. Poetry, including hip hop / rap; music production and performance which employ both digital sequencing and analogue sound (instruments); drama, including role play; fine art such as painting and drawing (including graffiti, cartoons and comics); sculpture; graphics and the construction of graphic stories; film including animation; textiles and fashion; and photography all provide opportunities for expression, participation, engagement and collaboration, and all can involve the head, the heart and the hands.

Participation is, in part, about individuals and groups finding a voice, a way of saying things and of being heard, and thus being able to offer their opinions and make a mark on their own worlds. While the National Curriculum and formal education support this achievement to a greater or lesser extent for the majority of children and young people it fails do so for a significant minority. Some of those with learning difficulties and/or emotional and behavioural difficulties and children and young people with complex needs struggle to find a voice. Creative use of expressive arts allied with practitioner willingness to join children and young people and accept their perceptions, provides fertile ground for supporting and amplifying their voices.

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Case Study: *Streets Ahead on Safety*

Our case study looks at an example of engaging children and young people in decision making to illustrate the social pedagogy approach - how heads, hearts and the hands of children were engaged in shared activity (Kimberlee, 2009).

Birmingham City Council's *Streets Ahead on Safety* project aimed to improve road safety and quality of life in an area of multiple deprivation where 87,000 people from largely Asian backgrounds live. A third of residents were under 16 years old and 58% self defined their religion as Muslim. The project area had a poor traffic accident record leading to high levels of child KSI (Killed or Seriously Injured). Between 2001–2005 there were on average 56 child pedestrian accidents per year in the project area which gives an average of 2.18 child pedestrian accidents per 1000 of the child population. This is extraordinarily high compared to the Birmingham wide level of accidents (0.3 accidents/1000 of the child population) and almost eleven times greater than the English average (0.2 accidents/1000 of the child population). European child accidental injury is now seen as reaching 'epidemic' proportions (Vincenten, 2006) with both black and minority ethnic identity and social inequality having strong associations with road injury (Towner et al, 2002). Existing UK school based road safety initiatives had rarely extended beyond the 'tokenistic'.

This project endeavoured to encourage a Highways Authority, engineers and road safety officers to provide local young people with opportunities to participate in decision making in the belief that the active engagement of young service users would lead to more effective and sustainable solutions to accident prevention. The project included 405 young people aged 9-11 years and involved environmental audits, interactive road safety awareness, citizenship training and engagement as decision makers.

Involving the Head in Road Safety
Young people can be disinterested in road safety (Audit Commission, 2007), so to stimulate their interest a new training technique was used based around interactive technology to explore safety issues and the highway code. In using *Qwizdom* (LARSOA 2006) road safety awareness was raised using a series of multiple choice questions where young people used individual, interactive keypads to learn road safety. Feedback to their responses is instantaneous and provided opportunities to discuss aspects of road safety such as crossing at road junctions, the prime cause of child KSI in the project area.

Involving the Hands in the Environmental Audit
Teacher-led exercises aimed at discussing 'moving around our community' provided an opportunity to understand routes taken by young people journeying to school. A familiar

walking route was devised to undertake an environmental audit using cameras and question sheets. These were discussed on return to school.

Involving the Heart in Citizenship training
Young people were invited to reflect on what actions could be undertaken to improve their local environment to make it healthier and safer. This was based on techniques developed by the Children's Rights Alliance for England (2005) from their *Ready, Steady, Go* participation packs. After considering responses given from the perspective of themselves, their Family, City Council, Police, local shopkeepers and school council, their ideas were collected and discussed in small groups. Groups were asked to select the best ideas for presentation to their class and the whole class voted on the best one for their school council.

Engaging with decision makers
To complete activities young people were invited to look at engineering plans as they affected roads, pavements and spaces outside their school. Question and answer sheets were devised to assist in exploration of key features and intended changes in road design. Young people were also shown a 3-D graphic presentation of the options being considered.

Once the young people had participated in small discussion groups to explore the plans they were provided with an opportunity to ask questions and scrutinize the work of the project's engineers. All questions were answered in open forums, and where the engineers had insufficient information they were forced to research a response and come back. Young people voted on the options by secret ballot.

Outcomes of participation:
Primarily, the purpose of this project was to engage young people in decision making on the project. For the first time in this community young people were treated as stakeholders and engaged with engineering plans that sought to address the high level of child KSI. In terms of the local Highway Authority's commitment to participation they have become an 'emerging' authority on the National Youth Agency/Local Government Association standards in that it has started to make the active involvement of children and young people a central commitment of its organisation (Badham and Wade, 2005). This project has additionally created local spaces to empower young people to express their views to adults in their community. The eventual engineering development partially reflected young people's drive, commitment, contemplation and involvement in tackling this issue and achieved rung six out of eight 'Partnership' level on Arnstein's *Ladder of Participation* where *power is in fact redistributed through negotiation between citizens and power holders* (Arnstein, 1969: 217).

Engagement yielded many rich and unanticipated benefits to the project, the community and young people themselves. Insight into the beneficial outcomes of participation and engagement techniques were revealed through young people's completion of confidential evaluation sheets. Questionnaires were also sent to the teachers and members of the project team. Importantly one of the main outcomes was that participation was seen as fun, which is an important aid to learning and an appropriate response to those who believe that road safety is boring (Jones, 2002).

Green and Hert (1998) have suggested that road safety learning is not always transferable to different contexts; however, in their evaluations young people stressed that what they remembered most about their day of participatory activities was road safety: *I learnt that road safety is very important. I also know how to look after the environment. I can now keep myself safe.*

This was endorsed by their teachers:
It really improved their road safety awareness and their thinking skills and individual self confidence.

Improved self-confidence, enhanced personal and social development, and a greater sense of responsibility and understanding are all attributes that are often associated with young people's engagement in participative practices (Kirby and Bryson 2002).

Active participatory approaches can also yield deeper insights into children's perspectives of the built environment and their local community something demonstrated in UNESCO's *Growing up in Cities* project (Chawla & Malone, 2003).

In undertaking this participatory and head, hands and hearts approach the project managed to understand and witness important features of the local community that provided material for future Citizenship lessons and revealed issues and problems previously unknown to local service providers. Young people enthusiastically engaged with the engineering plans and engineers were able to listen to suggestions regarding young people's misuse of public space, traffic flow, and the range of local languages spoken for improving signage.

The project included getting young people to consider ways in which their school council could develop issues raised from environmental audits. One school proposed that school councillors fine parents for parking over *School Keep Clear* areas to raise funds to support school trips.

Many young people were acutely aware of their parent's poor driving skills, a finding that is consistent with recent research on young people's safety awareness (Lupton and Bayley,

2006). References to accidents and road incidents revealed an understanding and recognition of a variety of problems including poor parking and speeding. This is important because one of the striking discoveries was that in every classroom someone could recall a recent road accident either involving themselves or a family member. Young people talk about road accidents and driving behaviour a lot and the Road Safe campaign (Wenham-Clarke, 2006) has made us acutely aware of the grief and trauma this creates. In the project area children and young people's awareness of death and injury is extraordinarily profound and revealed through participatory techniques.

Recent action research projects in Canada have put children and young people at the centre of processes of communal resolution by enabling them to develop local policy in partnership with service providers through processes of dialogue rather than consultation (Cairns 2000). The *Streets Ahead on Safety* project sought to imitate this approach by adopting a child rights based method to addressing the problem of pedestrian injury that threatens children and young people's health and well-being. Often the greatest obstacle to participation are the attitudes and working practices of adults and their adherence to processes and practices that are completely alienating for young people (Lyons 2004). It is vital to build learning and accountability into the participatory process by continuing to foster a collaboration based on dialogue, learning and mutual reciprocity between young people and adults (Percy-Smith, 2005). This case study required an engagement with local and national policy, the demonstration of practitioner values, and use of creative practitioner skills to secure the full engagement and meaningful participation of children and young people.

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Chapter Summary

In this chapter we have provided you with some insight into:

- The key participatory techniques for children, young people, and their families,
- Recent policy and legislative changes that form the context of participatory communication,
- Some theories and models that underpin practice,
- How different agencies, services and professionals offer support by giving you a case study of good practice,
- Potential tools and techniques for use in your own practice to support participatory communication.

Useful Resources:

Opening Your Doors to Young People

Youth Access has published new guidelines for making advice services young person-friendly. The **Opening Your Doors to Young People** guidelines provides advice agencies with: basic information

about barriers to access to services; a way of assessing how accessible, relevant and age-sensitive current services are; practical steps to take to improve services; examples of work undertaken by other advice agencies who have proved successful and could be replicated.

http://www.youthaccess.org.uk/publications/upload/OpeningDoors_FINAL.pdf

Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE)

The SCIE website contains numerous resources and e-learning activities related to young people's communication and participation

http://www.scie.org.uk/publications/elearning/cs/index.asp

The UK Youth Parliament

This website is a rich source of information on youth issues and gives contact information on regional organisers and local projects. There is useful links on how to follow debates on Twitter and Facebook.

http://www.ukyouthparliament.org.uk/

Further Reading

McClean, I. and McMillan, A. (2009) The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Politics, Oxford: OUP

A useful resource for checking and learning about important political concepts discussed here and on other policy courses you may pursue.

Koprowska, J. (2008) *Communication and Interpersonal Skills in Social Work.* 2nd edition. Exeter: Learning Matters.

Exploring the communication skills required for effective social work practice. Useful chapter 'Communicating with children'.

Nind, M. & Hewett, D.(2nd Edition, 2006) *Access to Communication.* London: David Fulton.

This details the communication technique 'intensive interaction', used to develop communicative relationships with children with profound and complex learning difficulties.