



Intergenerational DIALOGUE

on **Child Sexual Exploitation
and Abuse and related harms**

The role of preparatory work

Acknowledgements

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INTERGENERATIONAL DIALOGUE ON CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE AND RELATED HARMS - the role of preparatory work

Purpose

This learning brief explores how to prepare adults for meaningful intergenerational dialogue with children on child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA) and related harms. Evidence from recent participatory projects shows that effective dialogue does not happen spontaneously - it requires deliberate preparation of adults, sustained community engagement, and structured support for children. Drawing on evaluation findings and practitioner reflections, this brief identifies practical considerations and approaches that strengthen intergenerational dialogue.

Background

The term 'adult decision-makers' refers to different groups of adults who hold various levels of power to influence decisions that impact on children. These adults have different relationships with, and responsibilities towards, children.

For the purposes of this learning brief, adult decision-makers are divided into two groups:

- **Parents, carers and community members:** adults in a child's family including parents, carers (and extended family members) and adults within the wider community who may interact with children regularly such as teachers.
- **Other decision-makers including 'advocacy targets':** adults who have a platform and power to influence society's attitudes and behaviours such as religious leaders and the media; other adults including civil and public servants (such as health workers and police officers), business owners and employers and; adults who have been elected into positions locally (local council members, mayors, child protection committee members) and nationally (ministers and members of parliament) who have responsibilities to prevent CSEA, protect children and provide necessary provisions to support them.

The brief draws primarily on reflections and evaluation data from ECPAT International's *Children Know Better* project, implemented in Bangladesh and Nepal. From February 2024 to December 2025, the project worked with 46 child leaders aged 12-16, supported by 20 youth facilitators aged 20-25, to conduct peer research with 342 children and 51 adult decision-makers on CSEA and related harms. Child leaders were also involved in participatory analysis, report writing, awareness-raising and advocacy activities aimed at influencing local and national stakeholders. An external evaluation of *Children Know Better* was undertaken in 2026 using outcome harvesting to assess the outcomes, systems-level influence, and ethical quality of the project's participatory approaches.

This learning brief incorporates learning from several other projects implemented by ECPAT International and their partners that included elements of intergenerational dialogue. This includes the *'Building sustainable tourism destinations that protect children from sexual exploitation'* project in Costa Rica and Ecuador and; *'She Leads'*, a joint programme of work aiming to increase influence of girls and young women on decision-making and the transformation of gender norms across Africa and the Middle East. All quotes in this learning brief are from participants involved in evaluation or learning activities from the *Children Know Better* project. The brief also draws from two global learning discussions held in January and February 2026 with practitioners and academics who have significant experience of participatory approaches to research and advocacy in a wide range of country contexts.

AT-A-GLANCE LEARNING SUMMARY

1

Preparing Adults: Adults require intentional preparation to engage constructively with children, particularly on sensitive topics such as CSEA. Addressing adult bias, clarifying expectations, tailoring approaches to different decision-maker groups and making context-sensitive decisions about children's involvement in adult preparation all help adults become receptive and respectful audiences.

2

Community and Stakeholder Engagement: Safe and legitimate intergenerational dialogue is built over time through early buy-in, continuous communication and proactive reassurance. Engaging parents, carers, community members and other stakeholders - and normalising discussion of sensitive issues - reduces stigma, resistance and backlash while strengthening long-term support.

3

Preparing Children: Children's readiness depends on emotional safety, practical understanding and meaningful involvement in shaping how dialogue takes place. Providing advance information, exploring fears and risks, practising advocacy skills, offering post-dialogue debriefing, and inviting children to influence format, setting and communication approaches strengthens their confidence, safety and ability to engage as active participants rather than passive attendees.



WHY PREPARATION MATTERS: Power, Stigma and Audience

Although the language of ‘intergenerational dialogue’ is used frequently in the child participation space, less attention has been paid to how adult decision makers can be supported and ‘prepared’ to work with children so they can respectfully receive, and act on, children’s views, ideas and advocacy messages. Three key issues affect the preparation of adults for intergenerational dialogue:

Adultism is the system, and accompanying structures, that prioritise adults (and their views and ideas) over children and youth (and their own priorities and perspectives). ‘Adultism’ is acknowledged as a barrier to realising the rights of children and youth.¹

In thinking about the participation rights of children, adultism can occur when children’s abilities and capacities to inform and influence decisions are questioned or overlooked. Yet, to influence change, children need adults to listen to them and take their views seriously.

Audience: Lundy’s model of child participation² identifies four elements to participatory work with children and is increasingly being used to evaluate participatory approaches:

- **space:** provide a safe and inclusive space for children to express their views
- **voice:** provide appropriate information and facilitate the expression of children’s views
- **audience:** ensure children’s views are communicated to someone with the responsibility to listen
- **influence:** ensure that children’s views are taken seriously and acted upon where appropriate.

There are significant gaps in learning and evaluation regarding 'audience' and 'influence' and, in particular, the impact of children's engagement with decision-makers themselves - what needs to be done to ensure children's views are taken seriously by decision-makers.

Stigma dominates work on CSEA and victim-blaming occurs across all geographies.³ This stigma also hinders discussion and debate by adult decision-makers. Addressing CSEA requires us to explore taboo subjects of children, power and sex, areas that are usually considered too sensitive, personal and challenging to engage with. It requires the exploration of an extremely uncomfortable issue for many adults, that of children's sexuality. Preventing and responding to CSEA requires a nuanced examination of a complex situation - children's agency and constrained choices within their experience of sexual violence.⁴ Intergenerational dialogue on CSEA therefore presents additional complexities.

The following learning points incorporate these key issues into preparatory activities for three groups of stakeholders involved in intergenerational dialogue - adult decision makers, parents/carers and community stakeholders, and the children themselves.

Learning Point 1: Preparing Adults

Adults require intentional preparation to participate constructively in dialogue with children, particularly on sensitive issues such as CSEA. Without this groundwork, power imbalances, stigma and unconscious bias can undermine children's participation.

1.1 Challenging adult bias and building readiness to listen

It can be challenging for adults to recognise children's rights to express their views or contribute to and lead decision-making. It can feel confronting for adults in power, who are used to making unilateral decisions about children, to change how they work. When the dimension of CSEA is added - it can compound the challenges.

A key obstacle for children is the openness of adults to take their findings and the evidence they have produced seriously. Consequently, informing adult decision-makers about the rights of children to participate and the value that children's engagement can bring enables them to champion children's participation.⁵ To demonstrate children's capacities and expertise, it's vital to create opportunities for children to illustrate that they can effectively inform, influence or lead decision-making processes.

In responding to this recognised obstacle, ECPAT International developed the '[GREATER Adult Support for Child Participation](#)' manual.⁶ This resource aims to directly address issues of 'audience' and 'influence' from the Lundy model. It works from the position that adults (decision-makers) will only become 'adequate audiences' and be prepared to be influenced by children if they are able to overcome their own un/conscious biases about children and challenge social perceptions and norms about children and their abilities.

In the GREATER manual, through a series of suggested activities, adults are supported to explore and challenge their views on interrelated topics including children's rights, agency, and capacities. This manual was piloted in Bangladesh and Nepal as part of the *Children Know Better* project. Fifty-one decision makers in each country were involved in activities using the GREATER manual to prepare for a series of community dialogues where child leaders presented findings from the research and discussed subsequent calls to action (advocacy messages) with decision makers. In the project evaluation it was clear from decision makers who participated in community dialogue workshops that they were taking children's views seriously:

After coming out of one Focus Group Discussion [organised by children] itself, I had realised - the Ward [local government] should have done this thing too... we also lagged behind in this [action being called for by children]."

Decision Maker, Nepal

1.2 Segmenting adult groups to improve engagement and practicality

Facilitating preparatory activities with large and diverse groups of adult decision-makers can be problematic. In the *Children Know Better* project, although a diverse group of 51 decision-makers were identified in each country, it was challenging to bring them all together in one platform as a collective. This was partly due to decision-makers having different windows of availability and schedules. For example, it was challenging to engage government officials in Bangladesh in a full day of training (on the GREATER programme). It was also due to the reluctance of some groups, such as religious leaders and political leaders to collaborate - especially on the topic of CSEA.

Dividing decision-makers into sub-groups (based on common denominators - such as their location or their influence/decision-making power) may therefore minimise logistical and cultural challenges in bringing groups together.

1.3 Preparing adults for constructive and non-judgemental dialogue

In preparing decision-makers to participate in dialogue with children it is helpful if expectations are managed and boundaries clarified. Individuals should be reminded that their responses matter, this includes being mindful of body language and facial expressions or knowing whether it is appropriate or acceptable to interrupt children when they are speaking.⁷ These things matter to children and youth, for example in the *She Leads* programme, girls and young women shared how having an 'engaged'



audience mattered to them and they felt valued when they could see certain decision-makers taking notes and observing how they responded to their messages positively during intergenerational dialogue.

The issue of victim-blaming and stigmatisation of child advocates by others is particularly pertinent when they are advocating for change on the topic of CSEA. Explaining boundaries or 'ground rules' for dialogue between adults and children helps create a non-judgemental space for meaningful and respectful discussion - this is particularly important if those with lived experience of CSEA are participating. ECPAT has developed guidelines for preventing victim-blaming language, communication and behaviour⁸ which can be used with adult decision makers and children to help set boundaries around acceptable language, communication and behaviour for intergenerational dialogue.

1.4 Making context-sensitive decisions about children's involvement

Training and capacity building activities for adult decision-makers that prepares them for intergenerational dialogue may be led by adults, children and youth or a combination. In the *Children Known Better* project, child leaders were involved in the delivery of the training for decision makers in Bangladesh, but they were not present in training sessions for decision makers in Nepal. There are pros and cons to both scenarios. If children are not present during training sessions, adults may feel more comfortable expressing their true feelings, concerns and questions (which the GREATER workshops aim to explore - biases of adults towards children) which may allow for greater internal exploration of biases. Yet, if children are present, this may illustrate children's abilities and knowledge, which may in turn have a greater impact on adults' perceptions of children.

It is therefore important to assess whether or when to involve children in the delivery of preparatory activities for adults - this decision can be made in consultation with children and should involve looking at the 'cons' or risks and the 'pros' or benefits for the specific content being covered.

Prepared adults are more likely to listen seriously and respond constructively rather than defensively.



Learning Point 2:

Parent and Community Engagement

Intergenerational dialogue is safer and more effective when parents or carers and community stakeholders are engaged early and consistently. Trust and legitimacy are built over time rather than at the moment of dialogue.

2.1 Securing initial buy-in from key adult stakeholders

Children's participation on the topic of CSEA is sensitive. It is important to lay the groundwork and consider how parents, carers, community members and other adults who may be allies or adversaries for children can be involved from the start.

Different approaches can be taken to laying this groundwork such as sharing initial information or holding open meetings to explain project aims and the role of children in project activities with parents, carers and key stakeholders in the project such as community members, educators, child protection committees, local leaders or local government staff.

In the *Children Know Better* project, during the setup phase, project staff held initial conversations with a broad group of stakeholders (from parents to local government officials) to explain the project and seek their support and approval. This was identified as a helpful step in laying the foundation for continued work.

2.2 Normalising conversations about CSEA within communities

Before expecting children to engage in dialogue on CSEA and related harm, it is important to create 'safe' spaces (i.e. non-judgemental environments) for conversations on this topic with parents, carers and community members to raise awareness and increase understanding of children's rights and key elements of CSEA that the project is focusing on. Projects that focus on CSEA are more likely to lead to resistance and backlash from adults, particularly in conservative communities. Therefore, it is essential that work is done within communities prior to children engaging in research or advocacy activities. Activities that directly engage community members on the topic of CSEA and related harm therefore should be built in prior to children joining a project.

In the *Children Know Better* project, child leaders reported initial backlash from peers, relatives, community members and teachers for taking part in a project focussing on CSEA. However, over time these same individuals started to see the value of the project and observed benefits for the individual children taking part and their negative attitudes towards children dissipated. In addition, the evaluation found that with increased exposure to the topic of CSEA parents and carers started to approach decision makers to discuss their concerns:

So, before people, they don't like to speak about this matter because they feel shy. If their children get harassed by this problem, they don't like to share with others because they think if I share about this matter with others, it will be harmful for my children. But now, after this program, they like to share, especially some mothers, they like to share with me. Now, mothers like to share about this matter with teachers.

School decision maker, Male, Bangladesh

2.3 Moving beyond one-off consent to continuous dialogue

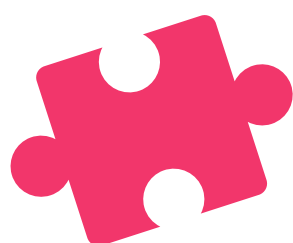
Parents and carers are key decision-makers in children's lives and their engagement in intergenerational projects should not be overlooked. In participatory projects, there are often a lot of 'unknowns' about project activities and timescales because these decisions will be made by children once the project is being implemented. For projects that span over several years, it is important to think about how parents and carers of children who are taking on significant roles within the project can be engaged in discussion and dialogue with their children about their child's role and activities in the project.

Typically, parents and carers engage in discussion with project staff at the start of the project to gain their consent for their child to take part. However, as participatory projects evolve, children's roles, responsibilities and the risks they face may change. Parents and carers will therefore need to be involved in ongoing conversations regarding their consent - these can be used to encourage parents and carers to discuss their child's involvement or learning from the project.

In the *Children Know Better* project, parents and carers were involved in initial consent conversations yet as child leaders developed understanding of, and confidence in discussing issues around CSEA, in some cases this led to tensions in the household:

Earlier, relatives used to make harsh comments but now they encourage me after seeing my changes.

Child Leader, Female, Bangladesh



Intentionally and regularly engaging parents and carers during the course of project activities may help build greater support for intergenerational dialogues within children's own families and communities on the issue of CSEA as this quote from a youth facilitator in the *Children Know Better* project illustrates:

The change I saw in family and society is that now parents have also started understanding a bit about this CSEA. It seems they have started giving importance to it. And regarding their children, you know, previously they wouldn't send them to such programs, Child Sexual Exploitation programs; they would hesitate a bit. But now, I have seen them encouraging children saying they must participate in such programs. And they are giving significant importance to mental health now, I feel.

Youth Facilitator FGD, Nepal

Continuous engagement transforms dialogue from a one-off event into a supported process.

2.4 Navigating challenging contexts for intergenerational dialogue

Participatory Action Research with children rarely takes place in stable or predictable environments. Practitioners must often adapt to shifting social cultural and political conditions. Political unrest is one example of a context that can heighten these challenges, particularly when combined with the resurgence of 'anti-youth' and 'anti-sexual health and reproductive rights' movements.

In the *Children Know Better* project, unrest in Bangladesh and Nepal meant that project activities had to be paused. The political climate also led to distrust and suspicion among adult decision makers who started to question the agenda, and motivations behind the project. This meant it was harder to bring children physically together and staff reported concerns around convening children in the immediate aftermath of the unrest in case they were accused of political conspiracy. To counter this distrust, project staff had to hold extra meetings with parents, carers and community members to reassure them. In validation exercises for the evaluation of the *Children Know Better* project, participants recognised this need:

Because you're going to have to work harder now with those ones who are resisting this change and who are digging in. And this is always the case when there's an important moment in citizen mobilization and there's a change that's trying to happen

Validation Participant

As dialogue is a two-way discussion between groups, rather than a one-sided consultation, facilitating continuous, community level interactions between adults and children (rather than high level, one-off events) helps intergenerational dialogue move away from 'performative' engagement to a mutually supportive process that enables both children and adults a better understanding of each other's perspective.

Learning Point 3:

Preparing Children

Preparing children for intergenerational dialogue is not only about equipping children to participate, but also about creating conditions in which they can shape the process itself.

3.1 Building children's emotional readiness and practical understanding

Children's confidence and safety in intergenerational dialogue are strengthened when they understand what to expect and have opportunities to prepare emotionally as well as practically.

It can be helpful for children to know before attending dialogues: who is likely to be present, what the space (venue/location) will be like, the agenda and any formalities, and in particular what they will be asked to share and why.⁹ It is equally important to explore together children's concerns, any foreseeable risks and mitigations that can be put in place. Risk assessments with children can help them decide whether mitigation strategies reduce their concerns and they are happy to take part in the dialogue (seen as part of 'informed' consent processes).¹⁰

Preparation activities may include advocacy training or role-play activities such as 'elevator pitches' that help children re-create and practice lobbying or public speaking, build their confidence and develop communication skills for dialogue with adults. In addition, following intergenerational dialogues, debriefing can provide the space for children to reflect on their learning and share any difficult feelings.¹¹

3.2 Involving children in shaping how dialogue takes place

Intergenerational dialogue is more equitable and meaningful when children have influence over how engagement is designed - including format, setting, and modes of communication - rather than being expected to adapt solely to adult-centred structures.

In the *Children Know Better* project, children expressed fears about meeting advocacy targets (adult decision makers) and were worried about what questions they may be asked. Prior to children meeting with decision-makers to share their messages, project staff held individual meetings with decision makers. These meetings discussed the nature and format of the dialogues and helped project staff understand the questions decision-makers would be likely to ask child leaders which were



fed back to children to help them prepare for community dialogues. The evaluation found that some decision makers reported they now had a more positive view of children's taking part in research and advocacy on sexual exploitation and child protection issues, with greater trust in children's capacities and a stronger appreciation of children's leadership.

They [children] couldn't speak before. When they saw us, they'd be so frightened they'd run away, yes, and they'd feel shy and embarrassed and all that. Today, hearing them speak, we're left speechless - truly, such beautiful words from their mouths.

Local government decision maker, Male, Bangladesh

In the *She Leads* programme, girl leaders developed creative formats for sharing advocacy messages. And when they attended a regional conference in West Africa of key (adult) stakeholders, girl leaders hosted their own side event to which adults were invited - consequently intergenerational dialogue was on their terms.

These approaches demonstrate that when children understand what to expect **and** have a say in how dialogue is organised, participation becomes more confident, balanced, and genuinely participatory rather than performative.





CONCLUSION

Intergenerational dialogue on CSEA and related harms is most effective when understood as an ongoing process rather than a single event. Meaningful participation emerges when preparation and design occur in parallel across three interconnected areas: strengthening adults' readiness to listen and respond constructively, building sustained trust and legitimacy within communities and stakeholder groups, and supporting children to participate safely, confidently and with influence over how dialogue takes place. Where one of these elements is neglected, existing power imbalances, stigma or uncertainty can undermine children's safety and limit their influence. Conversely, when adults are supported to challenge bias, communities are engaged early and continuously, and children are given time, information and opportunities to shape the format and conditions of engagement, intergenerational dialogue becomes more respectful, less adversarial and more likely to lead to tangible change.

In this way, intergenerational dialogue functions as a critical enabler of participatory approaches with children and young people on CSEA. It helps translate children's research, lived experiences and advocacy messages into spaces where decisions are made, strengthening the "audience" and "influence" dimensions of participation and increasing the likelihood that children's views are taken seriously and acted upon. Preparatory and co-design work are therefore not optional precursors but core enabling conditions for ethical, safe and impactful participation on sensitive issues such as CSEA.



USEFUL RESOURCES

- [GREATER Adult Support for Meaningful Child Participation in Preventing and Responding to Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse](#). ECPAT International (2025)
- [Shifting the Narrative on Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse. Guiding Principles on Victim Blaming Language, Communication and Behaviours](#). ECPAT International (2025)
- [Core Component: Creating a Safe Environment for Participatory Work with Children on CSEA](#) for examples of participatory risk assessments that can be undertaken with children and youth. ECPAT International (2025)



ENDNOTES

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9. Taylor, B., Elizabeth, M., B, P, Rajakumar-Mangrove, R. (2025) [Participation with Purpose](#). Luton: University of Bedfordshire.
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