

Children should be seen and not heard.

The phrase 'children should be seen and not heard' is an old adage drawn from the Victorian era, which unfortunately, is still a common phrase thrown around by parents today with a somewhat antiquated and misguided attitude towards children's rights. In actuality, children's rights could not be more conflicting with that statement.

Every child has rights, no matter what their age, where they live or what they believe. These rights are enshrined in the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (the Convention), one of the most internationally recognised treaties in the world and which Australia ratified in 1990 (UNICEF Australia). The Convention sets out a series of 54 articles governing basic human entitlements which early childhood educators have an obligation to ensure that every child in Australia enjoys and understands, as well as ensuring they are respected and understood by others.

As we celebrate the 25th year of the ratification of the Convention, it is no longer a question of 'why' we should promote children's rights and active participation in our early childhood services, but more 'how' this should be achieved. In looking at implementation, it is important that we include the observations of adult child interactions within our practice as these are the key to understanding where to begin. Services are starting to assess their adult child relationships in order to ascertain which principles of active participation need initial focus.

Having a thorough understanding of how to engage children in genuine opportunities to participate will allow children to build confidence into the future, and can only be supported through shared understanding with children, and viewing the child as a valued citizen and social actor. The confidence of children to be involved does not occur instantly or overnight, but takes time—gradually acquired through practice. It is for this reason that educators are building their understanding of these principles to be fully equipped with the knowledge of how to engage each child to contribute in a supported way. This will happen in collaboration with educators who can provide safe and secure contexts in which ongoing consultations with children can occur.

These principles are relatively straight-forward and yet putting these into practice demands time, careful consideration and understanding on the educator's behalf. Although we are at different stages of professional development, building respectful and reciprocal relationships is essential to this process, and is where most educators have begun their journey in educating children about their rights. These relationships involve the ability to demonstrate a genuine interest in the thoughts and ideas of the children we work with.

Building safe and secure relationships with the children in our services will provide a foundation for meaningful interactions with children into the future. Once a secure context has been established, the next challenge is to take into consideration why and how a child is being invited to take part, what the purpose is, and how each child can contribute in their own meaningful way. This shared understanding enables a deeper exchange of ideas and information with the group of children involved in the consultation. Shared understanding is not a one off event, it is an on-going practice of monitoring and developing each consultation to suit the children as it evolves.

Children are much wiser than you may think, and under the appropriate circumstances, they have the power to express their thoughts and views quite simply and with authority. In cases where active participation is embedded in the service, educators ensure consideration is taken to pitch engagement fittingly in terms of children's age, individuality and culture; however, where appropriate, children are consulted on the things that affect them and allow them to provide their thoughts and concerns on the agenda. Eventually, as the opportunities to participate increase and children's confidence levels grow, they will be able to provide genuine representations of their understandings, theories and ideas and be valued contributors to their communities.

Educators, who truly understand how to implement the education of children's rights, will engage in child-initiated, child-led programs throughout their daily practice and not tokenistic adult-initiated, adult-led interaction.

Educators are beginning to foster authentic child engagement in children's rights within early childhood services and it is clear they are making intentional arrangements to understand how

best to facilitate the active participation of young children, but this understanding needs to continue to develop. Our national curriculum document, *The Early Years Learning Framework*, which considers the developmental needs, interests and experiences of every child, seeks to embody children's rights and active participation in educators' daily practice and this is, in a number of ways, the central tenet in how we work with young children.

It is imperative that children understand they have a right to grow, to survive, to thrive, to reach their full potential and to make their voices heard. Active participation is the fundamental right of every child and treating children as competent and capable is paramount as this ensures their rights are truly valued and understood.

As we continue to advocate for the education agenda to shift into the hands of the children, we are genuinely embracing the ideals in the United Nations Convention on Children's rights. This does not mean to say that educators should provide free rein to children without support or guidance in daily practice, but allow them ample opportunity to engage in collaborative discussion with adults, to have their voices heard and to positively influence the aspects of their lives they can have control over.

Our ultimate goal is to transform children from passive recipients to active engaged participants (Hydon, 2014) and

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allow for possibilities to capture their involvement in learning about the basic fundamental rights directly relating to them- to provide them with a voice in the communities they belong to, and to empower them to share in their understandings of what their rights are. Let us not be dispirited implementers, but re-create the future for our children.

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