

Participation Guidance

A co-developed tool with members

Meaningful participation guidance

Introduction

Participation is one of the four general principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and is a procedural right through which to realise other rights, including the protection of children from online-facilitated sexual abuse and exploitation.

As decision-makers, organisations and professionals, we have a responsibility to amplify children, young people and survivor voices, so they are heard by the people with the power to drive positive change or drive positive change themselves. By listening to the experiences of children, young people and survivors we can ensure the right support is available to those who need it. We need to do this in a way that is not tokenistic and truly supports, empowers and benefits children, young people and survivors.

This tool provides advice and guidance on how to foster participation to effectively engage children, young people and adult survivors in developing responsive and impactful responses to reduce the risk of sexual exploitation and abuse online.

The content of the document has been developed in partnership with eight WeProtect Global Alliance members who are at the forefront of participatory work with children, young people and survivors on the issue of child sexual exploitation and abuse online. It is a 'live' learning tool developed with many members of WeProtect Global Alliance and will be updated as practice in this space continues.

It provides:

- An explanation of what meaningful participation in tackling online-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse means and outlines a model of participation that can be used to strengthen approaches at an organisational and project level.
- A core set of principles that underpin meaningful participation to help build the knowledge and practice of those wishing to conduct ethical participatory work to strengthen child protection policies and process relating to online facilitated child sexual abuse.
- An interactive checklist to support partners to evaluate and strengthen approaches to participation with children and adult survivors.

Breakout

Why is meaningful participation important?

“It elevates survivor voice, promotes survivor leadership, inclusion, and empowerment. Allowing survivors to have meaningful participation can help determine the difference between being survivor informed to survivor-led projects.” – **Ruby**

“Meaningful participation provides a chance for survivors to express what they want the world to know about their experiences and it’s also a venue for them to advocate or call to action in developing solutions.” - **Liberty**

“Because of our lived experience, we knew the feeling and impact of being ‘forced’. Being able to share our different insights, would help us survivors feel empowered knowing that we are being listened to.” - **Joy**

“Meaningful engagement with survivors holds us accountable in upholding our values to seeing people’s worth and dignity in every step of the way. I truly believe that this approach and genuine commitment towards this will pave the way for decision-makers, authorities, and corporations to act alongside the community of people with lived experiences to make sustainable improvements that are for and with people with lived experiences.” - **Vanessa**

What does meaningful participation look like when developing solutions to tackle child sexual exploitation and abuse online?

Supporting meaningful participation of children, and those with lived experience of harm, in developing solutions and projects to tackle online facilitated child sexual abuse means:

- Continuously involving children and young people, and people with lived experience, in a process of action to enable them to lead, inform and influence decision-making in matters that affect them and others.
- Designing activities which are child-friendly, trauma-informed and age-appropriate to support children, young people and survivors to be involved in activities where they can express their voice, giving them the freedom to be present and share any ideas they want to in a safe space which is accessible, inclusive, respectful, and ultimately beneficial to them.

- Understanding that a survivor could also be a child, and this will require an age-appropriate approach to be adopted to ensure active participation.

Participatory work is a journey - starting small can lead to actions of greater intensity in future projects. However, wherever you are in your journey, the principles and ethics should remain the same.

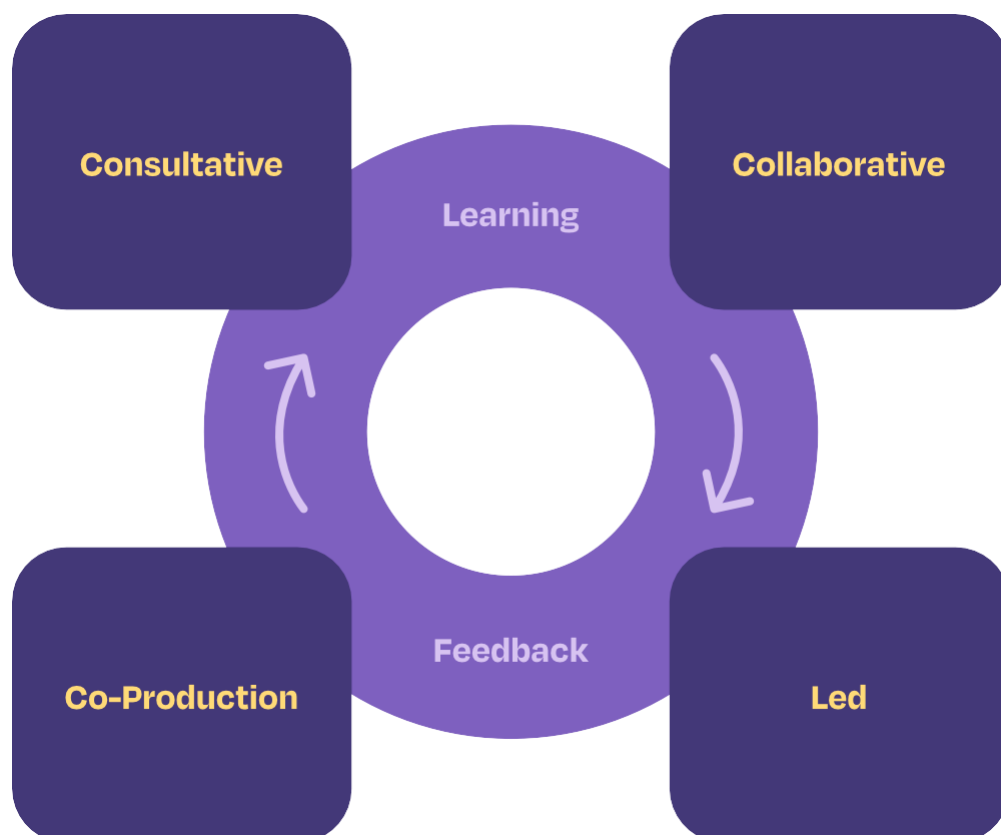
Model of participation

The approach outlined in this paper provides a starting point for agencies and organisations to engage children and adult survivors developing solutions to tackle online facilitated child sexual abuse.

It summarises four approaches to facilitate participation, combinations of which can be utilised to deliver different types of outcomes.

While the goal should be to reach the highest level of participation possible – i.e. led by children and/or survivors, the model also recognises that different levels of participation may be required in different situations and contexts. Different types of participation may also be used at different stages throughout the same project.

The model also emphasises the importance of continuous learning and seeking feedback from children, young people and survivors throughout the process.





Consultation

Children and/or adult survivors are consulted or are the subject of focus.



Collaboration

Children and/or adult survivors are advisers or contributors and are engaged from inception to implementation



Co-Production

Children and/or adult survivors are engaged in shared decision-making and play an active role in producing the outcome(s) from inception to implementation



Led

Children and/or adult survivors initiate or inspire the work and play a leading role in directing, decision-making and implementing an initiative

Principles that should guide your participatory work:

1. We have a duty of care to protect and safeguard children, young people and survivors. Their participation in activities should do no harm and should not place a child or adult survivor in danger or at risk of re-traumatisation. This means:
 - Safeguarding and protection are the responsibility of everyone involved.
 - We should go beyond policy and practice to create an environment of safety and protection where children, young people and survivors' feeling of safety is informed by their needs and priorities.
 - Responsibility for the safety of children, young people and survivors is paramount and should be considered during planning, direct engagement and aftercare.
2. Children, young people and survivors should have **autonomy and agency** to express their views, experiences and suggestions. This means:
 - Treating children, young people and survivors with dignity and respecting their views and decisions; ensuring there is accountability to them as key stakeholders in the decision-making process.
 - Ensuring active informed consent from children, young people and survivors with agreement and acknowledgement that this consent can be withdrawn at any time.
 - Recognising that agency can be difficult for some children, young people and survivors to express, and therefore the importance of creating a reassuring environment where children and adult survivors are supported.

- Communication with children, young people and survivors should be honest and transparent.
3. Equity and empowerment ensure everyone has the same opportunity to participate and is supported to contribute in a way which is appropriate and meaningful to them. This means:
- There should be equal benefits for children, young people and survivors and your organisation from the project or activity.
 - Identifying and reducing barriers to participation to ensure a wide range of voices and views.
 - Children, young people and survivors should be able to shape the agenda of the work they are involved in.
 - Recognising and acknowledging that there will be different contexts, impacts of oppression and inequality that individual children, young people and survivors will face. Take these into consideration when working with them.
4. Approaches to participation should be accessible, flexible and adaptable to maximise the ways Children, young people and survivors can take part and express themselves. This means:
- Take into consideration each participant's individuality and differences to provide opportunities, and break down barriers, for engagement that aligns best with their specific needs.
 - Being respectful that children, young people and survivors have other commitments and responsibilities and there may need to be additional consideration/flexibility for them to participate in projects and activities.
 - The definition of what is 'accessible' should be determined by the needs and understanding of the children, young people and/or survivors you aim to work with.
5. Child-centred and trauma-informed approaches must be utilised in the design of projects/activities, recognising there are vital areas of knowledge and understanding when working with these groups. This means:
- Understanding the impacts of trauma and that healing is an evolving process.
 - Understanding that participation work is inherently person-centred.
 - Recognising the importance of building relationships. Creating trust, empathy, and supporting two-way relationships with children, young people and survivors takes time and resources.
 - Recognising the experiences of children, young people and survivors cannot be conflated and should be treated as distinct forms of lived expertise and require different approaches to implement successfully into your participatory project.

Participation checklist

The following checklists provide guidance on things you may wish to consider in applying each of the principles in practice when developing approaches to ensure the active and ethical participation of children, young people and adult survivors. The checklists are not intended to be exhaustive, and each acknowledge that every activity will have its own unique considerations.

In some sections of the checklists, it is recognised that engagement with children, young people and survivors requires different approaches to implement successfully. Where relevant, differences in best practice are highlighted.

Before the Project:

- ☐ Before beginning any participatory work, ensure your organisation has an up-to-date safeguarding and child protection policy, reviewed by those with safeguarding expertise.
- ☐ From the beginning of any project working with children, young people and survivors, be transparent and clear about the project goals and what you hope to learn from them as participants. Ensure children, young people and survivors understand why they are part of the project, including having an open conversation about terminology. For example, 'online child sexual exploitation and abuse' and 'participation' are not terms that all children, young people and survivors may understand or engage with.
- ☐ Ensure communication and promotional materials clearly describe the activity and the type of participation being sought and that materials are accessible to all who may be interested.
- ☐ Ensure children, young people and survivors are provided with adequate information in the promotion of your opportunity so they can best decide for themselves if they want to participate.
- ☐ Before engaging with potential participants, consider resourcing and budgets and ensure they support equitable and accessible participation. Budgets need to consider fair remuneration for participant's time, and expenses such as travel, special needs, food, accommodation etc, as well as support for children, young people and survivors if needed. Ensure your budget has room for contingencies. Staff resourcing and time commitments should also be realistic.
- ☐ During your planning phase, complete a:
 - ☐ Risk assessment
 - ☐ Diversity and equity assessment of your activities
 - ☐ Trauma-informed design assessment (both when engaging children, young people and survivors)
 - ☐ Child and youth-centred programme design tool for child and youth activities (if you are aiming

to engage with children and youth)

- ☐ Adjust all activities based on results. In some cases, assessment means you need to reconsider if it is appropriate to conduct the work, especially if a project is high-risk with weak mitigation strategies.
- ☐ Assess if you need external or additional expertise to support your project e.g. trained facilitators, trauma-informed experts, project advisors with lived experience.
- ☐ Consider any generational, cultural or knowledge gaps or bias that you may need to address before embarking on this project (for example, a perception that online child sexual abuse is not as serious as contact abuse, lack of understanding about platforms).
- ☐ In the best case, participants should be remunerated, this remuneration should be accessible and equitable.
- ☐ Assess the demographics of children, young people and survivors you aim to work with to ensure there is representation and diversity.
- ☐ Ensure there are clear principles and ethical guidelines describing how the process of participation will be conducted, and that this is shared with all individuals involved in the project.

Choose venues or spaces children, young people and survivors can easily access and where they will feel safe and comfortable. Involve them in selecting venues, the activities and creating a safe space for their participation during the planning stage. This includes online spaces and platforms.

- ☐ In the initial activity or activity design, consider the best approach to engage a broad range of participants to prepare for different needs and engagement styles.

1. Child protection and safeguarding checklist

- ☐ Ensure everyone in your team has appropriate safeguarding training, clearance and/or guidance to work with under 18s and those with lived experience of child sexual abuse. Ensure everyone in your team is aware of and is assigned specific responsibilities to safeguard and protect throughout the activities.
- ☐ Based on your organisations child protection and safeguarding policy, ensure you are clear on who should and should not be in direct contact with children, young people and survivors in your organisation.
- ☐ Consider whether ethical clearance from a formal body or safeguarding experts is required if there are high risks or additional support needs.
- ☐ Consider how you will store personal data and information relating to children, young people and survivors. How will this be protected, and who has access to it?

- ☐ Fully brief the children and/or survivors about the activity, put in place support plans if they have any safety issues or concerns, and ensure participants know how to access this support. Some participants may be able to advise on their safety needs themselves.
- ☐ Develop an aftercare process, including what to do if participants need any support after the project or activity concludes.
- ☐ Consider how activities integrate with existing safeguarding systems and reporting mechanisms set up in your project, e.g. ensure participants are aware of support services and reporting pathways if these are not provided in the project (e.g. information on hotlines, referral services) and ensure these are safe and reputable.
- ☐ Create a space for children, young people and survivors to feel safe and comfortable to participate by drafting a safe space agreement with your participants that everyone who engages in the project has a responsibility to uphold and protect.

Survivor Engagement	Child (and Youth) Engagement
<input type="checkbox"/> ALWAYS offer anonymity or the use of a pseudonym especially when working with adult survivors or those with lived experience over 18.	<input type="checkbox"/> Children and young people may also want to use a pseudonym when the project is being promoted externally. They can also engage anonymously e.g. in polls. However, please always note your child protection and legal responsibilities to report any child protection concerns when engaging with children and youth.
	<input type="checkbox"/> Ensure parents/guardians or supporting individuals are briefed on and involved in the activity to support safeguarding. Remember parental/guardian consent is mandatory for under 18s to participate in any activity.

2. Autonomy and agency checklist

- ☐ Before you start any activity, ensure information and discussions about participating in the activity are clear, open, and informed. This should enable children, young people and survivors to make the best decision for themselves as to whether they want to participate in the project. Fully explain to participants:
 - Who is running the activity/project
 - Why the activity is being undertaken

- What data is being collected, how it is being used, how it is being stored and the date/timeline for destroying the information in line with legal requirements.
 - Be clear and transparent about how participants will be kept informed, and where appropriate consulted on how the information they share will be used over time (if appropriate).
 - What will happen during the activity.
 - How the results will be used and who they will be shared with.
 - Who is observing the activity, and if the activity is being recorded and why this approach is being adopted (with specific emphasis to ensure participants have agreed to any approach adopted).
 - What support will be offered if participants feel triggered, overwhelmed or experiences harm during or after the activity.
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- ☐ Ensure children, young people and survivors understand their role and data usage before, during and after the project. Asking them to describe this to you can be a useful way to check the project requirements have been understood.
 - ☐ Ensure informed consent has been obtained formally, is recorded and is reviewed. If the nature of the project changes from the initially described activity, you should discuss these changes with participants and ensure they still wish to give informed consent
 - ☐ Ensure children, young people and survivors understand their participation is voluntary, and that they can stop or withdraw their consent at any time during the project without repercussions. This includes before, during and after the activity or project. This includes the right to withdraw consent even after publication if they no longer want their views or content used.
 - ☐ With participants, regularly demonstrate and evidence how their insights and views are shaping the project or activity.
 - ☐ Throughout the project, hold regular check-ins to review how the project is going and discuss if changes are needed to accommodate any developing needs and desires of the children, young people and survivors.

3. Equity and empowerment checklist

- ☐ Discuss what children, young people and survivors want to gain from their participation and integrate this into the activity design e.g. would they like to develop a particular skill, or have some of their work amplified to a specific audience for advocacy.
- ☐ Use your diversity and equity assessment to review the demographics of children, young people and survivors you aim to work with to ensure there is adequate representation and diversity.
- ☐ Consider identity-based considerations and what might need to be in place for everyone based on their individual circumstances (More on this in checklist 4).

- ☐ Consider how you will adapt to different and preferred ways of working so views can be shared. Not everyone may be comfortable voicing their views in the same way so consider different methods to engage participants like writing notes, drawing, role play, recording etc. Some activities could be done individually or in group settings.
- ☐ Ensure children, young people and survivors are given the necessary knowledge, skills development, and information to participate in activities to a level that aligns with their own developmental or aspirational goals.

4. Adaptability and accessibility checklist

- ☐ Ensure everyone is given a consistent onboarding process so they have access to the same standard of information, briefings and resources.
- ☐ Complete an individual needs assessment with the children, young people and survivors you want to engage and ensure any identified needs are supported. One approach is to provide a questionnaire that helps them to express their identity, needs for safety, empowerment and achieving development goals.
- ☐ Based on needs assessment results, adapt the project content and activities where necessary. For example, some participants may need formats or language to be adapted.
- ☐ Consider the timing of your activities or project and plan your delivery timeframes to allow for meaningful participation rather than working to organisational deadlines.
- ☐ Review how your project/activity timeline works with children, young people and survivors' own commitments and responsibilities; Some participants may need to engage in activities over a longer time, or they may need regular breaks from intensive work.
- ☐ Be mindful of favouring your usual preferred work practices over the preferences of children, young people and survivors. The way you engage in this project or activity may be different to your traditional ways of working but may work best for children, young people and survivors.
- ☐ Whether an activity is online, in person or run in some other way, consider participant needs and how you can enable equal participation. For example, a participant may have a learning difficulty, hearing loss or other needs which could have an impact on the way you design activities.

5. Child-centred and trauma-informed checklist

- ☐ Due to the nature of the harm of online-facilitated child sexual abuse, there may be additional complexities that need to be considered. You should be mindful of the fact that work may be re-traumatising. We do not know the nature of the abuse that a victim or child has experienced. Being sensitive to the needs of all survivors, known and unknown, is imperative.

- ☐ When engaging in this work be mindful of emotions that may be triggered, and which may lead to behaviours and responses that you were not expecting. In needs assessments or discussion, it is important to understand what makes children, young people and survivors feel safe and comfortable.
- ☐ Appropriate wellbeing support and referral mechanisms must be in place. Participants should be made aware how to access this support at the start of the project. Ensure there are no barriers in place that would make accessing this support challenging or uncomfortable.
- ☐ Consider opportunities beyond your current project or activity to ensure work is not tokenistic. Ensure there is a sustainability plan for ongoing involvement, providing opportunities for survivors or children to influence and shape the services that have a direct impact on their outcomes.

Survivor Engagement	Child (and Youth) Engagement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Note individual boundaries and triggers for everyone, ensuring your activities are designed in a way that takes these into account. For example, some individuals might want to participate anonymously or with a pseudonym. Some may not wish to engage in specific project elements or will want to participate with a support individual, and some may not want their image being captured 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Use empowering child and youth-centred approaches and methods of participation that are engaging, relevant, age-appropriate, flexible and creative. Recognise that your participants may be the experts about how they would like to be engaged and what works best for them.

After the Project:

- ☐ Ensure participants know how to engage with the aftercare process.
- ☐ When the activity or project finishes, ensure there is a meaningful evaluation and feedback process that could be in the form of a debrief or an after-event review that empowers children, young people and survivors to express themselves.
- ☐ Inform participants on how you will remain accountable to them about the use of their work going forward.
- ☐ Inform participants how their information will be used, stored and destroyed in line with legal data protection and statutory requirements.

Thanks to our contributing members

This guidance tool was developed in partnership with; ECPAT International, Action Against Child Sexual Abuse Initiative (ACSAI), Fumaco, International Justice Mission, Protect Children Suojellaan Lapsia, Marie Collins Foundation, ‘Hamogelo’ Smile of the Child and Child X and reviewed by the Safer Young Lives Centre UK

Useful resources

The following resources provide further guidance and support on implementing meaningful participation principles and processes. They have been identified or produced by organisations and members of WeProtect Global Alliance who have implemented participatory work specifically related to child sexual abuse online.

Resource title and link	Organisation	Description
MCF Guidance for organisations working alongside victims and survivors who are publicly sharing their experiences of CSA	Marie Collins Foundation	General participatory approaches for working with victims and survivors.
Seeing things from both sides	Safer Young Lives Research Centre, University of Bedfordshire	A comic developed in collaboration to help young people and professionals understand each other’s views about young survivors’ participation in addressing child sexual exploitation and abuse.
From surviving to thriving: an online course for survivors interested in working to end human trafficking and sexual exploitation	Beyond Survivors (ChildX, Footprint to Freedom, Ge-STAC and Not Your Whore)	Resources and tools to help prepare survivors wishing to work in the field.
Creating a safe space: ideas for the development of participatory group work to address sexual violence with young people	Safer Young Lives Research Centre, University of Bedfordshire	Guidance on planning participatory group work with young survivors. The toolkit includes a planning checklist, risk register, individual risk and needs assessment and a ‘getting to know you’ form.
Practical guide for meaningful survivor engagement	eLiberare	Guidance on processes when preparing for survivor engagement.

Survivor Engagement Resources — Survivor Alliance	Survivor Alliance	Helpful one pager for working with survivors.
Voices of Empowerment	International Justice Mission	Co-authored by IJM's Center to End OSEC with survivors in the Philippine Survivor Network, includes their direct experiences participating in various engagements.

WeProtect Global Alliance brings together experts from government, the private sector, civil society and intergovernmental organisations. Together, they generate political commitment and practical approaches to build a digital world designed to protect children from sexual exploitation and abuse online.

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