

Involving Children and Young People in Children's Rights Advocacy

ADVANCING CHILDREN'S RIGHTS: CAPTURING THE LEARNING OF THE ATLANTIC PHILANTHROPIES GRANTEES IN IRELAND AND NORTHERN IRELAND

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Introduction

This resource looks at how children and young people have been getting involved in advocacy in Ireland and Northern Ireland in the past few years. We introduce children's right to have their views taken into account in decision-making, some examples of how children and young people have been involved, some things to watch out for when involving children and young people in advocacy.

Children's Right to have their Views Taken into Account

All human beings have a right to freedom of expression, but **only children have the right to have their views given due weight** in decision-making:

States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those 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, Article 12

The obligation to give children's views **due weight** in decision-making recognises that children and young people often lack power and influence in the decisions that are made for them and that, as **rights-holders, they are entitled to be heard and to help shape the decisions that impact on their lives.**

What does Article 12 really mean?

Adults, especially those employed by the State (such as teachers, police officers and social workers), are under an obligation to ensure children and young people are able to express their views freely, and that those views are considered seriously when decisions are made.

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child is a group of experts from around the world who monitor how well States are upholding their obligations. This Committee has explained that **Article 12 applies to both the decisions that affect individual children** (such as decisions made about their personal healthcare and education) **as well as decisions that affect groups of children** (such as decisions made about local, national and international laws and policies related to criminal justice or social care systems).¹

¹ Committee on the Rights of the Child. 2009. *General Comment No. 12 – The right of the child to be heard.*

Children and Young People Getting Involved: Examples from the Research

So how were children getting involved in public decision-making in these organisations?

Peer Research for Advocacy

Children and young people used questionnaires, interviews and social media (such as Facebook), to include the views of a broader group of children and young people in their campaigns. For example, PlayBoard supported a group of ten children (aged 8-12) to develop a peer questionnaire to explore children's attitudes towards play and the barriers they experienced in enjoying the right to play. The Young Researchers conducted face-to-face interviews with children using this questionnaire and reported their findings at PlayBoard's Conference in October 2013. The Ministers responsible for children and young people's issues in Northern Ireland attended this conference and committed to invest more in play.

Youth-Led Campaigns

These campaigns centralised the priorities young people raised and created opportunities for young people to engage with decision-makers beyond policy-led priorities. This approach is based on the idea that young people's priorities drive the campaigns, independent of, or in line with, the strategic priorities of the organisation.

Consultation Responses

Children and young people contributed to government-led consultations by a) submitting their own responses, b) sharing their views to policy officers in their organisation to include in a collective response and c) informing the consultation process by giving their views prior to the formal consultation. For example, VOYPIC encouraged the inclusion of children and young people's views early in the process during the Review of Minimum Standards for Children's Homes, so that young people had a say in what government asked in its consultation.

... it's putting the public servants into a space where they're challenged to think differently and to realise, 'Oh yeah, that's the impact we're having by doing this'. (Director interview)

Face to Face with Decision-Makers

Staff emphasised that direct engagement between children, young people and decision-makers gives the government officials a different but realistic insight into what the issues are for children. Children and young people were involved in the following methods of direct, face to face engagement:

- Attending and hosting meetings with government ministers;
- Presenting research findings to ministers and MLAs;
- Giving oral evidence and answering questions at Assembly committee meetings;
- Sharing experiences with local MLAs in constituency offices
- Participating in consultation processes facilitated and/or attended by public officials;
- Representing young people on statutory advisory boards;
- Representing children and young people's experiences during training of duty-bearers;
- Asking questions of decision-makers at public meetings;
- Hosting informal events for children and young people to discuss issues with decision-makers

Involving Children and Young People in Advocacy: Issues to Consider

Children, Young People and Adults Agree on the Issues

Organisations must work alongside young advocates to agree which issues to which they will all dedicate time and resources in a campaign. Often, this is achieved through open and clear discussions about why issues are important to all those involved. For example, Public Achievement described its role in supporting youth campaigns as structuring the work by 'building a box' – in this case peace-building, community relations and human rights – for young people to fill with their own agenda and areas of interest. Young people used this framework to run campaigns on Votes at 16, End all Punishment Attacks and for Suicide Prevention and First Aid to be taught in schools.

Acknowledge the Time it takes to Achieve Change

Change takes time, especially complicated legislative and policy change. Children and young people often get involved with youth advocacy to make a change, and sometimes there was frustration that their involvement did not align with any real change 'on the ground'. Most children and young people interviewed recognised that their involvement would not benefit them as individuals, however, and explained that they were working for changes that would affect the experiences of other children and young people. Organisations should be clear with children and young people about how each step is making a difference and encourage decision-makers to be clear in their feedback about how they are taking children's views into account.

Move Beyond Over-Consulting

Directors and staff were concerned about the extent to which policy-makers were influenced by consultation processes. Grantees questioned whether devoting time and resources to these activities were the most efficient way of influencing government decisions. Staff explained that at times, the demand to consult with children and young people through their organisations could become burdensome for the participants, many of whom were involved in other, on-going projects or campaigns of their own. More importantly, staff and young people explained their frustration at feeling that what they contributed was not taken into consideration by decision-makers. Organisations are well-placed to encourage decision-makers to establish meaningful and appropriate methods for hearing and giving children's views due weight, which sometimes requires moving beyond formal consultations.

Key factors for success

Choice

Children and young people have the opportunity to choose the issues, methods and level of engagement for their involvement.

Knowledge

Advocacy projects build children and young people's capacity on the issues so that they can get involved, or take the lead, in an informed way.

Support

Children and young people who want to get involved receive support by adults they trust.

*...when you come here, you're given support and help to decide what you want to talk about or what you want to do but it's kind of up to you, which is important because you don't want to be just being told what to do when you're not in school or something.
(Young people's interview)*

Continuity

Advocacy projects ensure that decision-makers and adults in power have mechanisms in place for involving children and young people in a routine, ongoing way rather than as a one-off event.

Background and Context

The Atlantic Philanthropies Children and Youth Programme (Objective 2) grantees incorporated a diverse range of 19 non-governmental organisations in Ireland and Northern Ireland, working with varied groups of children and young people in a multitude of ways. What is common to all is a commitment to effecting social change for children and young people in ways that ensure their active involvement.

Research teams

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