



# Ethical Guidance on children and young people's participation for LEAP partners

For services who are working with children and young people affected by sexual violence.

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THE INTERNATIONAL CENTRE  
RESEARCHING CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION,  
VIOLENCE AND TRAFFICKING



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## **CONTENTS**

**Page 3. Introduction**

**Page 4. Participation**

**Page 4. LEAP guiding principles**

**Page 5. Mechanisms to ensure safe and ethical practice**

**Page 5. LEAP participation principles**

**Page 15. References**

## INTRODUCTION TO THE LEAP PROJECT

The Life skills, Leadership and Limitless Potential (LEAP) project was a two-year programme funded by the European Commission, with co-funding from Oak Foundation. It was coordinated by the International Centre: Researching child sexual exploitation, violence and trafficking at the University of Bedfordshire (hereafter referred to as the International Centre)<sup>1</sup> and delivered in four countries: the United Kingdom (UK), Bulgaria, Romania and the Netherlands.

LEAP sought to improve knowledge and develop skills and understanding of a child rights approach to safe and ethical participatory practice when working with children and young people affected by sexual violence. The central aims of the project were to develop confidence amongst practitioners who work in specialist services supporting children and young people who are affected by sexual violence and to strengthen commitments to participatory practice. The project aimed to build the evidence base on how to support and involve practitioners and young people in advocacy, through research and evaluation. LEAP has also facilitated a European knowledge exchange through the dissemination of freely accessible tools and resources.

Together with the four country partners, the International Centre:

- Designed and delivered a four-day course on participatory practice for specialist service practitioners (in each country) and developed this course into an e-learning programme.
- Organised and facilitated 'communities of practice' in each country.
- Developed and delivered a three-day training programme for Youth Facilitators, who have co-delivered a life skills programme to other young people in their countries.
- Supported child and youth-led creative projects combatting sexual violence towards children and young people and shared these with the wider public to raise awareness.

This guidance introduces our understanding of the guiding principles and ethical framework for, children and young people's participation in the LEAP project.

We expected partner organisations to be committed to good practice and abide by the guiding principles outlined within this document when engaging children and young people in the LEAP project.

The guidance is subject to ongoing review as part of our commitment to reflective practice.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.beds.ac.uk/IC>

## PARTICIPATION

This guidance is based on an understanding of children and young people's participation as: **the right of all children and young people to be involved and influential in decision-making about issues which affect their lives and those of their communities, in accordance with their evolving capacity** (in line with United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and The UK Children's Act 1989/2004).

Key aspects of our working understanding of this are outlined below:

- Children and young people's participation relates to children and young people both as individuals and as groups or constituencies.
- Participation encompasses **different forms and types of decision-making**: including decisions made within individual, project, local, national or international contexts.
- There can be different (though overlapping) **levels of participation**. These can be broadly summarised as *consultative*, *collaborative* and *child-led* as outlined below:
  - **Consultative**: Adults seek children and young people's views and perspectives to build knowledge and understanding of children and young people's lives and experiences. It is an adult-initiated and led process that values children and young people's perspectives and offers them opportunities for influence.
  - **Collaboration**: Adults work in varying degrees of partnership with children and young people as collaborators. Opportunities are created for children and young people to take active roles influencing the design and processes of projects and sharing decision-making. Projects remain adult-initiated although their early development may be informed by children and young people.
  - **Child-led**: Opportunities and resources enable children and young people to initiate their own projects, groups and activities. Processes are owned and led by children and young people, although adults may be invited to facilitate and support them with aspects of their work. (Adapted from Lansdown and O'Kane, 2015; Lansdown, 2011).

Children and young people's participation may take place at several of these levels simultaneously within a single research project or activity. We understand that different 'levels' of participation are possible or appropriate at different times, depending on the capacity, interests, and circumstances of individuals, on the funders requirements, and resources available to the project.

## LEAP guiding principles

The LEAP participation strategy is based on the following guiding principles:

- We endeavour to uphold the best interests of the child at all times.<sup>2</sup>
- We recognise and respond to children as active members of society in accordance with their evolving capacity.
- We aim to adhere to the highest ethical standards in research and practice.
- We actively endeavour to minimise the potential of harm arising to any individual as a result of engaging with our work.
- We promote non-discrimination, equality and inclusive practice.
- We work within a rights-based framework in accordance with the UNCRC and European Convention on Human Rights.
- We promote reflective practice and remain open to learning and development.

## Mechanisms to ensure safe and ethical practice

The LEAP project applied for and received ethical approval by Bedfordshire University's Institute for Applied Social Research Ethics Committee.

Additional strategies to address potential ethical issues include:

- A project Advisory Group to provide ethical oversight
- Risk and needs assessment processes for potential participants
- Evaluation and reflective practice with partners and participants
- Ensuring relevant staff had enhanced Disclosure and Barring service (DBS) clearance or the local equivalent and received regular child protection training.

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<sup>2</sup> Where differing views about what constitutes a child's 'best interests' exist, and a child is under 16 (or is assessed to have additional learning needs or vulnerabilities), staff must defer judgment to those with on-going parental responsibility for the child.

## The LEAP Participation principles

Direct work undertaken by partner organisations with children and young people affected by sexual violence must be informed by an understanding of:

1. The impact of abuse, discrimination and trauma
2. Local and national child protection and safeguarding procedures
3. Children and young people's informed consent to participate
4. Inclusive and non-discriminatory practice
5. Representation, anonymity and potential stigma
6. Transparency and clear engagement parameters
7. Reflective practice and accountability.

Further details of expectations for partners relating to these areas can be found below.

### 1. The impact of abuse, discrimination and trauma

**In order that partner organisations can support children and young people who have experienced abuse, discrimination and trauma, they should have appropriate training, resources and support in place:**

- **Support to participants:** Potential project partners should, as a minimum, have the following:
  - Resources and expertise to comprehensively assess all potential participants to identify needs and risks.
  - Commitment and resources to provide support to participants before, throughout and following engagement in the LEAP project. This includes helping children and young people to make informed choices about engagement in the project and facilitating their attendance. It also includes providing an experienced named supporter for all participants, who will actively offer them an opportunity to reflect on the process and provide any necessary support, advocacy and/or onward referral.
  - Child protection policies and processes for managing disclosures.
- **Training and support to children and young people:** Children and young people (and the adults who work with them) will have differing needs for support to prepare them for meaningful participation. Support needs will differ depending on the activities involved but a commitment will be made to fully preparing all those involved by: managing their expectations, clarifying roles, identifying the skills they require and supporting them to develop these, and putting in place any required support. Organisations and partners must commit to carve out the necessary political place for children and young people and manage the expectations of adults in doing so.
- **Responding to and providing for children and young people's support needs:** Scenarios exist where either children or young people's participation in projects catalyses additional support needs, or additional support is required to enable individual children and young people to participate. In both

such scenarios, the relevant partner agencies, through whom the children and young people are engaged in project activities, should consider the need to provide any additional support which emerges due to their involvement. Where possible, project planning should be undertaken collaboratively with partner agencies to anticipate such needs, and project plans and budgets should ensure that the resources and flexibility to respond to emerging support needs are available.

- **Ensuring a safe place to meet:** Spaces used for activities with young people must be accessible and appropriate to their needs. Young people should be supported to ensure that risks are considered and minimised and they are at no risk when they travel to and from the place of meeting. Identifying a safe and appropriate space includes ensuring an adequate level of privacy for any group discussions about sensitive issues and not exposing participants to stigma. Buildings must meet national health and safety standards. Special considerations are also needed to support young people using online spaces and social media, for example online spaces for sessions should be held in a secure space to protect young people's identity and the information shared.

## 2. Local and national child protection and safeguarding procedures

- **Staff training and recruitment:** Staff conducting activities should receive regular child protection training and (where appropriate) have enhanced DBS clearance or the local equivalent. In order to mitigate the risks associated, all partner organisations involved should demonstrate that they:
  - are legally registered in their country to provide support and services to children and young people
  - abide by any state system that exists to 'license' professionals working with children and young people
  - have their own structures, procedures or checks in place for staff working with children
  - have child protection policies and procedures in place and ensure that all staff are trained in these areas
  - have a suitable system of supervision and support set up for staff, especially as working with vulnerable young people can be challenging.

All parties have an ethical responsibility to ensure that other adults who will be supporting young people understand their responsibilities in ensuring safe participation procedures for themselves as well as children and young people. For example, there should be adequate supervision support for frontline staff.

- **Responding to child protection issues:** Child protection issues should be responded to in line with training and the appropriate local procedures, and recorded appropriately. In most cases this means that issues are fed through the child protection framework of partner organisations or their relevant local safeguarding structures. When child protection issues are raised, the child or young person should be kept informed and involved as far as possible in the decision-making processes which follow.
- **Managing personal information:** Staff should only ask for personal information about participants (or potential participants) on a need-to-know basis. Such information may include basic information on the reason why the young person is accessing the service, the length of time they have been

working with the partner organisation, age, ethnicity, gender, living situation. Partner organisations or referring agencies should not share participants' personal information without the explicit consent of potential participants.

- **Recognising that 'outputs' of participatory projects that are disseminated with other children and young people may lead to disclosures:** When participatory products such as films, workshops, posters, campaigns and other stories are disseminated or screened in public, those viewing them may choose to disclose. It is vital that local partners consider where and how outputs/activities will be shared and how disclosures will be managed and supported. Large scale campaigns, for example, may lead to a surge of disclosures and in some settings there may not be the capacity to respond.

### 3. Children and young people's informed consent to participate

- **Fully informed consent:** All children and young people who consider participating in the work of the LEAP, either directly or through partners, should be supported to make informed choices about their engagement through the provision of accessible information, which includes information that is translated and/or adapted for their needs. Children and young people should also be given opportunities to ask questions and reflect on the impact of involvement in the short and long term, and these discussions and their consent should be appropriately recorded. The relationship of children and young people's involvement to the wider research and policy context should be made explicit as part of this information sharing. Consent is recognised as an ongoing process rather than a one-off event and requires ongoing prompts for participants to reflect at key identified points within a project (e.g. before and after an interview and before public presentations).
- **Parent/carer consent:** Children and young people's participation can never take place without their explicit consent. However, in cases where children are under sixteen years (or where local laws state otherwise), additional parent or carer consent may need to be sought. This may also apply to older children in cases where they have additional needs and their project workers advise that this is required. Exceptions are made in cases in which asking parental consent is judged to place a young person at additional risk, and a young person is assessed to be Gillick competent<sup>3</sup>, unless contrary to the best interests of the child. It is advisable to consider each situation carefully, on a case-by-case basis, in discussion with the agencies through whom young people are accessed.

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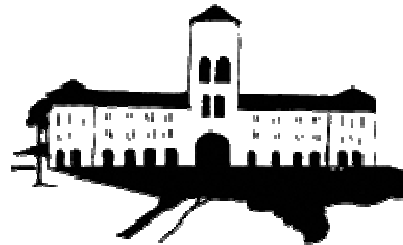
<sup>3</sup> Gillick competent is a term used in UK medical law to describe a child below the age of sixteen who has sufficient understanding and intelligence to consent to his or her own medical treatment, without the need for parental permission or knowledge.



### Example tool for providing information and opportunities for questions: Picture mapping

What do the young people already know about this project?

- Ask the group what they think this project is about.
- Afterwards give an overview of the project through picture mapping.
- Prepare flipchart paper with diagrams or pictures to explain the project (or draw as you're talking!). For example you may want to draw a picture of a university and your project to talk through who is leading the project. You may want to draw some young people with speech bubbles to show that the project wants to hear from young people. The LEAP Toolkit provides examples of this type of activity.



- Place these pictures in the middle of the floor and create a path of pictures. As you explain the different steps in the process, get the group on the floor, or standing around so they can ask questions and move through the different steps of the project so they can see how the project will work.
- Through your picture mapping you should explain the aims for this project.
- Encourage young people to ask questions throughout and make sure there is time at the end for more discussion and questions

- **Voluntary involvement:** All children and young people's participation is on a voluntary basis and can be ceased at any time. Staff and partners commit to uphold this, avoiding the application of any coercive or persuasive strategies, no matter how subtle or well meaning. When asking young people to commit, consideration should be given to the ease with which they can decline or opt out of involvement if they need or want to. Staff should be mindful of participants' body language and/or lack of participation in activities and consider that these may indicate they do not want to take part, in which case further discussions should take place with that young person.

#### 4. Inclusive and non-discriminatory practice

- **Inclusive practice:** LEAP recognises that children and young people's involvement will always fall short of fully inclusive, representative practice. However where possible, within the bounds of available resources, we actively work to remove barriers such as language, ethnicity, disability, religious belief, stigma, gender, institutional experiences (including children who are looked after or working with a youth offending team), sexuality, exclusion from school, or communication capacities. In addition, and where possible, we will seek to provide a range of approaches that support the participation of children and young people with different capacities, needs, preferences and circumstances, recognising that these may require significant support from specialist workers

and agencies. The possible resource implications for promoting inclusive practice should be costed and considered in project planning.

- ***Age, evolving capacity and diversity:*** Following on from the points raised above, children and young people should not be viewed as a homogenous group, and activities and information should be adapted for the different circumstances and capacities of potential participants. The importance of not making assumptions about children and young people's preferences for involvement in projects, and consideration of the most appropriate way to communicate with them is essential. Diversity within and between groups is recognised, and opportunities should be taken to consult with participants directly and with parents, carers or other trusted supporters to ascertain preferences about the most appropriate means of engaging and communicating with young people. It is recognised that children and young people will require different forms and levels of support to participate. That is why it is important to ask young people for their feedback after every session to get a sense of what they enjoyed and what they struggled with or didn't enjoy.

## **5. Transparency and clear engagement parameters**

- ***Transparent partnership:*** Work with children and young people is recognised as a partnership in which all stakeholders have different but equally valued roles. Differences in roles will depend on the needs of the task and the capacity of participants. As far as possible, the particular role, remit and responsibilities of each stakeholder group should be clarified at the outset of any participatory initiative. Ongoing opportunities to review and reflect on roles and responsibilities should be built in to the timeline of any project.
- ***Preparing and supporting all stakeholders for meaningful partnership:*** We recognise that bringing different groups (e.g. statutory service providers, parents and carers, researchers and service users) together to work in partnership for the first time may present challenges. Prior to such activities, preparatory work should be undertaken with each stakeholder group separately, to manage expectations, consider issues of ethics, group dynamics and accessibility of information and language, and to develop strategies to effectively manage these.
- ***Transparency and managing expectations:*** Issues of ownership, responsibility and decision-making power need to be made clear and explicit to participants. This means for example that the degree (and limits) of children and young people's involvement, influence and ownership over decisions and outputs in research will be considered and made explicit to participants and partners at the outset of a project or initiative, and throughout, wherever possible.

### **Ethical challenge**

Issues of power and control and the limits of these are present in many participatory projects and, particularly when working on projects with multiple stakeholders, it can be hard to get the balance right. This case study explores how these issues emerged in a large-scale, two-year research project that worked with more than 100 young people to amplify and make space for their voices on issues including sex, relationships and violence.

The project was funded by a large, nationally known organisation and involved projects and young people from across the UK. Alongside the one-to-one interviews with both young people and practitioners, small groups of young people worked together to create films exploring the issues being researched. These films were linked to, but independent of, the research project and were presented as an opportunity for young people to explore issues relating to young people and sexual violence and have a lot of control in thinking about how these issues are presented to others.

### **What parameters were set?**

Attempts were made to be transparent about ownership and control over the films. The young people involved in making the films were told from the beginning that their work was part of a bigger project and that there were multiple stakeholders involved. They were also told that the content of their films could be censored if local project staff felt that it posed a safeguarding risk for individuals or communities.

### **The ethical challenge**

Following the development of the concept and shooting of the films, the films were shown to the wider research team and the funder. It soon became apparent that there had not been clarification of the sign-off hierarchy within the research team. Some members of the research team felt that some of the content of the films posed a risk to young people – both at an individual level and in terms of wider, potentially negative messaging for other young people. Due to the concerns of the wider research team some of the young people were asked to re-shoot sections of the films.

### **Questions for reflection**

- How do we effectively manage young people's expectations in situations like this, and be honest with ourselves about the limits of control that we can afford? (This can be particularly pertinent when there are safeguarding issues, and organisational reputation issues.)
- In what kind of situations might young people have more power and control?
- How do we support young people to lead their own processes?
- Is this possible in a large organisation?
- How prepared are we, as practitioners or as researchers, to hear and accept viewpoints that contradict our own?
- How do we work with conflict when this emerges during participation work?
- Young people's voices can sometimes make us feel uncomfortable – how do we prepare ourselves and staff members for this?
- To what extent should we steer and guide young people in *how* they say things (when presenting for example)?
- How do we support young people fully and also adequately share control?

- **Reciprocity:** Consideration should be given to appropriate reciprocity for children and young people who offer their time and expertise to support research and project work. In many cases it may be appropriate for their participation to be on a solely voluntary basis, and reciprocity in such cases will represent a symbol of acknowledgement and thanks rather than payment for time. However in

other circumstances – particularly where young people are being asked to work alongside professionals who will be paid in a comparative role (e.g. on steering groups or as part of recruitment panels), consideration should be given to the appropriate level and form of reciprocity to offer parity with professional counterparts.

- ***Flexibility and responsivity:*** LEAP recognises that projects never go quite as planned. Therefore it is important that those leading projects, including partner organisations, maintain a commitment to being responsive to the changing dynamics and circumstances of a project or initiative. Flexibility should also be available within project plans to respond to<sup>4</sup> additional needs or ideas which emerge from participants themselves, particularly where these are prioritised by participants above the stated project aims. Where the International Centre leads a project, they should be informed of any changes to the project at the earliest possible stage.

## 6. Representation, anonymity and potential stigma

- ***Anonymisation of contributions:*** In most circumstances, children and young people's individual contributions within participatory activities will be anonymised, in the fora in which they are publicly shared (e.g. in publications, presentations and multi-media outputs). Exceptions to this include situations in which children and young people choose to present aspects of their contributions publicly (through media, conference presentations or the co-delivery of training). In such circumstances, staff from partner organisations should support participants to undertake careful consideration of the implications of public testimony and disclosure, for themselves and others, in both the short and long term. In such situations, having an understanding of the audience is critical. An understanding of who will be present in closed 'celebration events' is also important if young people are able to invite friends, partners and relations who may be 'unknown' to the partner organisation.
- ***Acknowledgement of contributions:*** Even where children and young people's contributions remain anonymous, acknowledgement should be made to individual participants at project level. Acknowledgment takes different forms but may include certification, accreditation or celebration events.
- ***Supporting positive identity:*** LEAP recognises the importance of supporting children and young people to maintain control and choice in how they and their contributions are represented. This includes ensuring opportunities for children and young people to discuss and reflect on whether they wish their public identity to include aspects of their service user experience and their preferred use of language around this.

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<sup>4</sup> In this context 'respond to' may simply mean signposting or sharing information with other professionals to respond more fully, or it may mean adapting project objectives or activities to incorporate new ideas initiated by participants.

### **Example of good reflective practice**

In supporting young people to build positive identities, professionals may provide the group with an opportunity to determine their own 'group identity' by thinking through how they would like to be described in publications and other public spaces, including online.

The group should determine whether or not they want to be identified as individuals who have been affected by sexual violence.

Professionals may feel the need to be explicit about the young people's experiences. A general tension exists between wanting to respect young people's chosen identity and the desire to state that the young people have been affected as a way of adding weight and credibility to their views and participation.

### **Questions for reflection**

- Are we honest with young people about why they are being invited to participate and clear with them about how important their experiences are in contributing to the project?
- Whilst supporting young people to see themselves as more than 'victims/survivors' and whilst acknowledging the importance of not labelling young people, are we transparent about how we will describe these young people in reports to funders, presentations at conferences and in journal articles?

### **Supporting Groups**

- **Managing risk in group settings:** Work which takes place in a group setting requires careful planning, risk assessment and support, recognising the potential for additional risks to participants. Case managers should assess and discuss the suitability of group work for the individual child or young person. Clear criteria should be developed as a way of thinking about the different dynamics of placing young people in a group. A full risk and needs assessment should always precede the development of group work and this should consider risks including the likelihood of re-traumatisation, stigma, reduction of safety and discrimination. Prior to finalising the group, local partners should work together with the young people individually to think about risks from their perspective. In such work, it should be explained that there will be no expectation to share their own experiences. Children and young people working in the group setting should be supported to employ techniques that enable them to protect themselves. For example, this may be through using the third person in discussions and using case studies or digital stories about other young people's experiences to explore related themes. In addition, partners should ensure that during group work:
  - there is a minimum of two facilitators
  - there is collaborative development of a group agreement
  - there is clear agreement on how the group agreement is managed in practice (i.e. whether and what sanctions would be used)
  - activities to support group interaction (ice-breakers, energisers etc.) are included
  - facilitators include activities which promote safe and comfortable endings.

- **Managing confidentiality in group settings and activities:** In work which takes place in group settings, participants will be supported to consider the limits to which professionals and children and young people can guarantee confidentiality and the need for this to inform participants' choices of what information to share within this setting.

**Example activity to explore the limits of confidentiality in group settings: The toothpaste exercise -**

- Write the word 'confidential' on flipchart paper and ask the young people to explain what it means to them.
- Prompt discussion and, once thoughts have been shared, provide a definition such as '*something to not tell other people*'.
- Explain that during these sessions, '*what is said in the room, stays in the room*' **but.....**

If they share information that:

- suggests that they are going to come to harm
- suggests that another young person or vulnerable adult is going to come to harm
- suggests that a serious crime has been or is going to be committed

...you would have to break confidentiality and share information with others in order to keep them or others safe.

- Ask if there are any questions about this or whether they want to 'hypothetically' test scenarios to see if they would count as 'harm'.
- Next explain that it is also impossible to guarantee confidentiality when working in a group, as although we ask everybody not to share things outside the room, sometimes things may slip out.
- Explain that this means that it's really important that people don't share anything that they don't want others to know or things that they may be embarrassed about now or in the future.
- You could give an example of a silly or embarrassing situation here....
- To help young people understand the idea of disclosure and that once they say something that suggests one of the three points above, (or something embarrassing) they can't take it back, the facilitator should squeeze a tube of toothpaste out onto a piece of card and then give the young people a couple of minutes to come up with suggestions of how to get the toothpaste back into the tube.
- At the end of the guessing (there is no way to do it!) highlight to the young people that they are in control of what they talk about in the group setting – but they should make that decision with the knowledge that once they've let something out, like the toothpaste, it can't go back inside.

## 7. Reflective practice and accountability

- **A commitment to reflective practice:** When leading or contributing to projects such as LEAP, the International Centre aims to facilitate opportunities to share learning with and between partners on children's safe and ethical participation, as part of its role. Opportunities for reflective practice should also be built in at local level by project partners. This should be recognised as part of debriefing and capturing learning to further improve safe and ethical practice with children and young people.
- **Feedback from participants** should be built into all projects. A range of opportunities should be developed to allow participants to challenge and provide feedback on their experience of the process, both during and following completion of their involvement. Records of this feedback should be used to adapt projects, influence future work and encourage critical reflection.

### Example activity for gaining feedback after a session

Step 1. *Say a big thank you:*

- Thank everyone for their hard work, for the interesting discussions and for sharing their views.
- Give an overview of what was shared and ask if there is anything else anyone wants to add or whether there is something that they don't want to share when reporting the discussions back.

Step 2. *Evaluation:*

- Ask everyone to stand in a circle.
- Ask each person to say something positive they will take away from the day (e.g. something they've learned, a friendship they've made, a feeling they have) and then to say something that they'll leave behind (e.g. one of the activities they didn't like, the not nice snacks!)
- End the session by letting people know that you're there if they want to talk or that they can share something in the suggestions box.

- **Feedback to participants:** All participants (children, young people, parents/carers and supporting project staff) are entitled to full feedback on the outcomes of their participation in research and other project-related activities, both immediately afterwards and, where possible, in the medium to long term. Structures should be put in place to enable this during project planning and ongoing review.

## References

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Lansdown G and O’Kane, C. (2015) *A Toolkit for Monitoring and Evaluating Children’s participation: Introduction*. Booklet 1, available at URL: <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/toolkit-monitoring-and-evaluating-childrens-participation-introduction-booklet-1> [accessed June 17 2017]

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