Creating a children's plan with children

Cassandra Kotsanas, Kylie Smith & Glenda MacNaughton

Research Report 43
May 2014

YOUTH RESEARCH CENTRE

THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors wish to thank the children who shared their ideas and thoughts about what it means to live, study and/or visit the City of Melbourne. We also thank the families, teachers, caregivers, services, librarians and other employees of the City of Melbourne who assisted the children's participation in developing this report. Finally, we thank Frances Kelly and Alison Knott at the City of Melbourne for their support and commitment to supporting children's participation.

CREATING A CHILDREN'S PLAN WITH CHILDREN
Research Report 43

Authors: Cassandra Kotsanas, Kylie Smith & Glenda MacNaughton

ISBN: 978 0 7340 4929 2

Youth Research Centre
Melbourne Graduate School of Education
The University of Melbourne VIC 3010
http://web.education.unimelb.edu.au/yrc/

Author contact: Cassandra Kotsanas
cmkot@unimelb.edu.au

Cover photo: James2 (see also page 23 of this document)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

TABLES AND FIGURES

List of tables

List of figures

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report outlines the process and outcomes of a project funded by The City of Melbourne and undertaken by the Equity and Childhood program (formerly the Centre for Equity and Innovation in Early Childhood) in the Youth Research Centre (YRC), at the Melbourne Graduate School of Education (MGSE), University of Melbourne. Equity and Childhood program researchers were employed to consult children from birth-12 years about their views on and ideas for the City of Melbourne to inform the development of a children's plan. The research draws from a new sociology of the child (Christensen & James, 2008; Kotsanas, 2009; MacNaughton & Smith 2009; Smith 2007; Winter, 2006), which employes a child rights approach to recognising children as active citizens with valid and important knowledge about their worlds, who should be consulted on matters affecting them (MacNaughton & Smith, 2008).

The report examines and illustrates children and parents' views on what makes the City of Melbourne liveable for themselves and others. It presents the findings of a comprehensive consultation process with children and their families including samples of the children's data in the form of words, photographs and drawings. The children who participated in this consultation were residents or regular users of services within the City of Melbourne, such as schools, childcare, libraries and playgroups. Children aged 3-12 contributed by talking, drawing, writing and/or taking photographs whilst parents and carers contributed on behalf of children under three years of age. Consultations took place in 2009-2010 and culminated in the publication of two children's plan documents by the City of Melbourne in early 2011, one children and one adult document.

Four themes emerged from the consultation, which were:

1. **A liveable city for children is a liveable city for all.**
   The consultations found that the relationships, environments and services that make it easy for children to live, explore and be safe and happy in the City of Melbourne will also support a city that is liveable for adults.

2. **Safety is a key component in children's lives**.
   Safety was an overarching issue of importance raised by children throughout these consultations. Children wanted to be with people and in environments that they believed were safe for them and for others.

3. **Children are able to suggest solutions to issues of concern.**
   Children were able to identify concerns and issues related to people, spaces and services and suggest creative solutions to these concerns.

4. **Children need the City of Melbourne to advocate for children's rights.**
   Many of the issues that the children raised show that in addition to providing services the City of Melbourne has a key role to play in advocating for children's rights.

Underlying those four themes were children's concerns with their relationships:

1. **Relationships with people.**
   Children spoke and drew about the importance of relationships with people they know and the difficulties of negotiating relationships with people they don't know.

2. **Relationships with the natural environment.**
   Children spoke and drew about the importance of the natural environment within their lives.

3. **Relationships with the urban environment.**
   Children spoke and drew about the importance of the urban environment and its impact on their lives.

4. **Access and equity.**
   Children spoke and drew about the importance of everyone being able to access features of their natural and urban environments.

This report both discusses the findings and celebrates the City of Melbourne's enactment of children's participatory rights throughout this project. The findings demonstrate the competence and unique knowledge of children under-12 years of age. It also highlights the role that sensitive and child-specific methodologies play in supporting children to express their ideas and concerns clearly and effect change at a service and local government level.

INTRODUCTION

On 1st January 2008, the Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006 (Vic) came into effect. The Charter states that:

> *'Government departments and public bodies must observe these rights when they create laws, set policies and provide services … This means that Government, public servants, local councils, Victoria Police and others are required to act in a way that is consistent with the human rights protected under the Charter. These bodies will have to comply with the Charter and take human rights into account in their day-to-day operations'.*

Human rights involve the rights of both adults and children. Local governments are legally bound under the Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006 (Vic) to actively enact, promote and support the human rights of adults and children in service provision, policy, and practice. The commitment to children's specific participation rights was informed by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), and in particular articles 12 and 13:

- Article 12 states that children have the right to express their views on all matters affecting them and for their views to be taken seriously; and
- Article 13 states that children have the right to freedom of expression, including the freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds through any media they choose.

In August 2009, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child released their General Comment No. 12 The Child's right to be heard, which emphasised the child's right to be heard as a process of participation:

> The exercise of the child's or children's right to be heard is a crucial element in such processes. The concept of participation emphasizes that including children should not only be a momentary act but the starting point for an intense exchange between children and adults on the development of policies, programmes and measures in all relevant contexts of children's lives. (p. 5)

This project was designed to begin an exchange between children and adults in policy specific to children, to inform the development of a Municipal Early Years Plan for 2010-2013 and an accompanying document for children. The Municipal Association of Victoria describes that Municipal

Early Years Plans (MEYP) “are one of a range of plans that a council develops in partnership with its community to support enhancement of the well being of its community” (2001, p.5). In this second cycle of their MEYP, the City of Melbourne initiated this project to:

- develop a Children’s Plan “for children by children”
- support children to inform the Municipal Early Years Plan
- demonstrate the importance of engaging children in the City of Melbourne in the development of public policies, services and facilities
- build on their commitment to the Child Friendly Cities principles.

This was achieved by engaging children and their carers in consultations about their experiences of living and visiting the city. Consultations with children were planned and approached on the basis of three assumptions:

1. Children are active citizens with important and valuable knowledge about their worlds (MacNaughton & Smith, 2009, 2008)
2. Children have a right to a say in matters affecting them
3. Any engagement with children must be ethical. It must be undertaken by people that the children trust, at times that suit them and in environments where children feel safe (MacNaughton & Smith, 2009).

Drawing on previous work with local government about children’s rights (Smith, Alexander & MacNaughton, 2008), this project was based on an understanding that when a local government considers adopting a children’s rights approach to governance, it may require support to engage with 3 issues: images of the child, human rights and children’s rights.

Images of the child

The way that adults understand children’s capabilities and situate them in a particular image of the child effects how children’s thoughts, ideas and beliefs are interpreted, represented and reported in civic life (Kotsanas, 2009; Smith, Alexander & MacNaughton, 2008). In traditional images, the child needs adults to make decisions for them in their ‘best interest’ (Rolfe, 2008). The child is seen as innocent, in need of protection, and not yet a citizen. Those traditional developmental views of the child lead to the exclusion of children from decisions that affect them. In contrast, a newer sociology of the child regards children as social actors with agency, rather than as objects needing adults to make decisions on their behalf (Christensen & James, 2008; Kotsanas, 2009; MacNaughton & Smith 2009; Smith 2007; Winter, 2006). In the ‘social actor’ model, the child has valid ideas, values and understandings of her/himself and of the world; and can act as a partner with adults to develop new policies and practices (O’Brien, 1997; Reimer, 2003).

This new sociology challenges traditional developmental views of the child as passive, weak, dependent and ‘incomplete’ adults, ill-equipped to make decisions about their lives. As Christensen and James (2000) argue, to regard children as social actors is to treat them as active participants in ‘contexts where, traditionally, they have been denied those rights of participation and their voices have remained unheard’ (p. 2). Dahlberg, Moss & Pence (1999) urge us to consider children’s perspectives rather than just impose our views:

> This is part of a wider ethical project of establishing a culture where the children are seen as human beings in their own right, as worth listening to, where we do not impose our own knowledge and categorizations before children have posed their questions and made their own hypotheses (p. 137).

Governments around the world are beginning to regard children as competent citizens, and are consulting them and enacting their ideas through policy and legislation. For example, increasing numbers of governments are creating equivalents of a Children’s Commissioner or Ombudsman and in England, the government has distributed formal guidance to departments on children’s participation (see Children And Young People’s Unit, 2004; MacNaughton & Smith, 2008; Smith, MacNaughton & Alexander, 2008, Pinkerton, 2004)

Human rights and children’s rights

An image of the young child as a citizen rests on the image of the child as a social actor, but it develops that image by associating it with the belief that young children have a right to participate in public debate and policy-formation. That belief owes much to the principles outlined in the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which made children’s rights - including the right to have a voice in decisions about them - legally binding in the same way as other (adult) human rights. The UNCRC influenced the City of Melbourne’s decision that its Children’s Plan should be written *with* children *for* children.

The United Nations Committee’s General Comment No. 12, *The Child’s right to be heard* (2009) emphasized children’s right to participate in decisions affecting them and to have their views taken seriously:

> The views expressed by children may add relevant perspectives and experiences and should be considered in decision-making, policymaking and preparation of laws and/or measures as well as their evaluation. (p. 5)

As MacNaughton, Smith & Lawrence (2003: p. 15) argued, the image of young children as active citizens rests on three ideas:

- young children can construct valid meanings about the world and their place in it
- young children know the world in alternative (not ‘inferior’) ways to adults
- young children’s perspectives and insights can help adults to understand their experiences better.

The children's rights approach to governance that was employed in this research is notable for embodying and enacting many images of the child, not just one. At any age - between birth and 18 years old - a particular child can, at different times, be any one of the following:

- innocent and in need of protection – on the basis of this image local government will likely create, implement and evaluate policy, services and facilities for children without consulting children
- a developing person needing adults' help to understand the world – on the basis of this image local government will likely create, implement and evaluate policy, services and facilities for children. Children will be consulted based on the local governments agenda and concerns
- a social actor – on the basis of this image local government will likely create, implement and evaluate policy, services and facilities with children
- an active citizen who is a competent meaning maker, with valid and important knowledge about their world – on the basis of this image local government will likely create, implement and evaluate policy, services and facilities with children and children will initiate issues and agendas (Kotsanas, 2009; MacNaughton, Hughes & Smith, 2006; MacNaughton & Smith, 2008; Smith, 2007; Woodhead, 2009).

Being able to recognise and act upon this multiplicity is important to how local government is able to uphold children's rights. Further, ensuring that multiple images are represented when reporting internally and to the community is essential to growing awareness of children's rights.

Rights in local government organisations

The Victorian state government expresses a children's rights approach to governance through the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act (2008), which defines human rights as belonging, 'to all people without discrimination, and the diversity of the people of Victoria enhances our community' (Victorian State Government, 2008, p.1). The main purpose of this Charter is to protect and promote human rights by 'imposing an obligation on all public authorities to act in a way that is compatible with human rights' (2008, p.2). In those statements, 'all public authorities' includes local government and 'all people' includes children.

Children's rights both express and develop broader human rights. Human rights promote, support and protect the social wellbeing and safety of all people, including children; and governments are obliged to enact them (Feldman, 2002). However, Wall (2008) argues that human rights are a moral concern, rather than a matter of institutions or organizations adhering to legal obligations such as the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. We would argue that human rights are both a moral and a legal matter; and that a children's rights approach to governance expresses both a legal and moral commitment to a fair and equitable civic life for everyone.

Over the past century, it has been increasingly acknowledged that groups whose human rights are especially vulnerable should receive specific and focused protection. This acknowledgement is a foundation of the United Nations Convention on the rights of the Child (1989), which proclaims children's right to (among other things) a voice in research, policy and evaluation. Research has shown that young children can tell adults about their lives and experiences and the concerns that they have for people close to them and for their immediate environment (e.g. Alderson, 2009; Diaz Soto, 2005; Lundy & McEvoy, 2009; MacNaughton, Smith & Davis, 2007; MacNaughton & Smith, 2008; O'Kane, 2000, 2008; Smith & MacNaughton, forthcoming; Smith, forthcoming). The United Nations General Comment No. 7, *Implementing child rights in early childhood* (2005), encouraged researchers, educators and policy makers to seek the views of children under five years old and to take these views seriously.

In Australia and internationally, groups such as Youth Councils and Youth Parliaments have enacted the rights of young people - principally, teenagers - to participate in government (Pinkerton, 2004; Wyse, 2001). In contrast, participation in government by young children - especially those under five years old - has been explored only recently (Kotsanas, 2009; MacNaughton & Smith, 2008; Smith, MacNaughton & Alexander, 2008). In Victoria, young children's participation in government is supported by the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006 and by local governments' obligation to report on children's participation in planning, developing and evaluating their community.

This project integrated images of the child with children's rights by recognizing and respecting children's citizenship and human rights. This report describes how children were consulted about what it means to live, study or visit the City of Melbourne; the extent to which they believe that the City of Melbourne is a liveable place for everyone; and what is needed to enhance that liveability.

METHOD

Methodological considerations in this research included designing processes so that a diverse sample of children most affected by City of Melbourne policy could be best consulted and contribute. This required multiple methods being tailored to the age of the children involved and the contexts in which they were consulted.

Recruitment

Participants were recruited from children's services where the children in attendance either lived in the City of Melbourne or regularly spent large amounts of time in the city (e.g. attending child care, using library services). The rationale for this recruitment strategy was to access the opinions of children whose wellbeing would be affected most by these services, which is also why participants were not recruited from public places (e.g. Melbourne Zoo, the Museum or the Aquarium), where many of the children would be one-off visitors.

Invitations were made to 53 schools, early childhood services and libraries within the City of Melbourne to participate in the project. In response 18 services including seven childcare services, five playgroups, four libraries, one outside school hours care service, one primary school and one adventure playground agreed to participate.

Participants

This research obtained views and ideas about what it was like to live/study/visit the City of Melbourne from 183 people - 130 children aged between three and twelve years old; and 43 parents or carers of children under two years old, who spoke on their children's behalf. Table 1 outlines the number of children who either directly participated in the consultation or were represented by an adult in the research project.

Table 1 Number of children and the age groups represented in the consultation

Age (years)	Number of children	Percentage of children
0 - 2	45	24%
3 - 5	100	55%
6 - 7	9	5%
8 - 12	29	16%
Total	**183**	**100**

N.B. A further 29 children participated, but the Project Team did not include their views - either because these children's parents did not consent to their participation or because the children said that they didn't want their views reported.

Demographics

Participants in the project came from services in eight of the City of Melbourne's eleven suburban areas: Carlton, East Melbourne, South Yarra, Southbank, Melbourne Central Business District, Docklands, Kensington/Flemington and North Melbourne.

Consultation tools and strategies

The Project Team used various tools and strategies to elicit children's views about what it means to live, study and/or visit the City of Melbourne and what they need to feel safe, secure, grow and learn in the City:

- Activity sheets and child surveys, with spaces to write and draw depending on the age of the child
- Parent/family surveys for adults to respond on behalf of children were under two years old
- Telephone interviews with parents or carers of children under two years old
- Photographs taken and annotated by children
- Video recorded by children with Flip cameras
- Drawings that were discussed and/or annotated
- 3-D constructions that represented the City made by groups of children
- Children's speech, scribed by an adult or recorded

The Project Team adapted each tool and strategy to make it appropriate for use with children of various ages, developmental abilities and linguistic abilities. All tools asked participants to respond to a set of key questions:

- What do you like about living in/visiting the City of Melbourne?
- What makes it hard to live in/visit the City of Melbourne?
- If you had a magic wand, what would you change about the City of Melbourne?

Pseudonyms

Children were asked to choose their own pseudonym so that they were not identifiable within the report and the Children's Plan. Children under the age of eight years generally chose names from popular culture such as Spiderman or Ben Ten or the names of their friends, siblings or teachers. Whilst some of the children over eight years also chose pseudonyms related to popular culture others chose pseudonyms that worked to subvert social norms around acceptable and appropriate language, for example, Wallie Wacker and One Big Coin Slot. As part of the researcher's ethical engagement principles children's chosen pseudonyms have not been censored in any of the documents.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was undertaken by examining key themes and issues that were discussed or illustrated by the children and families as examined in the Data section in the first part of the report. There are always tensions between adults' interpretations and children's intent and meaning when undertaking analysis of data. To limit the research teams subjectivity the analysis of the data was taken back and checked with children where possible. It is hoped this process has minimised the risk that children might be misrepresented or that data has been categorized in a ways that children did not intend.

FINDINGS

Four themes emerged from the consultation with children from birth to 12 years of age. These themes were:

1. **Safety is a key component in children's lives.**
Safety was an overarching issue of importance raised by children throughout these consultations. Children wanted to be with people and in environments that they believed were safe for them and for others.
2. **Children are able to suggest solutions to issues of concern.**
Children were able to identify concerns and issues related to people, spaces and services and were able to come up with creative solutions to these concerns.
3. **Children need the City of Melbourne to advocate for children's rights.**
Many of the issues that the children raised show that in addition to providing services the City of Melbourne has a key role to play in advocating for children's rights.
4. **A liveable city for children is a liveable city for all.**
The consultations found that the relationships, environments and services that make it easy for children to live, explore and be safe and happy in the City of Melbourne will also support a City of Melbourne that is liveable for adults. The children's key issues and solutions support a City of Melbourne that is liveable for all.

Table 2 Number of responses reflecting the themes

Theme	Number of children's responses	Number of adults' responses	Total
A liveable city for children is a liveable city for all	250	162	412
Safety is a key component in children's lives	49	22	71
Children are able to suggest solutions to issues of concern	34	10	44
Children need the City of Melbourne to advocate for children's rights	49	36	85

Underlying those four themes were children's concerns with their relationships:

1. **Relationships with people.** Children spoke and drew about the importance of relationships with people they know and the difficulties of negotiating relationships with people they don't know.
2. **Relationships with the natural environment**. Children spoke and drew about the importance of the natural environment within their lives.
3. **Relationships with the urban environment**. Children spoke and drew about the importance of the urban environment and its impact on their lives.
4. **Access and equity**. Children spoke and drew about the importance of everyone being able to access features of their natural and urban environments.

Liveability

The consultations found that the relationships, environments and services that make it easy for children to live, explore and be safe and happy in the City of Melbourne will also support a City of Melbourne that is liveable for adults. The children's key issues and solutions support a City of Melbourne that is liveable for all.

People

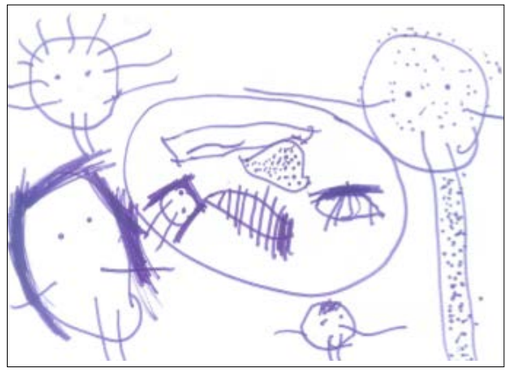
Children discussed the importance of relationships with people they know and meet in the City of Melbourne. They referred to relationships with people in two ways: relationships with people that they knew and the encounters with people they did not know. In response to questions about what they liked about being in the City of Melbourne children commonly mentioned their relationships with known people. 43 children and 23 adults talked about the importance of people in their lives, and these included family members, friends, teachers and caregivers. Spending time with these known people influenced their sense of wellbeing and made the City liveable for them and the people around them. Children also discussed relationships with people they did not know as something that could be difficult about the City of Melbourne, and described the effects of encountering unknown people upon how they engage with places and spaces. Children reported that their sense of safety, or lack thereof, with people they don't know affects their experiences in the City of Melbourne.

Natural environment

The children discussed the importance of both the natural and the urban environment to the liveability of the city. Children specifically talked about water, trees, grass and flowers as valued aspects of the natural environment. 28 children and 27 adults mentioned their relationships with the natural environment. This is particularly significant as parts of the City of Melbourne have dense populations in high-rise buildings. For children and adults who resided in these areas natural spaces were especially important.

What do you like about living in/visiting the City of Melbourne?

Figure 1 Bella



Bella, Age 3
"That's a picnic and that's all my family. That's my daddy and that's my brother and that's my mama, and that's me and that's my grandma."

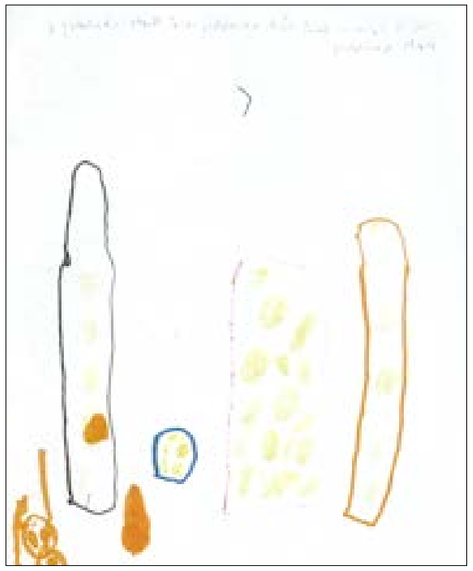
Figure 2 Lee

Lee, Age 4

Figure 3 Pretty Princess 2468

Pretty Princess 2468, Age 11
"I like the City of Melbourne because there are lots of things like parks, shops, building, trees and the beach"

Figure 4 Daisy



Daisy, Age 4.2
"This is a person. And that's a building and that's a building and that's a building."

Urban environment

176 comments, drawings or photographs by children and 112 comments by adults referred to the importance of their relationships with the urban environment and how that made the City of Melbourne liveable for them and for the people around them. Specifically, these participants mentioned the importance of:

- the cityscape (7 children)
- playgrounds and skate parks (26 children and 15 adults)
- attractions such as Melbourne Museum, Melbourne Zoo, Royal Melbourne Show grounds, swimming pools and cinemas (31 children and 8 adults)
- services such as the Venny adventure playground, libraries, sporting clubs, schools and child care centres, shops and restaurants, Queen Victoria Market (63 children and 43 adults)
- transport and roads (49 children and 46 adults).

Access and equity

Children's engagement with a liveable city depends on their abilities and on their economic circumstances. 49 children and 36 adults requested more services such as playgrounds and/or playground equipment, places to ride bikes and scooters, child-friendly amenities, child-friendly information, attractions, and traffic and transport services. For example, one child in a wheelchair and said that access to the physical environment and services in the City of Melbourne can be hard; 10 children mentioned that the size or degree of difficulty of playground equipment prevented them from using it; a parent living in North Melbourne (which has several high-rises) said that the area needs more playgrounds, because after school and at weekends, children have to queue to use the play equipment; one child discussed her need to have more child friendly information through the signage in the City of Melbourne; and several children also spoke about their experiences of using public transport as difficult.

What makes it hard to live in/visit the City of Melbourne?

Figure 5 Ben

Ben, Age 3.5
"I like the monkey bars but I can't reach them."

Figure 6 Griffin

Griffin, Age 4.7
"That's the tram and I'm looking on the tram to see if there is enough space for me."

Safety

The importance of safety in places where children lived and/or used services was evident in 49 comments or illustrations by children and 22 comments by adults.

People

As discussed above, 21 children said either that it was important to feel safe with people they know (family, friend, teachers and caregivers) or that it was difficult to navigate the City of Melbourne with people they didn't know. For example, children spoke about feeling safe in the City of Melbourne because their family lived there, or felt unsafe on the train because of strangers.

Natural and urban environments

In addition, 16 children and 15 adults mentioned the importance of their relationship with the urban environment and a sense of safety. Eight children talked about feeling of safety in parks and other familiar natural spaces and 5 children described how aspects of the urban environment such as schools made them feel safe. Feeling unsafe in natural and urban environments was related to spaces that were poorly maintained, such as littered playgrounds and train stations with graffiti.

Access and equity

From the data provided it is possible to correlate the safety of places and environments and economic circumstances. The City of Melbourne's 11 suburbs/areas feature diverse economic demographics and any one suburb/area can include rich and poor children (e. g. Kensington/Flemington and Carlton). Spaces deemed unsafe, particularly by older children with more independent mobility, were often those in lower socio-economic areas. Younger children's sense of safety was mainly measured by the proximity and supervision of known and trusted adults.

Figure 7 Pogo

Pogo, Age 11
"I don't feel safe at the station…I don't like the graffiti."

Figure 8 Monkey

Monkey, Age 4
"Yes I feel safe that my mum and dad are there".

Figure 9 Fluba

Fluba 11 years
"School. I feel at home it's basically where I live and where my friends live, so I feel safe."

Gertrude, Age 12
"All the laneways around Kensington. All the creepy people that are around and sit by places and talk to you. The people that ask you for money, and all they want is drugs and …"

Solutions

Whilst concerns about safety, wellbeing and liveability were shared throughout the consultations, 34 children between the ages of 3 and 12 years of age and 10 adults offered solutions to these concerns.

People

Seven children clearly stated that more people in safety roles and security equipment such as surveillance cameras could make people feel safer. In acknowledgement of children's concerns about safety additional questions such as What do you think you need to have a safe and secure environment in the city? were asked which elicited responses from children about police and emergency services, and security technology.

Natural and urban environments

Children also shared ideas and solutions to improve their environments. 12 children suggested how to solve their concerns about the natural environment. For example, at one children's centre children wanted more plants around the city, car-free spaces for cycling and walking, and more family-friendly parks and gardens with places for children to play and for spaces for dogs. 15 children and 10 adults offered solutions to their concerns about urban environments. These suggestions included: fixing roads, provision of more public transport, free public transport for children, different-sized playground equipment (to enable its use by children of different ages), more facilities such as swimming pools, and removing some establishments such as pubs away from areas frequented by children.

Access and equity

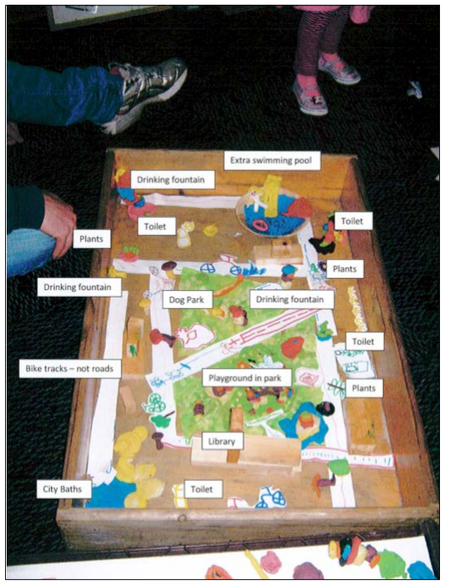
All of children's ideas for solutions increased access and equity for children and other community members, as they were focused on removing barriers and difficulties and making improvements.

If you had a magic wand, what would you change about the City of Melbourne?

Figure 10 Ethan

Ethan, Age 5
"Well they can call the builders and come and fix the road with cement mixers and for them to make the road a bit more safe - like some traffic lights, so the motor bikes could stop and the people could walk across the road."

Figure 11 Kinder2 children



Kinder2 children, Age 3-5
"More gardens and plants in the city- not just in the parks. Playgrounds for children in the parks. Places to take your dog for a walk. No cars, only bikes. Smaller trees and plants on the footpaths so that children can see them."

Orange-Peel-Goodness, Age 11
"More police doing patrols so they can get to places faster. Security cameras in laneways so that people are less likely to get mugged. People that are more aware and that don't turn blind eyes to crimes."

Advocacy

In addition to children's traditional status as non-citizens, the hierarchies that characterise adult citizenship are also reflected in children's citizenship (Lister, 2003). Children who are poor, with diverse linguistic skills and abilities are least likely to be heard in their community. Similarly, children whose families are not actively involved in civic activism (e.g. petitions, public forms) around community concerns are unlikely to have access to organisations. Therefore to continue the work that was begun with this project, children need the City of Melbourne as an advocate for their right to provision of services, protection from harm and participation in decisions, and to communicate their concerns to the relevant bodies.

People

Of the concerns that were raised about people during the consultations, some could be communicated by the City of Melbourne to the relevant authorities. For example, six children and two adults voiced concerns about safety at train stations, which could be passed on to the police or to public transport authorities.

Natural and urban environments, access and equity

Of the areas that the City of Melbourne is not directly responsible for, roads and transport where a major concern highlighted repeatedly in the consultations that could be shared with the road and transport authorities. Six children and two adults had concerns about noise and air pollution due to traffic congestion; 23 children and 20 adults who raised concerns about traffic, pedestrian access and difficult crossing the road; and 13 children and five adults mentioned overcrowding, accessibility and affordability of public transport. In addition one child spoke about the need for more public housing and four adults said there was a need for more schools and early childhood settings. These needs could be communicated by the City of Melbourne to the relevant State government departments.

What makes it hard to live in/visit the City of Melbourne?

TR, Age 9
"Metcard (not having one) and it's a big place so sometimes it's scary."

Bruno/Ranga, Age 11
"It's near the city so there is lots of noise."

Figure 12 James2

James2, Age 4.5
"The trams are really, really crowded and I don't like them. I just want lots of seats. The number 96 tram is sometimes crowded, but not the number 1; and (number) 8 trams are sometimes crowded, but not all the times… But I just get really tired, sometimes and just want lots of seats to sit down, 'cause I sometimes get really, really tired - do you know Teacher?"

Figure 13 Giselle

Giselle, Age 4
"There's a car and I'm holding your hand because there's a car coming quickly an we're running across the road. We're running quickly because the car is really near us"

OUTCOMES

The consultations undertaken in this research met the aims of the project to develop a Children's Plan for children by children, and supported children to take part in informing the Municipal Early Years Plan for the City of Melbourne for the period 2010-2013. The data from the consultations including children's words and large number of drawings and photographs were analysed and reported to the City of Melbourne. As a result the City of Melbourne published two versions of the Children's Plan as "companion documents" (City of Melbourne, 2010 p.8), one for adults and one for children.

The children's version, entitled 'My City and Me: Children's Voices', is a glossy, oversized, colourful, pictorial book with a mixture of activities, information and data from the consultations spread across 22 pages. It was published in January 2011 and made available at a range of children's services in the City of Melbourne such as at the libraries and childcare centres. It is significant in its novelty, being the first time that the City of Melbourne has produced a version of any policy specifically for children in early and middle childhood. This publication fulfilled a key aspect of ethical engagement with children as citizens – they should be reported back to. The blurb of 'My City and Me: Children's Voices' recognises the significance of the document:

> This is the first time that the City of Melbourne has asked children to help write the Children's Plan. We talked to parents with babies and toddlers and to children themselves from three to 12 years of age. The ideas we gathered became part of our Children's Plan… We promised children that we would produce their own version of the plan. This is it. We have tried to make it fun and interesting, with some I-Spy pages and then the harder stuff about the City of Melbourne. (City of Melbourne, 2011)

The information on the back cover also invites children's ongoing and active citizenship engagement by providing ideas for adults when sharing the book with children to encourage them to respond to questions and themes, and an address to send children's ideas to the City of Melbourne. In this way the consultations are ongoing, and children are invited to take part in the monitoring and evaluation processes.

Figure 14 The Children's Plan 2012-2013

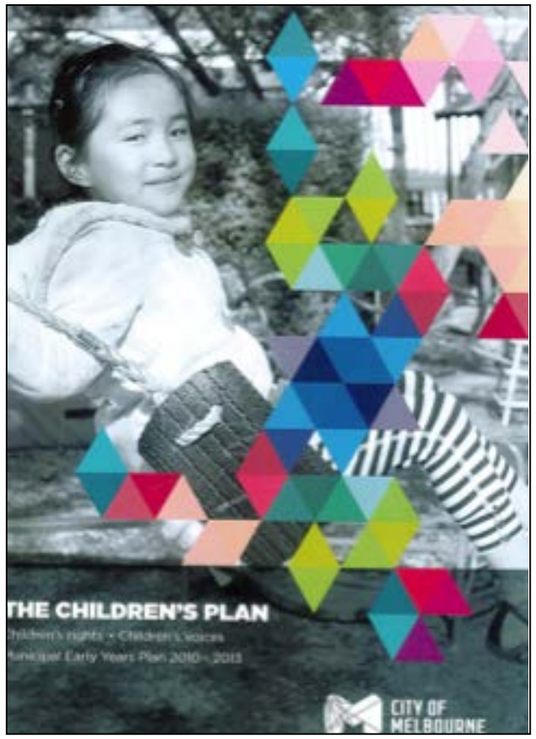
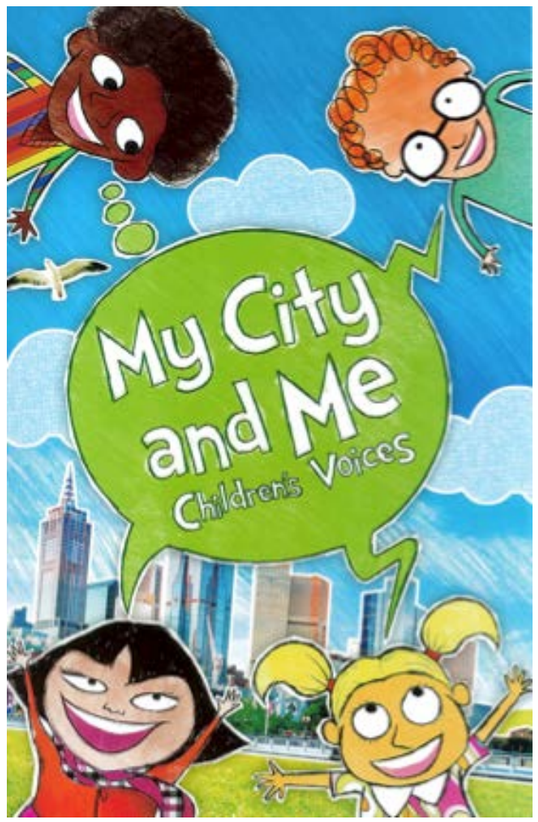


Figure 15 My City and Me: Children's Voices



CONCLUSIONS

By showing that by enacting children's rights creates possibilities for the whole community to benefit, the importance of engaging children in the development of public policies, services and facilities becomes evident and contributes to the research on the enactment of children's rights by local governments. The responses from children in this project demonstrated that:

- children know a lot about where they live and can express their knowledge and experiences clearly
- children have concerns about where they live, but have proposals to address their concerns
- children value and enjoy the services, people and environments provided in their city
- children value and enjoy safe spaces to live in, play in and explore.

The research findings support the relevance of the new sociology of childhood and the conceptualisation of young children as active social actors and agents to research with children about their environments and experiences. It showed how these understandings provided possibilities for upholding children's right to participate in decision making at a local government level. The project demonstrated that children have unique and valid understandings of their experiences and the world around them. Through consultations children aged 3-12 years of age were able to communicate their ideas successfully in ways that were used to inform policy and practice. The consultation showed that children are willing and able to participate in public debate and policy formation when appropriate opportunities are provided for them to do so. The resulting policy documents also demonstrated the feasibility of utilising children's ideas to generate useful and recognisable products. Further, the inclusion of children's voices in this process led to the creation of a document that communicates directly to children about the policies that affect them, thereby upholding their participatory right to information and facilitating children's engagement into the future.

The findings and outcomes of this research would not have been achieved without recognising, respecting and enacting children's right to participate in decisions that affect them and creating ethical engagement opportunities for children of different ages in different settings and circumstances. This necessitated the use of diverse methods that were appropriate to the children's age and ability, and which facilitated and elicited diverse responses about a range of topics. Non-verbal tools such as drawing, photography and constructions created opportunities to communicate visually and also encouraged children to speak or write about their ideas and experiences.

Children's participation in this project provided ideas and information specific to children's lives as well as children's unique perspectives and opinions about what could make a community more liveable for all its members. This has implications for local governments and other organisations planning to evaluate and improve their services, and suggests that provision to include children in consultations should be made wherever children are part of a target population. Ensuring that organisations have the capacity to support children and young people to participate will continue to contribute to the wellbeing of society more broadly.

REFERENCES

Alderson, P. (2000). Children as Researchers: Participation Rights and Research Methods. In P. Christensen & A. James (Eds.), *Research with children: perspectives and practices* (pp. 240-259). London and New York: Falmer Press.

Children and Young People's Unit. (2004). Core principles of participation. Retrieved 24 April 2008, from www.cypu.gov.uk/corporate/participation/coreprinciples.cfm

Christensen, P., & James, A. (Eds.). (2008). *Research with children: Perspectives and practices.* (2nd ed.). Oxon, UK: Routlege.

Dahlberg, G., Moss, P., & Pence, A. (1999). *Beyond Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care.* London: Falmer Press.

Diaz Soto, L. (2005). Children make the best theorists. In L. Diaz Soto, L. & B. B. Swadener *Power and voice in research with children*. New York: Peter Lang

Feldman, D (2002)Parliamentary Scrutiny of Legislation and Human Rights. *Public Law* 323, 338-339.

Kotsanas, C. M. (2009). Sustaining children's participation in early childhood settings? Discourse, power and the 'danger' of participation practices. Masters Research thesis, Graduate School of Education, The University of Melbourne.

Lister, R. (2007). Inclusive citizenship: realising the potential. *Citizenship Studies*, 11(1), 49-61.

Lundy, L., & McEvoy, L. (2009). Childhood, the United Naions Convention on the Rights of the Child, and research: What constitutes a 'rights-based' approach? In M. Freeman (Ed.) *Law and childhood studies: Current legal issues.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

MacNaughton, G., Davis, K., & Smith, K. (2009) Exploring 'race-identities' with young children: making politics visible. In MacNaughton, G.M. & Davis, K. (Eds). *Race and early childhood education: An international approach to identity, politics, and pedagogy.* Palgrave MacMillan. pp. 31-48.

MacNaughton, G., Hughes, P., & Smith, K. (Eds.). (2008). *Young children as active citizens: Principles, policies and pedagogies.* Newcastle, Australia: Cambridge Scholars.

MacNaughton, G. & Smith, K. (2008) Engaging ethically with young children: principles and practices for listening and responding with care. In G. MacNaughton, P. Hughes, & K. Smith (Eds.) *Young children as active citizens: principles, policies and pedagogies.* Cambridge Scholars Publishing: London.

MacNaughton, G., & Smith, K. (2009) Children's Rights in Early Childhood. In M.J. Kehily (Ed.) *Introduction to Early Childhood Studies*, 2nd Edition, Open University Press/McGraw Hill.

MacNaughton, G.M., Smith, K. & Davis, K. (2007). Researching with children: The challenges and possibilities for building 'child friendly' research. In J. A. Hatch (Ed). E*arly Childhood Qualitative Research.* Routledge, New York. pp. 167-205.

MacNaughton, G., Smith, K. & Lawrence, H. (2003). *ACT Children's Strategy – Consulting with Children Birth to Eight Years of Age: Hearing young children's voices.* http://www.children.act.gov.au/publications.htm

Municipal Association of Victoria. & DEECD (2011) *Municipal early years planning framework and practical resource guide.* Melbourne: Municipal Association of Victoria.

O'Brien, A. (1997). Consumer participation for young people in care. *Family Matters*, 46, 56-58.

O'Kane, C. (2000). The development of participatory techniques: facilitating children's views about decisions which affect them. In P. Christensen & A. James (Eds.), *Research with children: perspectives and practices* (pp. 136-159). London: Falmer Press.

O'Kane, M. (2007). "The Transition to School in Ireland: What Do the Children Say?," *International Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education Conference, Vision into Practice: Making Quality a Reality in the Lives of Young Children.*

Pinkerton, J. (2004). Children's participation in the policy process : Some thoughts on policy evaluation based on the Irish National Children's Strategy. *Children and Society*, 18, 119-130.

Reimer, E. C. (2003). A scaffold for participation in agency work. *Children Australia,* 28, 30-37.

Rolfe, S.A. (2008). Children's Voices in Decision-Making about their Best interests: The Case of the Victorian Child Protection System. In G. MacNaughton, P. Hughes, & K. Smith, (Eds.). (2008). *Young children as active citizens: Principles, policies and pedagogies.* Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars.

Smith, K. (2008). Uncovering the hierarchies of citizenship when implementing child participation in local government. Paper presented at 18th EECERA Annual Conference, *Reconsidering the Basics in Early Childhood Education*, Stavanger in September 3-6, 2008.

Smith, K. (2004). *Reconceptualising observation in the early childhood curriculum.* Unpublished PhD Thesis, The University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia.

Smith, K., Alexander, K. & MacNaughton, G. (2008). *Respecting children as citizens in local government: participation in policies and services project*. City of Port Phillip, Victoria.

Smith, K., & Smale, J. (2007) Child participation in local government. Invited workshop for *MUTANT,* Utrecht, Netherlands, 22nd October.

Smith, A. B. (2007). Children's rights and early childhood education: Links to theory and advocacy. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, 32(3), 1-8.

United Nations. (1989). *Convention on the rights of the child.* Geneva: United Nations.

UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. (2005). General comment no. 7: Implementing child rights in early childhood.

UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. (2009). General comment no. 12: The right of the child to be heard.

Victorian State Government. (2008). *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006*. Retrieved 25 November, 2009, from http://www.equalopportunitycomission.vic.gov.au/human%20rights/the%20victorian%20charter%20of%20human%20rights%20and%20responsibilities/

Wall, J. (2008). Human rights in light of childhood. *International Journal of Children's Rights*, 16, 523-543.

Winter, K. (2006). Widening our knowledge concerning young looked after children: The case for research using sociological models of childhood. *Child and Family Social Work*, 11, 55-64.

Woodhead, M. (2009). Childhood studies: Past, present and future. In M. J. Kehily (Ed.), *An introduction to childhood studies* (2nd ed.). Berkshire, UK: Open University Press.

Wyse, D. (2001). Felt tip pens and school councils: Children's participation rights in four English schools. *Children & Society*, 15(4), 209-218.