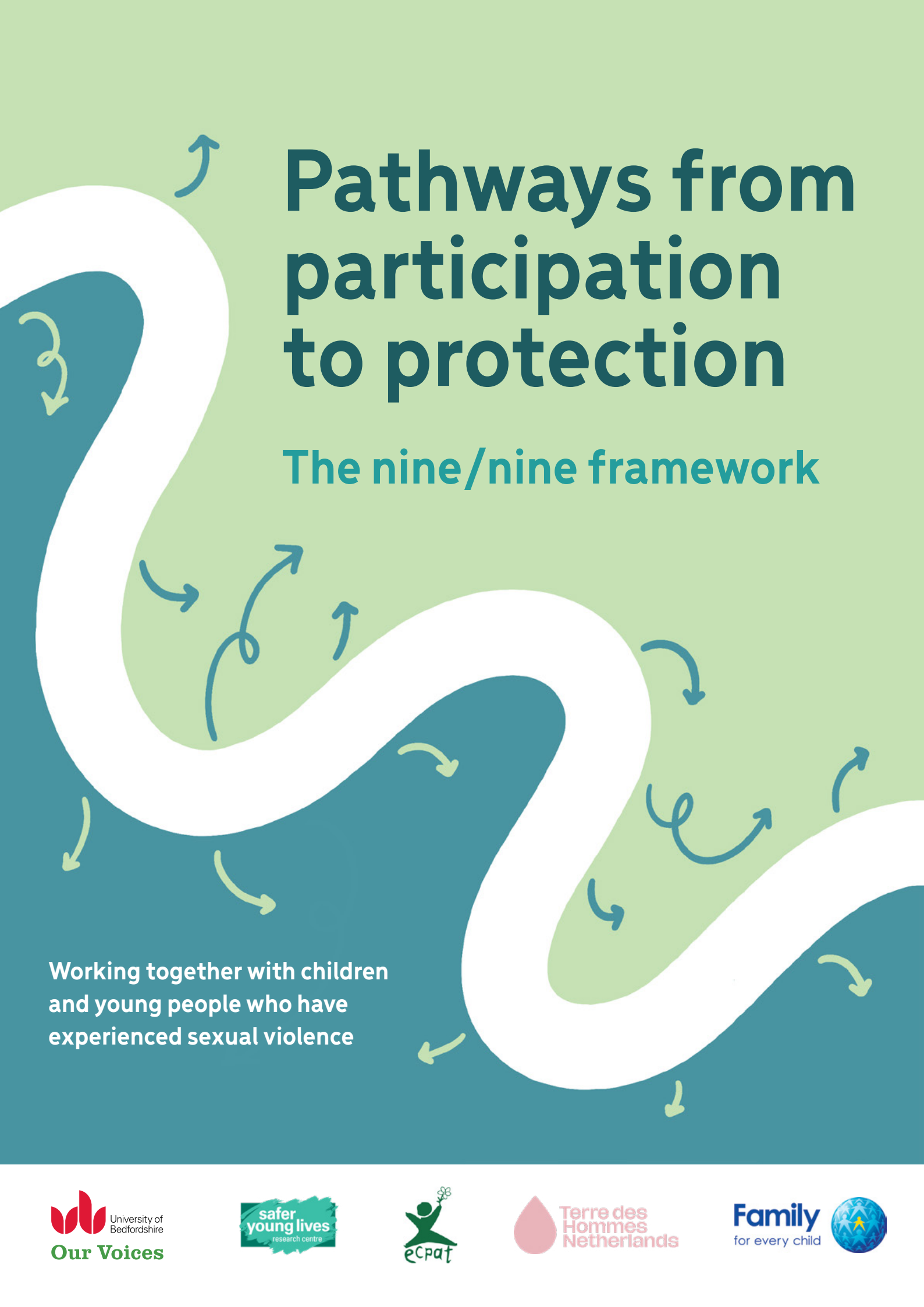




Pathways from participation to protection

The nine/nine framework

Working together with children and young people who have experienced sexual violence

About this resource

This resource has been developed for practitioners who are planning to initiate participatory projects with children and young people who have experienced sexual violence¹.

The resource is not a set of guidelines. It is a tool to help you explore participation rights and protection rights for children and young people you may wish to collaborate with and help you formulate – and articulate to others – how you have considered these rights in your work.

It sets out the ways that participation can potentially strengthen protection. It builds on others' work in this field, particularly the 'Participation is Protective' model developed by the Safer Young Lives Research Centre's Young Researchers' Advisory Panel (YRAP)². It aims to clearly outline how the participation rights of children and young people who have experienced sexual violence can potentially contribute to **nine protective pathways for children, young people and wider society**.

Facilitating the participation rights of children and young people who have experienced sexual violence can be challenging and complex. This resource draws on the **nine requirements for meaningful participation**³ to help you to consider what needs to be in place to support safe, ethical and meaningful participation, specifically when working with children and young people who have experienced sexual violence.

It is divided into three sections. The first provides some background and context to the topics being explored. The second outlines the **nine** protective pathways and **nine** requirements for meaningful participation. The third presents a tool you can use in your advocacy. It includes an example of how the '**nine/nine framework**' can be used to explain a planned participatory project or activity to others. This section also includes a blank template that you can adapt, use and share with children and young people, parents and carers, teachers, community leaders and funders to help them understand why you are hoping to gain their support for your project. The template aims to capture:

- how you hope to support children and young people's rights to protection throughout the project
- how the project may contribute to wider protective goals and pathways and;
- how you will attend to core requirements to facilitate meaningful and ethical participatory work.

¹ The Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (2025: 29) state that: 'Sexual violence against children encompasses both sexual exploitation and sexual abuse of children and can be used as an umbrella term to refer jointly to these phenomena, both with regard to acts of commission and omission and associated to physical and psychological violence'.

² The paper draws on a number of research projects (including quotes from these studies) initiated at the Safer Young Lives Research Centre at the University of Bedfordshire. It builds on work by colleagues and peers working in this field including: Warrington, 2013; Warrington and Larkin, 2019; Warrington et al., 2024; Hamilton et al., 2019 and Lefevre et al., 2019.

³ The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009 stated that 'all processes in which a child or children are heard and participate' must be: transparent and informative; voluntary; respectful; relevant; child-friendly; inclusive; supported by training; safe and sensitive to risk; and accountable'.

1. Background

CONTEXT

Sexual violence affects millions of children and young people globally each year⁴. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989), includes a number of 'clusters' of rights, including the **rights to participation and the rights to protection**. Listening to, and giving due weight to the views of the child (article 12) is a key principle and underpins how the Convention should be interpreted and applied in practice. However, evidence suggests that children and young people affected by sexual violence are often **denied their fundamental rights to participate**.

Although it should not be necessary to outline the case for why participation rights are critical for children and young people with these experiences, there is in fact a very compelling argument to be put forward. When children and young people are involved in safe, ethical and meaningful decision-making processes, this can **potentially promote protection and support positive outcomes for them, and others, in a variety of ways**.

PARTICIPATION AND PROTECTION 'RIGHTS CLUSTERS'

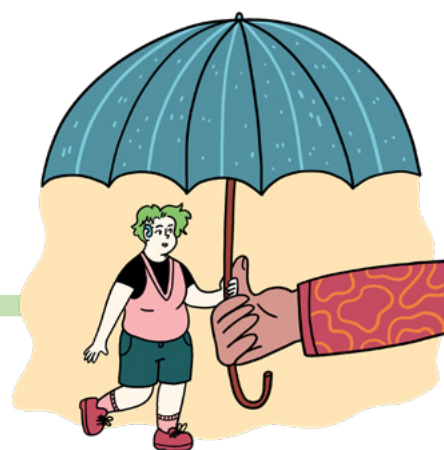
Participation rights

- article 12 right to be heard
- article 13 freedom of expression
- articles 14 freedom of thought, belief and religion
- article 15 freedom of association
- article 16 right to privacy
- article 17 access to information from the media

While article 12 is often described as the 'participation' article, articles 13 – 17 are also essential in realising rights to participation⁵.

Protection rights⁶

- article 19 protection from violence, abuse and neglect
- article 34 protection from sexual exploitation
- article 35 protection from abduction, sale and trafficking.



⁴ Ligiero et al., 2019.

⁵ Ruiz-Casares et al., 2017.

⁶ The UNCRC includes numerous articles addressing protection rights. When focussing on childhood sexual violence the most relevant include those listed in the box. However, depending on individual circumstances, other articles that aim to protect children will be relevant. This includes those associated with parental separation (articles 9–11), alternative care (20 and 25) or those concerned with children with disabilities (article 23), children from minority groups (article 30) and refugee children (article 22). An Optional Protocol of the UNCRC on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution, and Child Pornography (OPSC) further extends rights with the intention of guaranteeing protection.

BARRIERS TO EXERCISING PARTICIPATION RIGHTS

Despite the UNCRC's cluster of rights dedicated to participation, there are a range of barriers that prevent children and young people from claiming and exercising these rights, including:

- the lack of understanding amongst practitioners surrounding the importance of child and youth participation
- adultism, paternalism and protectionism⁷
- practitioners' fears and a lack of confidence in meaningfully engaging children and young people⁸
- different beliefs regarding children and young people's competencies⁹
- the lack of time practitioners have to prioritise relationships and participatory practice¹⁰.



PARTICULAR TENSIONS AROUND PARTICIPATION AND PROTECTION FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED SEXUAL VIOLENCE

When working with children and young people who have experienced traumatic events, there are often additional barriers to navigate¹¹.

When it comes to enabling participation rights for children and young people who have experienced sexual violence specifically, additional blocks emerge including:

- the belief that children and young people who have experienced sexual violence are 'too vulnerable' and therefore asking them to engage is an 'additional burden'¹²
- not seeing children and young people ('victims') as agents of change¹³
- challenges in developing a sense of safety and trust with children and young people, a foundation needed for their participation¹⁴
- fears of triggering and re-traumatising¹⁵
- enhanced fears that projects will not uphold and maintain children and young people's privacy and confidentiality¹⁶
- (for group work) concerns that bringing children and young people together will present certain risks¹⁷
- risk of legal retaliation, liability and reputational risks or other negative outcomes for the organisations and individual practitioners involved in participatory projects if things 'go wrong' and mistakes are made¹⁸.

7 Collins, 2017.

8 van Bijleveld et al., 2020.

9 McMellon and Tisdall, 2020.

10 van Bijleveld et al., 2015.

11 Vis and Fossum, 2015; Diaz et al., 2019; Toros, 2021; Woodman et al., 2023.

12 Ruiz-Casares et al., 2017.

13 We use the language of 'victim' here to portray how children and young people may be viewed by professionals. We prefer the term 'survivor' to acknowledge children and young people's strengths and capacities but equally recognise that all labels can be problematic and may be, understandably, rejected by individual children and young people themselves.

14 Cody and Soares, 2023.

15 Ibid; Warrington et al., 2024.

16 Ibid.

17 Frost, 2019.

18 Cody et al., 2024.

These 'blocks' which often prevent participation opportunities for children and young people tend to be framed as actions being taken in the 'best interests' of the child. However, as has been articulated by others, it is in the best interests of a child to enjoy *all* their human rights¹⁹.

When children and young people come into contact with organisations due to concerns for their safety and protection, it is natural that practitioners working with them take a 'protective' stance¹⁰. Once children and young people are identified as 'victims' practitioners can struggle to reconcile this with the notion that these same young people can also be 'agents of change'²¹. This means that those who have experienced sexual violence are often not included in decision-making about their own needs, or in discussions about how to help or improve responses for others²².

Over the years, practitioners have had to fight hard to ensure children and young people who have experienced sexual violence are recognised as victims and/or survivors. They have had to highlight children and young people's vulnerabilities to counter dominant, harmful narratives (particularly in relation to child sexual exploitation) that children and young people are 'criminals', 'child prostitutes', or consenting to the harm they have experienced. This work has been

(and continues to be) critical but has also led to alternative narratives which do not necessarily serve children and young people in the best way. For example, the 'passive victim' narrative can in turn downplay young people's agency²³.

Conversely, children and young people who have experienced sexual violence may sometimes be perceived as having 'agency', but the 'wrong kind' of agency – 'ambiguous agency'²⁴. This is when young people's views and ideas do not align with, or directly challenge policies and approaches taken by, adults and therefore their perspectives may be disregarded. However, evidence continues to highlight the importance of understanding children and young people's agency within their specific social structures, contexts and relationships if we hope to develop effective responses²⁵. What is clear is that victimhood and agency need to sit concurrently and that identities of 'victim' and 'agent of change' can (and should) co-exist.

If we are to improve the current situation for children and young people impacted by sexual violence, one way forward is to initiate dialogue to explain 'why' participation is important in the context of sexual violence and demonstrate the interdependency of children's rights²⁶.

19 Mitchell et al., 2023.

20 Horwath et al., 2012.

21 Warrington, 2013.

22 Brodie et al., 2016; Brown, 2006; Warrington, 2013.

23 Warrington, 2013.

24 Bordonaro and Payne, 2012, for more on this see Cody et al., 2024.

25 Abebe, 2019; Ranganathan et al., 2017.

26 van Bijleveld et al., 2020; Warrington and Larkin, 2019; Warrington et al., 2024.

The nine/nine framework



THE NINE PROTECTIVE PATHWAYS

Contributing to protective pathways for children and young people

Evidence shows that when children and young people who have experienced sexual violence have the opportunity to safely, meaningfully and ethically engage in decision-making that informs and influences decisions about their own care (or leads to positive change for other children and young people) that this can contribute to a range of protective factors for them personally.

1. CONFIDENCE IN THEMSELVES

'Because when you are told for years that you're shit and you're beaten and you're abused, you don't feel like you're worthy, it takes your soul'²⁷

'It's only possible to protect yourself if you think you're worth protecting'²⁸

When children and young people experience sexual violence this can lead to low self-esteem or a lack of self-worth²⁹. Opportunities to participate can help build children and young people's confidence and make them know that they matter³⁰.

When children and young people are asked for their views and insights this can increase their sense of self-worth, importance and value³¹.

When children and young people feel an increased sense of self-esteem, it can help them feel worthy of protection and therefore they may be more likely to engage with support systems and services³³.

When children and young people are asked for their opinion, and their views are respected and used to inform decisions, this can develop their confidence and sense of self-worth³³. Seeing the finished 'outputs' of their work can also lead to a sense of pride³⁴. Having ideas or work recognised and applauded by others can lead to opportunities for both approval and recognition.

Engaging in different initiatives can contribute to new positive identities: as youth advocates, advisors, experts and peer researchers or supporters. This can challenge negative representations and build self-esteem³⁵. For young people who may have experienced negative and stigmatising identities in the past, this aspect can be particularly impactful³⁶.

'The process of recovery is about building new identities different from the ones the exploiter and the sex trade gave them'³⁷

Taken together, the opportunities to be valued and contribute in positive ways through participatory engagement may counter some of the negative impacts of sexual violence on how individuals think about themselves and their worth.

27 Taylor-Browne, 2002.

28 Pearce et al., 2002.

29 Pearce et al., 2002; Taylor-Browne, 2002; Brown, 2004.

30 Lansdown, 2020.

31 Cody, 2017; Hamilton et al., 2019.

32 Hamilton et al., 2019.

33 Strauss Swanson and Szymanski, 2020; Godoy et al., 2022.

34 Cody, 2020.

35 Brown, 2006; Hagel, 2013; Strauss Swanson and Szymanski, 2020.

36 Salmon and Rickaby, 2014; Cody, 2020.

37 Female professional in USA, as cited in Cody and Soares, 2023.

2. CAPACITIES

'I have more knowledge about sexual violence and about how to prevent it'³⁸.

When children and young people lack self-confidence and esteem (and may also have missed out on education and other opportunities to 'achieve') supporting them to build knowledge and skills through participative projects and opportunities can be an important aspect for their protection.

When children and young people are provided with relevant information and can engage in decision-making and other activities related to their participation, this can be a mechanism to build a range of skills and knowledge³⁹. This may range from team building skills to specific skills in public speaking, advocacy or research⁴⁰. Such opportunities may prove useful for future study and employment and in some cases can also lead to a form of accreditation⁴¹.

'I know in regard to safeguarding some things must be decided by practitioners but it's the small things, asking the young people where they feel safe to have their meeting, if they want to bring someone etc'⁴².

3. CHOICE AND CONTROL

When children and young people experience sexual violence, they experience a lack of power and control. This lack of autonomy and choice regularly occurs in their subsequent interactions with practitioners⁴³.

In the aftermath of any traumatic event, family members or practitioners often attempt to determine the course of action and make plans for the individual's recovery. Yet disregarding the wishes of the survivor may further act to disempower them⁴⁴. Those working with survivors of trauma therefore believe that enabling individuals to 'take back' an element of control is central to healing and recovery⁴⁵.

When children and young people are not involved in decision-making about their own care and are living in for example shelters for trafficking survivors or other care facilities, transitioning out into the community and into independence may be more difficult⁴⁶. When children and young people are given options and choices and are enabled to inform and influence decision-making this can lead to a sense of control and agency⁴⁷, the first step to feeling empowered. Empowerment only happens when children and young people not only *feel* like they have power but when they have *genuine opportunities* to influence and make changes. When shared decision-making is not facilitated this can lead to a lack of agency and sense of disempowerment in children and young people⁴⁸.

38 Youth advocate in Albania, Bovarnick and Cody, 2020.

39 Findings from participatory projects that have involved young people with lived experience of childhood sexual violence in decision making in different ways have reported benefits related to: assertiveness (Hagell, 2013); building communication skills (Hagell, 2013; Bovarnick and Cody, 2020); increased team work skills (Bovarnick and Cody, 2020); increased knowledge of rights (Hagell, 2013; Bovarnick and Cody, 2020) and; boundary setting (Pearce, 2010; Strauss Swanson and Szymanski, 2020). And depending on the content and aims of the work, knowledge surrounding: help seeking and health (Hagell, 2013) sexual violence (Bovarnick and Cody, 2020) child rights, laws and policies (Bovarnick and Cody, 2020).

40 Pearce, 2010; Dhungel et al., 2019; Bovarnick and Cody, 2020.

41 Pearce, 2010; Hagell, 2013; Cody, 2020.

42 Young researcher in UK, as cited in Warrington et al., 2024

43 Jago et al., 2011; Warrington, 2013; Cody, 2017.

44 Herman, 1997.

45 Pearce, 2010.

46 Cordosa Tsai et al., 2020; Križ and Roundtree-Swain, 2017.

47 Strauss Swanson and Szymanski, 2020.

48 Aussems et al., 2020.

4. CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

'[what helped was] meeting other young people because actually if it's not their fault, then it's not mine either, you know'⁴⁹.

When children and young people experience sexual violence, they can feel they are the 'only one' which can lead to a sense of self-blame and isolation. Participatory activities that bring groups of children and young people together can lead to group dialogue and critical reflection. This can help them to understand their own situation alongside others⁵⁰. This is necessary to understand 'structural oppression' (how societal structures and systems, rather than individual actions, perpetuate inequality and disadvantage for certain groups) which in itself is a critical step in the path to empowerment.

'Some young people have told me that working with peers was more healing than therapy'⁵¹.

It can be helpful for children and young people to hear from others, exposing them to new perspectives and understandings. Such exposure may help them to reframe or reflect on their own experiences in a different way⁵².

When children and young people understand how structural issues impact their experiences, they may be more motivated to take action and draw on their experiences to improve the situation for others⁵³. When they gain a sense of others' injustices, they may also be more motivated to speak out for those who have been silenced⁵⁴.

Helping to strengthen professional practice to support children and young people

Engagement in participatory projects and processes can provide an avenue to support children and young people individually. This can occur through supporting them to develop the skills required for decision-making and start to recognise that they do have choices and that their voice and opinions are important and do matter.

Meaningfully facilitating children and young people's rights to participation can also help practitioners working in the sexual violence sector. It can help to support relationship building with children and young people and lead to the creation of better services and interventions.

5. CONFIDENCE IN THE CARE BEING GIVEN (building trust between professionals and young people)

Experiencing sexual violence can have a detrimental impact on children and young people's ability to trust others. This can be compounded by negative responses to the abuse by family members, peers, and practitioners. In turn, children and young people may withdraw and actively refrain from building relationships⁵⁵. This means that building trust is usually the first step in developing a relationship with a practitioner. This then forms the basis of all other activities and interventions⁵⁶.

49 Cody and Soares, 2023.

50 Dhungel et al., 2019; Lockyer and Koenig, 2022; Godoy et al., 2025.

51 Professional in UK, as cited in Cody and Soares, 2023.

52 Hickie and Roe-Sepowitz, 2014; Hamilton et al., 2019; Cody and Soares, 2023.

53 Bovarnick and Cody, 2020.

54 Bovarnick and Cody, 2020.

55 McKenzie-Mohr et al., 2012; Sapiro, 2020.

56 Herman, 1997; Valenti et al., 2020.

Developing trust can take time. One way of supporting the development of trust with children and young people who have experienced sexual violence is through promoting a young person's agency in decision-making⁵⁷.

Recognising and respecting young people's agency provides the conditions to allow shared decision-making to take place. If children and young people's views and opinions are not taken into account, and the reasons for decisions being made are not explained, this is likely to damage trust between children, young people and practitioners. If young people's voices go unheard, assumptions are made about them, or if practitioners do not believe young people, this can damage trust⁵⁸. Similarly, when confidentiality is broken trust is broken, and this can have a ripple effect where children and young people stop trusting everyone⁵⁹. Trust is central to effective work with children and young people. Working collaboratively and facilitating young people's engagement in decision-making may nurture this and support practitioners in their efforts to effectively engage with, and support, young people.

6. CREDIBILITY

'If a practitioner sat there and said to me 'oh yea it's going to be fine', I'd probably be like 'um, but you don't really know because you haven't been through it and you're not my age and you don't know what school's like and stuff'. But if it's another young person who had been through it and said, 'you know what it might be really bad at the time, but it does get better' and you do believe it more because you think, yea you're not lying, because you've been through it'⁶⁰.

When children and young people who have experienced sexual violence are excluded from decision-making about their own care, they may respond to that care negatively⁶¹. If services and interventions are designed and informed by children and young people with lived experience of sexual violence, this can enhance the credibility of those services and improve uptake and 'buy in' by young people.

When children and young people are involved in decision-making about their care this can lead to greater 'buy in' from them which can result in better health and recovery outcomes⁶². Research exploring the context of health care, demonstrates that working collaboratively with young people so they can: develop goals; understand the rationale for decisions and interventions; explore different options; and determine decisions, may contribute to a sense of control and ownership⁶³. This in turn, may lead to greater commitment by the young person to maintain and complete interventions and/or treatment plans⁶⁴. Therapeutic providers working with young people impacted by sexual violence overwhelmingly emphasise the importance of collaborative decision-making to develop effective responses⁶⁵.

57 Aussems et al., 2020; Barnert et al., 2020; Sapiro, 2020.

58 Cordisco Tsai et al., 2020.

59 Cordisco Tsai et al., 2020.

60 Young person in UK cited in Cody et al., 2022a

61 Johnson et al., 2018; Lefevre et al., 2019; Kosher and Ben-Arieh, 2020.

62 Warrington, 2013; Sahl and Knoepke, 2018; Barnert et al 2020.

63 Sahl and Knoepke, 2018; Barnert et al., 2020.

64 Sahl and Knoepke, 2018; Barnert et al., 2020.

65 Tiwari et al., 2021.

When children and young people are excluded from decision-making processes, this can lead to them finding other ways to exert control which may increase risk of disengagement from, and resistance to, services and support⁶⁶. In the context of care placements, young people's lack of involvement in decision-making (whilst not the only factor) may act as a push factor leading to young people running away from placements or actively contributing to the breakdown of placements.

In terms of broader services and support, information and messages conveyed by peers who have experienced sexual violence may have increased credibility and resonate further with young people⁶⁷. Children and young people impacted by sexual violence may be more willing to hear from, and take on board advice from peers, or those who have gone through similar things, as compared to messages delivered by practitioners⁶⁸.

'The girls have been through the system... they understand better than us what the issues are'⁶⁹.

7. CREATIVITY

Children and young people who have experienced sexual violence hold unique knowledge about their lives and needs which is critical when assessing and planning responses and interventions. They also possess knowledge which can be harnessed to develop better programmes and services for other children and young people.

Research with young people specifically affected by child sexual exploitation and trafficking supports the fact that the participation of young people in decisions surrounding their care is critical⁷⁰. Research from the broader child protection field suggests that when children and young people are supported to engage in meetings where decisions are made by practitioners, they are more likely to positively influence outcomes as compared to meetings where they are not present⁷¹. When they are involved in meetings about safeguarding this can provide them with the opportunity to: challenge assumptions and interpretations made by practitioners; identify their own concerns and influence decisions⁷². When young people are supported to meaningfully engage in meetings, conversations and assessments, this can lead to a better understanding of the young person's strengths, risks and needs. This can then lead to a plan that is more accurate and decisions that align with the needs of the young person⁷³.

66 Warrington, 2013; Khan and Ungar, 2025.

67 Cody et al., 2022b; Bath et al., 2021.

68 Cody, 2017; Moore, 2017; Hamilton et al., 2019. Studies exploring the use of 'peer supporters' in the context of sexual violence underscore the added level of credibility that individuals often extend to those with lived experience of sexual violence and exploitation (Buck et al., 2017; Hotelling et al., 2004; Deer and Baumgartner, 2019; Cody et al., 2022b).

69 Facilitator in Serbia, cited in Bovarnick and Cody, 2020.

70 Warrington, 2013; Cordosa Tsai et al., 2020.

71 Vis and Thomas, 2009; van Bijleveld et al., 2015.

72 Warrington, 2013.

73 Warrington, 2013.

Involving children and young people in research, consultations, meetings and other activities can ignite new innovative ideas for addressing prevention and responses to sexual violence⁷⁴. Calls have been made for children and young people, including those impacted by the issue, to be more actively involved in developing and informing prevention interventions⁷⁵. Young people are often critical of traditional prevention messages and campaigns that are targeted at them, but designed by adults, believing these may 'miss the mark'⁷⁶. Children and young people, when asked, have their own ideas of how they think they could effectively reach their peers⁷⁷. Practitioners report that often young people come up with ideas they would not have previously considered⁷⁸.

Consensus is mounting that children and young people must have more involvement in informing and influencing the research agenda surrounding the sexual violence of children⁷⁹. Their involvement can contribute to research that is more relevant, appropriate and insightful thus improving the evidence-base⁸⁰. Involving children and young people in strategic decisions about funding can lead to the identification of new problems, potential solutions and ultimately different initiatives being funded and supported⁸¹.

8. PROMOTING COMMITMENTS

Participation can strengthen accountability by enabling children and young people to learn about child protection and justice processes and systems. Engagement may also support them to access individuals and institutions and have their views and concerns heard and considered⁸². When children and young people are provided with information about their rights, this enables them to know what they should expect from practitioners and they are therefore in a better position to demand that these rights are respected⁸³. Such experiences can help them hold practitioners to account⁸⁴.

Many services designed to support children and young people impacted by sexual violence may struggle to meet their complex needs and effectively engage them⁸⁵. Those commissioning, funding, designing and delivering programmes, policies and services for children and young people should be held accountable to effectively work with those they are tasked to serve⁸⁶. This requires that practitioners work collaboratively with children and young people to reduce harm and meet their needs. As a starting point, working with individuals who have lived experience may help to shape programmes and interventions to help make them more welcoming, accessible and effective⁸⁷.

Similarly, if children and young people are involved in advisory groups or monitoring and evaluation processes, this increases accountability to funders, donors, service users and research participants⁸⁸. Therefore, engagement in decision-making processes provides a mechanism for holding practitioners and other duty-bearers accountable.

74 Feinstein and O' Kane, 2009.

75 Feinstein and O' Kane, 2009; Cody, 2017; UN Special Rapporteur on the sale and sexual exploitation of children, 2022.

76 Cody, 2017; Weston and Mythen, 2020.

77 Cody, 2017.

78 Bovarnick and Cody, 2020.

79 Bovarnick et al., 2018; Hamilton et al., 2019; Ritterbusch et al., 2020.

80 Bovarnick et al., 2018.

81 Warrington, 2018.

82 Lansdown, 2018.

83 Hagell, 2013.

84 Križ and Roundtree-Swain, 2017.

85 Hickle and Hallett, 2016; Johnson et al., 2018.

86 Melander et al., 2019.

87 Dodsworth, 2014; Hickle and Hallett, 2016; Melander et al., 2019.

88 Warrington, 2018.

9. CHALLENGING THE CULTURE OF SILENCE

Unlike many global challenges, sexual violence remains hidden and highly stigmatised. Stigmatisation of children and young people, particularly those impacted by child sexual exploitation, is a problem that occurs across cultural contexts⁸⁹. Some languages lack vocabulary for terms associated with childhood sexual violence and in many cultures and communities, talking about sex remains taboo⁹⁰.

Children and young people can experience self-stigma, where they feel shame, guilt and blame because of what they have experienced⁹¹. These feelings can emerge before the abuse is disclosed, and in the aftermath of a disclosure, with children and young people often experiencing negative responses and discrimination from others, including practitioners⁹². This cultural environment creates barriers to speaking out and can lead to children and young people lacking knowledge about what is abusive and exploitative behaviour. This in turn means that if children and young people do experience sexual violence, they can feel confused, alone and isolated.

Opportunities to participate can help to challenge the culture of silence surrounding sexual violence and thereby serve as a protective factor for children and young people.

When children and young people with experiences of sexual violence are given the opportunity to talk about sexual violence with their peers, this can help to break the 'taboo' and silencing surrounding sexual violence⁹³. Likewise, research with peer support groups has identified that collective spaces are recognised to be a powerful arena to challenge the silence, secrecy and shame associated with sexual violence⁹⁴.



⁸⁹ Buller et al., 2020.

⁹⁰ Sawriker and Katz, 2017; Gill and Harrison, 2019.

⁹¹ Buller et al., 2020.

⁹² Taylor-Browne, 2002; Brown, 2004; Holger-Ambrose et al., 2013; Creegan et al., 2005; Warrington, 2013; Hallett, 2013; Cordisco Tsai et al., 2020; Allnock et al., 2022.

⁹³ Cody, 2017; Bovarnick and Cody, 2020.

⁹⁴ Konya et al., 2020.

THE NINE BASIC REQUIREMENTS

Just because something is labelled as 'participatory' this does not mean it is inherently 'good' and will lead to positive protective outcomes.

In 2009, the Committee on the Rights of the Child published General Comment 12 introducing nine 'basic requirements' to support the ethical and meaningful participation of children⁹⁵.

This highlights how child participation must be:

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| 1. TRANSPARENT AND INFORMATIVE | 6. INCLUSIVE |
| 2. VOLUNTARY | 7. SUPPORTED BY TRAINING FOR ADULTS |
| 3. RESPECTFUL | 8. SAFE AND SENSITIVE TO RISK; AND |
| 4. RELEVANT | 9. ACCOUNTABLE |
| 5. CHILD-FRIENDLY | |

To maximise the potential for the nine protective pathways outlined above, projects need to be underpinned by these nine requirements and therefore it may be helpful to think about projects in terms of the nine/nine framework.



95 UNCRC General Comment 12, 2009.

What do these requirements mean in the context of childhood sexual violence?

Facilitating child and youth participation in the context of sexual violence can be ethically complex. Taking the time to think carefully about how these nine requirements will be met throughout (and following) children and young people's engagement is paramount. Planning will not extinguish the ethical concerns, risks and challenges that are inherent in working with children and young people in this area, but it may help to manage and minimise potential problems. As has been suggested by others, this recognition of the rights of children and young people to be protected *whilst they participate* is as important as realising that rights to participation can be protective⁹⁶.

See the template below as an example of the things you may want to unpack and consider for your own project.

'Children cannot be kept safe if they are not heard and cannot be heard where they are not safe'⁹⁷.

Concluding thoughts

This resource has introduced a framework to organise and reflect on the varied ways that participatory engagement can lead to protective outcomes for children and young people who have experienced sexual violence. This includes participation in their own care as well as broader projects and processes aiming to create knowledge and learning pertaining to sexual violence. It demonstrates that children and young people's participation should not be seen as just something that 'should' be done, but as an important part of their growth and recovery and a process for developing more relevant, locally grounded, credible and effective programming.

We hope this resource helps practitioners, researchers and other advocates to open up dialogue with those in their communities – children, young people, parents, carers, teachers, funders and policy makers – by helping them articulate 'why' participation is important in the context of sexual violence.

3: Advocacy Tool

On the following pages you will find two templates with some prompt questions to help you think about how you can communicate to others how your participatory project may potentially contribute to the nine protective pathways and how you plan to meet the

nine requirements of ethical and meaningful participation.

You can use the blank templates at the end of the resource and adapt these to fit your specific project.

⁹⁶ Mitchell et al., 2023.

⁹⁷ Mitchell et al., 2023: 4.

How will your project or initiative potentially contribute to the nine protective pathways?

Through this project we will ...
(Prompt questions)

- How will you create space for children and young people to share their ideas and priorities?
 - How might you validate their ideas?
 - How will you acknowledge their contributions?
- How will children and young people be referred to in the project? (e.g. youth advocates/ leaders/advisors)

Which will contribute to building children and young peoples'...

Confidence

- What skills, knowledge and capacities will be supported in the project?
- Will there be a structured programme of training?
- Are there opportunities to link any training with accredited schemes?

Capacities

- Are there different options for how children and young people may wish to engage? (e.g. inputting to project design, co-developing elements of the work, leading at different stages)
- Will children and young people be able to opt in and out of different activities?

Choice and control

- Will children and young people have the chance to meet together and critically reflect on different issues?
- Will children and young people have an opportunity to identify actions for change and their role within that?

Critical consciousness

**Through this project we will ...
(Prompt questions)**

- In which ways will you build trust with the children and young people involved?
- How will you approach communication?
- How will you approach and explain confidentiality and the sharing of information?

Which will help to strengthen practitioner practice to support children and young people through improving...

Confidence in the care being given

- How will children and young people's inputs and ideas in the project be used to create resources and messages for their peers?

Credibility

- How will you provide space for children and young people to share the unique knowledge they hold about their lives and needs?
- How will you draw on children and young people's skills, abilities and strengths and identify how each individual can contribute to the project in different ways based on these strengths?
- How willing are you to think outside of the box and tackle the issues that may be hard to confront?

Creativity

- What opportunities will there be for children and young people to learn about their rights, entitlements and complaints mechanisms?
- How will children and young people involved be able to hold you accountable as an organisation?
- What feedback loops will be in place to update children and young people throughout and after the project ends?
- How can you act as a facilitator so that children and young people's actions and ideas reach individuals and institutions with decision-making power?
- How will you monitor and evaluate how well things are going?

Commitment

- Will there be opportunities to provide a safe, sensitive and age-appropriate space for children and young people to explore consent, privacy, acceptable behaviours, respectful relationships and boundaries around their bodies?
- Can you explore together where is safe for children and young people to go or who to contact if they need help and support during and following the project?
- Will you share information with children and young people so that they know what to do if they feel unsafe or have questions and concerns about themselves or peers?
- How will you express and model that nothing should be unspeakable?

Our ability to challenge the culture of silence

How will your project meet the nine requirements?

What actions will we take in this project to meet these requirements? (Prompt questions)

**Transparent and
informative**

- What type of information will you provide and to who?
- What are the key parts that you will emphasise that may be particularly important for children and young people involved?

Voluntary

- How will you explain what you mean by 'voluntary'?
- What might you need to explain in more detail?

Respectful

- How will you demonstrate 'respect' in this project?
- How will you respect people's time and expertise?
 - How will you respect boundaries?
- In what ways will you recognise and respect the emotional labour that may be required for this work?
- How will you be respectful of the wider family and community?

Relevant

- If you are using tools and activities developed elsewhere, how will you adapt or contextualise these to make them meaningful and relevant?

Child-friendly

- Who will review the language and terminology you are using to check it's appropriate?
- What ideas do you have for making information more accessible and engaging?

How will your project meet the nine requirements? Continued.

What actions will we take in this project to meet these requirements? (Prompt questions)

Inclusive

- How might you engage children and young people from minoritised groups in the work and how might they feel about participating?
- How can you make the project welcoming and accessible to all?
- What resources and capacities do you have to make the project accessible to young people who may have additional needs related to, for example, disabilities and language?
- How flexible (timeframes and budgets) can you be to accommodate for individual needs and preferences?

Supported by training for adults

- What relevant training and support is available to staff who will be facilitating the project? (e.g. on safeguarding, trauma-informed practice)
- Can you provide training to staff who may be working with the group as consultants, designers etc.?
- Are there ways you can support basic training or activities to prepare the different 'audiences' who may engage with children and young people in this project?

Safe and sensitive to risk

- Can you develop an ethical protocol for the project which includes details surrounding the rights of those involved in the project?
- Will you develop a risk assessment for the project and a live risk register that will be revisited and updated throughout the project?
- Do you have a process for undertaking individual risk, benefit and needs assessments with children and young people who are thinking about getting involved in the project?
- Can you involve children and young people in collective risk assessing when engaging in different activities?

Accountable

- Do you have a complaints mechanism for this project?
- How and when will you feedback to children and young people involved in the project?
- Can you set up a participatory monitoring and evaluation process so that we can learn what is working for young people and what is not?

TEMPLATE

How will your project or initiative potentially contribute to the nine protective pathways?

Through
this project
we will ...

Which will
contribute to
building children
and young
peoples'...

Confidence

Capacities

Choice and
control

Critical
consciousness

Through this project we will ...

Which will help to strengthen practitioner practice to support children and young people through improving...

Confidence in the care being given

Credibility

Creativity

Commitment

Our ability to challenge the culture of silence

TEMPLATE**How will your project meet the nine requirements?**

What actions will we take in this project to meet these requirements?

Transparent and
informative

Voluntary

Respectful

Relevant

Child-friendly

TEMPLATE**How will your project meet the nine requirements? Continued.**

What actions will we take in this project to meet these requirements?

Inclusive	
Supported by training for adults	
Safe and sensitive to risk	
Accountable	

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