

# Parental Participation in Child Protection and Welfare: The Irish Context

Marie Gibbons

Nuala Connolly

Declan Quinn

# Overview

- ▶ Parental Participation in the Literature
  - ▶ Understanding parental participation & what parents want
  - ▶ Barriers to participation
  - ▶ Enabling meaningful participatory practice with parents
- ▶ An Irish Study
  - ▶ Qualitative study with 14 parents from Galway & Roscommon
  - ▶ Parents' experiences of the CPC system explored
  - ▶ Conclusions and implications for practice

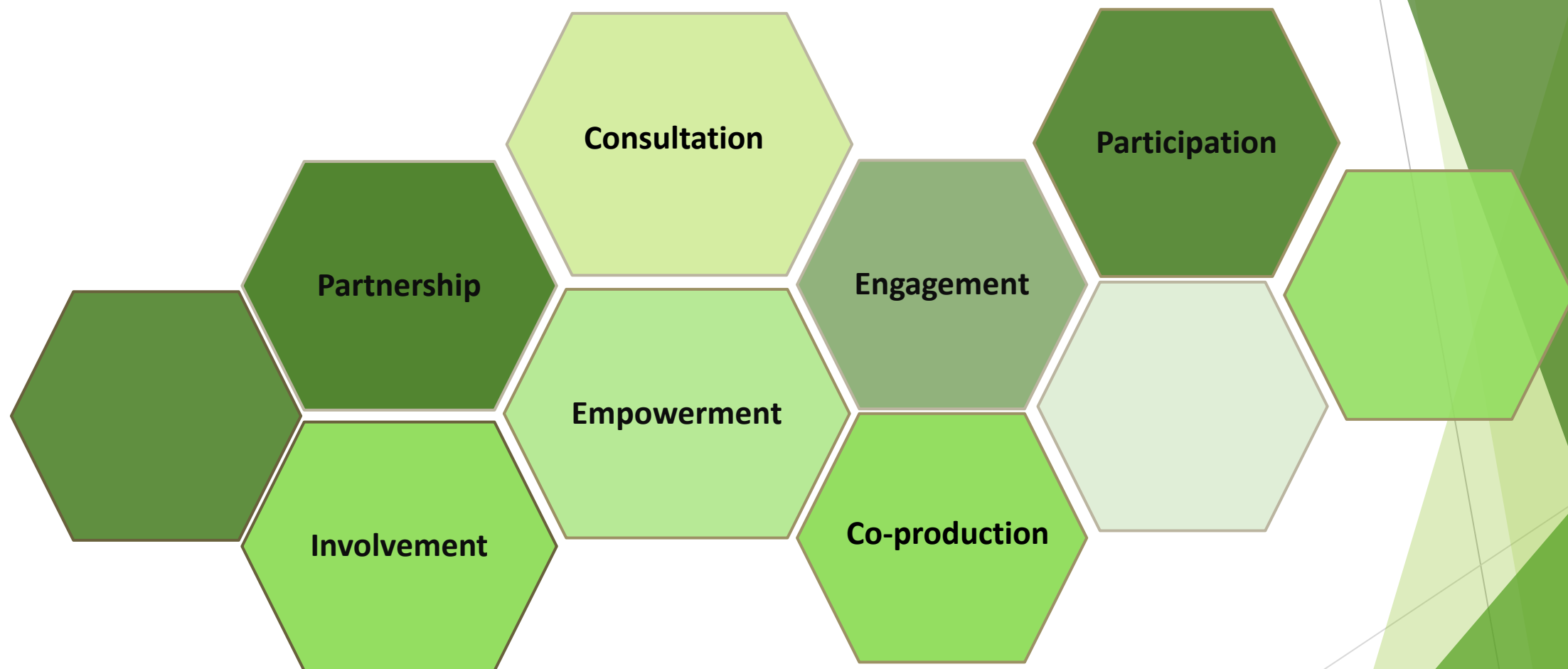
# Why Parental Participation?

- ▶ Recognising parents as having a right to participate in decisions affecting their families (Healy et al., 2011)
- ▶ An effective means of reducing barriers to engagement and advancing social inclusion
- ▶ Shift from seeing people as passive beneficiaries of welfare to “emphasise the capacity of service users to be creative and reflexive and active agents in shaping their lives” (Katz et al., 2007)
- ▶ A more ethical and more effective way of proceeding
- ▶ Relationship as the “communication bridge”, with empathy and self-knowledge as central tools (Biestek, 1957; Trevithick, 2003)
- ▶ Translating the ideals of participation into reality can be challenging (Corby et al., 2006)

# Policy Context

- ▶ 2007 “Your Service, Your Say” Comments, Compliments and Complaints Policy
- ▶ National Strategy for Service User Involvement in the Irish Health Service 2008-2013
  - ▶ service users “centrally involved in their own care” through “open dialogue, trust and mutual respect”
- ▶ Supporting parents is a key transformational goal of Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures 2014-2020
  - ▶ High Level Policy Statement on Parenting Support “partnership with children and their parents”
- ▶ Child and Family Agency Act 2013 - culture of participation embedded in culture and operations
  - ▶ Quality Assurance Framework 2014
  - ▶ Meitheal privileges the voice of the parent, carer and child
  - ▶ Parenting Support Strategy
  - ▶ Parental Participation Toolkit

# Defining Parental Participation



**TÚSLA**

An Gníomhaireacht um  
Leanaí agus an Teaghlach  
Child and Family Agency



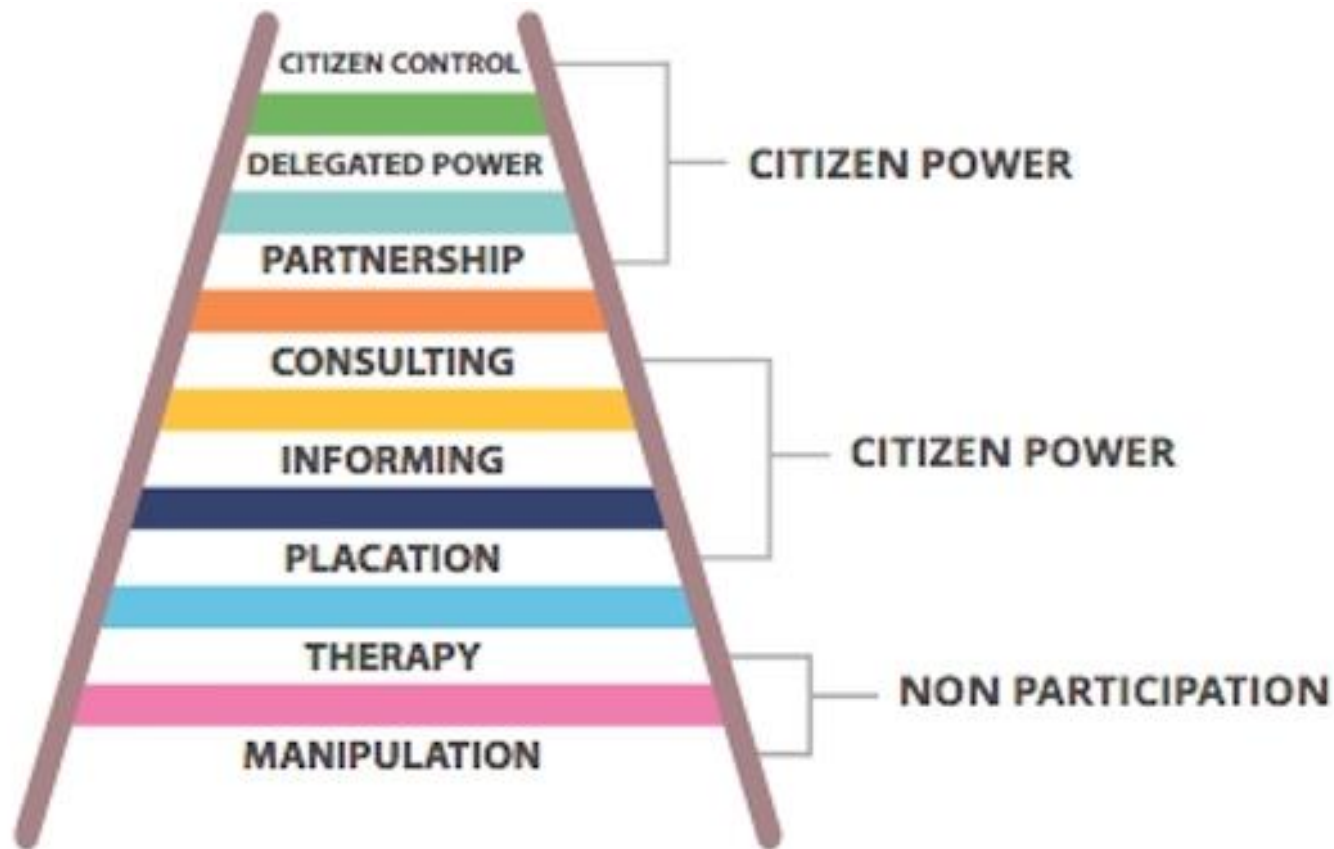
United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization



UNESCO Chair in  
Children, Youth and Civic Engagem  
Ireland  
CHILD AND FAMILY RESEARCH CENT



CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE'S SERVICES COMMITTEES



Source: Arnstein, Sherry R. "A Ladder of Citizen Participation," Journal of the American Institute of Planners, Vol. 35, No. 4, July 1969, pp. 216-224.

# Barriers to Participation

Parents	Services
Perceived Stigma	Difficulty engaging service users, hard to reach parents
Unfamiliarity with process, mechanisms, settings	Training and tools
Unfamiliarity with language, terminology	Resource limitations
Feeling outnumbered	False level of quality- principles versus practice
Feeling powerless, silenced	Power asymmetry in statutory settings
Wanting to appear cooperative	Activating parents to realise goals set

# Literature: What do Parents Want?

Being **treated with respect** where time is taken to listen to their views

**Having a voice** is linked to satisfaction with decision-making

Parents are more likely to exercise their voices when their opinions are asked for, and where there is **willing and supportive communication**

Practitioner working in a participatory way, **relationship building**

Experiencing **teamwork and flexibility** on the part of services



An Gníomhaireacht um  
Leanaí agus an Teaghlach  
Child and Family Agency



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization



UNESCO Chair in  
Children, Youth and Civic Engagemen  
Ireland



CHILD AND FAMILY RESEARCH CENTRE



CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE'S SERVICES COMMITTEES



# Literature: What works for Services?

ensuring the **physical environment** is appropriate

ensuring that the **purpose of any meeting is clear** and that all necessary information is shared in advance

actively encouraging the parent voice by **seeking parents' views**

**follow-up** on agreed plans or decisions for parents

being aware of the importance of relationships and **interpersonal dynamics**: developing trust, having authority, handling negotiations, attitudes

ensuring services are culturally sensitive and the **needs of all parents**

# The experiences of parents in the Child Protection Conference System in Galway and Roscommon

- ▶ Commissioned by Area Manager as a CYPSC initiative
- ▶ Approval granted by Tusla Research Office
- ▶ 14 parents from Galway and Roscommon whose children have been in the CPC system interviewed over two month period.
- ▶ Data analysed using thematic analysis.
- ▶ Statistical information and observations of independent chair of CPCs included.
- ▶ Report submitted to Area Manager in June 2016

# The Child Protection Conference (CPC)

- ▶ An interagency and inter-professional meeting, convened by the Area Manager following a request from the TUSLA Social Work Service.

## The key purpose of a Child Protection Conference is:

- ▶ to establish whether the child has suffered or is at risk of suffering significant harm and if so to formulate a Child Protection Plan;

The child's parents/carers and the child should be included at the meeting unless doing so would not be in the child's best interests (TUSLA 2015).

## The Child Protection Plan (CPP)

- ▶ An interagency plan formulated and agreed at a Child Protection Conference where the Conference confirms that the child is at ongoing risk of significant harm.
- ▶ It outlines the actions that professionals and agencies directly involved with the family need to take in order to ensure the child's continued protection and well-being.

## Child Protection Notification System (CPNS)

- ▶ A TUSLA Children and Family Services' record of every child who is the subject of a Child Protection Plan; the CPNS is a securely held national list.
- ▶ The decision to place a child on the CPNS is made at a Child Protection Conference.
- ▶ If it is decided at a Review Conference that the risk has been addressed and the child is no longer at ongoing risk of significant harm then they will be delisted and amended to inactive.
- ▶ A child's name is removed completely from the list once they turn 18 years of age



An Ghníomhaireacht um  
Leanaí agus an Teaghlach  
Child and Family Agency



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization



UNESCO Chair in  
Children, Youth and Civic Engagement  
Ireland  
CHILD AND FAMILY RESEARCH CENTRE



# Preparation for the Conference



- ▶ The majority of parents reported not having all the information they needed on the purpose and conduct of the conference and most parents report not having access to written copies of any professional reports in advance of the meeting
- ▶ The parents who reported being more prepared by their social worker and having access to professional reports prior to the conference were consistently more positive in their description of their engagement and participation during the process.

*“Before....it wasn’t mentioned at all that this was a child protection conference, it was just a ‘meeting’. They were calling it a meeting. It sort of dawned on me during the meeting what it was”*

*“I didn’t know how it would be run though, with the minute taker and that. It wasn’t until we got there that we realised that”*

# Feelings and Emotions (prior to CPC)

- ▶ In the lead up to the conference, parents report experiencing a range of distressing emotional responses such as anxiety, worry, sadness, panic, anger, or fear:

*“I was freaking out and I was having panic attacks a few days before the meeting”*

*“She was in an awful state, a terrible state like, and I was really, really angry”*

- ▶ Most of parents in this study reported they feared that a likely implication or outcome of the conference was that their children would be removed from their care;

*“What I thought about it was that the kids would be taken off us,...that was my biggest fear”*

*“When you hear ‘child protection’ you think ‘Christ, there goes the kids’ and you have that mind set”*

# Fairness as a Guiding Principle

*“The social worker called me into one of the rooms.... chairs all lined up around the walls and she handed me this form.... I’d say there must have been at least 10 pages in it- that was the report. There was no one I could ask about it, I was just basically told ‘this is the report, the meeting is in 10 minutes and this is what we’re going to be talking about’”*





# Advocacy

- ▶ Parents want to have the opportunity to nominate a person to attend with them, to support their engagement with the process.

*“I think there should be a family member or friend there who knows the family well, they should be top priority. For future reference, families might be able to suggest who should be there, they might be able to add people who could help”*

- ▶ National guidelines support the use of advocates

*“Advocates should be fully briefed, be approved by the chairperson, be a supportive presence but not part of decision making, the role of support person should be made clear to them and to the parents. Final decision rests with chairperson” (Tusla, 201*





# Relationships

- ▶ Many parents speak favourably about interactions with social workers, social care workers and conference chairs, and relationships are described for the most part as being supportive, helpful and respectful. Parents identified what they valued in these relationships:
- ▶ Support and help
- ▶ Trust and respect
- ▶ The ability to listen

*‘She had a lovely way of getting to know us, we felt we could really speak to her, it’s a hard thing to do. They need to be able to communicate without taking your self-respect away. She was able to do that’*

# The Conference itself:

- ▶ Non-attendance of key professionals is confusing for parents
- ▶ Similarly, a large numbers of professionals can feel intimidating
- ▶ Parental participation is more likely if parents feel supported and engaged
- ▶ Engagement is more than just being in attendance or not dissenting
- ▶ Hyper-vigilance- parents listening for one outcome‘*..like, we had to try and take in what he was saying. I had to let some of it go over my head. The thing at the back of my mind was just shut up and let them talk and then they won’t take the kids’*
- ▶ Being listened to while engaged but often choosing to remain silent
- ▶ Thinking that the plan has been agreed in advance of the meeting

*“When they’re talking to you you’re just hearing the worst things. You really are fearing the worst, you’re listening out for the worst....like there were good reports in there...but you didn’t hear that....you know...like it’s awful frightening in the conference”*

*“They listened well, yeah. ....If I had something to say, I was given the opportunity to say it, everyone listened”*

*“I was just too intimidated. I just admitted my faults. I couldn’t really defend myself I was too intimidated”*



# Consenting during decision making process

- Silence can be misinterpreted as agreement with decisions:

*'I feel a bit stupid trying to explain this but we went along with what they said so I suppose they must have thought we were agreeable. I don't think I disagreed as such, but I can't swear that I was actually voluntarily agreeing. It felt more like being backed into a corner.... the stakes are so high it's hard not to be agreeable if they're offering you a way out of losing your children'*



# Power and Authoritative Practice

- ▶ There were frequent references to power and a shared perception of a power imbalance.

*It's a power thing, no matter what I said, she (the social worker) was going to be believed'*

- ▶ Yet the perception of a power differential does not necessarily silence all parents. This suggests that the impact of the power imbalance can be minimised if parents feel a sense of respect and a non-judgemental attitude from the chairperson.

*'we knew that they had the power, but at the same time that didn't stop us from speaking out, like..'*

# After the Conference:

*“Even at the end of that meeting I still didn’t understand what it meant, and what it meant for the kids...when I went home I checked up on the internet to find out what it meant, I hadn’t a clue....”*

*“They just got up, pushed their chair in and put the file under their arm and out the door as fast as they could.... Instead we just came home and had a cup of tea and just tried to put back the pieces...”*

- ▶ Parents want to be debriefed after the conference and for this be a structured phase of the process
- ▶ This time ideally would be set aside immediately after the conference for listening, answering questions, clarifying next steps, a cup of tea, and to arrange a very timely follow-up

# Positive Outcomes

Most parents can identify a number of positive impacts on their family life as a result of the child protection plan

- ▶ Parenting had improved
- ▶ They had better access to appropriate support services
- ▶ They had more awareness and control over their personal circumstances
- ▶ The experience had brought them closer together as a family and that their children had benefitted from the plan

*“In the end.... it made an awful difference. It was the worst thing that ever happened and the best thing that ever happened. The change is fantastic, 100 times better. That wouldn't have happened on its own without the plan”*

# Negative Outcomes

- ▶ Negative outcomes- tend to be linked with the process but not usually the plan.
- ▶ Negative outcomes linked to the plan are linked to a perception of continuous scrutiny from agencies and services.

*“It’s ridiculous at this stage.....Every little thing is still an issue.....It’s finished for them but they’re all still watching us. It’s like an episode of Eastenders”*



# What next?

- ▶ Some of the findings challenge professional assumptions
  - ▶ misinterpreting silence for consent or agreement
  - ▶ perception of unfairness of poor preparation
- ▶ Other findings are practice issues
  - ▶ debrief
  - ▶ managing introductions
  - ▶ ensuring parents have access to reports in advance of conference
- ▶ Challenges for child protection teams. We asked;
  - ▶ What do you want to do with this information?
  - ▶ How do you want to use it?
  - ▶ How do you think you can make changes?

*Better prepared=better  
engagement=potentially better outcomes for  
children.*



# Thank You!

[Nuala.Connolly@Barnardos.ie](mailto:Nuala.Connolly@Barnardos.ie)

[Marie.gibbons@tusla.ie](mailto:Marie.gibbons@tusla.ie)

[Declan.quinn@tusla.ie](mailto:Declan.quinn@tusla.ie)