



Selecting and Preparing Children for Participatory Research and Advocacy on Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse

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SELECTING AND PREPARING CHILDREN FOR PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH AND ADVOCACY ON CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE

Purpose

This learning brief brings together learning and reflections on the recruitment and capacity development of children and youth to undertake significant roles or activities in participatory research and advocacy projects addressing child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA) and related harms.

Existing guidance in this area rarely provides details on factors to consider when recruiting children and youth into projects that focus on sensitive and taboo subjects. In this brief we share learning from recent projects implemented by ECPAT International and their partner organisations that have included elements of capacity development for children and youth. It should be noted, however, that the learning outlined in this document does not focus on selection and capacity development with children or youth who have lived experiences of CSEA as this was not the focus of these projects.

Background

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 and 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. All quotes in this learning brief are from participants involved in evaluation or learning activities from the *Children Know Better* project.

In addition, the brief incorporates learning from several other projects implemented by ECPAT International and their partners that included elements of selection, recruitment and capacity development of children. 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. 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

Selection/Recruitment: Design inclusive and realistic selection processes that balance desired skills with diversity and representation, recognise the strong influence of parents, carers and gatekeepers, and communicate clearly with communities to manage expectations and reduce unintended exclusion or backlash.

2

Preparation and training: Plan flexible, well-paced and context-relevant capacity-development that reflects children and youth's availability, differing starting points and learning styles. Use engaging, participatory and practical methods, revisit key concepts over time, and adapt materials to local social and cultural contexts.

3

Ongoing engagement: Maintain regular communication and adequately resource pastoral, relational and safeguarding support - including staff time, connectivity and mentoring - to sustain children and youth's motivation, wellbeing and meaningful participation throughout the project.



WHY SELECTION, RECRUITMENT AND PREPARATION MATTER

In recruiting or selecting children and youth to engage in a participatory project there are many aspects to consider. This includes considering which children and youth will be invited to take part, what the criteria will be, what barriers to participation may exist, how the roles will be advertised, how the project will be communicated, what the process for selection will include and how children and youth will be trained and supported for the roles they are tasked with¹.

In the Children Know Better project, in Bangladesh and Nepal 20 youth facilitators were recruited (aged 20-25 years) to facilitate the engagement of child leaders in a participatory action research project. Once youth facilitators had been selected, child leaders (aged 12-16 years) were recruited from the same communities. It should be noted that children and youth with lived experience of CSEA were not specifically targeted for engagement in this project.² Capacity development exercises to prepare child leaders for their role as researchers and advocates consisted of youth facilitators participating in a 'train-the-trainers' programme and subsequently delivering this training (covering a broad range of topics from concepts of childhood and CSEA to research and advocacy skills)³ to child leaders. Additional and refresher training and support were delivered to child leaders throughout the project.

The significance of the topic of CSEA: Alongside these practical and logistical considerations, broader social and cultural factors also shape both selection and recruitment and capacity-development processes for participatory projects on the topic of CSEA. Children and youth are denied access to comprehensive knowledge on sexuality and relationships in many parts of the world as this is viewed as 'morally inappropriate' and believed to challenge certain religious teachings. Where children and youth do receive sexuality and relationships education in the classroom, research consistently highlights the limitations and problems with the curriculum. This means that children may have received limited basic education on sexuality and relationships when coming into projects.⁴ This also means that parents and carers are likely to be hesitant in allowing their children to engage in these projects and they may have specific concerns around what children and youth will learn as part of training and capacity development.



KEY LEARNING ON SELECTION, RECRUITMENT AND CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT

Learning Point 1: Selection and Recruitment

Design inclusive and realistic selection processes that balance desired skills with representation, recognise the influence of parents, carers and gatekeepers, and anticipate potential community reactions to selection decisions.

1.1 Balancing skills, inclusion and representation

When defining the experience, knowledge and skills sought for children's roles, it is important to consider how selection criteria may unintentionally exclude certain groups. In the *Children Know Better* project, recruitment criteria initially emphasised gender balance, diversity and inclusion, availability over the two-year project period, caregiver consent and an interest in child-rights activities. Implementing partners then adapted these criteria to their local contexts.

However, while diversity and social inclusion were stated priorities - including preferences for children from marginalised communities or those out of school - some of the practical requirements contradicted these intentions. For example, in Nepal eligibility referred to children currently studying in specific school grades, while in Bangladesh preference was given to children with strong digital literacy, language and report-writing skills.

These conflicting criteria may have unintentionally limited participation from out-of-school children, children with disabilities or those engaged in employment, particularly given the significant time commitments required from children and a lack of compensation for their time. Learning from the *She Leads* programme demonstrates that additional resources, such as providing sign-language interpreters, may enable more inclusive selection processes. Practitioners have also noted that language barriers pose a significant problem for children and youth from indigenous communities.

When there is a commitment to recruiting a diverse group of children, including those from marginalised communities, different ethnic groups, children with disabilities or children with lived experience of CSEA, it's important that the 'asks' on children are realistic. A reciprocal commitment, from implementing partners is needed, to build in time and resources to enable children to develop the needed knowledge and skills without presuming these will already exist.

Learning from practitioners and academics suggests selection processes should:

- Value lived experience, shared language and peer credibility alongside formal skills, as these can build trust and generate deeper, more nuanced insights.
- Avoid over-emphasising academic or technical criteria, which may unintentionally exclude children with important contextual knowledge or fewer formal opportunities.
- Consider working with smaller, well-supported groups of children, as this can enable deeper engagement and more effective capacity development than large groups with limited resources.

1.2 Building trust with parents and carers

Projects addressing CSEA and related harms are introducing a sensitive or taboo topic, and it is likely that project staff will experience challenges in gaining consent from parents and carers for children to take on a significant role in the project. Consequently, it may be appropriate to undertake awareness raising on the topic of CSEA with potential parents/carers of children who will take on a significant role in the project.

In the *Children Know Better* project implementing partners initially found it challenging to recruit child leaders. There were a number of fears expressed by parents and carers that activities would include teaching their children about sex and sexuality. To try to address these concerns, the implementing partners invited parents of potential child leaders to their offices to meet with staff and share details about the activities children would be involved in and specifically the aim and content of any training. In addition, parents were invited to participate in elements of the trainings so they could understand the content that was being covered.

Practitioners have highlighted that parents and carers may be more willing to support children's involvement when projects clearly explain the emotional support and safeguarding measures in place. Demonstrating how children will be protected and supported throughout their engagement can be as important as explaining the project's objectives.

The evaluation of *Children Know Better* found that combining community awareness-raising activities on CSEA with the increased confidence and sense of responsibility demonstrated by child leaders led to greater overall support from community members for the initiative:

Although my family took my involvement in work related to preventing child sexual exploitation positively, some of my relatives discouraged me. But later, when they saw my personal growth and changes, their mindset shifted and they began to encourage me.

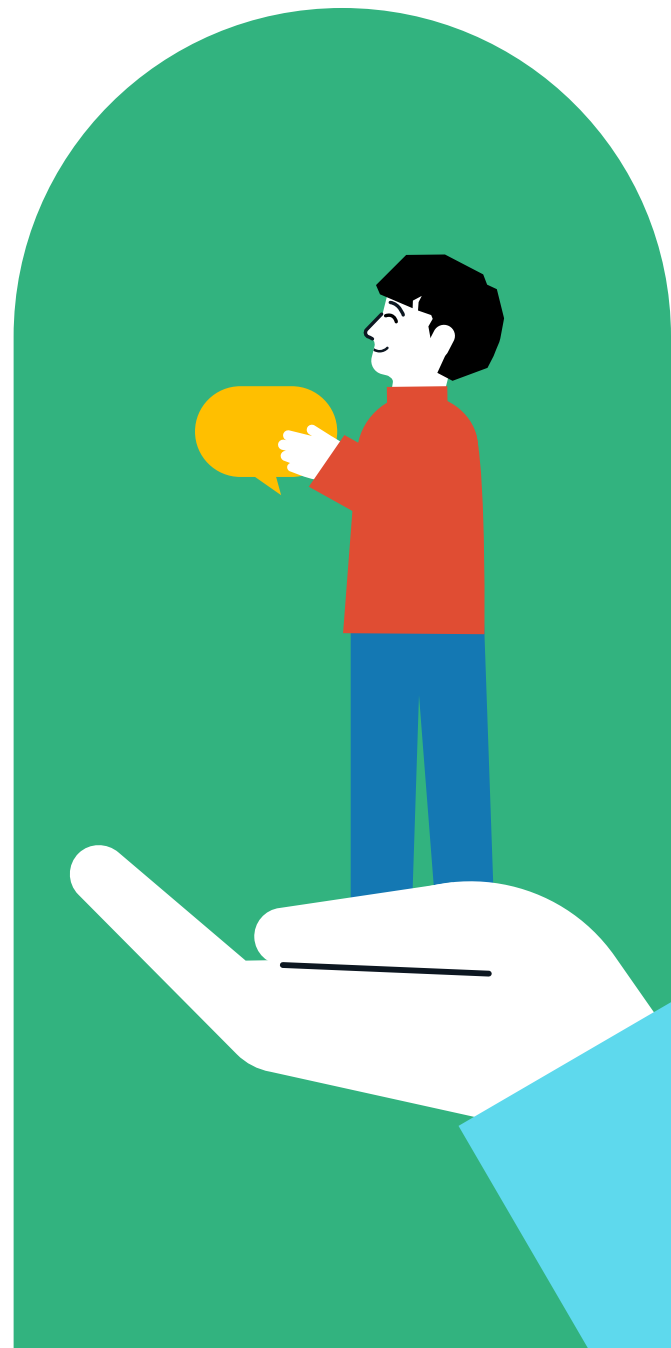
Child Leader, Female, Bangladesh

1.3 Recognising the influence of gatekeepers on selection and retention

Implementing organisations often need to partner with other institutions or organisations to help facilitate recruitment of children and youth, however this may lead to risks and challenges due to these organisations' role as 'gatekeepers' in the recruitment process. Developing clear Memorandums of Understanding or terms of reference for the different activities undertaken by partners in the selection process helps mitigate potential tensions or challenges with recruitment.

In the *Children Know Better* project, 25 children were selected to take on the role of 'child leader'. In Nepal, recruitment of children involved local government officers who acted as 'gatekeepers' by nominating children actively involved in government led activities in the Ward.

In Bangladesh, recruitment was more open and project staff visited communities to talk about the project, and children who were interested applied for the role. ECPAT staff reported a significant number of children dropping out of the process in Nepal, requiring further selection and recruitment rounds and a general lack of engagement in project activities whereas in Bangladesh there were no dropouts and engagement levels were high. Although other factors influenced the drop-out rate and levels of engagement in Nepal, selection and recruitment strategies may have had a role to play.



More commonly, it is NGO partners that act as 'gatekeepers' to potential child participants. In a multi-country study on research ethics⁵ that was implemented in Nepal with 2-3 local partners, discussions were needed with board members and senior staff for each local partner to explain the project and seek approval before the selection process for girls and young women could begin.

Practitioners and academics have noted that gatekeepers can influence not only which children are selected but also which perspectives are considered acceptable or legitimate. Recognising this dynamic and actively seeking diverse viewpoints can help avoid reinforcing existing power imbalances.

1.4 Anticipating community reactions to selection decisions

In setting out to select and recruit a small number of children and youth into a project it may be helpful to consider what other opportunities for engagement may be available or possible in the immediate future so that this can be confidently communicated in conversations with children (and their parents/carers) who have not been selected to undertake significant roles in the existing project.

In the *Children Know Better* project, implementing partners identified that a challenge for them was explaining to children, parents and community members why some children were selected for the project and others were not. To mitigate any potential backlash, implementing partners reassured families whose children were not involved that there would be future opportunities and ways for them to engage in activities associated with the project.

Practitioners and academics shared that clear communication about what children's engagement will - and will not - lead to is important to prevent disappointment or perceptions of tokenism. Children and families are more likely to view recruitment processes as fair when they understand the purpose, limits and potential outcomes of involvement.

Learning Point 2: Preparation and Training

Plan flexible, well-paced and context-relevant training that reflects children and youth's availability, learning needs and diverse starting points, while using engaging and participatory methods to build confidence and skills over time.

2.1 Planning for competing commitments and availability

An induction or training period for new 'recruits' is very common and helps prepare children and youth for their roles and responsibilities in project activities. Children and youth are likely to have competing demands, particularly if they are in school, college or work. In selection processes it is important to outline any significant dates or periods of

time when children will need to attend training or events as part of their role (and ensuring that significant training workshops or events are planned for times when children are likely to be available, for example, avoiding exam periods if children are school-going).

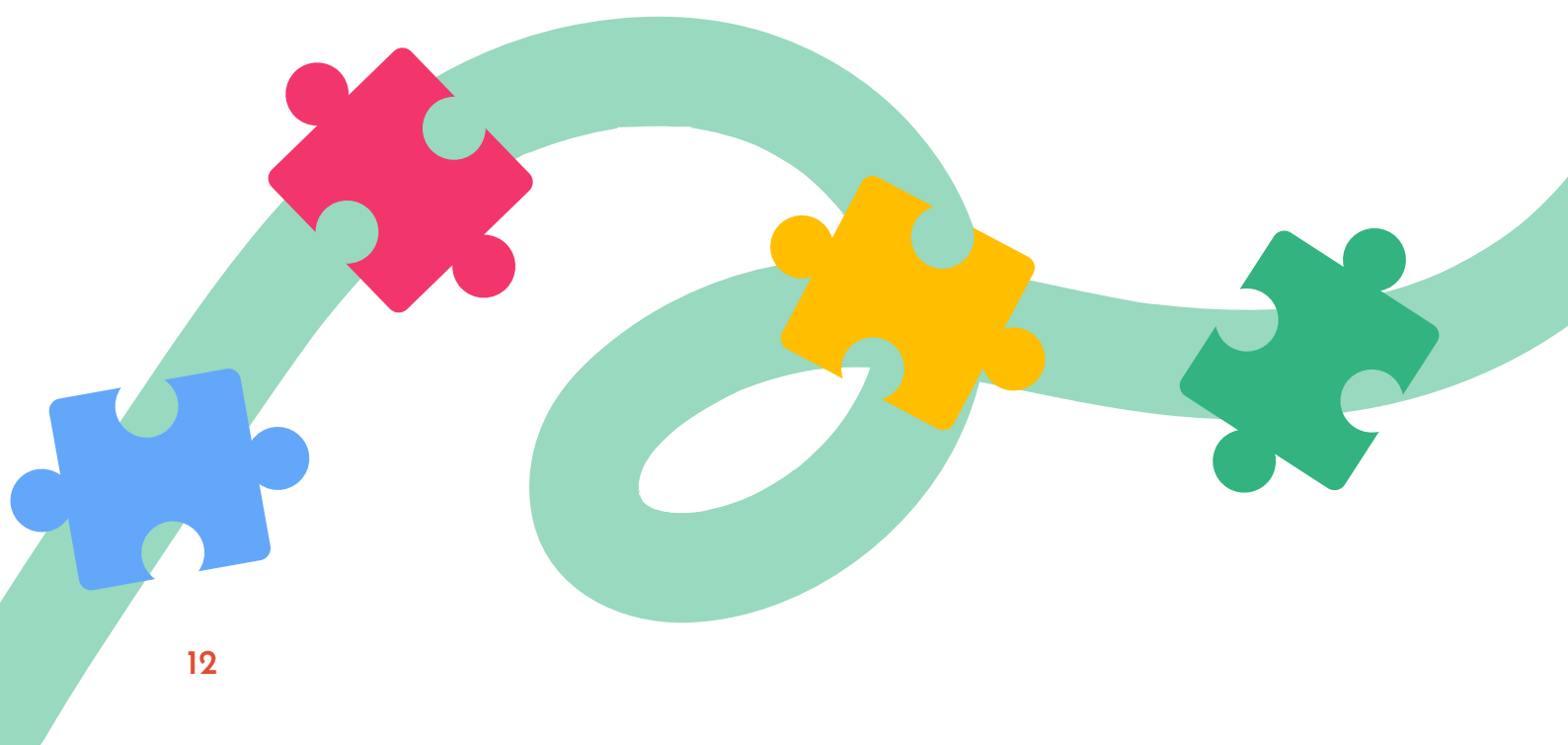
In the *Children Know Better* project, there was a significant aspect of capacity development including residential trainings. Implementing partners found it challenging to plan the training schedule as children and youth were attending different schools and institutions meaning their holiday and exam schedules differed. Recommendations for addressing this included - considering exam and holiday periods in the initial project design and ensuring a level of flexibility - recognising that there will need to be 'catch up' sessions for those who cannot attend. This highlights the importance of building flexibility into project timelines from the outset.

2.2 Recognising facilitation as foundational to participation

The skills and experience of a good facilitator are often undervalued in participatory approaches. In the nine basic requirements for meaningful and ethical children's participation⁶ (developed by Save the Children in response to the UN General Comment No.12 on the right of the child to be heard)⁷ facilitation requirements are referred to 20 times across all requirements - indicating how important facilitation is for meaningful participation.

In the *Children Know Better* project, youth facilitators were recruited to facilitate the engagement of child leaders in research and advocacy activities. The evaluation found that although youth facilitators were able to offer effective peer support to child leaders, youth facilitators had limited experience in participatory practice, safeguarding, and the power dynamics of group work with children. Consequently, their role was often restricted to acting as a key contact between adult staff and child leaders. Adult facilitators and partner staff were required to provide support for more complex needs (such as safeguarding) than communication.

In learning discussions with practitioners adult support for children was raised as critical - for example, providing technical support on safeguarding to child researchers during research and carrying the responsibility for sustaining advocacy efforts long-term and managing children's expectations regarding the outcomes for advocacy.



2.3 Designing training that is realistic, sequential and engaging

Participatory research and action projects addressing CSEA and related harms require children and youth to engage with complex concepts - including sexuality, consent, agency and intersectionality - alongside developing practical skills in research, ethics and advocacy. It is therefore challenging to strike an appropriate balance between covering essential material and recognising children's availability, concentration thresholds and differing starting points. In the *Children Know Better* project, training was relatively in-depth, yet tensions emerged: some child leaders and youth facilitators found it difficult to attend all sessions or absorb the content, while others expressed a desire for additional learning and practice.

Training approaches that are engaging, well-paced and sequenced over time can help address these tensions. Long or highly theoretical sessions can feel overwhelming, particularly when related activities occur months later and knowledge is harder to recall. Learning from both the *Children Know Better* and *Building Sustainable Tourism Destinations* projects highlighted the value of revisiting key concepts through refresher sessions, practical exercises and guest inputs, as well as allowing flexibility to adapt the pace to suit different confidence levels and prior experience.

Practitioners and academics also emphasised the importance of varied and participatory methods. Allowing children to express preferences about roles and tasks can increase motivation and reduce fatigue; using creative, visual or game-based approaches can make technical concepts more accessible for different learning styles and literacy levels; and recognising that not all children enjoy analytical or administrative tasks - with adults sharing more time-intensive responsibilities where needed - can help maintain enthusiasm, fairness and meaningful engagement.

2.4 Implementing global guidance in local contexts

There are many global manuals, toolkits or training programmes on implementing participatory approaches, often produced by international organisations. However, social norms and cultural factors on concepts of 'childhood' and on 'sexuality' significantly impact on how global guidance can be implemented in practice - and there is very often a need to adapt these national contexts and the realities faced by children and/or implementing staff.

In the *Children Know Better* project, a manual was developed called 'Participatory Action Research with Children' (PARC) which was piloted in the project. Initially, youth facilitators found the manual hard to understand due to its theoretical basis - struggling with the sessions on sexuality, agency, intersectionality and advocacy. Implementing partners had to contract local trainers in each country who were able to adapt the global and more generic guidance to local contexts and co-deliver with youth facilitators to child leaders satisfactorily. This aligns with learning from the *Building Sustainable Tourism Destinations* project where it was recommended that projects should be developed specifically for the national and local context - reinforcing the need to co-adapt materials with local partners and children themselves.

Although there is no shortage of guidance on implementing participatory approaches with children and youth, practitioners in Latin America⁸ noted that local implementing partners often need support to adapt, translate or 'de-colonise' global guidance and standards - which tend towards formal, institutionalised mechanisms for children's participation. Time needs to be invested in making global tools relevant for local contexts and more creative forms of self-organisation by children and youth often found at community or grassroots levels.

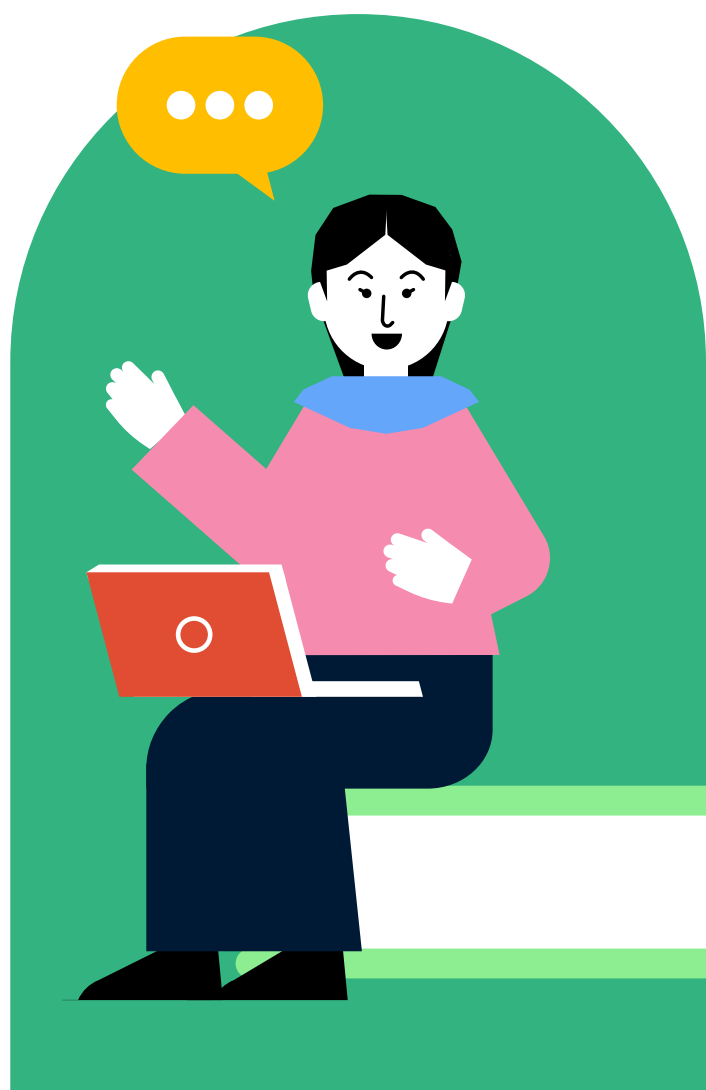
2.5 Anticipating technical and connectivity barriers in online training

Although virtual/online training workshops are becoming more popular and often seen as a cost saving exercise, there are significant challenges and hidden costs in engaging with children and youth online. In the *She Leads* programme, political conflict in Ethiopia meant physical meetings and convenings were restricted and work had to be moved onto virtual platforms. This was found to be particularly challenging for girls in remote areas where network coverage was poor and inflation rates meant the cost of data increased.

In the *Children Know Better* project, staff and youth facilitators in Nepal took part in online training of the trainers (2 sessions of 2 hours) based on ECPAT International's Participatory Action Research with Children (PARC) manual⁹. However, during the online training, connection issues, problems navigating the online platforms and difficulties in comprehension impacted on youth facilitators' engagement. As a result, youth facilitators did not feel confident enough to facilitate the training with child leaders and they required an additional four day in-person training.

Recommendations for navigating these challenges include recognising that virtual engagement is most effective when children already have access to, and familiarity with, online tools. Where this is not the case, projects should allocate additional time and support to build confidence and digital skills. It is also important to budget for data and connectivity costs and, where feasible, plan hybrid approaches so participation is not entirely dependent on online access.

Overall, when training children and youth for participatory projects - where interactive and relationship-based learning techniques are most effective - in-person training is generally more suitable than fully online approaches, as it more effectively supports engagement, confidence-building and meaningful participation.



Learning Point 3: Ongoing Engagement

Maintain regular contact and adequately resource pastoral, relational and safeguarding support to sustain children and youth's motivation, wellbeing and meaningful participation throughout the project.

3.1 Maintaining engagement between project phases

When engaging children and youth in participatory projects that extend over months or years, it's helpful to consider at the start how to maintain motivation and engagement in the project.

In projects involving multiple phases, planning regular sessions with child leaders in-between training and core activities is important to maintain their engagement and interest. In the *Children Know Better* project, online exchange meetings between child leaders, youth facilitators and project staff were planned throughout (and notwithstanding the challenges of virtual engagement) were viewed as playing a significant role. These meetings enabled ongoing communication with the child leaders and youth facilitators; further discussion on key topics; refresher discussions on different aspects explored in the training; joint planning; and practice sessions (for example, practicing interview or discussion techniques). However, feedback from the children, youth and staff indicated that a mix of online and in-person meetings and more regular meetings (i.e. every 2 weeks) would have allowed greater space for reflection and engagement.

3.2 Preparing for safeguarding disclosures

As the topic of CSEA is rarely discussed in public it is very likely that a research project exploring CSEA will trigger emotional responses for some participants (project staff, children and youth and other stakeholders such as parents or decision makers). It is also likely that disclosures of CSEA will be made during the course of the project. In the *Children Know Better* project it was identified that data collection was a key moment when disclosures of sexual abuse or harassment were raised (50 disclosures were raised during FGDs with children) and data analysis was sometimes a triggering moment for child researchers (child leaders) as this quote highlights:

During the data analysis workshop, we noticed children at some point got overwhelmed because we were digging through, now, the data. And as we were digging through the data, disclosures were there, very sensitive cases were captured, of course, in the data. And they had, of course, to discuss and analyse because they were to come up with recurring themes and, you know, identify the issues before we can support them to write a report.

ECPAT staff member



Because of this high likelihood of safeguarding issues being raised, it is very important to ensure that project staff are adequately experienced at responding to triggering and disclosures of abuse - taking a trauma-informed approach - and that organizational procedures and processes are in place to respond effectively to these safeguarding concerns. Please see separate Children Know Better- [Guidance Note - Ethics and safeguarding in participatory approaches to research exploring child sexual exploitation and abuse and related harms with child and youth researchers](#)

3.3 Resourcing pastoral and relational support

Participatory work is relational and continuous communication is key, particularly in projects that span over months and years which involves costs in staff time for pastoral support and costs related to phone and data usage for children and youth.

In both the *Children Know Better* and *Building Sustainable Tourism Destinations* projects, learning highlighted the need to provide children, and youth facilitators with mobile phones to implement project activities and communicate logistics. Children did not always have access to these and in some cases, had to rely on their parents' phones to communicate with project staff. In the *Children Know Better* project it was noted that youth facilitators' role evolved from a simple 'key contact' role to more of a mentoring relationship for some child leaders as this quote illustrates from a child leader in Nepal talking about a youth facilitator:

And at that time, I went, and was writing, tears came. Tears came and [she] listened to me in an extremely understanding manner. She gave a solution for that too. And she was very motivating about how I could do this, this and "you don't need to care about them"

Child Leaders FGD, Nepal



CONCLUSION

Recruiting and preparing children and youth to take on meaningful roles in participatory research and advocacy on CSEA requires more than well-intentioned invitations or one-off training events. The learning presented in this brief highlights that inclusive selection and recruitment, context-relevant and well-paced capacity development, and sustained relational support are all interconnected elements for implementing participatory research and action projects. Selection criteria, training design and engagement strategies each carry the potential either to widen access and strengthen children's confidence, or to unintentionally exclude those whose perspectives may be most important. Recognising the influence of parents, carers, gatekeepers and broader social norms - particularly around sexuality and children's participatory rights and agency - is therefore essential when designing participatory processes on sensitive topics.

Across the projects and practitioner reflections explored, a consistent message emerges - meaningful child and youth participation is both relational and resource-intensive. Adequate time, staffing, safeguarding structures and financial investment are not optional additions but foundational requirements for ethical and effective engagement. When children and youth are supported through realistic expectations, flexible approaches and ongoing pastoral care, participatory projects are more likely to generate deeper insights, stronger ownership and more sustainable impact. These learning points reinforce that quality participation is not achieved through a single method or toolkit, but through deliberate planning, adaptation to context and a continued commitment to children's wellbeing and agency throughout the project lifecycle.



USEFUL RESOURCES

- [Recruiting Young People \(Our Voices Too website, University of Bedfordshire\):](https://ourvoices.beds.ac.uk/your-project-journey/4-recruiting-children-and-young-people/) <https://ourvoices.beds.ac.uk/your-project-journey/4-recruiting-children-and-young-people/>
- [ETHYCS: Strengthening Research Ethics With Marginalised Youth](#) Helen Veitch, Children Unite (2025).
- [Participatory Action Research with Children \(PARC\) Manual](#). ECPAT International (2024)
- [The Nine Basic Requirements for Meaningful and Ethical Children's Participation](#) Save the Children (2021)

ENDNOTES

1. See [Recruiting Children and Young People](#) in 'useful resources'
2. Although it does not necessarily follow that the children or youth engaged in this project had no lived experience of CSEA
3. See [Participatory Action Research with Children \(PARC\) Manual](#). ECPAT International (2024) content included: Understanding Childhood, Sexuality & Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse, Critical Participatory Action Research Skills, Research Communication and Advocacy
4. Kantor, L. and Lindberg, L. (2020) [Pleasure and sex education: The need for broadening both content and measurement](#), American Journal of Public Health, 110, pp.145-148.
5. See [ETHYCS: Strengthening Research Ethics With Marginalised Youth](#) Helen Veitch, Children Unite (2025).
6. See [The Nine Basic Requirements For Meaningful and Ethical Children's Participation](#), Save the Children (2021).
7. Committee on the Rights of the Child General Comment No.12, The Right of the Child to be Heard, CRC/C/GC/12, July 2009
8. From learning discussions on participatory approaches held by ECPAT International / Learning Report
9. See [Participatory Action Research with Children \(PARC\) Manual](#). ECPAT International (2024)



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