

Children as decision makers

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Involving children and young people in planning, decision making and the evaluation of services and programs inevitably raises the eyebrows of adults working in the areas of service delivery, program development and policy formulation. Some adults may question young people's ability to see the 'big picture' and to make decisions, and even their right to be engaged in the first place. In challenging these ideas, the Western Australian Office for Children and Youth established a Children's Advisory Group (CAG) in 2004 – the first of its kind to be created within the Western Australia Government, and one of the first such groups to be set up in Australia.

The current Children's Advisory Group (CAG) is a diverse group of ten primary school children aged 9-12 years from the Perth metropolitan area. They are actively involved in all aspects of the Office's operation. The CAG has been evaluated throughout its inaugural year of operation, both in terms of process and impact, and has been found to have a significant impact upon government policy and practice. This paper will outline the process for the establishment and implementation of a CAG and the evaluation of a CAG on government policy. It will highlight evaluation findings and discuss future directions.

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Kids in Western Australia want to be heard, not only in schools, but in government too. Don't ignore us. We know what kids want. We are kids now.
(10-year-old, WA Children's Advisory Group Participant, 2004)

The Office for Children and Youth (OCY), a Western Australian State government policy office, has initiated and developed a suite of children's¹ engagement and participation techniques. This participatory and consultative approach has been operationalised following extensive research that has been guided and validated by children throughout the state of WA. Further, specific methods illuminated from this research have been refined by the Office's Children's Policy team, and researchers at Curtin University of Technology and the University of Western Australia.

The development of multiple consultative mediums was to ensure that a diverse group of children participated, including those children and youth who perhaps typically would not have had their voices represented in the development of social policy and programs. For example, employing focus group methodology in one instance enabled the Office to target remote Aboriginal communities, rural children, and those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, while a teacher-led consultation held in classrooms included more than 1000 children's voices in a more mainstream setting. Much of the work undertaken by the Office is reviewed and validated by WA children and youth, including those young people from marginalised backgrounds. These quality assurance mechanisms are ongoing and a feature of the Office's commitment to best practice.

The Children's Advisory Group (CAG) is one of the more successful mechanisms employed by the Office to facilitate ongoing and sustainable input from children into the development of government policy and programs. This paper will explore the development, implementation and

¹ For the purpose of this paper, the Western Australian Office for Children and Youth has defined 'children' as those young people from birth to 12 years.

evaluation of the WA CAG. Importantly, the future direction for the Children's Advisory Group will also be explored.

CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION AND CONSULTATION

Internationally, there is a growing trend to encourage the participation of children and young people in the decisions that affect their lives (Hart 1997; UNICEF 2002). The active participation of young people is clearly articulated in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). However, despite the growing movement towards children's participation throughout the world, there are very few sustainable government advisory groups made up of children. That is not to say that children are not consulted but generally these consultations are short term in nature and issue-specific. Some notable exceptions include the Children's Parliament in Bangladesh where over 20,000 young people are involved in selecting their own peer representatives. This Children's Parliament advocates strongly on children's issues and has effected legislative change, including the age of marriage for young girls (Hatfield 2005; Save the Children Australia 2004).

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Generally speaking, young people consulted by government tend to be either adolescents or those in their early twenties. There are numerous examples of youth advisory councils (YAC) that provide advice to government (eg, Youth Advisory Councils of WA; National Youth Parliament; Queensland Youth Council; New South Wales Youth Citizens' Jury (Carson 2004)). Some of these youth councils are ongoing. However, they often do not take into account the visions and ideas of younger children. Sustainable forums for young children (0-12 years) to express their concerns and suggested solutions to government are paramount if governments are to effectively address the pressing issues confronting our children today.

Children's Advisory Groups provide a vehicle for children to channel their ideas and views on issues directly to government, not-for-profit and for profit organisations. Generally, such groups consist of 8-12 child members, usually selected by teachers or peers at their schools according to the organisation's selection criteria. Once selected, the advisory group members work in partnership

with the host organisation, and are involved in projects and decision-making affecting children, contributing their first hand experience of children's issues. Children can, and do, provide unique insights into complex issues that challenge policy makers, and this advice and direction can improve the uptake of both child-centred policy and programs. As illustrated in Figure 1, there are many opportunities for children's active participation across a range of domains, including the family, school, community, government and socio-cultural areas (UNICEF 2002). Children's development emotionally, cognitively and physically will shape how they can participate in each of these domains (Hart 1998; Miller 1997), and their participation further extends their influence and capacity to make a difference (Kirby, Lanyon, Cronin & Sinclair 2003).

A WESTERN AUSTRALIAN MODEL: THE CHILDREN'S ADVISORY GROUP

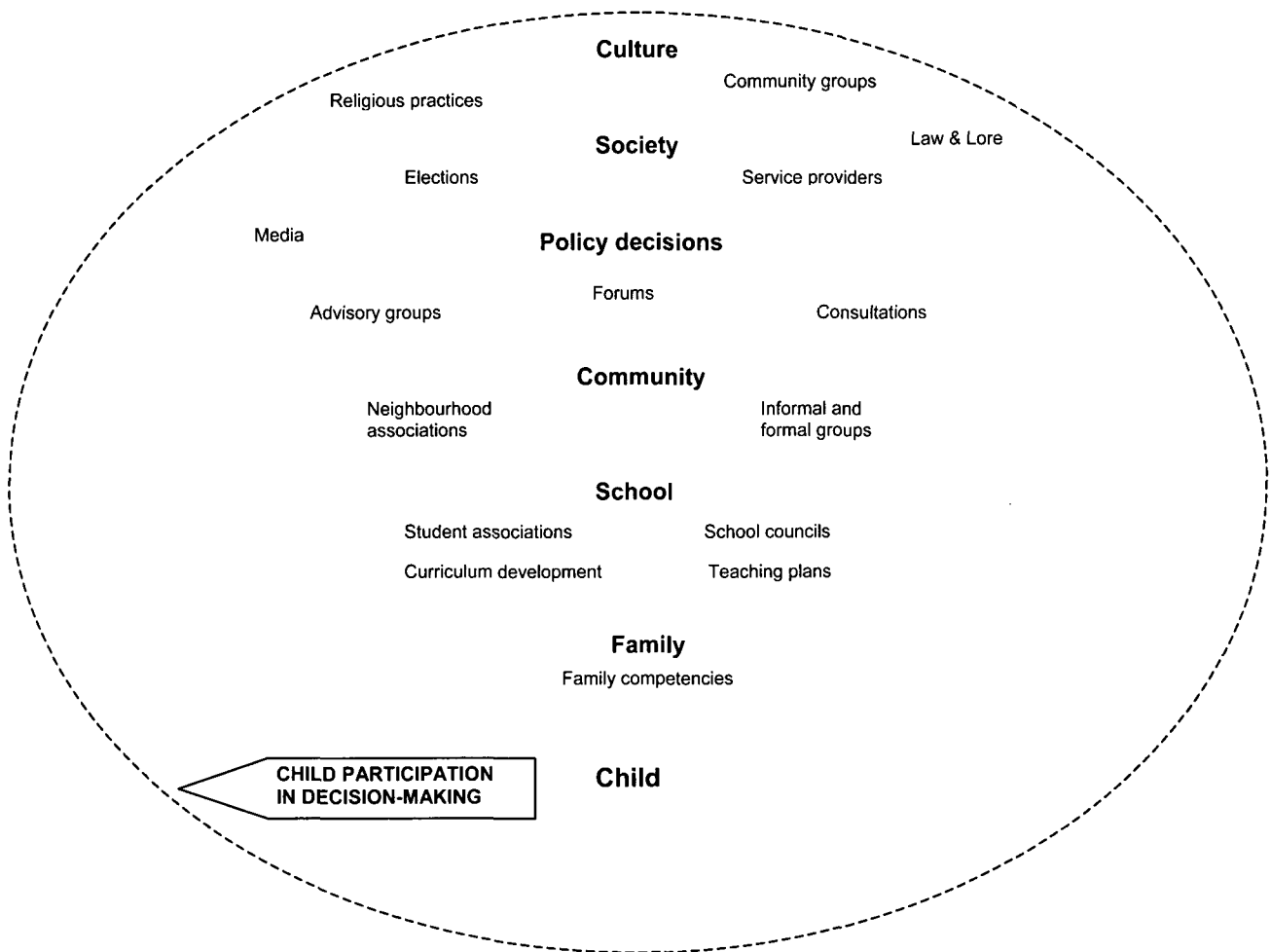
The Government of Western Australia, like the majority of western governments, did not have a sustainable mechanism to actively consult with children until recent years. Early in 2004, after a significant period of consultation and research, the Office for Children and Youth established a Children's Advisory Group (CAG). The formative research and preparation clearly indicated that to obtain relevant and valid information, consultation with children needed to take into account a variety of issues, including culture, religion, age and language appropriateness. It was also considered important that the CAG be sustainable so that relationships between the group (and its members), government and politicians could continue to be developed and consolidated over time. The research also indicated that organisational culture was a key factor in the success and sustainability of participation mechanisms, and that a commitment to children's participation must be made from all layers of the organisation (Kirby et al. 2003).

It is the Office's firm belief that consultation with children is often idiosyncratic depending on their needs. However, there are many strategies that can be adapted and utilised in many locations to ensure that the voices of children in all of their diversity are captured.

The Office has also long held the view that, when children are consulted, they should benefit more from the interaction than the organisation. It is important to take into account that children can be easily exploited for a number of reasons, including:

- children are usually volunteers;
- legally children are minors under adult responsibility; and
- children may assume they should aim to please and not question adults.

Figure 1: Children’s participation in decision-making



Adapted from R. Nimi in *The State of the World’s Children*, 2003 (UNICEF 2002)

Ethically, then, it is paramount that an organisation ensures that children benefit from interactions by having fun, learning new skills, making friends or receiving recognition for their contributions; and that this is made a priority over anything an organisation seeks to benefit from such an interaction. In some cases gifts or monetary payments may be appropriate, but this should be over and above the benefits children receive from the interaction itself.

The Western Australian Children’s Advisory Group synthesises and consolidates many of the strategies employed by the Office and provides an example of how children’s voices can become part of active policy and program development.

The next section of this paper will outline the steps taken in the development of the Western Australian Children’s Advisory Group.

STEPS TO DEVELOP A CAG

The Children’s Advisory Group met throughout 2004 on a monthly basis and participated in a variety of activities including:

- co-facilitating focus groups in schools to determine how Western Australian children can participate in community and government decisions that affect them;
- participating in the launch of the State Government’s *Children First* strategy;
- launching a poster of the United Nations Rights of the Child, in child-friendly language, during Children’s Week;
- participating in a consultation regarding the establishment of a Children’s Commissioner for Western Australia;

- co-facilitating interactive workshops with 200 children and young people at the WA 2029 Convention held in Perth on Future Visioning (developing ideas and statements about what Western Australia could be like in 2029); and
- meetings with the Hon. Premier and Minister for Community Development.

In developing a Children's Advisory Group, the Office strongly advocates that the children have the opportunity and right to develop their own internal and external rules (eg, consensus, respect, confidentiality); develop their vision and mission statements; articulate their training requirements; express their preference for the types of activities the group becomes involved with; indicate the degree of support required by the group; invite people they would like to attend their meetings; and develop strategies to ensure that their concerns and ideas are received by the relevant authorities and then acted upon.

The Office staff members involved in the CAG process play an integral part in facilitating the group. They do not influence the content of discussions, such as favouring a particular perspective, but rather guide the process of how the team interacts and shares ideas to empower, and how it enables all members of the group to contribute to the task or activity. As a general rule, staff members have more input into the group when it is establishing itself (eg, assistance with the terms of reference, operational issues and logistics). However, once the initial introductory period has been consolidated, the CAG members take on an increasing responsibility for the functioning of the group and establish a working partnership with the Office.

CAG PARTICIPANT SELECTION

The Office worked in partnership with the inaugural CAG to decide on the role of the CAG, its membership, and how members should be selected. There was a clear preference that there should be a mixture of girls and boys, from years 5, 6 and 7 (9-12 years of age) – preferably those children who were involved in their wider community in some way. It was stipulated that students need not necessarily be high academic achievers or the most popular students.

While selection aimed to represent the diversity of children in the population as much as possible, children understood that they were not expected to take on the responsibility of representing all the children at their school or the whole of Western Australia. Rather, they should ensure that the views put forward were their own ideas and opinions initially, and then those of their friends and peers could be sought at a later time.

Where possible, it was considered preferable to have the wider population of children involved in nominating children to be CAG members. The children themselves have suggested that it is best not to leave final selection of

members to children as it may result in a popularity vote, rather than choosing the person who best met the selection criteria. From those nominated, teachers or adults can then identify candidates for membership.

The representativeness of the inaugural group was initially limited to metropolitan schools due to logistical issues pertaining to the vastness of Western Australia (eg, travel to meetings and time required). It was decided that this issue would be addressed at a future time by piloting a regional CAG².

Once candidates were selected, their parents were provided with information about the CAG and their child's potential involvement in the Group. Parents were also informed that the consent for their child to take part as a member of CAG was provisional and that their child could withdraw from the program at any time (eg, in the event of school work deteriorating, or other competing demands). Parents were also invited to an introductory session with their children to see for themselves what the children would be undertaking. It also provided them with the opportunity to ask questions and to meet the other parents of children involved in the CAG project. Universally the parents accepted the opportunity for their child to become a CAG member. Parents were provided with update letters and CAG minutes and were invited to several functions during the year.

STAFF SELECTION

Appropriate staff selection is crucial in the development and implementation of a CAG. Ideally, these staff will be prepared to devote the time, commitment and passion required to ensure the success of the program. More importantly, the skills to communicate effectively with children aged between 9 and 12 years, the ability to engage and build relationships and take on a facilitation, rather than a leadership, role are paramount. It is the Office's experience that it can be difficult for staff with a peripheral involvement in the CAG project to prioritise attending meetings and building relationships with the children over other pressing tasks in their workload. Based on experience, it is preferable to minimise the number of staff involved, and have all of these staff involved in planning, facilitating and attending meetings. This shared workload helps establish the team atmosphere, a joint vision and work task streamlining.

Universally, staff members who have been involved in the CAG process have commented on how much they have learnt about the children's capabilities and about their own limitations. Staff engaged to work with a CAG should, therefore, be open-minded and willing to learn new skills and ideas. This commitment to learning allows staff to

² In 2005, the first regional CAG was established in Mullewa in the northern Western Australian Wheatbelt. All members come from the local Aboriginal community.

evolve and develop alongside the children as the CAG progresses over time. Based on feedback from the children themselves, staff should be able to relate in an egalitarian manner, be respectful, be friendly, listen, act on what is said, and be able to have fun.

CAG members are given an opportunity to invite whoever they would like to attend their meetings. However, they have requested that all invitees should be 'child friendly', engaging and open. Consequently, when specialist skills are required to deliver a development program requested by CAG (for example, media training), it is important that the outside consultant has the same skills set as those described above to ensure consistency and skill consolidation. Contracting the same consultant/s for a range of development programs also provides continuity for CAG participants.

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From an operational perspective, it is imperative that the CAG process be managed in a transparent and pro-active way so that the Group's ideas, suggestions, plans and vision can be incorporated into the Office's planning cycle, policy and program development. More importantly, it is necessary to ensure that the progress of the CAG is in the forefront of children's participation in Western Australia, and that the political processes are able to capture the CAG's input and act upon it (eg, Ambassadors for the Launch of WA's *Children First* policy, meetings with the Premier and Minister for Youth). Ensuring that the message of CAG is delivered, received and acted upon is challenging and the Office continues to work with CAG to develop and refine a range of communication methods (eg, internet, media release, publications, ministerial documentation, meeting minutes, radio).

DEVELOPING AND MAINTAINING A CHILDREN'S ADVISORY GROUP

Once the inaugural CAG members determined their vision and goals for the year, they were asked to consider what ongoing development tools they would require to meet their objectives. In 2004, CAG members requested development sessions in the fields of public speaking, consultation skills (eg, basic survey and focus group techniques), brainstorming skills, media training, and team building. These programs were provided by Office staff and external consultants. The

skills acquired through this process enhanced the CAG's ability to work as a team and participate in decision-making, planning, research and consultation processes.

Each CAG member was also asked to select a 'buddy' from the staff members working with them to answer any questions they might have, to provide extra support and encouragement and to assist in the completion of projects (eg, research). The buddy system helped the children to overcome any anxiety or uncertainty they may have felt at the commencement of the CAG. Over time, the need for the buddy system decreased as the children became more self-confident, and familiar with one another and the CAG process.

CHILD FRIENDLY MINUTES

To assist current CAG members to track the Group's progress, minutes of all meetings are recorded in child-friendly language by staff and then distributed to the team. The minutes record the issues discussed at meetings and provide a resource for the children to help them remember their past ideas, opinions and current actions. The minutes have become an extremely valuable tool as they affirm the importance of the children's ideas in detail and provide a mechanism for the children to verify that their ideas were understood and recorded correctly. The minutes have also proved an effective way to communicate these ideas to others, including parents, schools, the Minister, government departments, research institutions, national and international organisations and other Office for Children and Youth staff.

The minutes always require approval from the children prior to release to outside agencies. The children view the dissemination of this information as an important tool in developing an awareness in adults that children have the ability and right to be involved in decision making processes. Disseminating the minutes has proven very successful with a number of high profile organisations and departments who have approached the Office for assistance with developing their own sustainable Children's Advisory Groups.

Two keys to the success of the Office's inaugural CAG have been the Office's flexibility and its ongoing efforts to respond to the children's ideas and wishes about all aspects of the group's operation. Key points included:

- responding to both the children's verbal and non-verbal communication such as body language, written and pictorial; spontaneous ideas; and responses to direct questioning; and
- accurate and detailed feedback from the children which required a level of trust between the adults and the children, and between the children themselves. Staff sometimes use suggestion boxes and other anonymous means to allow shyer children to contribute.

CHILDREN'S ADVISORY GROUP – EVALUATION

The Office conducted a formal evaluation of the CAG at the end of its inaugural year (2004). Primarily, a process and impact evaluation was undertaken using modified evaluation criteria from the Citizens and Civics Unit (Citizens and Civics Unit 2002, 2003).

The evaluation provided the opportunity to consolidate all the relevant information, and to seek feedback from participants, parents, schools, and other stakeholders about the outcomes (or lack thereof) achieved by the CAG. A range of qualitative and developmentally appropriate mechanisms were used to collect the data, which enabled all CAG members to actively participate and contribute their ideas openly. These included focus groups, surveys, and workshops.

After inviting CAG members to contribute issues to be evaluated, the themes of particular interest to the evaluators included:

- process issues (eg, transparency of communication and information dissemination, recording and monitoring);
- engagement and relationship development;
- advocacy (eg, working with adults and children to ensure that the CAG's message is heard);
- organisational support;
- program development and skills development activities;
- CAG selection and recruitment;
- information and advice about CAG development; and
- recognition and reward.

In summary, the evaluation proved very positive with children, parents and stakeholders acknowledging the support and guidance provided by the Office. CAG members felt that they had both achieved and learnt a significant amount during their 12 month term. One child spontaneously explained to the Minister that they used to be quite shy, but now they had learnt how to speak up and have a say. Parents and teachers overwhelmingly reported changes to the CAG members in terms of maturity, confidence, skill acquisition, self esteem, and community and social awareness. Many parents did not want their children to end their CAG term because they valued the process so highly and the positive outcomes CAG had upon their child. Participants' evaluation responses were also favourable in relation to the transparency, representativeness, independence, cost effectiveness and timeliness of the CAG program. They also noted that intended improvements for the future included:

- increased profile for CAG;

- CAG alumni;
- development of new CAGs (eg, regional and/or Indigenous CAGs); and
- increased training and skill development opportunities.

In summary, the CAG strongly influenced the Office's practices in children's participation, directly informing the adults' facilitation styles and methods used in meetings and consultations. The CAG's advice was instrumental in the development and dissemination of state-wide policy (eg, Children First, Early Years), 2029 (WA in 25 years Conference), the Children's Commission legislation, and the WA Charter of Rights for Children in Care. The CAG had a profound impact upon participants, parents, Office staff, stakeholders and the wider population of children in Western Australia.

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CHILDREN'S ADVISORY GROUP – FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Through the success of the inaugural CAG, the Office is working towards consolidating this program as an extremely effective mechanism for engaging children in organisational decision making. This foundation adds further credence to the Office's mission to work collaboratively with children (and young people), the Government and non-Government sectors, corporate partners and the community towards increasing children's participation in Western Australia.

Currently, Western Australian children have limited knowledge of the CAG. Ways in which the Office could improve the CAG's profile in the wider community include:

- Establishing a CAG Resource – the Office is in the process of publishing a CAG toolkit for organisations interested in children's participation and how to set up their own CAG.
- Developing a website that promotes the CAG and resources to organisations and children – an interactive website that allows children to communicate their ideas to CAG members and discuss concerns with each

other. Organisations could also post questions for comment or gather information from this site.

- Increasing the CAG's involvement and profile during Children's Week (October each year), and making it more available to other groups and government organisations wishing to hear children's ideas, as well as to Western Australian children so that they can pass their ideas on to the CAG.
- Diversity and regional representation – need to improve the representation of Indigenous, CaLD and regional children in the group.
To address these issues, a regional CAG was set up in Mullewa, (a remote township in the mid-west of WA, approximately 600 kms north of Perth) consisting of five Indigenous children from the local primary school. This group is managed by the Office's Regional Development Officer (who is based in Geraldton). Both metropolitan and regional groups met for the first time at a two-day camp in Perth in June.
- Postcard to the Office/CAG – a child-friendly, pre-paid postcard (designed by children of WA) on which children can write their ideas or questions they have on children's issues, and which they can post back to the Office.
- New training opportunities – the Office will explore opportunities to bring trainers to WA to further enhance both CAG participants' skill levels and children's participation throughout the state. The Office will also develop 'train the trainer' programs in conjunction with CAG for delivery across the state.
- Alumni for CAG members – the alumni will ensure that previous members of CAG can maintain their association with the Office and CAG through training opportunities, consultation, activities and events.
- Outcome evaluation – the long-term effect of the skills, confidence and experience of public participation that CAG has had on its members' future civic involvement and personal successes.

CONCLUSION AND SUMMARY

The rationale for establishing a Children's Advisory Group in Western Australia was to provide an avenue for children to influence both organisational and governmental decisions in an ongoing and sustainable manner. It is recommended that organisations wishing to pursue the establishment of their own Children's Advisory Group should carefully consider whether their organisational culture can support this level of participation, and whether a sufficient amount of staff time can be committed to facilitating the process and building ongoing relationships with the children involved. Establishing a children's advisory group is a considerable, ongoing commitment. For some organisations, this may not

be an appropriate way for the organisation to achieve its objectives for children's participation.

The Office anticipates a positive impact through the employment of children's advisory groups in the government and non-government sectors, and corporate and community sectors in Western Australia. A significant amount of interest has already been generated by the inaugural CAG with government departments, including Education and Health, and research institutions seeking the Office's assistance in setting up their own ongoing CAG programs.

Children's advisory groups will provide additional mechanisms for Western Australian children to voice their opinions and ideas and, ultimately, to influence the policy and programs developed for children. It is envisaged that the effect and uptake of CAGs will evolve as the Office promotes and develops good practice models that encourage children and youth participation, and for organisations to coordinate policies, programs and services throughout the community to maximise the benefits for children and young people. ❖

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