

# ***Participation for Protection***

New perspectives on  
valuing young people's  
involvement in research  
addressing sexual  
violence

## ***Introducing ourselves***

Hello! Our names are Camille, CJ, Elsie, Evie, Hannah, Keeley, Kirsche, Louise, Megan and Rachel,

- We are a mix of young and older people who work in different roles in research on sexual violence. We came together to write an article because we have all been part of a group called YRAP (Young Researchers Advisory Panel).
- We design, plan, support and do research together to learn more about how we can better support children and young people impacted by sexual violence.
- We believe it is vital that children and young people with experience of these issues - including young victims and survivors of sexual violence- have a chance to inform and influence research.
- Here are our reflections and learning about
  - **What this process has been like, and**
  - **Why it's important**



## ***When it comes to research on sexual violence we think children and young survivors still get left out...***

We know children and young people's active involvement in research has grown over the last 20 years. However we notice that in research on sexual violence there is reluctance and caution about involving children and young people.

Evidence shows this is linked to adult worries about children and young people being distressed or even harmed by taking part in research on topics that are seen as sensitive – like sexual violence.

This is partly why YRAP was set up. We know being careful is important and we take it seriously. However we also think that it is important children and young people are involved in research about their lives and the lives of their peers.

**“I do think it's important to challenge the idea that participation is always risky...It may not be constructive for them to participate but from my personal experience it is the opposite. ” (YRAP member)**

# ***Keeping our work safe - trauma informed and flexible***

Working collaboratively on a subject like sexual violence does have risks. Within our group there have been times when we've felt angry, upset or triggered because of the work.

To reduce or respond to these risks we try to work together in ways we call trauma informed.

This means

- planning carefully to make people feel safe and comfortable,
- ensuring everyone feels like they have choices and are in control,
- responding quickly and sensitively when difficulties arise,
- safety planning WITH children and young people

**Group contracts**

**Information**

**Debriefs**

**1:1 catch ups**

**Support**

**Fun and grounding activities**

However, group work and participation work is also unpredictable. Unpredictability can be good - it is part of allowing children and young people a chance to change and influence plans and to be flexible and responsive to their needs. But unpredictability can also feel scary. **This means our work is always balance carefully preparation but leaving some space to keep things 'loose' and open to change.** This means when we agree to take part in YRAP we all have to agree to engage with a level of uncertainty about what will emerge and how this may make us feel - while also knowing support is there.

**“Recognise that every young person is different, experiences things differently. There is not one solution for all. You have to work with the young person and connect with them to be able to help them. Give them time and freedom.” (YRAP member)**

## ***Relationships, resources and reflection***

Other elements of our work that we think are essential are to keep our work safe are:

**Relationships:** As a YRAP team we recognise a direct link between building relationships and the holding and management of risk.

**Resources:** Money and staff time to support this work is vital. We see that too often children and young people's participatory work is built on, young people and adults time, passion and efforts that aren't properly supported or acknowledged. We want to challenge that.

**Reflection:** YRAP is a space in which it is okay to make mistakes. We have been able to say 'this is the first time we're doing this. We're figuring it out' and that we commit to learn as we go.



**“One thing that really stood out for me when I joined was that it didn't have to be perfect. We learned as we went ..... and I think that's really important .. because I think if you know that maybe that reduces the fear” (YRAP member)**

## Challenge and shortcomings

Despite careful planning and approaches outlined above we still face challenges and get things wrong. Below we summarise **five key challenges** :

- 1 Working within a ‘big institution’** - University systems aren’t always designed to support engagement of collaborators like children; disabled individuals; or people claiming benefits. If we want our research to be collaborative and inclusive we need to address these issues.
- 2 Short-term funding** - We’ve learnt that it takes time to engage young people, develop their trust and skills and build community. Funding cycles can disrupt and challenge this and we want Universities to invest in children and young people’s participation as core business.
- 3 Group work at a distance** - Building trust and familiarity when working remotely (online) can be tricky. We’ve had to learn new ways to manage different needs and conflict from a distance.
- 4 Issues of representation** - Our group is small and will never represent all children and young people affected by sexual violence. We also need to ensure that a focus on sexual violence isn’t the only thing that defines our group - which is made up of multiple identities and talents.
- 5 Balancing reactive and proactive work** - Sometimes responding to requests for YRAP to help other researchers and policy makers leaves little time to think about and do the work that YRAP want to do. We need to hold space for this work which is YRAP’s most fulfilling, meaningful influential work.

## Why this matters: Participation for protection

Having talked about **how** we work we now need to think about **why**. Above we outlined some big challenges, resources needs and thought required to do this work. This means that when we encourage others to involve children and young people in research, policy or practice addressing sexual violence they need to be really committed. As one YRAP member explained: **‘we want people to value this work better’**.

To help people to value this work and explain why it matters we’ve worked together to create a picture (‘infographic’) called **‘Participation for Protection’**. You can see it on the final page of this summary.

**“YRAP isn't therapy, but it is therapeutic in that it has a much more of a rippled impact on a sense of worth... And although that's not the aim of YRAP, it is a by-product of it. And I think that's really important ”**

Our infographic explains the relationship between children and young people’s participation and building safety and protection - individually and in communities.

The infographic tries to change how we think about risk (the main barrier to children’s involvement) and highlight the risk of children and young people NOT being involved in influencing decision making and change - particularly in the field of sexual violence.

**As long as resistance to child and youth participation in contexts of trauma continues, we will continue to share our learning and advocate for such approaches in research and practice.**





