



Wrap Up

Leading the Agenda in May

Empowering Children

Children's participation is at the heart of our agenda. We commit to afford respect to children and young people and strive to give them a voice amongst competing priorities. Three questions were posed to the panel as follows:

1. Victoria is home to almost 1.3 million children under 18 years. This cohort represent 1 in five Victorians (21.8% of the population). Whilst children are not afforded voting rights, they hold the universal right to have a say on matters that affect them. This leads us to consider the first question.

Have we moved on from the view that children should be 'seen but not heard'?

Vivian

From a research perspective, yes, we have. There are a number of world breaking studies that involve cultivating an understanding of how children use the world. The question we need to answer now is how are we going to use the data?

Liana

Initial response is no. Children as beings with agency and rights is still not embedded in our psyche. From the CCYP viewpoint, looking at the reportable conduct scheme and how organisations respond and investigate accusations of abuse, in many of these cases children are still not part of the investigation. They are left out or their accounts may have less weight.

Through the enquiry into *Children in Out of Home Care*, the common theme coming from the children is that from the first point of contact with child protection, they all say that they have had virtually no voice in what is happening to them and what is happening into the future.

Sometimes we still don't even "see" children in family violence work. Even though they are recognised as the silent victims; they are often still not seen. We still have a long way to go.

Despite this, things are shifting, many local government areas are doing well, and the student voice movement within schools is also a step in the right direction, so yes there is a shift but there is still a long way to go.

Fatima

Initial response is also no. Even though the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* has been ratified, there is no accountability for keeping to this; there is no incentive to change laws or policies. Young people around Australia feel disempowered. They don't feel they have the space to have a say to engage in politics. We don't facilitate a political culture from a young age. We don't give them ways to have a say and give opinions. This is changing and should continue to change, but more needs to be done.

2. Children's participation occurs as a result of the deliberate actions of individuals, organisations and communities.

What factors support and encourage children's active participation?

Vivian

Children and young people are authentic stakeholders. We must look to how children and young people gather their thoughts and participate in the world. We need to find different ways for them to give voice, be creative, get their narrative in understanding, use technology, validate the thoughts of children, ask the right questions, empower them to visualise their thoughts, validate their thoughts, find out what they are really trying to tell us, ask "and what else?".

It's imperative to find a way to activate the voice and ideas of children – e.g. Berkley University Y PLAN – invite young people to come together and solve the problems within their own community, turning their voices into practical outcomes, embedding civic responsibility.

Fatima

Children and young people don't always know what they want, so we need to give them space to figure this out. If we ask the right questions, they are articulate and well-reasoned in what they say. We need to be specific and facilitate the growth of an idea for young people to become more passionate about it, and for action to happen.

Liana

The two [Child Safe Standards](#) that most organisations struggle with are Standards 1 and 7. The starting point is addressing the mindset of those involved, at every level of the organisation. We need to move beyond "it is just too hard; we don't have the resources or the time to do this". A culture of change is needed. The mindset required is as simple as *children matter*, along with an understanding the issues of children, what they want. Organisations need to be prepared to give time and resources to find out.

Children have a sense about whether they will be heard and taken seriously when they speak up about something. They need to feel empowered and safe; feeling safe is as important as being safe. Organisations need to have a child focused mindset in their publications, in the spaces they utilise and create: spaces where children feel safe and comfortable. It needs to be embedded into everything, not only in what you do, but how you show that to the children.

It is not enough just to think about how to access the "easy children" and capture their voice, but also have regard for giving "hard to access children" a space to voice their needs. The challenge is to find ways to include them, and thus find ways to seek out the voices of all children.

3. The Child Safe Standards and the local government community engagement requirements provide an authorising environment to ensure children have a voice. This should not be a tokenistic tick the box proposition.

What can adults do to be the champions of change for children and ensure their voices are not only heard but that they have influence?

Vivian

We are not the champions of children; the children and young people are the champions. We need a new paradigm. We need to change the mindset about how we see children: children are active agents in their own right. They are not a problem to solve. We need to find opportunities to give them a voice that is meaningful and authentic not just tokenistic.

Fatima

Organisations need funding. There are great organisations out there that have this as their primary business, and they need funding. Adults can contribute to this.

Have a youth or children's summit in every council, inviting young people who may not normally put their hand up for this sort of thing. Have people around young people who believe in them and push them to take opportunities. You need to make sure that the recommendations from the youth summit are acted on and foster a culture of engagement from a young age. This needs to be done at the local level, not from higher levels of governments or it won't work – engage with schools, engage with the different clubs in the schools, find things that they are passionate about and give them space to create change.

Young people find community when they gather with others who have the same passions. It doesn't have to be a club about change; it can be anything, the discussion will change to community and political things.

Think about the media consumption of our children, the influence this has on children's thoughts. Create spaces that invite children to have a say on something, safe spaces where they can chat about issues and their thoughts, safe social media spaces – with dedicated moderators.

Liana

Be prepared to be the provocateur – ask the question about children and young people, how are we going to make sure that they are involved, how do we make sure we hear what they say. This can mean you get cast as the annoying person, but it is a necessary space to be in to create change and better recognise children as active agents. You can't claim that resources and time are barriers for not including children's voice. It is your job to include children.

Open question time

Observation – Something happens to us as we move into adulthood, we lose something, the way we see things is different, so we often don't see what children are actually saying. We put an adult spin on it or say, isn't that cute? We need to be careful that we don't miss the point of what children are saying.

Question – Looking around there is a lack of men in this room. What do we need to get more men involved in the conversation? We need more men in this space.

Fatima

Children lose hope. It is often beaten out of them as they grow up. I think we need to be more childish in our decision making.

Liana

We lose our inner child. We dismiss what children say. There is still a lot of challenge to this and we need to ensure we truly listen to children.

How do we get men more involved? We can't do it without tackling gender stereotyping. Things to do with children – caring for, supporting them – are still primarily seen as women's work. This is shifting but still needs to shift further.

The Children's Commissioners around the country and NZ are probably 50/50 women and men. The idea that children are active beings with rights and a voice is seen as work for both men and women at this level. We need to come at it more from this angle to change the thinking.

Question – There is a lack of political platform of children's rights within all levels of government. What is the advocacy role of the Commission in this space? What are your hopes for this space?

Liana

Many of our politicians don't see children as important or as agents with rights. This occurs from the local to the Federal level. This mindset needs to change.

On a state level we are taking steps in the rights direction. Victoria is the only state to introduce a reportable conduct scheme and the Child Safe Standards as legislation, even though this what the Royal Commission suggested should happen across the nation.

My job as Commissioner is to call out and ensure that children are seen, to highlight this and become the annoying person.

There are two elements to political positions – leadership and responsiveness – the second element is where we can make change and get a different view across. Be the provocateur with political leaders at all levels.

Question – There is a lack of young people in our local governments, and when young people do take a stand they are dismissed or told they should be at school instead of protesting. We often tell young people they should be involved, but only in the boxes we allow. How do we get young people to take a meaningful stand when people in positions power talk down to them and tell them they shouldn't do it?

Fatima

We need to embed with children that they have a voice and a right and the ability to be involved. We need to facilitate for children to be active and involved, create opportunities for this to happen, foster a culture of being involved. Creating change from a young age empowers them to continue, so create space for them to make small changes within their local community.

Give them small wins – provide space for children to make small changes.

You need to get buy-in from your own organisational staff before you can get buy-in from others.

Question – Empowerment starts at home. There is often pushback from families when their children are taught about their rights. How do we work with families to share the role of empowering children?

Create awareness. It is important for parents to become role models.

Have a conversation introducing the idea that children do have rights, but they are not absolute. Chat to parents about how to have the conversation with children introducing knowledge about rights as one of the concepts of parenting.

Question – How can we engage children on issues that are challenging without destroying their hope, but rather empower them to do something?

Ensure there is adequate mental health care, especially in schools, if facilitating a session that may bring up stuff for children and young people. Ensure you have specific people there during the session to help children and young people; employ people specifically for that role.

Put things into a story – water down the message, e.g. BTN or ABC kid's news app – give children an opportunity to do something about it no matter how small it may seem.

Anxiety about talking to children without harming them is given so much weight in our thinking that it often prevents us from talking to children at all. Look at what we can talk about, make it age appropriate. What supports can you put around it to help them? Sometimes we are protecting ourselves, not the children.

Young people will find a way to add their voice, so help them to do that in a safe space. We can be creative; e.g. emotional literacy through art project.

Question – Can you give us an example of right questions?

Fatima

Give young people the permission to criticise the status quo.

Vivian

Take on a child's mind frame and ask yourself the '3 whys' questions like children do.

Liana

It is about facilitating them to think about the links to other things. Facilitate the discussion so they can make this leap themselves, then ask them to continue in their thoughts.

CCYP have produced a video on how to interview children and a package of information on how to interview using trauma-informed practices.

[Video link](#)