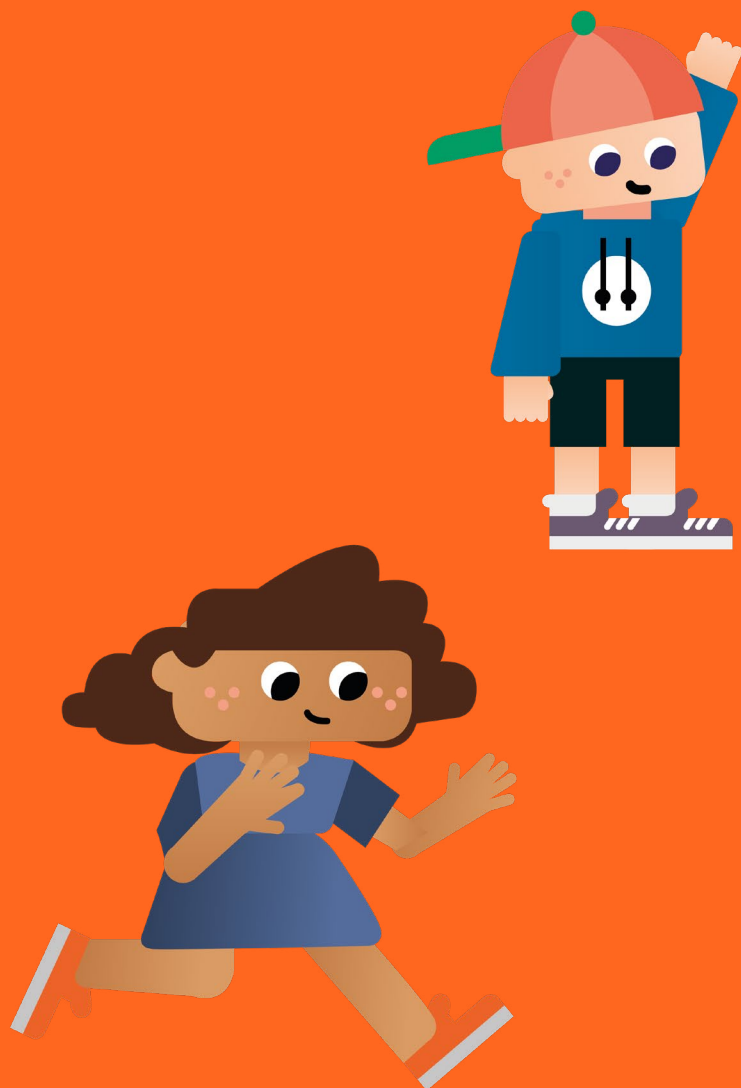


Our voices matter

Children define meaningful participation
Insights from five European countries



Eurochild
Putting children at
the heart of Europe

A child-friendly abstract

This report looks at how children understand, view and experience child participation in decision-making processes. To shape the report, Eurochild consulted 128 children across five European countries: Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, Malta, and Wales (UK). Children shared their views, experiences, and ideas about what participation means to them and how it should work in practice.

Children were clear that they want to be involved in decisions that affect their lives because participation is their right. For them, participation is not just about being asked for an opinion once in a while. It means being included equally in discussions and decisions that shape their everyday lives, whether at school, in their communities, or in public policies that affect them.

Many children described situations where they were asked for their views but never received feedback afterwards. They did not know whether their ideas were considered, whether anything changed, or why decisions were made differently. When participation is not followed by feedback or visible action, it can feel disappointing and discouraging.

For children, meaningful participation means:

- being treated with respect
- being taken seriously
- knowing how their views are considered
- having a real opportunity to influence decisions
- receiving feedback on what changed, or why it did not

The report also shows that not all children have the same opportunities to participate. Some voices are heard more than others, while others are often left out. This means that many children still do not have equal chances to share their views and be heard.

Children are not asking for adults to agree with every idea they have. Instead, they want honesty, transparency, and genuine respect. They want adults and institutions to explain decisions clearly, listen carefully, and show that their opinions are valued, even when the final decision is different from what they suggested.

The message of this report is clear: participation must be meaningful, inclusive, and lead to real impact. Institutions, governments, schools, and organisations all have a responsibility to create safe and supportive spaces where every child can take part. Listening to children is not enough; their voices must also help shape decisions and bring real change.

Table of contents

Acknowledgments	2
Eurochild's approach to the meaningful participation of children	2
Introduction	4
A note on the methodology	5
<i>Key themes:</i>	
• What do children mean by participation?	7
• What do children describe as performative participation?	10
• How does a missing feedback mechanism lead to participation without accountability?	13
• Who is excluded from participation?	16
• What role do adults play in shaping participation?	19
Call to action: what children want adults to do to ensure meaningful child participation	23
Annexe 1: Children's quotes on child participation	24
Annexe 2: Eurochild resources on child participation	31

Acknowledgements

This report presents the findings of a series of consultations with children conducted by five National Eurochild Forums (NEFs) in Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, Malta and Wales (UK).

The NEFs are participatory spaces supported by Eurochild member organisations, where children can share their views on issues affecting their communities, countries and Europe. They bring together children from diverse backgrounds and lived experiences and help link local and national concerns with European level discussions and decision making. Particular attention is given to reaching children in vulnerable situations, ensuring that a wide and diverse range of children's perspectives informs Eurochild's work.

- **Bulgaria:** [National Network for Children](#)
- **Croatia:** [Society 'Our Children' Opatija](#)
- **Estonia:** [Estonian Union for Child Welfare](#)
- **Malta:** [Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society](#)
- **Wales:** [Children in Wales](#)

The Eurochild Secretariat gratefully acknowledges the NEFs for coordinating and implementing the consultations. Special thanks go to the NEF coordinator Kristina Nenova, Antonia Katić, Triin Sooäär, Angela Caruana and Russell Baker for their commitment. We extend our sincere appreciation to the 128 children who generously shared their experiences, views and recommendations, as well as to the NEF staff who supported translation, enabling a more diverse group of children to participate.

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Eurochild's approach to the meaningful participation of children

Eurochild position on child participation

Eurochild is committed to working towards a society in which **all children grow up happy, healthy, confident and respected as individuals in their own right**, in line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Our capacity building and advocacy work focuses on several interconnected thematic areas, including **child poverty, child protection, child participation, children's rights in the digital environment, and children's mental health**, with a strong and consistent focus on **children in vulnerable situations**.

Child participation cuts across all these areas. However, Eurochild recognises that participation does not happen on equal terms for all children. **Structural barriers continue to exclude many children from decision making**, particularly those who are most affected by policy choices. Children living in poverty, in care, with disabilities, with a migration background, or in rural and remote areas are among those least likely to be consulted, despite being disproportionately impacted by decisions in education, social protection, public services and community life. Participation opportunities are often concentrated in urban centres, formal structures and well resourced settings, leaving many children unseen and unheard.

Bringing children's voices into these conversations is therefore not optional; it is essential. Eurochild operates on the principle and firm belief that **children are experts in their own lives**. They hold unique knowledge about their everyday realities, the barriers they face and the solutions that would work best for them. As such, children must be able to **participate meaningfully in decisions that affect them**, individually and collectively.

The primary goal of this report is to bring children's voices directly into the conversation: to listen to their perspectives, acknowledge their lived experiences, and consult them on what participation means in practice. No one understands childhood better than children themselves, and policies that fail to reflect their insights risk being ineffective, exclusionary or harmful.

Eurochild's work on child participation

Eurochild's expertise on child participation is grounded in the combined knowledge of its trained and specialised staff, the experience of its member organisations across Europe, and extensive practice gained through direct engagement with children and projects or initiatives that directly involve children. These initiatives engage children from diverse backgrounds and contexts, including those growing up in vulnerable situations, and place participation at the centre of policy, advocacy and practice.

Eurochild involves children in advocacy, projects, and governance through different groups of children:

- The [Eurochild Children's Council](#) (ECC) creation 2017
- The [National Eurochild Forums](#) (NEFs) creation 2019
- The [Network of Online Visionaries in Action](#) (NOVA) creation 2025

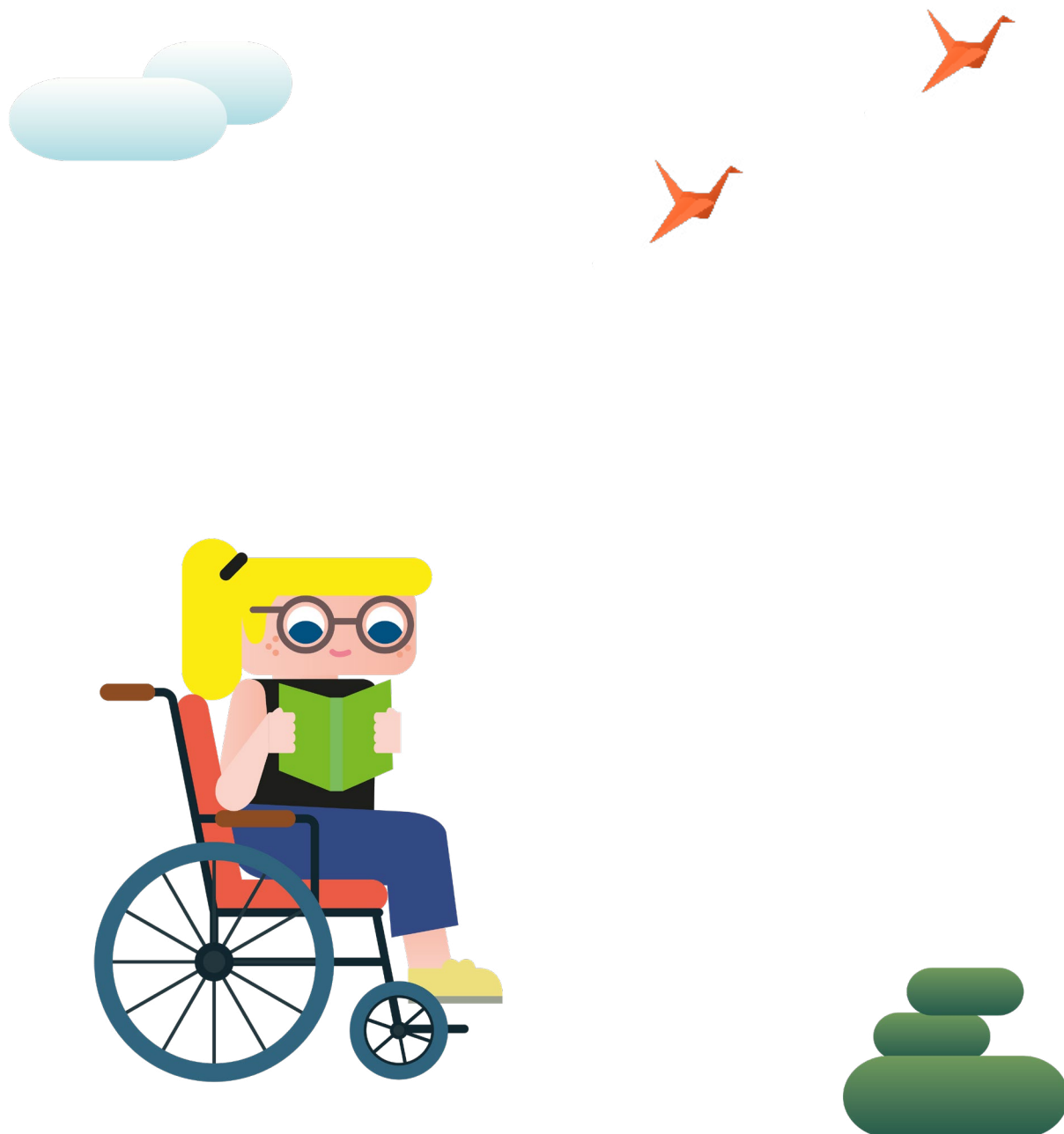
Our goal is to provide space to the children to meet decision-makers to express their views at national and EU level; to involve children in governance decisions and events organisation as well as in developing accessible documents for children. **We aim to create a dialogue between children and decision-makers to enable children to influence decisions that affect them.**

In 2025, Eurochild conducted an extensive, participatory process to develop its new [Strategic Framework 2026–2029](#), which reflects a strong commitment to children rights and inclusive engagement. Under Goal 2, Championing rights, voices and interests of all children, Eurochild affirms that children are experts of their own lives and that their voices must meaningfully shape the policies that affect them. Eurochild is committed to leading by example by ensuring safe, inclusive, and meaningful child participation in its work, while also empowering others to adopt similar approaches. This includes promoting its methodology for meaningful child participation to strengthen practice across Europe, systematically amplifying the rights, voices, and interests of all children, particularly those in the most vulnerable situations and ensuring robust safeguarding measures in all child participation activities. In addition, under Goal 4, Bolstering a resilient and impactful network, Eurochild will further embed children's involvement in its governance, strategy implementation, and communications, reinforcing

In all participation related work, Eurochild is committed to ensuring that children's involvement is meaningful, inclusive and influential. To this end, Eurochild applies the **9 requirements for effective child participation**¹, which provide a robust framework to ensure that participation is safe, transparent, respectful, child friendly, inclusive, supported by adults, and linked to real influence and outcomes. This approach helps distinguish genuine participation from performative participation.

Eurochild also works to **strengthen the capacity of organisations, professionals and institutions** to embed child participation systematically, by providing training and addressing not only practical methods but also the underlying attitudes, power imbalances and institutional cultures that shape whether children's voices are truly heard.

Further information on Eurochild's work and resources on child participation is available on our website. In the meantime, you can already access a selection of resources in the annexe 2 at the end of the report.



1 Committee on the Rights of the Child, GC No.12, The Right of the Child to be Heard, CRC/C/GC/12, July 2009, para 3

Introduction

Child participation is a central principle of Eurochild's work and of the broader child rights framework on which that work is based. Grounded in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) – in particular Article 12, Eurochild works to ensure that children are **recognised as rights-holders whose views must be heard and taken seriously in decisions that affect their lives**. This commitment also reflects Eurochild's wider mission to place children's rights and wellbeing at the heart of policymaking across Europe.

Although child participation is now widely recognised in policy and practice, it is still too often **understood through adult-defined terms**: as a process designed by adults, facilitated by adults, and evaluated according to adult assumptions about what participation should look like. Too rarely are discussions grounded in children's own understandings of what participation means, what makes it meaningful, and why sometimes it fails.

This report starts from that perspective. Developed by Eurochild in cooperation with **five National Eurochild Forums in Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, Malta and Wales (UK)**, it explores how children themselves understand and experience child participation. Based on consultations with **128 children aged 10 to 18**, the report brings together children's reflections on what participation means to them, where they feel heard, where they do not, and what they believe needs to change.

What emerges clearly from the consultations is that children do not see participation simply as being present, being consulted, or being asked for an opinion. They see it as something more comprehensive: **a process grounded in respect, genuine influence, transparency, inclusion, and accountability**. They are equally clear about what participation is not. Across consultations, children described experiences of exclusion, tokenism, performative involvement, and consultation without feedback or follow-through. These experiences shape not only whether participation feels meaningful, but also whether children are willing to engage again.

The report therefore does more than reaffirm the importance of child participation as a rights-based obligation. It examines the **conditions** under which participation is experienced by children as meaningful or meaningless, genuine or performative. In doing so, it contributes to Eurochild's wider efforts to strengthen child participation in practice, not only by creating more opportunities for children to speak, but by paying closer attention to **how those opportunities are designed, facilitated, and followed through**.

At the same time, the findings highlight that child participation is not only valuable for children themselves. **Children's perspectives can improve the quality, relevance, and legitimacy of decisions, policies, and services** that affect their lives. Where those perspectives are absent, overlooked, or filtered through adult assumptions, important dimensions of children's lived realities may remain unseen.

This report is therefore both analytical and practical. It documents how children perceive participation, but it also draws out the implications of those perceptions for EU institutions, national governments, public authorities, and civil society organisations. By grounding the analysis in children's own testimonies, it argues for a more accountable and meaningful approach to participation; one that moves beyond mere appearance and consultation, and towards forms of engagement that children themselves recognise as real.

Ultimately, the report makes a simple but important point: for participation to be meaningful, children must be treated as equal participants in the process, heard, respected, taken seriously, and able to benefit from their involvement. Their testimonies make clear that the **question is not whether children are ready to participate, but whether adults and institutions are willing to create the conditions for genuinely shared, responsive, and worthwhile participation**.

Before presenting what children told us, the next section describes how we worked with them and how the consultations took place.

A note on the methodology

This report explores how children themselves understand child participation, grounding its findings in their lived experiences rather than in adult definitions. Consultations were carried out by National Eurochild Forums (NEFs) in Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, Malta and Wales (UK), using a common methodology developed by Eurochild’s Child Participation Team. Detailed guidelines ensured a meaningful, inclusive and consistent approach to all five countries.

Between September and December 2025, 128 children aged 10-18 took part in eleven focus groups consultations. Ten were held in person and one online. Some NEFs ran a single session, while others organised multiple groups to reach different participants.

The table below provides an overview of the consultation formats and the number of children engaged in each country.

Overview of children consulted through focus group discussions

National Eurochild Forum	Method	Number of children	Age	Gender
National Network for Children, Bulgaria	In-person focus group discussion	15	15-18	7 female 8 male
Society “Our Children” Opatija, Croatia	In-person focus group discussion	8	10-14	4 female 4 male
	Online focus group discussion	12	14-17	8 female 4 male
Estonian Union for Child Welfare, Estonia	In-person focus group discussion	14	13-17	11 female 2 male 1 unknown
	In-person focus group discussion	15	12-14	7 female 8 male
	In-person focus group discussion	15	14-17	8 female 7 male
Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society, Malta	In-person focus group discussion	11	10-13	6 female 5 male
	In-person focus group discussion	8	10-17	4 female 4 male
	In-person focus group discussion	9	10	3 female 6 male
Children in Wales, United Kingdom	In-person focus group discussion	13	12-18	9 female 4 male
	In-person focus group discussion	8	12-18	3 female 3 male 1 non-binary 1 unknown
	Total	128	10-18	70 female 55 male 1 non-binary 2 unknown

The **consultations were conducted in the children's national language** across the five NEF countries: Bulgarian, Croatian, and English, with Estonia and Malta carrying out the consultations bilingually, respectively in Estonian and Russian, and Maltese and English. The translation process – from English to the respective national languages and then back to English – was carried out by staff from the five NEFs, including the direct quotes from children and highlighted in this report.

Following [Eurochild's child safeguarding policy](#), informed consent was obtained from all participants and their parents or legal guardians. All relevant child **safeguarding standards were strictly upheld throughout this participatory process** involving children. Each child was made aware that even after giving their informed consent, they could withdraw it at any time and choose not to answer any questions.

As a final note, the Eurochild child participation team recognise that certain methodological constraints restrict the wider quantification of the findings, including the differences in sample sizes across the five countries surveyed. **The findings are therefore not intended to be representative at country level**, but rather to reflect the perspectives and lived experiences shared by the children who took part, helping to avoid over-interpretation of the results.

However, the purpose of this consultation was to **bring children's voices into the conversation on child participation and serve as a reminder that children have a right to share their perspectives, voice their opinions and have their recommendations heard**. Consultations such as those with the NEFs are a first step in mainstreaming child participation in civic dialogue. They highlight children's invaluable input while simultaneously engaged and empowered as actors of change in their lives and those of their peers.

Structure of the consultations with children

The children who participated in the consultations were encouraged to explore and share their perspectives on child participation. The discussions were structured around **five key areas**, developed by the Eurochild child participation team, to guide the discussion:

- Understanding child participation
- Importance of participation
- Spaces of participation
- Benefits, barriers and solutions
- Call to action

These questions are not independent of one another. Rather, the questions within each area were designed to provide children participating in the consultation process with a **disaggregated framework, enabling them to express and explore their views in a detailed and nuanced manner**, and to ensure that these views are meaningfully captured and understood.

To avoid repetition and improve coherence, the report does not follow this original structure. Instead, it is organised into thematic chapters based on the main findings from the consultations. This approach allows children's views to be presented in a more holistic and meaningful way, showing links across different topics rather than separating them into isolated sections.

The following chapters present the insights shared by children during the consultations.



KEY THEMES

What do children mean by participation?



Children are human beings no matter what their age is... this doesn't mean that they cannot have opinions on issues or be involved in decisions."

- Child from Bulgaria, 16

For decades, child participation has been defined, designed, and evaluated largely by adults. Frameworks have been built, ladders of participation constructed, and policies written; often with **limited reference to how children themselves understand what it means to be genuinely involved**. This chapter addresses that gap directly. It presents, in children's own terms, what participation means to them: not as a procedural requirement or a box to tick, but as a lived experience with real emotional, social, and political dimensions, carrying both personal and collective importance. What emerges from the consultation is a definition that is consistent across all countries and age groups: children do not describe participation as simply being asked for their opinion. They describe it as a **rights-grounded relationship, a responsibility, and a right**, one that places obligations on the adults and institutions responsible for making it meaningful.

Participation as a right, not a privilege

The most consistent finding across the consultation was that children frame participation as a fundamental right, not as something granted to them by adults when deemed appropriate. Many participants explicitly referenced the UNCRC, demonstrating **awareness of their legal entitlement to be heard**. More importantly, they understood what that entitlement requires in practice.

"Providing children with opportunities to get involved and get their voice heard by those who will listen, care and act — Article 12." — Young person from Wales, 18

"Because children also have the right to decide over their own future." — Child from Estonia, 16

This rights-based framing has important implications for institutions. When children describe participation as a right, they are not making an aspirational statement; they are identifying **an obligation**. Participation processes that are selective, occasional, or dependent on adult goodwill do not meet this standard. Children were clear that the question is not whether

they should participate, but whether the adults and institutions responsible for their lives are fulfilling their duty to make that participation possible and meaningful.

Participation as genuine influence, not just expression

A second defining feature of children's perspective is the clear distinction they make between being heard and having influence. Across all countries consulted, children stressed that participation does not end with the chance to speak. It requires that their views be taken seriously and lead to meaningful consideration or action.

"The most important thing is that what children say truly has meaning, a reason, and a result that follows." — Child from Estonia, 16

"To be able to express our opinions and for them to be taken into consideration during decision-making processes." — Children from Bulgaria, 17

This distinction, between expression and influence, is one that many institutional participation processes fail to fully recognise. **Children are often invited to consultations, asked for their views, and then returned to their lives with no information about what happened next**. Children across the consultation described this experience clearly, and its consequences are explored in depth in Chapter 3. What matters here is that even in their definition of participation, children already anticipate this failure and explicitly reject it. Influence, outcomes, and follow-through are not add-ons to participation; they are part of what participation means.

Participation as a partnership between children and adults

Children did not describe participation as a space where they take over from adults, nor as one where adults simply do less. They described it as a

collaborative relationship built on mutual respect, shared responsibility, and equality of standing.

“It is a joint decision-making relationship between children and adults.” — Child from Croatia, 14

“It is a joint cooperation between children and adults where they are equals. Or it should be.” — Child from Croatia, 14

The addition of *“or it should be”* is significant. Children are not describing the participation they experience, they are describing the participation they believe is possible and right. This aspiration for genuine partnership, rather than consultation on adult terms, runs throughout the consultation and shapes every dimension of what children identify as meaningful or harmful in participation practice.

This partnership model also places particular emphasis on the role of adults. Children repeatedly stressed that listening is not passive; it requires time, openness, and a genuine willingness to be changed by what one hears.

“It is not that easy to listen to another human being. It takes time and extra effort, but it definitely matters in the end.” — Child from Bulgaria, 16

“They should listen to children actively in order to understand what stands behind behaviours and actions.” — Young person from Bulgaria, 18

Participation as lived expertise

One of the most powerful and consistent arguments children made was that **they hold specific, irreplaceable knowledge about their own lives**, knowledge that adults do not have access to without listening to them directly.

“Everyone is an expert in their own lives. So we are experts as children in children’s lives.” — Child from Croatia, 13

“Adults and children see our problems very differently. Something that is small to adults can be a huge deal for children.” — Child from Croatia, 14

“Children know about the problems that genuinely affect them and are also able to find solutions to them.” — Child from Estonia, 15

This framing challenges a common assumption in institutional settings that expertise belongs to professionals, researchers, and policymakers. Children are articulating a different kind of expertise: one grounded in proximity, daily experience, and embodied knowledge of what it feels like to be a child navigating specific environments. **Excluding this knowledge misses a crucial opportunity to make decisions more informed**, more holistic, and more

aligned with children’s lived realities.

Participation as belonging and active citizenship

Beyond the individual relationship between a child and a decision-maker, children connected participation to something larger: **a sense of belonging** to communities, societies, and democratic processes.

“It is being a part of a bigger thing than you are.” — Child from Croatia, 14

“Children having a say in different fields and contributing to society in general.” — Child from Estonia, 15

“Children are not the future, we are the present and the future.” — Child from Wales, 17

This last quote deserves particular attention from institutional readers. It is a direct challenge to the language commonly used in policy documents, which frames child participation as an investment in future citizens. Children are rejecting that framing. They are insisting on being recognised as **active members of society now**, with legitimate perspectives on the decisions shaping the world they already live in.

Impact on children

Understanding what participation means to children is inseparable from understanding what it does for them. Across the consultation, children described participation as **a space for empowerment, where they grow: building confidence, communication skills, and a sense of their own capacity to contribute**. Being genuinely heard, they explained, changes how they see themselves.

“It made me feel strong and heard.” — Child from Malta, 10

“I felt happy and trusted even though I am young.” — Child from Malta, 10

“When you see you are responsible for something good it gives you strength to go on.” — Child from Croatia, 13

“When someone asks for my opinion, I feel good about myself. I know that when someone asks for my opinion, it is taken into account.” — Child from Estonia, 16

The second sentence of the last quote matters as much as the first sentence. The positive effect does not come from being asked; it comes from knowing that being asked means something. This distinction should inform how every participation process is designed and evaluated.

Where differences in children’s perspectives matter

Across the consultation, children’s understanding of participation was remarkably consistent. However, some differences are worth noting. **Older children** (above 13 years old), particularly those with experience in formal participatory structures such as children’s councils or youth forums, tended to **articulate more institutional and rights-based definitions**. **Younger children** (below 13 years old) more often described participation **through the lens of everyday relationships**: being listened to at home, having a say in family decisions, and being included in classroom discussions.

These differences are not a contradiction; they simply reflect the fact that **participation looks different depending on a child’s age and experience**. But it does have a practical implication: **participation processes** built around formal structures and institutional settings are **not equally accessible to all children**. They tend to work best for those who are already comfortable in those environments, and risk leaving others behind. Meaningful participation needs to make room for the many different ways children express their views and seek to have influence in their lives.

What children are asking adults to do

Children’s messages on what participation means are both an invitation and a challenge. They are inviting adults and institutions into a genuine partnership, one built on mutual respect, shared responsibility, and a **willingness to be changed by what children say**. And they are challenging the assumption that consulting children is enough, that asking the question fulfils the obligation.

“It is a joint cooperation between children and adults where they are equals. Or it should be.” — Child from Croatia, 14

“The most important thing is that what children say truly has meaning, a reason, and a result that follows.” — Child from Estonia, 16

“Children are not the future, we are the present and the future.” — Child from Wales, 17

“Everyone is an expert in their own lives. So we are experts as children in children’s lives.” — Child from Croatia, 13

Children are asking decision-makers to start from a simple principle: that children’s knowledge of their own lives is **not less valid than adult expertise**, it is different, and it is necessary. Policies and decisions that do not draw on that knowledge are not more objective. They are less complete. Genuine participation is not a procedural step to be ticked off, it is the condition under which decisions affecting children can claim to truly

serve them.

After understanding how children define participation, the next chapter explores when participation feels superficial or tokenistic to them.



KEY THEMES

What do children describe as performative participation?



Children’s participation is not when our involvement is shown as decoration... we are included only by showing pictures on social media... but no change comes from our opinions.” — Child from Estonia, 14

Being invited to participate is not the same as being able to participate. Across the consultation, children described a pattern they encounter repeatedly and recognise immediately: **they are included visibly, but excluded meaningfully**. They are present in rooms where decisions are made, but their presence does not change decisions. They are asked for their views, but those views are used to decorate conclusions that were already reached before they arrived.

Children have a word for this. Several words, in fact. They call it fake. They call it decoration. They call it being puppets. What they are describing, with striking consistency across all countries consulted, is participation that functions as **performance, designed to publicly demonstrate inclusion while leaving power structures entirely intact**.

This chapter examines how children experience and identify this pattern, why it is harmful, and what sustains it across institutional and everyday settings.

Decoration: presence without purpose

The most visible form of performative participation that children described is what several of them called decoration: being present in a space or event not because their contribution is needed, but because their presence makes the event look inclusive.

“When a child is used and asked to act as décor, to decorate an event organised and facilitated by adults.” — Child from Bulgaria, 16

Children described being photographed, featured in communications, and positioned as evidence of inclusive practice, while having no meaningful role in shaping what was being communicated or decided. **Their image was used; their views were not.**

This form of participation is particularly problematic

because it is often invisible to outside observers. From the outside, a photograph of children at a policy event appears to show participation. From the inside, children know they were not genuinely involved and were simply present. **The gap between those two experiences is where children’s trust in adults’ designed child participation processes may begin to erode.**

Tokenism: voice without power

Beyond decoration, children described a more structured yet equally superficial form of participation: tokenism. This is the version of participation that has all the right features, a council, a consultation, a meeting with decision-makers, but where **children’s contributions have no real influence**.

“It ‘looks like’ participation but it is fake and doesn’t follow children’s thoughts and desires.” — Child from Bulgaria, 16

“We are often invited to organise events but in most of the cases our decisions are not taken seriously.” — Child from Bulgaria, 15

“You are given a sense of power, in truth you have none, you are just puppets for them.” — Child from Malta, 17

Children were precise in identifying what makes tokenism distinct from genuine participation. It is not about whether a structure exists; youth councils, student councils, and forums were frequently mentioned as spaces with real potential. It is about whether that structure is connected to actual decision-making or operates **in parallel** to it, giving children the experience of participation without any of its substance.

“Youth councils are nice structures... but if this does not actually reach decision-making processes... you can

express your opinion, but it is often overlooked.”

— Child from Estonia, 16

This distinction matters for institutions. The existence of a child participation mechanism does not guarantee meaningful participation. Children are asking institutions to look past the structure and examine the connection, or lack of it, between what children say and what actually changes.

Manipulation: participation as endorsement

The most troubling pattern children described was not passive exclusion but active manipulation, situations where adults use children’s presence or words to **legitimise decisions** children were never genuinely consulted on.

“Using children ‘to promote’ adults’ opinions and thoughts.” — Child from Bulgaria

“Children’s participation is not when adults say what they think we think and do not ask us what we actually think.” — Child from Estonia, 14

Several children described being **positioned to publicly endorse** decisions or policies, with their endorsement then used as evidence of their support.

“There will be a president or someone who is going to pass a new law about schools or about playgrounds or anything that has to do with children, and for promotion they invite a lot of children to come talk about it, and these children are forced to speak highly of the issue or photos of the children are taken during the activity so that other people can say ‘look, the children agree with this’ when this is not actually the case.” — Child from Malta, 13

This dynamic falls short of meaningful participation. It is a **misuse of children’s voices**, one that inverts the very purpose of participation. Instead of creating space for children’s perspectives, it can replace them with adult-driven narratives while maintaining the impression that children have been heard. Children who recognise this describe feeling excluded and not accurately represented.

Behind the pattern: adult authority and institutional barriers

Children also reflected on why performative participation is so persistent. Their analysis was clear: it is sustained by adult control over participatory spaces, and by the unwillingness of many adults and institutions to genuinely **share power**.

“Adults should not impose their opinions.” — Child from Bulgaria, 18

“When you try to comment about something, the adults don’t care, they think you’re not smart enough, not

grown up enough to make decisions that are sensible.”

— Child from Malta, 10

“When we say we need something... they just say no without even explaining why.” — Child from Croatia, 14

Children described environments, particularly schools, where adult authority is so structurally embedded that genuine participation becomes almost impossible. Teachers have final say. Administrators set the agenda. Children can speak, but the **framework within which they do so is entirely controlled by adults** who have no obligation to be changed by what they hear.

Performative participation is not only the result of adults who are unwilling to listen, but it is also the result of systems that do not require them to. When there is no accountability for **ignoring children’s views**, ignoring them becomes the path of least resistance.

Impact on children

Children’s testimonies make clear that performative participation produces tangible emotional consequences, leaving them **angry, disillusioned, and less willing to engage again**.

“Undervalued.” — Child from Wales, 17

“I felt nervous and offended.” — Child from Bulgaria, 16

“Frustrated and exceedingly angry.” — Child from Wales, 15

These are not isolated reactions to a single negative experience but rather demonstrate that **tokenism can and does occur across multiple child participation structures**. Children’s insights suggest that such experiences can shape their perceptions and understandings of the value of their participation, and can reduce their willingness to engage. Furthermore, children who, through repeated experiences, perceive their participation as performative may not simply be disengaged, but may even be stepping back from processes that have left them feeling let down and misunderstood.

Disengagement and distrust in participation processes can have broader implications. Where children withdraw, institutions may lose access to perspectives they most need. This may be particularly true for those already hardest to reach, whose experiences are invaluable in forming and challenging existing policies, and who may also be among those most discouraged by earlier experiences of performative participation.

Where differences in children’s perspectives matter

Across the consultation, children’s experiences of performative participation were remarkably consistent. However, some variations can be observed in how these experiences were described across both age

groups and countries.

Within this context, certain patterns appear more frequently in some groups than others: references to manipulation and forced endorsement were more often mentioned by children in Malta, while “*decoration*” language was predominantly used by Bulgarian and Estonian children. Croatian children more frequently referred to adult authority and experiences of being dismissed outright.

Age also shapes how children experience and describe the problem. Younger children engaged in performative participation mainly in everyday settings like classrooms, family decisions, or school life. Older children, particularly those with experience in formal participatory structures, described it in more institutional terms, such as youth councils disconnected from decision-making, consultations that lead nowhere. The same fundamental experience, but at different scales.

What children are asking adults to do

Children’s message on performative participation is direct: stop using their presence to demonstrate inclusion while leaving everything unchanged. **They are asking adults and institutions to examine honestly whether the participation they offer is real**, whether it connects to actual decision-making, whether it leaves room for genuine disagreement, and whether it treats children as partners rather than symbols of inclusion.

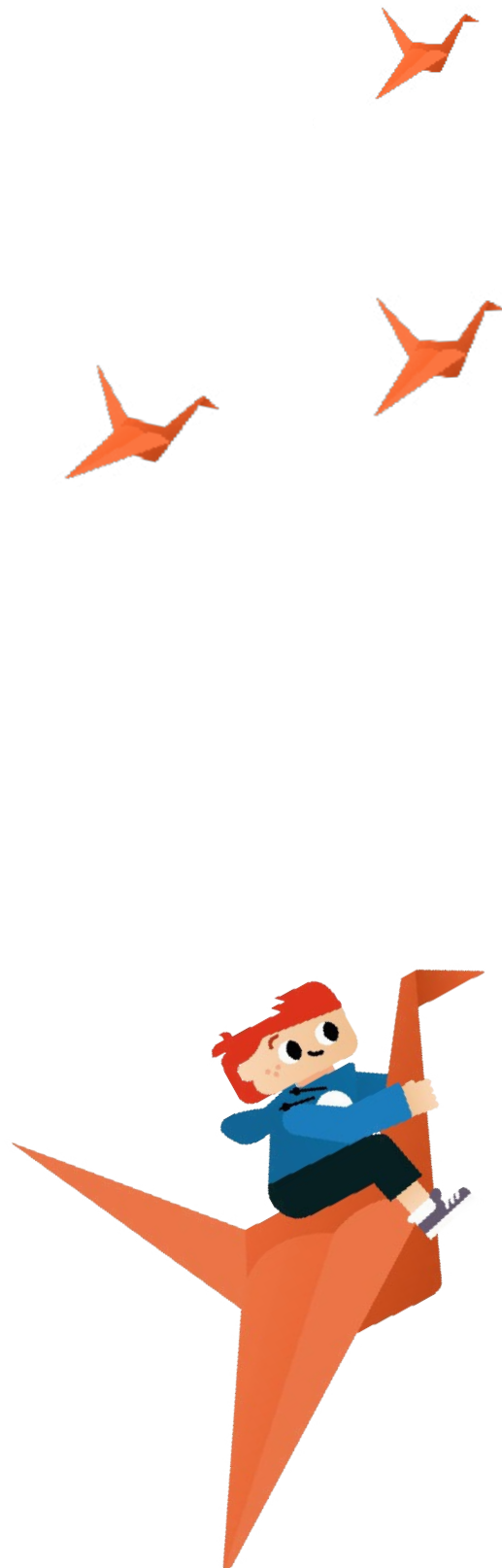
“It ‘looks like’ participation but it is fake and doesn’t follow children’s thoughts and desires.” — Child from Bulgaria, 16

“When we say we need something... they just say no without even explaining why.” — Child from Croatia, 14

“Recognising children as actual people and treat them with respect.” — Child from Wales, 14

Children are also asking institutions to look beyond the existence of participatory structures and examine what those structures actually produce. A council that meets but never influences, a consultation that generates no response, an event where children are photographed but not heard, these are not participation. They are the opposite. And children, as this consultation makes clear, know the difference.

Children also highlighted another barrier to meaningful participation: the absence of feedback and accountability.



KEY THEMES

How does a missing feedback mechanism lead to participation without accountability?



“Youth councils are nice structures... but if this does not actually reach decision-making processes, then at the moment they do not seem useful.” — Child from Estonia, 16

Across the consultation, one message came through clearly and universally: children are not opposed to participating. They want to be involved, they have ideas, opinions, and a clear sense of what affects their lives. What appears to discourage engagement is not being asked to contribute, but what follows, or, in some cases, **what does not follow, after they have shared their views.**

Children across all countries described similar experiences: they are invited to share their views, they do so, and then no follow-up. In many cases, there is no clear indication of how their input has been considered or whether it has influenced any outcome. Over time, these experiences can lead children to question the value of their participation. Rather than feeling included in decision-making processes, some describe participation as one-sided, where their time, trust, and ideas are taken without a clear sense of what is done in return.

This chapter examines that pattern, what children call it, how it feels, and what they are asking institutions and adults to do differently.

What children experience: the gap between being asked and being heard

Children were consistent and precise in describing the difference between being consulted and being genuinely heard. For them, **hearing is not complete until something changes, or until an honest explanation is given for why it cannot.**

“You are asked for your opinion... but nothing is done with the answers.” — Child from Estonia, 15

“Students council did a short survey... the results were that something needs to change... unfortunately nothing changed.” — Child from Croatia, 14

These testimonies point to something important. Children are not dismissing participatory structures outright; they recognise their potential. What they are rejecting is the version of those structures that stops at consultation and **never reaches action.** A youth council that meets regularly but whose recommendations are never passed on to decision-makers is, in children's view, not a participation space.

The emotional weight of this experience should not be underestimated. When children invest time and trust in a process that leads nowhere, the damage goes beyond disappointment. It shapes their understanding of what participation is, and whether it is worth trying again.

The trust deficit: what broken promises cost

Several children described situations in which adults had explicitly encouraged them to participate, implied that their views would matter, and then failed to follow through. This combination, raised expectations followed by silence, was described as particularly harmful.

“Adults should avoid promising real participation and then showing zero interest in children's ideas.” — Child from Bulgaria, 16

“We have been trying to reach our mayor of our city for the last two years... we have sent emails, he doesn't reply.” — Child from Croatia, 14

These experiences create what might be called a trust deficit, a growing gap between what participation claims to be and what children actually experience it to be. Once that gap becomes wide enough, children stop engaging, not out of indifference but out of self-protection. Why invest in a process that has repeatedly shown it does not value your contribution?

This trust deficit can have longer-term consequences that go beyond individual consultations. Over time, it

may contribute to civic disengagement. A weak feedback loop is therefore not only a limitation in the process, but also a potential risk for meaningful democratic participation.

What works: the power of visible outcomes

The counterpart to this pattern is equally clear in the consultation. When children can see that their contributions led to some form of change, this often has a positive effect on their confidence, motivation, and sense of belonging.

“When we have children’s week we always go and visit the mayor of our city. Last year we said we were unhappy with the school meals... and they changed it and took our wishes and healthy needs into account.”
— Child from Croatia, 14

“A few years ago we suggested to our mayor that one of our playgrounds needs to be repaired, and this year it was finally renewed.” — Child from Croatia, 16

“We came up with the idea to close a big street once a month so kids can play in it... and it made me feel heard and proud.” — Child from Malta, 14

What is notable about these examples is their scale. School meals, a playground, a street closed once a month: none of these involve major policy reform. These are small, concrete, local changes, yet they illustrate something important: **when children can see that their views have been taken into account, this can shape their belief that participation is meaningful.** This is not about limiting children’s participation to minor issues, but about the **importance of visible impact.** Without it, even participation in larger issues, risks feeling abstract or inconsequential.

This points to an important consideration for institutions: accountability is not only demonstrated through large-scale outcomes, but also through transparency, follow-through, and respect for children’s time and contributions.

Accountability as a condition, not an afterthought

Children’s views suggest that feedback and transparency are not simply additional elements of participation processes, but important conditions for them to be experienced as meaningful.

“Seeing that the opinions they expressed were actually acted upon.” — Child from Estonia, 16

“Transparency... seeing through the whole process.”
— Child from Malta

“I need to see the impact.” — Child from Wales

“If something can’t be done, we need to know.”
— Child from Malta, 17

That last quote is particularly important. Children are not demanding that every idea they propose is implemented. They understand that not all proposals are feasible. What they are asking for is an explanation, a genuine, respectful account of what happened to their contribution and why certain things were or were not acted upon. In the absence of such feedback, silence can be experienced as a sign that their contribution was not taken seriously.

Why this keeps happening: a structural problem and adults’ responsibility

Children also reflected on why the feedback loop breaks down so consistently. Their analysis pointed to two interconnected causes: a lack of genuine commitment from adults and decision-makers, and the absence of structural mechanisms that make accountability mandatory rather than optional.

“They have the resources, but they do not take children seriously. They just listen for show.” — Child from Malta, 13

“When other people speak on behalf of children, but it is not about conveying children’s voices.” — Child from Estonia, 16

In many cases, children described participation processes designed to publicly demonstrate inclusion rather than achieve it in practice. Consultations were held, photographs taken, reports written, but the link between children’s input and actual decision-making was never established. Without that link, accountability is impossible because there is no moment at which children’s views are formally required to be considered. This points to a **structural gap.** In most institutional settings, there is **no obligation to report back to children** on what happened after a consultation. **Feedback is left to the goodwill of adults** or organisations, which means it is inconsistent, often absent, and always dependent on circumstances rather than guaranteed by design.

Impact on children

Consultation without feedback or follow-through may have effects beyond individual children and processes. When children repeatedly experience participation that appears to lead nowhere, this can shape how they understand the value of their involvement. It may influence whether they feel that their views are taken seriously, whether institutions are responsive, and whether engaging is worth the effort.

“If we don’t have child participation, then when we get older, we won’t know how to participate in other things.”
— Child from Malta, 10

“It is important to be empowered... from an early age in order to become active citizens later in life.”
— Child from Bulgaria, 17

Children recognise this connection themselves. Participation is not only about the decision at hand, but it also shapes how children understand whether democratic processes are responsive and worth engaging with. When experiences are positive and meaningful, this may support the development of trust in institutions and a willingness to participate in civic life.

This framing has particular significance for EU and national institutions. **Democratic disengagement among young people is widely documented across Europe**². The findings here suggest that early experiences with participatory processes may contribute to **how young people come to perceive democratic institutions**, particularly where expectations are raised without clear follow-through. In this sense, gaps in feedback and follow-through are not only procedural, but may form part of the conditions through which democratic culture is shaped over time.

Where differences in children’s perspectives matter

Across the consultation, the experience of participation without follow-through was shared by children in all countries. However, some differences are worth noting. **Croatian** children provided the most concrete examples of both failure and success. Their testimonies included specific instances of participation that led to **real change (school meals improved, a playground repaired, a street closed for play) as well as equally specific experiences of being ignored** (including two years of unanswered emails from a mayor). This combination suggests that Croatian children may have greater direct exposure to formal participatory structures, giving them a clearer basis for comparison between processes that work and those that do not.

Estonian children were particularly articulate about the structural dimension of the problem, the gap between participatory spaces and actual decision-making. Their testimonies focused less on adults failing to respond and more on **systems that are simply not designed to transmit children’s views to the people with the power** to act on them. This framing points toward institutional reform rather than individual attitude change.

Younger children (below 13 years old) tended to describe the broken feedback loop in more personal and relational terms, such as a teacher who ignored a suggestion, or a parent who did not follow through. Older children, particularly those with experience in formal structures, described it in more systemic terms. Both experiences reflect the same underlying failure, but the scale at which children encounter it shapes what kind of response they are asking for.

What children are asking adults to do

Children’s message on accountability is simple: follow through, or explain why you cannot. They are not asking for perfection they are asking for honesty. They are asking decision-makers and adults to close the loop they opened when they invited children to participate, to come back with an answer, however small, and to treat children’s time and trust as something that deserves a response.

“If something can’t be done, we need to know.”
— Child from Malta, 17

“Adults should avoid promising real participation and then showing zero interest in children’s ideas.”
— Child from Bulgaria, 16

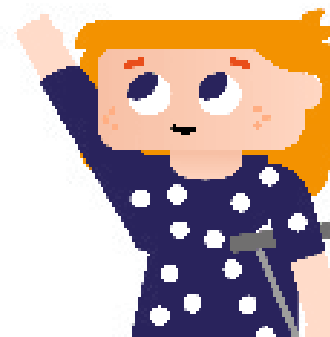
“There should be evidence to see that children’s opinions are changing something for them.”
— Child from Wales, 14

“Show children past examples of successful participation to show the potential benefits behind shared decision-making.” — Child from Wales, 18

Children are also asking institutions to stop treating feedback as optional and to build it into the design of every participation process from the start. When accountability is structural rather than dependent on the intentions of individual adults, it stops being an afterthought and becomes part of what participation means.

Beyond issues surrounding the process, children drew attention to the unequal opportunities to participate and the groups most often left out.

² European Commission, Flash Eurobarometer 545 – [Youth and Democracy](#) (2024)



KEY THEMES

Who is excluded from participation?



Children who experienced care... their voices often get lost.
— Child from Wales, 17

Child participation is often spoken about as if it were a single, uniform experience, something that either happens or does not. The consultation, however, points to a more complex picture. Not all children enjoy the right to have their views heard. The processes designed to hear children's voices are themselves shaped by assumptions, habits, and structural barriers that make some children much more likely to be heard than others.

What emerges from children's testimonies is not simply a list of excluded groups. Rather, they point to **recurring gaps in who has access to the right to participate. In many cases, the children most affected by decisions are among those least likely to be consulted.** This does not appear to be incidental, but reflects how **participation processes are often shaped by assumptions about who can take part**, typically favouring children who are confident, articulate, and already connected to institutional structures, and who face fewer barriers to participation. This is also often linked to the fact that many processes are not designed to be inclusive of children with additional needs or those from less advantaged backgrounds, further limiting their opportunities to take part.

This chapter examines who gets left out, why, and what it costs.

Children in vulnerable situations

Children highlighted those experiencing difficult or unstable life circumstances, children in alternative care, those affected by abuse or conflict, and those living in poverty, as among the least likely to be reached by mainstream participation processes.

"Children who we assume they are faring well and don't need help." — Child from Wales, 14

"Children who are less privileged." — Child from Malta, 15

While children recognised that participation

opportunities for children in vulnerable situations are already limited or frequently overlooked, this second quote also highlights an additional risk within this group. Children who are considered to be coping well, despite facing vulnerability, may be even more likely to be excluded, as their apparent resilience can lead to an assumption that they do not require additional attention or consultation. From the children's perspective, this can result in some children within vulnerable groups being further marginalised within participation processes, precisely because their needs are less visible.

Children with disabilities and special needs

The most consistently mentioned group across all countries was children with disabilities or special needs. Children were clear that exclusion here is rarely deliberate; it results from assumptions about capacity, and of participation processes that are simply not designed with these children in mind.

"Children with disabilities because they are seen 'as different' than children with regular development."
— Child from Croatia, 14

"Children with special needs mainly."
— Child from Bulgaria, 17

Inclusion in name is not the same as inclusion in practice, and children with disabilities are among those most likely to experience the gap between the two. The implications for process design are direct.

Participation mechanisms that rely on verbal expression, formal settings, or written communication will systematically exclude children who need different forms of engagement.

Accessibility should not be an add-on; it should be a precondition.

Younger children

A second group consistently identified as overlooked was younger children, particularly those under twelve. The **assumption that younger children lack the maturity or knowledge to contribute** meaningfully was described as one of the most common reasons their voices are not sought.

“Younger children (8–12).” — Child from Estonia, 14

“Small children under 12.” — Child from Wales, 16

Children who raised this point were not arguing that younger children should participate in the same way as older ones. They argued that age should not be used as a reason to exclude, and that adults often do not know how to engage younger children effectively, which leads to their perspectives being overlooked by default rather than by deliberate choice.

This matters particularly in the context of EU and national policy processes, which tend to favour formal consultative structures that are simply not designed for younger age groups. The absence of younger children’s voices from these processes does not mean they have nothing to say; it means **no one has created the right conditions for them to say it**.

Children with a migrant background and ethnic minority origin

Children also highlighted those who face social, economic, or cultural marginalisation as among the most consistently overlooked. This included migrants and children from minority ethnic or religious backgrounds.

“Migrants.” — Child from Malta, 17

“Children who come from other countries.” — Child from Malta, 12

Children described discrimination based on race, religion, and socio-economic status as factors that shape not only whether marginalised children are invited to participate, but whether they feel safe and welcome doing so. For children who have experienced exclusion or hostility in institutional settings, a participation process may not feel like a safe space without deliberate effort to make it one.

“When people see me... they see me as a foreigner... they never paid attention to me.” — Child from Malta, 11

This testimony is a reminder that inclusion is not only structural. It is relational. A child who does not feel seen as a legitimate member of a community will not feel empowered to speak within it, regardless of whether they are technically invited.

Quieter children or children with challenging behaviours

Children also pointed to two groups whose exclusion is less visible but equally significant: children who are shy or less confident, and children who are labelled as difficult, disengaged, or academically struggling.

“Quieter children who do not express their opinions and may need extra encouragement to speak.” — Child from Estonia, 16

“Children who are scared to talk or shy because they are scared of what people will say to them.” — Child from Malta, 14

Participation processes that rely on open discussion, public speaking, or self-nomination will consistently favour children who are already comfortable in those formats. Quieter children **are not less capable of contributing**, they need different conditions to do so. When those conditions are not provided, participation spaces end up amplifying the voices of those already most likely to be heard.

The same logic applies to children perceived negatively by adults or peers.

“Children who get bad grades or who behave poorly.” — Child from Croatia, 14

“The more misbehaved children or those who don’t follow academic standards.” — Child from Wales, 14

These children are often the ones with the most direct experience of how systems fail children. Excluding them from participation processes because of how they are perceived does not protect those processes; it weakens them.

Impact on children

The inclusion gap in child participation is not only a question of fairness to the children who are left out, though it is that. **It is also a question of the quality and legitimacy of the decisions being made.**

When participation processes consistently hear from the same children, those who are already confident, already institutionally connected, and already relatively advantaged, the perspectives they generate are incomplete. Policies designed on the basis of those perspectives will reflect the needs and experiences of some children while remaining blind to others. The children most affected by those policies are often precisely the ones who were never asked.

“If adults don’t involve us how can they know what we need?” — Child from Croatia, 14

This question applies with particular force to marginalised children. Adults who have not heard from

children in care, children with disabilities, or children from minority backgrounds cannot claim to understand their needs, and policies built without those perspectives will fail to serve them, however well-intentioned they may be.

There is also a democratic dimension to this. Participation processes that reproduce existing inequalities do not just exclude individual children; they **reinforce the message that some voices count more than others**. For children who already experience marginalisation in their daily lives, this message is not new. But it deepens disengagement and erodes trust in institutions at precisely the age when that trust is being formed.

Where differences in children's perspectives matter

The inclusion **gap manifests differently across countries, reflecting different national contexts** and the groups most likely to be marginalised in each setting.

Children in Malta were particularly vocal about the exclusion of migrant children and those from minority backgrounds, reflecting the specific demographic realities of their context. Welsh children more frequently highlighted children in care and those perceived as academically disengaged, suggesting the particular visibility of those groups in the Welsh policy landscape. Croatian and Bulgarian children focused more on disability and the exclusion of children who do not conform to adult expectations of behaviour or academic performance.

Age also shaped how children described exclusion.

Younger children tend to describe it as being dismissed or not taken seriously, with adults assuming they are too young to have relevant views. Older children, particularly those involved in formal participation structures, were more likely to notice the absence of certain peers from those structures and to name that absence as a problem.

What is consistent across all countries is an **underlying pattern: participation processes tend to reach children who are already visible**, already confident, and already connected to institutional structures. Reaching those who are not requires deliberate effort, and that effort is currently not being made consistently anywhere in the consultation.

What children are asking adults to do

Children's message on inclusion is straightforward: stop assuming, and start asking. **Stop designing participation processes around the children who are easiest to reach**, and start building ones that actively seek out those who are hardest to include. Stop treating accessibility as an afterthought, and recognise it as the starting point.

"Different forms of expression... writing or drawing so that I can participate in a different way."

— Child from Malta, 11

"That everyone is equally included... everyone has the same opportunities to say something."

— Child from Croatia, 14

"Activities not suited for disabled people or because of assumptions or stereotypes." — Child from Wales, 18

Children are not asking for special treatment; they are asking for equal treatment, designed around the reality of their lives rather than the convenience of institutions. They are asking decision-makers to look around the room and notice who is missing, and to take responsibility for that absence rather than accepting it as inevitable.

Children also emphasised that adults play a decisive role in shaping whether participation is meaningful or not.



KEY THEMES

What role do adults play in shaping participation?



“When you try to comment about something, the adults don’t care, they think you’re not smart enough, not grown up enough to make decisions that are sensible.” — Child from Malta, 10

Every chapter in this report points, in one way or another, to the same underlying reality: **participation does not succeed or fail solely because of structures. It succeeds or fails because of people.** The attitudes adults bring into participatory spaces, the way they listen, the degree to which they are willing to share power and be genuinely changed by what children say, **these are the factors that determine whether participation is meaningful or performative, empowering or extractive.**

This is not a peripheral finding. It is one of the **most consistent messages across the entire consultation.** Children are not asking primarily for more councils, more forums, or more consultations. They are asking for adults who know how to listen, who respect their perspectives, and who take their contributions seriously enough to act on them. Without that, no structure, however well-designed, will produce genuine participation.

This chapter examines what children say about the adult factor: what good adult engagement looks like, what gets in the way, and what adults can learn from genuinely listening to children.

What children need from adults: listening as an active practice

Across all countries, the condition children identified most consistently as essential for meaningful participation was not a structural one. It was about adults’ attitudes. They described genuine listening, not as passive hearing, but as an active, effortful, and open-minded practice that requires adults to set aside assumptions and engage with what children are actually saying.

“It is not that easy to listen to another human being. It takes time and extra effort, but it definitely matters in the end.” — Child from Bulgaria, 16

“They should listen to children actively in order to understand what stands behind behaviours and

actions.” — Young person from Bulgaria, 18
“Include children more in decision-making. Truly listen to them, not just pretend to listen.”
— Child from Estonia, 15

Children drew a clear distinction between adults who listen to respond and those who listen to understand.

The first group is common. The second group is rarer, and it is the one that makes participation feel genuine. When children sense that an adult has genuinely engaged with what they said, considered it seriously, and allowed it to influence their thinking, the effect on children’s confidence and willingness to continue participating is significant.

This highlights the importance of preparation and training, not only for those facilitating child participation, but for all adults involved in engaging with children in policy-making processes. Listening in the way children describe is a skill, one that can be developed, but that requires deliberate investment.

Adult attitudes and stereotypes: the barriers children name

If genuine listening is the foundation of meaningful participation, then adult attitudes that dismiss or underestimate children are its most significant barrier. Children across all countries described encountering adults who assumed they were too young, too inexperienced, or too uninformed to contribute meaningfully.

“Adults who believe that a child doesn’t have the knowledge or cannot be more knowledgeable on topics which concern them.” — Child from Bulgaria

“Many parents or teachers who instill in children the idea that they are too young or lack experience.”
— Child from Estonia, 15

These attitudes not only affect individual interactions. They shape the environments children inhabit,

classrooms, family settings, and institutional spaces, in ways that make genuine participation structurally difficult. When adult authority is the organising principle of a space, and when that authority does not include an obligation to take children seriously, participation becomes dependent on the goodwill of individual adults rather than guaranteed by design.

Children also described more deeply embedded **cultural attitudes, particularly in some national contexts, where hierarchical relationships** between adults and children are so normalised that even raising the possibility of shared decision-making feels transgressive.

“People with a Soviet-style mindset who think that adults have very strong authority over children.”
— Child from Estonia, 16

“Adults should not impose their opinions.”
— Child from Bulgaria, 18

These testimonies point to something important for adults to understand. Adult attitudes are not simply personal; they are shaped by cultural norms, institutional structures, and professional training. Changing them requires **more than individual goodwill**. It requires deliberate investment in how adults who work with children are prepared for participatory roles.

What adults can learn: the case for intergenerational dialogue

Children were not only critical of adults. They also articulated, with clarity and generosity, what adults stand to gain from genuinely listening to them. Their responses make a strong case for intergenerational dialogue not as an obligation to be fulfilled but as a genuine source of insight and learning.

“They should get to know our needs and wishes; we need intergenerational relationship and solidarity.”
— Child from Croatia, 14

“They can learn the problems children face in a society that wasn’t similar to the adults when they were growing up.” — Child from Wales, 17

Children emphasised that even with the best intentions, adults often lack accurate or current knowledge of children’s lived realities. The world children are growing up in is different from the one adults grew up in, and children have direct experience of challenges (online environments, cyberbullying, new forms of social pressure) that many adults have not encountered in the same way.

“Parents think inside the box, but children think outside the box.” — Child from Malta, 10
“A new perspective, fresh ideas, and worldviews.”
— Child from Estonia, 17

Children also highlighted that listening to them can lead to more effective responses to the problems that affect them most directly.

“They will solve issues such as domestic violence and school violence in a more effective way.”
— Child from Bulgaria, 17

“How to notice when children are struggling.”
— Child from Wales, 17

These points suggest that child participation is not only a rights-based obligation, but also contributes to the quality and relevance of decisions, policies, and services. Where children’s perspectives are not taken into account, decisions may be made on the basis of incomplete information.

Mutual learning: participation as a two-way process

A theme that ran consistently through children’s responses was that the relationship between children and adults in participatory spaces should not be one-directional. Children are not simply sources of information to be extracted, they are partners in a process of mutual learning.

“They can learn from us and we can learn from them. It’s vice-versa.” — Child from Malta, 12

“We all learn cooperation and understanding.”
— Child from Croatia, 13

“Better communication between the generations.”
— Child from Bulgaria, 16

Children described participatory processes at their best as spaces where both children and adults grow, where adults gain new perspectives, and children develop skills, confidence, and a sense of agency. This vision of participation as mutual rather than extractive should inform how institutions design and facilitate engagement with children.

It also has implications for how adults are positioned within participatory spaces. Children consistently described the most effective adult roles as facilitative rather than directive, adults who create conditions for children to contribute, who manage the process without dominating it, and who are visibly open to being influenced by what they hear.

“A supportive atmosphere. Good facilitators.”
— Child from Estonia

“We need to make the table rather than just be invited to sit at one.” — Child from Wales, 17

How adults can help: practical conditions for better participation

Children were also concrete about what adults can do differently. Their suggestions were practical, specific, and entirely actionable. They point clearly to what investment in adult capacity for child participation should look like.

“Safe and open spaces where adults want to know what we think and feel and want to include us.”

— Child from Croatia, 14

“By genuinely listening to them, noticing them, their wellbeing, and respecting them.” — Child from Estonia

“Make it more fun and interesting and interactive.”

— Child from Malta, 14

“Education of adults about children’s rights and the fact our rights come from our needs, and not wishes.”

— Child from Croatia, 10

Children call for adults who are trained and prepared for participatory roles, **not just willing, but equipped**.

They emphasised the importance of facilitation that is adapted to children’s ages and communication styles, that creates genuine safety for disagreement and difference, and that treats children’s contributions as valuable rather than as content to be managed.

They also called for adults **to be honest about what is possible**, about what will be done with children’s contributions, and about why certain ideas cannot be acted upon. Honesty, in children’s views, is itself a form of respect.

Impact on children

The difference between adults who engage genuinely and those who do not is not subtle; children feel it immediately, and it profoundly shapes their experience of participation.

When adults listen well, create safe conditions, and follow through on what they hear, the effect on children is consistently positive. Children described feeling trusted, valued, and capable, and those feelings translated directly into greater confidence, stronger skills, and a deeper willingness to remain engaged in participatory processes.

“Knowing that we were trusted by adults.”

— Child from Wales, 17

“Anytime I am asked for my opinion it makes me feel needed... and it makes me want to speak.”

— Child from Wales, 14

When adults engage poorly, dismissing contributions, dominating discussions, or failing to follow through, the impact is equally clear and equally lasting.

Children described feeling invisible, patronised, and unwilling to try again. Over time, repeated negative experiences with adults in participatory spaces do not simply discourage individual children; they shape a broader understanding of what participation is and whether it is worth investing in.

This places a significant responsibility on the adults and institutions that design and facilitate child participation. The quality of adult engagement is not a secondary consideration — it is the primary determinant of whether participation produces the outcomes children are asking for.

Where differences in children’s perspectives matter

Children across all countries identified adult attitudes as a central barrier to meaningful participation, but the specific forms this takes vary by national and cultural context.

Estonian children were particularly focused on structural dimensions, the **absence of trained facilitators**, the lack of systems that require adults to act on children’s contributions, and the gap between participatory spaces and actual decision-making. Their testimonies suggest that in the Estonian context, the adult factor is **as much about institutional design as individual attitude**.

Bulgarian children placed particular emphasis on the need for adults to engage in self-reflection to examine their own assumptions and biases before entering participatory spaces. Several participants described adults who were well-intentioned but whose unexamined attitudes about children’s capacities undermined genuine engagement. Bulgarian children also highlighted the value of intergenerational dialogue and mutual learning more consistently than children in other countries.

Croatian and Maltese children focused more on the relational dimension, the importance of specific adults who made them feel safe, trusted, and valued. Their testimonies suggest that in these contexts, **individual adult relationships** play a particularly significant role in determining whether participation feels meaningful. Welsh children were the most explicit about power, describing adults who control participatory spaces in ways that **prevent genuine shared decision-making**, and calling most directly for adults to relinquish that control.

What children are asking adults to do

Children’s message to adults is clear and consistent. They are not asking adults to step aside, they are asking them to step up. To listen not just with their ears but with genuine openness. To create spaces where all children feel safe enough to speak. To be honest when ideas cannot be acted upon, rather than simply going silent. And above all, to trust children, not as a favour,

but as a recognition of their rights.

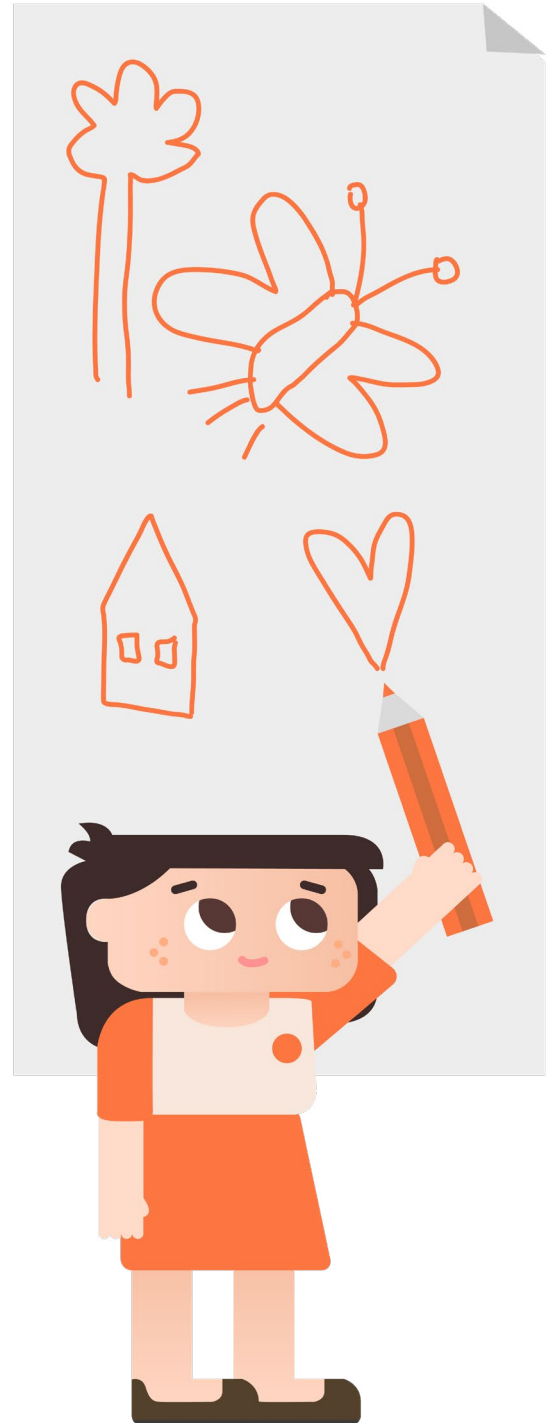
“Recognising children as actual people and treat them with respect.” — Child from Wales, 14

“Adults themselves can teach how to be active.”
— Child from Estonia

“Education of adults about children’s rights and the fact our rights come from our needs, and not wishes.”
— Child from Croatia, 10

The ask is not complicated. Children are not demanding perfection; they are asking for honesty, effort, and respect. They are asking adults to take participation as seriously as they take any other professional responsibility. And they are asking institutions to stop leaving that responsibility to individual goodwill, and instead build it into the systems, training, and accountability structures that shape how adults engage with children every day.

Based on their experiences, children were clear about what needed to change. The next section presents their call to action.



Call To Action

What children want adults to do to ensure meaningful child participation

- **Move beyond listening to children**
Children are asking to be recognised as equal partners in the decisions that affect their lives. Listening to children is not enough; their voices must also help shape decisions and bring real change.
- **Move beyond symbolic participation**
Children are asking for more opportunities to participate, but meaningful ones, connected to real decision-making, with active listening from decision-makers. Children are experts of their own lives and bring practical solutions to discussions.
- **Stop treating feedback as optional**
Children are asking adults and institutions to consider how they influence or do not influence decisions made by decision-makers with answers, feedbacks, and explanations, even when change is slow, partial, or impossible.
- **Include every child**
Children are asking adults and institutions to stop building participation processes around the children who are easiest to reach and to actively seek out those who are too often excluded.
- **Build intergenerational dialogue**
Children are asking for adults and institutions to engage in dialogue: listening, reflecting, and growing alongside children rather than speaking for them.

Annex 1: Children's quotes on child participation

To further illustrate children's voices, this annex provides direct quotes from the consultations, including additional quotes not included in the report before.

Bulgaria

In your own words, how do you describe child participation?

"It means a process of participation of children and young people in order to be able to express their opinions" (17 year old child)

"That they should listen to children and young people actively in order to understand what stands behind certain behaviours and actions" (18 year old child)

"I will tell them that it is not that easy to listen to another human being, it will take time and extra efforts but it definitely matters in the end." (16 year old child)

What is not "child participation" for you?

"When a child is used and asked to act as a décor, to decorate an event organized and facilitated by adults" (16 year old child)

"When the idea of a meaningful participation has been abused and exploited" (17 year old child)

"It 'looks like' participation but it is fake and doesn't follow young people's thoughts and desires" (16 year old child)

"We have many examples, coming from the school setting when we are often invited to organize events but in most of the cases our decisions are not taken seriously" (15 year old child)

"Adults should avoid promising real participation and then showing zero interest in young people's ideas" (16 year old child)

"Using young people 'to promote' adults' opinions and thoughts."

"Adults should never forget for whom they have created a space for participation" (17 year old child)

"Adults should not act overprotectively because this doesn't allow children to grow up and learn from their mistakes" (16 year old child)

Can you give examples of times when you were asked for your opinion? How did you feel?

"In our school, the Students' Council created a poster (the main topic was related to young people's anxiety and how they can cope with it during the high school). We presented it in front of two people from the school management and they spent 40 minutes to dissuade us. This felt quite frustrating because we spent a lot of efforts and although we were the majority in the room, our voices were not stronger than those of the adults." (15 year old child)

"In my school, there was a round table and adults asked for our opinions (I cannot remember the topic we had discussed). Only young people were invited to participate and share honestly their opinions. However, 2 teachers joined and started to blame us for our opinions, they provoked discussions and 27 young people tried to defend themselves and convince two people that they have the right to share what they think about. I felt frustrated because we were convinced that our opinion will be expressed freely" (16 year old girl)

Can you give examples of times you were not asked for your opinion, but you wanted to give your opinion? How did you feel?

"I have an example coming from my family setting. Family friends started to discuss teenagers' attitudes and specifics with my family members and nobody asked me what I think about those thoughts. The funniest part was that I was the only teenager in the group and they did not want to discuss the topic with me." (16 year old child)

Why do you think it's important for children to be involved in decisions?

"Children are human beings no matter what their age is.... this doesn't mean that they cannot have opinions on issues or be involved in decisions." (16 year old child)

"Children will feel more appreciated and maybe they will not act aggressively or act out their emotions;" (16 year old child)

"It is important to be empowered to participate in decision making processes from an early age in order to become active citizens later in life." (17 year old child)

What can adults learn from listening to children?

"Adults will learn more things about the environment, the new generations and the way they express themselves;" (15 year old child)

"They will progress and reflect on problems in a different way;" (16 year old child)

"They will solve issues such as domestic violence and school violence in a more effective way." (17 year old child)

"They will feel support and understanding by the young people." (16 year old child)

What ideas do you have to encourage more child participation in decision-making?

"Active listening"

"Sharing personal experience"

"Providing peer to peer support and training by professionals."

How can adults make it easier for children to participate?

"Education, additional trainings"

"However, it is always related to the personality and to its readiness to act in a child-friendly or youth-friendly way" (15 year old child)

What would you say to adults who think children are too young to participate in decisions?

"I will tell them that the age difference between us doesn't mean that we do not have the right to speak and to be listened to;"

(16 year old child)

"Their experience doesn't mean that it fits well to mine;" (16 year old child)

"We can disagree no matter what our age difference is;" (16 year old child)

"Children are never too young to participate in decision-making;" (16 year old child)

"Adults can make this process possible and create a space for young children in order to be able to participate in decision-making process;" (15 year old child)

Croatia

In your own words, how do you describe child participation?

"It is a right of every child to express his or her opinion, to express their feelings and inner world." (16 year old child)

"It is a joint decision making relationship between children and adults." (14 year old child)

"It is being a part of a bigger thing than you are, it can be something very important like participating in some discussions, consultations like this and so on. Participation should be relevant and important to everyone in the process." (14 year old child)

"I am asked about my needs, opinions, feelings and based on that adults help me during the decision-making by offering support." (11 year old child)

"It is also a part of not being discriminated against or judged about something you say or do." (14 year old child)

"It is being a part of something bigger than just you, like your councils, forums, groups of children." (14 year old child)

What is not "child participation" for you?

"I wanted to say how in schools we as a class came up with a great dance to show at the school recital, but the teacher didn't like it and she just immediately said her idea is better and we weren't allowed to show what we wanted. And she asked us to come up with something. In sports (soccer) we were included with our previous teacher in planning the game and our techniques and now we have a new teacher and he says he is the team leader and he knows best. So it is really frustrating because outside of our city councils and forums we don't have a chance to actually participate because it mostly depends on adults and their beliefs, attitudes and behaviors." (14 year old child)

"Last year students council did a short survey where they interviewed their peers about children's meals at schools, and the results were that something needs to change because children don't want to eat stale pizza and so on, unfortunately nothing changed." (14 year old child)

"It is a shame children don't have their own EU Parliament to show adults how it can be done in a more friendly, polite and inclusive way. Participation is inclusion, not division." (13 year old child)

"When we say we need something in our students councils in schools and they just say no without even explaining why." (14 year old child)

"It is when adults make decisions without including children because it would be "more work". Also, when adults don't even try to explain to children things which are relevant to the topics they are trying to be a part of" (14 year old child)

"Adults often use complicated words and we can't understand them. For example in schools and they don't even try to explain it to us which is the worse because we then don't have any idea how to comment or react to something." (10 year old child)

Can you give examples of times when you were asked for your opinion? How did you feel?

"When we have Children's week we always go and visit the mayor of our city. Last year we said we are unhappy with the school meals and food, and since the City is the founder of the school they changed it and took our wishes and healthy needs into account. We also asked the mayor to take better care of our city parks and we held several actions." (14 year old child)

"In our Children's City Council of Opatija we have all the space we need and want for our opinions to be included and taken into account. For example we organized and designed the activities for our Children's week, or tomorrow we have a festival and everything was done by our ideas. We meet regularly with the mayor of the City of Opatija and ask him and his deputy questions on our sessions, and if they don't have the answer or don't know it they send it to us in a written form or inform us on the next session." (14 year old child)

"I went to therapy sessions because of my knee and they asked me for my opinion at the doctor's office on how would I like to proceed with the therapy and I was very happy because I got to choose what is best for me." (14 year old child)

"Our council and school are drastically different. In schools we can say what we think, but it doesn't change anything. It is like it is a form they want to satisfy because they are obligated to. That is why I am happy to have a chance to be a part of Children's Council, and NEF Croatia where I matter as a person and where my voice matters. I am also a part of the school cooperative group. And in the whole group there is 2 children and 10 adult teachers. It is better than school councils but still is very different than Children's City Council" (14 year old child)

Can you give examples of times you were not asked for your opinion, but you wanted to give your opinion? How did you feel?

"At home I am never really asked about what I think or need and I am very sad about it because I would also like to be included in the planning of for example our trips or something." (10 year old child)

"On our training sessions we even if want to say something we are discouraged because of older team players and our coaches." (14 year old child)

"It is the same on my swimming lessons. Every coach has their favorites and they exclude others by offering different opportunities to only selected children." (14 year old child)

"In schools often. As a member of students council what we think or feel is not in the interest of adults." (11 year old child)

Why do you think it's important for children to be involved in decisions?

"It is important because we have our own voices. We spend so much time in schools and we should have a say in the planning of the curriculum or the annual plan or at least school meals." (14 year old child)

"When decisions are affecting children, children should be the decision makers of their own present and future. When decisions are affecting children, children are the experts." (14 year old child)

"Adults and children see our problems very different. Something that is small to adults can be a huge deal for children. That is why we need and deserve the chance to express ourselves." (14 year old child)

"Our voices define the children all around us: in our schools, cities, municipalities, countries. If we are speaking up and are involved in decision-making processes it is important that we are equals to adults, otherwise it is not meaningful." (14 year old)

child)

“When you see you are responsible for something good it gives you strength to go on and do even better. As active citizens of our societies we get a chance to change our world. And that is amazing.” (13 year old child)

“So that adults don’t make big mistakes in the names of children and “improving their lives”.” (11 year old child)

“It is important for our self-esteem, communication skills, presentation skills. When we accomplish something we feel better.” (16 year old child)

What can adults learn from listening to children?

“They get to know our needs and wishes, intergenerational relationship and solidarity.” (14 year old boy)

“Adults get to know our lives and how big impact they have on us children.” (14 year old child)

“They get new creative ideas from children and learn what children like/want/need in today’s world.” (14 year old child)

What ideas do you have to encourage more child participation in decision-making?

“Flyers, billboards or drawings to attract more children and to promote CP.” (16 year old child)

“To have a council as the Council for Children of the Republic of Croatia but where more children would be involved.” (14 year old child)

“Promotional materials such as videos to encourage CP on all levels, and maybe examples of good practices.” (14 year old child)

“To have more Children’s Participation events for children such as conferences, trips” (10 year old child)

“On the EU level to exchange children from Children’s councils to have exchange meetings and study visits with children and adults” (13 year old child)

“To advocate for Children’s Participation on a school level. That we from Children’s councils, NEF Croatia have an opportunity to show how CP looks like in our activities and how to implement it in schools with the support of our organizations and mentors” (13 year old child)

“I think that at the national level, children could create some smart and educational posters, and at the European level, they could make a video because that’s very popular today and I believe it would reach our peers all around the world” (14 year old child)

“Definitely promotional videos” (13 year old child)

“More children’s councils and forums especially on local levels but who do actual work and CP activities” (14 year old child)

How can adults make it easier for children to participate?

“Adults should make opportunities for us to participate as equals to adults” (14 year old child)

“Adults should give us strength and security so that we feel safe” (14 year old child)

“Safe and open spaces where adults want to know what we think and feel and want to include us” (14 year old child)

“More children’s councils and forums which promote and advocate Children’s participation on a global level” (14 year old child)

“Education of adults about Children’s Rights and the fact our rights come from our needs, and not wishes” (10 year old child)

“To have time and try to understand what Children’s Participation is” (13 year old child)

What would you say to adults who think children are too young to participate in decisions?

“I would be very frustrated and disappointed. We have Children’s City Councils and no children is too young for participation, activism and being a part of our society.” (14 year old child)

“Even though children don’t know maybe some facts and a lot of things that adults know, we are the experts of our childhoods.” (14 year old child)

“I would tell those people how children also have values and opinions and beliefs and how in many part of the world children can’t express their opinion and that is awful. This is important for the whole world, children and adults.” (14 year old child)

Estonia

In your own words, how do you describe child participation?

“Children’s participation is important because we can give a child’s perspective to adults, as children think differently. If I had to explain to adults what children’s participation is, then for me it means society – a stronger society – when children and young people are included.” (14 year old girl)

“Creating a platform where young people are invited to participate, while ensuring that they feel comfortable, take part voluntarily, and that it genuinely has meaning and something actually moves forward.” (17 year old girl)

“The most important thing is that what children say truly has meaning, a reason, and a result that follows. Children should be able to speak freely about their wishes and desires, knowing that these won’t remain just dreams and that they can also do something themselves to help make them happen.” (16 year old girl)

“Children having a say in different fields and contributing to society in general. For example, helping to solve many major problems and sharing children’s opinions on issues that concern them.”

What is not “child participation” for you?

“Children’s participation is not when our involvement is shown as decoration. When, figuratively speaking, we are included only by showing pictures on social media that we were present and attended, but no change comes from our opinions or assessments as a result of being there.” (14 year old girl)

“When adults start directing children by saying that everything is fine. Every child has their own opinion that needs to be listened to. If this is not done, society cannot be made more child-friendly and children will always remain out of the picture.” (child)

“Children’s participation is not when adults say what they think we think and do not ask us what we actually think. They simply suggest what we might think.” (14 year old girl)

“Youth councils are nice structures attached to ministries, where young people meet and express their opinions, but if this does not actually reach decision-making processes, then at the moment they do not seem useful. The same applies to youth councils at local level, where young people’s opinions are not taken into account as much as they could be. You can express your opinion, but it is often overlooked.” (16 year old boy)

Can you give examples of times when you were asked for your opinion? How did you feel?

"Sometimes at school (about twice, when surveys were conducted in primary school, I don't remember the topic). It's good that some schools use anti-bullying programmes, but when a real problem happens, for example only what adults want to hear about young people's opinions is taken into account."

"In the student council, opinions have often been asked, and when I have shared my opinion, things have actually changed." (15 year old girl)

"I have participated in the general assemblies of the Estonian Student Councils' Union and in public policy input collections, where there were workshops and opinions were asked, for example, about the current school environment. We were able to have a say and write down our thoughts, and they use this to go to the state level – it is their input. What students say goes somewhere bigger. I feel very good, because my opinion really matters." (15 year old girl)

"The last time I was able to express my opinion in a bigger way was when our home was being renovated. I was happy that my opinion and wishes were taken into consideration, and the home renovation was done in a way that suits me." (16 year old boy)

Can you give examples of times you were not asked for your opinion, but you wanted to give your opinion? How did you feel?

"You are asked for your opinion, you respond, and they don't listen to the answer. They ask and inquire just to say they asked young people, but nothing is done with the answers. When you find a place that actually does something with your response, then you feel that you are cared about." (15 year old girl)

"In the school environment, when another student in a joint organising team took over the organisation of an event without discussing it with others. It didn't feel good, because everything should be transparent." (16 year old boy)

"We had to decide on group members and choose who would be the group leader and who would be subordinate. It was pointed out that because I know many things, I should be 'the subordinate'. I wasn't asked whether I wanted to be. I was quite angry and felt betrayed." (14 year old girl)

"I feel that this problem hasn't occurred much for me personally. Those students who are not in the student council don't really get much of a say in school life. Of course, when there are surveys, they do, but in general they can't participate in events organised by the student council. Since I am in the student council, this makes me feel a bit sad. There are certainly students in schools who would like to represent their opinions more, but don't dare to and just keep it inside, even though it could help a lot." (16 year old girl)

"Sometimes at home, during family arguments, my opinion doesn't come across as strongly as I would like. It doesn't make me feel bad directly, but rather frustrated. I have quite good problem-solving skills, and sometimes I feel that they are not valued at home." (child)

Why do you think it's important for children to be involved in decisions?

"So that decisions are not made that young people do not like or that make their future and opportunities worse." (15 year old girl)

"It is impossible to make good decisions that affect young people without discussing them with young people themselves. It should also simply be taken for granted." (17 year old girl)

"Children know about the problems that genuinely affect them and are also able to find solutions to them." (15 year old girl)

"Otherwise, decisions that change children's lives are made without the child even knowing. This creates rebellion, and as a consequence society collapses." (15 year old girl)

"Because young people are more than little children. Don't treat us like cute and helpless puppies. Treat us like people!" (16 year old girl)

"So that everyone can feel good in our society." (14 year old girl)

What can adults learn from listening to children?

"Adults can develop their listening skills, learn to take others into account, and learn how important children truly are." (child)

"They can learn a small piece of children's opinions. Children's way of thinking is not just 'there's no money, taxes are rising, life is over' – children know how to dream." (15 year old girl)

"Children's perspective and how to communicate with children in the future. More innovative solutions that keep up with the times." (15 year old girl)

"Getting to know children and how intelligent and motivated they actually are." (16 year old boy)

"Getting to know children and behaving in a more child-friendly way." (15 year old girl)

What ideas do you have to encourage more child participation in decision-making?

"It is important that young people can participate in a familiar environment and with familiar people. I am planning to organise discussion evenings at school so that they can discuss issues in their own school, with their classmates, because this is a new experience for them. It is good when they are surrounded by familiar things and people. More such events should be organised within communities." (17 year old child)

"Definitely the easiest way is through student councils. I know that in quite a lot of schools you can join at a young age. It is a good starting point where you can develop skills, learn how to organise events, and learn how to raise your voice." (16 year old child)

"Wherever possible, ask. Don't be selfish, if you can, speak up and ask how others see things." (16 year old child)

"A pan-European youth organisation, highlighting inter-school programmes (e.g. EPAS), and a social media platform for information exchange among active young people." (17 year old child), (16 year old child), and (15 year old child)

"Involve young people more in decision-making processes and school activities. In kindergartens, involve young people even in small projects." (16 year old child), (15 year old child), (14 year old child), and (15 year old child)

How can adults make it easier for children to participate?

"Adults themselves can teach how to be active, for example, by enrolling children in different hobby groups. They can ask for children's opinions on various topics and broaden children's horizons." (child)

"Include young people more in decision-making. Truly listen to them, not just pretend to listen." (15 year old child)

"Make proposals to them and share information about participation opportunities." (15 year old child)

"Ask for their opinions more often." (16 year old child)

"Support their wishes; don't raise 'quiet' children (parents often think that a quiet child is a good child)." (16 year old child)

"By genuinely listening to them, noticing them, their wellbeing, and respecting them." (child)
"Include them, listen to them, educate parents (through trainings), and encourage young people." (15 year old child)
"By supporting and listening to them, giving them opportunities to participate, for example in surveys, and simply asking for their opinions." (15 year old child)
"A supportive society (funding robotics, for example)." (14 year old child)

What would you say to adults who think children are too young to participate in decisions?

"People who say this do so because they themselves grew up in such an environment where parents had greater authority. Times have changed somewhat now. Today, young people have more opportunities to speak up." (16 year old girl)
"This is our future that we are shaping as young people. In the end, we are the ones who will live in the future that adults are shaping for us right now. This is our future more than theirs." (16 year old boy)
"How is a child supposed to know how to express their opinion if this opportunity is taken away from them early on? If a child grows up not being listened to, then as an adult they won't dare to speak up either. It doesn't work so that you suddenly become old and immediately know how to express your opinion. It develops gradually over time." (child)
"The question is: if you don't allow me to express my opinion and make all decisions for me, then how do you know that it is actually the right step? If I have a different viewpoint, you might end up making things worse for me." (14 year old girl)

Calls to Action

Changing adults mindsets, not just processes:

"Adults could think about what feelings they would have if they themselves were young right now." (15 year old Child, Estonia).

Malta

In your own words, how do you describe child participation?

"you participate in things, rather than just living a life where you do nothing... Participation means making your life fun." (10 year old girl)
"just like we are doing now, it's when children have ideas and adults give them the chance to express themselves." (13 year old girl)
"if you are going to run a project and it affects everyone, why are you only consulting with adults, and not with kids?" (17 year old boy)
"Child participation is good for children, for education for children ... they learn more about the world that we live in" (10 year old boy)
"Children say something which can reach the world; get their voice heard to other children and people who might agree with them, so they can share with others" (10 year old boy)

What is not "child participation" for you?

"This is something that I have seen happening abroad, that for example there will be a president or someone who is going to pass a new law about schools or about playgrounds or anything that has to do with children, and for promotion they invite a lot of children to come talk about it, and these children are forced to speak highly of the issue or photos of the children are taken during the activity so that other people can say 'look, the children agree with this' when this is not actually the case" (13 year old girl)
"developers don't take the need for children to play into consideration, so they build tiny spaces" (10 year old girl)
"We wanted to start a break club for young children, we made a bit of an effort. We went to ask the head and she said 'ok, you have some supplies, I don't care, you can do this, go'. We were taking an initiative, but the adults don't even care that we are doing a good thing and making an effort." (10 year old girl)
"I have a younger sister who always asks questions about everything, but she is shut down and not given the chance to speak because she asks all the time" (14 year old girl)
"children ask banal questions sometimes, but sometimes their questions are very insightful or require answers which adults do not have... They ask questions which are needed and which can make a difference" (12 year old boy)
"I think that children in general should be taken more seriously, not the fact of responsibility and things, but when a child comes up with ideas or something to help out, the adults might nod and agree, but not even take into account the thought and idea of the child, because they think the child's ideas are not within the intelligence of the adult." (14 year old girl)

Can you give examples of times when you were asked for your opinion? How did you feel?

"it is an honour to be young and be valued and able to work with adults when making an important decision about Gozo" (13 year old girl)
"but you listen, you understand, and you take note of what we say and you try to do something about it. You (the facilitators) believe that what children have to say is important... It makes me feel good because I am paid attention to." (10 year old girl)
"if someone does not participate, the team will fail." In the same way, teamwork, communication, and trust are important and thus in sports teams it is important that the young players' opinions are taken into account." (12 year old boy)
"we were mentioning stuff, and I mentioned a compromise which worked out... I was happy to be part of it." (13 year old girl)
"We came up with the idea to close a big street once a month so kids can play in it, with activities set up, and we open them all in different places so it is accessible for all kids... and it made me feel heard and proud." (14 year old girl)
"At school, I got chosen to be in EkoSkola, and the teacher asked me if I agree with something we were discussing. I felt strong and heard." (10 year old girl)
"that's why I joined, because what I cannot say at – because at first you feel helpless... before we had these children's councils, to make your voice heard, I'm rarely heard at school and they take nothing into consideration. If you are not heard at school, you have to grow up and go into politics to be heard again. In the children's council, 1) my voice is heard and 2) it is actually taken into consideration and is actually serious." (11 year old boy)

Can you give examples of times you were not asked for your opinion, but you wanted to give your opinion? How did you feel?

"When people see me at first sight, they see me as a foreigner who can't speak Maltese. Teachers, they ask questions and obviously I know Maltese so I understand, and used to raise my hand but they never paid attention to me. They don't pay

attention to me because they just think that I'm a class clown or that I will use bad Maltese. This made me mad because they judged me without getting to know me, but now I am used to it. Because at first you think 'why am I like this? Why am I different?' but then you get used to it. I solved it by speaking to an assistant head, so now people know who I am and know my story." (11 year old boy)

"My mother is the person that includes me the most, so I was shocked and it made me feel mad." (14 year old girl)

"once I gave an idea to the school to get funds for an NGO, I told them the idea, they invited the chair of the NGO but they did not tell me about this meeting. It felt like I told them the ideas but they excluded me from my own idea... even though other students were asked to join the meeting." (13 year old girl)

Why do you think it's important for children to be involved in decisions?

"Children think more simply than adults which I think can be really handy in a discussion situation where they can give you new ideas" (13 year old girl)

"When adults listen to children it helps them make better decisions that suit everyone" (11 year old boy)

"if you are trying to target a population, why are you excluding part of the population?" (17 year old boy)

"consulting is good, but after you consult you need the action to be taken. You can consult as much as you want and have millions of ideas, but then if the ideas are not implemented then it's for nothing." (12 year old boy)

"Us children are the next generation of Malta, the next generation of leaders, so if we are part of decision making, it helps us make good decisions in the future whilst also knowing what is happening now. It also helps us build new skills."

"If we don't have child participation, then when we get older, we won't know how to participate in other things. So then, we might not give information that might help the world. We might get useless if we don't learn how to speak up" (10 year old boy)

"I think children have lots of ideas, sometimes even more than adults" (10 year old girl)

What can adults learn from listening to children?

"There's so much they can learn! In my opinion, anything." (11 year old boy)

"A lot because adults don't see the world how children see it. They see their job, they see more problems, like money... but children and then see... how don't know how to explain but it's different" (13 year old girl)

"They can learn from us and we can learn from them. It's vice-versa" (12 year old boy)

"Children think outside of the box, adults would just build a parking lot. But for example if you are going to build a parking lot, you can build a roof over it so that the cars don't get hot in summer, and cover it with plants." (10 year old girl)

"I think children have lots of ideas, sometimes even more than adults" (10 year old girl)

"younger children have a lot of creativity. My younger sister can spend two hours playing with just two pencils. My dad can't even sit still for five minutes" (14 year old girl)

"parents think inside the box, but children think outside the box" (10 year old boy)

What ideas do you have to encourage more child participation in decision-making?

"More open spaces for children to talk"

"dividing the age groups for better results during sessions"

"Open forms which children can fill in so that the government hears their ideas"

"implementations have to come out of consultations."; "even if you have 20,000 ideas, you still have to implement them"

"you show them, you don't just talk. You express your ideas, and you don't let anyone hold your ideas back, you speak up"

"A space where ideas can be submitted, such as an anonymous system for proposing, for example a letter box to put in feedback – [for example]. 'I write that I'm not feeling safe in a park and want cameras'; 'If for example, I don't feel safe at the park because there aren't any cameras. So, next to the council, or if we have scattered letter boxes, we can write 'I wish there were more cameras in the new park, because I don't feel safe'. So then, the adult can say, 'okay, we'll do it, because it's not only for children, but it's good for adults too'"

"You have to have a goal. The fact that I know that I can make a difference in my country ... instead of just staying at home and complaining that there's lots of traffic, lots of exhaust, no open spaces ... the fact that I know I can do something about it encourages me to come here ... the fact that I know I can share my ideas"

"Creating adverts to encourage people, including promotional material created by children for children"

"Make a children's council or several councils for Europe that cover a certain issue/issues. Creating forums that help children express their opinion on certain things even online."

"Creating an "international day" for child participation so that children can connect with children who are not directly close to them, similar in concept to youth exchanges by international organisations."

"Having more exchanges abroad related to culture and opinion-sharing, similar to Eurochild councils that encourage connection."

How can adults make it easier for children to participate?

"Suggested hosting debates for children" (17 year old boy)

"it is useless to teach someone how to light a fire with the theory, you need to learn how to do it by practicing." (12 year old boy)

"in school, one break, assembly, or lesson could be assigned for children to have the space to contribute to their microcosm"

"give us more spaces, more time and regular meetings." (13 year old girl)

What would you say to adults who think children are too young to participate in decisions?

"I would tell them that children under 10 or 10+ all have their own rights to pick and make their own decisions. Children of any age, young, old, teens, kids, they all need to help themselves, to make their life happier and more active. If their life is all about cleaning and doing things only other people want, it is not good. Their life is their life and not others'." (11 year old girl)

"Everybody, including children, has the right to share their opinion/ideas. When making changes for example in a playground - playgrounds are used by children, not adults – children have every right to see and make decisions before the changes are made" (13 year old girl)

"We are our own people and we shouldn't be forced to do activities we don't want to do. We are the future of the world and we need to make decisions that benefit us in the future" (12 year old boy)

"They should dedicate time to teach children wise decision-making skills, so that the children can also participate in other activities." (11 year old boy)

"You should help us make decisions, not give us your already made decisions and ask us to accept them" (10 year old girl)

"I wouldn't tell them anything, I would just prove them wrong"

"you tell them 'When you were a kid, did you make decisions yourself? Did you want safe spaces for you to play? Don't you think that children should have the right to play in the streets without the possibility of them hurting themselves?'"

"then why give us the opportunity in the children's local councils? if you think we're too young, why give us the opportunity? And we prove ourselves over and over again, that when we have the opportunity at councils, we do good activities, and we have good ideas. In fact, we do so many good activities at school, there are competitions between the schools to see which school participated the most" (14 year old girl)

"Sometimes they can be right that we wouldn't know certain things that parents already know. But at the same time, it shouldn't be a reason to prevent children from decision-making"

Calls to Action

Create spaces that are real, not symbolic:

"Give us more spaces like this... more time and regular meetings." (13 year old child, Malta)

Connect children at European and national levels:

"Creating a European Parliament for children so that they can voice problems on a bigger scale." — Child from Malta

Wales (UK)

In your own words, how do you describe child participation?

"Providing young people with the opportunities to get involved in social activities and getting their voice and opinions heard by those who will listen, care and act – Article 12" (18 year old non-binary person)

"The freedom to have you have as a young person to express how you fell in a safe space to be listened to make change" (19 year old male)

"When a child is actively included in an activity and asked their opinion and views on things." (14 year old girl)

What is not "child participation" for you?

"When there are not activities for all people. Making conclusions about children and their needs." (14 year old girl)

"Being ignored or having the capability and capacity to have young peoples voices heard, to have young voices, and not doing it." (19 year old male)

"Activities not suited for disabled people. The same people getting opportunities and not others. Getting spoken at." (18 year old non-binary person)

"Not involving kids because of stigma that they can't manage" (17 year old girl)

Can you give examples of times when you were asked for your opinion? How did you feel?

"Anytime I am asked for my opinion it makes me feel needed in a way and it makes me want to speak and actually share my thoughts and opinions." (14 year old girl)

"In my local council they decided stuff on the new transport interchange and we didn't know about it." (14 year old boy)

"The annual care conference and the Ministerial Advisory Group - as a representative for young carer I was asked my opinions on what young carers needed more support on. Consultations, I have taken part in many consultations through Children in Wales. It made me feel empowered, proud and like I am actually making a difference." (19 year old male)

Can you give examples of times you were not asked for your opinion, but you wanted to give your opinion? How did you feel?

"School and workplace as well as some youth councils. Some youth councils and advisory panels want to be seen as engaging young people for reputation points and actually ignore the young people." (19 year old male)

"There are sometimes I want to give an opinion and it hasn't been asked. I feel like it's not wanted." (14 year old girl)

"Sometimes there are some changes that are shut down without consultation." (14 year old boy)

Why do you think it's important for children to be involved in decisions?

"It increases self-esteem and self-belief (which is important in child development)." (17 year old girl)

"Communication allows children build relationships with others which is crucial in socializing. Problem solving activities help children navigate themselves through difficult situations so they don't stress and panic."

"Negotiation and leadership allows children to express opinions and ownership in a respectful way to show different paths." (17 year old girl)

"It helps children to feel more valued and respected and more confident in expressing their opinions." (17 year old girl)

"Helps them value other people and learn to appreciate their opinions by first valuing their own, helping them help and socialize with others." (17 year old girl)

"It has a positive impact on community engagement and encourages active citizenship."

"We need to 'make the table' rather than us just being invited to sit at one." (17 year old girl)

"You can help child participation improve by asking the same questions that are given to older people if it also impacts them (they can do this anonymously if needed). Involve them in the decision making instead of excluding them and then putting their opinions into action so that they can see you're there to listen. (e.g. youth clubs)" (17 year old girl)

"You develop confidence as well as key social skill. You also form connections, building networks that will prove useful in the future and make lifelong friends with similar core values, beliefs and opinions."

What can adults learn from listening to children?

"Fresh ideas. More open ideas and acceptance. New generation." (16 year old girl)

"They can learn the problems youth face in a society that wasn't similar to the adults when they were growing up." (17 year old girl)

"How to look at things from young peoples' perspective. They can learn what to do when a situation arises." (14 year old girl)

"Adults can learn about the issues that young people are actually facing - so many adults don't know the struggles young people face either due to being uneducated on the topic or pure ignorance. If adults took the time to actually listen and learn from young people then the world would be a much better place." (19 year old male)

"How to notice when children are struggling. How to support ALN (Additional Learning Needs) children and young people CORRECTLY." (17 year old non-binary person)

What ideas do you have to encourage more child participation in decision-making?

“show past examples of child participation being successful to show the potential benefits behind youthful decision making” (18 year old male)

“schools should actively promote and encourage participation outside of school settings” (17 year old non-binary child)

“there should be rewards when people are being asked to do things, there should be evidence to see that their opinions are changing something for them to be able to continue to make and join in things” (14 year old girl)

“opening doors and adapting the room. The needs of young people may be different to their older counterparts, so making sure that accessing opportunities is given to prepare young people for their future” (child)

“Educating children in the European/national level, and give them more opportunities in participation. instead of neglecting their opinions. Show children that they’re willing to take their ideas into account. Let young people influence what impacts them” (17 year old girl)

How can adults make it easier for children to participate?

“Listen! Give them a platform to get their voices heard. They to understand them.” (12 year old girl)

“Make more youth led / based events, conferences and activities. It will keep engaging and provide young people with a more enjoyable, safe environment to let YP participate in.” (18 year old male)

“More interactive resources. Involvement in any decision, regardless of how small it is. Give more information about decisions, meetings etc. Ask more questions to allow young people to answer.” (16 year old girl)

“Creative tasks. Cancel hierarchy stigma, ‘older people know better’. Actions on opinions - show that they’re heard.” (17 year old girl)

What would you say to adults who think children are too young to participate in decisions?

“Childrens opinions are what will build our future. If you ignore children then you are building our future with ignorance” (boy)

“Children now are the future of the world. They are the ones that understand the current state of the world and they are the important voices in decision making. Young people are the ones likely to be affected the most by current decisions” (17 year old non-binary child)

“I will convince them to change their perspective. Children are not the future leaders, we are the present and future, change your mindset. The world is evolving its not the 90s.” (17 year old girl)

Calls to Action

Show children that their participation makes a difference:

“There should be evidence to see that children’s opinions are changing something for them.” (14 year old Child, Wales)

Recognise that children are not only the future, they are the present

“Children’s opinions are what will build our future. If you ignore children, then you are building our future with ignorance.” (15 year old Child, Wales)

Annex 2: Eurochild’s resources on child participation

Publications:

[How children feel: Children’s perceptions of mental health in four EU Member States \(2025\)](#): publication after consulting children, in collaboration with members

[Eurochild 2024 Sub-report on Child Participation](#): publication after consulting our members

[VOICE report \(2024\)](#): publication after consulting children, in collaboration with members and partner organisations

[Our Rights. Our Future. The Europe We Want. Children’s recommendations to European Union decision makers \(2024\)](#):

publication after consulting children, in collaboration with members and partner organisations

[Poverty takes away the right to childhood: Children’s perceptions of poverty in 4 EU Member States \(2023\)](#): publication after consulting children, in collaboration with members

[We are Here Toolbox \(2020\)](#): publication in collaboration with a member

[Toolkit on how to engage children in advocacy work \(2018\)](#): publication in cooperation with the Council of Europe

Child friendly documents:

[Child-friendly Guidelines on Mental health and Wellbeing at school \(2026\)](#): direct work with children (Eurochild Children’s Council)

[VOICE child-friendly report \(2025\)](#): direct work with children (Eurochild Children’s Council)

[The child friendly poster of Eurochild Child Protection Policy \(2024\)](#) : direct work with children (Eurochild Children’s Council)

[The child friendly explanation of the EU Child Guarantee \(2023\)](#)

[The EU Child Guarantee Game \(2023\)](#)

[Conference on the Future of Europe: a child-friendly introduction \(2021\)](#)

Child Participation projects:

[CERV DAY](#): project with a member (Italy)

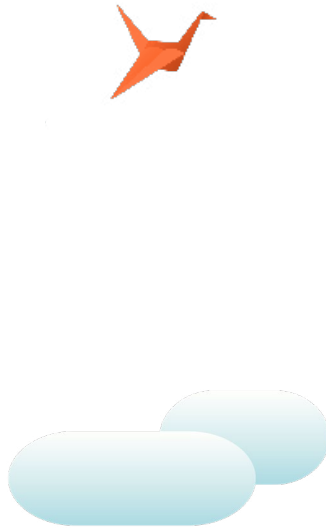
[CERV Child Citizens Joker](#): project with a member (Hungary)

[Reaching-In](#): project with members (Bulgaria and Spain)

Social media contents:

[ECC meet EU decision-makers for World Children’s Day \(2024\)](#): video showing Eurochild Children’s Council’s work with Eurochild

[NOVA Explain Online Safety \(2025\)](#): video presenting children’s perspectives, recorded for an event.



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Eurochild is the largest network of organisations working with and for children throughout Europe, striving for a society that respects, protects and promotes the rights of all children. We represent over 234 organisations and individuals from across 41 European countries. Our mission is to promote the rights and well-being of children in policy and practice, through advocacy, membership exchange, and research.

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