



# Fostering safety and reducing risks in child, youth and family services

Empowerment and Participation  
Tim Moore 2021



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## Why empower children and young people?

- We believe and children and young people tell us that:
  - Children who feel valued and have confidence in their own feelings and concerns are more likely to seek out support
  - Children who have confidence in adults and organisations are more likely to raise concerns and ask for help
    - Confidence that they are valued
    - Confidence that the organisation takes their safety seriously
    - Confidence that they will be believed
    - Confidence that things will get better if they raise concerns or seek support



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## The building blocks of empowerment

*Building confidence in adults and organisations*

- **Empowering cultures:** create environments where children feel valued, supported, that their safety is a priority and that adults will act
- **Empowering relationships:** increase the likelihood that children and young people have adults to whom they can turn if they have concerns, need to get help or to be protected

*Building confidence in themselves*

- **Awareness, skills and knowledge:** children and young people know what is right, that organisations are taking their safety seriously and what to do if they need help or have been hurt or harmed
- **Participation:** encourages children and young people to share their ideas, needs and concerns, provides them opportunities to feel valued, listened to and supported and builds their confidence that they are being taken seriously

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## A few things about empowerment

- Empowerment happens through lots of small 'moments'
- The more 'empowering moments' a child or young person has the more confidence they have in adults, organisations and themselves
- Children and young people build confidence by knowing that adults and organisations take their safety seriously and know what is being done

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## Parts of the resource that support empowerment

- Discussion about how different groups of children and young people might be more vulnerable and how they might be empowered
- Explanations of how the building blocks are empowering
- Checklists and tools to help determine how empowering your organisation currently is
- A tool to plan strategies and activities that are empowering



**Empowering relationships checklist**

Do children and young people feel that adults in your organisation:	Yes/No
... do things to keep them safe?	
... show they care about them?	
... show they respect them?	
... act in ways that are predictable and like adults 'should act'?	
... have authority but are approachable and listen to them?	
... talk appropriately about sensitive issues?	
... prioritise their needs and concerns?	
... do what they say they will do?	

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**Empowerment tool 1: How empowering is my organisation?**

Part Three Tools

My organisation	1	2	3	4	5	How do we know?	What can we improve?
	None of the time	Some of the time	Most of the time	All of the time			
Leaders demonstrate that they value children and young people and their views							
Leaders demonstrate that they value children's rights							
Your organisation celebrates diversity - different cultures, genders, ages, sexualities and religions							
Your organisation actively discourages discrimination against people (including children and young people) on the basis of culture, gender, age, sexuality or religion							
Your organisation is aware of children and young people's vulnerabilities							
Your organisation has strategies in place to empower children in their interactions with adults within the organisation							
Your organisation has invested in opportunities to enable children and young people to have their say							
Your organisation has policies in place that clearly articulate how children and young people influence the organisation							
Your organisation supports staff to have appropriate and empowering relationships with children and young people							

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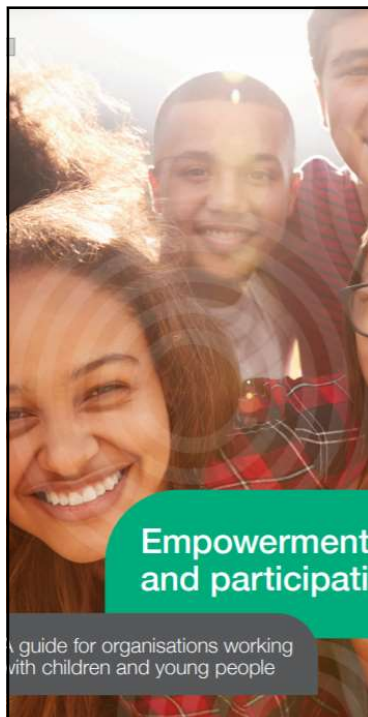
## Participation

- Is about supporting children and young people to have their say and help inform the things that you are doing to keep them safe and raise concerns if they are unsafe or have been harmed
- It ranges from individual, unplanned, in-the-moment chats to planned and formal group exercises
- It's about listening and responding
- Requires you to think about:
  - SPACE: what do children need to be able to share their views and needs
  - VOICE: what opportunities (formal and informal) do children have to share their ideas and raise their concerns?
  - AUDIENCE: who is listening and who needs to hear?
  - INFLUENCE: how will we act on what children and young people tell us?


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## Parts of the resource

- Section 2:
  - Includes an explanation of how participation helps improve children's safety
  - Reflections to get you to think about:
    - When and how children can participate
    - What children and young people might need to feel safe when participating
    - What you need to have in place to truly listen and respond



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**Creating safe and inclusive spaces  
(3–8 years)**

Part three: Tools

Creating a physically safe space	Creating an emotionally safe space	Creating an inclusive space	Understanding support needs	Building peer connections	Engaging children
<p>Consider the space from the eye level of a child. Provide a comfortable space free of hazards. This could include child-size furniture, beanbags, cushions or a chill-out corner. Provide opportunities for children to direct their play and activities. Set up spaces in an organised way. Children thrive in an environment that has structure and familiarity. Consider ways to create an informal, welcoming environment that is not intimidating, such as by managing the ratio of children to adults, using a relaxed conversational style or not wearing formal uniforms.</p>	<p>Create a sense of belonging by helping children to co-create a 'group contract' about how everyone is going to treat and support each other. Build friendships by playing games that encourage social interaction. Provide group and individual activities. Provide opportunities for children to share their concerns with a trusted adult.</p>	<p>Consider the needs of each child (for example, comfort and accessibility). Will some children need more or less help to participate? Role model inclusive conversations and offer activities and toys to all children, regardless of their gender. Decorate the space with artwork or posters depicting diversity and provide culturally inclusive toys, jigsaws, games, activities and other materials. Acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the lands your organisation is on and include an Acknowledgement of Country in activities. Don't assume a child's gender identity. Ask for their preferred pronouns and respectfully use them.</p>	<p>Children will have different abilities, cultures, behaviours and experiences. Learn about these and ask children how they want to be supported. Adapt practices to support children's needs. Help children develop relationships with peers and caring adults to develop a support network. Use play, teamwork and collaborative activities to help with this.</p>	<p>Help children engage in structured games and play involving rules negotiated with others. Help children understand their rights and responsibilities. Encourage children to see other children's strengths. Help children connect with other children who have similar interests. Help establish buddy systems.</p>	<p>Help children set and reach practical goals or learn new skills to build confidence. Use stimulating spaces and engaging activities to provide opportunities for conversations. Give children age-appropriate roles and responsibilities. Children can find adult or bureaucratic language alienating and disempowering. Aim to create a shared, mutually understood vocabulary. Use inclusive plain English and provide positive reassurance such as by saying "thank you for sharing" and "that's a great perspective", to encourage communication.</p>

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**1. Space**

Part three: Tools

**Space checklist**

Does your organisation:	Yes/No
... ensure the physical environment is a place where children and young people feel comfortable and welcomed?	
... create an environment for participation that is emotionally safe?	
... enable children and young people to feel they're taken seriously?	
... ensure participation activities are inclusive and accessible?	

**Participation tool 1: Identifying safe spaces**

Children and young people feel safe when they are in an environment where it is safe for them to speak up. This tool provides opportunities for children and young people to discuss 'safe spaces'. Keep in mind that safety here is not just about physical safety and managing hazards, but is also about emotional safety and wellbeing. Further ideas for creating safe spaces for children and young people of different ages can be found in the following guide.

Aim	Target	Reasons	Time
To help obtain feedback on how physically and emotionally safe children and young people feel in your environment and how this might be improved.	3–10 years (with modifications)	Customised data (sticky notes, drawing prompts) or map of the space	20–40 minutes

**Conduct 'warm-up activity'**

**Reach a 'group agreement'**

**Introduction**

Briefly explain that the exercise aims to find out how physically and emotionally safe children and young people feel in your organisation. Explain that children and young people may feel safe in some places and unsafe in others. Ask children and young people, "what do we mean when we say 'safe'?", "how can you tell if you are safe?", "what happens in your bodies?" and "how do people act when they are safe or unsafe?". Let them know that your organisation is interested to learn which places feel safe and those that don't, so you can make changes to improve things. Tell children and young people that they will be asked to explore the space and decide whether they feel safe there. Ask them to identify places that might be out of bounds, and together, decide the boundaries for the activity (for example, don't go outside the centre, stay in front of gates, don't cross the road and keep out of staff rooms). Supervise participants to move around your organisation's spaces/areas and identify areas that feel safest, less safe or unsafe. Children may like to place coloured dots (green for safe, orange for less safe and red for unsafe) around the space. Young people may place sticky notes around the space and record their views and observations about where it feels safe or unsafe. Alternatively, young people may make safe, less safe and unsafe places on a map of the organisation's spaces. After the participants have finished or the session, you may walk around, checking at spots where participants have placed markers or coming together as a group to talk about the places participants feel safe or unsafe.

**In their own words**

To be able to have your say you need to feel comfortable, you need to know that you're going to be taken seriously and that you're not gonna be judged. Having people you trust helps you, it should be relaxed and help people feel comfy. If it's too formal you might be intimidated but if it's not formal enough you might think that they're not taking it seriously.



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### Participation tool 3: Developing a child safe policy or statement of commitment to child safety

*Part three: Tools*

Child safe organisations help their community understand how they keep children and young people safe and protect them from harm. Children and young people should have opportunities to inform the development of child safety policies and may need child-friendly versions to appreciate what their organisation is doing. Child-friendly versions can be developed with children and young people to build their knowledge while helping to share messages with their peers. Information about how to create a child safe policy or statement of commitment to child safety can be found at <https://ccp.org.vic.gov.au/child-safety/>.

Aim	Target	Resources	Time
To help children and young people inform and understand your organisation's commitment to safety and show them how it is keeping them safe. To get feedback from children and young people about whether your organisation is empowering and safe, and what things might need to be strengthened.	13-18 years (with modifications)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A summary of the things that might be included in your organisation's policy or statement of commitment.</li> <li>A sheet of A3 paper for each point to be made in your policy or statement of commitment.</li> <li>Coloured markers and art supplies (like stickers, glitter and coloured paper).</li> </ul>	45-60 minutes (including 40-45 minutes for the exercise)

**Preparation**

Prepare a summary of the key commitments included in a policy or statement of commitment. These might include:

- upholding children's rights
- treating children and young people with respect
- asking children and young people and listening and responding to their views
- promoting culture safety for Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and culturally and linguistically diverse children and young people
- celebrating diversity
- maintaining privacy and confidentiality
- undertaking continuous improvement.

Your commitment could make specific reference to empowerment, including providing details about culture, relationships, knowledge and participation.

**Conduct warm-up activity**

**Reach a group agreement**

**Introduction**

Provide children and young people with a summary of the key commitments included in a policy or statement of commitment. This could be a printed sheet or flash cards with the words or ideas. Explain that when discussing safety, you are aware that children and young people might express dissatisfaction with the way your organisation is keeping them safe. Ensure they know that you will listen to their concerns, you are prepared for these concerns and you value their input. Explain that you are seeking feedback and suggestions on your organisation's policy or statement of commitment.

**Group agreements**

Before commencing a group activity or discussion, it is important that the group sets some expectations about how members will work together to create a safe space to talk. Deciding to work together respectfully, to support each other and to clarify out bullying helps set the tone of a group, and ensures that all children and young people can have their say. The way that you set up this activity should be tailored to the group. Young people probably won't need much prompting, but younger children might need more help to come up with ideas.

**Steps**

**Introduce** let children and young people know that when talking about things like safety it is important that everyone feels comfortable. They need to know that their contributions are valuable, that they won't be judged for what they say, and that all ideas are helpful.


**Modify for different groups**

Although the exercise works best if the group helps establish its own expectations, you might provide a list of ground rules that children and young people work with. These might include:

- being respectful
- having the right to have a say – or not
- listening one at a time, appreciating others' contributions
- laying down rules that there is no bullying, teasing or judging
- having things said in the group as confidential unless there are concerns about someone's safety
- showing well-come by making sure that you don't show things you might regret later or that could be shared in private with an adult.

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### Participation tool 2: Safety shields

**Shield template**

What do you expect here?	What you would like done to keep you safe?
How would you feel if this changed?	What can you do if nothing changes?

### Participation tool 4: V is for Victory

**V is for Victory template**

How things are

How can we get there?

How we'd like it to be

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## Stay in touch



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