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‘Speak Up’: Participation of Children and Young People in Decisions About their Lives in Tusla Services

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Introduction

The UNESCO Child & Family Research Centre at NUI Galway carried out a study to find out to what extent the voice of children and young people are being heard in decisions made about their lives by Tusla.

This study forms part of the larger study. It aims to explore the experiences of children and young people involved with Tusla of participating in decisions made about their lives.

Decisions taken affecting the lives of children and young people who are involved in Tusla can be for example decisions about school and decisions made in care planning and review meetings.

The study used the Lundy Model of Participation to understand what is required if children and young people are to meaningfully participate in decisions made about their lives. (see Figure 1)

The questions we asked children and young people involved with Tusla were:

1. Do they feel they are being listened to when decisions are being made about their lives?
2. Do they feel they have the opportunity to voice their concerns?
3. How can Tusla learn from the responses and improve how they work with children and young people in the future?

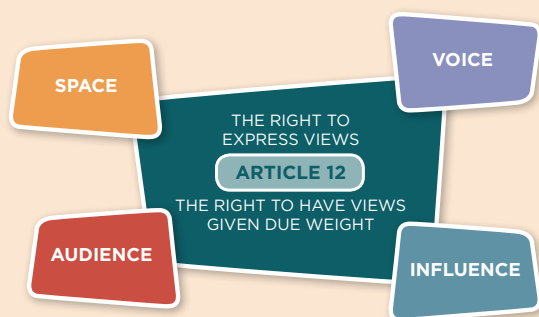


Figure 1: The Lundy Model of Participation

How we did the study:

Nineteen young people were interviewed by a researcher from the National University of Ireland Galway. They were aged between 9-21 years. There were 14 girls and 5 boys in the study. The research was supported by two advisory groups.

These groups were:

- A project advisory group: This group advised the research team on how to access children and young people and what issues needed to be thought about when seeking consent from children, young people and their parents and guardians.
- A youth advisory group: This group provided advice on the research questions, information leaflets and consent forms

Finding young people to take part in interviews:

The children and young people who took part in the study were found with the help of Tusla's four regional Partnership and Participation Officers. They ensured the children and their parents and guardians understood the study and what was involved. Children and young people who were interested contacted the researchers, consent forms were signed and interviews were conducted in a place chosen by the child or young person.

SPACE: Provide a safe space for all children and young people to express their views.

VOICE: Provide children and young people with the information and support they need to express a view.

AUDIENCE: Ensure their views are communicated to someone with the power to make decisions.

INFLUENCE: Ensure that children and young people's views are taken seriously and acted upon where appropriate.

WHAT DID WE FIND OUT?

SPACE

Some children and young people talked about formal spaces i.e. Tusla camps or residential settings where they had their voices heard, but most felt that informal settings such as a chat, cup of coffee or drive in the car led to more meaningful and relaxed conversations, which felt safer and more normal than a formal setting. Not having their social worker available outside of office hours was a problem however, as a lot happens in a young person's life outside of 9-5.

a lot happens over two days or a weekend, a lot can happen between five o'clock and the next morning at nine from my experience in care... you're well aware that that is a 9 to 5 job that they're doing.





VOICE

Children, young people felt that they needed to be given the information and the confidence to make an informed input about major decisions such as being taken into care. They also felt it was important they would be listened to when their opinions were given. They felt it was important that young people speak up as they are the experts about their lives. They said that children and young people should not be afraid to speak up because it is important that adults hear their view.

*Just speak up and just keep speaking until you are heard.
Don't let it go.*

AUDIENCE

Adults whom the children and young people knew they could trust and who had the power to positively impact their lives and advocate on their behalf were important. These were trusted family members, social workers, Tusla care staff and friends. Children and young people also stressed how important it was for staff to listen attentively without being absorbed in taking notes. Non-verbal behaviour such as eye contact was also important for adults to show they are listening.

They're [Tusla staff] not there to be notetakers on young people's lives, I feel that they're missing out on a whole section of what's actually going on in their lives and if they want to really be there for young people they need to be listening to them. Not just sitting there taking notes.

INFLUENCE

Children and young people reacted positively in situations where their voice was heard and their views acted upon. In cases where they were ignored they reacted negatively. A lack of information about how decisions are made makes it difficult to understand how and why these decisions are made.

As children and young people got older they felt they had more independence, they could speak up for themselves and let their voices be heard.

Oh I talked, I was the one who spoke to the judge and the judge listened because ...I didn't want a permanent [foster care] order, do you know, til I'm 18, to be in care...She said she'll give me ... she'll give me the permanent order but to come back in six months for another meeting and if she thinks things are going well, she'll drop the order, she'll get rid of the order altogether.

And when I turned 16, 17, it's getting easier ...Yeah. I thought it would get harder now...But it actually got easier.

Summary:

Children and young people do have space where their voices are heard in Tusla services. Hearing their views in informal settings are better. They react positively when they have a real input into decisions taken.

Creating a supportive relationship between children and young people and their care workers is important. The relevant care workers have to be motivated, keen to listen and react according to what they hear. The result has to be real and not tokenistic and children and young people should be provided with information on how decisions are made. It is important that children and young people speak up to have their voices heard.



A good idea suggested by a participant was that Tusla should employ young people to educate staff, parents and guardians and other young people about what life is like for young people involved with Tusla services.



Study Limits:

This is a small study based on the experience of nineteen children and young people. It cannot therefore represent the voice of all children and young people in Tusla services in Ireland.

Thank You!

This study would like to thank all the young people, children, parents, foster parents and staff who supported in this study and shared their stories and viewpoints.

'Thank you to Trish O' Donovan for her support in writing this key findings report.

What should Tusla do now?

1. Staff should be trained in communication skills with a focus on non-verbal behaviour.
2. Staff should avoid too much note taking in conversation with children and young people.
3. Staff should consider having important discussions in informal settings and give young people a choice of where these should take place.
4. Tusla should employ young people as experts in training sessions for foster parents and staff.



About the Programme

The Development and Mainstreaming Programme for Prevention Partnership and Family Support (PPFS) is carried out by Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. The programme wants to change child and family services in Ireland. This change means making sure that any harm to children, young people and families is prevented and in situations when they need support and help, it is offered to them as quickly as possible.

About the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre, NUI Galway

Our job at the UNESCO Centre is to study how Tusla is supporting families, youth and children and present what we find out. There are five areas we examine on this programme including: Meitheal and Child and Family Support Networks; Children's Participation; Public Awareness; Commissioning; and Parenting Support and Parental Participation.

This literature is derived from the Children's Participation work package as part of the Development and Mainstreaming programme for Prevention, Partnership & Family Support.

Further Information

If you have any questions on our research, please email cfrc@nuigalway.ie

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