

Children's experience in evaluation: Making a difference

*Dr Sharon Milne
Ms Sue van Daatselaar*

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In Aotearoa (NZ) children are increasingly being included as participants in evaluations both as part of the widening understandings of whanau and family and as the focus of evaluations in their own right. This participation is long overdue and there is recognition of the important contribution children and young people can make. Their input is often essential to the integrity of the evaluation. However, while this growing understanding is to be commended the ethics and development of appropriate processes and methods for the inclusion of children and young people has in many instances lagged behind. As part of this roundtable a group of interested participants reflected on some of the practice issues arising out of a number of evaluations that have involved children as either the only participants or as part of wider evaluations. Issues such as appropriate methodologies, participatory processes, consents, timing, reciprocity and other ethical concerns relating to involvement of children were discussed.

The roundtable was introduced by the facilitators who identified some key contextual issues.

A. Convention on the Rights of the Child

Article 12

States that children who can form their own views should have the right to express those views and have them taken into account. However, the right to participate and freedom of expression are not equated with self-determination. Each child's views are their "reality", which must be considered, but also must be weighed against the best interests of the child in any decisions eventually taken.

Article 13

States that children have the right to freedom of expression, which includes seeking, receiving and giving information and ideas through speaking, writing or print, through art or any other media of child's choice.

Their participation is not mere formality; children must be fully informed and must understand the consequences and impact of expressing their opinions.

The corollary is that children are free to not participate, and should not be pressured. Participation is a right, not an obligation.

Article 14

Establishes that State parties must respect children's right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, as well as parents' or guardians' role in their exercising this right.

Research and monitoring and evaluation activities seeking to involve children must clearly acknowledge and ideally seek to build on these respective roles.

Article 15

Establishes that the States parties must recognize children's right to freedom of association and of peaceful assembly. As children's capacities evolve, they will increasingly participate and seek the representation of their perspectives in wider fora – at community, sub-national, national and global levels. Research and monitoring and evaluation activities can help this evolution along.

B. Some important issues for consideration when involving children in evaluation include:

- Accountability
- Degrees of participation
- Protection of children's best interests
- Informing children
- Informed consent
- Equity and non-discrimination
- Respect of children and their views
- Ownership
- Methodological limitations

The ladder of participation: (UNICEF Evaluation Office (2002). '*Children participating in research, monitoring and evaluation (M&E) – Ethics and your responsibilities as a manager*'. Evaluation Technical Notes No.1)

Non-Participation

- Tokenism – children are given a voice but have little choice about the subject, the style of communicating it or any say in organising the occasion
- Decoration – children are asked to take part in an event but are not given any explanation of the issues or the reason for their involvement
- Manipulation

Degrees of participation

- Child-initiated, shared decisions with adults
- Child-initiated and child directed projects
- Adult-initiated, sharing decisions with children
- Participation in which children are consulted and informed
- (Run by adults, but children understand the process and their opinions are treated seriously)
- Assigned but informed participation

C. Roundtable group discussion

i) Key question:

As part of the roundtable discussion, people organized themselves into groups of mixed experience in working with children. A pre-prepared exemplar was used to discuss issues that might arise as part of this particular evaluation. It was established that the term children would include children up to the age of 16 years (those over the age of 10 referred to as 'young people'). It was also agreed that age was not the only determinant of degree of participation, as stage of development might be more relevant factor. Using the exemplar, participants were asked to discuss in their group ways the research/evaluation could be re/ designed to increase active participation of children in the research/evaluation.

Key questions explored by these groups included:

- a) What processes could be established to create a more meaningful role for young people in establishing service evaluation objectives?
- b) What kinds of instruments could be used and how could they be developed in a way that provides the best measure of children's perspectives?

ii) Developing and effective model of evaluation for/with children – some key issues discussed in the time available included:

- Evaluators decide the capability of children to participate in the decision-making process? What are the criteria by which evaluators make this decision? Age is one factor that impacts on the level of children's participation. There are a number of positive examples of peer evaluation models, used for engaging marginalized young people in research and in utilizing young consultants as researchers. However these examples tend to illustrate participatory

models for young people or older children (13-16 yrs). The way in which evaluators encourage the participation of younger children involves consideration of the evaluation context and complexities involved in the topic of inquiry.

- Evaluators need to initially decide what groups of children should participate and following this, the appropriate method or vehicle for engaging children in the evaluation process. Evaluators need to make a conscious decision to minimize bias involved in making these decisions.
- There is a trade-off involved in informing children about the purpose of the evaluation, as children may respond to the evaluation questions according to what they might perceive as the possible consequences of their response. For example, children tailor their responses according to the impact they perceive their comments will have on parents or agency staff who assist them.
- These above issues highlight the importance of reflexive practice, as evaluators must be cognisant of the impact of interactions with children on the evaluation process.
- Evaluators need to consider methods of building trust with children, identifying the resources and processes needed to create a safe space for children and build a trusting relationship between the evaluator, the evaluation process and the child?
- Constraints to developing participatory processes can manifest during the human ethics application. Firstly, human ethics committees are commonly concerned with informed consent, where a parent or guardian consenting to the child's participation in the research and the child agrees to participate in the research. The consent of parents is the primary focus of consent, above consideration of the participation of the child in the evaluation process. Where the degree of participation desired is greater than 'assent to the research', evaluators need to consider the question of who is best person to approach the child to gain consent to ensure that consent process reflects the desired degree of participation. Secondly, Human Ethics applications require the evaluation to be responsive to 'duty of care' issues, i.e. demonstrate adequate protection of research respondents. For example, while children who have experienced trauma are vulnerable and there is a duty to protect children from experience harm in the evaluation process, children are conceptualized as objects rather than subjects to the evaluation.
- If evaluations are to involve children as 'participants' rather than 'subjects' of the evaluation, the evaluation approach needs to balance a number of different frameworks. Evaluators would need to talk to children at the design stage and discern what participation means from their perspective.
- Can the purpose of evaluation include the creation of a rehabilitative or positive experience for children who participate? If so, then who decides what a positive experience is for children participating in evaluation? What impact does the goal of creating a positive experience for children have on the objectivity of the evaluator? These questions relate to the debate on 'whose values are valued' that has occurred at the conference.
- How can evaluators remain engaged with the child within themselves, as a method of engaging in reflexive learning and developing awareness of children's issues in evaluation and research?

D. Conclusion

The workshop was an exploratory exercise to demonstrate the breadth and depth of issues in developing participatory processes for children and young people in evaluation. The roundtable provided an opportunity to develop networks with colleagues who are involved or have an interest in children and young people's involvement in research. Key issues identified in the roundtable will contribute to future work by the facilitators on strengthening evaluation practice where children and young people are participants. Further discussion with the facilitators is welcomed.

About the facilitators:

Sharon Milne lives in Waitakere Ranges in West Auckland, New Zealand and is an independent researcher and evaluator. She has a background in community development work and a focus on housing issues. She works mainly with children, families and social service agencies and programmes.

Ethical and effective processes for children as partners in evaluation and research are key areas of interest. She is currently working with children on an evaluation of a social service and on another project that explores the impact of accidental injuries on children and their families. Sharon can be contacted at: sharonm@ihug.co.nz

Sue van Daatselaar has recently adopted Melbourne as her home and she currently works for the Department of Human Services, managing the performance effectiveness review of human service programs. Her interest in developing quality processes for children and young people participating in evaluation and research has evolved from a practice base in social work and family therapy. Sue can be contacted at: Sue.vandaatselaar@dhs.vic.gov.au

E. References

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A couple of sites that have some material relating to children are,
Childrens Issues Centre, Otago University
Child Poverty Action Group www.cpag.org.nz