

# Consumer Participation for

This quote expresses the sense of isolation and powerlessness experienced by many young people in care (and afterwards), and would be recognised by many workers within the care system as being fairly typical. While much emphasis is placed on treating the symptoms of such feelings and resulting behaviours, identification and treatment of the *causes* is usually dependent on the skills of particular individuals in particular services rather than on a systemic approach that actively encourages 'consumer participation'.

Consumer participation is a practice designed to increase the accountability of service providers to their consumers. In essence, consumers should be involved in everything from individual case management decisions all the way through to helping formulate government policies which affect them.

In this paper, consumer participation is defined as the meaningful involvement in decision-making processes of children and young people in care.

The following discussion is based on the experiences of the Australian Association of Young People In Care (AAYPIC) as to how this process may be undertaken.

Over the past decade or so consumer participation has been actively sought and encouraged, not only in the retail and business sectors, but also in areas such as mental health, corrective services and disability services. Consumer participation has now been recognised in the child welfare sector, with a number of service providers making changes to the way services

*'I was a ward for ten years – from when I was eight until I was eighteen. In that time I had 63 placements. No one ever really asked me where I wanted to go and if it was okay. They [workers from the New South Wales Department of Community Services and non-government service providers] made the decisions and I was told where to go. Heaps of times I ran away from my foster placement because I didn't want to be in a family no more. If only they asked me maybe things wouldn't have been so bad.'* (Girl, aged 19)

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have been provided in the past.

The New South Wales document *Standards for Substitute Care Services* (1996) supported the need for services to ensure consumer participation. The standards will result in increased professional recognition of the need for consumer participation and should result in a better care system for children and young people. The role of consumer networks (such as AAYPIC) is to assist service providers and government to fully implement these standards for consumer participation.

### Potential problems

The process of achieving full consumer participation has been a challenging one, partly because of the general perceptions about the place of children and young people in our society, exemplified by the old saying 'children should be seen but not heard'.

At the crux of the matter are issues of power, control, involvement and choice for all parties involved in the care system. Raychaba (1993) comments that, historically, service provision for children and young people in care has been paternalistic, controlling and disempowering. This trend has been noted by observers of child welfare systems in

other developed nations (Mayer and Peterson 1975; Rooke and Schnell 1983; Mac Neil 1984; Stein and Carey 1986; Aldgate et al. 1989; Sullivan 1992; Brendtro and Brokenleg 1993).

Service provision to date has been largely based on the perception of children and young people as 'victims' in need of care and protection. Upon entering the care system this 'victim mentality' is often reinforced, and may subsequently impinge upon the normal cognitive and psychosocial development of a child or young person. A child or young person is a victim only while being subjected to abuse or neglect, and should cease to be a victim when removed from abusive or neglectful situations within their family.

As was made clear in the report *Systems Abuse: Problems and Solutions* (NSW Child Protection Council 1994), some children and young people suffer abuse after they are removed from their family and placed into care. This 'systems abuse' may result, in part, from a lack of responsiveness to consumer needs and consumer involvement in decision-making processes.

The Task Force on the Child as Citizen (1978:81) puts this another way: 'While we have



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developed theories of child development about which there is some agreement, we still embrace these theories from a viewpoint of *children being essentially passive and dependent*. Their role is to cooperate, obey . . . This attitude sees children, however affectionately, as having *no role to play in adult decision-making about them*. Perhaps innocently, but nonetheless effectively, this perception *renders the child invisible*.' (italics added)

Thus there have been few attempts to allow children and young people equal participation in the care system to their fullest capacity. Other attempts have been to give children and young people a voice and to encourage them to fit into well established, often hierarchical, adult dominated systems. These systems focus on individual children and young people being involved in adult

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processes where there is an expectation that, once given the opportunity to have a voice, they do so in front of a number of adults. This is often a daunting and confrontational process, if measures have not been put in place to allow children and young people to participate to their fullest capacity, including access to and support from their peers.

## Having a voice versus participation

There is a difference between having a voice and being able to participate. Having a voice is mostly a one-way process where children and young people express their views and wishes only. Participation is a two-way process where all parties express their views with decisions being made jointly. In allowing children and young people to participate to their fullest capacity, changes to service provision structures have to be made. These changes need to be undertaken in partnership, with consumers as key stakeholders. Changes that are merely imposed rather than negotiated are less likely to have long-term benefits for all parties, especially consumers.

In other so-called 'victim' areas, such as disability services, there is widespread acceptance of consumer participation, and systemic processes have been established to facilitate this. But for children and young people in care, this has yet to happen on a systematic basis. That there is a need for systemic structures is reinforced by the report, *Systems Abuse: Problems and Solutions* (NSW Child Protection Council 1994:143), which states that: 'There is need for regular opportunities for children and

their advocates to be heard on matters that concern them and to be involved in review and monitoring processes. This will require appropriate structures within *all organisations and systems that deal with children.*' (italics added)

As Campbell (1989:67) notes, when consumer participation occurs and participants are given the appropriate support and encouragement, 'people can move away from being the victims of circumstances to being those who take control of circumstances, seek to alter them and, by their experience, learn to help other "victims"'.

If children and young people in care are not given (more) control over their lives then they may come to view themselves as having problems only professionals can cure. Young people contacted by AAYPIC confirm this, saying that if they had been able to participate in decision-making processes while they were in care, they would have been able to make more informed decisions

once they had left care rather than continually fall back on the welfare system for support.

## Implementing consumer participation

Consumer participation is not intended to be confrontational or to override the role that workers and carers have in caring for children and young people. Rather, it aims to create a more open environment where views and concerns of consumers, workers, carers and service providers can be exchanged so that changes reflecting input from all parties can be made.

AAYPIC is working with a number of service providers to develop different models to allow as much participation by consumers as possible – from individuals to groups. These models take into consideration service provider structures as well as the structure of the Department of Community Services, and have been adapted to allow consumers to participate more fully within services.

Three useful steps have been identified by AAYPIC through its work over the past three years.

- *The creation of regular opportunities for children and young people to come together to identify, discuss and resolve issues of concern to them and the service provider.*

Many services are already involving consumers in making decisions which directly affect them – for example, those who are in residential care or refuges have weekly house meetings to discuss current issues for living together (for example, chores and shopping). There is now the further need to involve consumers in other decision-making processes, such as the development of, or changes to, a service's policies and procedures.

Consumer groups should be formed in different ways to suit different types of services. Services providing short-term care could have an open forum each time new children and young people enter. The participation of consumers in sharing their experiences of the service with their peers is extremely useful as part of this process. At such a forum the person in charge of the service should convey the importance of full consumer input into the processes of decision-making and change. Any changes that the service may or may not make, as well as the reasons for the decisions, should be conveyed to consumers as quickly as possible, rather than just having them take place. Genuine commitment is important, because many young people would say that they had been asked on other occasions to be involved but had seen no results. ➤

## AUSTRALIAN ASSOCIATION OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN CARE

The Australian Association of Young People In Care (AAYPIC) is the consumer organisation for children and young people who cannot live with their families. Its mission is to ensure that all children who are or have been in care are afforded the same life opportunities as all young Australians. This is done by allowing those who are or have been in care to support each other as well as working with service providers and governments to improve systems to enable services to meet more effectively the needs of children and young people in care.

In 1996 AAYPIC published the book *Every Childhood Lasts a Lifetime*, by Jan Owen, in which a number of people who have been in care are given the opportunity to tell their story in their own words.

Services offering a number of different programs and/or providing long-term care could hold regular open forums (for example, every three to six months) to provide an update for every child and young person on changes that had occurred and to determine if there were any new issues of concern. In between these forums those young people who wanted to work on issues could meet regularly (for example, monthly) to continue to work with management. It must be emphasised that for consumer participation to work effectively the process must be driven by consumers and not by the service.

Enabling children and young people from different services in a geographically defined area (such as a Department of Community Services area) to come together creates an opportunity for consumer monitoring of the care system. When this happens the gathering needs to be open to all consumers and not just a few representatives from individual services.

Ex-consumers should also participate to ensure a more open, participatory process, where children and young people exchange their experiences and learn to support each other.

Having an area-based group would also broaden the consultation base for consumer input, with representatives being involved in planning process for the area and providing input on a wide range of policy issues. This would also prevent the inadvertent tokenism that can occur when a young person is asked to be a part of broader policy formulation.

There is also a need for ongoing consumer participation in the monitoring, evaluation and review of service provision.

- *Providing young people with the skills and facilities needed to support their actions.*

The formation of consumer groups does not mean that there would be no role for workers. On the contrary, having workers and/or adult supporters involved in the groups as a source of information and support is vital to the success of a group and meaningful consumer participation.

Services can also provide low cost support, such as transport to and from meetings, photocopying and access to meeting places and phones. Large costs can be met by involving the group in fund raising activities.

AAYPIC provides training for young people in such areas as working with their peers, effective communication, organising and conducting meetings, and using the media. Providing young people with skills and facilities enables more equal participation.

- *Creating a structure by which children and young people in care can participate in an ongoing capacity.*

The experience of AAYPIC to date has been that there will always be a number of young people wanting to make changes and who wish to be actively involved in the consultation process on a continuing basis. Other young people will choose not to be involved regularly, but opportunities need to be created for them as well. Having an accessible and non-hierarchical structure will create an environment for consumer participation. Throughout the process, young people will self-select the extent to which they become involved. In short, there is no right or wrong way to involve consumers, as long as the process is driven by them with support by workers. Children and young people will make mistakes (as do adults) but, as long as they are supported, they will

become more responsible in being able to participate.

### Summary

Consumer participation offers young people a chance for experiential learning and personal development, and also brings benefits to others, including service providers. As stated in the Youth and the Law Project (1992:11): 'The community [including service providers] and young people in particular benefit directly from the projects . . . The involvement of young people in . . . development and implementation will ensure that other young people will support the initiative of their peers. Individual young people acquire personal skills and self-confidence through their experiences . . . which open up further opportunities in all spheres of life – increasing their skills and equipping them to make positive contributions in whatever communities they belong.'

Since the establishment of AAYPIC, the service providers who have worked with consumer groups have benefited, and levels of disruptive behaviours, conflict and communication problems have decreased as the services have become more responsive to consumer needs.

It is important to recognise the changes that have occurred in the care system. Services are becoming more open, responsive and accountable, not only to consumers, but also to funding bodies and the wider community. However, many changes still need to be made in individual services and to the system as a whole. As these changes occur, all workers and service providers need actively to put in place mechanisms to engage consumers in order to directly benefit the children and young people in their care.

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