

PRACTITIONER BRIEFING

*Complex issues in 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 survivors¹ 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 this².

¹ 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.

² 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 consensus³ 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 outcomes⁴. 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.

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

⁴ See '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.'

This briefing paper

Our research highlighted a number of issues that require careful thought and consideration when supporting the participation of young survivors in decision-making processes or activities that seek to address the sexual abuse and exploitation of other young people. Four areas that were particularly notable were:

- the potential for triggering
- feelings of anger and frustration
- public identity disclosure
- compensating young survivors for their time and contributions⁵

We have produced this briefing to share what we found out about these complex issues – and to highlight that young people and professionals can have different views about them.

⁵ We produced a comic for professionals and young people, *'Seeing things from both sides: A comic to help young people and professionals understand each other's views about young survivors' participation in efforts to address child sexual abuse and exploitation'*. This comic explores three of the themes included in this briefing: the potential for triggering; feelings of anger and frustration; and public identity disclosure. It also includes a section on risk and readiness, which is discussed in a separate briefing paper in this series. It does not address the issue of compensating young survivors for their time and contributions.

Potential for triggering

A trigger is something that causes someone to feel upset or distressed because they are made to remember something bad that has happened to them in the past. Being triggered can be very distressing. A discussion about sexual violence or encountering certain situations, events, or sensations may (re)trigger flashbacks or trauma associated with sexual abuse. Young survivors may feel they are re-living these traumatic experiences. Different people may be triggered by different things because everyone is an individual with unique experiences.

Involving children and young people in participatory group work is a risk because **they may be triggered during activities and/or find the experience emotionally draining**

86% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that involving young survivors in participatory group work puts them at risk of triggering.

'In my case, asking me certain questions will [cause] trauma [to] me.'

FEMALE YOUNG EXPERT, GUYANA

Some (professional) participants were concerned that young survivors might be triggered as a result of not being 'ready' to take part in participatory activities, and that doing so might negatively affect their healing and recovery. While there may be agreement about the benefits of participation, the risk of a young person being triggered can mean participation opportunities are withheld or limited to activities deemed 'safe' or 'non-triggering'.

'Other children's experiences might be overwhelming and cause triggers...'

FEMALE PROFESSIONAL, UGANDA

Other participants (both professionals and young experts) held the view that the risk of being triggered wasn't necessarily a reason to withhold participation opportunities, and that – so long as the right support structures are in place – participation activities provide a space in which triggering can be safely managed.

'Young people are triggered all the time. Workers/peers can provide a much safer space to deal with that triggering than the wider world.'

FEMALE PROFESSIONAL, UK

'It's not about excluding some young people who may be triggered, but it's about making sure that their decision to participate is as fully informed as possible and there also needs to be a discussion as well.'

MALE PROFESSIONAL, UK

Participants expressed that while being triggered may be difficult at the time, it can play an important part of healing and recovery. Participants explained that being triggered:

- might expose them to information or provide them with a new understanding that is helpful for them to process and understand what happened to them
- can provide them with support to understand what their triggers are and how to cope with them
- can help to allay feelings of self-blame associated with their experiences of abuse
- is a risk they are prepared to take if they are involved in something that makes a difference and contributes to change



Feelings of anger and frustration

When young people experience child sexual abuse and exploitation, they may feel – and present – a range of different emotions, including anger and frustration. How a young survivor presents can influence how professionals feel about involving them in participatory activities. For example, if a young person expresses their anger in a loud and external way, or professionals fear that involvement in participatory activities may spark anger, this can sometimes be used as a reason to not involve them in activities.

Involving children and young people in participatory group work is a risk because **exploring CSA/E⁶ in a group can enhance their feelings of anger and frustration**

No clear consensus was reached on whether involving young survivors in participatory group work may enhance anger and frustration. This seemed to be because young survivors may already have these emotions, even if they are latent, or because even if these emotions are enhanced, this is not necessarily negative or a cause for concern.

'The feelings are probably already there, but they're not always known about...'

FEMALE PROFESSIONAL, USA

'You can't address or assess how much of a risk/how to react to something accurately without info... I have had countless issues when a professional has described a child as 'inappropriate, problematic, argumentative'... None of this included or explained that she was being exploited by her stepdad and that she was, for obvious reasons, upset, angry, stressed, alone, etc.'

FEMALE PROFESSIONAL, UK

⁶ In the questionnaire, instead of using the full wording of 'child sexual abuse and exploitation' we used the acronym CSA/E.

When children and young people are involved in participatory group work with other children and young people affected by CSA/E **it can reassure them how normal it is to have certain feelings and emotions connected to the abuse, including feelings of anger**

Consensus on this statement was high, with **96%** agreeing or strongly agreeing that when young survivors are involved in participatory group work it can lead to reassurance. Participants agreed participation in group activities with other survivors can provide a safe space for young survivors to share their collective frustrations. It can help to validate feelings of anger and support individual healing and recovery.

'Individuals that have experienced [child sexual abuse] would have a lot of emotions and lowered self-esteem. Care groups would provide an environment where they would be able to express themselves, be understood and reassured that their feelings are acceptable.'

FEMALE YOUNG EXPERT, GUYANA

'I found it easier to be angry for other people and their own experience than I did my own, partly because I did blame myself quite a lot. But meeting other young people who'd experienced [abuse], actually, I couldn't blame them for and it and it made me think, well, I can't blame myself then, you know.'

MALE PROFESSIONAL, UK

Anger can also be a catalyst for positive change when young survivors are supported to channel it in meaningful ways.

'It does help participants to connect with their anger and even rage, as well as frustration. However, it is a risk if the group is not supported to engage with the emergent feelings and channelise it through expression and action.'

MALE PROFESSIONAL, INDIA

'They have so much to be angry and frustrated about. And it's right that they expressed that, but it's not always expressed in a way that wins people's hearts and minds and that, I feel, can sometimes dampen what change people are trying to make.'

MALE PROFESSIONAL, UK

For the participation rights of children and young people affected by CSA/E to be realised, **workers and organisations must be honest with children and young people about how much power they will have when taking part in decision-making processes**

There was strong consensus on the importance of being transparent with young people about how much power they would have over decision-making processes, with **93% of participants** agreeing or strongly agreeing with this statement. There was a recognition that when professionals involved in participatory activities are not transparent about this, these shortcomings can fuel further anger and frustration.


Public identities

Young survivors who take part in participatory activities may be invited to use their voices, images or names in different resources. They may also be invited to attend or speak at conferences or other events. In doing so, they may identify – or be identified by others – in different ways. For example, they may identify as a 'youth advisor', an 'advocate', a 'victim', or a 'survivor'. The issue of identity in the aftermath of sexual abuse and exploitation is a complex one and how young people want to identify is a personal choice, to be acknowledged and respected.

'I personally don't identify with the survivor label. I'm eligible for it in terms of my experience, but it's not something that I identify with. I'm not overly offended by it, by being referred to as such, but I'm mindful that there are young people that are, but there are also young people that strongly identify with that label.'

MALE PROFESSIONAL, UK

When children and young people are involved in participatory group work with other children and young people affected by CSA/E **it can contribute to new positive identities which can support recovery and build self-esteem.**

 **93% of participants** agreed or strongly agreed that participation in group work with other young survivors can contribute to positive identities for young survivors. Our research highlighted that the new identities young survivors may form can have a number of positive effects.

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

FEMALE PROFESSIONAL, USA

'They become change agents, youth advocates and some build a survivors' platform where they are able to raise awareness and lobby key duty bearers and hold them accountable.'

FEMALE PROFESSIONAL, UGANDA

Participants also acknowledged that having an identity linked to painful experiences also comes with potential risks and challenges and that young survivors should not have to publicly disclose personal experiences in order to contribute to different initiatives. Issues raised were around:

- young people's new identities becoming their whole identity – and frustrations of not being recognised for more than the trauma they have experienced
- the potential for young people feeling exposed, stigmatised, or unsafe as a result of being involved in participation work
- young people's involvement in participation work as a source of conflict with family and community members, particularly in certain cultural contexts

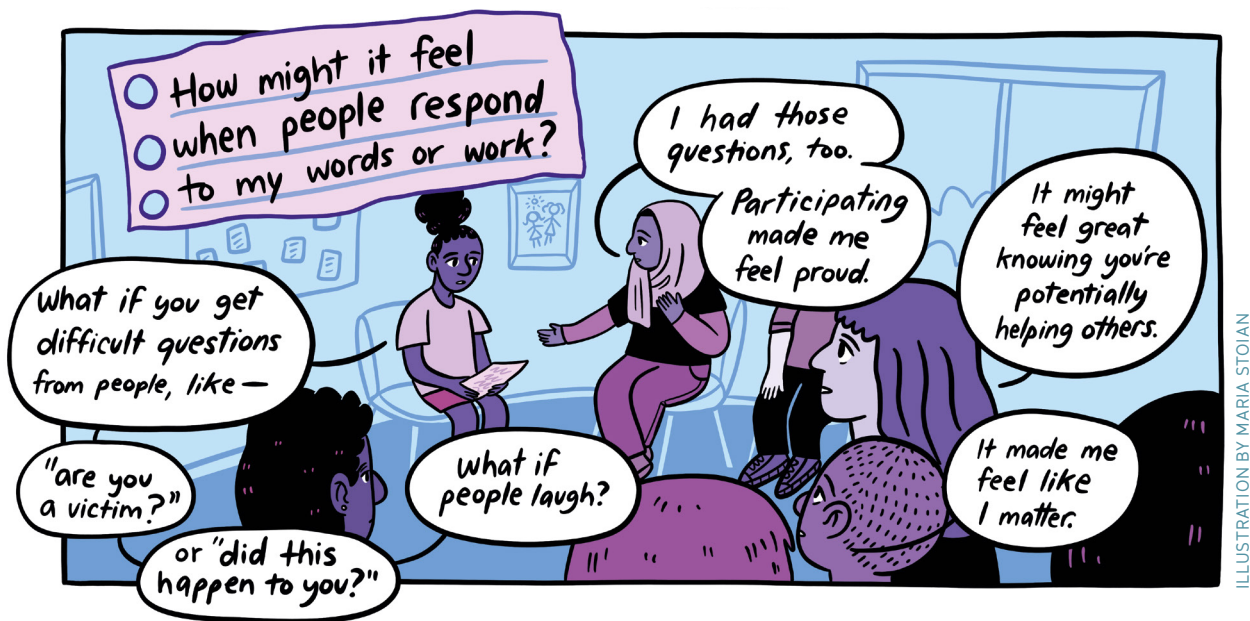


ILLUSTRATION BY MARIA STOJAN

'I come from a culture [where] virginity is so very important. And a culture where you're not supposed to have sex outside marriage... That's a big thing in my culture... There's a stigma attached to it. Because it's seen that you may have done something to get yourself sexually abused... Always the blame is on the girl for what has happened to her.'

FEMALE PROFESSIONAL, INDIA

'They are experts on a time of their lives that was perhaps the most traumatising, harmful and painful experience of their lives. The combination of professional and personal/historic identity can be messy. Young women can also feel a frustration at not feeling more than their trauma. It can make them feel stagnant.'

FEMALE PROFESSIONAL, UK

Our findings draw attention to the role professionals can and should play in supporting young survivors to think about the implications of participating in different activities and having an identity that is linked to experiences of trauma – both now and in the future. It was acknowledged, particularly in relation to involvement in public-facing activities, that for some, their experiences may continue to be an important part of their identity, while others may reach a point where they wish to leave that part of their identity behind.

'There might be a point where you really strongly identify as a survivor of this experience, but then that changes for you and you don't really need that anymore... And so you should be conscious of kind of moving on from that.'

FEMALE PROFESSIONAL, UK

'Young people should always be given a choice about how to participate and how to identify themselves.'

FEMALE PROFESSIONAL, UK

Compensating young people

There aren't any fixed rules around how young survivors are compensated for their time and input to participatory activities. Our findings suggest that this may vary according to the activity or context in which the initiative is taking place. In contexts where financial resources are limited, being able to compensate young survivors for their time may not always be possible. However, lack of money may be a barrier to survivors taking part.

'In Zimbabwe, sometimes it is difficult to help without money as poverty is one of the push factors.'

FEMALE YOUNG EXPERT, ZIMBABWE

When workers are thinking about inviting children and young people affected by CSA/E to take part in different participatory activities **this means always paying them for their time**

When workers are thinking about inviting children and young people affected by CSA/E to take part in different participatory activities **this requires money, but not having the budget should not be used as an excuse not to involve children and young people in decision-making processes**

Consensus was not reached on a statement about the need to pay young survivors for their time. However, **90% of participants** agreed or strongly agreed that not having a budget should not be used as a reason not to involve young survivors in decision-making processes. It is clear from our data that not being able to pay young survivors does not necessarily have to be a barrier to creating and offering participation opportunities.

Compensation may come in the form of money, but young survivors can also be supported with alternative items.

'Child involvement is a right and as such should be respected with or without money.'

FEMALE PROFESSIONAL, UGANDA

'Youth should be paid for participation, but there are other ways to compensate.'

FEMALE PROFESSIONAL, USA

'Yes, more work needs to be done around this so it isn't extractive i.e. being paid for a role isn't enough.'

FEMALE PROFESSIONAL, UK

What is most critical is that organisations are committed to facilitating participation work well; that compensation is considered and that young people are clear about what is being asked of them and if and how they will be supported and rewarded for their input. It is essential that they have a positive and meaningful experience in which they feel seen, heard and valued.

'Young people should never be out of pocket and staff shouldn't have to squeeze participation work around all their other responsibilities.'

FEMALE PROFESSIONAL, UK

Key Messages

- Participatory work requires professionals to consider, prepare for, and manage sometimes **unpredictable situations**. It's important that staff are equipped with the necessary training and skills to effectively manage this.
- There will always be the **potential for triggering** in this work. Open lines of communication, shared decision-making with young survivors, and ensuring they are clear about the purpose, nature and potential risks of the activity may help to allay fears around this.
- The potential for young survivors being triggered or expressing anger and frustration needs careful thought and attention. Having the right support structures in place is critical but these scenarios do not necessarily have to be viewed as a risk. **Participatory spaces can provide a safe environment** for young survivors to share these feelings.
- Professionals should consider if and how participatory opportunities might enable individuals to work in partnership with other young survivors and support them to **channel their anger into something positive**, and maximise participation outcomes.
- **Young people should never be asked to disclose their identity** as a survivor of child sexual abuse or exploitation in public and should be supported to contribute their knowledge and expertise in ways that do not require this.
- **Organisations should avoid undertaking participation work that may feel extractive for the young people involved**. If it is not possible to pay individuals for their time, researchers should think about other ways of recompensing them that is feasible and will be of value to the participants.
- It is important that young survivors are **clear about the potential benefits** of taking part and if and how they will be compensated. They should also always be clear that their participation is voluntary.

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