

Participation: Meeting together – deciding together

Kids participating in case-planning decisions that affect their lives



nsw commission for
children & young people



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Introduction

ABOUT THE PARTICIPATION PROJECT

Participation is more than just giving children and young people a say – it is about listening to their views, taking them seriously and, wherever possible, following through on their ideas and suggestions.

Children and young people have lots of energy, enthusiasm and great ideas. Organisations that work with them can benefit greatly from the qualities, perspective and knowledge they are able to bring.

Children and young people want to participate in decision-making about their lives:

“Because it’s about us!”

(Boy, 15 years)

“We can have a say in what happens to us and our life.”

(Boy, 12 years)

In 2002, a group of people got together to better understand and find ways that kids could be more involved in making decisions that affect them. There was a particular focus on helping kids in out-of-home care to participate in case-planning meetings, where important decisions about their lives are made. A vital part of this project was the involvement, expertise and advice of children and young people.

Some important ways that organisations could better support kids to participate were identified and a range of useful tools were developed to help involve children and young people more effectively.

This booklet, *Participation: Meeting together – deciding together*, was developed as an inclusion in the Commission for Children and Young People's *TAKING PARTICipation seriously* kit.

TAKING PARTICipation seriously kit

This is a toolkit for people in organisations who want to see the participation of children and young people move from rhetoric to reality. It contains a series of booklets and information sheets that give information about children and young people's participation, as well as plenty of practical ideas that people can apply in their organisations or workplaces to make room for kids' participation.

TAKING PARTICipation seriously includes the following components:

- **Sharing the stage – an overview**
- **Conferences and events**
- **Involving kids in staff selection**
- **Meeting together – deciding together**
- **Participation – references, models and resources.**

Other parts may be added to *TAKING PARTICipation seriously* in the future.

You can find these resources at www.kids.nsw.gov.au/publications/taking.html or by telephoning 61 (02) 9286 7276.

ABOUT THE PARTICIPATION PROJECT:**A big thank you**

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Dr Nigel Thomas

Senior Lecturer in Applied Social Studies
School of Social Sciences and International Development
University of Wales, Swansea

PARTICIPATION: **What is it?**

To participate means to 'take part', 'to take or have a part or share, as with others' (*The Macquarie Dictionary; 3rd edition, 2001*).

Participation can vary from someone being present and taking part in making decisions to someone just knowing that their views are being considered and will be acted upon.

Participation for children and young people is about them getting involved so they can have their say in a way that is comfortable and appropriate for them. It involves adults really listening to what they have to say and giving due weight to this in decision-making.

Of course, sometimes children and young people choose not to participate. This is a form of participation too. The most important thing is that kids are given the opportunity to be involved in making decisions that affect their lives.

Participation by children and young people should be encouraged so they can have a say in all the important issues that affects their lives, such as:

- **health**
 - **education**
 - **legal matters**
 - **living arrangements**
 - **being safe from abuse or neglect.**
- 

PARTICIPATION:

Why is it important?

Children and young people across NSW say that they want to be more involved in their communities and to feel that the adults around them value their contributions.

Participation is important to children and young people because:

- it connects them with their community
- it allows them to express their voice and opinions
- it means programs and services that are designed for kids better meet their needs.

"Children and young people are more than capable of talking about their views and their feelings than they are ever given credit for." (*Thomas and O'Kane, 2000*)

Participation is a kid's right

The *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, adopted by the United Nations in 1989, clearly spells out that children and young people have a right to participate in decisions that affect their lives.

As a signatory to the Convention, the Australian Government has made a commitment to giving children and young people the help they need to participate in the important decisions that affect them.

Under the *Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998*, the NSW Government has a responsibility to ensure that all children and young people receive the care and protection they need to promote their safety, welfare and well-being. The participation of kids in decision-making is one of the key principles of this Act.

Under the *Commission for Children and Young People Act 1998*, the Commission for Children and Young People is required to encourage kids in NSW to have their say about the issues that affect them, individually and as a group.

Some examples

If a young person's parents have divorced and a contact order is made for her to go to her dad's house every weekend, shouldn't she have an opportunity to have her say?

If a child has cancer and a decision is made about the type and length of treatment he needs, shouldn't he play an active part in making the decision?

If a young person is in State care and not able to live with her family, shouldn't she have a say about where she lives?

If a child with a disability is having problems at school, shouldn't he have a say in where he goes to school and what sort of support he needs?

A summary

Participation gives children and young people the opportunity to talk about what is important to them. It also leads to better decision-making as they can offer their expertise on a matter and 'own' any decisions that will affect them. Participation creates better outcomes for children and young people and the organisation that is involved in the decision-making process, saving valuable time and energy in the long-term.

To help children and young people improve and increase their participation in decision-making, it is important that adults working with them:

- know what NSW legislation says about participation
- understand how effective participation can occur
- have practical tools to encourage effective participation.



Chapter 1:

KEY ELEMENTS OF PARTICIPATION

Five key elements of children and young people's participation in decision-making

The following key principles will help organisations working with kids develop a framework to encourage the participation of children and young people in making important decisions about their own lives.

You can find more information on the five key elements of participation in *Sharing the Stage*.

Visit www.kids.nsw.gov.au/publications/taking.html#sts or phone 61 (02) 9286 7276 to obtain a copy.

1. Children and young people's participation is part of an organisation's culture

Organisations that value the participation of children and young people develop a culture of participation in their everyday work and in how they describe themselves. They develop ways to support day-to-day and long-term participation in decision-making, document it in their policies, make it a part of staff duties and practice genuine, not tokenistic, participation.

2. Kids have a place in decision-making

Participation is most effective when organisations and the kids they work with are clear about the decision-making process. These organisations involve children and young people in how they work, decide together how they will participate, are open about the limits of participation and set aside funds and staff time to help participation happen.

3. Adults adapt to kids' ways of working

Organisations often try to fit children and young people into a decision-making framework that suits adults, even though this generally won't meet the needs of kids. To really benefit from the contribution they can make, organisations need to create an environment in which children and young people feel comfortable in participating. For example, make sure that meeting times, dates, venues, format, minute taking and length are appropriate for kids.

4. Strong relationships with kids

Children and young people see the world through their relationships with others. Therefore, adults who are able to build strong relationships with kids are more likely to be successful in encouraging their participation in an organisation's decision-making processes. Organisations can help staff build these relationships by giving them time and opportunities to get to know the children and young people they work with. The quality of the relationship between a worker and a child or young person is one of the most significant factors affecting participation – the better the relationship, the better the participation.

5. Participation rewards kids and organisations

If children and young people are to maintain their interest in participating in decision-making, their experience should be enjoyable, challenging and fun. They must feel that their time and effort is valued and has had some real effect on the outcomes for them. The organisation should not only give kids a say but listen to what they say and give due weight to this in its decision-making. Listening to kids can enhance the performance of the organisation and improve the service it provides to children and young people. The more practice that kids have in participating, the less staff time is required and the better the outcomes achieved.



Chapter 2:

MEETING, MEETINGS, MEETINGS!

About meetings

Formal meetings are a common place where decisions about children and young people are made.

Such meetings could involve the child or young person, their parent(s) or carer(s), other family members, their worker, their worker's manager, their teacher, their doctor or other health professional, their social worker or counsellor, community members, elders, advocates, friends and other people involved with the child or young person.

Usually at the meeting everyone talks about what is going on in the life of the child or young person and what they think needs to happen for them in the future. Decisions and plans should be made after listening to what the child or young person has to say.

Important decisions that affect the lives of children and young people are made in a variety of settings, such as:

- hospital staff and family members meeting to decide whether to change the medical treatment for a child or young person.
- staff at a youth mentoring scheme meeting to match a child or young person with an adult mentor.
- a legal representative for a child or young person who's been charged with an offence meeting with the parents/carers and/or a youth worker to discuss court procedures before going to court.
- a family court counsellor holding a formal meeting with a mother or father and their children to work out contact arrangements.
- a teacher or principal and family members meeting to plan how to best meet the educational needs of a child or young person with a disability.

- juvenile justice officers, teachers and housing providers meeting to discuss arrangements for the release of a young person from detention.
- regular case-planning meetings to plan for support services for a child or young person in care.

The language of meetings

Different types of organisations use different language when they talk about meetings where important decisions are made that involve kids:

- Out-of-home care services refer to these meetings as a 'case conference', 'case-planning' or 'case review' meeting.
- Disability services refer to them as 'individual service planning' meetings.
- Education services refer to them as 'individual education planning' meetings.
- Health services refer to them as 'case conferences' or 'case reviews'.
- Juvenile Justice services refer to them as 'case conferences'.
- Legal services refer to them as 'client meetings'.

The meeting process

In decision-making, the process can be as important as the outcome. For many kids, being involved in the process is the most important thing.

"To get what I want is not important; it is the decision thing, the method to get what you want."

(Girl, 14 years)

Children and young people need preparation, practice, support and encouragement to be able to take part in decision-making. They are often not used to speaking up and many adults are not used to listening to kids. It is an uncommon situation for a child or young person to be involved in a group where there are only adults present. It makes sense that they might feel more comfortable if they can have a person of their own age with them.

For more formal meetings, such as case reviews, preparation increases the opportunity for a child or young person to influence different parts of the meeting, such as who will attend, where it is held, what will be discussed and what they want to say.

Who should be involved

Kids

Kids need to have a genuine role in decision-making about matters that affect them, not a tokenistic contribution.

"Everybody should have a say in what they do in their life."

(Boy, 12 years)

"I think you should have a say because it is not fair that grown-ups should make all the decisions."

(Girl, 10 years)

Family and people that kids trust

Children and young people feel that the people they live with and those that they trust should also have a big say in making decisions that affect them.

"Well if another person made a decision who didn't know me very well, then I wouldn't like it. But it is all right if it is my mother, but not someone I didn't know about."

(Girl, 8 years)

Parents, carers and workers, a counsellor, a teacher they trust or a friend are just some of the people who can encourage genuine participation by children and young people. If a child or young person is going to be involved in a meeting, it is important that they feel informed and confident about participating.


Steps involved in effective participation

Helping a child or young person to participate effectively in a meeting involves:

- preparation before a meeting
- support during a meeting
- support after a meeting
- continued support between meetings.

Participation of children and young people in a meeting, discussion or review is a process that should include preparation, explanation, consultation, discussion and negotiation.

The following model provides some important things to keep in mind when organising a meeting. These are then explored in more detail over the following pages.



A participation model for meetings

Major principle

In everything you do, pass on information and skills to children and young people to help them learn more about decision-making and how they can be involved.

Stage 1: Before a meeting

Talk with the child or young person about:

- *why the meeting is being held*
- *who will be at the meeting*
- *where would they like the meeting to be held*
- *what will happen at the meeting, including how differing opinions will be heard*
- *what they would like to be discussed during the meeting*
- *how they would like to participate in the meeting*
- *whether they'd like a friend to come to the meeting for support (and whether they want anything kept private from their friend)*
- *how they'll get to the meeting*
- *any 'hard to understand' language or jargon that may be used and what it means.*

It is a good idea to send the child or young person an invitation to the meeting, either by letter or email, to confirm the details that you discussed with them.

Stage 2: At a meeting

Make sure the child or young person:

- *knows everyone's name, what they do and why they are there*
- *is given a pen and paper to take notes*
- *is given the opportunity to have their say*
- *is given the chance to ask questions*
- *understands what is being discussed and what it means for them*
- *is clear about the decisions that have been made.*

Stage 3: After a meeting

Make sure the child or young person:

- *has an opportunity to talk about how they thought the meeting went*
- *is clear about what happens next and who will do what*
- *receives a copy of the minutes from the meeting (if minutes were taken).*

Example: an annual review meeting is due for a young person who has been in care for five years with the same carer.

Before: *The worker makes a time to see the young person. They have lunch together and talk about what the young person wants to discuss at the meeting and who will be there. Together they draw up a list of things to be discussed (the agenda) at the meeting. The young person says he would like to bring his best mate, who is also in care, for support. Afterwards the worker sends an invitation to the young person with all the details of the meeting. The worker also talks with the young person's carer about how they can encourage his participation at the meeting.*

During: *The young person sits next to his worker and his best mate. His worker supports him when he speaks up about something someone says that he doesn't agree with. The young person wants to have a drink and something to eat in the middle of the meeting and his worker calls for a 10 minute break. The young person writes down the main decisions that are made on the paper his worker has given him.*

After: *The worker rings up the young person and asks how he thought the meeting went. The young person says it was okay and that he understood the decisions that were made. The young person said he thought the meeting was too long. The worker said they would look at this for next time. The worker tells the young person when he will contact him next and makes sure the young person has his current phone number if he needs to ring before then. The worker then sends out any minutes or papers from the meeting to the young person.*

Before a meeting – preparing for participation

Why prepare?

Preparation is essential for genuine participation. Children and young people are less likely to be familiar with meeting procedures and are likely to be anxious about participating in a meeting.

Preparation helps a child or young person feel more confident, which makes it more likely that they will feel able to express their views. It also gives them a chance to think about what they want to say and how they want to say it.

Preparation helps children and young people know what's going to happen at a meeting so they feel good about attending and taking part. Thomas and O'Kane found that participating is harder for kids if they feel they are being 'put on the spot' and if they don't know what will be said or who will be at the meeting. Good preparation can usually eliminate surprises during the meeting. It helps to empower children and young people and avoids them feeling 'left out' or as if they haven't had a say in the decisions that were made.

For very young children, children and young people with an intellectual disability and those who communicate non-verbally, preparation prior to a meeting is vital. In a relaxed environment, and with plenty of time, they have the opportunity to properly express their views, which can then be presented at the meeting.

Some children and young people may choose not to attend the meeting. In this case, it is essential to spend time with them before the meeting to find out how their views can be clearly presented in their absence.

Who to prepare?

Making sure that everyone involved in a meeting is properly prepared helps the meeting to run more smoothly. This includes preparing children and young people, their parents, other family members, carers, workers,

the support person and anyone else who is involved. Particular effort should be made in preparing children, young people, parents and relatives, as they can often feel powerless, intimidated and unheard.

Explaining the importance of participation to others at the meeting, particularly those who might not be used to sharing decision-making with kids, can help create an environment where people can work together with respect and cooperation.

Preparation includes:

- Involving the child or young person in deciding:
 - where the meeting is to be held (to make sure it is accessible and not intimidating)
 - when the meeting is to be held (to make sure they are available)
 - who is invited to the meeting (such as a friend, advocate or relative)
 - what is on the agenda (so they know what will be discussed).
- Sharing with the child or young person any reports written about them and seeking their views.
- Explaining the purpose of the meeting and seeking the views of the child or young person about how they want to have those views expressed, such as preparing a letter, video or tape recording. This should include explaining any limitations of the meeting.
- Explaining some of the words and phrases that may be used at a meeting. Different groups, such as family law, education and health organisations, use particular words and phrases which should be explained to the child or young person to help them to understand what is being said.
- Giving the child or young person information about what is likely to be said and preparing them for other people's views.
- Telling them who else will be at the meeting. Showing photos of the people who will be attending could be a helpful way to 'introduce' them to the child or young person.

- Using verbal and non-verbal ways to achieve good two-way communication with children and young people of different ages and developmental stages.

Preparation for case-planning, case reviews and other formal meetings includes:

- Asking the child or young person what questions or issues they would like to have on the agenda.
- Explaining the different jobs that people at the meeting will have, such as the chairperson, the minute taker, the case worker/social worker and so on.
- Allowing the child or young person to have a say in who they would like to be at the meeting, where it should be held and who they would like to sit next to if they are attending.
- Sending an invitation to everyone involved is both respectful and efficient. The invitation should outline the purpose of the meeting, the date, time, venue and directions to get there.* This should be followed up with a phone call to the child or young person to confirm that they are coming. Sadly, some kids are never invited to their case-planning meeting.
- Providing clear directions about where the meeting will be held and making arrangements with the child or young person about how they will get to and from the meeting.
- Providing each person with a copy of the agenda (which the child or young person has helped prepare) prior to the meeting.

Choosing how to participate in a meeting

Preparation includes talking with a child or young person about the different ways they can participate in a meeting. Choosing to not participate in a meeting is an option that should also be explained to them. Participation is about being heard, not about attendance.

* Example available with this kit.

There are a variety of ways that a child or young person can participate in a meeting, which can include:

- speaking at the meeting
- choosing someone to speak for them
- writing their views down and reading it at the meeting
- writing their views down and asking someone else to read them out
- displaying their views in artwork to be shown at meeting
- putting their views on an audio tape to be played at the meeting
- writing their views on a whiteboard
- speaking and/or listening by telephone or video conference
- sending their views by email.

The views of children and young people can still be heard whether they:

- do not attend the meeting
- attend only part of the meeting
- attend the whole meeting
- attend the meeting via a different medium (such as phone or video)
- have someone or something else (like a picture) to present their views.

In addition, young children or children and young people with a disability, could participate with the use of:

- communication books and boards
- symbols
- pictures of people, activities and objects
- magazines
- keyboard/computer
- photographs
- block alphabet
- deaf/blind alphabet.

It is obvious that some children and young people may need more time to express their views and this should be taken into account in planning the timeframe for the meeting.

When working with children and young people with autism and Asperger's Syndrome it is essential to plan a meeting time that won't disrupt their important routines. It is also best to keep the number of people attending the meeting to a minimum.

Support persons at formal meetings

Explain to the child or young person that they can ask someone to come to the meeting with them. They may want this person to speak for them, to explain things to them, to support their views or to just be there with them. This could be an adult, a friend, a sibling or anyone they trust and feel safe around.

Ask the child or young person whether there are any things they want kept private from their support person. The support person may also need some advice about what their role is at the meeting.

Summary of preparation

In preparing the child or young person for the meeting, discuss with them:

- what the meeting is about
- what is likely to be discussed, including what they would like to be discussed
- how they want to express their views
- where and when they would like the meeting to be held
- how they are going to get to and from the meeting
- who else will be attending the meeting
- who will be doing what jobs at the meeting, such as chairing or taking minutes
- how long the meeting is likely to take
- whether there will be any breaks.

Give the child or young person:

- an invitation to the meeting*
- a copy of the agenda, after it has been discussed with them and they have made their suggestions*
- a list of the names and jobs of the people who will be there.

Tips

Provide as much information and explanation as the child or young person needs.

Write this information down briefly and in simple language for the child or young person to keep with them.

Offer to email or SMS/text the child or young person a reminder of the meeting.

Give plenty of notice of meetings to everyone involved.

Traps

Not giving enough notice of a meeting to everyone involved.

Assuming young children or children and young people with a disability cannot, or do not want to, participate in making decisions.

Telling a child or young person what the agenda is rather than allowing them to have a say about what will be discussed.

Making the preparation time overly formal. It should be conducted in a familiar and informal setting, such as a local café or any place where the child or young person feels relaxed.

Tools

The following tools are designed to help you involve the child or young person in case-planning decision-making. See Chapter 3 for an explanation of when and how to use these participation tools.

- Letter of invitation to the meeting*
- 'Give me a say' cards*
- 'What's important' activity*
- Diary for children and young people in out-of-home care
- Information brochure on case-planning meetings*

At the meeting – supporting participation

Maximising participation: meetings are for listening and having a say!

Many children and young people find planning and review meetings difficult because:

- they feel uncomfortable when there is conflict between adults.
- there are too many people at the meeting who know all about them but they know nothing about the adults.
- they do not feel able to say what they want to say in front of carers, parents, teachers or other people.
- they do not want a particular adult to attend or to have access to the minutes (such as a parent or teacher).
- they prefer a neutral venue.
- adults in the meeting often focus on their difficult behaviour and forget to acknowledge their achievements.

There are many aspects of a meeting that can assist or hinder the participation of children and young people. The following ideas will help adults adapt to kids' ways of working and are an important part of encouraging children and young people towards genuine participation.

* Available with this kit.

Venue

Hold meetings in places where kids feel comfortable, not in formal adult surroundings. Sitting around a huge board room table is not child-friendly. The venue should be an appropriate size, not too big and not too cramped. It should be free of distractions and interruptions, such as noise, surrounding activity and telephones. The facilities should be private and comfortable, including the temperature and seating. The meeting room needs to be accessible for anyone with a physical disability who is attending.

Refreshments

Food and drinks help to create a friendly, casual and welcoming atmosphere. Make sure the food and drinks are child-friendly, such as juice, soft drink, sandwiches or pizza.


Seating

Make sure that seating is the same for everyone. A variety of different heights and styles of seating can create poor group dynamics and can contribute to power differences, where some people dominate and others withdraw.

Resources

Make sure everyone has a copy of the agenda, a pen and something to write on. Don't assume that children (no matter how young they are), young people, parents or carers don't want to make notes.

Make sure that there are communication tools (if needed) that will help the child or young person express their views, such as a CD player, VCR or television.



Culture and language

Cultural norms may affect how a child or young person participates, especially if their parents or other family members are also there. A child or young person may need support to deal with this.

An accredited interpreter should be used when someone at the meeting does not understand or speak English well enough to be able to participate fully. Stress the confidentiality requirements to the interpreter.

Breaks

Think about how long the meeting needs to be and whether there will be any breaks.

Flexibility

Adults often have their own ideas about how meetings should run and how kids should participate. Meetings can be intimidating for children and young people as they often require knowledge or skills that they don't have.

Many kids find it boring to 'sit and talk'. They can also find normal meeting procedures very rigid. Workers should use activities that help make the process more fun and interesting, break down power differences and give children and young people more space to set the agenda.

Once at the meeting, a child or young person may change their mind about the way they want to participate. They may have decided before the meeting to speak for themselves and then are too nervous to do it. Or it may be decided at the meeting that it would be better to change the order in which the topics on the agenda will be discussed.


The length of the meeting should match the attention spans of children and young people. Adults need to be flexible enough to adapt to unexpected changes during a meeting.

Support

It is hard for children and young people to speak up when they are in a meeting full of adults who seem to know lots about them and are in control of what is going on. It is often helpful for them to have some support – a friend, relative or worker – with them during the meeting.

Useful definitions

Children and young people may not understand some of the ‘taken for granted’ language used by adults. Explaining unfamiliar words and phrases to children and young people can help them better understand what is being discussed.

- *Worker*: can be any person who is employed to give particular help to a child or young person. This could be a social worker, caseworker, key worker, counsellor, speech pathologist, teacher or juvenile justice worker.
 - *Agenda*: a list of the things that will be talked about at a meeting.
 - *Chairperson*: the person who runs the meeting, introduces people to each other and makes sure everyone gets to have a say.
 - *Minute taker*: the person who writes down what is said at the meeting and the decisions that are made so that everyone can remember it all later on.
 - *Minutes*: the notes that the minute taker makes at the meeting. They are a record of all the things discussed and the decisions made at the meeting.
 - *Case plan*: a list of decisions that are made at the case-planning meeting that explains how your family, carers and your caseworker will work together to look after you. It lets everyone know what’s going on, what will be done next and who will do what.
- 

Tips

Be aware of things that can hinder communication, such as a hearing impairment, some other disability, language difficulties or cultural differences.

Make sure that seating arrangements encourage good communication and participation.

Be aware that the child or young person may be very nervous.

Give the child or young person plenty of time and space to express their views. Do not rush them. Let them know that they can take their time.

Use language that kids understand and explain any words they don't understand.

Have meetings at times that suit kids. Children and young people in out-of-home care, health and special education systems often have lots of disruptions to their schooling and other parts of their lives.

Use humour. It reduces tension and helps people to relax.

Keep meetings quick and to-the-point. Kids, like adults, get bored and frustrated if they feel their time is being wasted.

Traps

Thinking that attendance is participation.

Assuming silence means understanding or consent.

Seating which inadvertently makes some people feel 'left out'.

Talking over children and young people or finishing sentences for them.

Tools

The following tools are designed to help you involve the child or young person in case-planning decision-making. See Chapter 3 for an explanation of when and how to use these participation tools.

- Kid-friendly agenda template*
- Kid-friendly minute template*
- Writing pads
- Pens
- Kid-friendly food and drink.

After and between meetings – building for future participation

Why discuss and review the meeting afterwards?

It is important that kids, and in fact all participants, feel supported and empowered at the end of a meeting. Spending time with the child or young person after the meeting gives the worker an opportunity to hear what he or she thought and felt about how the meeting was run, the decisions that were made and the way that they participated.

Q: "What would you like to have happen after a meeting?"

"Go over what was discussed and see things happening."

(Boy, 12 years)

"The things they said would happen."

(Girl, 15 years)

Discussion after the meeting helps the worker to know whether the child or young person needs any more information to fill in any 'gaps' and whether they would like the meeting to be run differently next time.

Sensitive issues about the life of the child or young person are often discussed at meetings. Sometimes these discussions can leave them feeling exposed, embarrassed or confused. Post-meeting discussion helps children to explore these feelings and lets them know it's okay to be feeling angry or sad or some other emotion as a result of what was discussed.

Post-meeting discussion also provides the worker with an opportunity to make sure the child or young person understands the decisions that were made and what is going to happen next.

Children and young people like to know that their contributions are appreciated and have helped shape a decision. Post-meeting discussion acknowledges the attendance and participation of the child or young person.

Between meetings — building trusting relationships

Children and young people involved in service systems have many more adults and strangers in their lives than most other children.

An essential part of a worker's role is to build a trusting relationship with the child or young person. A strong relationship with the child or young person can help them to communicate more freely when it comes to talking about sensitive issues in their life and making important decisions.

Q: "Is there anything that makes it easier to talk to certain people?"

**"Because you know them well,
they know what your feelings are
and things like that."**

(Girl, 12 years)

Good relationships are built through regular contact and respectful communication. There are many ways a worker can keep in contact and build a relationship with a child or young person, such as:

- visits
- outings
- telephone
- sms text messages
- e-mail
- letters
- cards
- attending events, such as a sports carnival.

Q: "Can social workers help you say what you want?"

"In a way, yes – if you have known them for a long time."

(Girl, 9 years)

Q: "What makes an ideal social worker?"

"It is someone you can talk to."

(Boy, 10 years)

"A good listener."

(Girl, 10 years)

"Someone who helps you sort out your problems."

(Girl, 12 years)

Children and young people need to feel that they can contact their worker. Workers should make sure that they are accessible to the kids they work with. They should make sure the kids have their phone number and/or email. Giving them a contact card with those details on it is helpful. It is vital that workers respond to kids' contacts by returning emails or phone calls promptly. Organisations should aim to keep the child or young person with the same worker so that they can build a trusting relationship.

Tips

Remember important dates such as birthdays, anniversaries and graduations.

Check regularly that the child or young person still has your up-to-date contact details.

Treat children and young people individually and find out what sort of contact they like best.

Traps

Getting bogged down with immediate pressures and forgetting to stay in touch with children and young people who are 'doing well'.

Assuming that children and young people who don't contact you, don't want you to contact them.

Participation checklists

Check out Appendix B for participation checklists. These will help you in supporting children and young people's participation before, during and after a meeting.



Chapter 3:

MAKING IT HAPPEN: Practical participation tools

The tools described in this chapter can be used by workers to encourage and support kids to participate in individual decision-making forums, especially those that affect their own lives.

They can also help workers build stronger relationships with children and young people and help them to adapt to a kid's way of working.

These tools are the result of the expertise and advice provided by the children and young people in the participation project.

The tools are available with this kit or can be obtained by phoning 61 (02) 9286 7276 or visiting www.kids.nsw.gov.au/publications/taking.html#cp

Name: Information brochure on case-planning meetings

Purpose: Kid-friendly explanation of what happens at case-planning meetings

What to do:

This brochure contains information in kid-friendly language explaining what happens at case-planning meetings and how children and young people can participate. It can be used by workers to prepare children and young people in out-of-home care to attend these types of meetings.

The worker can go through the information with the child or young person and then leave the brochure with them. The child or young person may want to read it through again on their own or discuss some of the details with their parent/s, carer/s or a trusted friend.

Information brochure: taking part in meetings about you.

WHAT IS A CASE-PLANNING MEETING?

This is a meeting where you and all the people involved in looking after you get together to talk about what's happening in your life and if there's anything else they can do to make it better.

HOW OFTEN DO CASE-PLANNING MEETINGS TAKE PLACE?

They should take place at least once a year but may happen more often if there are big changes happening in your life.

WHO CAN GO TO A CASE-PLANNING MEETING?

- You
- Your caseworker
- Your caseworker's boss
- Your family
- Your carers
- Your teacher
- A support person
- Anyone else who is involved in making decisions about you or is important to you

WHERE ARE CASE-PLANNING MEETINGS HELD?

They may be at the office where your caseworker works or anywhere where everyone coming should feel relaxed and able to talk. You can help choose where they are held.

WHAT IS TALKED ABOUT AT A CASE-PLANNING MEETING?

Things which are important to you like:

- How much you get to see people who are special to you like your mum and dad, brothers, sisters, grandparents and friends.
- Activities you want to do like play soccer, take dancing lessons or go on a holiday camp.
- Do you need to go to the doctor or dentist.
- Are you are happy with where you are living.
- How you're going at school.

WHAT IS AN AGENDA FOR A CASE-PLANNING MEETING?

- It is a list of the things that are going to be talked about.
- It is printed out on a piece of paper and has your name and birth date at the top, followed by the date of the meeting, where it is being held, what time it is being held and who is coming.
- It then has the things that are going to be talked about written down like this:
 1. Family contact
 2. Health issues
 3. Schooling
- You can help your case-worker make up the agenda to be sure all the things you want talked about are on it.
- You can have a copy of the agenda to read before the meeting so you know what is going to be talked about and you can keep it.

Information brochure: taking part in meetings about you.

WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENS AT THE CASE-PLANNING MEETING?

- A 'Chairperson' runs the meeting.
- A 'minute taker' takes notes of what is discussed. Those notes are called the 'minutes'.
- Everyone discusses what is on the 'agenda'.
- At the end of the meeting the Chairperson makes sure all the things on the agenda have been talked about.
- The decisions made at the meeting are written in your 'case plan'. A case plan lists all the important things that should happen for you.
- The Chairperson should tell everyone that a copy of the minutes will be sent to them and when the next case-planning meeting will be held.

HOW LONG DOES A MEETING LAST?

It can last an hour or even more if there are lots of things to talk about.

DO I HAVE TO GO TO THE MEETING?

No, not if you really don't want to.

If you don't want to go:

- You can tell your caseworker or someone else attending the meeting what to say for you.
- You could write it down for them to read out. You would get a copy of the Agenda and the Minutes so you know what went on.
- Your caseworker should also speak to you about the meeting and explain the decisions that were made and why they were made.

IF I GO, WHAT DO I HAVE TO DO AT THE MEETING?

- You can have your say and talk about what's important to you. You listen to what everyone has to say. Only one person should be speaking at a time.

- If you don't agree with what they say you, your caseworker or your support person can say so.
- You can ask questions at any time.

DO I HAVE TO STAY FOR THE WHOLE MEETING?

No. If you just want to go to part of the meeting you can. To go to part of the meeting is better than not going at all.

WHO DO I SIT NEXT TO?

- You can sit where you like. Usually your caseworker will tell you before the meeting who will be there and ask you where you would like to sit.
- Some kids like to sit next to their caseworker so they can remind their caseworker to talk about the things that are important to them.
- Other kids may like to sit next to their parents, carers or support person.

CAN I TAKE SOMEONE I TRUST TO THE MEETING?

Yes, you can.

WHAT IF I HAVE A COMPLAINT ABOUT HOW THE MEETING WENT?

You can speak to your caseworker, your caseworker's boss or someone you trust or you can ring Kids Help Line on 1800 55 1800 and speak to them about it.

WHO SEES THE MINUTES FROM THE MEETING? IS IT PRIVATE?

Everyone who attends the meeting gets a copy of the minutes and a copy is put on your file. Your file is kept in a secure place so no one can see it except your caseworker and their boss.

Name: 'Give me a say' cards

Materials: Pre-meeting cards
Post-meeting cards

Purpose: *Helps prepare a child or young person for a case-planning meeting and to de-brief afterwards*

What to do:

These cards are used to help a worker and a child or young person to discuss some of the issues about a meeting where important decisions will be made. A worker may choose to use only some or all of the cards.

The pre-meeting cards contain sentences to finish, like:

- *At the meeting I want to sit next to ...*
- *Things I want talked about at the meeting are ...*
- *I don't want to be asked questions about ...*

The post-meeting cards contain sentences to finish, like:

- *What was good about the meeting was ...*
- *At the next meeting I would like to ...*
- *I didn't understand what they meant by ...*

'Give me a say' cards: helps prepare a child or young person for a case-planning meeting and to debrief afterwards.

I would like to have a say about:

I didn't understand what they meant by:

At the meeting I want to sit next to:

What was good about the meeting was:

I don't want to be asked questions about:

At the next meeting I would like to:

Name: 'What's important to me' activity

Materials: Flat sheet of paper with 'Most Important' at the top of the sheet and 'Least Important' at the bottom of the sheet.
Activity cards.

Purpose: *To discuss what's important to the child or young person, either before a meeting or to build a relationship.*

What to do:

The worker gets the child or young person to arrange the cards on the sheet according to what's more or less important to them. The child or young person may want to prioritise the cards in order of most important to least important, or bunch them in groups.

The cards cover a range of things that may be important to children and young people, such as:

- *to be listened to*
- *to get what I want*
- *to have someone help me.*

'What's important to me' activity cards: to discuss what's important to the child or young person before a meeting. We've left a couple of cards blank for you to write your own thoughts.

To not be
talked down to

To understand
what's going
on

To feel
included and
able to say
what I think

To not be
hassled into
making
immediate
decisions

'What's important to me' activity cards: to discuss what's important to the child or young person to build a relationship.

To be able to
talk to someone
if I need to

To be able to
say what I feel

To be left
alone if I want
to be

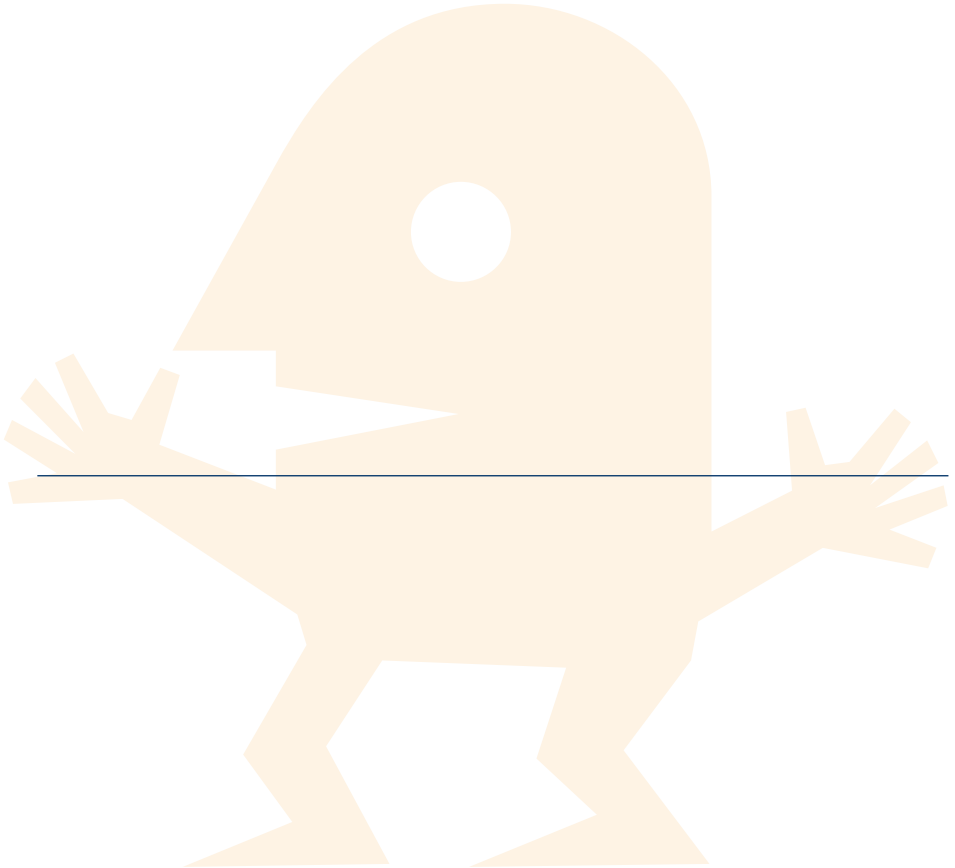
To know I will
be understood

To not be
interrupted
when speaking

To know I can
have a
different view

'What's important to me' activity sheet: to discuss what's important to the child or young person either before a meeting or to build a relationship.

Things that are most important to me



Things that are least important to me

Name: Contact card

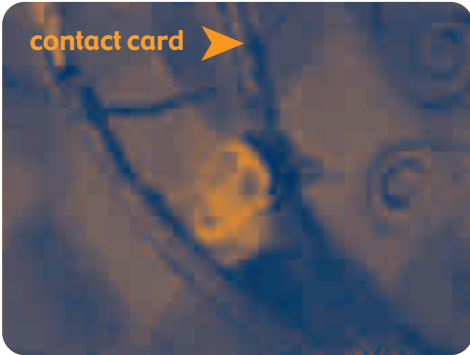
Materials: Business card with bright graphic on one side and worker's name, phone number and email address on the other side.

Purpose: *A non-identifying card for kids with up-to-date contact details*

What to do:

This card has the worker's up-to-date contact details and can be given to a child or young person they are working with. Additional emergency phone numbers can also be printed on the card. It is a generic card that can be used by workers from any organisation who work directly with children or young people. The card does not feature the logo of any organisation so if it was lost it would not be obvious that the child or young person is in contact with any particular organisation.

Contact card: a non-identifying card for kids to have with up-to-date contact details.

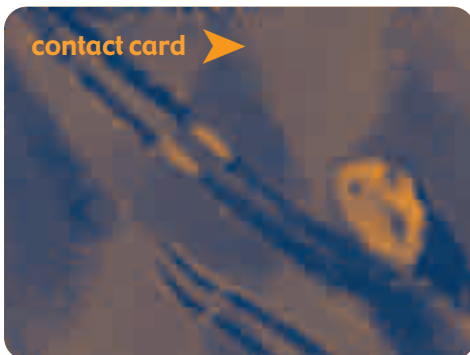


Worker's name: _____

Worker's no: _____
Emergency no for: _____
POLICE/AMBULANCE: 000
KIDS HELP LINE: 1800 55 1800
EMERGENCY YOUTH
ACCOMMODATION LINE: 1800 424 830

Worker's name: _____

Worker's no: _____
Emergency no for: _____
POLICE/AMBULANCE: 000
KIDS HELP LINE: 1800 55 1800
EMERGENCY YOUTH
ACCOMMODATION LINE: 1800 424 830



Worker's name: _____

Worker's no: _____
Emergency no for: _____
POLICE/AMBULANCE: 000
KIDS HELP LINE: 1800 55 1800
EMERGENCY YOUTH
ACCOMMODATION LINE: 1800 424 830

Name: **Invitation template for a case-planning meeting**

Materials: 'Kid-friendly' invitation template

Purpose: To create an invitation to attend a case-planning meeting

What to do:

This is a sample invitation for a child or young person telling them about their case-planning meeting that is coming up. It uses kid-friendly language and style. It can be changed to make it personal for the child or young person attending the meeting.

Invitation template: to create an invitation for a child or young person to attend a case-planning meeting.

< _____ *Child or Young Person's Name* _____ >

< _____ *Insert Address* _____ >

Dear < _____ *name of child of young person* _____ >

When we last met we discussed the need to set up a meeting to talk about how things are going and to make plans with you.

As the meeting is about you, it is really important that your views and wishes are heard.

During our discussion, we talked about the different ways you could participate in this meeting. You chose to _____ <*insert one of the below* _____ >

< *attend for the whole meeting* >

< *attend for part of the meeting* >

< *not to attend the meeting but to take part over the phone* >

< *not to attend the meeting but have your caseworker present your views wishes* >

< *not to attend the meeting but have your carer present your views wishes* >

< *not to attend the meeting but to write down your views / wishes for discussion* >

Thank you for your help in planning the meeting. The details of the meeting are below:

- The meeting will be held on < *day of week* > < *date* > **at** < *time* > **at** < *location* >.
- I have also invited: < _____ *list of names of others invited* _____ >
- The things we will talk about are: < _____ *list agenda* _____ >

If you have any questions or would like to talk further about the meeting please phone me on < *phone number* >, or you may ask < *name of carer /support person/key worker* > to call for you.

I look forward to < *seeing you on* > < (*insert meeting date*) >

< *seeing you after the meeting to talk about what happened* >

Yours sincerely,

Caseworker's name

Position

Location

Date

Casework Manager's name

Position

Location

Date

Name: **Agenda template for a case-planning meeting**

Materials: 'Kid friendly' agenda template

Purpose: To create an easy-to-read agenda for a case-planning meeting

What to do:

This is a sample template a worker can use when writing up an agenda of what will be discussed at a case-planning meeting. It uses kid friendly language and style. It can be a record of the agenda for the child or young person's file. The worker should send the child or young person the agenda, along with their invitation to the meeting, with plenty of time before the meeting.

Agenda template: to create a case-planning meeting agenda.

This is a meeting about:

< Insert name > (VIP)

< Insert date of birth >

The meeting is to be held on:

< Insert date >

At the following time:

< Insert time >

At the following place:

< Insert venue >

The people who have been invited are:

< Insert name >

< Insert child/yp's name >

< Insert name >

< Insert position or relationship to child/yp >

< Insert name >

< Insert position or relationship to child/yp >

< Insert name >

< Insert position or relationship to child/yp >

< Insert name >

< Insert position or relationship to child/yp >

< Insert name >

< Insert position or relationship to child/yp >

The things that will be discussed are:

ITEM

Any Details (if needed)

< Insert item >

< Insert details >

< Insert item >

< Insert details >

< Insert item >

< Insert details >

< Insert item >

< Insert details >

< Insert item >

< Insert details >

< Insert item >

< Insert details >

< Insert item >

< Insert details >

Name: **Minutes template for a case-planning meeting**

Materials: 'Kid-friendly' minutes template

Purpose: *To create easy-to-read minutes from a case-planning meeting*

What to do:

This is a sample template a worker can use when writing the minutes from the case-planning meeting. It is a record of what was discussed during the meeting, what decisions were made and what will happen next. It uses kid-friendly language and style. A copy of the minutes can be put on the file of the child or young person, and given to everyone who attended the meeting, particularly the child or young person.

Minutes template: to create kid-friendly, easy-to-read minutes from a case-planning meeting.

Case-planning meeting minutes

This was a meeting about: _____ < Insert name > (VIP)
_____ < Insert date of birth >

The meeting was held on: _____ < Insert date >

The meeting was chaired by: _____ < Insert name >

The purpose of the meeting was: _____ < Insert purpose >

The people who attended were:

_____ < Insert name > _____ < Insert position or relationship to child/young person >

_____ < Insert name > _____ < Insert position or relationship to child/young person >

_____ < Insert name > _____ < Insert position or relationship to child/young person >

_____ < Insert name > _____ < Insert position or relationship to child/young person >

_____ < Insert name > _____ < Insert position or relationship to child/young person >

The people who were invited but couldn't attend were:

_____ < Insert name > _____ < Insert position or relationship to child/young person >

_____ < Insert name > _____ < Insert position or relationship to child/young person >

The things that were discussed were (the agenda):

Item	Details discussed	Actions to do
_____ < Insert item >	_____ < Insert details >	_____ < Insert action >
_____ < Insert item >	_____ < Insert details >	_____ < Insert action >

The documents that were given out at the meeting were:

Document	Who was it given to	Was a copy provided to take away
_____ < Insert document >	_____ < Insert name or 'All' >	Yes/No

Here is a list of things that will need to be discussed at next meeting:

Item: _____ < Insert item >

Next meeting:

Date: _____ Time: _____ Place: _____

Signature of person who wrote minutes: _____



TAKING PARTICIPATION SERIOUSLY

Appendix A:

WHAT THE LAW SAYS ABOUT PARTICIPATION

Participation – what the law in NSW says

The principle of the participation of children and young people set down in the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* is clearly reflected in legislation in NSW.

Commission for Children and Young People Act 1998

It says: "the views of children are to be given serious consideration and taken into account".

One of the main functions of the Commission is:

"To promote the participation of children in the making of decisions that affect their lives and to encourage government and non-government agencies to seek the participation of children appropriate to their age and maturity." (s11(a))

Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998

It says: "the State has the responsibility to ensure that children and young people receive the care and protection they need to ensure their safety, welfare and well-being." The participation of children and young people in decision-making is one of the important principles of this Act.

Section 9 (b) says:

"Wherever a child or young person is able to form his or her own views on a matter concerning his or her safety, welfare and well-being, he or she must be given an opportunity to express those views freely and those views are to be given due weight in accordance with the developmental capacity of the child or young person and the circumstances."

Section 10 outlines the principle of participation and says:

- (1) To ensure that a child or young person is able to participate in decisions made under or pursuant to this Act that have a significant impact on his or her life, the Director-General is responsible for providing the child or young person with the following:
 - (a) adequate information, in a manner and language that he or she can understand, concerning the decisions to be made, the reasons for the Department's intervention, the ways in which the child or young person can participate in decision-making and any relevant complaint mechanisms,
 - (b) the opportunity to express his or her views freely, according to his or her abilities,
 - (c) any assistance that is necessary for the child or young person to express those views,
 - (d) information as to how his or her views will be recorded and taken into account,
 - (e) information about the outcome of any decision concerning the child or young person and a full explanation of the reasons for the decision,
 - (f) an opportunity to respond to a decision made under this Act concerning the child or young person.
- (2) In the application of this principle, due regard must be had to the age and developmental capacity of the child or young person.
- (3) Decisions that are likely to have a significant impact on the life of a child or young person include, but are not limited to, the following:
 - (a) plans for emergency or ongoing care, including placement,
 - (b) the development of care plans concerning the child or young person,
 - (c) Children's Court applications concerning the child or young person,
 - (d) reviews of care plans concerning the child or young person,
 - (e) provision of counselling or treatment services,
 - (f) contact with family or others connected with the child or young person.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people

Section 13 (2) is specifically about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people and talks about the importance of consulting with them on their placement. It says:

"In determining where a child or young person is to be placed, account is to be taken of whether the child or young person identifies as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and the expressed wishes of the child or young person."

Office of the Children's Guardian

The Office of the Children's Guardian (OCG) was set up under the *Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998* to promote the best interests and rights of children and young people in out-of-home care. The OCG wholly supports the participation of children and young people in making decisions that affect their lives.

One of the functions of the OCG is to make sure that agencies providing out-of-home care services to children and young people meet certain standards in all the services they offer.

One of these standards relates specifically to the participation of children and young people. All agencies must demonstrate that they actively promote the participation of children and young people in decisions that affect their lives.

Standards in Action – (the NSW Disability Services Standards)

The Standards require involvement by people with disabilities, including children and young people, in planning the services they receive, and in making decisions about their lives:

2.1.3 The individual planning process takes into account the service user's wishes, needs and strengths.

2.1.11 Service users have the right to request a review of their individual plan at any time.

- 2.1.14 The agency actively encourages and supports the involvement of the service user, his/her family, guardian and/or advocate, key staff members and other as required, in the development and review of the individual plan.
- 2.1.15 The service user is given the opportunity and is encouraged to nominate (and have accepted) who he/she wants to participate in the planning process.
- 3.0.3.3 The agency offers each person with a disability support to make informed decisions and choices in relation to the service he/she receives.
- 3.0.3.5 The agency implements its policies and procedures to maximise service user participation in decision making at the individual and service level

Participation in decision-making: (Standard 1.7 of the Updated Standards for Substitute Care)

Participation of children and young people in decisions relating to their own care is actively promoted. Families will be involved in decision-making about their children's care where possible.


Indicators that the agency is promoting participation:

- 1.7.1 Policies and practices maximise participation by children, young people and families in decision-making.
- 1.7.2 There are strategies to support the direct involvement of children, young people and their families in case-planning.
- 1.7.3 It is ensured that the child or young person and their families understand the case plan.
- 1.7.4 Children and young people are consulted when there is a change in a caseworker, direct care worker, authorised carer or designated agency.
- 1.7.5 Interpreters are used and, where appropriate, include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander interpreters and/or community representatives.

1.7.6 Policies and procedures require that children and young people give informed consent about specific issues.

Young Offenders Act 1997

The Young Offenders Act requires that the convenor of a youth justice conference consult with the young offender, as well as several other people about who should attend the conference, and where and when it should be held. The Act also allows for the offender (or a victim) to veto all or part of an outcome plan from a conference.



Appendix B:

PARTICIPATION CHECKLISTS

Before a meeting

This form should be completed by the child or young person's worker at least one week before a meeting.

Name of young person _____

Date of birth _____

Date and time of last meeting _____

Date and time of this meeting _____

Has the child or young person been involved in deciding:

Where meeting is to be held YES / NO

When meeting is to be held YES / NO

Who is invited to the meeting YES / NO

The agenda for meeting YES / NO

Has the child or young person read reports written by:

Residential staff YES / NO

Social worker YES / NO

Family therapist YES / NO

Occupational and/or speech therapist YES / NO

Education staff YES / NO

Psychologist or psychiatrist YES / NO

Police officer YES / NO

Legal representative YES / NO

Anyone else (specify) YES / NO

Has the child or young person made comments on any of these reports?

YES / NO

Who is responsible for bringing these comments to meeting?

Has the child or young person had some special time with her/his worker to prepare for meeting?

YES /NO

If yes, please state when and for how long (eg 22 April: two hours)

If no, please state why?

Has the child or young person prepared a report, video, tape-recording or any other material for review?

YES / NO

If yes, who will bring this to the meeting?

If no, please explain why

Does the child or young person want to bring anything else to the meeting (for example, a school report or sports award)?

YES / NO

If yes, who will bring this to the meeting?

Does the child or young person want a friend, advocate or relative to attend the meeting?

YES / NO

If yes, who will invite this person?

Does the child or young person need collecting from their school/college/work/centre to attend the meeting?

YES / NO

If yes, who will collect her/him?

Will the child or young person require a snack or meal before or after the meeting?

YES / NO

If yes, who will prepare this?

Date form completed _____

Signature of child or young person _____

Signature of staff member _____

During a meeting

1. Does the young person have:
 - a comfortable seat?
 - a drink or snack?
 - copies of all reports?
 - the agenda?
 - a pen and some paper?
2. At the beginning, does everyone agree how long the meeting should approximately last?
3. Is everyone introduced to the child or young person?
- 3a. Do they say who they are and why they are attending the meeting?
4. Is the child or young person given time to read through reports if she/he has not previously seen them? (even if she/he has seen them before some extra time may be required to jog her/his memory).
- 4a. Has the child or young person been given the option of leaving the room to read the reports in private (perhaps with a trusted adult)?
5. Is the child or young person given space and time to comment on different aspects of her/his life:
 - contact with family and friends?
 - school/college or work?
 - health?
 - how life is in the home?
 - relationships with worker?
 - plans for the future?
 - special achievements?
 - any worries or difficult problems which she/he wants to talk about?

6. Is the child or young person given space to ask questions or make special requests (eg she/he may want permission to attend a school trip)?
7. Do the professionals in the meeting talk about the achievements of the young person since the last meeting?
8. If professionals or parents say things which upset or make the child or young person angry, who comforts and supports her/him?
- 8a. If the meeting is becoming too difficult or upsetting for the child or young person does anyone suggest having a short break or some people leaving the room?

After a meeting

1. Does the child or young person's worker spend time with her/him after the meeting to check that:
 - she/he understands the decisions of the meeting?
 - she/he knows about the complaints procedure?
2. Does the worker discuss with the child or young person whether she/he needs any special help or information to prepare for her/his next meeting? If special help or information is required, is a timetable agreed?
3. Does the worker make sure that the child or young person receives a copy of the minutes and decisions of the meeting?
4. Does the child or young person understand that she/he can request a meeting at any time?



Participation: Meeting together – deciding together

Kids participating in case-planning decisions that affect their lives



nsw commission for
children & young people

NSW Commission for Children and Young People
Level 2, 407 Elizabeth Street Surry Hills NSW 2010
Phone 61 2 9286 7276 Fax: 61 2 9286 7267 www.kids.nsw.gov.au

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