

## *PRACTITIONER BRIEFING*

*Factors that influence  
outcomes when supporting  
the participation rights of  
children and young people  
with lived experience of  
child sexual abuse and  
exploitation*

# Introduction

## Background to the study

Every child and young person who has experienced child sexual abuse and exploitation has a right to be involved in decisions that directly affect them. The level of their involvement, and the weight given to their views are determined by their evolving capacities. Young survivors<sup>1</sup> may also have opportunities to be involved in decision-making processes or activities that seek to address the sexual abuse and exploitation of other young people, for example, working with different organisations to inform the development and implementation of research and advocacy, co-produce resources, engage in peer-to-peer education or mentoring, or take part in advisory groups, training or conferences.

Engaging young survivors in participatory initiatives is both important and complex. Professionals can worry that a young survivor's involvement in such activities may cause them (or others) further harm or distress, or have a negative impact on their recovery. However, young survivors not only have a right to be heard, but research and practice show that there can be benefits to supporting children and young people who have experienced sexual abuse and exploitation to inform and influence change for themselves and for others.

Researchers at the University of Bedfordshire wanted to understand more about the complexities and potential outcomes associated with participation for young survivors. We consulted with a panel of 58 'experts' from 18 countries (including researchers, practitioners and young survivors) to understand their perspectives on this<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> We recognise that not everyone with lived experience of sexual abuse and exploitation will identify with the term 'survivor'. The term 'young survivor' is used in this paper to ensure consistency across the study's outputs. The term describes all children and young people who have had these experiences – however they identify themselves.

<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of the briefing papers, when quoting participants, we identify them as either 'professionals' or 'young experts'.

## About our practitioner briefings

We have developed four practitioner briefings to share some of the learning from our research. They present findings from a questionnaire and subsequent focus group discussions. The questionnaire involved our panel of 58 experts rating and responding to a series of statements to determine how far they agreed or disagreed with them. This was to identify if there was consensus<sup>3</sup> around certain complexities and outcomes associated with participation for young survivors. Some of these statements are shown in our briefing papers with their associated percentages.

These figures are contextualised with learning from the supplementary qualitative data gathered from the questionnaire and focus group discussions. This data highlights that nothing is 'guaranteed' when it comes to participation and that there are a number of factors that may determine the final outcomes. Each of our briefing papers explores a specific element of these findings.

We have also produced a separate briefing paper which sets out our methodology in more detail.

<sup>3</sup> We define consensus as 70%+ of participants agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement.

## This briefing paper

Our research found that overall, there was strong agreement that young survivors having opportunities to engage in participatory policy, practice and research initiatives could potentially bring positive benefits in myriad ways. However, participants also felt that such positive outcomes are not guaranteed. There are many factors to consider that may influence and determine the final outcomes.

Participants drew attention to the complexity of young people's lives, and to the fact that cause and effect are not always clear-cut. Through analysing the qualitative data from this study, we identified five key themes as mediating factors that may influence how far positive outcomes may be achieved.

We have produced this briefing to share what participants felt were important things to consider when designing, facilitating or accompanying young survivors to engage in decision-making and action.

# The factors

## Good quality ethical standards are critical

Participants felt that positive outcomes are dependent on how young survivors' engagement is explained, framed, facilitated and supported. It is important to:

- ensure participation is ethical, meaningful, consistent and transparent
- prioritise open communication – adults should take the time to properly explain, manage expectations, be realistic, and ensure young survivors receive feedback

*'Only where all ethical standards are fully addressed can there be any confidence that the results will be positive.'*

FEMALE PROFESSIONAL, UK

*'If and ONLY if youth are involved in a meaningful way'.*

FEMALE PROFESSIONAL, USA



ILLUSTRATION BY MARIA STOIAN

## Young people must be supported to develop the knowledge and skills they need to engage and influence

Engaging in a participatory process does not automatically lead young people to acquire the skills and knowledge they need to inform and influence programmes or policy. Supporting young survivors to develop and learn new knowledge and skills to enable them to participate meaningfully is critical.

*'If young people are given the tools to input into decision making. I think it's vital that young people are shown HOW to have their voices heard so this can be carried on in different parts of their lives.'*

FEMALE PROFESSIONAL, UK

Participants also noted that engagement in such initiatives may only be beneficial for young survivors' future education and careers if they are supported to know how to make these connections:

*'This requires helping them have language for what they accomplished and know how to speak about it in an interview and put it on a resume. It is important they learn how to do this without sharing that they were clients as well – they don't need to share their stories to share this work.'*

FEMALE PROFESSIONAL, USA

## Everyone is an individual

Every young survivor is an individual, and their experiences, context, personality and needs will differ. This means it is challenging to predict how and what a young person may gain from engaging in different participatory processes. For some, taking part in different activities and initiatives may be helpful, but others may feel differently.

*'I think it is about creating a space for young people to make their own decisions. Some might love to offer their advice, while others may not.'*

FEMALE PROFESSIONAL, USA

*Not everybody is the same.*

FEMALE YOUNG EXPERT,  
GUYANA



ILLUSTRATION BY MARIA STOIAN



## Facilitators and other professionals involved in participatory projects and activities have a central role to play in ensuring standards are maintained and risks are mitigated

Adult facilitators, and other professionals supporting young survivors' engagement, have an important role to play in maintaining ethical standards. They must be clear and open in their communication to manage expectations and explain processes.

Within group work settings, facilitators have a critical role in anticipating and mitigating potential risks and challenges that may arise during engagement. Participants highlighted the importance of facilitators having adequate knowledge, skills, experience and training<sup>4</sup>.

Participants also noted that adult professionals may have other important roles, such as helping to screen opportunities for young survivors' participation that may arise from various groups, organisations and researchers. In addition, they may help young survivors think about the possible advantages and disadvantages of engaging in different types of activities.

*A good worker can help guide them by answering questions and talking through any risks (without making it sound too scary to be involved.)*

*It should be a shared process.*

FEMALE PROFESSIONAL, UK

<sup>4</sup> See 'Group work as a mechanism for the collective participation of children and young people with lived experience of child sexual abuse and exploitation: Practitioner briefing.'

## Structural barriers at various levels may limit the influence of young survivors' participation

Structural barriers are obstacles that can negatively affect one group of people more than another. They can perpetuate disadvantages and limit the potential positive changes that can arise through participatory processes. Such barriers include:

- **Organisational barriers** – such as a lack of commitment to participation within leadership and the lack of time and other resources
- **System barriers** – such as ineffective, bureaucratic and rigid systems and processes related to child protection, social care, health and the criminal justice system
- **Societal barriers** – such as social norms surrounding the role and capacities of children and young people and the silence and stigma associated with child sexual abuse and exploitation.

*'I think that gatekeeping and/or limited availability of resources can pose a difficult barrier to individual needs being met, even when young people's thoughts and wishes are sought and recorded.'*

MALE PROFESSIONAL, UK

*'An individual worker can achieve this in how they work with young people but might struggle to create organisational change and choose to shield young people from harmful attitudes.'*

FEMALE PROFESSIONAL, UK

*'Though activities and resources can be beneficial to children and young people affected by CSA [child sexual abuse], society is made up of individuals of different mindsets hence it'll be difficult to combat the stigma of CSA.'*

FEMALE YOUNG EXPERT, GUYANA

*Young people sometimes feel powerlessness by rigid systems.*

FEMALE PROFESSIONAL, UK



# Key Messages

- Neither the benefits nor risks associated with participatory work involving children and young people affected by child sexual abuse and exploitation, are guaranteed. **However, good quality ethical standards are critical to the success of any participatory initiative.** It is important that the participation of young survivors is ethical, meaningful, consistent and transparent.
- **Young people must be supported to develop the knowledge and skills they need to meaningfully participate.** Thinking through how their engagement is organised, explained and facilitated will help to create the best possible environment for positive outcomes.
- **Everyone is an individual** with their own preferences and needs. This calls for a flexible approach to engagement, which involves different options for engagement and activities.
- **Facilitators and other professionals involved have a central role to play** in ensuring standards are maintained and risks are mitigated.
- **There will also be factors that are out of an individual's or organisation's control.** Barriers and blockages may be due to people, systems, processes or wider structural issues. These also need to be considered and, where possible, addressed by those seeking to support and facilitate the meaningful participation of young survivors.

**Suggested citation:** Cody, C. and Soares, C. (2023)  
*Factors that influence outcomes when supporting the participation rights of children and young people with lived experience of child sexual abuse and exploitation: Practitioner briefing.* Luton: Safer Young Lives Research Centre, University of Bedfordshire.

**Acknowledgements:** We would like to thank all the participants who took part in this study and extend our thanks to a number of services/organisations who facilitated the engagement of young people in the study and supported them throughout the process. Thanks to our Project Advisory Group for their ongoing support and input. This project was possible thanks to the support of Oak Foundation.