



Children & Young People's Strategic Partnership

Effective Parental Participation Guide 2019

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Purpose

These guidelines were developed as the result of a review of the previous “Parental Participation Strategy” document. This review took into account the findings of the Regional Parenting Survey 2018 in which 656 parents gave their views regarding family support services, barriers and difficulties, and how to overcome barriers and difficulties.

The purpose of this document is to improve outcomes for children and young people through effectively engaging with their parents. It seeks to do so by two methods:

- To encourage and empower parents to engage with CYPSP, including self-referrals;
- To encourage and empower organisations and service providers to engage with parents

These guidelines will provide an overview of parental participation, its importance and steps for implementing best practices. It will seek to guide organisations that work with parents as to the best methods to improve parental engagement and participation.

Background & Introduction

The Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership (CYPSP) is a multi-agency partnership that includes the leadership of key statutory agencies, community and voluntary organisations that have a responsibility for improving the lives of children and young people in Northern Ireland. The purpose of the CYPSP is to lead integrated planning and commissioning of support and services aimed at improving the lives of children and young people throughout Northern Ireland. The CYPSP's purpose is:

- To put in place integrated planning and commissioning across agencies and sectors, through the Children and Young People's Plan, aimed at improving wellbeing and the realisation of rights of children in Northern Ireland, in relation to the 6 outcomes as set out in Our Children and Young People, Our Pledge 10 year Strategy
- To ensure that the CYPSP will be informed by and inform individual organisational business, corporate and community plans.
- To ensure the participation and involvement of children, young people, families and communities in the integrated planning process.
- To ensure an effective and efficient, fully mandated structure which is representative of all key stakeholders is in place to carry out the work of the partnership.

The engagement and participation of children, young people and their parents is vital to this approach and the CYPSP is committed to ensuring that children, young people and parents participate as active partners at all stages and levels of their planning processes. Over the lifetime of the CYPSP a number of mechanisms for engaging children, young people and parents in planning processes have been developed and are on-going. Under the Parental Participation Project led by Parenting NI, parents are being supported to effectively participate. These Guidelines to Effective Parental Participation were developed and designed implementing evidence based models of practice.

Whilst there is no 'one size fits all' approach to parental participation this guide will help support members/groups to think openly about how they can effectively engage with parents to lead to effective parental participation.

What is Parental Participation?

Before it can be effectively established why it is important to encourage parental participation, it is important to outline what is meant in this document by “parents” and “participation”.

Definition of Parents

The Council of Europe, (2006, European Committee for Social Cohesion), recommendation 19 states that the term “parent” refers to persons with parental authority or responsibility. “The term parent not only refers to biological parents but also those who are involved in caring for and raising children”. In UK Law, the Education Act 1996 defines a Parent as “any person who is not a parent of his but who has parental responsibility for [a child], or who has care of [a child]”. This outlines that a “parent” does not necessarily have to be the biological mother or father of a child, but can be anyone with parental responsibility.

For the purposes of this Guide the term “parent” refers to anyone who plays a significant role in the upbringing of a child (i.e, mother, father, foster carer, adoptive parents, step-parents, grandparents, legal guardians and kinship carers).

Definition of Parental Participation

Parental participation is the involvement of parents in the decision making process. The ultimate aim of involving parents is to empower them to be more involved in the decision making process across all levels, with a focus on improving the quality of life for children and their families. Parents are their children’s primary carers, their first educators and first source of knowledge. Participation with them is fundamental to creating an effective relationship between parents and organisations seeking to engage with them.

Parental participation requires the engagement of all parents. Collaboration should be proactive rather than reactive, sensitive to the circumstances of all families, recognise the contributions parents can make, and aim to empower parents. Practitioners and planners should have a good understanding of parents’ needs, backgrounds, cultural norms and expectations. Therefore it is essential to respect parent’s rights and responsibilities to provide guidance for the child which is appropriate to their evolving capacities.

Tusla, the Irish Child and Family agency defines Parental participation in their own toolkit as:

“Parental Participation means providing opportunities for all parents to have a say in decisions affecting their lives and the lives of their children and encouraging positive participation in all aspects of their child’s care and education”.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is a human rights treaty which sets out the civil, political, economic, social, health and cultural rights of children.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) Article 5 states:

“Parties shall respect the responsibilities, rights and duties of parents or, where applicable, the members of the extended family or community as provided for by local custom, legal guardians or other persons legally responsible for the child, to provide, in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child, appropriate direction and guidance in the exercise by the child of the rights recognised in the present Convention.”

Effective parent participation is important to ensure when a parent and professional work together, they recognise each other’s knowledge and skills to make informed decisions about services that make the best use of resources. For parental participation to be effective and genuine parents need to have conversations with and work alongside professionals, in order to co design, develop and improve services.

Working with parents helps professionals to understand what needs to happen to develop services that meet families’ needs and also helps parents understand the complexity involved and the challenges faced by the professionals who have to bring about that change. Working together and sharing knowledge enables parents and professionals to find solutions that work.

Parenting NI believe, along with other key stakeholders, that in order to have effective partnership working with the best outcomes you need the following:

- Good Information
- Honest Consultation
- Effective Participation
- Co-production

“Engagement is often synonymous with involvement. Involvement of families in child welfare services is important, but real engagement goes beyond that. Families can be involved and compliant without being engaged.

Engagement is about motivating and empowering families to recognise their own needs, strengths, and resources and to take an active role in changing things for the better.

Engagement is what keeps families working in the long and sometimes slow process of positive change.”

(Steib, 2004)

Benefits of Parental Participation in Planning, Developing and Evaluating Services

The benefits of parental participation and engagement extend beyond an increase in service use. Parents can be involved but may not be actively engaged to effectively participate in the service design, development and evaluation. Parents can bring skills and knowledge in planning, developing and evaluating services, which will ensure they are all needs led.

The benefits of involving parents in the planning, developing and evaluation of services include:

- People who feel they have had their say are more likely to be positive about proposals
- Fresh ideas may emerge
- People are far more likely to be part of a long-term solution if they have some ownership of the early ideas
- Builds trust and confidence in the partnership
- If parents are involved in planning and developing services as well as partnership working with service planners/providers the services are more likely to be relevant, better used and more responsive to changing need (Welsh Guide)
- Working with parents will offer a more consistent approach when delivering and evaluating services

Theoretical Models

There are many ways parents can effectively participate in the planning and decision-making process. However, if the method of participation does not allow their voices to shape the decisions that affect them, then parents are not meaningfully involved and therefore will not be engaged. Participation has many meanings to many people. The opportunities for participation are there to be grasped but only if all those involved have a common understanding and share a common language.

There are a number of theoretical models that are used by organisations seeking to improve parental participation. Some of the national and international models in use are:

- The Wilcox Model
- The Welsh Model (Wilcox Adapted)
- The Scottish Model (Empowering Communities Act)
- TUSLA Model
- Spectrum of Public Participation Model

Each of these models are based around improving the participation of members of the community. They are not all specifically aimed at parental participation, but can be applied to this section of society with relatively minor amendment. There are a number of similarities across models – such as the use of staged processes. In the Wilcox Model these are “stances”, in the Scottish model they are “rungs” and in the Spectrum of Public Participation Model they are “stages”. This is because most theoretical models agree that participation is a process as opposed to an event, and that trust, information and empowerment are central planks of successful parental participation.

As part of the review of the Parental Participation Strategy and the formulation of this guide, Parenting NI conducted a review of theoretical models. The result of this review was the continued adoption of the Wilcox Model. The rationale for this decision was that the Wilcox model had a strong, simple and non-institutional structure. However, it was acknowledged that aspects of other models could be adapted into the process recommended in this guide.

The Wilcox Model

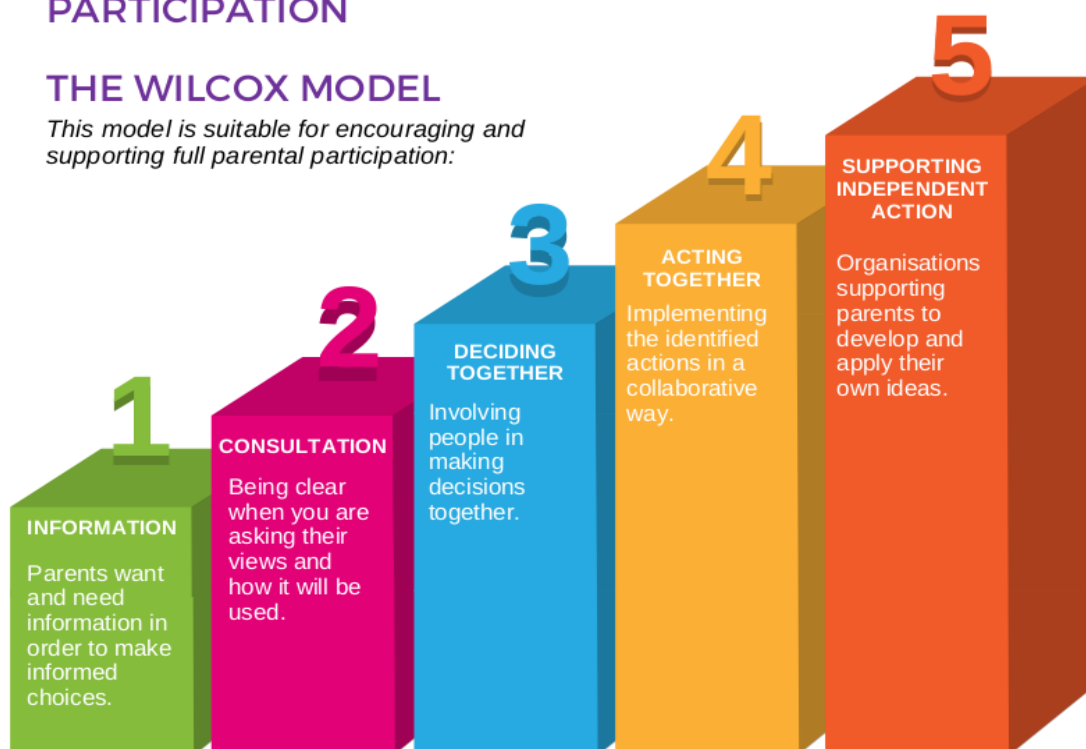
To fully understand and effectively embed effective parental participation in practices, David Wilcox set out a theoretical framework.

David Wilcox's 'The Guide of Effective Participation' provides both a theoretical framework for common understanding and practical advice on tools and techniques that can be used to identify blocks and find solutions. According to Wilcox's theoretical framework, the central most important element in the participation process is the individual or group who controls the decision-making process. His model is based on the assumption that organisations/planners decide to initiate a practice of involving others in their decision-making process, rather than taking a grassroots approach where citizens attempt to affect an organisation without being invited. Therefore, the organisation decides how the process will occur and the level of control it will give to its participants. His participation process is broken into five stances — information, consultation, deciding together, acting together and supporting independent action—and takes into account that participation practices occur over time.

FIVE STEPS TO PARENTAL PARTICIPATION

THE WILCOX MODEL

This model is suitable for encouraging and supporting full parental participation:





Level One – Information

Parents want and need information in order to make informed choices about services, planning etc, such as:

- Information about local services. This can be written, verbal or through information sessions
- Information about planned developments which can be the starting point for more active involvement

This can be challenging as information needs to reach a wide range of parents, taking into account issues such as language, literacy, gender, disability and accessibility.

There needs to be a variety of methods of sharing information such as:

- Directories/websites (which have to be kept up-to-date)
- Social media
- Word of mouth
- Local newspapers/newsletters/radio/TV
- Information days
- Posters/flyers/leaflets
- Engaging with parents directly accessing services

Effective use of parent friendly language is important to reduce the challenges. All sources of information to be communicated should be user-friendly and be considerate of the challenges parents' face, as outlined above.



Level Two - Consultation

In the Wilcox model there is a difference between consultation (where parents are asked their views on a limited range of options) and deciding together (where parents can suggest alternatives and be part of the decision-making process).

Before consulting with parents a clear objective needs to be established, which considers whether parents have an influence or not. It is also important that prior to the commencement of the

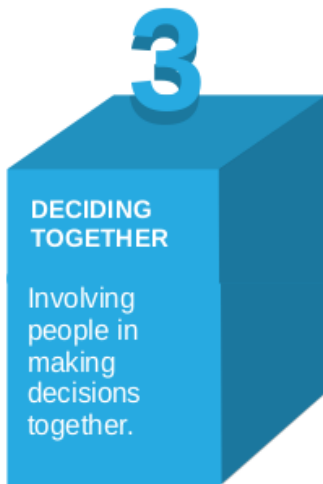
consultation that information from recent research or surveys are considered to ensure there is no duplication. Parents are willing to be consulted but they want the information they provide to be used.

There are a variety of consultation methods, each with its own benefits and limitations. During the planning process for each consultation it is important that professionals listen to what the needs of the parents are to plan the consultation to meet these needs, as some parents may respond more effectively to one kind of consultation than another, therefore it is advisable to use a range of methods and aim to reach a wider range of parents.

Methods of consultation can include:

- Focus groups
- Online surveys
- Questionnaires
- Face to face surveys

Following completion of the consultation process and production of the outcomes report, a clear understanding by the professional about how the information will be used and how to provide feedback to the parents.



Level Three - Deciding Together

An important element of parental participation is asking parents for their views but in order to take it a step further; parents should be involved in decision making. This should be based on views collated from parents with the knowledge and experience of other professionals. This can be done at two levels:

- Deciding together at a service level where parents can be members of Committees, panels, etc;
- Deciding together at the Partnership level where parents can develop strategies and plans; be on steering groups designing new services and be members of strategic partnerships.



Level Four - Acting Together

There are numerous ways in which parents can take a more active role in developing and managing services. Areas in which can work collaboratively with professionals could include:

- Recruitment and selection of staff by ensuring parental participation is embedded in process
 - Production of information and educational materials by providing an alternative view point from an end users perspective, ensuring materials are parent friendly
 - Being involved in staff training by providing the opportunities for professionals to benefit from their experiences
- Co-run activities and offer their time as parent mentors/facilitators as parents are usually willing to help organise activities they want for themselves. Some parents who have benefitted from a service will want to give something back. This should also enhance the experience for other parents who are attending.



Level Five Supporting Independent Action

Level 5 is parent run services where parents can be supported and/or funded to run their own services/networks/forums. There are many different terms to describe the meeting of parents:

- Parent councils
- Parent panels
- Parent forums
- Parent federations

Their purpose will vary but the principle is usually the same – to support and inform members.

In order to participate fully, especially in strategic meetings, parents may need support through:

- Confidence-building
- Training
- Preparing for meetings
- Guidance

In addition more practical support may also be required to include:

- Help with childcare
- Assistance with transport
- Other expenses

Professionals should consider:

- Materials to be user friendly and considerate of literacy levels
- Reduction in the use of jargon and abbreviations
- Verbal information to be considerate of literacy levels
- Times to be convenient
- Provide sufficient time for parents to participate
- Funding arrangements to provide effective support

Challenges in Parental Participation

Whilst there are numerous benefits to effective parental participation, there can also be some barriers and challenges. These can be unique to an individual parent, however they need to be taken into consideration by practitioners and organisations. Parents stated in the CYPSP Regional Parenting Survey 2019 the following challenges and barriers to participation:

- Fear of judgement
- Lack of Information
- Not within the service area
- Lack of childcare
- No access to transport
- Time of appointments
- Waiting lists
- Rural with no access to services
- Don't qualify due to income level
- Concern over Social Services getting involved if they couldn't cope
- Language
- Change in key person to contact, no consistency
- Time
- Support to contribute
- Lack of feedback

These challenges highlight the need for professionals to be skilled and experienced with the knowledge of engaging with parents and working sensitively with diverse groups and for organisations to support professionals. Additionally, they should be supported to develop their skills and knowledge on appropriately engaging and communicating with parents if there is a safeguarding issue. In addition, the importance of signposting parents who require support and assistance should be highlighted.

Challenges for Professionals

The benefits of parental participation for professionals is significant, however there are also challenges which need to be acknowledged. Following engagement with practitioners through Parenting NI's Engaging Effectively with Parents training, they stated the following challenges:

- Lack of time to effectively engage with parents
- Limited capacity due to workload
- Lack of resources in parent friendly language
- Activities provided in the past didn't get good responses
- Apathy – need to engage on everything
- Don't have direct access to parents – rely on others
- Don't have training for all staff within the organisation in engaging effectively with parents
- Geographical spread
- Intimidated by very vocal parents
- Parents using engagements to sabotage work/plans – direct their anger at planners

Professionals need supported to actively engage and encourage effective parental participation. They need support from within their organisation and the tools to implement their work.

Overcoming the Challenges

Many of these challenges can be overcome with careful planning, collaborative working practices, good preparation, clear communication skills and support provided through training. The following steps may help in addressing the challenges to participation, and demonstrate the value of parental involvement:

- **Commitment to participation**
Develop commitment to value the benefits of effective parental participation by encouraging a culture of participation within organisations
- **Decide who will lead**
Develop a steering group to drive participation, with an identified lead
- **Support for professionals**
Provide training and effective resources for professionals to enable them to engage effectively with parents and ensure they understand the value of parental participation
- **Map existing parents groups and services**
Develop links with existing parent groups and services to enhance participation from wider sources and share methods of best practice in participation
- **Support parents to develop participation principles and standards**
Develop guidelines to support the principles of effective participation, so parents know what is expected and there is demonstrated organisational commitment to participation
- **Build the capacity of parents to participate**
Work in collaboration with parents who have a range of needs to develop and strengthen their skills, knowledge and abilities to effectively participate in the process.
- **Evaluate parental participation**
Work in collaboration with parents and organisations to evaluate the outcomes of participation exercises, to ensure parents receive effective feedback to feel valued in the process, through the implementation of the Wilcox Model.

It is imperative to involve parents across all levels; services that are developed in partnership with parents have the potential to be more relevant, better used and more responsive to changing needs. Parents who are well engaged with a service, and feel they have benefitted from it may offer help to others, creating benefits in the community.

Parental Participation Tools & Strategies

To enable professionals to effectively implement the Wilcox model of parental participation they will need supported through the provision of tools and strategies. These range from relatively low cost information dissemination exercises to complex co-designing of service delivery. Which elements will work best depends on a series of factors, in particular where on the Wilcox Model an organisation currently sits.

1. Community Profiling – Understanding the community that parents and families reside in, their needs and challenges is essential to enable Stage 1 of the Wilcox model to be implemented effectively. The aim of Community Profiling is to allow an organisation to develop an understanding of the parents and families they are seeking to engage with. This step is particularly important when an organisation is seeking to engage parents in an area or group that they have not previously worked with. Developing a community profile requires a 6 step process:

- **Scoping** – determining the purpose and range of the proposed project;
- **Development a research plan** – decide who will do the research, and what methods they will use, as well as costs;
- **Endorsement** – identifying who needs to support the development of this profile, who are the gatekeepers and facilitators;
- **Research Activity** – the active prosecution of research, using different approaches
- **Presentation** – the profile should be shared not only with the project team, but also with the community who has been profiled;
- **Production** – this is the final step. Once the profile is complete, who will take ownership, and when/how will the profile be reviewed?

Only once a project has a strong understanding of the community with which it seeks to engage – in this case, parents – can sufficient progress be made.

2. Communication with Parents – Once a clear understanding of the needs of parents, their family and the community has been established developing an information dissemination plan is required. Materials and activities designed should be parent friendly taking into consideration language, additional needs and literacy levels. There are mixed methods of communicating with parents, which should follow Stage 2 of the Wilcox Model ensuring parents are consulted with to inform the design and content, these include:

- Local social media avenues
- Posters
- Information Stands
- Exhibits
- Displays relevant venues
- Information events

The project team who design the materials and events need to be clear as to the aims and objectives of the activity. This ensures that the communication, intervention and message is clearly understood by parents in a non-judgemental way. However, to be most effective there should also be opportunities for the community to give feedback or indicate a willingness to engage.

If the service or organisation already has reasonable levels of engagement from parents, they should consider implementing Stage 3 of the Wilcox Model, which is deciding together in the design, creation of materials and support during events. Organisations at this stage need to break down the barriers for parents ensuring they are fully supported to activity participate.

3. Research Methods – There are many methods to engage and consult with parents to seek their views and involve them in the process. The methods decided need to be carefully considered to ensure the research outcomes take account of any key ethical considerations.

Focus Groups - This tool is an excellent method of exploring issues as well as co-designing further activities. It does require a reasonable level of engagement in order to both have enough participants and for those participants to feel comfortable in sharing. Thus, focus groups may not be suitable for very early stage participation exercises. The professional facilitating the focus group must ensure ethical considerations are accounted for, which are:

- Ensuring quality and integrity of the research
- Seeking informed consent
- Respecting the confidentiality and anonymity of the participating parents
- Ensuring parents are participating voluntarily
- Providing the parent with the right to withdraw

- Avoiding harm to parents, ensuring there is an avenue of support for them
- Showing that the research is independent and impartial

There are also a number of other factors to consider when establishing focus groups. First is size. Depending on the capacity of the project, you may be able to hold several focus groups of reasonable size (6-10). Second, effort must be made to ensure that the groups are representative of the community at large. A community profile will help to ensure that one group or section is not under or overrepresented.

In addition to this, a suitable, accessible venue which supports the equality of parents. There may also be associated costs for refreshments as well as supporting the parent with travel and childcare expenses. The purpose of the focus group should be clearly outlined in advance. A focus group facilitation pack should be designed with a clear structure, aims and objectives defined and questions should be focused to meet the aims and objectives. Parents should be supported to explore the question responses in more detail, to enable richer feedback. Facilitators should take care to ensure that all members of the group are able to contribute, and careful feedback notes should be taken. The responses from the group should be collated and a report produced which will then support further action.

Surveys – Surveys are an excellent research tool for seeking and building engagement of parents and the community in larger numbers. Like displays and exhibits, surveys are a complex and flexible device to get a response from those who projects are seeking to engage. The exact format of your survey will depend on the projects existing levels of engagement. High levels of engagement will mean that surveys can be done in a wider range of ways;

- **Online** – using established online survey tools, views of parents can be sought from a larger demographic. Online tools are an effective method of seeking parent's views through straight forward questions with predefined response choices and providing a free space for parents to express their views in their own words. The main advantage of this method is that larger number of parents over a wider geographical area can anonymously provide their views without fear of judgement or identification

- **Questionnaire** – questionnaires are a method to seeking views of parents using a pre-scripted questions. Parents independently complete the questionnaire with little support from the professional, unless required. The main advantage of this method is that it is more personal as the professional has the opportunity to personally explain the aim and purpose while providing the parent with a safe space to complete the questionnaire. This method also has flexibility as the professional can take the questionnaire to the parents, which is advantageous when trying to engage with hard to research parents.
- **One to One survey** – the survey is developed similar to the questionnaire however the professional assists the parent to complete by personally explaining each element of the survey to the parent and recording their views accurately. The main advantage is that the parents is fully supported especially if they have additional or literacy needs. Also the professional can draw out responses and record accurately more detail through discussion with the parents.

The method implemented will depend on the scale and scope of the project. Some methods are expensive and can take more time (focus groups and one to one survey), whereas others (online surveys) are lower cost and less time consuming. Projects should consider what information they are seeking, and what they intend to do with it. It is unproductive to get parents to voice an opinion if they then do not see that being actioned upon.

When designing a survey, no matter what method of implementation is used, care should be taken to ensure that questions are short and designed to give direct answers. A test run with a smaller trial group of parents can help to identify issues, like understanding of questions, language and engagement. When promoting the survey, particularly online, projects should be careful to certify that responses are from relevant individuals. This can be done in a number of ways, for example a “screening” question about where they live, or if they are indeed parents.

In order for each of the 5 levels in the Wilcox model to be successful the CYPSP and all member organisations need to be committed to engaging parents in meaningful ways and adhering to an agreed set of standards when working with parents.

7 Point Guide

To support organisations and services to increase parental participation this 7 Point Guide was developed in collaboration with parents. This Guide has been adapted from the Cardiff Parents Charter. Parents stated:

- terminologies should have clear definitions
- parental participation should be included in decision making of individual cases as well as service development

7 POINT GUIDE AS DEVELOPED BY PARENTS

- 1 Parents should be valued and shown respect.
- 2 All agencies that provide services to families should pro-actively seek feedback from parents about services that affect them or their children.
- 3 Agencies should encourage parental participation at all levels from providing information of new plans about developing services to enabling parents to put their own ideas into action.
- 4 Let parents know how they can get involved and what they can influence – information about participation should be jargon free and easy to access.
- 5 Let parents know how to challenge decisions, and who can help them to give their views, if they want help
- 6 Offer parents practical support (such as expenses, childcare, training) to ensure everyone has opportunity to participate fully
- 7 Everyone should have an equal right to participate including parents that are 'seldom seen, seldom heard'

This approach mirrors the Northern Ireland Executive's approach to improving participation and decision making. In particular, the primacy of co-production (whereby organisations and institutions co-design services with users) is expressed by the former Health Minister Michelle O'Neill MLA in her "Health and Wellbeing 2026: Delivering Together" strategy.

She states that:

"I am making a commitment that the design of new and reconfigured services will be taken forward on the basis of co-production and co-design".

Parental Participation 7 Point Guide

1. Parents should be valued and shown respect

Parents who are involved with services may need additional support may not want to get involved beyond this. However, some parents may feel able to get more involved. These parents should be supported and encouraged to participate. Their needs should be considered and respected. Equally, parents should be able to withdraw from participation whenever they feel that they need to. It is important for organisations to continuously encourage a range of parents to participate.

2. All agencies that provide services to families should pro-actively seek feedback from parents about services that affect them or their children

People who work with parents / children /families need to be approachable. Parents need to feel that they are being listened to. Having systems which encourage honest feedback can reduce complaints as issues can be dealt with and resolved quickly. Services which are responsive to the needs of parents and children ask for feedback from their service users frequently. Depending on the type of service, this could be done through mixed methods. When parents have provided information or views they need to be advised how it will be used.

3. Agencies should encourage parental participation at all levels from providing information on new plans about developing services to enabling parents to put their own ideas into action

Parents should be encouraged to participate more widely at all levels of service planning, provision and evaluation through consultation, involvement on committees/boards and running of services. There should also be ways for parents to get involved including developing policies, action plans or strategies around family support, health, disability, education and childcare. The process implemented by organisations to recruit parent representation should be fair and clear. Parents can be a valuable resource for organisations not just users of services.

4. Let parents know how they can get involved and what they can influence – information about participation should be jargon free and easy to access

Parents need many different forms of information, presented using a variety of methods to enable full participation. Parents should be consulted with using a variety of methods adapted to suit their needs. Parents can help to design leaflets, posters, etc; and can help inform and support other parents. Written information should be clear and easy to understand using concise language. Information should be given pro-actively, rather than waiting for parents to ask or expecting them to pick up leaflets. Parents have lots of useful ideas and local knowledge. However, they can become disillusioned with the process of participation if it is not clear. Parents need to receive feedback about decisions being made following consultation. Parents can feel let down when they don't see signs of progress even though it can take a long time to implement change. So, effective ongoing communication is essential.

5. Let parents know how to challenge decisions, and who can help them to give their views, if they want help

Parents sometimes need help to make their views known, particularly if they are unhappy with a decision or want to make a complaint. They should be advised who to approach with their complaint or challenge, and how to find someone to help them to make their views known (if they have difficulty in doing so themselves). Ideally, parents want to give feedback informally, to familiar people. Organisations should have clear procedures for formal and informal feedback.

6. Offer parents practical support (such as expenses, childcare, training) to ensure everyone has opportunity to participate fully

In order to participate fully, especially in strategic meetings, parents may need confidence-building, training and preparation for meetings. Meetings which are user friendly should be held at times which are convenient for parents. An offer of help with childcare, transport and other expenses should be considered. Written materials should be parent friendly with little use jargon or abbreviations. It should also be conscious of parental literacy issues. Verbal information provided should be considerate of parents with low levels of literacy skills.

7. Everyone should have an equal right to participate including parents that are 'seldom seen, seldom heard'

Professionals should take into account different needs related to gender, age, ethnicity, culture, language, religion, sexual orientation, physical and learning impairments, mobility, personal finances and caring responsibilities. This is an area where resource issues can become a problem for groups.

Supporting Marginalised Parents (Equality and Diversity)

Everyone should have an equal right to participate including parents that are “seldom seen, seldom heard”. Consideration needs to be given to gender, age, ethnicity, culture, language, religion, sexual orientation, physical and learning impairments, mobility, personal finances and caring responsibilities. It is essential that all layers of the CYPSP seek the involvement of a broad cross section of parents. The audit of Locality Planning Groups and Regional sub-groups identified that some groups of parents were more difficult to engage than others. There may be a number of reasons why this is the case with particular parents but there are some parents who need additional support to participate. Examples may include parents:

- Living in poverty
- Whose children are in the care system
- (or their children) who are experiencing mental health problems or substance misuse
- Who are suffering from domestic abuse
- Who are living in refuges

Organisations working with these families have an important role in making sure views of parents and young people in these groups are heard by planners. CYPSP representatives should link in with social workers, health visitors, drug and alcohol teams, community / voluntary organisations, etc. when developing opportunities for parents to contribute to service planning. In particular, they should engage in effective consultation with these groups to ensure service planning is inclusive of all sections of the community.

Other key groups of parents who may need additional support to participate include:

Fathers and Male Carers

It is important to support fathers as well as mothers in their parenting role. Fathers play a significant role in improving outcomes for children. The culture of our society needs to embrace this role as vitally important. Service provision should be inclusive of them. When working with fathers, like working with mothers, there is a need to be honest about what you are offering. Stressing the benefits to their children, use language/images that are male friendly, use word of mouth to recruit and work individually before inviting fathers to a group. Valuing fathers does not lessen the importance of mothers. Children benefit from actively engaged mothers and fathers.

Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) Parents

BME parents can be under-represented and can face many barriers in the participation process. BME parents may feel excluded and services may not be designed to accommodate their needs. Language and cultural differences can make the participation process a challenge so it is important to find ways of involving and engaging BME parents.

Parents of Children with a Disability, Life-limiting Illness or Additional Needs

Some parents of children with additional needs may experience more concerns and can face many challenges, i.e. dealing with range of professionals, possibly having to fight for services, difficulties securing a school place that they want for their child, etc. Many of these parents develop strengths through advocating for their children. These can help to make them effective members of strategic groups. They can draw on their own experiences as they are aware of the challenges families face and will want to improve services for their own and other children.

Parents with a disability, life-limiting illness or additional needs

Some parents with additional needs may find participation difficult if communication and/or access needs are not met. Steps need to be taken to ensure they know what services are available and to support their involvement in participation.

Lone parents

Some lone parents may face additional issues in bringing up their families, such as lower incomes and childcare issues. It is important to give lone parents a voice in policy and planning as many services will have lone parents as service users.

Grandparents

Grandparents can provide practical, emotional and financial support to their children and grandchildren, which could include childcare. However, sometimes grandparents can provide kinship care for their grandchildren when they are separated from their parents or when their parents are unable to provide that care and support. It is important to support this group and for their voice to be heard.

Parents of Looked After Children

Parents of children who are 'looked after' could experience grief and anger and may not wish to work co-operatively with statutory agencies; however, they still need support and opportunities to have their views known. Maintaining a link is key for both the child/young person and the parent (only if it is in the best interest of the child), they will have valuable experience to contribute to reviews of services and service development plans.

References

- Wilcox D. (1994) Guide to effective participation, Partnership books, www.jrf.org.uk
- Welsh Assembly Government (2006) Parent Participation - Practice Guide for Children and Young People's Partnerships
- Charter for Parent Participation in Services for Children and Families in Cardiff
- Baseline Audit of Parental Participation in CYPSP process (2015)
- Phase two Developing a Guide to Parental Involvement (2015)
- Dad's Direct, The Dad Factor in NI How Fathers Improve Child Outcomes (2015)
- Department of Health (2016). *Health and Wellbeing 2026: Delivering Together*. p.20.

About CYPSP

The Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership (CYPSP) brings together a range of agencies, including voluntary and community sector organisations, that aim to improve the lives of children and young people in Northern Ireland. CYPSP emphasises a rights-based approach to its work ensuring planning services that uphold children's rights and encouraging children, young people and their parents to participate in the process.

The CYPSP works at four different levels and membership consists of the leadership of all the key agencies:

- Partnership
- 5 Outcomes Groups
- 8 Regional Subgroups
- 27 Locality Planning Groups
- 29 Hubs

The CYPSP has four core themes: communicating with government, early intervention, resource optimisation and the integration of planning which all contribute to the following factors contributing to well-being:



About Parenting NI

Initially established in 1979 as Parents Advice Centre, Parenting NI (PNI) has been supporting parents across Northern Ireland for 40 years. During this time, the organisation has acquired a reputation for providing high quality services to meet the needs of parents, their families and practitioners. PNI believes that effective parenting is the cornerstone of strong families and that parents should be supported to provide children and young people with a positive upbringing. The organisation has proactively sought to identify emerging needs of parents by developing and expanding services to meet those needs.

Vision

Our vision of the future is one where parenting is highly valued.

Mission

Our mission is to provide a range of accessible services and support to meet the needs of those in a parenting role.

Values

- **Professional** – We will work together as a team to apply principles of excellence, compassion, communication and accountability, and by working together with other professionals aim to achieve optimal support for all parents
- **Accessible** – We will strive to deliver responsive and accessible parenting support and services across the region
- **Respectful** – We will show consideration for one another and recognise and respect each other's differences
- **Equality** – We will ensure all parents have an equal right to access our support and services.
- **Needs Led** – Every parent has the right to a voice. We will listen to what parents need and develop services to meet those needs.
- **Trustworthy** – We will be open and honest in everything we do.

PNI provides a range of services regionally to support parents in their parenting role which includes Family Support Services, Parenting Programmes & Workshops, Parental Participation, Employee Wellbeing Service, and Practitioner Training.

Developed by



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