

Hart's Ladder of Participation Activity

Do you engage children and youth in planning and decision-making in your program?

Let's use Hart's Ladder of Participation to find out!

Dr. Roger Hart (co-director of the Children's Environments Research Group) created a "ladder" of participation to help us think about where we really are and where we'd like to be in terms of children's participation in our programs. This ladder was not created to suggest that we have to be "at the top" rung, but rather, that we ought to be aiming to get out of the lower rungs of non-participation, and think of ways to genuinely engage children and youth.

Activity:

1. Read and reflect upon the 8 rungs of the ladder.
2. Which rung does your garden project fit into?
3. What steps can you take to reach a higher rung?

Below are the main points to consider from the ladder:

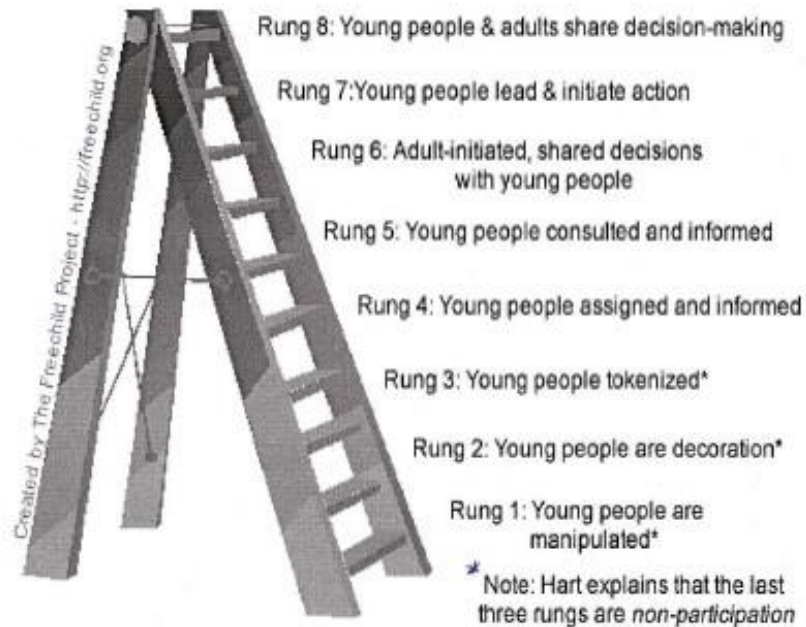
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Roger Hart's Ladder of Young People's Participation



Adapted from Hart, R. (1992). *Children's Participation from Tokenism to Citizenship*. Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre.

Degree of Participation

4. Child-initiated, shared decisions with adults:

- a. Young people feel competent and confident enough in their role as community members to understand the need for collaboration and that in asking adults for their input, the project may be strengthened.
- b. There is abundant trust.
- c. Adults serve as listeners, observers and sounding boards (i.e. they don't jump in with their own designs on the project, or to organize the project).
 - o For example, young people may determine that they want to clean up a wooded area in their community to create a nature trail. They learn about all aspects of creating such a trail, hold meetings to plan it, but check in with a friend's parent in local government, several parents, and a teacher with an interest in ecology, for their diverse ways of thinking about certain aspects the project.
- d. The goal isn't about "kids' power."

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5. Child-initiated and directed projects:

- Adults notice a youth-led project emerging and allow it to occur in a youth-directed fashion.
- Hart places this second on the ladder because occasionally young people don't trust adults enough to seek their input. The caution with this rung is in children carrying out their projects in secret because of fear of adults, or being intimidated by them. An example is a literal secret garden that adults are not aware of.

6. Adult-initiated, shared decisions with children:

- Children are involved to some degree on every part of the process of garden planning, design, and implementation.
- Adults make no assumptions about what children want in the landscape.
- Children understand issues such as fundraising, garden design, organization and management
- Children understand how and why compromises are made, if they are necessary. They may also begin to cultivate a "language" of talking about this with others.

7. Children are consulted and informed about project:

- Project designed and run by adults, but the children's views and opinions are taken seriously. A good example is with a survey designed to gather young people's input into a school garden: children are informed of the purpose, they may be asked to volunteer, and afterward, they are fully informed of the results.

8. Assigned but informed:

- Children are assigned to a project and may not initiate the project themselves, but they are fully informed about it (i.e. a school garden project).
- Children may still have a sense of real ownership of the project.
- A key aspect of this rung is the degree to which children are engaged in critical reflection. For example, are children just viewed as a free source of help for the garden project, or do they have a chance to reflect on it, consider it, and learn from it?

9. Tokenism:

- The most challenging and most common among very well-meaning adults. Adults are genuinely concerned about giving children a voice, but haven't really begun to think carefully about the best approach for this.
- The appearance of children's involvement is there, but in fact, they have had little choice about

planning the garden project, communication around it, and no time in which to critically reflect and form their own opinions.

- o An example is that adults select charming, articulate youth to talk about the garden in a public venue, but those youth haven't had ample opportunity to critically reflect or consult with their peers. The key here is symbolic versus actual engagement and involvement.

10. Decoration:

- Involves, quite literally, decorating children. For example, they may sport garden T-shirts with no involvement in organizing or understanding the program.
- Adults use children to bolster the program as if the children are understanding participants. For example, adults make children sing garden songs at a harvest festival, and it may even appear that they wrote the song, or that they were involved in organizing the garden or the festival, when in fact they were not.

11. Manipulation or Deception:

- Adults consciously use children's voices to carry their own message about the gardening project. For example, they produce a garden poster, advertisement, or publication with drawings by children, when children aren't involved in the program planning.
- Adults may deny their own detailed involvement in meetings, planning, shaping the project because they think it diminishes the effectiveness or impact of the project – they may say that children are genuinely engaged, when engagement constitutes weeding or planting.
- Adults may design a garden, have kids do a simple planting, then tell the local newspaper that kids designed and built the garden.

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