

# The IBCR child participation policy

August 2021



BUREAU  
INTERNATIONAL  
DES DROITS DES ENFANTS

INTERNATIONAL  
BUREAU  
FOR CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

OFICINA  
INTERNACIONAL DE  
LOS DERECHOS DEL NIÑO

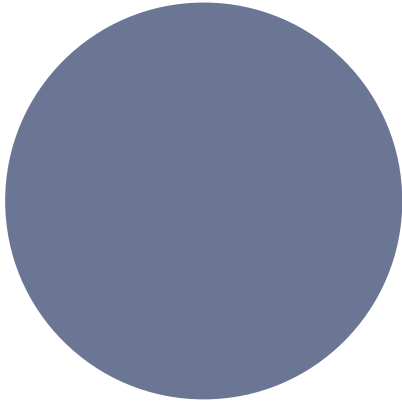
المكتب الدولي لحقوق الطفل

“ Our vision is that **children** are agents of change who play an **active role** in their life and in the decisions that affect them. ”



# Table of contents

C	Context and purpose of this policy .....	4
	The rights-based approach and international texts .....	5
D	Defining child participation .....	8
	The IBCR's vision.....	8
	The definition .....	12
	Child participation values .....	15
	Child participation as a circular concept.....	18
	The nine principles of participation .....	20
T	The IBCR's commitment to child participation .....	22



# Context and purpose of this policy

Child participation is at **the heart of the IBCR's initiatives**. Our approach is based on the four main principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child<sup>1</sup> (hereinafter “the Convention” or the “CRC”). As such, the Bureau has involved children in its activities in various ways over the years, via consultations, testimonials, speeches on their rights, involvement in data collection and more.

The importance already given to child participation is highlighted in the IBCR's **2021-2024 Strategic Plan**, which lists child participation as one of the organisation's four strategic pillars of action.

To that end, we have revised and reaffirmed our perspective on child participation in this updated version of our child participation guidelines, The IBCR Child Participation Policy (“the Policy”).

This Policy, designed for our team members and partners, presents our vision of child participation as well as the values and principles that guide that vision. It also serves to advocate for the added value of child participation as a way to generate **meaningful, innovative and promising child participation integration initiatives**.

The Child Participation Policy is an addition to other standardised Bureau documents, including the IBCR Child Safeguarding Policy, the Guidelines on the fight against fraud and corruption, and the Institutional Policy on Gender Equality. The Policy will be **updated every three years** to reflect the goals that emerge and institutional learning acquired during this period.

<sup>1</sup> - Convention on the Rights of the Child, November 20, 1989, R.T. Cano 1992 No. 3 (entry into force on September 2, 1990).

## THE RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH AND INTERNATIONAL TEXTS

Our approach is heavily based on rights, and **our child participation initiatives are founded on the following frameworks** :

- ✓ The Convention on the Rights of the Child (specifically Articles 12 and 13)
- ✓ General Comment No. 12 by the Committee on the Rights of the Child
- ✓ General Comment No. 24 by the Committee on the Rights of the Child
- ✓ Guidelines on Justice in Matters Involving Child Victims and Witnesses of Crime
- ✓ The IBCR monitors 33 international conventions covering children's rights-related issues and factors of discrimination. These conventions provide a framework for the inclusive and intersectional approach advocated by our policy, which addresses gender in all its diversity and ensures that the child is effectively protected against all forms of discrimination (Article 2.2 of the CRC).

The IBCR believes that the various mechanisms aimed at fostering child participation must respect all the principles of **human rights**.

### The Convention on the Rights of the Child :

Although the word participation is not explicitly mentioned in **Article 12** of the CRC, it is the first article to refer to the concept.

Article 12 addresses children as legal persons by listing the main components of the participation principle.

It assures that all children capable of discernment : have the right to express their views freely in all matters affecting the child and that the views of the child be given due weight during proceedings that affect them.

Article 12 also specifies that the age and maturity of the child must be taken into account.

### Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child

« 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.

For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law ».



Child participation must respect the principles of non-discrimination (Article 2) and a child's right to survival and development (Article 6). Furthermore, **the best interests of the child** (Article 3) must lie at the heart of child participation, i.e., when determining best interests, affected children must be adequately informed and given the opportunity to be heard. Thus, a child's best interests cannot be adequately applied unless the elements of Article 12 are respected, and vice versa.

The Convention includes **additional articles that are closely linked to the notion of child participation and provide a better understanding of the true scope and implications of the right to participate.**

These include the following :

- ✓ Article 5 : which addresses the issue of a **child's evolving capacities** and **the responsibility** that adults in general and parents in particular have to provide direction and guidance, helping children to exercise their rights
- ✓ Article 13 : freedom of **expression**
- ✓ Article 14 : freedom of **conscience** and **religion**
- ✓ Article 15 : freedom of **association**
- ✓ Article 16 : right to **privacy**
- ✓ Article 17 : right to **information**
- ✓ Article 19 : right to **protection** from violence
- ✓ Article 29 : right to **education**
- ✓ Article 31 : right to **rest** and **leisure**, and to participate fully in cultural and artistic activities in their community

The IBCR believes that a **broad interpretation of the right to participate** encourages its effectiveness and promotes the other rights of children. Without child participation, these other rights cannot be fully respected.





# Defining child participation

## THE IBCR'S VISION

The IBCR's mission is to contribute to the protection and promotion of children's rights according to the commitments of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and its optional protocols. To that end, the Bureau bolsters protection systems by strengthening stakeholders' skills and implementing standardised procedures.

**The IBCR simultaneously sees child participation as a means, an outcome and a core principle.  
Participation as an outcome to strengthen the active role that children play in society.**

**Child participation as the guiding principle for all activities and a core principle for an approach to programming rooted in the rights of children.**

**Child participation as a means to promote other rights and to improve the Bureau's actions.**

We believe that children are agents of change who play an active role in their own lives and that they must be allowed to express their views and participate in decision-making processes that affect them. We believe that children should be involved in the IBCR's activities and in society in general, individually or collectively.

This participation should happen at various stages and in multiple ways in order to improve the efficiency, relevance, sustainability and impact of these processes. It is crucial, however, that child participation be part of an approach that is centred on their best interests and which incorporates their other rights.

The IBCR favours an approach based on communication and empowerment, which reinforces the child as a person and gives weight to their voice and views on the issues that affect them, whether directly or indirectly. This approach promotes greater independence among children, improves their capacity to protect themselves and gives them a stronger voice in their community.

### Our vision is that

children are agents of change who play an active role in their life and in the decisions that affect them.

For this to happen, children must be allowed to express their views and to participate in the various decision-making processes that aim to protect children's rights.



We believe that the notions of participation and empowerment are intricately linked, with each reinforcing the other to create the “transformative” aspect of child participation.

The IBCR’s vision departs from protectionist views in which the child is reduced to a passive, vulnerable beneficiary, subject to adult protections and decisions. This traditional perspective implies that adults know how to communicate, discuss and collaborate with children.  
It also implies that children are able to communicate with their peers in order to share their experience and have a positive influence on each other.

There is no longer any doubt that children are best placed to express their own views and influence decisions about their needs, circumstance, interests, likes and dislikes, etc.

The right to participate implies that children play an active role in defining their well-being and who and what contributes to it.

Experience has shown that children can effectively contribute to a range of areas including research, consultation, institutional management, service and staff assessments, training tool development, advocacy, project management and implementation, policy development, peer coaching, student leadership and drafting legislation. This type of child participation adds value to the lives of children and adults alike.



Participation **enables CHILDREN** to do the following :

develop their independence by :

- highlighting their skills
- building up their self-esteem
- reinforcing their sense of responsibility and critical thinking skills
- improving their ability to influence their own life and that of their community

contribute to their own protection and that of their peers by :

- sharing their perspective and their experiences with peers and adults
- understanding and sharing information on their rights and responsibilities
- encouraging the implementation and use of services they feel are helpful
- promoting the harmonious development, protection and survival of all children
- fighting against ostracisation, exclusion, discrimination and marginalisation

play their role in the community by :

- strengthening their relationships with other children and adults
- reinforcing their sense of belonging in the community and in society
- preparing them to exercise their civil, political, social and cultural rights
- developing respect for the views of others (children and adults)
- reinforcing their participation as citizens and agents of change

Child participation **enables ADULTS** to do the following :

better understand and appreciate the best interests of children by :

- understanding different perspectives as they reflect on the experiences of children
- encouraging greater adult accountability for the problems faced by children
- encouraging the inclusion of all children
- taking into account the capacities of children
- strengthening the relationship between children and adults

implement actions and strategies that are meaningful, effective, lasting and adapted to a child’s specific situation by :

- identifying services that support the wellbeing and best interests of children and take into account a child’s point of view
- integrating children’s views when assessing actions and strategies
- improving the visibility and credibility of actions that address issues affecting children

reinforce civil society and participatory democracy by :

- facilitating children’s civic participation
- helping to create a civil society

# THE DEFINITION

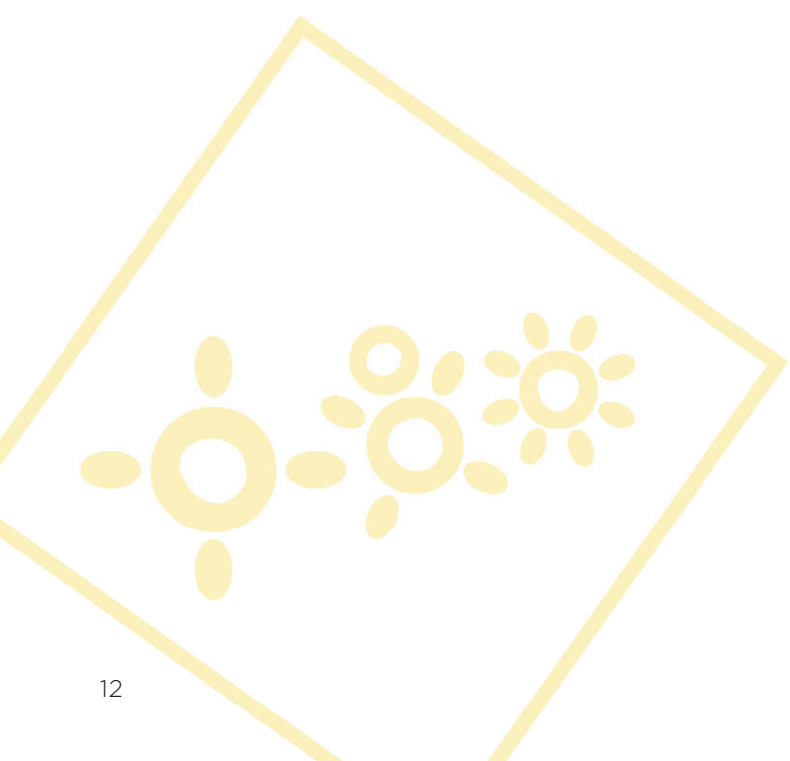
Armed with this vision and understanding that there are many definitions of the concept, the IBCR has opted for the definition of participation found in the CRC's General Comment No. 12, which considers the many ways that a child can participate according to the context and purpose of the process.

The IBCR therefore views child participation as

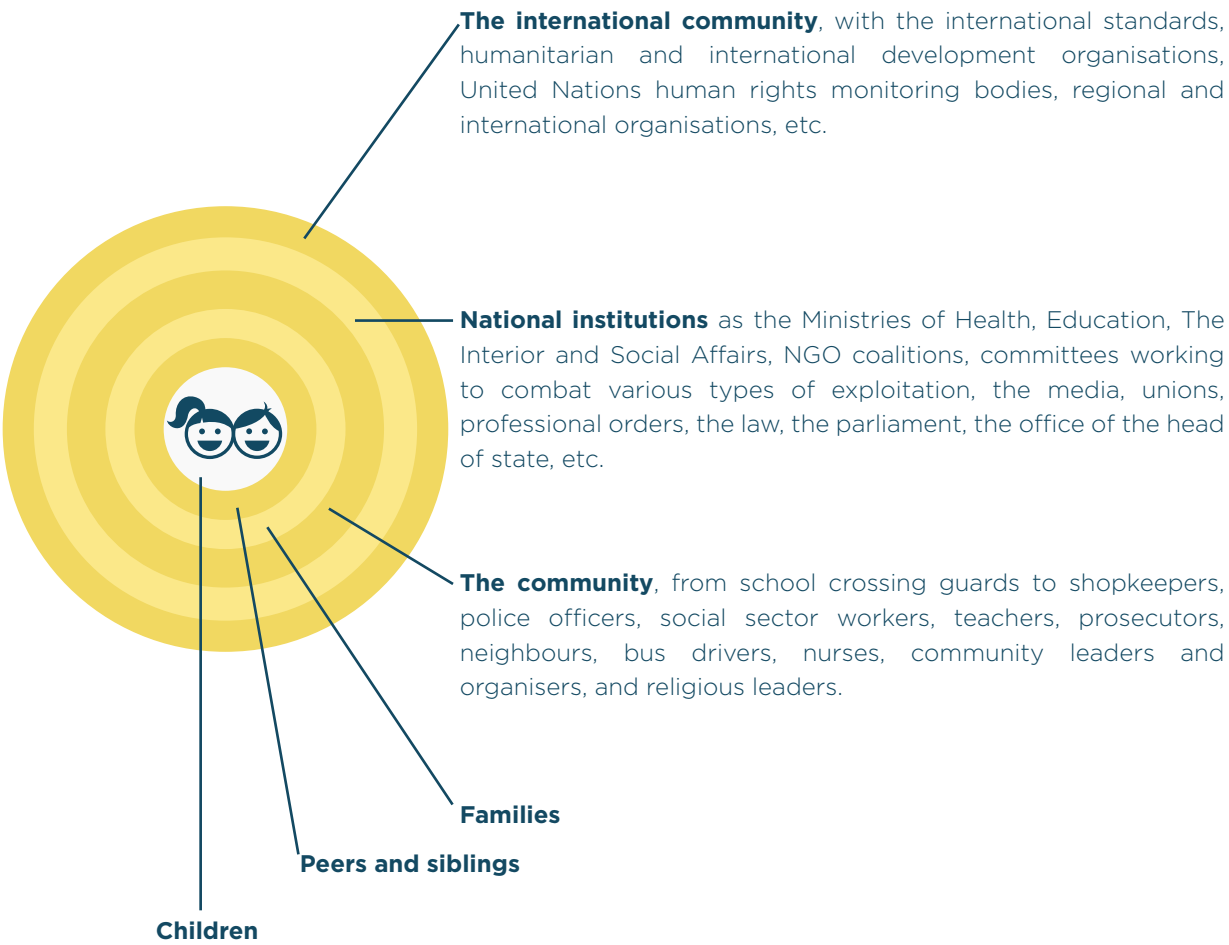
« ongoing processes, which include information-sharing and dialogue between children and adults (and among children themselves) based on mutual respect, and in which children can learn how their views and those of adults are taken into account and shape the outcome of such processes. »

According to this definition, child participation is not a one-time or isolated occurrence. Rather, it is part of an approach that promotes **dialogue between child and adult** stakeholders on any decisions or actions that affect children. The ultimate goal is to build a culture of child participation within family units, societies and institutions in the child protection system.

This definition aligns with the Bureau's child protection system model, which **places children at its core** so they can be involved in initiatives designed to help them reach their full potential and become independent. This definition also highlights the important influence that children have on each other by integrating dialogue among children as well as between children and adults.



# THE CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEM







### Our values<sup>3</sup>

Respect  
Non-discrimination  
Honesty  
Responsibility

## CHILD PARTICIPATION VALUES



### Respect

Respect means viewing children as legal persons, trusting them, believing that they can express and assert their views and needs, and understand the information given to them.

Adults who respect children treat them with dignity and equality. Adults should seek input from children on issues that directly affect them, listen, understand where they are coming from, highlight their true potential, provide opportunities for participation and, without abusing their power, provide the guidance needed for children to fully participate in the project.

**Children are people with their own opinions, voices, desires and feelings, all of which must be taken into account.**

*(IBCR Child Safeguarding Policy, p. 6)*



### Non-discrimination

The term discrimination (...) should be understood as any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on race, colour, gender, language, religion, political beliefs, national or ethnic origin, descent, or any other circumstance, which has the purpose or effect of compromising or destroying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of all human rights and fundamental freedoms.<sup>2</sup>

Non-discrimination, or equal opportunity, means **considering all children as equal with the same right to participate**. The IBCR believes that participation must be a means of improving equality among all children; it must not ignore or reinforce existing inequalities, even indirectly.

Much like the overarching issues related to non-discrimination, inclusive participation is a way to fight inequality in all its forms. Non-discrimination among children is not upheld when adults and children make decisions or choices based on personal characteristics such as age, gender, ethno-cultural background, physical ability, religion, social class, etc., which leads to the unfair preference for one child over another.

Experience has shown that certain children face more barriers than others do and that these prevent them from participating, depriving them of information and the ability to express their views and to take part in decision-making. One of the pillars of the CRC is non-discrimination, and as such it is essential that we understand the impact of discrimination on various opportunities for child participation and to account for these key issues in our initiatives.

<sup>2</sup> - The UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) (1989), adopted by the UN Human Rights Committee, and General Comment No. 18, par. 7 concerning the principle of equality.  
<sup>3</sup> - These values only represent the IBCR's values related to child participation.





## Honesty

This value implies that adults **act with transparency**, sharing as much relevant information with children as possible so that they can exercise their right to participate.

Being honest requires ongoing conversations about the expectations, roles, responsibilities, powers and obligations of all actors.



## Responsibility

Responsibility implies that **adults are responsible for creating an adapted context that fosters child participation**, and that children do not need to justify their capacity to participate or the relevance of their participation.

This value also implies that adults must anticipate risks and are responsible for putting measures in place to mitigate any potential harms on a child's well-being stemming from participation processes or outcomes.



# CHILD PARTICIPATION AS A CIRCULAR CONCEPT

Existing literature on child participation offers **a variety of participation models**. Of particular note are the **linear** (Hart), **chronological** (Lundy) and **circular** (Treseder) models. The IBCR’s position moves away from the levelled approach of linear or hierarchical models, opting instead for a vision that is closer to Treseder’s circular model<sup>4</sup>.

This model considers that every level of participation can be appropriate, depending on the context, goals and activities that form the participatory framework. But beyond adherence to rigid theoretical models, the choice of participation levels must be guided by an inclusive respect for a child’s fundamental rights through empowerment (while ensuring their safety).

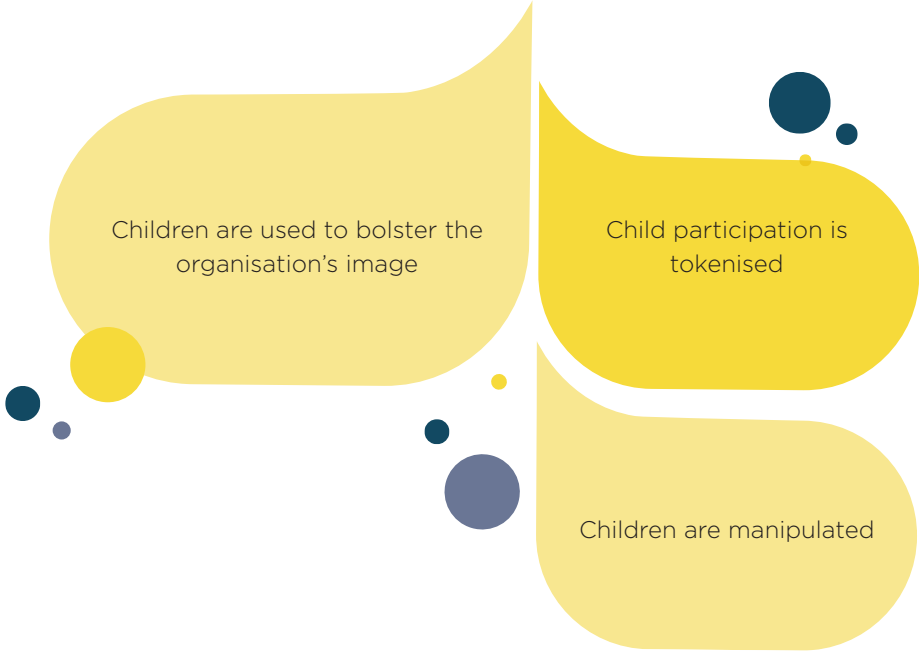
This type of model seems better adapted to the IBCR’s practices and to realities in the field. Several levels of **participation may be appropriate, according to the profile of the children involved, the project’s context and circumstances**, issues in play and the goals of the process.

Following this logic, simple consultations can be a valuable opportunity to promote and implement a child’s right to participation, as long as the principles laid out further on in this Policy are followed. **It is therefore important to examine a range of criteria and make an informed choice when choosing the most appropriate form of participation**. A comprehensive understanding of the various types of participation by all actors will help inform the decision-making process and help identify which forms to avoid.

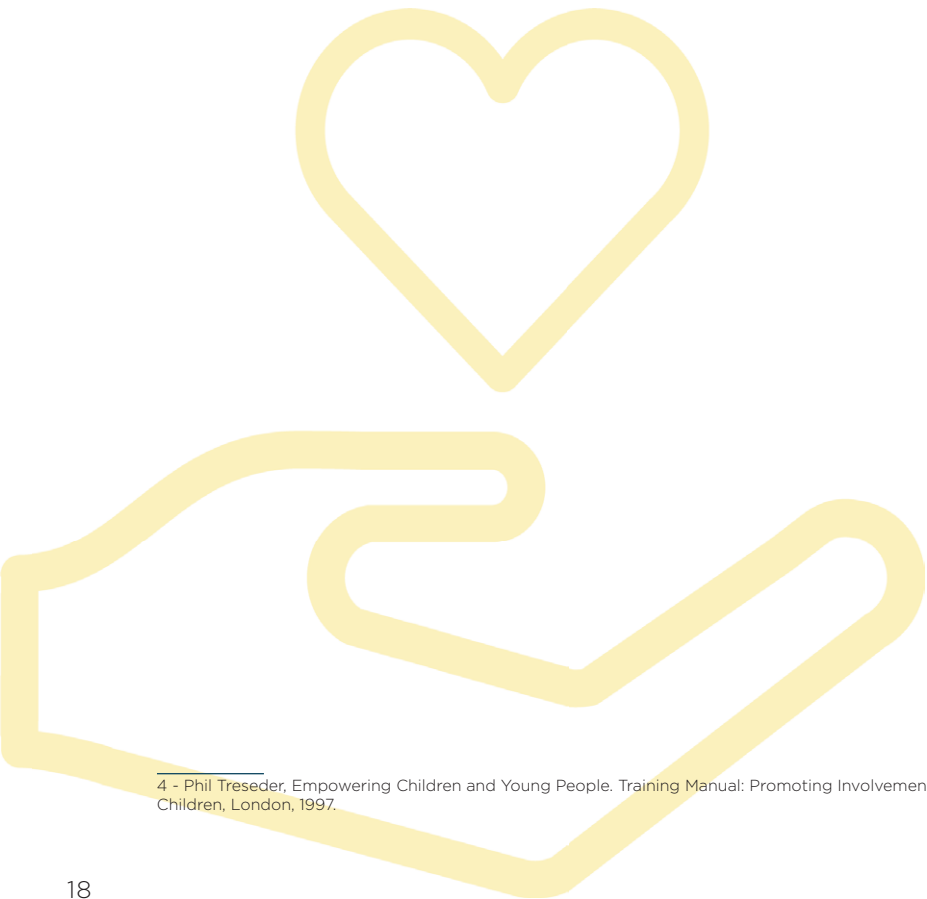


Forms of participation

## Non-participation



Children are manipulated



4 - Phil Treseder, Empowering Children and Young People. Training Manual: Promoting Involvement in Decision Making, Children’s Rights Office and Save the Children, London, 1997.



# THE NINE PRINCIPLES OF PARTICIPATION

The nine principles of child participation as specified in the CRC’s General Comment No. 12 reinforce the IBCR’s values by articulating their content more concretely. They guide and inform the development of IBCR’s child participation methodologies and processes.

As specified in the Committee’s General Comments No. 12, **all processes in which a child or children are heard and participate must be :**

## Transparent and informative

Children must be provided with full, accessible, diversity-sensitive and age-appropriate information about their right to express their views freely and their views to be given full weight, and how this participation will take place, its scope, purpose and potential impact ;

## Voluntary

Children should never be coerced into expressing views against their wishes and should be informed that they can cease involvement at any stage ;

## Respectful

Children’s views have to be treated with respect and they should be provided with opportunities to initiate ideas and activities. Adults working with children should acknowledge, respect and build on good examples of child participation, for instance, in their contributions to the family, school, culture and the work environment. They also need an understanding of the socio-economic, environmental and cultural context of children’s lives. Persons and organisations working for and with children should also respect children’s views with regard to participation in public events ;

## Relevant

The issues on which children have the right to express their views must be of real relevance to their lives and enable them to draw on their knowledge, skills and abilities. In addition, space needs to be created to enable children to highlight and address the issues they themselves identify as relevant and important ;

## Child-friendly

Environments and working methods should be adapted to children’s capacities. Adequate time and resources should be made available to ensure that children are adequately prepared and have the confidence and opportunity to contribute their views. Consideration needs to be given to the fact that children will need differing levels of support and forms of involvement according to their age and evolving capacities ;

## Inclusive

Participation must be inclusive, avoid existing patterns of discrimination, and encourage opportunities for marginalised children, including both girls and boys, to be involved (see also para. 88 of the GC). Children are not a homogenous group and participation needs to provide for equality of opportunity for all, without discrimination on any grounds. Programmes also need to ensure that they are culturally sensitive to children from all communities ;

## Supported by training

Adults need preparation, skills and support to facilitate children’s participation effectively, to provide them, for example, with skills in listening, working jointly with children and engaging children effectively in accordance with their evolving capacities. Children themselves can be involved as trainers and facilitators on how to promote effective participation; they require capacity-building to strengthen their skills in, for example, effective participation awareness of their rights, and training in organising meetings, raising funds, dealing with the media, public speaking and advocacy ;

## Safe and sensitive to risk

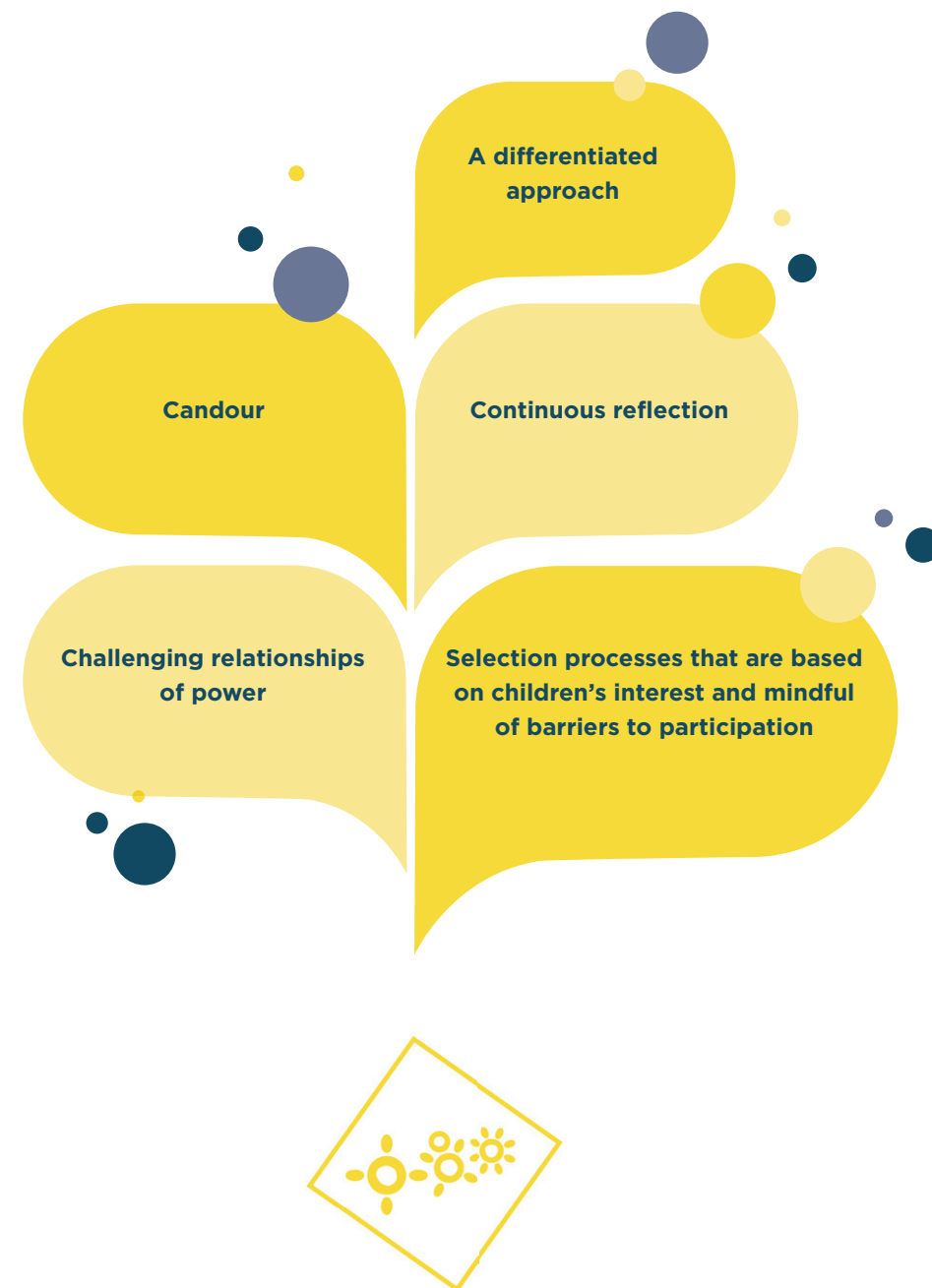
In certain situations, expression of views may involve risks. Adults have a responsibility towards the children with whom they work and must take every precaution to minimise the risk to children of violence, exploitation or any other negative consequence of their participation. Action necessary to provide appropriate protection will include the development of a clear child protection strategy which recognises the particular risks faced by some groups of children, and the extra barriers they face in obtaining help. Children must be aware of their right to be protected from harm and know where to go for help if needed. Investment in working with families and communities is important in order to build understanding of the value and implications of participation, and to minimise the risks to which children may otherwise be exposed ;

## Accountable

A commitment to follow-up and evaluation is essential. For example, in any research or consultative process, children must be informed as to how their views have been interpreted and used and, where necessary, provided with the opportunity to challenge and influence the analysis of the findings. Children are also entitled to be provided with clear feedback on how their participation has influenced any outcomes. Wherever appropriate, children should be given the opportunity to participate in follow-up processes or activities. Monitoring and evaluation of children’s participation needs to be undertaken, where possible, with children themselves.

# The IBCR's commitment to child participation

The participatory framework, definition, values, models and principles described in this Policy inform the IBCR's concrete commitments regarding the implementation of child participation.



## A differentiated approach

Non-discrimination is closely tied to respect for difference and diversity among children. As such, it implies the need to acknowledge the uniqueness and specific needs of each child by employing accommodation measures where necessary.

## Continuous reflection

Child participation must be adapted to the child and as such, it requires constant assessment, e.g., How are they feeling? What are they thinking? What are they able to understand?

The person responsible for the process must also continuously measure the impact of their actions and ensure that the child or children understand the impact as well.

## Candour

It is the adult's responsibility to adequately communicate all relevant information to the child, even if it is likely to disappoint them. In the same vein, no promise should be made if any doubt whatsoever remains as to its materialisation.

## Selection processes that are based on children's interest

and mindful of barriers to participation

The selection process in any child participation initiative is critical to its outcome. The process must not fall into the trap of focusing solely on the needs of the activity or of adults, while being careful to reflect the relationships of power that exist within the society. Thus, selection processes must be based primarily on the interests of the child and the barriers to participation that certain groups of children face. A clear and informed explanation of the process, its risks and advantages must allow for all children to express their interest, regardless of age, gender, level of education, etc. This presentation must also consider accommodations to address any barriers to participation, so that all interested children are able to take part.

## Challenging relationships of power

The very nature of child participation implies challenging existing relationships of power. In this sense, two positions must be central to all processes:

- a) a rejection of adultism, i.e., the attitude where adults believe that children do not have the maturity or competencies needed to express themselves or to meet their needs and therefore do not see children as persons in their own right, and
- b) an anchoring to contexts in the field.

The IBCR's participatory processes must therefore be flexible and defined collaboratively with children and their partners.



Children are agents of  
change who play an  
active role in their life  
and in the decisions that  
affect them.



FOLLOW US



**WWW.IBCR.ORG**



BUREAU  
INTERNATIONAL  
DES DROITS DES ENFANTS

INTERNATIONAL  
BUREAU  
FOR CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

OFICINA  
INTERNACIONAL DE  
LOS DERECHOS DEL NIÑO

المكتب الدولي لحقوق الطفل

805, Villeray Street, Montréal (Québec) H2R 1J4  
Phone +1 514 932 7656 - [info@ibcr.org](mailto:info@ibcr.org)