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A Child Perspective and Children's Participation

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Comment on This Article

Abstract

This paper is concerned with children's participation in communicative processes. We suggest an interpretation of the concepts child perspective and participation that might make it easier to understand, analyze and facilitate "effective" participation for children. Our threefold notion of the child perspective contains both structural and individual aspects. We state that adults must guarantee children's rights as well as make arrangements to ensure their participation. Further, children's participation must take place in a way that incorporates their subjective understanding and experiences. This requires exploring and identifying the meanings of their assertions, not taking them for granted. We suggest an interpretative model in which understanding between individuals through communication is essential. Our discussions are illustrated with Norwegian children's experiences in participation situations, collected from our research on children in child welfare cases and our reflections on daily situations with children.

Keywords: **child perspective, participation, communication, understanding, participatory procedures**

Introduction

Since the 1990s, the concept of a child perspective has received increasing attention in child research, political programs, and practical pedagogical activities associated with children (Sommer 2003; Johansson 2003). This is related to the "new" view of the child and children's rights, where emphasis is given to the participation and contribution of children. Governments, private parties, and organizations are now treating children in radically different ways than previously has been the case (Chawla and Heft 2002). The political and cultural attention directed towards children indicates that children are expected, and have expectations themselves, to be included as participants. The focus currently placed on children's participation in their own lives, as well as within the public sphere, is a phenomenon that can be linked to the cultural and political modernization of democratic states (Skivenes 2002; cf. Habermas 1996; Eriksen 2001). An increasing number of groups of individuals are now included within the political and judicial spheres of society (Kymlicka 2002). In Norway, women, ethnic and religious minorities, homosexuals, and now children are included among such groups. The right to participate and contribute to decision-making processes is one particular aspect of their inclusion in a democratic society.

The participation of children has become an important issue in legislation and political programs in Norway and internationally. For example, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) has been ratified by 191 nations, that is, every country except the United States and Somalia (the latter does not have sovereignty to ratify conventions). The CRC states that children have the rights to freedom of speech and to participation in decision-making processes that are relevant to their lives. In Norway, the child's right to participate has been enshrined in the Children Act, the Child Welfare Act, programs for school and day care, and children's citizen projects in municipalities.

The emphasis on a child perspective and children's participation can lead to mobilization towards giving children equal standing in both the economic and cultural hierarchy (Kymlicka 2002). Arguably, a key struggle for children is to be recognized as visible subjects in authoritative debates and decision-making forums, while at the same time being seen as individuals and not only as a group. However, a major challenge in practice and research is identifying what a "child perspective" and "children's participation" exactly mean and what is needed to fulfill them. It is not sufficient that children are invited to participate and can express themselves. Consideration must be given to the ways in which states and adults view children and gain a proper understanding of their opinions, as well as ways in which adults can facilitate their participation.

The aim of this paper is to examine critically the concepts of children's perspective and children's participation. We hope this will contribute to easier facilitation of children's participation as well as better analysis of the efficacy of participatory processes for children. We start with a short explanation of children's participation, and the concept of child perspective. We then present an approach to understanding children and their opinions through "authentic" conversations. Thereafter, four procedures for ensuring children's participation are presented.

Next, we outline obstacles to shared understanding and cooperation that may arise. We highlight children's communication skills and the differences in their needs and abilities, and adults' tendency to protect and educate children. The arguments in this paper are supported by examples from research undertaken by the authors on children in child welfare cases as well as incidental reflections on ordinary situations in the authors' own families. In the concluding section, we summarize our arguments and explore the prospects of realizing inclusion of children's perspectives in modern society.

Children's Participation

There is a long history behind children's rights. The focus of the Geneva Convention of 1924 and later UN declarations (e.g., 1959) was the welfare and protection of children—not their participation. The discourse on children's participation appeared in the preparation of the CRC, and it was not without discussion. Many nations had reservations about the participation Articles in the CRC, and have since had difficulties realizing these in practice (Smith and Lødrup 2004; Verhellen and Weyts 2003; Sandberg 2003).

Article 12, no. 1 in the CRC concerns the right to participation:

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.

This Article gives children the right of participation in matters affecting them, which in this paper we limit to mean participation in discussions with other individuals, primarily adults. That is, we do not focus on children's self-determination, but rather their joint decision-making. We believe that in principle, children of all ages must be regarded as subjects with their own agendas and perceptions of what is important and meaningful in their lives. Furthermore, our approach takes language and communication to be the key components that constitute common social values and an intersubjective understanding between individuals (Habermas 1990). To take others seriously is to try to understand what they are saying.

The Concept of a Child Perspective

The concept of a *child perspective* is usually understood to mean a child-friendly perspective that is informed by new approaches to the study and analysis of children and childhood (James and Prout 1990). A central element is that children are seen as individuals, with opinions, interests, and viewpoints that they should be able to express (Lee 2001). This perspective is expressed in many different ways by lay people and in the research literature (Halldén 2003; Johansson 2003; Sommer 2003). While there is agreement that honoring the child perspective is positive, the lack of precision in definition and practice leaves the way clear for many different applications of the child perspective. This is neither acceptable if one wishes to achieve children's rights in accordance with the CRC's normative foundation, nor useful as a scientific tool to study and evaluate children's lives and activities. We agree with Sommer (2003) that the concept of a child perspective must be

differentiated from the benevolent “child saver” discourse and be specified in a systematic way (Skivenes and Strandbu 2005). We propose a concept of the child perspective that contains three aspects on two different levels:

- The first part of the child perspective is at the structural level. It concerns children’s rights and position in society, as well as their legal protections. States must recognize children as legal subjects, and implement systems that are appropriate to their needs and competencies so they can be participants in their own life (CRC Article 4). How children’s rights to participation are facilitated through co-decision and empowerment is the central feature of the first component of the child perspective.
- Secondly, on an individual level, children must receive recognition from adults (e.g., professionals, parents, citizens). A primary aim is to regard all stakeholders—including children—as individuals, each with their own particular needs and interests. Children’s capacities to make decisions are not fully developed, and they are consequently dependent on their guardians and the state. Nonetheless, we argue for a position where children can be considered in the present—as human *beings*—rather than only in a future perspective as a human *becoming* (Lee 2001; cf. Shapiro 1999).
- The third component of the child perspective is also on an individual level and concerns the context of different children’s lived realities. Respect for the child’s view of the world is central when taking children’s interests into consideration. Johansson defines the child’s view as “...that which the child recognizes, the child’s experiences, intentions and expression of his meaning” (2003, 42). The point of commencement is that children have needs and viewpoints that are qualitatively different from those of adults (see James and Prout 1990).

This threefold notion of a child perspective is for analytical purposes, but it must also be fulfilled if children are to be taken seriously and participate on their own terms in society. The responsibility for incorporating the child perspective into decision-making rests with states and adults.

Three important points needing further elaboration unfold from this concept of a child perspective. Firstly, what do we mean by *understanding* children when they are participants? Secondly, to fulfill the intentions of the CRC and make adequate structural arrangements for children’s participation, there is a need for general procedures (or standards—cf. Wade and Badham 2003) governed by children’s special needs. Thirdly, there are some obstacles in the communicative interaction between adults and children that need special attention. We discuss each of these points further in the following sections.

Understanding and Participation

In order to achieve a real exchange of views between adult and child, we need to know how to establish understanding between them, including an outline of how to meet the specific needs of the individual child. The psychologist Sommer (2003) is

concerned with the difficulty adults have in understanding children's opinions and interests. He distinguishes between the children's view of their situation, and the part of it that others can gain access to by communication and interpretation. The Norwegian language philosopher Skjervheim explains premises for understanding and interplay between individuals, and states that each party must be a participant in the meeting with the other, not simply an audience (Skjervheim 2002). Being an audience, one is not trying to understand expressions and arguments as they are intended by the speaker, but instead just handling them as face value facts. Thus one is not taking the other seriously and recognizing him or her as a participant. Using these distinctions, we see participation as:

Interaction with others that is concerned with identifying the meaning of that which comes to expression. Individuals are taken seriously and have influence, whereby others take up their expressions for consideration and discussion.

Thus, to take the other seriously it to become engaged in that person's viewpoints and let them, for our purpose the child, present their authentic opinion for us. The central aim with regard to children's participation is to achieve correspondence between the child's experience and the adult's understanding of it (Kjørholt 2001). The key question is: Do we regard the child's view as a statement that arouses our attention and that we must investigate, or do we accept it as a simple fact—something that we have already understood and categorized? The following example from one of the researcher's family experiences illustrates our reasoning:

A young boy was to attend a kindergarten that his older brother, aged four, had attended for several years. Their parents were very pleased about this and thought it would be good for the boys. However, after two weeks, the older brother stated that he did not want his younger brother to attend the kindergarten. When the mother asked why, he stated, "He follows me around all the time."

The mother spoke with the staff at the kindergarten, hoping to prevent the younger boy from bothering his older brother too much. The staff told her that the two boys played together very little and that the smaller boy had not followed his older brother around. The boys had scarcely been together. What was it that the older boy actually meant?

The older boy was very fond of his younger brother, and often said to others that they should be careful with "his baby." His parents had told him that they were pleased he would be there to look after his younger brother. The older boy had taken this literally, and did not play with his own friends in the kindergarten. His sense of responsibility for his younger brother "followed him around" and he wished that his brother were not in the kindergarten. The parents saw that he was frequently "fed up" in the kindergarten and it emerged that he was concerned that something might happen to his younger brother if their parents were not there to look after him.

Among other things, this story is a reminder that in many situations, information has to be obtained from a number of sources, not just the child, in order to clarify what comprises "the child's point of view and interests" (Andenæs 1991). In this case, through conversations with the boy and the staff at the kindergarten, the adults were able to discover what the child really meant.

Collaboration requires the ability to interpret others' opinions with an open mind in order to identify their real meaning. For this to occur, adults need first to recognize that a child is an individual capable of forming an opinion.

However, we must sound a note of caution. Interpretation implies putting meaning into social phenomena and processes, and there is always a danger that these interpretations are wrong. Errors are particularly likely when children are concerned, as their language skills and social and cognitive maturity vary considerably. We follow up with some potential pitfalls later in the paper. The next section discusses how to create precise and flexible procedures for children's participation.

Legal Recognition and Procedures

Children's rights are a political priority for the UN (UNICEF) and many Western nations, and through the CRC, children are given rights to participation and freedom of speech. These rights correspond to the first element of the child perspective outlined earlier and are enacted in national law in many countries. In Norwegian law, children are accorded absolute participation rights in two stages. At seven years of age they must be given the opportunity to express themselves (per law revision no. 86 of August 1, 2003), and at 15 years of age they are recognized as parties in legal cases and can make decisions on their own about their education, religion and enrollment in organizations. The recent reduction from 12 years to seven years of age for the recognition of children's rights in matters concerning them was undertaken as a direct response to the CRC in Norwegian law. The intention is that children shall be given a central position in child custody and child protection cases and also more generally in Norwegian society.

In many ways, Norwegian law provides children with a strong position and an unambiguous right to participate. During the last 15–20 years, Norway has aimed to secure due process in formal proceedings for children, and children's participation is an important part of this. However, the nation has not fully succeeded in this aim. Research shows that Norwegian children are rarely heard, or have their opinions considered, in serious cases such as child custody and child protection (see Oterholm 2003; Havnen et al. 1998; Vis 2004; Hansen 1998). Similar findings are reported in international studies (see, for example, Smith and Taylor 2003; Murray and Hallet 2000; Thomas 2000).

There are several ways of overcoming this problem. In our opinion, one issue is that although Norway and other states give children strong participation *rights*, they have not made adequate arrangements for including children as actual participants. We therefore outline four general procedures that should be considered in different decision-making situations where children are involved. In

short, these are: formulation of opinion, communication, inclusion of argument, and follow-up.

General Procedures for the Participation of Children

There is an increasing body of literature concerning approaches to involving young people in decision-making, and several of them have a procedural approach (e.g. Wade and Badham 2003; Shier 2001). Drawing on theories of communicative rationality (Habermas 1990) and our own theoretical and empirical research on child's participation in the decision-making process (Eriksen and Skivenes 1998; Strandbu 2004; Skivenes and Strandbu 2004), we distinguish between four general procedures that we see as conducive to facilitating effective participation with children. These procedures are both precise and flexible, so as to include children with different capacities, needs and interests, and in different situations:

1. Children must have the *opportunity to form their opinions* when a resolution is required. The formulation of opinion requires that children are informed about decisions beforehand, and that they receive adequate information appropriate to their age. They must also be informed of the possible consequences of the decision for themselves and others. They need the opportunity to reflect on their thoughts and on what ought to be, and may possibly be, done.
2. Children must have the *opportunity to express their viewpoints in a decision-making situation*. Thus they must be asked about their opinions and how these should be presented in the ongoing discussions. They should choose whether to speak for themselves or have a trusted adult speak on their behalf.
3. Children's *arguments must be taken seriously* and must be included in the decisions about what is to be done. This implies that the arguments are evaluated and that reasons for standpoints and arguments are given. Any reasons for excluding a child's interests and wishes must be clearly explained. One suggestion is to ensure that there is a person responsible for guiding discussions and making sure that everybody is heard. It is particularly important that inequalities in opportunities and results be fully explained. Inclusion in decision-making does not imply that one's viewpoints shall dominate; rather, they are taken account of along with the views of others.
4. Children must *be informed after a decision has been made* about both how the result had been reached and what the result actually means. There must be an opportunity to ask questions and appeal the decision. It is imperative to have some form of external control of the process and the outcome so as to minimize misuse of power.

These four procedures can be seen as essential to ensuring that children can be participants in different decision-making situations. The procedures are not,

however, sufficient in themselves. The participants in these processes must negotiate and give each other the opportunity to participate under their own terms.

Even when good procedures are established, there needs to be a sincere intention to involve children on their own terms. Without demanding and ensuring that children's points of view are expressed, their voices will not be heard. As one of the informants in a study of children's participation in neighborhood settings in the international Growing Up in Cities program states: "It's hard to have a voice in a community unless someone asks you" (Percy-Smith and Malone 2001, 4). In our studies of children's interaction in decision-making processes, we often see that the opportunity for the child to have a voice in family and child welfare matters is overlooked (Skivenes and Strandbu 2004; Strandbu 2006; cf. Dalrymple 2002; Holland et al. 2003).

In short, there seem to be deficits in adults' engagement with children's experiences and point of view. This might be due to a lack of awareness of children's language skills and the need to treat them as individuals. In addition, the roles adults often take when interacting with children, namely protectors and educators, may inhibit full engagement.

Obstacles to Cooperation with Children

There are many challenges to children's participation. We concentrate on four main dilemmas, which we illustrate with examples from children in everyday situations and in decision-making situations where we see children as participants stating their own assertions.

Language and Communication Skills

One main challenge concerning children's participation is their language skills, which depend on age and maturity, among other things (Wilson and Powell 2001). It is important to be aware of concepts, grammar structure, sentence length, and question form when speaking with children (ibid.).

Misunderstandings between the parties and confusion for the child might be the result when one speaks to a child as an adult. Communication is not, however, just the spoken word; it is also the behavior of the others, their gestures, tone and facial expressions (Johansson 2003). We gain knowledge about a child through conversation, by observing different communication signs, and by recognizing the child as a participant. This is illustrated by another example of an everyday situation with the same two brothers mentioned above, aged one and four years:

For more than an hour, the mother had attempted to get the one-year-old child to sleep. He had just fallen asleep when his older brother stepped on a musical box outside the bedroom. The music awakened the small child who began to howl again. The mother got upset with the older boy, who stated, "I did this on purpose." Of course, it may be that he was tired and worn out and upset at not receiving any attention, and therefore did do it deliberately, but the boy's expression, tone and, not least, the previous history, told the mother the opposite. The older brother had been very concerned that his

younger brother was ill, and among other things had come into the room and given him a teddy bear so that he would go to sleep. The mother therefore asked the four-year-old what he meant when he said that he had done it deliberately. The boy then answered: "I did it by mistake." In this example, the boy's language skills could not communicate what he wished to say. He was not able to formulate the negation in the sentence, i.e., "I did not do this on purpose."

The example illustrates the challenges of an everyday situation when communicating with small children. The four-year-old boy's expression is understood by the adult, not because of the literal words spoken, but more by that which Stern (2000) labels "emotional harmonizing." Emotional harmonizing happens in day-to-day relations, where the interpersonal knowledge between adult and child tells them both how the other thinks and feels.

Conveying Real Meaning of Children's Unique Experiences

Children, like adults, differ from one another in terms of robustness and emotional and physical strength. They have different pasts, stories, and experiences. Thus, even when children of the same age participate, one cannot expect the same capacities from them. In addition, some of the situations in which children may participate are sensitive and difficult, like child custody cases or the need for child protection services. One example of this is that of a boy aged 15:

The boy had lived with his mother until he was 12 years old, and for the next two years he had lived with his father and his father's. Due to major conflicts between the boy and the father, with the father at this time expecting a new child, the boy had to move out. In addition, he could not reside with his mother and stepfather, the father to his stepbrother and sister, as his stepfather did not make him welcome. For the last year the boy had lived a nomadic life, occasionally with the family, occasionally with friends. The child welfare authorities wished to stabilize the residential situation for the boy. A number of meetings were arranged between the family and authorities, within the family and between caseworkers, where the boy's care situation was discussed. The boy had a very clear opinion that he stated in the meetings: He claimed that he wanted to move into a small flat by himself.

The researcher wanted to understand the implications of his assertion and the content of the boy's life and life challenges. The researcher asked the boy to wave a magic wand and say how he would like his life to be:

I could wish that I won the Lotto. More than the lowest prize. I could have done a lot with that money. Buy mother a house so that she could move away from my stepfather.... She has not said that she would do that, but I know her. I know that it won't last long.

He explained that if his mother could move into her own home then he would move there with her and his stepbrothers and sisters. In the course of the interview, the researcher repeated the three things that the boy had defined

as the most important in life—money, a place to live and food—and asked him if love was important to him in any way. The boy confirmed this by saying that love among siblings was important. He had earlier expressed his love for his little sister (Strandbu 2006).

The interview with the boy revealed disappointment, loneliness, and hardship that had not emerged at the meeting with the child welfare authorities and family. He showed that he wanted to take care of himself by stating that he wanted to live in a small flat. Clearly, however, the interview with the researcher revealed that there were other things he also wanted. Our interpretation is that the boy's opinions about his own desires and needs were too emotionally difficult to talk about in the family meeting. At the same time we also see that the boy took responsibility for his own situation and thus the only solution, in his eyes, was to "survive." When a child participates in a decision-making meeting where the issues at stake involve troublesome circumstances, assistance from an independent support person is especially important (Dalrymple 2002; Holland et al. 2003; Furnivall et al. 2004; see also Strandbu 2006).

It is imperative to be aware of communication skills and differences in life experiences and competence when children are involved in communication with adults. Just as an age difference is an obstacle for understanding between adults and children, the same applies for dissimilar life experiences and sociocultural upbringing (Skivenes and Strandbu 2006). However, adults might also be hindered by their taken-for-granted roles as protectors, educators and child raisers.

Protection in the Best Interest of the Child?

When we ask what it means to understand the world from the point of view of the child, we enter a social world that is already established and interpreted by the actors involved, including both adults and children. In Western middle-class culture, it is widely believed that childhood should be a happy, carefree, and protected phase in life (Stephens 1995; Boyden 1990; Hennem 2002). Because we are immersed in a culture that operates with specific views of children and childhood, it can be difficult to reflect on the manner in which adults "understand" children and childhood (Solberg 1996). For example, Hodne (2005) finds that the majority of adults describe their own childhood and the relationship they had with their parents as very positive when they look back on their life. This may be explained by the fact that adults have a reluctance to perceive childhood as being anything other than good (Hodne 2005). One way this perception of childhood manifests is in adults' natural desire to protect children. Of course children must be protected, but at the same time, they must develop and be raised to adulthood while being treated as human beings in their own right. Thus, participation is important both in the decision-making respect as well as a stage in the child's personal development.

Those who work for children's interests generally take one of two main positions, labeled "child savers" and "child liberationists" (Archard 1993). The former are primarily concerned with protection of children while the latter conceptualize children as bearers of individual rights, including participation (Melton 2000). There is often a tension between seeing the child as sensitive and immature, on the one hand, and accepting the child as an independent able participant on the other. The

ways in which adults understand children provide an indication as to how they think about the inclusion of children as participants in a decision-making process (Skivenes and Strandbu 2005; Strandbu 2004), as demonstrated in the following example.

A meeting was arranged by child welfare authorities where Peter's family and caseworkers discussed, among other things, how Peter, age eight, could attend football training every Tuesday. Peter lived with his mother who had serious psychological problems. Frequently, she did not manage to get up in the mornings. She did not have a car and neither did she have the capacity to organize a ride for him to and from football training for him. Peter had regular visits and meetings with his father, every second weekend and Wednesday to Thursday every week.

While the discussions were going on, Peter played cards with a representative from the child welfare authorities and the researcher in a room next door. Without asking Peter, the family and caseworkers determined that he should change the visiting days with his father from Tuesday to Wednesday, so the father would be able to drive him to the football training sessions.

Peter was both annoyed and disappointed when he was informed later about what had been decided: "...We have our weekly excursion at school on Thursdays and Dad makes hot chocolate, and Mum does not. I'd rather be with Dad from Wednesday to Thursday" (Strandbu 2004).

We see that the adults made a resolution based on what they considered to be the immediate problem, something that well illustrates our point that a child can have a completely different understanding of an issue from that of adults. For Peter, this was something much more than the mere organization of a ride to and from football training. His everyday routine had been disturbed, and he was neither informed nor consulted when the decision was made. For the father, this was a question of protection. In the interview, he clearly expressed that such meetings were not the place for children. He did not want Peter to be present during the discussions where there would be some argument and much discussion about how sick his mother actually was. To include Peter would clash with the father's views of childhood and children, but his insistence on excluding Peter also reflects his lack of understanding about what participation can mean for the child.

A central feature here is that consideration must be given to each individual child's unique requirements and capacity concerning information and formulation of opinion, as well as the appropriate points at which the child's opinion should be expressed. Peter could have participated in the decision-making process by being present at certain times during the meeting, or another person could have presented Peter's viewpoint prior to the adults making their decision. In this way, Peter could be protected and taken care of, without denying him the opportunity of saying what was important for him.

The Adult's Role as Child Raiser

The last challenge addressed in this paper is the adult's role as a child raiser. The concept of *raiser* refers to a relationship in which an adult has possession of something that the immature child requires. Because adults have both a private and a public responsibility concerning the care of children, there are certain situations where decisions have to be made which are in apparent conflict with what the child desires. Risk assessment concerning a child might result in the dilemma that, the greater the problem, the more power is required to be used by the adult (Juul and Jensen 2003).

Interviews with children who had participated in the decision-making processes of the child welfare authority demonstrate this point (Strandbu 2006). One example is a girl aged 17 who wished to break with a drug habit by moving to another town. The child welfare authorities believed, however, that the only way the girl could be assisted was by compulsory admission to an institution. In such instances, it can be a major challenge to find the balance whereby the child is not denied her status as a subject even though her desires and viewpoint may not be supported by the adults.

In interviews with the girl after the meeting, where forced admission to a rehabilitation center had been discussed, she expressed the feeling that she had not been listened to. In a survey of children in the care of the welfare authority that asked them to rank the factors which were important in participation in a decision-making process, the right to be heard and to express one's views was ranked as the most important, while getting their own way was the least important (Thomas 2000).

As Skjervheim (2002) points out, we tend to objectify the other particularly when we do not take them seriously. We then tend to regard the other as a "case" and do not listen to them as a person. The message of this example for adults is to react to children's expressions with respect and to be tolerant in listening to what they have to say during a decision-making process. It is important to grant the child the status of subject while admitting that the right to participation does not necessarily mean that one must agree with the child's viewpoint.

Conclusions

Through several years of research into children's participation, we have observed a constant skepticism and concern among lay people and professionals about letting children participate in decision-making processes. Concerns include difficulties with the child's loyalty towards their parents, the burden of responsibility they will carry for their decisions, and their lack of proper competencies and knowledge to participate (see, for example, Haugli 2005). One gains the impression that the opinion of the "child savers" (Archard 1993)—their understanding of the child as vulnerable and immature—is widely accepted. However, we also observe that, with the increased emphasis placed on participation rights in the CRC, the child perspective has become more important. Research projects and measures from government agencies, states, companies and public offices, all recognize children as individual social actors.

These contradictory views lead us to believe that the skepticism about children's participation originates from a one-dimensional understanding of its importance for children. In response, we have suggested interpretations of the child perspective and participation that may make it easier to understand, analyze, and facilitate "real" participation for children. Our threefold notion of the child perspective contains both structural and individual aspects. We have stated that children need to enact their rights, but they also require appropriate arrangements to ensure that their participation is meaningful. Following the lowering of the age limit for children's participation to age seven (in Norway), and increased worldwide attention to the child perspective and children's participation rights, we might see change characterized by greater attention to providing the circumstances for realizing children's participatory rights. Finally, children's participation must take place in a process that incorporates the child's subjective understanding and experiences.

Without providing children with the opportunity to participate when important decisions about their lives are to be made, children are unable to escape from an objectified position as a "human becoming." This perspective of the child denies the intention of state and legal acknowledgement of the child as a "human being." Enabling children's participation in the decision-making process at all levels requires consideration of when and how they should participate. Specifically, when children are participants, the following four procedures must be considered: formation of opinion by both adults and children, expression of both adult and child viewpoints, recognition of the child as a serious party in the decision-making process, and finally, informing the child about the outcome decision—a process in which the decision is justified, explained and, where necessary, contested.

In applying these procedures, it is necessary to identify mechanisms that consider the unique experiences and special needs of the individual child. Children differ with respect to language, experience, competence, and ability when they participate in social exchange. The responsibility for realizing a child perspective in decision-making situations and for ensuring a balance between participation and protection rests on states and adults. We have argued that in relationships and interaction between adult and child, it is vital to understand the child's point of view and engage with his or her expressions to secure "real" participation for children. Adults (citizens, parents, professionals) must ask themselves about their own motives and engagement in what the child says. Do they see children as participants or an audience, and do they meet children's expressions with a sincere interest in understanding the content of their meaning? We have proposed that children need to be recognized as participants. This applies whether adults are concerned with education and protection of children, or if they doubt children's abilities and skills.

It is our firm belief that there is a desire in modern society to realize a child's perspective and participation in the decision-making and policy arenas. The legal recognition illustrates this. However, there is an urgent need to take steps to develop this further. There needs to be in-depth discussion of these concepts, and we hope this paper makes a contribution to this end.

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