

# what matters to me

Citizenship in Practice



## Citizenship in Practice

# What Matters to Me

Children in Scotland's **Citizenship in Practice** project aims to promote and increase the participation of children and young people with disabilities, in decision making. The project is primarily concerned with involving young people with learning disabilities. Initially the project worked with nearly 50 young people, identifying their interests and concerns. This report describes that work, its findings and ways for young people to take issues forward.

It will be of interest to adults working with children and young people with disabilities, people involved in policy making affecting all children and young people, adults wanting to make their work more inclusive, as well as project participants and other young people.

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# Key findings

- Creative, flexible methods work best allowing young people with a range of abilities to participate. Using multi-media approaches (ie art / music / drama etc) helps to make work accessible, stimulating and fun. Close liaison with group leaders is vital to ensure young people find activities understandable and meaningful.

"I would like more music and singing, that's what I like best."

Young woman aged 16

"More recording our voices and opinions."

Young person aged 13

- Results show that more time needs to be spent developing young people's understanding of choice and making decisions. Children and young people need regular experience of choice - clear, understandable options leading directly to their chosen outcome.

"What is choice?"

Young woman aged 15

"I have no choice."

Young man aged 12

- 'What matters' to young people with disabilities is essentially the same as what matters to all young people:

"More friends my age."

Young woman aged 16

"Going on trips."

Young woman aged 18

"Having my own space"

Young woman aged 19

"My family."

Young man aged 17

"Give me more respect."

Young woman aged 17

"School"

Young man aged 16

"Being listened to more."  
Young woman aged 19

"I think that smacking  
children with the belt is  
wrong."  
Young woman aged 13

But are young people with disabilities included in debates or decisions along with other young people?

- Issues that received the strongest response tended to be about young people taking more control and responsibility in various aspects of their lives.

"My sister gets a letter and  
opens it herself. I get a  
letter and I don't get to  
open it."  
Young woman aged 16

"I get bothered if I'm not  
included in discussions."  
Young woman aged 16

- Other people's attitudes often affected how much control young people could take over their own lives.

"When people speak to my  
Mum instead of me."  
Young woman aged 18

"The way that people accept  
me is not enough, they just  
accept my chair half the  
time and don't accept me as  
me."  
Young woman aged 17

- Difficulties with accessibility limited what people could do - this included inaccessibility through lack of support and/or not being allowed to go somewhere.

"I like to go out and I can't because there's not enough access."  
Young woman aged 13

# Introduction

Children in Scotland's **Citizenship in Practice** project aims to promote and increase the participation of children and young people with disabilities, in decision making. The project is primarily concerned with involving young people with learning disabilities - a group that is at particular risk of being under represented in decision-making processes. The two-year project is funded by The Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Fund.

The project began by trying to identify young people's interests and concerns so that future work could concentrate on addressing their issues.

We asked:

## What matters to you?

Forty-six young people with a range of learning and physical disabilities from around Scotland explored this question. The participants ranged from 11 - 19 years of age; 18 were male and 28 female. They worked as eight separate groups.

This report:

- gives details of the methods used;
- demonstrates how methods were made accessible to young people with a wide range of abilities;
- discusses how effective methods proved - including young people's opinions;
- identifies how young people can be involved in taking some of these issues forward.

The findings from **What Matters to You?** form the backbone of the Citizenship in Practice project. Having examined 'what matters' the project will work with groups to address some of their issues: exploring them in greater depth; increasing other people's awareness of them; and informing and influencing relevant decision makers and policy. This report (and accompanying CD) is the first step along this path.

# The plan

Groups chose around three different ways of exploring *What Matters to You?* from a list of alternatives compiled by Children in Scotland. This then formed the basis of a work plan for each group.

Different plans needed to:

- take into account the time each group had available and the style of the group (some groups were school classes, others after school clubs etc);
- produce end results that young people could keep and feedback they could understand;
- appeal to young people **and** the decision makers the project aims to influence.

They also needed to:

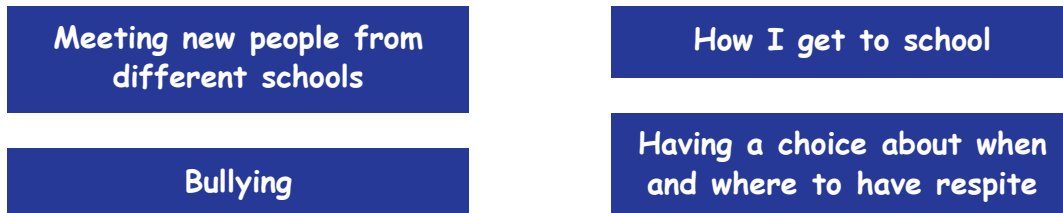
- be individual enough to meet the needs and wishes of each group **but** share enough common ground with other groups to allow a comparative perspective;
- provide a mixture of focused methods to extract specific information and data, and freer methods to allow greater self-expression.

Interestingly, many groups chose the same alternatives, the three most popular being:

- *voting on statements;*
- *Mind Maps* (a visual picture or 'map' of young people's thoughts and ideas);
- *recording a CD rap.*

# Voting on statements

## What we<sup>1</sup> did



Young people considered a number of statements like the ones above and then voted on whether or not these represented something that was an important part of their lives - something that mattered to them. Young people could also add their own statements and get the group to vote on them. The statements covered various aspects of people's lives, from school to social life, privacy to risk-taking, as well as wider issues like pollution and having a social worker. The three voting options were 'Yes, it matters', 'No it doesn't' and 'Not sure'.

### Plus Points

- ✓ Helped stimulate thinking about what mattered - sometimes in areas that young people had not considered before
- ✓ Gave concrete results and a clear picture of areas of importance for young people.

## How we all got involved

All the groups completed this exercise in one form or another. Group leaders tended to adapt the general principals to suit their group. Some of the adaptations are shown below:

- Some groups worked through a large number of statements (approximately 40) to give a broad brush-stroke impression of what mattered. Others concentrated on a far smaller number but explored them in more detail.
- Some groups discussed the statements and their responses as a group, others worked one to one and then fed back to the group.
- Some groups voted by a show of hands, others with beans (on a scale of 1-3), others verbally. Some groups divided the room into three, 'Yes, it matters' at one end, 'No, it doesn't' at another and 'Not sure' in the middle with participants moving to the relevant space.

A number of group leaders also noted down comments made by young people during the activity, giving further insight into the information generated by voting.

<sup>1</sup> In these headings we is used to refer to the young people participating.

# Mind maps

## What we did

Having started thinking about 'what matters' through the statements above, young people were then asked to record their thoughts and ideas visually, in a mind map. The request was kept open, encouraging young people to make their own interpretations. Some symbols and pictures were supplied as optional starting materials.

### Plus Points

- ✓ Views can be expressed freely and creatively using images not words.
- ✓ A stimulating and accessible way for others to understand the views being expressed - maps have been used in displays at conferences and have toured round different participating groups giving them direct feedback on what other people thought.
- ✓ Useful visual prompts for young people when asked about their views at a later date.

## How we all got involved

Groups completed this exercise in different ways. Some concentrated on just a few ideas; others gave a huge overview. Some groups created a joint mind map combining all their ideas while others worked on individual maps. Pictures, symbols, photographs, cuttings from magazines and text were all used to show what mattered to different people. Some groups used cameras to record important things in their life and this seemed to be a particularly effective way of including other people (whether they were family, friends or other staff) in the project. The actual process of creating the map, particularly in group situations, often led to interesting and fruitful discussion between members of the group. This activity was not felt to be particularly accessible to young people with visual impairments. The option of creating a tactile map was discussed but in the end it was decided to use an alternative exercise.

# Recording a CD rap

## What we did

Following on from the above work, all groups were involved in creating a rap entitled **What Matters to Me**. Initially simple exercises were practised where young people took it in turns to give their name / where they live / something they like doing etc over a drum beat. Moving on, young people did individual recordings (listening to a beat through headphones), giving their views on 'what mattered'. These different recordings were then cut and mixed over a beat to form a rap single on CD.

### Plus points

- ✓ Views can be expressed freely and often hearing a recording seemed to affirm views were being listened to.
- ✓ Popular with groups - young people thought it was "wicked".
- ✓ Using recordings from all the groups effectively gives the 'bigger picture'.
- ✓ Medium does not rely on an ability to read, write or even use speech.
- ✓ Opens new opportunities for publicising project and its findings.

## How we all got involved

Groups had worked in preceding weeks on deciding what they wanted to say. Some young people used their completed mind maps as a prompt, others spoke about how they felt at the time. A number of young people didn't use speech. Some of them gave their views using a communication aid and head switch; others worked the week before, with staff, selecting their message which was then recorded on to a switch. At the recording, the young person was able to access this message by pressing the switch. Others were asked about their message and answered using gestures and facial expressions, their views were then spoken and recorded by another person. All the young people featured in the final rap.

# The answers

All groups broadly followed the same themes and methods of working. However, on a smaller scale, work was tailored to suit each particular group. Therefore, although 46 young people took part altogether, the numbers voting on particular statements varies. Although young people were given opportunities to make their own statements, very few did. This seems significant, particularly given the discussion on 'choice' below. Young people also made many interesting and insightful comments whilst completing the exercises which were recorded by group leaders. A selection of these from various individuals are given to provide further insight into the figures.

## Statistics and responses

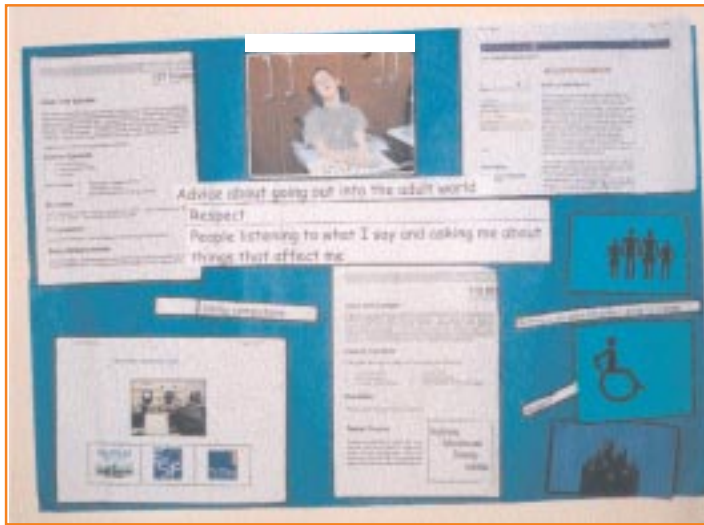
The statements that received the strongest response concerned young people taking more control and responsibility over various aspects of their life. This was evident in a range of situations:

Statement	Number of young people who thought it mattered
Having letters addressed to me	32 out of 33
To go to meetings about my education	26 out of 28
Information about my health that I understand	21 out of 21
Not being with grown ups all the time	28 out of 32

"My sister gets a letter and opens it herself. I get a letter and I don't get to open it."  
Young woman aged 16

"I get bothered if I'm not included in discussions."  
Young man aged 16

"My electric wheelchair is important to me because that's the only way I can move about by myself and get to places without people pushing me."  
Young woman aged 15



Young person from Corseford School

Young person from Graysmill School



Girls from The Yard

# Mind Maps



Young people from Stanmore School



Young person from Westerlea School

An essential part of young people being able to exercise more control was people using language the young people understood and explaining what was going to happen. This was recognised by young people and also scored highly.

"If they're talking about you, you want to know what they're saying."  
 Young man aged 17

"You want to know what'll happen to you"  
 Young woman aged 13

Other people's attitudes were questioned in a number of situations:

Statement	Number of young people who thought it mattered
Not being treated like a child	21 out of 21
People talking to me, not my parents	21 out of 28
Respect	21 out of 21
Being treated the same as everybody else	10 out of 12

"I just feel that folk don't actually listen enough to folk with disabilities... they listen to folk that's in their level."  
 Young man aged 17

"We are young men and women now."  
 Young man aged 14

"Give me more respect."  
 Young woman aged 16

Young people also showed themselves sensitive to other people's needs:

"Get to know people inside and not just look on the outside."  
 Young woman aged 19

"Other people may have disabilities we're not aware of."  
 Young woman aged 13

Questions about choice produced some conflicting information. Young people spoke about wanting ‘more choices’ and ‘being able to try new things’ got 100% support. However a number of statements containing elements of choice got a mixed response:

Statement	YES does matters	NOT SURE	NO doesn't matter
To help choose my teacher	9	-	14
Having a choice about when and where I have respite	15	1	7
Choosing who helps me get up in the morning	8	6	4

It seemed that at times, young people struggled with the concept of choice. As one young person asked “What is choice?”

Where young people had been engaged in a structure or system that promoted making choices they generally regarded this positively. One young person gave a strong response to the statement ‘to have a meeting to talk about what happens at school’. When this was explored further it appeared that this related to her participation in regular weekly meetings where students plan and choose which trips and activities they want to be involved in. ‘Having my own space’ received 100% support and young people valued and seemed used to the idea of being able to choose to go somewhere quiet when they wished.

Although when asked about choice in a general sense, young people would consistently vote this as being important, when asked about choices in specific situations their reactions varied significantly. There are a number of possible reasons for this but observation and discussion with young people and group leaders would suggest the following may impact:

- the hypothetical nature of some questions posed difficulties – it can be difficult for all of us to choose options that we have never experienced;
- choices in a range of situations are arguably more limited for young people with disabilities. This can lead to them having a less clear definition and understanding of choice;
- a number of ‘choices’ regularly offered to young people are not real choices (for example questions like “Would you like your medicine now?” / “Shall we put your coat on to go outside?” are not really asked with the option of answering “No”). *Triangle*<sup>2</sup> have highlighted this phenomenon in their work and call them ‘false choices’. Many children and young people with disabilities experience false choices as routine, which can create both confusion and a sense of learned passivity.

Social aspects were also highlighted as being important to young people.

Statement	Number of young people who thought it mattered
Meeting young people who don't go to my school	31 out of 34
Meeting children and young people without disabilities	17 out of 20
Being part of my community	19 out of 20

When recording the rap 19 young people mentioned their family and 22 mentioned their friends as being important.

"I like going to discos because it would mean I could meet up with my friends."

Young woman aged 13

"Going out with my friends, going to clubs, being able to talk to my friends near and far away from my house."

Young woman aged 13

It was clear, however, that accessibility issues often limited where and what young people could do:

Statement	Number of young people who thought it mattered
Can't go somewhere because there's no-one to go with me or my wheelchair can't get in	29 out of 30
Public transport should be available to take us to places	13 out of 13

"I like to go out and I can't because there's not enough access."

Young woman aged 13

"For the wheelchairs to fit in taxis is totally hard."

Young man aged 17

Accessibility did not necessarily depend on the ability to get a wheelchair in or out. A number of young people (some wheelchair users, others not) spoke about not being able to go somewhere because there was no one to go with them, they were not allowed to or suitable transport was not available.

Young people were also asked about a number of wider issues. Wider issues that mattered to young people varied according to people's experience and understanding of the world. For some, it was difficult to comment on something other than direct personal experiences. However, wider issues that did get a response from some groups included:

Statement	Number of young people who thought it mattered
Physical punishment of children and young people	23 out of 26
Going to hospital and how I'm treated there	18 out of 18
Being able to vote	18 out of 21

# What we thought of the exercises

Most young people completed a survey giving their views on the sessions. Two groups did not complete the survey due to time limitations and one group of seven recorded their views on a single survey form. Some group leaders also gave feedback on the work. Their thoughts on the different activities are summarised below.

## Statements

- 10 young people (and the joint group form) liked voting on statements “lots”;
- 9 liked voting on statements “a bit”;
- No-one said they did not like this exercise.

A number of young people (and group leaders) felt that more time would have been useful. This was a comment made about the whole project but was felt particularly strongly with this exercise. It was not easy to get a happy balance between ensuring there were enough statements to give groups a range of aspects to comment on and the time available.

In a number of cases the lack of time was a positive criticism in that statements had triggered discussion and highlighted issues requiring further exploration - in some cases it was felt a statement could have taken up a whole session of its own. Sometimes however, the time difficulty was associated with trying to cover too many topics in one go or with the complexity of the concepts behind what at first glance, appears straightforward use of language. For example, in one group feeling ‘special’ meant feeling good to some young people and having a disability to others.

## Mind maps

- 20 of the young people questioned liked making the mind maps lots;
- 4 liked it “a bit”;
- 1 didn’t like it very much.

This proved to be a very popular part of the sessions and the resulting maps indicate that many groups spent a lot of time and effort making them. In many cases, not relying on the written word made messages stronger and the exercise easier to participate in. Young people seemed able to have more direct input and often expressed a sense of ownership in the finished article.

"I like the mind map best because I was on it."

Young woman aged 17

As mentioned earlier, one drawback of this method is that it is not particularly accessible to people with visual impairments, although making a tactile map is an option. The five young people who liked the mind map only "a bit" or "not much" were all from the same group. Reasons for this will be explored with the young people and the group leader in the future.

## Recording a rap CD

- 16 young people (and the joint group form) liked making the rap "lots"
- 7 of young people liked it "a bit"
- 3 didn't like it very much.

Again, young people seemed to enjoy this exercise, although a number commented on needing more time to think about what they were going to say in the rap and to practice saying it. In order to get a high enough quality recording, young people had to be recorded individually. Some young people seemed to really appreciate this personal attention; others would probably have preferred 'group rapping'. Young people have, however, been pleased with the professional quality of the CD that this method of recording allowed.

# What now?

The statements, the mind maps and the rap all highlight that 'what matters' to young people with disabilities is essentially the same as what matters to any young person. While this may sound obvious, the question we need to ask is - does decision making and policy making carry this through in practice?

In a recent survey by Children in Scotland of over 1000 young people, health, crime and safety, families, school and leisure were voted the five topics that mattered most to children and young people living in Scotland. This (with the significant exception of crime) is consistent with the findings from *What Matters to You?* The question remains, however, are young people with disabilities included in debates or decisions along with other young people? Or, are young people with learning and physical disabilities (if they are consulted at all) only asked about disability issues? The questions are particularly pertinent where people may perceive barriers to including young people with disabilities: where views may need to be sought using different methods; alternative means of communication employed; and/or the process may take a longer period of time. It is vital to remember that **all** children and young people can communicate what they like and don't like.

## Future work

In the future, this project aims to develop and support ways of ensuring that young people with learning and physical disabilities are included in these general debates. Possible options are:

- the national debate on education due later in the year;
- school meals;
- opportunities after school (whether it be going to college or getting a job);
- health issues;
- the children's and young people's manifesto Children in Scotland are compiling for the next election.

Citizenship in Practice's overall aim is to discover more systematic and inclusive ways of involving children and young people with disabilities in decision making to ensure that everybody is given the opportunity to be listened to.

In addition specific issues came through which young people and this project can take forward:

- having more choice about respite;
- social activities and accessibility issues ('accessibility' in its widest sense);
- being more involved in decisions at school (not only big decisions about education but also smaller ones about what happens during the school week).

## Key recommendation

There are also opportunities for more general work on making choices and understanding choice. *What Matters to You?* highlighted dramatically that for many young people a significant amount of work needs to be done on the basic concepts of choosing and making decisions.

'Making choices requires understanding and confidence in one's own ability, and where children have had little opportunity to practice this it can be difficult.'<sup>3</sup>

If the project had been longer it would have been of enormous benefit to spend the whole of the first year on these concepts, developing young people's understanding and ability to use them. This work cannot happen in a vacuum, however. It must be recognised that making real choices, on whatever scale, needs to be an everyday experience for young people at school, at home and in the community. In addition, training on developing self-confidence and ways for young people to express their views, particularly when they disagree with decisions would be useful. When asked "*What makes you angry?*", 5 out of 9 young people replied "*Nothing*". When asked "*Is there anything you think is unfair?*", 5 out of 10 young people said "*No, nothing*". Is this the average teenage response?

## Main lesson learnt

One particular theme *What Matters to You?* has emphatically highlighted is that young people want to take more control and more responsibility of their lives. On a small and large scale, young people identified how they would like more say and more influence over what happens to them. From experiences related by young people it would appear that it is often not their 'disability' that denies them this control but society and its attitude.

"When people speak to my Mum instead of me...when they ask my Mum how I am and not me."

Young woman aged 18

"The way that people accept me is not enough, they just accept my chair half the time and don't accept me as me."

Young woman aged 17

"I have no choice."  
(This response was given regarding respite and choosing who helped with personal care.)

Young man aged 12

"People doesn't really listen what you think."

Young woman aged 17

Therefore work on specific issues, discussed above, needs to be matched by work aimed at promoting this significant shift in attitude amongst society. ***Citizenship in Practice*** aims to increase and promote the participation of children and young people with disabilities in decision making. The project can do this by: identifying issues young people feel are important; supporting young people to inform and influence decision makers and relevant policy; and through this raise awareness in a more general way. It is hoped that work from *Citizenship in Practice* will form a small part of the much bigger challenge facing society:

**to change people's disabling attitude to disability.**

Children in Scotland wishes to thank all  
the young people who have taken part  
in **Citizenship in Practice** so far,  
and the staff at:

Corseford School - Capability Scotland

The Funky Blue Smurfs

Graysmill School

Royal Blind School

Stanmore House School - Capability  
Scotland

Westerlea School - Capability Scotland

The Yard  
(Scotland Yard Adventure Centre)

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