

Research Digest Standard 4 Consultation



Ensuring inclusive decision-making requires consultation that promotes participation and seeks out, listens to and acts upon the views and opinions of children, parents and staff, and other stakeholders, as appropriate.

Introduction

“The quality of the relationship between the child’s different carers and interested adults is a crucial determinant of the quality of the care and education received by the child.... Essentially, working together is about putting the child’s welfare first – above professional and personal differences and other considerations. The child’s needs should always be considered as the most important factor when developing working partnerships” (Kay, 2004:121).

Consultation is a pivotal component of partnership within early childhood care and education (ECCE). As a tool of good practice, it is dependant on a shared sense of purpose and includes everything from positive and effective communication to conflict management. One of the most fundamental characteristics of successful consultation is that it is participatory and not prescribed – those included in the process should feel valued and respected.

The consultation process includes contributions to decision-making processes and strategies from a wide range of interested stakeholders; parents, staff, children and other interested parties (e.g., speech therapists, assistants, personnel of other community services). Their inclusion, therefore, needs to be structured in a manner that is tailored to their role. Adults working within the setting, for example, could be supported to engage with each other and as a team, and children could be encouraged to contribute their views and opinions on issues relating to their daily experiences within the setting. Similarly, engagement amongst relevant stakeholders on issues related to the health and well-being of the child could be promoted. The common denominator between any of these methods of consultation is that they contribute to an inclusive decision-making process that enhances the overall quality of provision within the setting.

Recent Research

Inviting and responding to consultation

Stakeholder consultation is a feature of national developments in relation to ECCE in Ireland (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education [CECDE], 2004; National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA], 2005). Furthermore, consultation with parents, staff, children and others involved in the child's health, care and education is now regarded as an integral part of good practice in early childhood settings (Neaum and Tallack, 2000; Rodd, 2006). Stakeholders can be invited to consult on the development of services in their local community, on policy making subcommittees, on the curriculum, or as part of the annual review ( Research Digest/Standards 7: Curriculum,  8: Planning and Evaluation and  10: Organisation). This necessitates establishing a working relationship between management and the stakeholders based on:

- A shared sense of purpose
- Mutual respect
- Collaborative and inclusive processes
- Collegiality, cooperation and honesty
- A willingness to negotiate (French, 2003; Rodd, 2006)

Effective consultation calls for skilled leadership in communication, conflict resolution and meeting the needs of others. Effective teams are characterised by shared values and the pursuit and achievement of goals, roles and responsibilities which are accepted and understood by all involved (Rodd, 2006).

Consultation with children recognises them as competent, co-constructors of knowledge and young citizens. It also acknowledges their expertise in their own lives and demonstrates respect for their views, their silences and their rights as outlined in Article 12 of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (United Nations [UN] General Assembly, 1989). The Mosaic approach is a way of listening to children which integrates the visual with the verbal. It advocates a multi-method formula

whereby children's own photos, maps and tours are connected to observing and talking to gain a deeper understanding of children's lives (Clarke and Moss, 2001). The approach is about dialogue, reflection and action. Appropriate processes for consulting with children will be relevant, relaxed, informal, rewarding, and enjoyable (Smith *et al.*, 2000). Hart (2005) concludes that consultation with children is critical to the learning process. Bingham and Whitbread (2007) explore the extent to which meaningful collaborative consultation with children in conflict can successfully promote young children's social understanding, knowledge, specific social skills and emotional regulation.

There is an ethical responsibility to ensure that having conscientiously engaged with stakeholders (particularly children), their voices are heard, and serious consideration given to their views. Stakeholders are entitled to feedback on the decisions made, or any reports that emanate from their participation (Smith *et al.*, 2000). Consultation ensures:

- Democratic processes
- Accountability
- Transparency
- Continuity between the service and family/community/agencies
- Enhanced child/parental/staff/community knowledge, skill and confidence

In authentic consultation, all stakeholders are seen as important resources bringing added value to the setting. The rationale must never be lost – the positive impact on what all those participating have in common, namely the child (French, 2003).

Implementing the Standard

There are a number of practical steps which a setting may consider once the decision has been made to actively invite contributions to decision-making processes and strategies for the development and delivery of the service from a wide range of interested stakeholders. This involves reflecting on how consultation with staff, parents ( Research Digest/Standard 3: Parents and Families), children and other appropriate people is encouraged, and could include the following:

- Regular staff meetings, where staff are encouraged and supported to identify their needs
- Appropriate forums (e.g. regular group meetings, suggestion boxes and so forth), where adults are facilitated to share opinions and ideas
- Open, solution-driven discussions within the setting
- The encouragement of parental input regarding the policies and procedures of the setting
- Staff/parent meetings, where parents are given the opportunity to discuss their child's development, accomplishments and/or needs/difficulties
- Staff participation in annual appraisal of the setting
- Self-evaluation opportunities for staff, regarding their own performance
- The organisation of annual meetings, where all stakeholders are invited to share their views
- Full representation of parents on advisory, management and policy-making committees
- Parental input about the curriculum/programme and its relationship to children's development

- The effective and efficient facilitation of interactions with a broad range of stakeholders (including families, colleagues, assistants, other community services, regulatory or other statutory officials and so forth)
- The inclusion of children in age-appropriate decision-making, with regard to the development of the setting

Additional, specific strategies need to be developed and used to encourage children's capacity to contribute their views and opinions on issues relating to their daily experiences:

- Using open-ended questions
- Giving children adequate time to think and reply
- Encouraging children to name and share feelings and emotions
- Sharing control of conversations with the child
- Involving children in finding/choosing a solution to a problem

Conclusion

As a key component of quality, effective consultation must bridge the gap between what is suggested by those involved in decision-making processes and strategies, and the tangible outcomes of those contributions. Each setting needs to ensure that it acts upon the input it has gathered from the consultation process, and uses it to inform and enhance the development and delivery of the service. The views and opinions gathered through consultation with stakeholders should be used regularly to review and revise all aspects of practice; staff need to be encouraged to take responsibility for the implementation of agreed actions; and policies and procedures should become working documents that are revised and updated on a regular basis.



The development of *Síolta* itself was dependent on the consensus of an unprecedented number of those involved, whether directly or indirectly, in the provision of ECCE services. The consultation process that underpins the Framework must, therefore, be continued and extended, to ensure that all those involved in early childhood provision (children, parents, staff and other interested stakeholders) have a voice.

Resources for Consultation

Bingham, S. and Whitebread, D. (2007). From Theory into Practice; Teachers Supporting Children's Self Regulation in Conflict Situations within an Early Years Setting. Paper presented at the CECDE Conference, *Vision into Practice*, Dublin Castle, 8th–10th February 2007. Accessed at: http://www.cecde.ie/english/conference_2007_symposia.php, 11th February 2007.

Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (2004). *Talking about Quality*. Dublin: Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education.

Clarke, A. and Moss, P. (2001). *Listening to Young Children: The Mosaic Approach*. London: National Children's Bureau.

French, G. (2003). *Supporting Quality: Guidelines for Best Practice in Early Childhood Services* (2nd ed.). Dublin: Barnardos' National Children's Resource Centre.

Hart, M. (2005). Listening and Empowering Children in Early Childhood Services (in) Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (Ed.) (2005). *'Questions of Quality' - Conference Proceedings*. Dublin: Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education, pp. 205-213.

Kay, J. (2004). *A Practical Guide to Good Practice in the Early Years* (2nd ed). London and New York: Continuum.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (2005). *Towards a Framework for Early Learning: Final Consultation Report*. Dublin: National Council for Curriculum and Assessment.

Neaum, S. and Tallack, J. (2000). *Good Practice in Implementing the Pre-school Curriculum* (2nd Ed.). Cheltenham: Stanley Thornes.

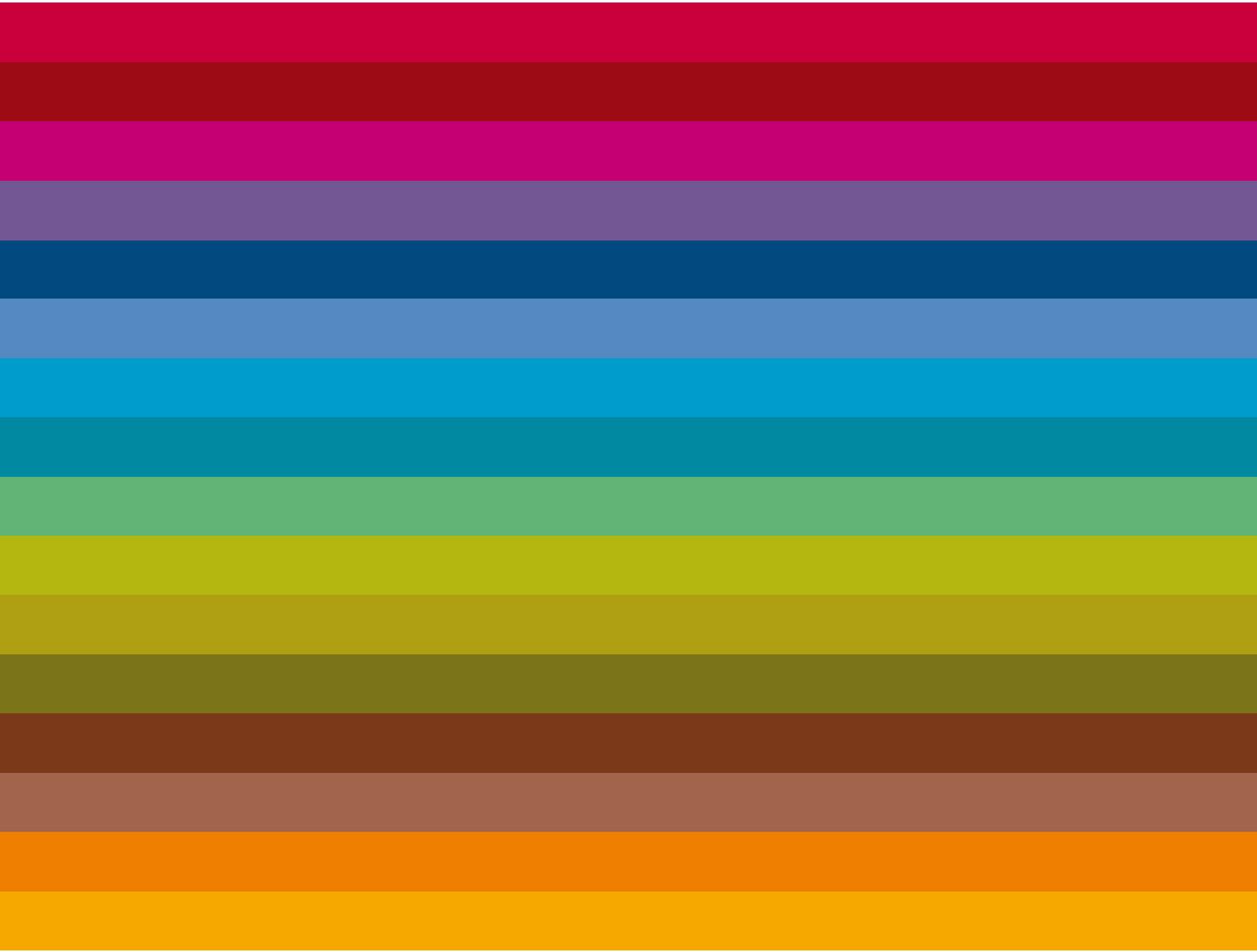
Rodd, J. (2006). *Leadership in Early Childhood* (3rd ed.). England and New York: Open University Press.

Smith, A., Taylor, N. and Gollop, M. (Eds.) (2000). *Children's Voices: Research, Policy and Practice*. New Zealand: Pearson Education New Zealand Limited.

United Nations General Assembly (1989). *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Geneva: United Nations.

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The National Quality Framework
for Early Childhood Education

