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EVALUATION CENTRE

CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION IN PLANNING AND EVALUATING EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE



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Contents

1	Introduction	5
2	Children's right to influence matters concerning their lives	7
3	Overview of research methods that address children's participation	8
4	Enhancing children's participation in planning and evaluating early childhood education and care	10
	4.1 Multimethod research and mosaic approach	10
	4.2 Observation and ethnography	12
	4.3 Children as agents and explorers	14
	4.4 Language-based methods	16
	4.5 Visual, creative and play-based methods	18
5	Enhancing children's participation takes conscious actions	20
	References	22



1 Introduction

Evaluations of early childhood education and care (ECEC) conducted by the Finnish Education Evaluation Council (FINEEC) have shown that children's participation in planning and evaluating the activities should be enhanced (Repo et al., 2019; Juutinen et al., 2021). Areas in which ECEC staff would like support include hearing children as permitted by their age and developmental level to improve children's possibilities of exerting influence as group members.

In 2021, FINEEC commissioned a systematic literature review to find out which methods for enhancing children's participation have been used in ECEC research. Based on the information produced by the review, support material can be developed for ECEC staff to help them promote children's participation. The authors of the review were Marleena Mustola and Eija Sevón from the University of Jyväskylä, and the review will later be published as a scientific research article (Sevón, Mustola, Siippainen & Vlasov, pending).

This publication summarises the research article based on the literature review. The publication discusses methods that can be used to enhance children's participation in planning and evaluating ECEC. It contains practical examples of and tips for engaging children in planning and evaluating everyday activities, collected from the members of the ECEC evaluation network coordinated by FINEEC. The publication also contains reflection questions intended to challenge ECEC staff to consider how children's participation is actualised in their child group's activities. The author of the summary publication is Anna Rissanen.

Children's participation is underpinned by legislation



Children must have the right to express their views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.” (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child 60/1991)



Children shall be treated equally and as individuals and they shall be allowed to influence matters pertaining to themselves to a degree corresponding to their level of development.” (Constitution of Finland 731/1999)



The objective of early childhood education and care is to secure the children's possibility to participate in and influence matters that concern them. Children must be given an opportunity to participate in planning, carrying out and evaluating the activities. When planning, delivering and evaluating early childhood education and care, children's opinions and wishes must be investigated and taken into account as permitted by their age and level of development.” (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 540/2018)

2 Children's right to influence matters concerning their lives

Under the UN Convention (60/1991) on the Rights of the Child, every child has the right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them, and the views of the child must be given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child. The child must be given an opportunity to be heard about matters that affect them, and this obligation is also stressed in the statutes that direct Finnish early childhood education and care. In the daily life of ECEC seeing children as active and capable agents who influence their own lives is an example of realising participation. Children's possibilities of influencing decision-making and bringing about changes are also closely associated with participation. (Kataja, 2014.) In other words, participation means activities in which the child is able to consciously exert an influence in their social environment (Turja & Vuorisalo, 2017).

Children's participation is enhanced by the peer group offered by ECEC, the experience of belonging to a group, and being heard and seen. Children's understanding of their rights and responsibilities as well as the consequences of their choices, on the other hand, develops when their participation is enabled and supported by an adult. (National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care, 2022.) In the context of children's participation, the staff should pay particular attention to their actions and be open to change, making it possible to develop and change ECEC activities in response to children's proposals and needs (Sevón et al., pending).

The basic premise of developing the ECEC culture is inclusive pre-primary education in which each child may act, develop, and learn as a unique individual and a member of the community (Harkoma et al., 2022). Children's participation cannot be actualised without the staff's active efforts. Therefore, consciously organised possibilities for realising children's participation should be an element of daily life in ECEC. (Turja, 2020.) The key is understanding what participation means and reflecting on your actions and professional role as an enabler of children's participation in planning and evaluating ECEC (Sevón et al., pending).

3 Overview of research methods that address children's participation

The conducting of the literature review was directed by questions about what types of data collection methods have been used in ECEC research that enable children's participation and are associated with hearing them. Children's role in different stages of data collection, and the potential challenges or opportunities associated with the methods were also examined.

Based on the literature review, we formed six categories of methods in which children had been engaged in data collection for research in different ways. The methods were partly overlapping and placing a certain method in a single category was not always straightforward. The categories were:

- 1.** Multimethod research and mosaic approach
- 2.** Visual methods
- 3.** Observation and ethnography
- 4.** Children as agents and explorers
- 5.** Language-based methods
- 6.** Creative and play-based methods

The following chapters contain an introduction to the principles related to the methods, examples of practices, and questions to be reflected on. ECEC professionals can use the contents in their work as they consider methods for enhancing children's participation in planning and evaluating ECEC. To make this publication easier to read, visual methods and creative and play-based methods have been integrated into a single chapter. They are discussed in the last chapter on categories of methods.

Multimethod
research
and mosaic
approach

Visual
methods

Language-
based
methods

Observation
and
ethnography

Creative
and play-
based
methods

Children as
agents and
explorers

Quantitatively larger categories were multimethod research and mosaic approach, visual methods as well as observation and ethnography. Smaller categories were children as agents and explorers, language-based methods as well as play-based methods.

4 Enhancing children's participation in planning and evaluating early childhood education and care

4.1 Multimethod research and mosaic approach

The mosaic approach is a method developed in early childhood research, in which several different ways of producing information are used in the data collection. Each part of the dataset obtained using different methodologies form a piece of the mosaic, and together they add up to a finished picture. A key principle of the mosaic approach is enabling children's equal participation and respecting their agency. In the mosaic approach, different channels of interaction, simultaneous use of visual and language-based methods, as well as diverse means and methods of hearing children are stressed in information production. In the evaluation of ECEC activities the mosaic approach can, for example, consist of a combination of different methods, such as photography, drawing, storytelling, discussions with children, interviews, roleplay, pedagogical documentation and so on.

In addition to versatile methods, the diversity of the research subjects as well as the reflective nature of the methods and their attachment to the daily life of ECEC are emphasised. Using several methods based on different sensory channels gives the children more versatile possibilities of expressing their ideas and views. Using multimethodology in information production consequently promotes paying attention to the children's individual characteristics and different backgrounds.

The mosaic approach and multimethod research underline the key principles of children's rights, including children's ability and skills to express themselves, and their right to be heard and express their views. This approach respects children's knowledge of issues relevant to their daily lives.

- How do we ensure that all children in the group can get their voices heard in matters that concern them? How have we accounted for the children's varying ages and levels of development or, for example, language proficiency?
- Which different methods do we use to find out about children's views? How do these methods support and complement each other?
- How do we make sure that the methods are versatile, and pleasant to the children?
- How do we enable the participation of children's guardians in planning and evaluating the activities?

Practical tips



'My page' is an attachment to the child's ECEC plan which serves as an initial mapping and marks the start of goal-oriented planning of activities at the beginning of the operating period. My page consists of five image shapes for which the child can produce content topics in a way that is suitable for their age, level of development and ways to express themselves. The child fills in the form at home together with the guardian, after which it is handed back to the day-care centre. The realisation of the child's wishes, interests and views recorded in the initial mapping information is evaluated using the pedagogical documentation tools that are appropriate at any one time as part of the group's activities. One shape and set of content at a time, the My page evaluations produce collage-like key documents for the group that are constantly within the children's reach, visible and recallable. The support of the images and the identifiability of the evaluation data produced by children for themselves, are addressed especially in implementation. The content of My page and the evaluation information are present at the ECEC plan discussion. The evaluation produced by the child is documented, and it becomes visible in the ECEC plan alongside educators', other professionals' and guardians' views.



A mind map type planning paper is prepared for a small group. Adults first set out in it rough plans for the month ahead, after which the staff together with the children add detail to them, working in small groups. Images are drawn to illustrate the text. Children's ideas, for example project topics suggested by them, are also added to the plans. At the end of the month, the plan is examined and evaluated together with the children, who consider how it went, was it easy or hard and should this topic be worked on further. Photographs of the implementation may also have been placed around the plan to make it easier to recall the topic at the time of evaluation.

4.2 Observation and ethnography

Observation and ethnography are commonly used methods in ECEC research. Ethnography means an attempt to understand people's actions as part of their environment or different social groups, and it is often referred to as 'field work'. In ECEC, the objects of ethnographic interest include children's social relationships, play, humour, children as agents in their environment and children's media cultures. Information is collected mainly by observing, but it can be complemented by notes, interviews with children or video footage. Observation can be used especially when the goal is to examine and understand children's actions and interaction in different everyday situations.

In the daily life of ECEC, observing, talking with, and hearing the children are part of pedagogical documentation. They are key methods for obtaining concrete and diverse information on children's lives, development, interests, thinking, learning, and needs as well as the activities of a child group. (National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care, 2022.) Observation should be systematic and the staff should have a shared understanding of what its objectives are and how the information produced in this way will be used. On the other hand, making spontaneous observations, enabling unhurried time together and having interactive discussions are in themselves important goals that also enhance children's participation.

When making observations, attention should be paid to not allow pre-defined objects of observation or the staff's own interpretations to excessively direct the idea formed of children's viewpoints. In other words, the staff should reflect on how the children's own thoughts and perspectives can be captured in addition to observation carried out by an adult.

- In what situations can we use observation? What can we find out with observation? Do we pay attention to the entire group's operating culture, atmosphere, and interaction?
- Do the children themselves have opportunities for observing the daily routines? What kinds of things could the children observe, and how could they document their observations?
- Are we observing our own actions, interaction, or the everyday structures and rules we have created?
- How do we ensure that the staff has enough time for being together, listening and having discussions with the children?

Practical tips



The children evaluate the activities all the time, which is why the staff must pay attention and listen to the children's comments. Some consciously ask the children about their opinions. Smiley faces and thumbs up are easy evaluation tools. Observing children's body language is important. Images and other concrete methods support the child in evaluating the activities. Together with the children, the staff goes through pictures of the group's projects and themes, and the children say what they have learned and what they liked about the activities.



The staff observes the children and their interactive relationships as well as evaluate the effectiveness of the learning environment in relation to the child group. Based on the staff's evaluation, routines and practices are shaped that enable the children's participation in the activities. As our day-care centre is small, the staff is able to assess the children's participation daily and to modify the practices to support their participation.



Three tubes for tennis balls are used for everyday evaluations. We keep green, red, and yellow balls in a basket. The coloured balls are used to evaluate daily activities diversely and under guidance. Gradually, children start to use them independently as well. For example, two girls came in after the morning's outdoor play and wondered if they should evaluate their time outdoors. One of them dropped in a red ball, the other a green one. "Why did you put in a red ball?" one asked. The other replied: "I got snow up my sleeve and I felt cold."

4.3 Children as agents and explorers

The children as agents and explorers method emphasises the co-agency of adults and children as well as children's full participation in planning and evaluating ECEC activities. The essential principle of this method is children's participation in all stages of the activities on an equal footing with the staff. In the key role is children and staff actively working and learning together, sharing things, and blurring of the children's and adult's roles. The method that reinforces children's agency is used especially in activities that emphasise the child's right to participate in constructing information. A concrete example of these types of activities is developing the everyday practices in ECEC.

In the children as agents and explorers method, everyday practices in ECEC are developed completely from the children's perspective. Children's personal observations and experiences from different environments help them develop as thinkers (National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care, 2022) and support their ability to express their opinions and thoughts openly. In explorative small group activities following this method, the children formulate and ask questions and seek answers to them together with adults. Children's observations and ideas are verbalised and documented during the process. The staff's role is to keep the process going, take note of the children's initiatives, plans, and ways of evaluating daily practices, and help the children discuss the results on the basis of which the everyday practices can be modified if necessary.

Explorative activities are about taking note of children's initiatives and enriching them in the group's activities as well as joint reflection between the children and the staff when faced with diverse issues, phenomena, and outputs. ECEC practices and, for example, operating environments are developed from the children's perspective with observations made with the children and documentations of the process.

- How could we make better use of children's questions and reflections to carry out explorative projects?
- How can we make sure that explorative activities are used as diversly as possible in pedagogical work?
- How do we use and modify different learning environments in our explorative activities?
- How and of what types of things do we obtain information together with the children?

Practical tips



In peer evaluation, the children assess each other's crafts, for example, what would I add to this, what would I not put in it However, this is done without criticising. This assessment method guides the child to give and receive feedback. The child can also assess their own work and modes of work. First, a goal is set for the work: what do I want to express with this, what am I aiming for, and then we will consider whether I succeeded.



We built a climbing wall in our day-care centre based on the children's drawings. Our pre-primary pupils first drew pictures related to the sea on papers, after which we picked the children's favourite drawings. Based on the drawings, one of our staff members painted the background of the climbing wall. An occupational therapist came to show us where the footholds should be placed. All children at our day-care centre know that the wall shows pre-primary pupils' drawings.

4.4 Language-based methods

The principle of language-based methods is to help children to be heard in matters that concern them by dialogical means. These methods are based on the staff's actions that create a dialogical environment for the children, sufficiently safe in emotional terms for them to dare to express their opinions, views and bring up matters that are important for them.

An interview is the most commonly used language-based method. Different variations have also been derived from interviews including storytelling, reminiscence interviews as well as play-based and multisensory interviews. The discussion can be enriched with auxiliary materials, including toys, photographs, and children's drawings or paintings. Using auxiliary material helps to establish a contact with the child, for example in an individual interview situation. When conducting individual interviews, it would be a good idea to consider the adult's role and the way in which the child may structure the interview.

In addition to individual interviews, group interviews can be used as part of dialogue-based methods. The advantages of a group interview include that the interactions in the group make the children feel safe and that they are less nervous. However, the challenges of a group interview may include that some of the children may be excluded from the discussion in a group interview or there may be challenges arising from group dynamics.

The purpose of interviews and storytelling is therefore, above all, to understand the children's perspective on issues and phenomena related to their daily lives, including emotions, relationships with friends, bullying or the significance of the media in the children's everyday lives. In the planning and evaluation of ECEC activities, hearing the children's voices supports their evolving self-esteem as full members of the child group.

- How diversely do we use language-based methods in efforts to capture the children's perspectives?
- What methods have we used to enrich, for example, interview situations?
- How can we make sure that all children can participate in discussions on matters that are important for them? How do we take into consideration those children who cannot express themselves verbally?
- How do we ensure that the children can have spontaneous and unrushed discussions about significant issues of everyday life with each other and with us?

Practical tips



Children's meetings where the child group gets together with an adult. The principle of the meeting is an informal discussion with a free choice of topics. Usually, the discussion is about what the children would like to do alone, in pairs and in a group. The discussion may also concern a certain situation and take the form of a debriefing by means of talking, drawing, and playing. A memo is produced of the meeting for the parents to read. The children's wishes can also be put up on a large board on the wall. Later on, the wishes that have been fulfilled, and those that have not and the reasons for this, are discussed with the children.



After an excursion, the children were asked to draw a smiley face in red or green on a sheet of paper. We then talked about what went well and what did not. It turned out that one child had been cold, another hungry, and one would not have liked instructor-led activities. The evaluation document was left on display for the children and their guardians, and on the next excursion we made sure that everyone wore woolly socks, we brought a picnic, and we dedicated the excursion to the children's independent activities only. This was a quick and easy everyday evaluation with simultaneous documentation that had a direct impact on future activities.

4.5 Visual, creative and play-based methods

In the literature review visual, creative, and play-based methods were placed in different categories during the analysis phase. However, in this summary publication, to improve the readability, these categories were combined as the methods included in them have several similarities. Additionally, these methods are often complemented by observing or interviewing the child, either during or after the activities.

The use of visual methods has increased with more widespread and advanced digital devices. Visual methods include using videos, photographs, emojis, and drawings alike. Creative and play-based methods stress children's strong agency and control of the situation as they can decide what type of information they will produce. When selecting devices and techniques for visual and creative methods, it is important to consider the children's age and level of development. With younger children, using such new methods as a camera often requires trials and practice together with an adult. Older children, on the other hand, can work together with their peers with an adult's support.

Visual, creative, and play-based methods can, for example, be used to capture young children's ideas and viewpoints concerning the learning environments and daily life of ECEC, quality of the activities and children's wellbeing. Creative and play-based methods make it easier to capture children's thoughts and viewpoints regarding topics such as their feelings, as the methods produce different types of narratives and memories than an oral interview alone. By using different creative methods, the children can, for instance, be asked to plan a play environment of their dreams, tell a story through music, build models, and play role games.

- What types of visual, creative, and play-based methods are familiar to our group and liked by the children?
- What types of creative and play-based methods would allow us to obtain information about the children's daily life in ECEC better?
- In what ways do we interpret material produced with visual and creative methods? How do we involve the children in interpreting it?

Practical tips



We make digital growth folders for the children and discuss the images and videos together with them. The child evaluates the activity and their participation, for example: "in that picture, we made a parkour course with those benches and an adult helped us. The chairs are usually only used for eating, but we were allowed to do tricks on them even if we were inside. It was fun and exciting." We record these thoughts in the growth folders, and this way also the guardians can get more involved in the children's everyday life and their child's experience of it. These thoughts allow us to develop our activities together with the children. The adult can ask further questions related to the children's stories: what do you think should have happened, what do you think the adult was like, why do you think the adult said you must be in two different play groups.



A play-based mode of interaction in guidance and methodological use of play make evaluation a natural part of the child's world of experience. Through storytelling, a character has been made an active part of the group's daily life. A movable and laminated character has been used, or one that has been put on the wall in a visible location. The character is part of the activities and promotes group formation. When the introductory phase is reaching its end, the group gets together and everyone gives a pledge of friendship to each other and the character. This meeting consists of some nice play along song or fun action-based exercise associated with friendship, in which the character is involved. Organising the children in a circle emphasises togetherness and a shared experience. At the end of this situation, the children consider and agree together on rules that they promise to follow to ensure that everyone can be comfortable. Guided by playful instructions, every child can write their name in their own little piece of paper with the pledge and an image of the character. The realisation of the friendship pledge is evaluated throughout the operating period, and continuous and enriching activities are built around it.

5 Enhancing children's participation takes conscious actions

The methods discussed above are attached to the idea of a child as seen in early childhood research, in which the child is seen as a capable describer and evaluator of their own life. In the literature selected for the review, a strong commitment to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (69/1991) could be seen, as well as to the children's right to express their views and be heard in matters that concern them contained in it. The studies contained a great deal of ethical reflection on genuine realisation of children's participation in the research process as well as critical discussion on the power hierarchy in the relationship between an adult and a child.

The use of methods that support children's participation in everyday life also requires the ECEC staff to have a deep ethical reflection and examination of the relationships between the staff and children in the child group. Ultimately, children's participation in planning and evaluating the activities is about not only individual methods or ways of capturing the child's opinion but also how the staff understands participation. When planning and evaluating the child group's activities, the staff should pay attention to both the structures that support the activities and their own actions in enhancing the children's participation. The staff should consciously support the children in expressing their thoughts, while ensuring that the children's opinions are taken seriously and noted appropriately.

The key to participation is reflecting on its equity or inclusiveness: which children in the group are able and allowed to participate, and capable of participating in planning and evaluating the activities? Using one, or even several methods does not guarantee that each child can be engaged in planning and evaluating the everyday life in ECEC. Sometimes it is a good idea to pause and consider what a child's participation in planning and evaluating the child group's activities mean, and when it is meaningful from the perspective of the child, the adult and the entire pedagogical process alike.

- **What types of methods are we already using to enhance the children's participation?**
- **How can we promote the children's feeling of belonging to the group through our actions?**
- **How can we ensure that the children's ideas and proposals are part of planning and evaluating the activities?**



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