

# IMPLEMENTATION OF THE CHILD'S RIGHT TO PARTICIPATE – A GUIDE FOR MEANINGFUL INVOLVEMENT OF CHILDREN



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## Implementation of the child's right to participate – a guide for meaningful involvement of children

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# Contents

## Introduction

### 1. Child's right to participate (Article 12 of the Convention)

- 1.1 Child participation as a human right
- 1.2 Advantages of child participation
- 1.3 Meaningful participation of the child in practice
- 1.4 The 10 principles of child participation
- 1.5 Useful materials and tools to support children's participation

### 2. Child participation in child protection work

- 2.1 The child protection worker's legal basis for involving children
- 2.2 Importance of child participation in child protection work
- 2.3 Children's own opinion and participation experiences
- 2.4 Toolbox for increasing child inclusion and participation

### Annex 1 Best practices from foreign specialists

#### **Contributors:**

**Authors:** Helen Saarnik, Anneli Valner (EUCW)..

**Editor:** Sirje Orvet

**Graphic design and layout:** Ain Saare

**Translation (Estonian-English):** Luisa Tõlkebüroo OÜ

## Introduction

**Human rights are universal values and norms that help us recognize, understand, and respect every person – ourselves as well as others. These rights belong to everyone, regardless of age. To better protect children's lives, development, and safety, the United Nations (UN) has adopted a dedicated document on children's human rights: the Convention on the Rights of the Child (hereinafter referred to as 'the Convention').<sup>1</sup>**

Children's right to participate is a principle laid down in Article 12 of the Convention, in the spirit of building a democratic, equitable and caring society. This is not only an ethical guideline, but an internationally recognised human right that imposes a clear obligation on the state and all adults – including parents, policy-makers, child welfare professionals and other professionals working with or for children – to create a supportive environment and conditions that allow children to express their views. When children are able to play a meaningful role in their decisions, their well-being as well as the quality of their services and policies will improve.

### **Purpose and structure of the guide**

The purpose of this guide is to support all professionals who work with or for children, helping to increase their active participation in different work processes. The guide provides ideas and recommendations on how to improve the involvement of children in the design of policies, services and practices and supports children's right to participate in decisions concerning them.

This guide was structured on [the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) and [General Comment 12 of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child<sup>2</sup>](#). It also provides practical guidance and tools based on international guidelines and good practice of the Council of the Baltic Sea States, in particular Estonia.

The guide is divided into two parts: the first focuses on the meaning of the child's right to participate, highlighting why the participation of children is important and what principles and ways of inclusion to implement in policy-making, decision-making and planning. The second part deals with the participation of children in the case management of child protection work based on the best practices of the Council of the Baltic Sea States and is primarily intended to assist all people working in the field of child protection – child protection specialists. Each chapter explains key topics, provides practical guidance and examples for reflection.

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<sup>1</sup> UN General Assembly (1989). [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#)

<sup>2</sup> UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2009). [General comment No. 12 \(2009\): The right of the child to be heard](#), CRC/C/GC/12

We hope that the guide provides inspiration and motivation to all specialists working with and for children to improve their daily work, think further and find solutions.

## 1. Child's right to participate (Article 12 of the Convention)

### 1.1 Child participation as a human right

Children's right to participate is a fundamental human right recognised by Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, according to which:

***1. States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.***

***2. For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law.***

(UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989<sup>3</sup>)

Article 12 of the Convention says that every child has the right to express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them, and to have their views considered and taken seriously. It is appropriate to note here that Article 12 does not use the word "participation". The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child explained in its General Comment No. 12 that "participation" includes activities between children and adults: information sharing and dialogue based on mutual respect, in which children can learn how their views and those of adults are taken into account and shape processes in children's lives<sup>4</sup>. Thus, the implementation of Article 12 is closely intertwined with the implementation of a number of other provisions of the Convention, such as Articles 5 (right to parental guidance), 13 (right to freedom of expression), 14 (right to freedom of thought), 15 (right to freedom of association) and 17 (right to information)<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> UN General Assembly (1989). [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#)

<sup>4</sup> UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2009). [General comment No. 12 \(2009\): The right of the child to be heard](#). CRC/C/GC/12

<sup>5</sup> UN General Assembly (1989). [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#)

Participation thus means much more than just expressing an opinion – it includes awareness, inclusion and the possibility to influence decisions that shape the child's life. Participation of the child is important in both the private and public sphere: home, alternative care, school, workplace, community, social media, as well as policy-making and strategic planning. Opportunities to express an opinion must be available in early childhood to support the child's development into a confident, responsible and caring adult. Although participation rights apply to each child regardless of age, as they grow, participation opportunities and ways change: a younger child can participate in simpler choices and sharing their experiences, but a parent generally has a greater capacity to discuss more complex issues, make decisions and take responsibility. Children of all ages must be given a favourable way to participate and their opinion must be given appropriate weight.

## 1.2 Advantages of child participation

Child participation is not just an ethical choice but a basis for a democratic society, and if the rights of the child are guaranteed, the fairness, balance and sustainable development of society can also be guaranteed. The participation of children has a positive impact on both them and society in general.

1. **Human rights are applied in practice.**

A child has the right to receive information in an understandable language and form in order to understand the situations concerning him/her and to make informed decisions as well as to express his/her opinion and participate in decisions concerning him/her.

2. **More child-centred services and policies.**

Child participation strengthens democracy and promotes an inclusive society. A child-centred approach means that services and policies are designed based on children's needs, day-to-day experience and rights. That does not mean ready-made solutions created by adults, but the creation of space and opportunities where the child's voice counts and he/she has the opportunity to be an active participant. Such participation helps to shape a society where the well-being of a child is important today, not only in the future.

3. **Equality.**

The participation of children helps to ensure that the rights and needs of all groups, including minors, are taken into account. If children are not involved, a significant proportion of the population is excluded from decision-making processes, which can lead to increased discrimination and inequality.

4. **Strengthening relationships, trust and well-being.**

The participation of children helps to establish and deepen trustful relationships with family, community and specialists. If the child feels that they are really listened to and their opinion has weight, their sense of security, confidence and willingness to cooperate will increase. Participation is therefore not only the implementation of the law – it is also a way to strengthen relations and links that support the well-being of the child.

5. **More effective reach and support for peers.**

Children and young people are often best placed to build trustful relationships with their peers and be effective trainers, information mediators and supporters. Involving children creates opportunities to engage with those who may otherwise go unheard.

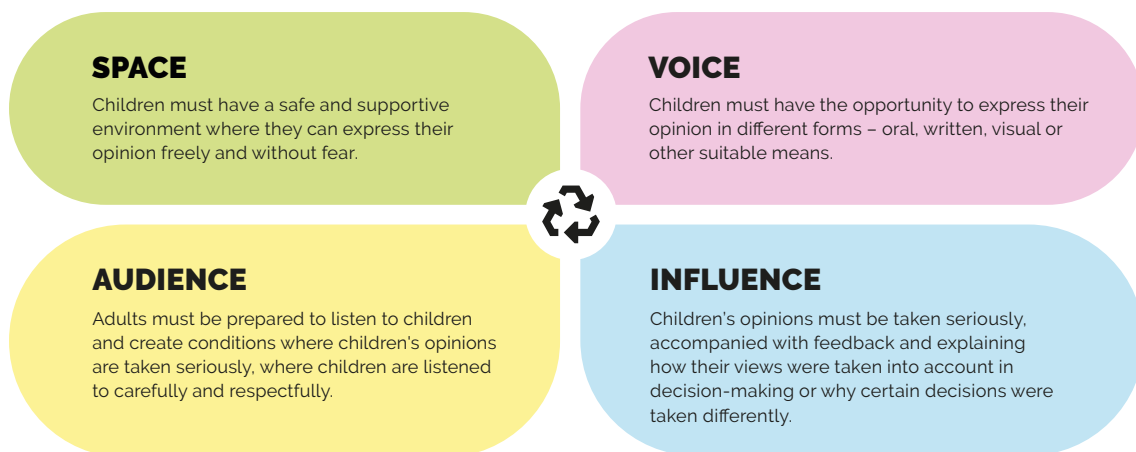
6. **Increased responsibility.**

The participation of young people increases their own responsibility as well as that of governments and institutions. Youth participation strengthens the responsibility of governments and institutions. The involvement of children and young people in policy-making provides an opportunity to influence decisions about them, which often have an impact in the long term or in the future.

### 1.3 Meaningful participation of the child in practice

Child participation does not take place on its own – it requires the creation of suitable conditions to support the meaningful participation of children. Meaningful participation indicates that the child's opinion is not a formality, but has been heard, taken into account and forms a meaningful part of the decision-making process.

The concept of child participation has been widely discussed and meaningful using different models and theories. This guide relies on the four chronological steps of Laura Lundy's<sup>6</sup> child participation model, which must be followed when this right is exercised meaningfully.



<sup>6</sup> Lundy, L. (2007). 'Voice' is not enough: conceptualizing Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. *British Educational Research Journal*, 33(6), 927–942.

Children may not always be able to contribute to the final decision, but their views must be given an appropriate weight, taking into account the age and maturity of the children<sup>7</sup>. At the same time, the best interests of the child must be taken into account when making decisions. There may be situations where the child's wishes differ from other parties or cannot be fully taken into account<sup>8</sup>. In such cases, it is important to explain to the child the reasons for the decision in a way that he/she understands that his/her opinion has been important and he/she has been taken seriously.<sup>9</sup>

## 1.4 The 10 principles of child participation

General Comment No. 12 of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child states that all processes in which children can express their views and participate must be **transparent and informative, voluntary, respectful, relevant, child-friendly, inclusive, supported by training, safe and sensitive to risk, and accountable**<sup>10</sup>.

The table below outlines 10 principles of child participation that need to be taken into account at every step in order to involve children in the decision-making process in a way that is respectful to them. The table contains practical guidelines, checklist questions and examples to support discussions. In the left-hand column are explanations of each principle, and in the right-hand column are corresponding checklist questions, which we encourage you to think about before involving children. The quotations in italics at the end of each topic are from the children themselves<sup>11</sup>.

It is important to emphasise that any organisation that involves children is responsible for ensuring that the legislation, ethical principles and applicable rules relating to child participation are respected. This includes, among other things, ensuring children's privacy and safety, complying with data protection requirements, and seeking consent from parents or guardians. Participation must always be organised in a way that is safe, meaningful and legally sound.

The principles of children's participation have been drafted by the EUCW and the Children's and Youth Rights Department of the Office of the Chancellor of Justice in Estonia.

<sup>7</sup> UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2009). [General comment No. 12 \(2009\): The right of the child to be heard](#), CRC/C/GC/12

<sup>8</sup> UN General Assembly (1989). [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#)

<sup>9</sup> Lundy, L. (2007). "Voice" is not enough: Conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child', *British Educational Research Journal*, 33(6), 927–42.

<sup>10</sup> UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2009). [General comment No. 12 \(2009\): The right of the child to be heard](#), CRC/C/GC/12.

<sup>11</sup> NGO [Ambassadors for the Rights of the Child of the Union for Child Welfare](#).

# 1. TRANSPARENT AND INFORMATIVE

**Provide children with clear information: what they are participating in, what the purpose of their participation is and how they will participate. Also explain their role and rights in the participatory process.**

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| <p>Children are informed about the whole participatory process, including what activities will be carried out together, how long it will take, and what the results might be.</p> <p>Children are given the opportunity to ask questions and make suggestions.</p> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How do you plan to explain to children why their participation is important and necessary?</li> <li>2. What other information do children need to decide whether or not to participate (e.g. topic, methods, objectives, rights, timeframe, transport and food service arrangements, who will have access to their opinions, etc.)?</li> <li>3. What opportunities do children have to ask questions and make suggestions?</li> </ol> |
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*"A child needs a thorough explanation of what is expected of them. Adults need to remember that children don't have the same set of experiences as adults."*

# 2. VOLUNTARY

**Assure children that their participation is voluntary and without pressure or obligation. Allow each child to participate in the way and to the extent that is right for them.**

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| <p>It is up to each child to choose whether they want to participate, how they want to participate, and in which activities or discussions. They can opt out at any time and without consequences.</p> <p>Children can take part in different roles according to their preferences:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• participant – shares personal experiences and opinions;</li> <li>• representative – represents the views and interests of other children;</li> <li>• facilitator – supports other participants and helps to create an inclusive and safe environment.</li> </ul> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What steps will be taken to ensure that children's participation is voluntary and free of pressure from adults (e.g. it does not take place during a compulsory school lesson)?</li> <li>2. How do children give their consent and how are they guaranteed the possibility to opt out at any time?</li> <li>3. What opportunities are there for flexible and varied participation – e.g. by listening, participating in a dialogue, participating partially or occasionally, in a group or individually, etc.?</li> <li>4. How can we ensure that children can express their views freely without them feeling pressured to do so?</li> </ol> |
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*"Children should not be forced to express an opinion if they don't want to."*

### 3. CONSENT

**Be aware that the way in which children and parents are informed and asked for consent will depend on the form, scope and topic of the participation.**

For certain activities, children and parents must be provided additional information and asked for consent, and they must also receive an explanation about how they can withdraw consent and the consequences of doing so.

Consent from the children and the parents is required separately in the following cases, for example:

- when the participation receives public coverage;
- when personal data is collected (usually this means name and age, but also, where necessary, information on e.g. allergies, special diet, etc.);
- when an event involves an overnight stay (including e.g. allocation of rooms);
- travelling abroad with a child.

When drawing up the consent form, you must:

- use clear and simple language that children and parents can understand;
- describe exactly what consent is being asked for and how it will be used;
- explain that consent is voluntary and can be withdrawn at any time without negative consequences;
- include a contact person to contact in case of questions or concerns.

Consult a lawyer to assess what further information to children and parents should be given and whether consent must be in written form.

1. How to ensure that the child and parent understand what consent is being asked for?
2. What information is needed, and for what purpose and for how long is it needed (e.g. after the end of the participation, will information that is no longer needed be deleted, e.g. information on allergies, etc.)?
3. How do you plan to make it clear that consent is voluntary and can be withdrawn at any time (e.g. removal of an online photo of the child)?
4. What opportunities do the child and parent have to ask questions before giving consent?
5. What is sufficient time for considering whether to give consent without feeling pressured?

*"Consent is understood the same way by all parties and can be withdrawn if circumstances change."*

## 4. RESPECTFUL

**Treat every child with respect. Treat children with dignity, and be a role model for them. Value and appreciate children's participation.**

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| <p>Inclusion of children is based on cooperation and mutual respect between children and adults. To achieve this, it is important that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• adults have the skills to treat children with respect;</li> <li>• the foundations for cooperation and dialogue have been carefully considered and prepared;</li> <li>• the roles of children and adults are clearly defined.</li> </ul> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What rules need to be jointly agreed to make all participants feel respected (e.g. only one person speaks at a time, dissent is allowed, participants do not disparage each other, etc.)?</li> <li>2. How are children's suggestions identified and taken into account when agreeing on the rules?</li> </ol> |
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*"A child is a fully-fledged human being and is in no way less important than an adult."*

## 5. CHILD FRIENDLY

**Communicate with each child in an appropriate and child-friendly way, taking into account their age and developmental level. Take into account children's daily lives, including school, home and extracurricular activities. Be realistic about how much time children are willing to commit to working together. Child-friendliness means consciously adapting to the child's world and needs.**

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| <p>Communication methods and forms of participation should be appropriate to the child's age and level of development, so use simple language, visuals and playful or creative approaches. If possible, create an opportunity for the child to participate in a familiar and safe environment, such as school, youth centre or home area/vicinity.</p> <p>Child-friendliness is about respecting the child's experiences and taking them seriously. It is important to create a safe space, to take into account the child's readiness, to provide feedback to the child, and to enable meaningful participation that builds trust and self-esteem.</p> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What child-friendly methods are used (e.g. role-playing games, voting by movement, etc.)?</li> <li>2. How do they match the children's age and level of development?</li> <li>3. How is the child's participation supported when they are non-verbal or express themselves in other ways (e.g., drawing, playing, gestures)?</li> <li>4. How do the space and communication methods support children's creativity, movement and freedom (e.g. cushions, mats, etc.; making a poster, video, etc.)?</li> <li>5. How are children's schedules and other commitments taken into account (e.g. when they are not in school)?</li> </ol> |
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*"When involving children, you have to consider their age and ability. A 5-year-old child can't provide input in the same format and amount as a 15-year-old."*

## 6. INCLUSIVE

**Give a voice to children with a wide range of experiences and backgrounds.  
Invite children of different ages, gender, native languages, geographical locations and needs.**

It is important to provide diverse and accessible opportunities for participation that take into account children's differences – including linguistic and cultural background, physical or mental disabilities, living environment and other factors. This will ensure that every child who wants to take part will find a way to do so that is appropriate and safe for them.

1. How do you plan to involve children from different backgrounds and experiences (e.g. by mentioning this in the call for participation)?
2. Are opportunities for participation also accessible for children with special needs, language barriers or living in remote areas?
3. What has to be considered so that all children can participate, regardless of their specific characteristics and needs (e.g. who will support a child with special needs in moving around)?
4. What kinds of diverse participation opportunities are used to get children involved in the way that is right for them – verbally, visually, playfully?

*"Every child thinks in their own way, and that's a good thing – it leads to better ideas."*

## 7. RELEVANT

**Choose topics that are relevant and meaningful for children.**

Participatory activities focus on topics that affect children's lives – topics they are interested in and where they have the requisite knowledge and experience.

1. How are children's interests and suggestions considered in the choice of topics?
2. How do the topics chosen relate to children's lives and experiences?
3. How can children share their experiences and opinions on the chosen topics?

*"Influencing children to give certain types of input isn't inclusion, it's manipulation."*

## 8. EMPOWERING

**Provide support for children so they can participate with self-confidence and sense of security.**  
**Listen to them openly and actively, without interrupting or dominating the discussion.**  
**Provide extra support for those who need it.**

It is important to support children's self-awareness and skills so that they can participate confidently and meaningfully. For example, you can use:

- reflection exercises;
- training and workshops;
- mentoring, where more experienced children support less experienced participants.

It is also important to allow enough time and space for children to get to know each other, to get used to each other and to create a friendly and trusting atmosphere together.

1. What training and knowledge do activity leaders need in order to support children in an informed way (e.g. listening skills)?
2. What kind of preparation and support (e.g. expert explanations on the topic) do children need to participate in a self-confident manner?
3. How is it ensured that children can freely express their opinions without fear, shame or discomfort (e.g. discussions in pairs at the beginning and later in a larger group)?
4. How can participation be extended to children who are shy or have been excluded in the past (e.g. creating a word cloud)?

*"A child may feel frightened or confused the first time he or she is in an unfamiliar situation. Adults need to provide support and encouragement."*

## 9. SAFE AND SENSITIVE TO RISK

**Take responsibility for ensuring that working with children is safe for every child.  
Make sure that participation does not harm the child.**

The participatory environment must ensure children's physical, emotional and mental well-being.

The risks of stigma, exclusion, bullying, abuse and other risks must be assessed and measures taken to mitigate them.

Adults need to have the skills to spot a child's concerns and act accordingly.

There must be enough adults present to ensure overall safety.

Adults can only interact with the child in a professional capacity: the adults won't invite the child into their home or establish contact outside work, or give the child rides alone, except in an emergency; and adults must avoid inappropriate physical contact.

Adults must ensure that children do not have access to substances or products that are prohibited to minors.

Children and parents must be informed whom to contact if someone feels that inappropriate or unacceptable behaviour has occurred.

1. What kind of environment does the participatory process take place in and is it supportive of children's safety and well-being (e.g. free from excessive distractions, etc.)?
2. What measures are in place to ensure the physical, emotional and mental well-being of children throughout the participation process (e.g. first aid skills, involvement of a psychologist, etc.)?
3. How are children and parents informed about where to turn for help (e.g. in a leaflet, in a confidential conversation, etc.)?

*"The child needs to feel safe and well to participate effectively. Adults need to make sure that no one puts a child in danger or in an uncomfortable situation."*

## 10. ACCOUNTABLE

**Take children's opinions into account when making decisions. At the end of the process, adults and children should both provide feedback to each other.**

It is important that children feel heard and understood, and that their opinions influence decisions that affect them. If children's views cannot be taken into account when making a decision, the reasons must be explained to them – this shows that their views are valued and taken seriously.

Children should be acknowledged and thanked for their participation.

To improve the quality of the cooperation between children and adults, it is important to regularly analyse participatory processes and learn from experience. Examples of methods that can be used include:

- feedback sessions where both children and adults share their experiences and suggestions (including anonymously, if so desired);
- mapping exercises to assess the strengths and opportunities for improvement of the engagement process;
- sustainability analysis to ensure the continuity and real impact of children's participation in decision-making processes.

1. How are children's views reflected in the decisions made and how is this explained to them?
2. If their opinions could not be taken into account, how to explain it to children?
3. How will children be asked for feedback on decisions, outcomes and the participatory process (e.g. in a discussion group, questionnaire, etc.)?

*"It is very important that every case where children are listened is followed by acknowledgment and action. If there is no acknowledgement and action, the child's input and time are wasted. That's "youthwashing"."*

## 1.5. Useful materials and tools to support children's participation:

This chapter provides a range of useful materials and tools that were collected during the mapping of practices in the Baltic Sea Region and support children's participation in various activities and decision-making processes.<sup>12</sup> The materials offer diverse approaches and can also inspire in the national context.

However, it is important to remember that there are many ways to support children's participation. We encourage specialists to be creative, adapt methods according to the situation and choose them in cooperation with children – taking into account the details of each specific situation, and the needs and capacities of the children.

| <b>International guides, recommendations, tools (in English)</b>  |  |
|---|--|
| <a href="#">Committee on the Rights of the Child. (2009). General Comment No. 12: The right of the child to be heard</a> (CRC/C/GC/12). United Nations.   | UNICEF: <a href="#">Child Friendly Cities initiative</a> .   |
| Landdown, G., (2011) <a href="#">Every child's right to be heard. A resource guide on the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child General Comment no.12</a> . Published by Save the Children UK on behalf of Save the Children and UNICEF | Pinto L.M. (Ed.), Bird, D., Hagger-Vaughan, A., O'Toole, L., Ros-Steinsdottir, T. & Schuurman, M. (2020). <a href="#">We Are Here. A Child Participation Toolbox</a> . (1st ed.) Brussels: Eurochild & Learning for Well-being Foundation. |
| Council of Europe. (2023). <a href="#">Guidelines for developing a national children's participation strategy</a> . Strasbourg: Council of Europe.  | Save the Children: <a href="#">Planning events with children</a> .   |
| Council of Europe (2021) " <a href="#">Listen – Act – Change, Council of Europe Handbook on children's participation</a> ". For professionals working for and with children.  | Save the Children: <a href="#">Moderating events with children</a> .   |
| <a href="#">Recommendation on the participation of children and young people under the age of 18</a> . Council of Europe, 2012.   | Barnafrid (2025) <a href="#">CHILDREN'S AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S VOICES A handbook for participation and inclusion</a> . Linköping University.   |
| UNICEF (2021) <a href="#">Guidance on Child and Adolescent Participation as part of Phase III of the preparatory action for a European Child Guarantee Version 1.0 (December 2021)</a> .  |  |

<sup>12</sup> All the links in the table are as of 14 April 2025, and the authors emphasise that they may change over time.

## 2. Child participation in child protection work

The child, and the child's rights and well-being, are always at the heart of child protection specialists' decisions. Part of the child's well-being stems from being part of a family having stable relationships, which is why the child's family must also be taken into account in decision-making processes. The child and his/her family are experts on his/her life and therefore must be able to participate in decision-making processes and express their opinion. Each specialist working with a child can support the child's participation from the very first meeting, listening carefully and creating the conditions for him/her to express his/her personal opinion.

A major basis for child protection work is the Convention on the Rights of the Child and Article 12 of the Convention<sup>13</sup> is the most important from the perspective of the participation and inclusion of children. It states that a child has the right to freely express his or her views on all matters related to him or her. Although there is a high focus on Article 12 of the Convention (see Chapter 1 in the guide), there is only a small amount of literature linking child protection work and the requirement to implement Article 12 of the Convention, which also provides guidance for child protection workers. One of the few publications that explains this connection is Professional Practice in Child Protection and the Child's Right to Participate by Falch-Eriksen and Toros (2022)<sup>14</sup>, where child participation is addressed from a human rights perspective. The authors argue that participation is a prerequisite for a decision made in the best interests of the child and the aim of the book is to encourage specialists to promote and implement rights-based practice.

Our guide was created to help child protection specialists who want to increase the participation of children in their work. Similarly to child protection work, where there is often no single solution for each case that would help solve the child's concerns, this guide also brings together various possibilities and ways to increase the involvement and participation of children. We have gathered good examples and working tools to inspire them to find smart inclusion solutions. Child protection work requires creativity and creativity, and the best solutions are made in cooperation with the child and their family.

<sup>13</sup> UN General Assembly (1989). [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#)

<sup>14</sup> Falch-Eriksen, A., & Toros, K. (2022). Professional Practice in Child Protection and the Child's Right to Participate. New York: Routledge.

## 2.1 The child protection worker's legal basis for involving children

Article 3 (1) of the Convention<sup>15</sup> says that in all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.

Legal norms is an integral part of child protection work in two ways.

First, they give the professional the right and responsibility to make specific decisions for the well-being of the child. However, adherence to the rules alone is not enough – it is also important to understand why these rights have been granted and how to exercise them responsibly. If the child's opinion is not elicited and there is no reasoning given for not eliciting it, that goes against the principle of the rule of law.<sup>16</sup>

Secondly, the delegation of rights means that the child protection worker has the right to decide on their own in certain cases. This is called freedom of decision or discretion. Such freedom is always restricted by law, which is why we also talk about limited decision-making autonomy – "...which only exists in an area that is free from restrictions"<sup>17</sup>. In child protection, decision-making autonomy is important in order for a specialist to adapt the process to the situation of a specific child and family. This allows for flexibility in case management, but requires every decision to be made carefully and responsibly. When adapting the process, it must always be taken into account that the aim is to protect the rights and human dignity of the child. It is therefore important that child welfare professionals use their discretionary power in each case thoughtfully and in the best interest of the child<sup>18</sup>.

Subsection 29 (5) of the Child Protection Act<sup>19</sup> states that upon assessing the child's need for assistance and provision of assistance, the local government shall establish and document the opinion of the child and attach it to the mandatory case plan related with the child, unless provided otherwise by a specific Act.

<sup>15</sup> UN [Convention on the Rights of the Child \(1991\) RT II 1996, 16, 56.](#)

<sup>16</sup> Falch-Eriksen, Asgeir; Toros, Karmen (2022). Professional Practice in Child Protection and the Child's Right to Participate. New York: Routledge.

<sup>17</sup> Dworkin (1977) "Taking rights seriously".

<sup>18</sup> Falch-Eriksen, Asgeir; Toros, Karmen (2022). Professional Practice in Child Protection and the Child's Right to Participate. New York: Routledge..

<sup>19</sup> [Child Protection Act RT I, 31.12.2024, 23.](#)

Subsection 28 (3) of the Child Protection Act<sup>20</sup> states that a child protection worker must involve a child, a person raising a child or a child's institution where the child is present in assessing the need for assistance of a child. Pursuant to subsection 22 (3) of the Child Protection Act<sup>21</sup> upon occurrence of the child's need for assistance, the person raising a child and the person working with a child shall seek assistance and cooperate with child protection officials and other persons working with children, if necessary. Thus, there is an obligation to involve a parent who has the right to participate throughout the case management process.

For each decision concerning a child, it must be documented whether and how the child's opinion has been requested and taken into account when making the decision. Requesting the child's opinion is part of the process of ascertaining the child's interests. Subsection 21 (3) of the Child Protection Act<sup>22</sup> states that if the best interests of a child differ from the child's opinion or if a decision which does not coincide with the child's opinion is made on other grounds, the reasons for not taking the child's opinion into account must be explained to the child.

## 2.2 Importance of child participation in child protection work

The child and his/her family are at the heart of child protection work. The child and his/her family must be actively involved in the whole case management process. Inclusion includes providing the child and family with explanations about child protection work, interventions, the role of a child protection worker in their life and the conduct of case management. This also includes regular information sharing with child protection workers, asking for and taking into account the opinions of the child and parents.

Child involvement is a purposeful activity that must take place throughout the whole case management process. There is no minimum age for child inclusion, but the child's age and level of development should be taken into account. Inclusion makes it possible to highlight the child's thoughts and wishes and ensures that the decisions made are based on the child's opinion and interest. In the case of inclusion, it is important to give the child enough time to establish a trust-based contact with a specialist or another adult they feel safe with. It is also important to remember that the child's opinion may change due to the combined effect of time or other circumstances. Thus, the determination cannot be a one-off act, but every decision concerning the organisation of life of a child must be re-examined<sup>23</sup>.

<sup>20</sup> [Ibid.](#)

<sup>21</sup> [Ibid.](#)

<sup>22</sup> [Child Protection Act RT I, 31.12.2024, 23.](#)

<sup>23</sup> [Handbook on assessing child well-being \(2017\)](#)

The child is free to express his/her opinion and the child protection worker must consistently ensure this right in proceedings relating to the child in order to form decisions relating to the child in his/her best interests. When it comes to forming an understanding of a child, it is very important to regard the child's opinions as relevant, self-referential and reflexive. This means that the child is aware of matters and is allowed time to participate. Granting full participation to a child is seen as a turning point in order to bring about sustainable changes in changing the child's life and transforming the development path. Participation is important in interpreting and guaranteeing all other rights, especially because it certainly emphasises the importance of taking into account the preferences, aspirations and feelings of children in matters related to their well-being<sup>24</sup>.

## Principles of meaningful inclusion of a child:

- ♥ **Sincere interest in the child and his/her situation, learning about his/her and his/her needs.** Children appreciate interest. Showing interest makes it possible to create an environment that children perceive as safe to express their thoughts in.
- ♥ **Involvement of the child from the outset.** For example, information about the child protection specialist they will meet, the reason they are meeting, and what will happen next.
- ♥ **Respectful treatment of the child and honesty.** Children's experience suggests that their well-being is boosted by knowing what is happening. Adequate information helps them understand the interventions and consequences of child protection work.
- ♥ **Substantive conversations, patience and a serious attitude towards children's concerns.** Children recommended that their strengths be noticed more<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>24</sup> Falch-Eriksen, Asgeir; Toros, Karmen (2022). Professional Practice in Child Protection and the Child's Right to Participate. New York: Routledge.

<sup>25</sup> [Ambassadors for the rights of the child \(2022\) Recommendations for promoting participation and inclusion.](#)

## 2.3 Children's own opinion and participation experiences

Increasing the participation of children and more effective inclusion of children is increasingly discussed in the context of child protection work, but the experience and ideas of the children themselves have not been studied very much in Estonia. However, the child is the best expert on his/her life and has the right to have a say about how much he/she wants to be involved.

One study that looks at children's participation experience in child protection is *The Child's Voice in Child Protection Work* by Kadi Lauri, Karmen Toros and Rafaela Lehtme<sup>26</sup>. The study discussed the communication style and skills of child protection workers dealing with children aged 10–17. The results showed that some children lacked significant experience with communication, as the interaction with the child protection worker was superficial and brief. One child did not remember that the child protection worker had spoken to him or her at all, at either the first or subsequent meetings. These stories tended to be characterized by one-sided communication, where the child protection worker only asked question after question about the problems. The children's thoughts, feelings, perspectives and wishes were not discussed. One child said they had not met any specialists who asked about their feelings and wishes. Children felt that the child protection worker should be more interested in the child's positive aspects and strengths (what is good, who provides support), especially at the beginning of the interaction. While the researchers did not draw attention to the topic of problems and strengths during the interviews, the children themselves emphasised that child protection workers were too focused on problems.

Children also talked about how their participation in child protection work could be increased. The most important thing was the relationship of mutual trust and trust with the child protection worker, listening to and trusting the child, asking for and considering his/her opinion and confidentiality, which is the basis for a trust-based relationship. For example, the use of different methods was highlighted, including the possibility of writing down responses and desires. One child said that they did not like to talk but would be able to communicate in writing.

A study conducted in 2021 led by the EUCW<sup>27</sup> looked at the experience of children living in alternative care in decisions concerning their lives. The study showed that

<sup>26</sup> Lauri, Toros, Lehtme (2020) Participation in the Child Protection Assessment: Voices from Children in Estonia. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 38 (2), 211–226.

<sup>27</sup> Saarnik, H., Sindi, I. (2021). Experience of children being raised in alternative care in participating In making decisions about their lives. Tallinn, EUCW.

children's awareness of their rights has improved but also indicated that they still do not know how to exercise and implement these rights. The results of the survey showed that 20% of the children wanted to be asked for their opinion more and for their opinion to be considered more.

Children living in the alternative care service were asked whether and how much they received information about separation from their family and new living arrangements. Only 16% of respondents said they were told about the different possibilities of where they could go live, while 9% of respondents were not sure whether they were told about them or not. 21% of respondents heard an explanation about what matters needed to be decided, 23% of respondents said their opinion was heard, 29% were told about what decision was made, but only 11% felt their opinion was considered. Thirty percent the respondents felt their opinion was not considered in the making of the decision. Fourteen percent of respondents said that the child protection worker provided a reason as to why the child's opinion was not considered<sup>28</sup>.

## 2.4 Toolbox for increasing child inclusion and participation

Child protection work is complex in nature, which is why there are no universal tools that can be used in every situation and with every child. The child protection worker must always work according to the specific situation, the child and his/her needs and desires, and a number of other factors. In child protection work, creativity is not only allowed; it is an essential skill.

To develop this guide, a number of professionals working with children (child protection workers, a school social worker and family therapist) shared the best practices, guidelines and tools to further increase the participation of children in their work. The idea behind all of it is to inspire and encourage others.

The table below summarises the recommendations of specialists and categorises them by work processes. Many tools are universal and may also be suitable for use in steps other than those indicated in the table. The choice of a specific tool depends on the situation and the child. Be creative, think out of the box, and find a suitable solution together with the child!

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<sup>28</sup> Saarnik, H., Sindi, I. (2021). Experience of children being raised in alternative care in participating in making decisions about their lives. Tallinn, EUCW.

# RESOURCES FOR CHILD PARTICIPATION

## 1. First contact and building trust

**Objective:** to foster a sense of security and build rapport with the child.

**Practitioners' approaches and recommendations.**

- A child/adolescent does not open up when talking to every specialist. Find an adult who has a good rapport with the child. The child does not have to re-tell his complex story for multiple adults. Allow an adult the child chooses – someone the child feels safe with – to take part in the meeting with the child. This creates a sense of confidence that the child is not alone – there is someone who believes in him/her on his/her side. That will make it easier for the child to participate and talk.
- Three important approaches to an interview with a child:
  - don't take sides;
  - don't downplay concerns the child may have;
  - create a safe space where the child does not feel they are to blame, no matter what they choose to share.
- A good tactic is to give anxious and restless children something they can do during the conversation: small toys, modelling clay, a stress ball, kinetic sand, etc. That can help them to calm down and focus. Always keep suitable small widgets in your workplace and bag.
- Our child protection works actively with youth centres. We visited the youth centre with the family supporter to meet the children as part of a night camp. We all sat in a circle on the floor and showed the children that we were completely ordinary people. We had tea and cookies. The questions from the children just kept on coming. They shared concerns from anonymous friends, asked for advice. We saw that from a public servant's perspective, it isn't possible to hear the issues that the kids are actually interested in or troubled by.
- In the same vein, there are three meetings with children planned at youth centres this year. During networking meetings with the youth outreach workers, we prepared a plan under which the Child Protection Act and the Family Law Act were printed out for the children. As one of the preliminary actions, professionals go over legislation with the children, highlighting places that are interesting or confusing for them. Youth centres, in conjunction with children, prepare the opportunity to ask questions of child protection workers anonymously. A hand-made mailbox or another solution proposed by children, which is opened together with a child protection worker, will be used for assistance. At the same event, child protection workers give children the opportunity to step into the role of child protection worker. At first, in groups, children resolve demonstration cases and make their own proposals. The child protection worker explains how the cases are resolved. We agreed that I (a child protection worker) would bring my dog Roosi (a corgi – tiny, cute) to the meeting with the children, as this small and harmless creature is bound to contribute to building a great rapport.

- The child protection worker has been and is engaged in several appealing sports and organises the introduction of sports and group play at the youth centre. The game is followed by a conversation circle with the aim of creating a positive image of a child protection worker and achieving better engagement with children.
- The child protection and the supporter assigned to the family agreed with the mother and the child that the child and the support person would take walks in the small town from time to time as part of the designated support service. The child really opened up during these walks. The child's wishes and expectations for specific assistance were revealed. This was explained and discussed together: child protection, support person and parent. The situation in the family improved, relationships settled down, and they didn't shy away from reaching out if problems came up later.
- A great game to get acquainted with the child is called Treasure Chest. The box contains various objects, which can vary depending on the age of the child: toys, pictures, calendars, pens, beads, etc. The child selects his/her 'treasure', holds on to it, and explains why he/she made the choice, what it reminds him/her of.
- I have played UNO when first meeting a child, or several children in one family. They come in different difficulty levels. I use the simplest version. If nothing else is at hand, tic-tac-toe is always a good fallback option. In the office, I have soft toys that children can examine and sort. When parents of young children come in, we use activity toys to stave off boredom: matching and stacking games.

**Resources:**

- A worksheet from the website of the bullying-free schools foundation (SA Kiusamisvaba Kool), "How are you doing".
- Can be used at the beginning of the conversation, as an introduction.
- Emotion cards with a picture of a bear.
- These can be very helpful for striking a rapport with children.
- Scratch paper is good for getting rid of early anxiety.

**2. Gathering information about the child's experience and opinion**

**Objective:** to support the child in expressing his/her experience, thoughts and feelings.

**Practitioners' approaches and recommendations.**

- Open dialogue
- Be there for the child/young person, meet him/her repeatedly, talk about the issues that are important for the child. Offer the opportunity to for children to engage in activity during the conversation – especially for anxious children.
- Don't expect every child to open up immediately at the first meeting and tell you everything. Try to establish a relationship of trust with them, talk openly about yourself and always explain why you are talking to them, what will happen next, etc.
- Always prefer open questions, avoid yes or no questions. For example: "Tell me about your day today." "Tell me what's a good/bad day for you", etc.

- Illustrations for younger children help to identify the child's personality traits through his/her pictures. Easy to undertake, no special equipment required. A pencil and paper is sufficient. The child expresses his/her feelings, perceptions and aspirations by drawing.
  1. Family drawing: helps to understand family relationships and the child's emotional state.
  2. House – tree – human: allows to identify self-concept and perception of the surrounding world.
  3. An imaginary or actually not present animal: shows the child's creative abilities and internal conflicts.

**Resources:**

- **Angela Jakobson's "Finish the Sentence Cards"**. They have helped me build a good rapport with the child as we play the game together and talk about key issues. During the conversation, I take note of the child's general state. The child is not very controlling about what he shares while playing. The activity allows you to hear a genuine child's story. This helps you notice details that otherwise might escape notice
- Inclusive Education Centre (Kaasava Hariduse Keskus) chat cards **"Youth resource chest"**
- Andrea Harn's **"Mood Cards"**
- **tarklaps.com** – worksheets, workbooks and posters: workbooks for overcoming anxiety (don't overthink, achieve peace of mind); a workbook for Trauma and PTSD; a child's mental health kit (workbooks), calming corner posters for the development of emotional intelligence, an e-book on how to set up a calming corner and use it; motivational and inspirational posters; breathing cards and posters; affirmation cards and posters to support the child's positive self-talk; routine cards; and worksheets to promote body safety
- **tarkrebane.ee** - worksheets for small children and simple exercises.
- **lastega.ee** – a large amount of free worksheets for working with children.
- **toolehedlastele.ee** – large number of worksheets and developmental tests for children of all ages.
- **minutarklaps.ee** – play-oriented study materials, development worksheets created by experts, developmental tests, etc
- **tarkvanem.ee** - worksheets, information sheets, posters, tests for working with children, etc
- **taibutera.ee** - therapy and teaching aids for specialists with many possibilities of use and materials for working with children of different ages and levels of development
- **lengu.ee** - playful and developing products for children, jewellery business, free worksheets, etc

- **Metaphor cards** - contain pictures or symbols that help the child to open up and understand their own mood, as well as to unlock feelings and thoughts in their subconscious
- **eluplaan.ee** - chat cards: important conversations with the child, dragon play, success story career, family values, and much more
- Family evening table chat cards and a set of cards entitled **"What do you want to be (when you grow up)?"** [Kelleks tahad saada?]
- **"Expression Puzzle Building Block"** game Fourth-to-sixth-graders have found thus fun, as there's a competitive element. I leave breaks for conversation between the game

### 3. Assessment of risk and protection factors from a child's perspective

**Objective:** to map the child's understanding of relationships, threats/risks and supporting factors.

#### Practitioners' approaches and recommendations.

- In difficult situations, use the model "Who has the problem?"  
Try to find out who has the problem during the conversations. Usually the person reaching out has the problem. For example, if a parent reaches out for help, think through the situation together. The child/young person often does not even perceive a problem at all. In such a case, start with the person who does see a problem. Explain to all parties why a problem might exist for one person and not for another person. Then try to find a compromise together.
- I mostly only use assistive resources if the topic is very complex and emotionally difficult for the child. Sometimes it's easier for the child to write down his problem than to talk about it. Situations can be acted out with smaller children. Use of brochures and worksheets to talk about complex topics with older children and teens/young adults. This allows the child to analyse his or her complex issues in more detail on the basis of the questions already given.

#### Resources:

- Child assistive tools: "Three houses"; "Four supportive questions" to assess the child's need for help in both Estonian and Russian; eco-card – tool for mapping the child's immediate network and relationships; the Well-Being Triangle; an educational card game called "The Greatest Courage".
- peaasi.ee materials – cards: anxiety, depression, myths and reality; workbooks: self-harm cessation, anxiety, depression, mental health first aid, sleep diary, cannabis first aid;
- Worksheets: find the emotion, anger statements, mental health calendar, mental health vitamins, understanding feelings, mood like the weather, the balance wheel, a visualization of a calm place, 10 steps to staying connected, understanding worry, growing positive feelings, find your anxious part, write about feelings, sound hunt, emotion calendar, discover your psychotic part, tickets "We're together", school stress recognition game;
- chat cards: emotions, exercise, rest, relationships, diet.
- SBRIT – tool for working with teenagers where use of harmful substances is suspected.
- With young children, I have used Pisila wooden dolls and games to act out situations and clarify family relationships.

## 4. Explaining decisions and processes to the child

**Objective:** to help the child understand what is happening around him/her and what happens to him/her in processes related to him/her.

### Practitioners' approaches and recommendations.

- One of the most common assistive tools is the triangle of need. I conduct the conversation through open-ended questions and by reflecting the conversation. Making choices largely depends on the child's age, level of development and their openness.
- I have used an "blank notebook" system. By prior agreement, the child starts making entries in the notebook on their own. For example, he/she writes down his screen time; he "empties out" all of his feelings and thoughts by recording them in the notebook; he keeps a gratitude diary to write down a certain number of things every evening for which he was grateful that day. This leads to a positive thought pattern in the brain.
- As children don't tend to keep physical diaries today, there is a great need to create a list or table for putting in place plans with children who have fallen behind in their studies. We usually use the resources available in their homes, like pages in notebooks, a calendar, etc. I would also ask teachers to make a list of the uncompleted work for the child so that they can hang it in a visible place in their home. A sense of accomplishment can be created by crossing out the completed work in broad strokes (preferably with a red pencil). The more items are crossed out, the greater the motivation to keep on striving. I recommend that students highlight the days and times when they have an appointment in a bright colour and reward themselves with a star or smile when they went to their appointment. They reward themselves for an agreed number of positive stars, or a parent rewards them.

## 5. Supporting children's participation

**Objective:** to encourage and allow the child to express their views and take part in decisions.

### Practitioners' approaches and recommendations.

- Try to understand, don't condemn!  
In every situation, try to understand what the child is actually telling you. Snap disapproval is easy, but the key to success lies in understanding the child.
- Play exciting age-appropriate board games with the child.  
Create a fun and relaxed atmosphere: this will ease the child's anxiety. Observe how they behave when playing, whether it's hard for them to lose, or whether the sense of accomplishment opens them up even more. Let the child create new rules, and follow those rules yourself.

**Resources:**

- **Emotion bottle.**  
Have the child write things they have strong feelings about on a piece of paper and put them in the bottle. Different variations are possible. For example, children can seal their unpleasant feelings in the bottle and thus let go of them. They can also bottle good emotions, to be removed from the bottle one by one at a difficult moment and feel better.
- **Painting mandalas.**  
Different images can be found online. Painting mandalas is calming and it is also something that can be done together during a conversation.
- **Jenga – the game that uses wooden blocks.**  
I added a further element to the game by writing the beginning of a sentence or questions on some of the blocks, for example: my ideal day, your favourite year, the best gift I have received, etc. During the game, the questions can be answered either by the player who has removed the block or by the rest of the participants.
- **The board game “What Am I Like?”** (Milline ma olen?, designed by Külli Poom).  
The target group is pre-school and elementary grades. I have used it with 2nd and 3rd graders and one 6th grader. The goal is to get to know the students and, in the case of younger children, learn about emotions.
- **liikumismangud.ee** - active game recommendations for inspiration indoors/outdoors for different specialists working with children.

**6. Winding up work and follow-up activities**

**Objective:** The aim is to reinforce the child's experience, provide an opportunity for reflection, and support relationship closure.

**Practitioners' approaches and recommendations..**

- **Be open and honest.** Tell the child what will happen and how things will be going forward. Let them know about the next steps, such as future services, meetings with other professionals, etc. that will take place in the child's life. Agree on whether you will meet in future and how regularly. If necessary, help the child to create a so-called crisis plan: who and how they can contact if they have a problem, how to practise self-care, and how you can be reached.
- **Feedback wheel** - a simple way to collect feedback from children.  
The feedback wheel or similar format is divided into sectors by question and subject. For example: “What worked well?”, “What could be changed?”, “What do you feel was missing?”, etc. Children can rotate the wheel and provide the specialist with the necessary feedback when answering the question.

## ANNEX 1 Best practices used by foreign specialists.

In addition to the above, children's specialists from abroad have also provided input for the preparation of the guide. The table below summarises examples of approaches and tools by<sup>29</sup> country.

| COUNTRY        | TOOL/PRACTICES   |
|----------------|--|
| <b>Finland</b> | <a href="#"><u>Lastensuojelun Keskusliitto</u></a>   |
|                | <a href="#"><u>Itsenäisyyden juhluvuoden lastensäätiö</u></a>  |
|                | <a href="#"><u>Pesäpuu</u></a>   |
| <b>Iceland</b> | <a href="#"><u>Services in the Interest of Children's Prosperity</u></a> , Farsæld barna   |
|                | <a href="#"><u>Act No 86/2021 on the Integration of Services in the Interest of Children's Prosperity</u></a> (2021)   |
|                | Elia International Ltd. <a href="#"><u>Signs of Safety</u></a>   |
| <b>Germany</b> | <a href="#"><u>Die Ergebnisse des Nationalen Rats gegen sexuelle Gewalt an Kindern und Jugendlichen</u></a>  |
| <b>Latvia</b>  | Sagatavots iespiešanai un iespiests SIA "Drukātava" (2020), <a href="#"><u>Metodiskais materiāls sociālajam darbam</u></a>   |
|                | Mācību materiāls: <a href="#"><u>Bērna līdzdalības princips</u></a>  |
|                | Latvijas Republikas tiesībsargs (2019), <a href="#"><u>Ziņojums par bērna tiesībām paust savu viedokli un tikt uzklausītam bērnu aprūpes centros</u></a>                                 |
| <b>Norway</b>  | Folkehelseinstituttet rapport (2024), <a href="#"><u>Utfordringer for barn og unges medvirkning i barnevernet. En studie av forskningslitteratur og sentrale aktørers erfaringer</u></a> |
|                | Barne-, ungdoms- og familiedirektoratet (2022), <a href="#"><u>Samvær – kunnskapsbasert retningslinje for vurdering av samværsordning ved omsorgsovertakelse</u></a>                     |
|                | Barne- og familiedepartementet (2024), <a href="#"><u>Forskrift om barns medvirkning i barnevernet</u></a>   |

<sup>29</sup> All of the links in the table are as of 11 April 2025, and the authors of the guide emphasise that they may change over time.

|                |   |
|----------------|---|
| <b>Sweden</b>  | Socialstyrelsen (2018), <a href="#">Att samtala med barn - Kunskapsstöd för socialtjänsten, hälso- och sjukvården och tandvården</a>              |
|                | Socialstyrelsen (2023), <a href="#">Bedöma barns mognad för delaktighet</a>   |
|                | Barnafrid - National centre of knowledge (2024), <a href="#">Children's and young people's voices, A handbook for participation and inclusion</a> |
|                | Barnombudsmannen, <a href="#">Stöd och verktyg</a>  |
| <b>Denmark</b> | Social- og Boligstyrelsen, <a href="#">Laura Lundys model</a>   |
|                | Social- og Boligstyrelsen, <a href="#">Konkret inddragelse af børn og unge</a>  |





