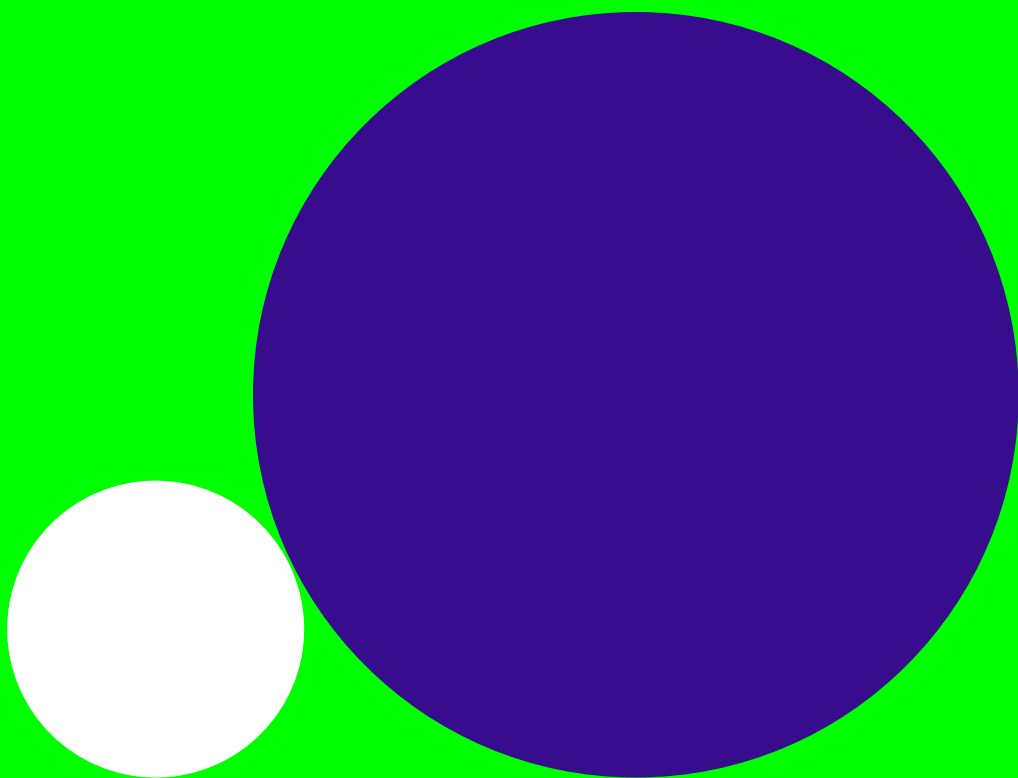


# **To be taken seriously**

Examples of children's participation

Tina Eliasson



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## Foreword

The right freely to express your view is one of the pillars of democracy. It applies to everyone, including small children. The right to vote in general elections, by contrast, only applies to those who have turned 18. That is the age at which we become regarded as full citizens, ready to exercise our right to vote in general elections. But democratic schooling has to go on throughout life. Early in life, very early, we must be given the opportunity to begin practising putting words to our views, listening to others' views and making decisions together. This applies in contexts great and small: in play, at home, on the bus, in the shop and at school.

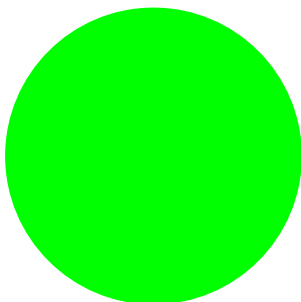
At A Safer and More Humane Gothenburg we are convinced that children who are taken seriously and whose voices are heard are well prepared to become secure adults. One way of throwing light on this important area has been to ask Tina Eliasson for help. With a keen ear and an open mind, Tina has captured the practice of participation in this book. She paints a picture of what happens when children, young people and adults set out on joint adventures. One of the "adventures" described is the joint production of a film in which young people's experiences and special competence made up the very basis of the story. There are more examples. The impression that lingers after reading the book, and which cannot be sufficiently emphasised, is the importance of adults' support and respect for young people. That the encounters happen. Really happen.

Gothenburg, June 2010

Ylva Mühlenbock

The secretariat group, A Safer and More Humane Gothenburg

The City of Gothenburg



## Summary

Children and young people like to contribute with their opinions and their own knowledge. It gives them an incentive to further involvement in important issues - if only adults have the ability to listen to them and to support them.

This is shown by the examples of children's involvement in projects that this book describes. Allowing children space is about adults' attitudes to children and, not least, about democracy.

The book explores opportunities and difficulties inherent in participation and influence, factors which it is important that everyone is aware of. The report is a good basis for further discussion and development regarding children's possibilities for influence in different activities.

To illustrate how it is possible to work with children's and young people's right to participate in activities practically, the book looks at three concrete examples:

- We follow the production of **Isblomma**, a film based on young people's own experiences of growing up in a family in which one parent has an addiction. The film is part of the project "Films for the good route", which is an example of having young people participate and giving them influence in the making of a film - ranging from opinions about the script, casting and actual production work. Bona Via association was the base of the project, but the initiative was taken by a director who realised the importance of allowing children's voices to be heard.
- In **BAMM** (Barn som medforskare av matlandskapet, or "Children as co-researchers of the foodscape") nine researchers have worked with

ten-year-old children as co-researchers in order to highlight healthy aspects of what is known as children's foodscapes. The researchers developed a method they believe can be useful in many contexts and which involves children in work- and change processes. BAMB run at the Centre for Consumer Science at the University of Gothenburg 2008-2010.

- **Bunkern** ("the Bunker") is a municipal activity in Gothenburg involving music, photography and film. The Bunker was created in response to young people's wishes, and young people have had influence on various decisions regarding both the construction of the premises and the actual activity. Young people's interests and involvement control the activity, with the support of adults. A model for young people's influence has been developed in which young people's responsibility and trust permeates the activity.

The book highlights the Child Convention, focusing on Article 12 which is about children's right to be heard. Various opinions about the Child Convention are discussed, for example that the "convention child" comes across as a stereotype and that children's need for protection is necessary but can in itself constitute a limitation of the child's independence.

Discussions and definitions of the terms "children's perspectives" and "childperspective" are dealt with as well as of the terms "participation" and "influence". Roger Hart's "ladder" will be presented, a model for participation and influence which is a useful tool when it comes to discuss in what way children and young people are involved in various processes.

Janusz Korczak, the "Old doctor", has been an inspiration all through the text and his thoughts and theories are presented mostly as quotes throughout the book.

## Is big more important than little?

*There appear to be two lives, one serious and respectable, the other indulgently tolerated, less valuable. We say: a future person, a future worker, a future citizen. That children will be, that they will really begin to be serious only in the future. We kindly let them plod along beside us but, in truth, it would be more convenient without them.*

*No, not at all. They were and they will be. They did not appear suddenly by surprise and not just for a brief period either. Children are not a casual encounter who can be passed by hurriedly or dismissed rapidly with a smile and a "Hello".*

*Children account for a large proportion of mankind, a sizeable portion of the population, of the nation, residents, citizens - constant companions.*

*Children have been, are, and they will be.*

*Is there a life that exists as some joke? No, childhood years are long and important ones in the life of man.*

(Korczak, 1992, p. 174)

Korczak wrote the above in 1918 and the words may apply even today, almost a century later. In the book "The Child's Right to Respect", Korczak (1929/1992) describes how we are taught from our earliest childhood that big is more important than little. He writes that it is size and what takes

up more space that elicits respect and admiration. He further argues that small is equated with ordinary and uninteresting. “Little people mean little wants, little joys and sorrows.” (p. 161). Is it thus better or more important to be an adult than to be a child?

Childhood is no preliminary stage of adult life, you can’t divide life into different degrees of maturity, Korczak argues (Mathiasson, 2004). Children are people, same as adults, but they lack the experiences that adults have. As adults it is our task to share our knowledge and to guide children through their early experiences. Korczak believes that it’s not really fair to compare children and adults:

*We play with children using marked cards; we pierce the child’s weakness with the trump cards of adult virtues. As card-sharks we so shuffle the deck as to juxtapose the worst of their hands with the best of ours.*

(Korczak, 1992, p. 173)

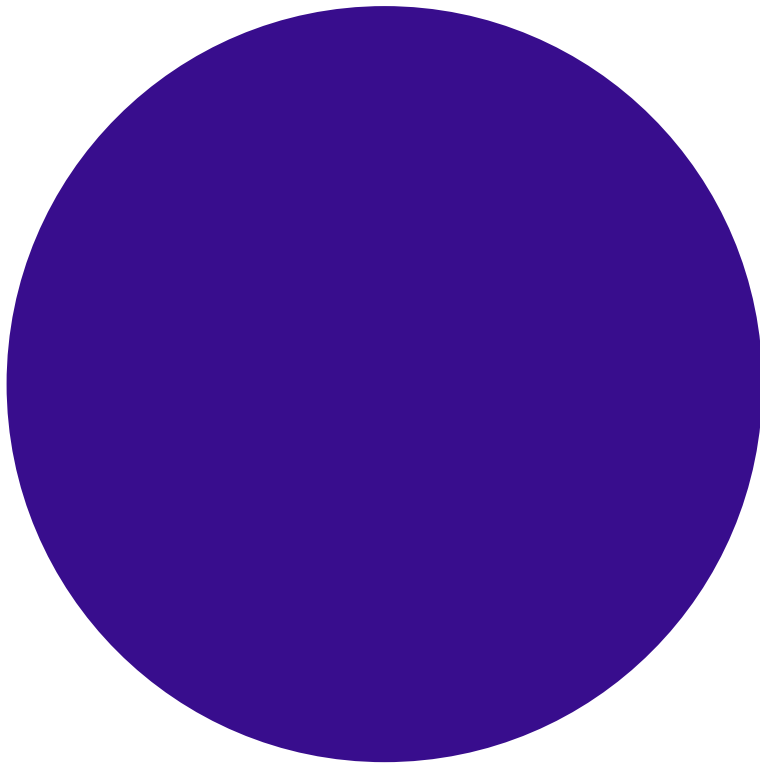
Korczak emphasize something important here, something to think about. Is it true that we don’t listen enough to children and young people? Don’t we take them and/or their views seriously? It is important to look more closely at these questions. Twenty years ago, *the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* was adopted by the UN General Assembly. Today, in Sweden, we hear in different contexts how adults should consider “the childperspective”. To understand children’s perspectives we will have to listen to what children have to say and to invite them to take part in different activities.

The idea behind this report has been to identify instructive and illuminating examples of how children are participating in activities and are having influence on decisions. The intention has been to find out more about opportunities and difficulties of such efforts. Certain limitations have been imposed on the selection of examples, which will be explained further on.

More specifically, this is about highlighting three different examples of activities in which children and young people have been/are being given the space to influence decisions in different ways. The activities will be described as well as children’s and young people’s experiences participating and on getting active influence. Also adults’ experiences will be described. Hopefully it will serve as a basis for continued discussions and development.

The report includes discussions and definitions of the terms participation and influence as well as the terms childperspective and children’s perspectives. *The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (the Child Convention)* is described briefly, with focus on influence and participation.

Korczak’s words affects people. According to Thomas Hammarberg (the Commissioner for Human Rights at the Council of Europe) Korczak is the father of the very idea that children also have rights, and his wise words will recur throughout this report in the form of quotes. For these reasons Korczak, or the “Old doctor” as he also was known, deserves an own section where his life and pedagogic method will be described briefly.



## The “Old doctor”

Janusz Korczak<sup>1</sup> was a pedagogue as well as a social worker and the director of an orphanage (Hammarberg, 2007). Children were the focus of his work throughout his life (1878-1942). Among many other things, he published a number of different books and founded a magazine for and with children.

The “Old doctor” had a special capacity for speaking to children as if they were adults and with adults as if they were children. He understood both and was thus able to mediate between the parties – and give the young generation preference. His primary message was about respect for children, about children’s value as human beings, but also about their abilities and competence.

According to Leif Mathiasson, who was a contributing author to the anthology “Janusz Korczak och barnens värld” (“Janusz Korczak and the world of children”) (2004), Korczak’s work through life is imbued with his deeply humanist outlook on life. Korczak was a contemporary of pedagogic innovators such as Montessori, Steiner, Freinet and Dewey. He was in contact with Jean Piaget and was inspired by Ellen Key.

In the same anthology, Siv Fischbein describes how Korczak in his work as director of an orphanage tried to apply the various pedagogic ideas he had developed in his writing. He created a pedagogic system based on the notion of a social contract between children and adults. “Small ones” and “big ones” had the same rights and the same obligations.

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<sup>1</sup> His real name was Henryk Goldszmit. He used “Janusz Korczak” as a pseudonym.

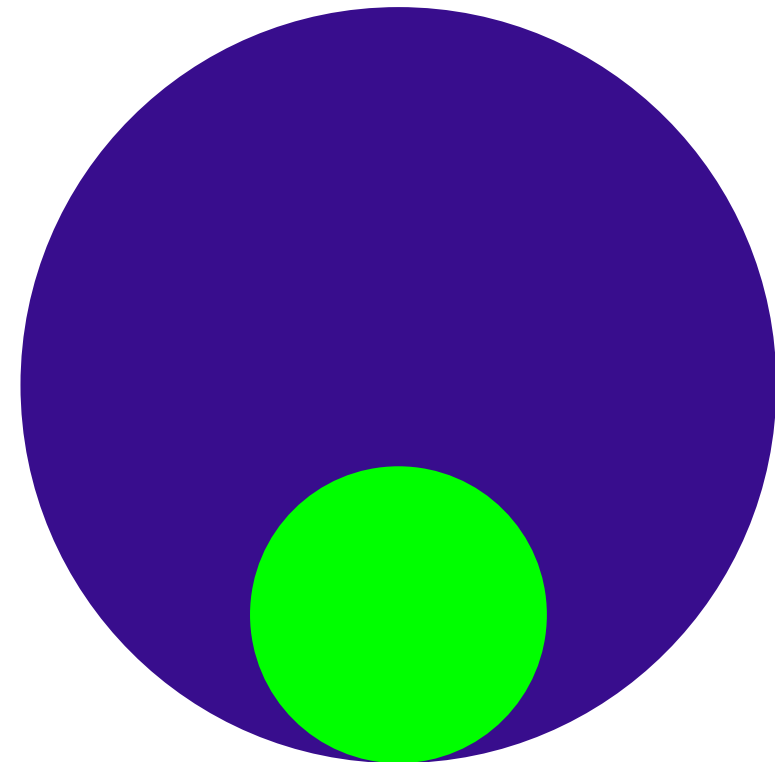


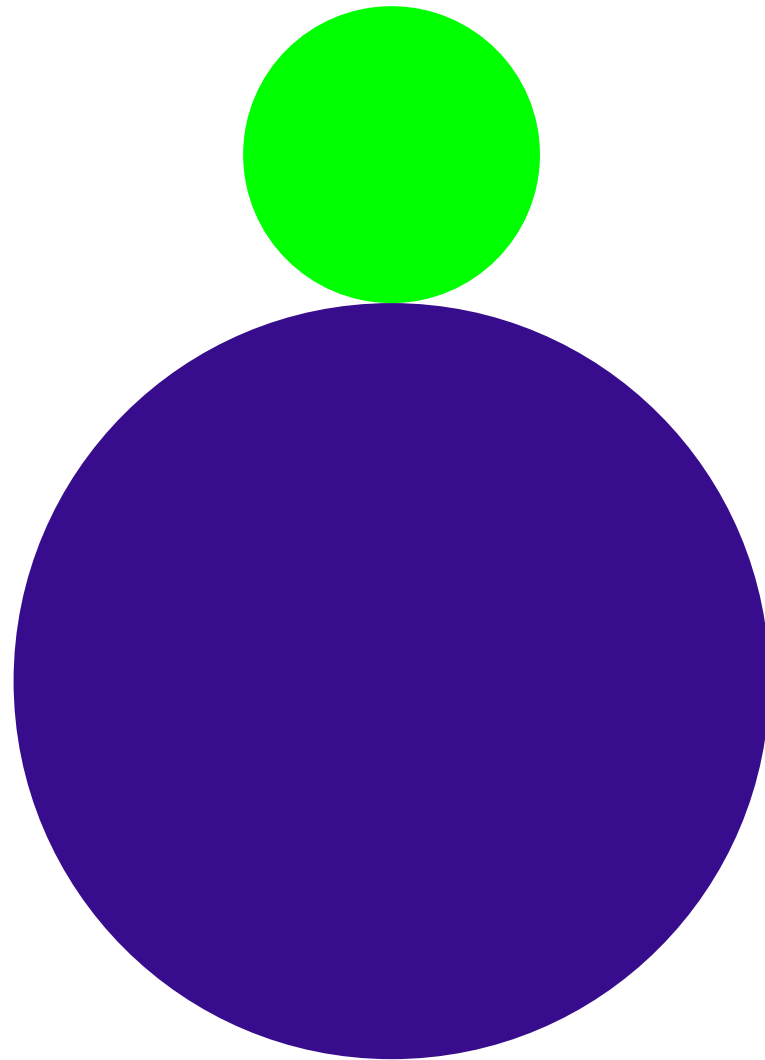
The agreement between children and adults was based on the idea of autonomy. Among other things, adults and children collaborated in the day-to-day maintenance of the orphanage. The governance of the orphanage included a children's parliament, a court of peers, voting procedures, mentoring systems and leisure groups. Perhaps the most important thing for upholding autonomy was the idea of the environments continuous influence on the individual.

Fischbein writes that a fundamental principle of the method was an all-pervading respect for children as human beings. Children's suggestions were taken seriously, but not everything was accepted. She argues that an essential part of the pedagogy was directed towards changing what wasn't desirable and emphasising and amplifying what was wanted to promote. The best thing was if changes came about through the children's will to change themselves for the common good and not through reprimands or punishments. Peer influence played a significant role in this.

Reading about Korczak and his methods is inspirational. Lars H. Gustafsson, a well-known Swedish practising paediatrician, writes: *Let me begin with a confession: Janusz Korczak is one of my most important role models in my work as a paediatrician...* (Mathiasson, ed., 2004, p.117).

Regrettably, Korczak's life ended in tragedy. He was murdered in the Treblinka concentration camp in 1942 together with the children from the orphanage (Hammarberg, 2007). His work has had an impact on many people, and according to Hammarberg his thinking inspired the work writing the Child Convention.





## **The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child**

### **The idea and the message**

*The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1989. In 2005, 192 countries had ratified the convention; Sweden did so in 1990. The Child Convention focuses the individual child and includes all types of human rights. It is an international statement of the civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights of children, and governments can be held to account morally<sup>2</sup> for not observing it. Every fifth year, the governments of the signatories to the Convention have to report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child what steps they have taken to implement the different articles in the Convention.

The Child Convention frames a universal definition of what rights should apply for children all over the world and contains certain fundamental general principles. These relate to each other and together they form an attitude to children that could be termed as the Convention's view of children. These principles include that The Child Convention apply to every child without discrimination and furthermore the best interests of the child, the right to life and development and also the respect for the views of the child. This last principle (Article 12) contains

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<sup>2</sup> The Convention on the Rights of the Child is a "soft law", which means that breaches of it cannot be prosecuted in a court of international law. Instead it is a question of developing a moral view of how children should be treated.

elements which are related to children's participation and influence. It is about every child's right to say what they think in all matters affecting them, and to have their views taken seriously. Therefore Article 12 will be dealt with in greater detail below.

### **The view of children**

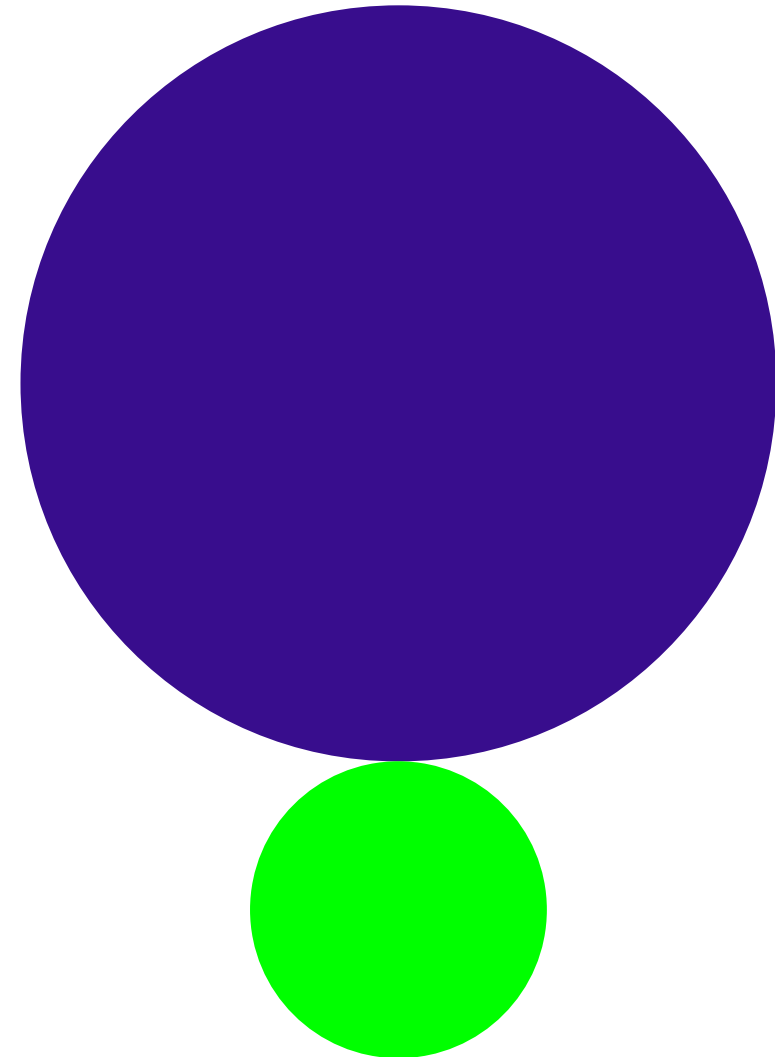
There is a paradox in the Child Convention's view of children, Kristina Bartley (1998) writes in her thesis:

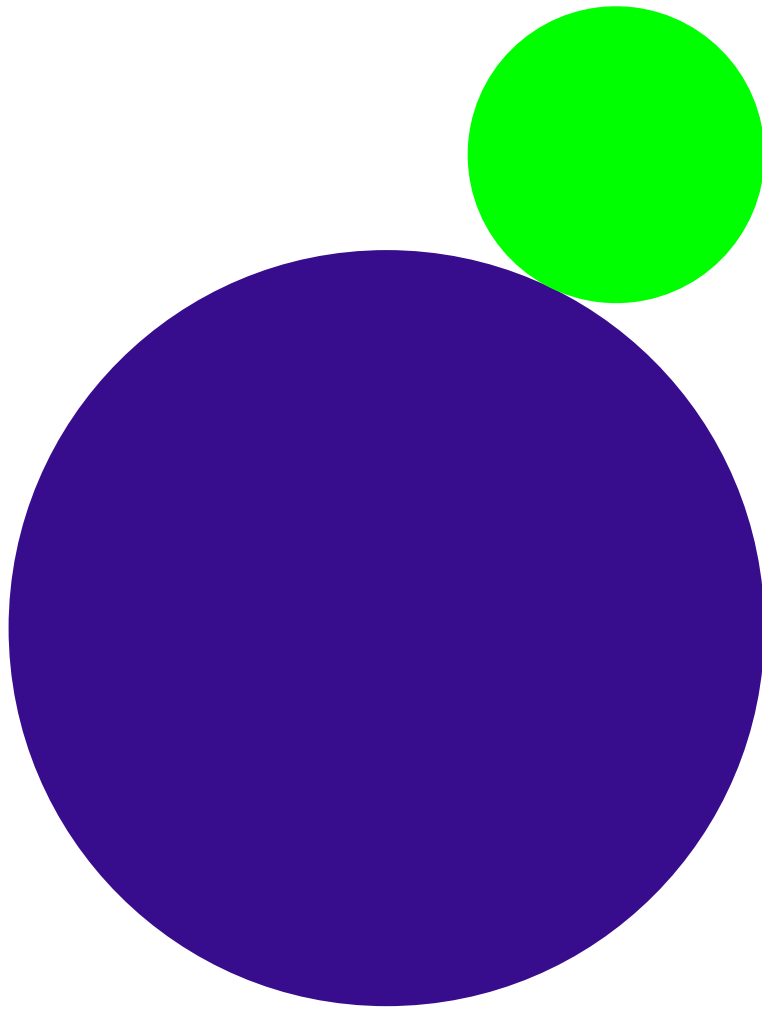
*The Convention views the family as the fundamental unit of society, and the view of the child is characterised by an individualistic outlook. The child is seen as an individual in the family and in society. At the same time, it shows the paradox that characterises the child's position in the family and in society. This is that the child is seen as an individual in his or her own right, as an actor, but at the same time as weak, vulnerable and subordinated parents and other adults' care, protection, power and control. The child's need for protection is necessary, but can thus also constitute a limitation of his or her independence.*

(p. 81)

The discussion is preceded by an analysis of the Convention's view of the family, the child, parents and society, as well as of certain criticisms that have been levelled at the Convention. Among other things, the definition and use of the term "child" has been seen as problematic. The Convention's definition of children follows the judicial definition, which states that individuals under the age of 18 are children. Bartley argues that the Convention child comes across as a stereotype, and she calls for a more nuanced picture of the situation for children in different signatory states, as well as suggesting a specification of the child concept.

Bartley's discussion is perhaps a pointer that adults should view children in a more nuanced way, as well as specify which children they mean when they speak about the child perspective and children's perspectives in different contexts.





## **The childperspective – what does it actually mean?**

*The child has a future and a past as well, full of memorable events, memories, and many hours of the most significant solitary reflections. No less than we, he remembers and forgets, appreciates and rejects, reasons logically – and errs when he doesn't know. Thoughtfully he trusts and doubts.*

(Korczak, 1992, p. 176)

Depending on how adults regard children, they are allowed to participate in activities in various degrees. Today, in Sweden, politicians and professionals often talk about considering the childperspective, but what does it actually mean? In the following different meanings will be discussed. We will also take a closer look at definitions of the terms the child's perspective and children's perspective.

### **The childperspective – different definitions**

Bartley (1998) discusses the childperspective, arguing that there are several definitions of the term and describing the views of various researchers.<sup>3</sup> One suggests that the childperspective is an adult construction, another makes a historical analysis of the term and describes how we previously

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<sup>3</sup> Anne Trine Kjørholt, Alfred Oftedal Telhaug, Per Olav Tiller (Bartley, 1998, p. 33, 34).

had an adult perspective on the child but now regard the child as an actor in his/her own right. Another interpretation is about seeing the child from the child's own perspective, and the importance of seeing the child as a social actor. The author herself argues that the child's perspective can be about adults' perspectives on children or children's perspectives on their own surroundings and on themselves. The meaning and interpretation of the term depends on the society and period in which we are living. Further, the interpretation is affected by the context in which the question about the child perspective is posed.

Bartley also points out that adults in various positions contribute to form a general childperspective. That perspective can be seen in politics, legislation, school, child care and in research. In order to identify and define children's own perspectives, adults have to try to imagine the child's situation. Children convey their thoughts, feelings, needs, wishes and knowledge to the adult world, and the adults interpret their statements, expressions and signals. However, both adults' and children's perspectives are formed in different ways within each individual based on different contexts, assumptions and positions.

Arnér and Tellgren have written the book "Barns syn på vuxna" ("Children's view of adults") (2006). They claim that adults often say that they are applying a childperspective when they interpret children, but that they frequently tend to set out from their own perspective, i.e. from an adult point of view. The children are certainly the focus, but they are often viewed from the adults' frames of reference and perspectives. Often children are portrayed as objects for adults rather than as subjects, which can be understood as adults viewing children from an adult perspective.

Monica Nordenfors (2012) recently made an overview of research on children's participation. Nordenfors also emphasises different ways of interpreting the child's perspective, and points out that recent child-research does not see childhood as invariable and uniform. Children's images of e.g. their families become different, just as for adults. Reality is thus described from different vantage points.

The child's perspective is manifested in the encounter between adults and children, Bartley (1998) writes. Arnér and Tellgren (2006) make the same claim in a discussion about communication between adults and children<sup>4</sup>, arguing that we get to know our surroundings by speaking to other people. This applies to the small child as well as to the adult. They advocate a relational perspective, which means that what is meaningful does not reside in the individual (child or adult) but in the relationship

4 The authors' discussion is based on theories by George Herbert Mead and Lev Vygotskij.

between them. A desirable interaction between adults and children is also about creating meaning together, e.g. through dialogue.

*Studying what children tell others or studying what they do and give attention to in various ways, becomes significant for their possibilities to express themselves from their own perspective, but also gives them opportunities to develop their own thoughts.*

(ibid., s. 13)

How are we then to define the term childperspective? Arnér and Tellgren (2006) claim, as many others do, that there are many definitions of the term, not only one. The definition of the term can be seen as changeable in the same way as e.g. children may be defined differently depending on cultural, historical and social conditions in society. The term can also be narrowed down to refer to what the world looks like from children's point of view – what children see, hear, experience and feel. There are also related terms that are used, such as "the child's best interests" or "children in focus". The authors argue that when the term "childperspective" is used, the meaning would be that adults try to see a situation from the child's point of view, strive to understand and then take measures they consider to be in the child's best interests.

The same authors also discuss the misunderstanding that the child's perspectives are in opposition to the adult's perspectives:

*However, children can never be seen as totally separate from their parents or other adults in their surroundings. When we talk about the importance of the childperspective, the intention is not for parents to be forgotten about, but for children to become visible.*

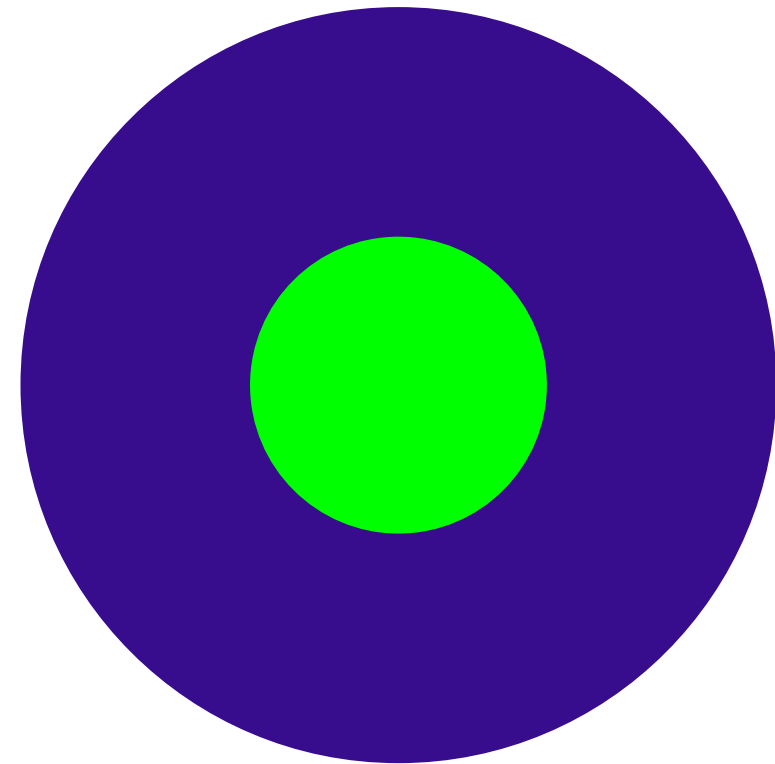
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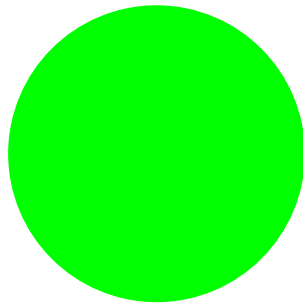
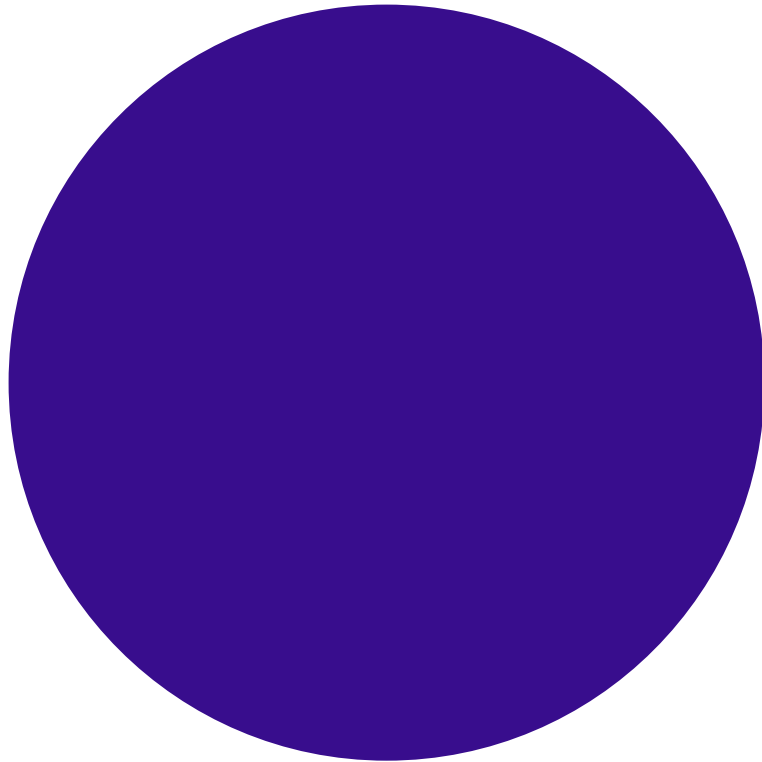
### **The child's perspective or children's perspectives?**

Nordenfors (2012) shows that the term "childperspective" is ambiguous and can be used both as an ideological and a methodological term. It can be turned into a rhetorical and ideological tool in political discussions. She refers to Halldén, who points to the difference between "children's perspectives" and "childperspective". When the term is written with two words – children's perspectives – it is about trying to capture the child's culture, to take part of what children experience. When it is written with

one word – childperspective – it is about capturing children’s voices and interpreting them. It is also pointed out that childperspective is about the place children are given in society – the term is intended to protect children’s rights, to act in the best interests of children or to study a culture created by children. The meaning of childperspective is thus something that goes beyond just representing children’s perspectives on different phenomena.

Arnér and Tellgren (2006) also argue that the meaning of the terms childperspective and children’s perspectives differ. They perceive that the term childperspective is about how adults regard children’s situation, while children’s perspectives is about the children’s own perceptions of their lives. The possibilities of understanding children’s perspectives are improved by speaking to children, but this also reveals that children’s perspectives can be very varied depending on their different circumstances and experiences. Adults need to identify their own preconceptions repeatedly including their own view of children and childhood, in order to understand children’s perspectives better. The same authors claim that children are in a subordinate position in society and that this is the least questioned subordination in society. They believe that childhood often appears as a transitional period without any value in itself, and that children become characterised as “not yet adults”. Children know more about their own world than adults do. For that reason, Arnér and Tellgren believe that children’s participation in planning within the activity where they are should be more obvious from the very beginning. Participation and children’s perspectives are interdependent since a basic premise for children’s participation are adults’ ability to adopt or understand children’s perspectives (Nordenfors 2012).





## Participation and influence

The following section is a survey of how the terms “participation” and “influence” may be defined, as well as of why it is important to involve children and young people in different processes. There is further a description of the Child Convention’s Article 12, which contains elements which are related to children’s participation and influence. But first a few wise words from Korczak:

*Respect for the present moment, for today!*

*How will he know tomorrow unless we allow him a conscious, responsible life today?*

(Korczak, 1992, p. 178)

### Definitions and purposes of participation and influence

Arnér and Tellgren (2006) distinguish between “to affect”, “to participate” and “to influence”. They write:

*Participation, for us, means being a part of the process, as opposed to stand next to it with a possibility to affect it, which can be arbitrary and thus a risk of taking part on the terms of adults. It is also important to analyse the boundary between participation and influence, since there is no clear definition of the terms in relation to children and the subordination that characterises their existence together with adults.*

*We choose to use the term influence primarily, since for us it means that children have a real possibility to influence their situation, as opposed to the term participation, which can more be interpreted as being allowed to take part in something which has already been decided.*

(p. 15)

In this text, different terms are used depending on which terms different authors have used. Most importantly though, is that we are aware of the fact that the terms are complex and need to be discussed. Arnér and Tellgren (2006) argue that the terms imply values that need to be discussed in depth in order to be clarified for both adults and children. They believe that an awareness of the terms childperspective and children's own perspective must be maintained at all times in order to create an understanding of that children's influence, participation and responsibility need to be made possible and sustained.

Nordenfors (2012) points out that it is important to reflect on the purpose of children's participation. One purpose is for children to fit in to society and for children's power vis-à-vis adults to increase. In principle, adults make all the decisions, e.g. on the design of public spaces or the outcome of public processes. Children may be allowed to express their opinions in principal at an early stage, but are seldom heard later on when actual decisions are to be taken. Adults need to give up taking preference in different activities in order to let children's participation increase. They also have to take part in processes where children's perspectives on their own situation are not just seen as picturesque features, but are taken seriously and given significance. This requires that adults review their own conceptions of children and of children's situation.

There is no perfect model for participation (ibid.), what works best varies from case to case. Participation, after all, occurs in different contexts and at different levels. For children and young people, it might be a question of participating in a decision that touches on aspects of their own lives, or being involved in e.g. planning, design or perhaps the evaluation of specific services, as consumers. Participation at the society level might be about getting involved in social planning or environmental work. The political level is another context for young people to participate in.

Roger Hart (1992) discusses participation and the process of taking part in decisions that affect one's own life and the life in the community where one lives. According to Hart it is with the help of such a process that you build a democratic society; taking part is a fundamental civil right.

Hart (ibid.) argues that there are different opinions as to whether children and young people should be allowed to make their voices heard

in various situations. For some people children are society's salvation. Others claim that children's participation is a naive idea since children do not have the ability to make decisions that adults do. Yet others think that children should be protected from involvement and responsibility regarding society's problems. Hart believes that children need to become involved in meaningful projects together with adults. He argues that it is unrealistic to think that children, at the age of 16, 18 or 21, will suddenly become responsible, participating adults without previously having had the opportunity of practising the skills and responsibilities that are required in order to be involved. Hart claims that they have to practise:

*An understanding of democratic participation and the confidence and competence to participate can only be acquired gradually through practice; it cannot be taught as an abstraction. Many western nations think of themselves as having achieved democracy fully, though they teach the principles of democracy in a pedantic way in classrooms which are themselves models of autocracy. This is not acceptable.*

(ibid., p. 5)

There are many examples of children and young people actually organising themselves in order to do something or to influence something. Behind any such involvement there is motivation. Young people can create and handle complex projects if they feel that they own the project in some way. If they don't sense any form of ownership they will have no motivation, nor will they show the competence they actually possess.

*If young people do not at least partially design the goals of the project themselves, they are unlikely to demonstrate the great competence they possess. Involvement fosters motivation, which fosters competence, which in turn fosters motivation for further projects.*

(ibid., p. 5)

However, young people's participation and involvement in society is a complex issue (Hart, 1992). The degree of participation is not just a question of variations in children's development in terms of motivation and knowledge, but also of variations in terms of the social and cultural context they have grown up in. Hart discusses participation in different countries, how adults sometimes haven't had the possibility to influence or make their own voices heard either. He claims that the possibilities that children have of participating in everyday activities in the home, at school, in the



neighbourhood or in different social groups are reflected in adults' possibilities of participating in society. The author argues that adults' and childrens participation belong together, and that society as a whole benefits if the conditions are created to allow children to participate more. He writes:

*Intervening to improve children's participation is one means of fundamentally improving the whole society, but this should always be done while keeping in mind the child's family and the impact that a child's empowerment may have on his relationships within the family.*

(ibid., p. 5)

It has been mentioned earlier that there is no perfect model for participation. Hart, however, has developed a model, Hart's Ladder, which is often referred to in discussions about participation (Nordenfors, 2012). The model can be a useful tool, if not for anything else, a tool helpful to reflect on participation and different degrees of influence. Before describing the model it is of course important to see what the Child Convention says about participation and influence.

### **The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child - Article 12**

There are several articles in the Convention that is linked to participation and influence, but Article 12 is usually mentioned first. According to the article, signatory states shall guarantee *any child that is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express them freely in all matters that affect him or her*. Further, the child's views shall be given due weight in accordance with the child's age and maturity.

Recently the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child drew up a document (2009) in which Article 12 is analysed in greater detail. The Committee argues that a better understanding of what the article means is needed, as well as of how it can be made to apply for every child. The Committee claims that it is important to listen to the individual child as well as to groups of children, but that it is also important to try to listen to individual children expressing themselves collectively. Countries must assume that children have the capacity to express their views. Children must not have to prove their ability to express themselves before being listened to. Under the article, countries have the obligation to recognise children's rights to be heard, but children have a choice. Expressing an opinion is a choice the child makes, not an obligation.

In the clarification described above, the Committee discusses in greater detail what is meant by children's age and maturity. It is pointed out that the child has the right to influence its own life and that this does not apply only on those occasions when the child is vulnerable and in need of protection, but on all other occasions as well. Freedom of expression and access to information is held up as prerequisites for the child to exercise the right to form its own opinions as well as the right to express these freely. Children's voices can further provide interesting perspectives in various processes, and their views must be considered in decisions, policy formulations etc. According to the Committee, such processes should set off intensive dialogues between children and adults. The document provides an interesting analysis of issues concerning participation and influence and the implementation of these in various contexts.

### **Views on the Convention**

Various views have emerged on the Convention. Those dealt with here can hopefully initiate thought processes about how children in different situations are regarded and what space they are given in different contexts.

The paradox inherent in the Convention's view of children (Bartley, 1998) has been mentioned earlier, among other things, the Convention child comes across as a stereotype, and a closer definition of the term "children" is suggested. Children are seen as weak, vulnerable and subordinated to the care of parents and other adults. Children's need for protection is necessary but can in itself constitute a limitation of their independence.

Hart (1992) also discusses the Convention and argues that it emphasises the child's need for protection, but that it doesn't point out the obligations that come with the rights. His view is that children also need to understand that the rights citizens have also imply obligations. In order to learn about these obligations, children need to be engaged in various activities that allow them to cooperate with people who are older and more experienced than they are. That is part of the reason why it is so important that children participate in social projects.

The Child Convention emphasises children's right to protection and their ability to speak on their own account in legal matters, but the articles that deal with the right to be heard and freedom of expression go beyond this. Hart claims that children's right to express themselves and participate in society is sometimes opposed to the attitude that parents or guardians have to children. He says that children are not always allowed to express themselves at home with their families. The

best thing of course is if all children can make themselves heard, but that is not easy for all parents to understand as they themselves may not have been allowed to make their voices heard. The author's view is that the goal should be to encourage the whole family to participate, and he writes:

*While the child's freedom of expression and participation in community issues may often be contrary to the childrearing attitudes of the child's parents or caretakers, it is ultimately in the best interests of all children to have a voice. This is especially difficult for disadvantaged, low income parents to understand when they themselves have had no voice and see authoritarian child rearing as the best approach for their child's success. The aim should be to encourage the participation of the whole family. Sometimes children may themselves be the initiators but the goal should always be at least to make the parents aware of the process.*

(ibid., p. 7)

## **A model helpful to start reflect on participation**

In the following section, the model for participation/influence usually referred to as "Hart's Ladder" will be discussed. In Hart's original text (1992) he only uses the term "participation", I also use the term "influence" as both terms has been discussed previously above. As said before, Hart's Ladder can be a useful tool when we are trying to involve children in different situations. In this context it's interesting to think of how Arnér and Tellgren (2006) distinguish between "to affect", "to participate" and "to influence"<sup>5</sup>.

Rungs 4-8 on the ladder are examples of participation and varying degrees of influence while rungs 1-3 are not about participation and influence at all. Rungs 7 and 8 are models where children themselves take the initiative to do something and make decisions on their own or together with adults. Hart claims, however, that adults are not particularly good at responding to young people's own initiatives, which would appear even more important for us to reflect on.

### **Hart's Ladder**

Hart has borrowed the ladder concept from an article about participation for adults<sup>6</sup>, but has added new categories. The purpose of the

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<sup>5</sup> See "Definitions and purposes of participation and influence".

<sup>6</sup> Here Hart refers to Arnstein (1969).

model is to serve as a tool to start to think about children's participation/influence in different activities.

Below is a description of the rungs, from the lowest to the highest.

- 8 Child-initiated, shared decisions with adults
- 7 Child- initiated and directed
- 6 Adult-initiated, shared decisions with children
- 5 Consulted and informed
- 4 Assigned but informed
- 3 Tokenism
- 2 Decoration
- 1 Manipulation

### **Rungs 1-3 are not about participation and having influence**

The first three rungs of the ladder – manipulation, decoration and tokenism – are not about participation in the sense of having influence, but they can be useful to reflect on when children and young people are to be invited to participate in projects or other situations.

**1. Manipulation** – Manipulation can be about children carrying placards with a political message in a given context, without understanding what the message is or why they should carry the placards. Another example is asking children to draw their “dream playground”. Adults then collect the drawings, put all the ideas together and present them as “the children's design” in another context. The children, though, have not been shown the analysis of their ideas and have not been told how their ideas are going to be used. Hart terms this approach manipulative. If the children had been presented with the analysis, or if they had been told how the ideas were going to be used, the approach would not have been manipulative.

**2. Decoration** – Hart's examples of decoration include children singing or dancing at an event, wearing t-shirts with prints related to some issue or organisation. The children themselves have not been given sufficient information about what context they are acting in. The author here sees that the children are being used in a fairly indirect way.

**3. Tokenism** – Hart discusses various types of occasions in which children are given a voice, but they are not asked what they want to talk about –

they are not being given a choice. Neither do they have any choice regarding the forms for the communication, nor any possibility to express their own opinions on the subject they are talking about. This can be the case when children are used on conference panels; they are then being used as symbols (tokenism). He describes the following:

*Articulate, charming children are selected by adults to sit on a panel with little or no substantive preparation on the subject and no consultation with their peers who, it is implied, they represent. If no explanation is given to the audience or to the children of how they were selected, and which children's perspective they represent, this is usually sufficient indication that a project is not truly an example of participation.*

(Hart, 1992, p. 10)

However, Hart points out that there are also examples of children being allowed to participate in a good way at conferences, meaning that they have had the possibility to prepare themselves and so on. But regardless of what the children say, they usually get plenty of applause, have their photographs taken, and are featured in the local newspaper the following day as “aren't they sweet?”. As if what they said at the conference was not taken seriously. Sadly enough, Hart asserts, children learn from this experience that participation can be merely for show.

These first three rungs/levels of the ladder are thus not about participation/influence.

Here are a few wise words from Korczak again:

*The child is not dumb; there are as many fools among children as there are among adults. Dressed in the clothing of age how often do we impose thoughtless, uncritical, and impractical regulations. Sometimes a wise child is shocked by a malicious, senile, and abusive ignorance.*

(Korczak, 1992, p. 176)

### **Rungs 4-8 are about participation and about having influence**

Below are descriptions of another five rungs on the ladder. These are about participation and varying degrees of having influence. However, rung number 8 at the top of the ladder should not always be seen as the best model to apply. The possibilities for children to participate and

having real influence vary with age and social/cultural circumstances. Hart therefore talks about the importance of choosing rungs so that children's participation and influence increase as much as possible based on the circumstances.

**4. Assigned but informed** - Children are assigned but informed when they have been given a task and have been properly informed what the task is about. In order for children and young people really to have participated, they must have understood the intentions of the project and know how they are going to make decisions regarding their participation and why. They must have a meaningful task and must have volunteered for the project after it has been described to them.

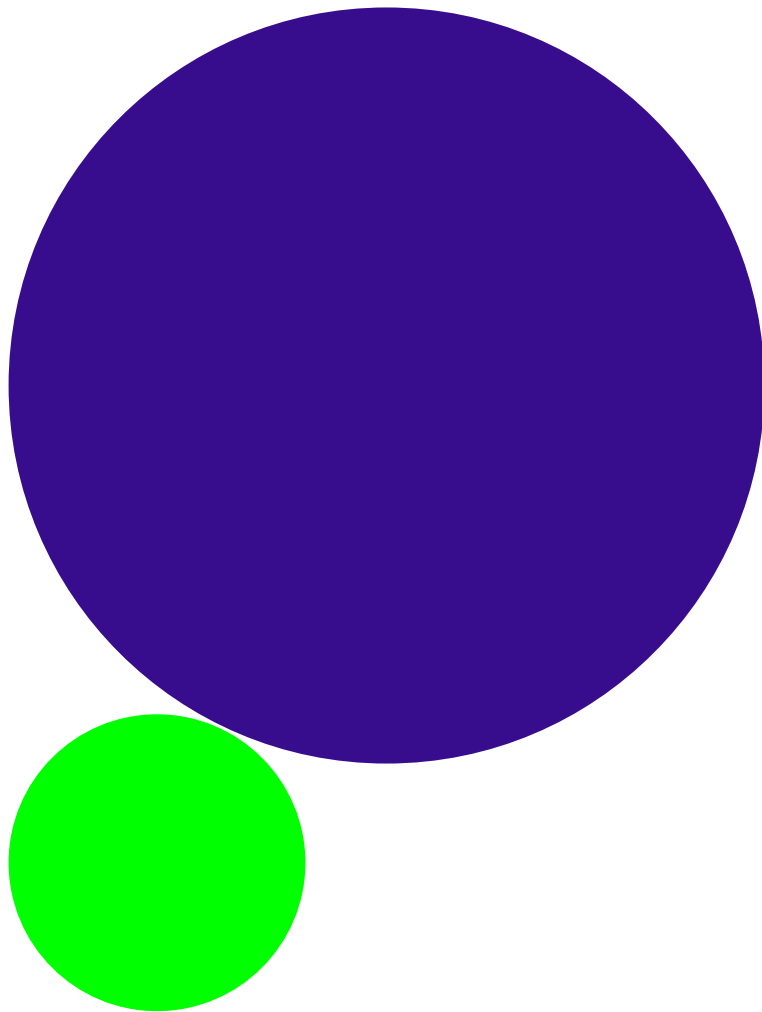
**5. Consulted and informed** - This rung implies that adults design and run a project, but that children work on it as consultants. The children understand the process of the project and their views are taken seriously. Hart gives an example of a TV broadcaster that sometimes consults children before creating new TV programmes. A low cost version of the programme is made first, for the children to watch and review. The programme is then redone based on the children's comments, after which the new version is shown to the same children.

**6. Adult-initiated, shared decisions with children** - This rung is about real participation/influence. Here adults take the initiative for a project, but decision making is shared with young people. Hart mentions an example, when children were taught to collect news from different parts of the country. They produced a daily newspaper, and professional journalists advised and assisted the children.

**7. Child-initiated and directed** - There are many examples of how children initiate different projects. If the circumstances are supportive, Hart argues that small children too can collaborate within large groups. He mentions a school where the children began to build on a sandbank behind the school. The children were under 8 years old, and there were about fifty of them each time. The school staff understood the value of this activity and refrained from getting involved and instructing the children.

**8. Child-initiated, shared decisions with adults** - Hart highlights an example from a school where he himself worked. He had divided the children into small groups to go out into the woods to observe animal behaviour from behind a specially built hideout. Two 10-year-olds from another class had seen this and decided to follow the example. They built a blind beneath a

table in their classroom and began to observe how their friends behaved. They used a form that Hart had designed for the animal observations. Their teacher supported this and made suggestions for how to improve their blind as well as the form. The activity became a valuable tool for the class of children to learn about themselves by observing their own behaviour. At the end of the school day the observations became a tool for resolving conflicts, among other things. If it hadn't been for the teachers' impressive insight and creativity, the children may never have been given the opportunity to develop this activity.



## **Examples of children's and young people's participation and influence in different activities**

Hart's ladder was one of the tools used in the search for interesting examples of children's and young people's participation and influence in this work. Three examples will be presented: Isblomma, BAMB and the Bunker. All three of them fits into the sixth rung on Hart's Ladder, i.e. decision making initiated by adults and shared with children or young people.

### **Delimitations and aims**

Certain delimitations were made from the start. Activities such as schools and preschools where the natural target group is children and young people were not given priority since they all probably work with "influence issues" in some way. It would have been problematic to choose only a few examples. However, one of the examples described is from a youth activity where of course young people are the natural target group. Things don't always turn out as intended. After having looked at various activities, and after having spoken to many different people, in both municipal and non-municipal activities, the road led to the three examples presented here: one from a university, one from an association, and one from a municipal youth activity. A number of activities were studied, some of which at first seemed interesting but were rejected on closer scrutiny.

As described earlier, the idea behind this study has been to identify instructive and illuminating examples of how professionals in different activities strive to let children participate and to give them influence. The aim has been to gain knowledge about the opportunities and difficulties of such efforts.

### Ambitions

The ambition was to interview children, young people and adults in each example and a total of six adults and seventeen children and young people were interviewed. Experiences of participation and influence in the activity were discussed. For ethical reasons no names will be given of the interviewees. Instead, young people are termed for instance young people, youth, adolescents or the young women or men, children are children and adults have been given various titles such as: the researchers or mentors, the coordinator, the director, the writer and the representative from Bona Via.

In the section that follows, the examples/projects will be introduced, with a description of how they evolved, how they are (were) financed and a description of the work concerning participation and influence of children and young people, based on various documents as well as on interviews. After that we get a closer look on what emerged in the interviews with the children, young people and adults involved.

The examples are presented in different ways since they are different in character. It seems necessary to define the terms used within the projects. It is also of interest to discuss the approach that BAMM is based on since this in turn can be related to the theoretical approaches highlighted earlier. The three examples are worth considering in different ways, and they have one thing in common, namely that they strive to let children and young people participate and to give them influence.

With the help of the different individual experiences that will be described here, and together with researchers' discussions of the child-perspective, children's perspectives, participation and influence, as well as of *the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*, my hope is that the report will serve as a basis for continued discussion - that it can become a small contribution, among many, in search for more reflection on children's and young people's influence in matters large and small.

## Three examples

### Isblomma - a film for the good route

Bona Via is a non-profit association that runs activities in Gothenburg for children, young people, young adults and parents in families where one of the adults is addicted to alcohol, illegal or legal drugs. At the beginning of 2008 the association was granted financial support from "Allmänna Arvsfonden" (The Swedish Inheritance Fund) for the project "Film för den goda vägen" (Film for the good route), and this funding made the film Isblomma possible. The film is based on young people's own experiences, and by means of a close collaboration between young people, the script-writers and the director, a feature film script was developed for Isblomma.

The young people involved in the project all have experiences of growing up in a family with substance addiction (Bona Via, 2009). *The aim of the film is to show how children are affected when one of the parents is addicted to alcohol or to illegal or legal drugs.* Another aim is for the film to serve as a tool for reaching out to children and young people who are in this situation. It is also intended to be a contact link to activities where they can receive help. The fundamental idea behind the project is for young people to help other young people.

"Allmänna Arvsfonden" demanded that the film should be implemented in some context, which is why a schoolproject also developed. A representative from Bona Via was a manager of the schoolproject, and three young women worked with the project. The project involved showing the film to school classes and then organising a discussion about

it, led by the three young women. The aim was to begin a dialogue... *that will hopefully help many young people come out of their shame and guilt. To let them know that there is help to be had and that they are not alone!* (www.isblomma.se)

The following presentation focuses on the filmproject.

### How it began

In 1991, a film was made for Bona Via called "Med rätt att leva" ("With the Right to Live"). It is about the children of alcoholics and it's still frequently screened in various contexts. Several years later, the director of that film read an article about how addiction within families is increasing. That was in 2006, and the article described how there were 3-4 children in every school class who live with a parent or parents that have an addiction of some kind, and that this is a family secret. It also described how addiction was increasing among youths and how the alcohol- and drug debut was dropping to ever lower age levels. That is why the director contacted Bona Via again to discuss a new film, a youth film. The idea was to ask young people themselves about how they experience their situation. That is how the idea of the film *Isblomma* started.

### From idea to reality

*At one of Bona Via's reunions a director visited us who had an idea of making a film. It was to be about someone whose parent was an alcoholic, and she wanted to create it together with young people from Bona Via. Some of us jumped at the chance...* That is how some of the young people describe the beginning of the filmproject. The director wanted the film to be about young people's reality, and for that reason it was also very important that the story came from them. It was important that the young women and men took part in the entire process, from scriptwriting to the actual shooting.

After a few meetings, seven young people became interested in participating in the film project. They met with the director and a representative from Bona Via once a month. During the meetings they talked about their own experiences of growing up in a family with addiction problems, but also about the need to make a film. It was going to be a film by and for young people. Eventually a writer was invited to the meetings. She took part of experiences and ideas and wrote a film script based on them. During the process, which took about two years, script ideas were read together with the young women and men, who made comments and offered suggestions. The script was given a thorough going over, was altered and adapted, and finally it was read by actors at a seminar. That was when all those involved

began to understand that they had been successful, that it would turn into a film that would be shot during the summer of 2008.

### Film production work and trial screenings

Casting was done during the early summer of 2008. Three young women on the project participated in the screen tests. They also went out to schools themselves to run screen tests, with good results. Throughout the whole production, there was a continuing collaboration between the young people on the project, the film team and the director.

Work began with a kick-off event at which the youths and the director told the team and actors about the film's purpose and goal. The young women and men were given various tasks to do with casting, sound and lighting, photography, set design and general duties. The film team was divided according to different areas of responsibility and the various groups met before the start of production, to plan. One person was appointed responsible for each group, and this person gave instructions to the young people as well as answering their questions. The team was relatively young, which was a conscious choice by the director as the film was for and about young people. It was easy to build a sense of community and everyone took full responsibility for their tasks.

In the report on the project, the process of producing a film is described as stressful and an expensive process that requires concentration from all involved. There is no time for hesitation. The director describes how the young people handled the situation in a very competent way. Before each day of shooting, the timetable was emailed to everyone, and each day began with a meeting with the film team, after which the director met with the actors to talk to them about the day's scenes. During shooting, the young women and men helped the younger actors find their way around, they had an important function. When the shooting was over there was a party.

A fair amount of work remained after shooting, including editing, sound and lighting, as well as the writing of music and texts. The young women and men participated by commenting at the editing stage, but also by taking part in trial screenings and the discussions that followed. On one occasion parents and friends participated as well, in order to also let them share their views and perspectives on the film.

### Interviews about Isblomma

Interviews with three young women in a group and with three adults individually will be detailed below. As previously mentioned, adults are referred to by their titles, and quoted names have been changed to titles.

## On trust

*The child is a rational being. He knows full well what his needs, difficulties, and obstacles in life are.*

(Korczak, 1992, p. 176)

I met the three young women on Bona Via's premises – they prepared coffee and we chatted before the actual interview began. I told them again why I wanted to talk to them, about my work and about the fact that the interview would primarily focus on participation and influence in the process making the film. There would be no focus on their background and about what it's like to grow up in a family with addiction problems. However, I soon realised that the two things were difficult to separate.

We started to talk about how the whole thing began and they explained that a director came to one of their reunions to introduce an idea for making a feature film which was to be based on young people's experiences. Six young people became interested and began to see the director regularly in order to build their trust in her. I understood that it was rather touchy to talk about how things had been at home. One of the girls told me that the director had worked with Bona Via before and knowing that probably made it easier to have trust in her from the beginning. People working at Bona Via knew that the director was a good person; perhaps it would have been different if it had been another director. The other girls didn't think so much about that, but instead thought it sounded exciting to make a film and also that you didn't actually have to talk if you didn't want to. You didn't have to tell everything, only those things you felt like telling. That's how it usually works at Bona Via.

They said it was a long process that it took quite a long time before anything happened at all. Eventually a writer was invited to the meetings, yet another person to begin to have trust in, but the director thought it was important to let the process take the time that was needed.

*... we spent a lot of time together, chatting and having coffee. But I know that thing about trust, we talked about it before the writer was going to come in, I think it was the director who brought it up and said that things shouldn't move fast with the writer unless we... "I want you to feel that she really cares, that she listens and that you build trust". So the director really didn't push us when the writer came in. So they were sensitive to our side of things.*

One way I understood that the subject was sensitive was when the young women talked about why they had become interested in being

part of the project. On the one hand it was a spontaneous reaction that it would be fun to make a film. On the other hand they didn't at first want to tell anyone that they were making a film via Bona Via. One of them recalled that at the beginning she never mentioned the word film. If anyone asked where she was going and what she was going to do, she only answered that she was off "to some meeting". Another girl described her thoughts at the beginning:

*... "As long as I don't have to show the film to my family, it's OK", that's how I thought at the beginning.*

The others agreed and recognised themselves in this. Later during the conversation they also talked about their "baggage" and that it's common for children of alcoholics to be somewhat afraid of clashing with authorities, and how that may have affected them in this process. One of them said the following:

*It was really like "Shit, she's a director, she's going to make a film, she's invited us of all people, she's letting us do this together with her – maybe we shouldn't criticise what she does". But I don't think it was anything that she brought in, that she had to be "bigger" than us, but I think it's something we have in our baggage...*

The others confirmed that it was probably about their baggage. That was probably also the reason they didn't dare comment too much on the script to begin with, but that changed:

*I think they were pretty good listeners overall actually, specially the writer because she like absorbed everything we said. She was really like that, she was really good and at the beginning she was a bit so and so because we didn't dare criticise since we were scared of it ourselves and very scared of people like that... and then it was like we dared maybe to say things like that name isn't right... but when we'd met 10 times, then it was like, hell, now we can say what's really not right.*

When I spoke to the writer and the director, it seemed that listening was a very natural thing for both of them. "How can you make a film at all without the people it's about?" the director asked. She also described that it's very common that children who grow up in families with addictions are betrayed by adults. That's why it's so important that a process like this takes time and that you listen.

The representative from Bona Via said that she somehow took it for



granted that she should take part in the “film meetings”. I asked why and she discussed back and forth. Maybe there wasn’t any particular reason, perhaps it was about protecting the young people. She argued that Bona Via has a responsibility to ensure that the children are treated well and that they are not getting used in any way, but she also carefully pointed out that she had a lot of faith in the director. She never thought the youths would be treated badly. When I spoke to the young women I realised just how important the adults at Bona Via are and have been for them. Bona Via gives them security and support, so it may have been significant for them that someone from Bona Via was there for the meetings, especially in the beginning.

### **Different perspectives meet**

The young people are the basis of all the stories in the film, but the director argues that it is important to point out that the script is written by the writer. Working on the script went on for a couple of years, and all the stories are mixed.

The early meetings were held without preconceptions. The young men and women described themselves, and after a while they decided what the family in the film should look like. The lead role was to be a girl, and they decided that the father should have addiction problems. In order for the audience to understand that these kinds of problems are everywhere, the family should be an “ordinary” one, and not a family in which there were already many other problems. The writer wrote a first manuscript, she discussed it with the director, and then it was read together with the youths. They made comments, which might be about choice of words but could also be concrete suggestions for changes. For example, the end of the film was discussed a lot, it was hard to decide how it would end. Many scriptversions were written and debated.

The writer said that the film doesn’t always reflect the youths’ stories. It wasn’t possible to include everything, and for the scriptwriter and director there was also the aspect of artistic freedom. The writer tested scripts based on the young people’s suggestions, some worked while others didn’t. She said that they might occasionally have felt let down, but never unheard.

The girls talked about the fact that they had different experiences and sometimes felt differently about the script, even when they saw the film for the first time. Sometimes they had to reach a compromise:

*... since we were coming from different experiences, I sometimes felt that I had another experience that didn't match several of the others', and then of course it didn't turn out the way I wanted it, but that's something you just have to take...*

It’s important to focus on the children, said the representative from Bona Via, because the focus easily ends up on the addicted parent. At Bona Via they are constantly working to maintain focus on the children. She therefore found it interesting during the work on the script when the young women and men themselves saw the focus shifting to someone other than the main character in the family, they pointed it out. Focus had to be on Isa, the older sister in the family.

“What do you think would have happened to the film if the youths hadn’t been part of it?”

*... I think that if they hadn't been there I would have had more focus on the activities at Bona Via in general, I really believe that... because it's dear to my heart and I obviously want more people to come to us...*

I understood that she is very engaged in her work and feels very strongly about what she does. She described how she had tried to get something about Bona Via’s activity into the script and that it felt important. We talked about the different interests and perspectives that the work encompassed and that they were all important. The writer and I also discussed the different perspectives that met during the course of the process. Despite the different perspectives, she felt that there was no one who mixed “their person” with the work. It was always about making the film as good as possible and how it was going to be received by audiences.

The director told me that the directors’ role isn’t always simple. Film production is both about time and money, it’s about keeping the production together, about being supportive and inspiring. Sometimes it’s about making quick decisions, and it’s difficult to please everyone. She said that as the director you have to be able to draw the line and also think in the long term. A film like *Isblomma* will be shown for a long time and will live for years.

### **Popular children**

I spoke to the three young women about Hart’s Ladder and about his example of that children sometimes are used on conference panels. Often they have not had the possibility to prepare themselves on the subject. Sadly enough, no matter what they say one can be sure of a lot of applause and photography and attention in media. Children are quite simply very popular, it’s enough that they sometimes only show themselves. I asked the young women if any of them had experienced anything like that. One of them recalled a public appearance:

*We often say that we're so incredibly popular, but I once said that I wasn't quite into it, yet they said it was alright anyway. And I'm not nervous, because all I have to do is show myself and half the job is done...*

They told me that they sometimes participate in various appearances with Bona Via association and that they know how they will become popular just by turning up, that people think it's cute with young people. Sometimes they go to different events to represent Bona Via, it's good for the association. The activity at Bona Via is important for the three of them and for others, and it is with Bona Via's help that they are now able to talk about the situation they had at home. However, the young ladies also expressed a certain frustration over that they sometimes just need to show up to get applauded. They are also often being treated like victims, they think people feel sorry for them. The conversation continued:

*Yes, it's frustrating, but we also use it. I can sometimes get a bit of age paranoia, I really mean it, because I realise that you can get a lot of good stuff when you're young. I mean that when you're a young person, that you become a bit more popular in various contexts and then you might lose that... but I do not feel that we're not taken seriously because everywhere we participate we almost get an expert role because we've experienced things and most of the other people we talk to have no idea whatsoever...*

### **About daring and developing**

I wondered how this process had affected the three of them. Two of them said that they now dare tell people about their background and that is because of the process. One of them expressed the following:

*First it's about daring to say that you're a child of an alcoholic and then you have to dare to tell other people, you will have to dare to say it, that you're making a film about it, to all the people around you... I mean it's not like I'm going around waving a flag, but...*

Somebody else told me that she now consider whether she wants a person to know about her background or not, that the feeling of not saying anything instinctively is no longer there. One of them said that she thinks she has changed during the process, but it didn't happen from one day to the other, after all it's been a process that has been going on for several years. They discussed the film meetings, that they at first seemed

to be some kind of continuation of the meetings they had at Bona Via earlier. The film meetings were an opportunity to carry on talking, because that need was still there. One of them felt that there was a big change when the film was made, that's when she suddenly started to tell other people that she was involved in a film. She said:

*I mean there hadn't been a reason before, so you might say I've developed from not saying anything to others to being open about it in those situations where I felt it was right.*

One young woman feels that her focus has changed from feeling sorry for the person who drinks to feel sorry for the child instead and that happened during the film project. It's like having gone from the worst to something good. Someone began to talk about influence and described that they came to Bona Via when they were children to receive help. Then they became involved in a big project and got influence in a way that they haven't had at home in the same way at all. Since the film was released they've been invited to big conferences to speak and they've met various politicians:

*... there we are, we who haven't had any influence at all, just like that, that makes you realise that you actually can do something. If you have a bit of luck but also like a bit of your own will, and if you have a bit of time you could use really a lot of time for everything that is...*

*At this point they were speaking all at once, about the fact that it is possible, that you actually can influence things. About how they've discovered different things during the process - this wasn't just about the filmproject, but also about the schoolproject that was launched after the film was finished. The conversation continued:*

*Yeah, you do have some influence in doing something after all, and it's pretty amazing to feel that when you used to feel pretty powerless, or at least I feel that I have been...*

*But it's more that kind of holistic view that nothing really needs to be that difficult... specially now, afterwards...*

*You can actually contribute to make yourself feeling good, just something like that...*

### Background

BAMM is short for “Barn som medforskare av matlandskap” (“Children as co-researchers of foodscapes”) and is an interdisciplinary project that run 2008–2010 at the University of Gothenburg’s Centre for Consumer Science (CKF), with support from Formas<sup>7</sup>. Through the project nine researchers have developed a method that could be useful in any context that involves children in work- and change processes (Brembeck et al 2010).

When it comes to child research it is not common for children to be involved in the actual research process. In the report about BAMM the researchers describe how it’s even less common to involve children in research about food and health. That is a field dominated by quantitative studies that try to follow and measure the effects of and evaluate various interventions directed at children on the basis of public health or food science. Within BAMM, they didn’t want to research about children, but with children. The basis for the work has been the involved children’s interest and their questions about food and foodscapes. What is interesting to children and what children want to know more about are some of the guiding questions for the work.

### Health promotion and participation

BAMM is about food and health, and is linked to health promotion according to the researchers. Health promotion can be defined as a process that enables people to increase control over, and to improve, their health. BAMM is thus about giving more power to children in issues concerning health. Like health promotion, BAMM is all about being health supportive and to enable people to develop competence and confidence regarding their own health they need to take part in the process themselves. In BAMM, this is about children’s participation and influence on research concerning food and foodscapes.

### The terms *foodscape* and *co-researcher*

In BAMM they define *foodscapes* as places where children, in their daily lives, encounter food, eating and messages about food. According to the authors, this definition has been concrete and graspable in the project, both children and adults have found it easy to understand, and it has been preferable to use comparing to other, more theoretical applications of the term.

There are four identified ways of viewing children and childhood in research: *children as objects*, *children as subjects*, *children as social actors*

7 The Research Council for the environment, agricultural sciences and spatial planning.

and *children as co-researchers*. In research about food and health, children are still most commonly regarded as objects. With this outlook, children’s lives and welfare are studied from an adult perspective, with the help of information from e.g. parents, teachers and others. Children are seen as vulnerable and incompetent, and are regarded as unfinished persons who need adults’ care and fostering. Children are seen as “becomings”.

There is another research approach that regards children as “beings”. According to this outlook children are subjects with their own wishes, thoughts and life worlds. Children are seen as valuable, but different. There is a development of this approach<sup>8</sup> in which children are not just seen as subjects but also as social actors who take part in, change and are changed by the world they live in. Children are seen as independent, competent individuals who can look after themselves. On this view, no differences between children and adults are taken for granted, and no special methods are needed to do research about children. It is from the perspective of children as social actors that the concept of “children as co-researchers” has been developed.

### Children as co-researchers

In the report on BAMM, the researchers discuss how it is possible to turn children into co-researchers. They discuss power aspects in relations and communication cultures. They also offer advice to others who want to work with children as co-researchers. Among other things, it is important to think through the choice of research environment. Different environments have their advantages and disadvantages and frame the research in their particular way, which is important to keep in mind. Further, it might not always be beneficial for children to participate in all phases of the research. Sometimes a particular area needs to be elucidated where children’s participation is valuable. It can therefore be better to determine the degree of co-research based on the project’s goals, and then adapt the methods accordingly. It is important, however, not to be limited by preconceptions of what one thinks children of various ages can manage. The researchers also highlight children’s free will and to consider which groupsize that would suit the research project best. Further, just like adults, children need to learn how to do research. It is important to select methods that suit the co-researchers; for the children in BAMM, the less an activity was like ordinary schoolwork, the better. Children’s own resources should be the starting point of the work. That means taking their skills, knowledge and values seriously in order to let them enrich the research. Even more important is to have an attitude

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towards the children that is characterised by respect and mutual exchange. The researchers point out that it is important to reflect on one's own role as "a different kind of adult". They argue that it is easy to enter into familiar roles in relation to each other. Finally they suggest giving children an insight into the world of research, i.e. how a researcher relates to knowledge and knowledge production, and to think about how to get the research out into society.

### **BAMM - how was it done?**

The researchers in BAMM wanted to work with children as co-researchers to see if they together could highlight healthy aspects of the children's foodscape that appealed to the children themselves. The ambition was that the researchers should function as mentors for the children and to be responsive to the children's interests and wishes. They wanted the co-researching to evolve together with the children.

Forty-four children in two parallel fourth classes became co-researchers, they were thus 10 years old. The project began with the mentors spending a day at the school, to participate in lessons but also to have lunch and afternoon snacks with the children. Later on that day the children met at the After school club for a more formal presentation of the project. The children were also asked to begin to think about what the word foodscape could mean, they also got to know that it was voluntary to participate in the project. In the evening an introduction was held for the parents and they were asked to give their consent to their children's participation in the project. The children were divided into six groups, each with a researcher as a mentor. The groups met one afternoon each week, at first in the classroom and then, after school hours, at the After school club. The researchers could also take part in the children's morning classes.

First a research class was organised since one couldn't expect the children to know very much about research. The mentors described things such as formulating research questions, developing methods, analysing and reporting. It was important to direct the children's interest towards reflecting on the term food and foodscapes first since that was the focus of the project. The children used their creativity by drawing and painting to illustrate various thoughts about foodscapes. They were further asked to keep a food diary for a day, and on a few occasions tastings were arranged. Early in the project, the children, the mentors and teachers visited Hälsoäventyret Oasen (a health promotion development unit in Vara<sup>9</sup>) to take part in the activity "Good fuel". This visit had two purposes; to do something fun together and to study the subject, namely food and health. To study

<sup>9</sup> A small village in Sweden.

the subject are always part of a research process and this exercise was suitable for the children instead of reading books.

During the research process the children posed a number of creative questions about food, such as how much food costs, what astronauts eat, what shop the food is from, and so on. The various research groups also held discussions about how you can find out things you are wondering about. Among other things, that led to activities like taking photographs and interviewing people. The mentors tried to base everything on the research questions the children were asking, and when the material had been collected, compiled and analysed they asked the children what they wanted to know more about or what they were curious about. The groups thus developed in different directions. Among other things, two of the groups began to explore the phenomenon of taste - that was when a tasting was arranged of various cereals. Together they formulated the research question "Why is everything that tastes good unhealthy?". For that reason the children went to the supermarket next occasion to find products they thought were nice but which didn't contain any sugar. During their visit to the supermarket the children carefully studied different labels with lists of contents, and different prices. They were then asked to work on various questions prepared by the mentors, including "Have you chosen something healthy?" and "Were the products advertised in the supermarket?". New questions arose about advertising which eventually led to that all groups were watching commercials on film. Other activities within the project included visiting a pizzeria and the school's dining hall, a crisps tasting, interviews with parents, etc.

When the research class was finished, BAMM was reported to the parents. The children decided themselves what they wanted to tell about the research. Various stations were set up containing information such as photo collages, health adventures, tastings, advertising films and parents' foodscapes. The children were responsible for the various parts and parents could move between the stations. Before that the mentors informed the parents about what the children had done during the autumn.

The conclusion from BAMM is that ten-year-old children are very competent co-researchers. The children learnt more about food and health, but most importantly, their self-esteem grew. They were proud to have been allowed to participate in and to control a research process. That became evident during the presentation for the parents. The children were also interviewed in the local press and on a radio programme, where they came across as both competent and interested food researchers. An evaluation survey produced a long list of suggestions for continued research, and fifteen children immediately signed up for continued research the following semester. Also the mentors say that they have

learnt new things. Since the children led the process, they learned things about children's relation to food and their foodscapes that were quite different from what the adult world generally see.

### Interviews about BAMB

Two researchers and a total of nine children were interviewed about BAMB. The children were interviewed in groups of two.

#### How interest was awakened

The researchers were looking for a suitable area to work with children as co-researchers of foodscapes and found a municipality that was working actively with food and health in schools. They contacted an After school club that received children from one of the schools in the area, thinking they might be able to do the research at the club. The leader in charge was very positive to BAMB and became involved.

The head teacher at the school was also positive to take part in BAMB. There were two parallel fourth-year classes at the school whose teachers also became interested in collaborating with the researchers. When the researchers understood that it would be difficult to assemble the same group each time at the After school club, they were instead offered to work with the children in the two classes during school hours. The teachers thought that BAMB fitted in with the theme they were currently working on.

The researchers first went to the school to meet the children. They had lunch together then they went into the classrooms to explain to the children who they were. After school the researchers held a more coherent presentation of BAMB at the After school club. They introduced themselves one by one and began to talk about foodscapes, inviting the children to begin to think about what that might be. At this point the children were tired and a bit lacking in concentration. Afterwards the researchers weren't sure how many children were interested in participating.

The alternative to participating in BAMB was to do something together with the teacher. The majority of the children were interested, but a few children might have joined BAMB because they didn't have any alternative that seemed more fun. Possibly the trip to Hälsoäventyret Oasen in Vara was an attraction, and possibly the children were affected by teachers and the leader at the After school club encouraging them to join BAMB. It's difficult to know for sure, but the two researchers I interviewed believed that the children became interested partly because they thought it was exciting and because it involved doing other things than the usual school work.

The researchers do not believe that the children felt forced to participate, they carefully tried to explain the purpose of BAMB, and they believe that the children thought BAMB was serious. Among other things, they explained to the children by means of various examples that they wanted to ask how the children themselves regarded different situations to do with food.

*... we wondered how the children viewed this and what they actually wanted, and perhaps there's no harm in asking the children what they think. I think they felt from the beginning that this was a serious undertaking...*

"Why did you become interested?" I asked the children in the first group I met. One of them replied that he was interested in getting two dishes in the school dining room. I wondered if the BAMB researchers had said that there were going to be two dishes?

*No, but they said that it was something you could try to make happen, and then I was in a group that was going to make models so that we'd be able to try to convince them to make two dishes.*

As far as I understand there were not yet two dishes to choose between, but the boy didn't express any disappointment about it. At least there was a will to change something at school. A girl became interested because she thought it seemed fun to do research. One of the boys said that it sounded like fun to go on an excursion, and then he began to describe making models in BAMB.

#### Roles in the school environment

I discussed school and roles with the researchers. They didn't want to be authorities who told the children what to do and how to do it, but they said that they, in the school environment, were more easily given the role of a teacher or a supply teacher:

*... we didn't want to be the kind of authorities who said now you do this and now you do that, the risk then is that you're seen as a teacher who doesn't manage to draw the line, you become that supply teacher who is not so important, and this is of course one of the downsides of working in schools, precisely because these roles are there and it becomes difficult perhaps to define this new role, particularly as we had fairly large groups...*

The large groups were occasionally seen as a disadvantage when it came to give advice to the children. It was positive that many children wanted to participate, but some were possibly there because there were no other alternatives that seemed more fun. Then involvement was a bit lacking, sometimes the children were doing other things which meant that the researchers had to tell them off, and then they became something else than the mentors they wanted to be. We also talked about school as an arena for research and that it has both advantages and disadvantages. The researchers said that if they were going to work more with the method that was developed in BAMB, it would be important to reflect on precisely the role you get as mentor – in order to be more conscious of this than they were at the beginning in BAMB.

*... it's actually not that easy to come in and sort of be another type of adult, that you want to be that mentor on a slightly more equal level. It's not just a question of... no matter how good your intentions are, you come into an already existing structure, and the children have different ways of seeing adults, different categories. You have to work on that quite consciously, how you're going to do it, to introduce yourself, what activities to begin with and so on...*

We further talked about whether it would have been easier if the groups had been smaller, though it's not only about the size of the group. It's also about being inside the school's structure, about sitting in classrooms and having activities that are similar to school activities. They felt it was a challenge, but it was instructive as well.

I also discussed roles with the children, asking them how they thought the adults in BAMB were, if they were different from the teacher at school. Someone replied that they were like all other adults, someone else thought they were more fun and referred specifically to his mentor. One boy talked about the fact that adults sometimes laugh at what children say, but he didn't think the adults in BAMB did so – instead they were sometimes too nice. He said something like this:

*BAMB listened, but they were too nice sometimes, they didn't put their foot down. We participated a bit too much.*

### **On research and on children as co-researchers**

I asked the children what they thought when they were asked if they wanted to take part in a research project. They told me that it seemed fun, and a boy said that he would like to learn about the effects from different vitamins. Now, though, he didn't think that was interesting any

more. We decided that it was because he had now talked about it so much that he had grown tired of it. Someone else said that it wasn't that much fun to do research at first, but that it became more fun.

“Can you tell me what it is you do when you do research?” I asked. One of them replied that he couldn't remember how they did it. I asked if they didn't ask a bunch of questions, and again got the reply that they couldn't remember that they had done research, but that they did other things. I asked:

*But isn't that like doing research then? Because when you did things maybe you found out about things.*

*We did find out about a whole lot of things.*

The children in the other group I met told me that they tested different foods and fruits and that they did a tasting of cereals. They thought it was exciting to design the dining hall and imagine what it would look like. Apparently the queues to it are very long. They told me that they were given different tasks by the mentors, but that they also could influence what they were going to do. They explained that at first they worked with BAMB and with food, and then with technology, that they went to the Chalmers University of Technology to invent things. One boy said that it's cool to do research and that he discovered that the researchers in BAMB were actually real researchers.

The researchers described what it was like to guide the children, they said it worked out fine to let the children lead them. When the children had finished something, the mentors asked them what they thought, if there was anything they hadn't found out about and if there was anything they'd be able to ask more about, if they could carry on researching something. Many different ideas came up in every group, and the mentors couldn't follow all of them, but had to settle for one line of reasoning. They had to stick to ideas that was possible to realise. For instance, it wasn't possible to go off somewhere far to study something.

The mentors further described how they themselves have learned that there are other types of attitudes to food, regarding children, than those that appear in the media. The children had a serious interest in food, in ingredients and in various “foodalarms”. Ethical issues came up too. Some children, for example, were interested in where the rice was from, but these questions were harder to follow up – they couldn't possibly go to Asia to look at rice paddies.

Once a week the mentors met to discuss how things were going in the various groups and how they might move on based on what the

children wanted. The mentors had to prepare visits, e.g. telephone the school dining hall to ask if it was all right to visit. Each week they waited to hear what the children wanted and then they made plans on what was possible to do.

*... a certain type of preparatory planning was needed for our part and then we did that and then we let it loose and it worked, actually. I mean it does feel a bit scary as an adult not to have that curriculum for the autumn's co-research on hand, but it worked really well and they had a number of ideas and were really involved.*

The researchers said that when you work with children as co-researchers, it's the children who should be doing the work, you have to regard it as a meeting, a cooperation between children and researchers:

*... you have to see it as a cooperation, but that we have competence in how to do research and they have competence in being children and in the child's perspective. And then of course you have to meet halfway, and there's nothing wrong in teaching them how to do research.*

When BAMB ended, 15 children announced their interest in carrying on doing research. This year a postgraduate student from the Centre for Consumer Science is being a mentor. The children who are continuing now are the really interested ones. The postgraduate student has reported that the children have lots of ideas and that they now know how to go about doing research.

#### **About not changing eating habits**

An important point for the supervisors was that they were not going to tell the children what was right and wrong when it came to food. Instead they assumed that the children already knew. The fact that they didn't try to change the children's eating habits was a prerequisite for their functioning as co-researchers – that the researchers were going to research with the children, not about them. They said that the children would hopefully get a greater awareness of health issues anyway, through reflection:

*Of course you don't necessarily have to be all that healthy because you're researching on health, good if you can see it like that and that it hopefully can lead to an understanding and awareness of health issues and so on. You do reflect on those things in the long run, not just knowing that this is healthy and that is unhealthy.*

For the first tasting the mentors brought apples, and later the children were interested in doing tastings of e.g. cereals. The mentors had to respect that, and that tasting in turn led to questions about the problems with sweet things and how, for instance, sweet cereals are marketed for children. The children found out what different products contained, what nutrients there are and what you need in order to be healthy – their knowledge deepened. The fact that the mentors pursued the children's ideas, they got to see various attitudes to food that they wouldn't have seen if they had focused on what was right and wrong. The children were for example very interested in finding out what they should eat to have energy for their sport activities. They were interested in the chemical side of things, for instance what glutamate contains. Their interest in these things, the researchers said, is absolutely natural when you are ten years old, and that is something that needs to be understood and respected.

I asked the children what they had learned during their time in BAMB. Someone had learned that meat contains a lot of protein. One boy said that he is more careful with food now, that he thinks more about what it contains. He wants to eat food that's a bit healthier. Someone else talked about the fact that you need to be careful about what you buy, that it can be unpleasant to think about how eggs are produced, for instance.

## **The Bunker**

#### **About the activity**

The Bunker was inaugurated in September 2007 and is located in an old air raid shelter, thereby the name. It's an activity that comprises music, photo and film and is linked to a school and a youth club in Gothenburg City. The Bunker has fully equipped rehearsal spaces which are run in collaboration with ABF (the Workers' Educational Association). The activity includes a "rockschool" where young people can enrol and have access to a music leader once a week. There is also a recording studio and access to equipment and editing for photo, film and graphic design. To gain access to the premises, young people have to attend a free introductory course to learn how to use the equipment for their area of interest.

#### **Brief background**

Young people in the city district showed a clear interest in music, so a rockschool started already in 2004, with leaders. The school grew, and soon ten bands were rehearsing there each semester. Eventually the bands began to rehearse on their own without a leader. Those who wished to pursue music wanted an empty rehearsal space where it was possible

use their own equipment, and where they would be able to spend more time rehearsing than what was possible at the youth club.

During spring, 2005, one room became a basic recording studio, a lot of people wanted to learn more about making music through computers. The studio was difficult to soundproof which caused problems since the school also used the premises. The desire for a larger space with better conditions for bands to record grew bigger. When the youth club organised a music camp, further requests came up about finding a good place for photo- and film editing. Among other things, the young people wanted to make music videos, preferably with access to a recording studio as well.

The youth coordinator and interested youths began looking for suitable premises together. Eventually a proposal involving the old air raid shelter was presented to the politicians in the district and they decided to allocate funds to fulfil the young people's wishes. The shelter was converted into what is now known as "the Bunker". In the process a construction board was formed with 10 young people and one adult who works as youth adviser and is also the project coordinator for the Bunker. This construction board was responsible for interiors and equipment matters, and contributed proposals and comments regarding security issues. During discussions the idea came up of applying for funds from the National Board for Youth Affairs in order to develop, among other things, a model for young people's influence which at the same time would increase social interaction. The funds were granted and the Bunker received SEK 450,000 in project support. One of the aims of the project was to develop a model... *for influence that managed to unite different types of participation and influence while at the same time being democratically consistent. When it is complete, the idea is that the model will be applicable on other, similar activities.*

### How does the Bunker work?

Young people spend time on their own in the Bunker, and there is a lot of interest in participating on various courses. The factors for success in the Bunker, "the building blocks" or the guidelines, are described in an activity report from August 2007 until December 2008 and are presented below in italics words. These are about adults showing trust and faith in young people's own ability to take responsibility. It is important to create a feeling of responsibility and reliance, that feeling must permeate the activities at the Bunker. When the young people have attended an introductory course in their area of interest, or have attended a semester at the rock-school, they sign a commitment, which gives them access to the premises and the equipment. For adolescents under 18, a parent or guardian also has to sign the commitment. The commitment is intended to serve as a form of support within the activity, and was formulated together with

young people in order to create space for influence and understanding. When the young people pick up their key, they are also given a run-through of locking and alarm routines, as well as fire safety regulations. The adults at the Bunker are a premises caretaker and various tutors for music, film and photography. The tutors' role is to train, not to keep an eye on how the young people are behaving. Conversations between adults and young people are more on creative processes than on matters of order. In that way, they believe that the feeling of *trust, faith and responsibility* grows, and those three words are the Bunker's guidelines.

The Bunker is meant to be *accessible* to young people, they are meant to be able to use the equipment when they get inspired and feel creative, regardless of age or experience. The physical accessibility and the social aspect, i.e. wanting to go to the Bunker belong together according to the activity report. The premises have a code card entry system, which increases security and makes it possible for more people to have their own "key". The space and equipment are reserved by means of a booking system on a website developed by young people. Since the beginning, the youth have said that it is important that those who use the premises know what is expected of them. If everything is *perfectly clear* it will create a sense of security even when you are there as a beginner. The Bunker must also be characterised by *flexibility*, and therefore it is possible to join the activity at any time during the year. The content of the introductory courses is based on the young people's prior knowledge and to some extent also their social situation, which can vary from group to group. The technical equipment must be user friendly and of good quality, which in the Bunker is known as *qualitative simplicity*.

It's possible for young people to get involved in the activity for shorter or longer periods of time. They can become involved in the activity generally, or as part of a private wish or dream about doing something special. The activity is divided into different groups of interest, and all those authorised to use the activity are invited to meetings at least once during a semester. On those meetings decisions about development and maintenance are made. The youth adviser/project coordinator who is responsible for the activity strives, together with the tutors, to make all suggestions from young people workable. This has led to the founding of the Ramaskri cultural association. The association serves as a network for all interested young people and consists of a project committee which is represented on a board. New projects are constantly being added and old ones disappear or change direction. Through these forums, young people are given the opportunity to influence the management of their area of interest. The activity report describes this as *multi-dimensional influence*, which is one of the building blocks in the activity alongside *qualitative simplicity, flexibility, accessibility and clarity*.



## Interviews about the Bunker

Below interviews about the Bunker will be portrayed. I met seven teenagers in a group and they were between 13-19 years old, both young men and women. I refer to them mainly as the group. I also met the coordinator responsible for the activity. It's important to point out that though she is responsible for the activity, the Bunker is not her workplace.

### To feel that you are being taken seriously

We spoke for a long time. The conversation had touched on different things, responsibility but also involvement, support and a sense of togetherness. It was an intriguing conversation. Finally I asked the group if they would like to tell me something special about participation, influence, or about adults' attitudes towards children. I explained that I wanted to know what was important for them. In other words, did they want to convey anything special? They pointed out that it's important to feel that they are being taken seriously, and that the more responsibility they get, the better it is. Someone talked about how good it was to be on the same level as those who are bosses or leaders, that you can talk to them as friends. ... *It's not like the adults running things and you are just the young person...*

### Getting a driving licence - the conditions

Young people decide what goes on at the Bunker, and to gain access to the premises and equipment they have to complete an introductory course. Attend the introductory course can be likened to get a driving licence, according to the coordinator. When 18-year-olds get their driving licences, this signifies that they have been entrusted with driving a car and can manage in traffic. At the Bunker they don't have to be 18 to take an introductory course. Regardless of age, the course teaches them how to handle the equipment. And that's what counts. That means the young people fulfil the conditions, that they have their driving licence. Then they should also be trusted to be able to use the Bunker and its equipment when they want to.

The group I met felt that there weren't very many rules at the Bunker. Instead the focus is on different interests. They said:

*... I mean you could easily imagine the situation as "you can't do this and you can't do that..." ... But the rules are really few, it's not like "you can't do this and you can't do that", instead it's... The only rule is that drugs aren't allowed, that's just about the only one... and that you have to clear up, as well...*

The coordinator described the responsibility that comes with access to the premises. She said that the commitment every person has to sign

before they get a key was written together with young people. There are points there about alcohol consumption not being allowed in the Bunker, but other than that there aren't many points that contain "not". They are more about having to report if anything in the premises is broken, or letting people know if you can't attend the interest group meetings which are arranged once a month. The commitment is carefully read through together with each individual, and if you have any comments or views regarding the commitment, you are welcome to express them. This is because decisions are made jointly at the Bunker, and rules can be reviewed if they seem out of date. The commitment exists to make the activity work, and the coordinator felt that the youth were good at follow the commitment. She described the various alternatives that exist when things have been left in a mess, for instance:

*... if you arrive here and it's a mess you have two alternatives - either you report it so we can check who was there before you and tell them they have to shape up, or else you clear it up yourself. You can never say "but that's what it looked like when we got there". That's not an alternative, instead you have the two alternatives and that works really well.*

The coordinator said that it can be inhibiting to talk too much about responsibility, though it's good to always remain open to comments from young people. The adults in the Bunker take all comments seriously. "Do you think responsibility and influence are connected?", I asked. It wasn't an easy question to answer. She pointed out that responsibility is a word that can be interpreted in several ways, and:

*... at the same time I think that if I'm going to be able to... to feel that I can have an influence on something, then I have to know what is expected of me... and the commitment is very connected with the activities here working smoothly... to make sure that those who come after you can have fun too and to make sure everyone knows what is expected...*

### Relationships

The group and I talked quite a lot about responsibility, and they explained that there is no staff employed to work at the Bunker other than the caretaker of the premises and the course tutors. They discussed the responsibility that comes with getting access to the premises. Their view was that there might be so little damage in the Bunker because they were being trusted. They told me that no one gets keys on their first day.

First you have to do an introductory course for your area of interest and get a security run-through, but this too is about relationships:

*... I mean, you won't get the key if you don't have some kind of connection with the people who work here, like the course tutors or someone... you develop a relationship with the people who work here as well, sort of... I mean you don't give the key to just anyone you don't know, do you? And the fact that you develop a relationship might also mean that you care even more because you get to know the people...*

One of the boys felt that the relationship with the adults at the Bunker was similar being friends and said that the adults were pretty cool and not so “mothering” as adults otherwise can be. They described how the adults in the Bunker don't look down on young people, and said that the adults do have lots of power and responsibility but they don't use it. In the Bunker young people are given a chance to express themselves.

When the activity began and when the introductory courses were being planned, it was a conscious choice not to hire course tutors who were trained youth leaders interested in film, music and photography. Instead, professional sound technicians, filmmakers, photographers and musicians who were interested in and involved with young people were hired. The reason for this was that the activity itself was the focus – that is, the focus was to be on young people's interests and not on young people themselves.

### **About support and about solving things together**

*... At times he likes to go exploring on his own; when things get rough, he asks for direction and help. What he needs is a guide who will politely answer his questions.*

*Respect for his lack of knowledge!*

(Korczak, 1992, p. 176)

“Has it ever happened that an adult has said no to an idea?”, I wondered. None of them could think of an occasion when that had happened, but they told me that in order for any idea to become real they have to be engaged in the actual activity, with the support of an adult. One young man said... *it's like you always work it out together in the end.* If anyone has problems or if anyone wants help with gigs for instance, the adults

help out, they show the way but they don't take over and sort everything out. Some of the others expressed:

*They back your ideas a lot... you can almost suggest silly ideas and it's like, sure, they're open to everything, if that's what we want to do, then lets decide about it... I mean just an idea like this, the atmosphere here is really amazingly open...*

The idea they refer to is the idea about the Bunker, which became a reality because the adults were attentive and open to young people's wishes and interests. Young people have been involved in the entire process, from idea to construction. During the process a construction board was formed with mainly young people on it, which made the decisions about the premises. Later an open workshop was organised once a week. Those who wanted to help arrange the space could come. The work included building sound absorbers for the studio, painting walls and to decorate. In the open workshop decisions about different things to do with the space were reached by those present, so the former construction board could disband.

Eventually different interest groups were formed which are tied to the Bunker's various activities, where they discuss different ideas. There is now also a culture network, Ramaskri, which is an association with its own board and annual meetings. The association wants to enable culture for young people. In Ramaskri there are representatives from the Bunker's different interest groups and also various committees, i.e. working groups within the association. The coordinator is the mentor of Ramaskri, and employees from the youth club support the young people in the various working groups. According to the coordinator, Ramaskri and the Bunker go together, everyone who does courses at the Bunker automatically becomes a member of Ramaskri. The association even weighs in on matters to do with the Bunker, even about estimating the budget for the running costs of the Bunker. One of the young people described the following:

*Ramaskri has an influence on the Bunker because of this forum where the coordinator make sure that everyone get together. She's responsible for the budget, so it's a forum where she make sure various parts of the Bunker and our ideas come together. But also that we, within reasonable limits decide about the budget and therefore also about courses and so on...You can't get more influence than that...*

### Involvement and flexibility

I asked the coordinator about the term “multidimensional influence” and if she could explain a bit more about what it means. She explained that it’s about young people’s possibilities to go in and out of an involvement, to be able to become involved temporarily in something and then change to become involved in something else. To become engaged in somebody else, to help others, can be an incentive for involvement in itself. The young people are not forced into a fixed structure, but they are expected to attend members’ meetings and give their views on different things. There is a certain framework, but it is flexible and can be changed.

She says that it’s important that adults dare to ask questions and that they have faith in that young people have very good ideas. It’s about catching the ideas and supporting them. Together you can start something. It’s about daring and about following young people’s ideas. If involvement ends, why get involved? Maybe there’s something else that’s more important. It’s about being flexible.

The group of young people told me that in the Bunker you can choose how much you want to become involved in different things. One of them said that he came into contact with Ramaskri because he plays in a band, so he went to the Bunker and was pleasantly received, at first he was only there to rehearse. Now he is involved in one of Ramaskri’s committees:

*... now I’m using something that’s good and doing something that’s good... and I’ve chosen to do it, that’s nice.*

Two of the others confirmed that you can choose how much you want to get involved. They go to the Bunker twice a week and rehearse, and so far they’ve been happy with that.

### About growing

The coordinator says it’s important that adults are there for young people and give the support that is needed. That must be obvious for the youths. She said that it’s important for newcomers to feel that they have the same possibility to influence the activity as she has and that they get the feeling that “we’re doing it together”. She notices when they don’t need so much support anymore. The young people must feel that it’s okay to fail. It’s essential that they grow, that they go from being beginners to become experts in their area of interest. And then also the adults have to believe that the young people really are experts. If young people get that confidence they later want to take part in other democratic processes:

*If you can influence things in your surroundings you grow, many grow and want to develop that. “I’m no victim - I can have an influence”...*

The coordinator further talked about young people’s expertise and said that adults in their 30s and 40s are far away from the young people’s world, and you ought to realise that as an adult. She thinks it’s important to let young people be experts in their areas and that the adult world should represent support and experience. She said:

*Being an adult doesn’t mean that you always have all the answers. The older you get, the fewer answers you have. There are so many exciting things going on in young people’s world and adults have to be curious about how young people think - not to tell them what’s right and wrong, but to be brave enough to ask questions. In that approach there is security and adulthood... dare to have fun and to do new things together.*

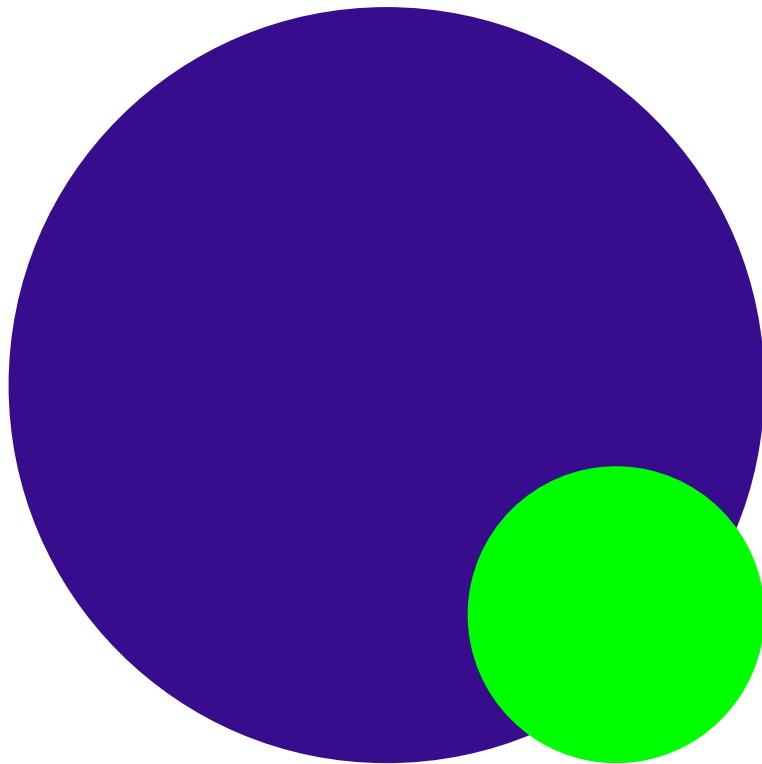
I sensed a positive spirit when I spoke to the youths and I think the coordinator had a great deal to do with creating that special “Bunkerspirit”. I asked them what they had learnt from being involved in the activities at the Bunker. One young man said that he knows how to arrange gigs himself now because of the support he had in the beginning. He said that by being in the Bunker he has developed a belief that it is possible to have a real influence on different things. The conversation continued:

*Yes, but it’s like this, even if you put an awful lot of time into ideas and you prioritise this and there’s a lot of time behind it from many young people, really incredible. But it’s not that you do it... I mean, even if you do it voluntarily and for a good reason and so on you get it back... you get so much out of it. Not just that you have nice meetings with lots of coffee and cakes, but that you actually develop and get to know people and... you get experiences...*

*We’ve had a number of events and I haven’t participated that much in the planning because I have a lot of other stuff: the band, football and school... but I feel that you very much want to be here. It feels like you’re missing out on a lot... by...*

*Tina: What is it you are missing out on?*

*It’s the sense of community of doing something together...*



## **Opportunities and difficulties**

Below I will continue to discuss the sense of togetherness, or rather attitudes, relationships and interaction between people. Influence and democracy will also be discussed. It seems important to highlight these specific things in closing.

This report is intended to serve as material for reflection. Another purpose is to use various examples to learn about opportunities and difficulties of children's and young people's participation and influence in different activities. In the descriptions of interviews, opportunities as well as difficulties have emerged. These could instead be termed aspects of participation and influence that we would do well to be aware of.

### **Attitudes, relationships and interaction**

I'll let Korczak open with some words to consider:

*We learn very early in life that big is more important than little.*

*"I'm big", a child rejoices upon being lifted up onto a table.*

*"I'm taller than you", another affirms with pride, measuring himself with his peer.*

*It's unpleasant standing on one's tiptoes and not being able to reach or to keep up with grown-up with one's little steps. A glass easily slips out of a small hand. It's hard for a child to scramble on a chair, or into a vehicle, or up a flight of steps;*

*he can't quite grasp the door knob, see out of the window, hang something up or take it down because it's too high.*

*In a crowd the child can't see anything; he isn't noticed or else he's jostled.*

*It is inconvenient and unpleasant to be little.*

*It is size and what takes up a lot of space that elicits respect and admiration. Small is equated with ordinary and uninteresting. Little people mean little wants, little joys and sorrows.*

*A big city, high mountains, a tall tree - these are impressive.*

*We say:*

*-A big deed, a great person.*

*A child is small and doesn't weigh much. There's less of him, too. We have to bend down, lower ourselves to him...*

(Korczak, 1992, p. 161)

Korczak reflected on adults' attitudes towards children already in the beginning of the last century. Above he explains how we are taught early in life to admire what is big. His words are worth considering.

In the film project the idea was that the film would be based on young people's own stories. It was time to ask the children how they felt about their family situation, to move the focus off the addicted parent and on to the children. Without the young people, it wouldn't be possible to make the film. From the outset, the young people were regarded as experts in their area. In BAMB the researchers made the basic assumption that the children were competent individuals, that they for instance already knew what was healthy to eat and what wasn't healthy. They assumed that the children already had absorbed facts from various types of media, as well as from parents' requests. For that reason they were careful not to try to change the children's eating habits. In the Bunker the adults actively worked from the beginning not to have a fostering attitude towards the young people. Instead they wanted to provide good conditions for the young people to develop within their areas of interest, and to support them when needed. They regarded the young people as experts within their areas of interest.

Much of it comes down to adults' attitudes. The adults in these three activities have viewed children and young people as capable human beings. They have the idea that children and young people already know, and what they don't already know they have the ability to learn. It is also about interaction between people. Not primarily interaction between children and adults, but interaction between co-researchers and supervisors, or between the director, writer and the experts, or between people interested in music, film, photo and course tutors and mentors.

For the adults in the examples described it appears natural to see children as capable, but it is probably not quite as natural for all adults. Scientific theory shows that there are different ways of regarding children: as objects, as subjects or as social actors. According to the Swedish Government Offices (2006), Article 12 is the most radical article of the Child Convention. No state has yet reported any profound changes when it comes to let children express their views freely and be listened to. This could possibly have to do with the viewpoint that has been brought up before, that the convention child comes across as a stereotype. And further that the child's need of protection is necessary but that can also constitute a limitation of its independence.

To begin to discuss adults' attitudes towards children can be a first step towards a change that children should be listened to. As Bartley (1998) points out, this is partly about getting rid of the child stereotype. Not to see children as objects but as competent individuals, but also to give them support when they need it. It is also a question of, as Arnér and Tellgren (2006) put it, adults trying to identify their own preconceptions, which also include their own views of children and childhood.

Arnér and Tellgren (2006) claim that what is meaningful resides in the relationship between individuals. It is in the meeting and interaction between individuals that something meaningful has occurred in the three examples I have described. The children would not have been able to do research without the mentors. Similarly, the young people in the Bunker would not have been able to develop within their areas of interest if they hadn't had the support of the course tutors and others. The young people in the film project were dealing with attentive and open adults, and were able to strengthen their attitude to their background and grow in various ways.

It is in the relationships between people that meaningful things happen.

## **Influence and democracy**

*It is a difficult problem, how to share the conquered places, how to assign tasks and to reward, how to husband the inhabited regions of the globe. What kind and how many factories should be established in order to provide work for hungry hands and brains, how to maintain order and discipline in the human swarm, how to secure protection from an ill will or the madness of a single individual, how to fill the hours of life with activity, rest and recreation, guard against apathy, satiety, and boredom? How to unite people into law-abiding community, enhance understanding, when to scatter and divide? Push ahead here, slow down there; here to inflame, there to quell?*

*Politicians and law-makers make careful attempts. But time and again they err.*

*And they deliberate and make decisions about the child too: but who asks the child for his opinion and consent; what can he possibly have to say?*

(Korczak, 1992, p. 162)

The old doctor's words speak for themselves. They describe a society as it was nearly a century ago. If we compare with today's society, in 2012, what has actually changed?

I have previously described how Hart (1992) discusses participation and how important it is that individuals are allowed to take part in decisions, children as well as adults. According to Hart, different processes that include participation and influence affect individuals' lives, as well as life in the community where they live. He argues that it is with the help of such processes that a democratic society is built; to participate is a fundamental civil right.

Hart discusses the different views as to whether children and young people should be allowed to make their voices heard in various situations. For some, children are society's salvation. Others claim that children's participation is a naive idea since children do not have the ability to make decisions that adults do. Yet others think that children should be protected from involvement and responsibility regarding society's problems. But Hart thinks that children need to become involved in meaningful projects together with adults. He argues that it is unrealistic to think that children, at the age of 16, 18 or 21, will suddenly become responsible, participating adults without previously having had the opportunity of practising the skills and responsibilities that are required in order to be involved. He argues that children need the opportunity to practise, they also have to learn to understand that the rights that citizens have also bring obligations. In order to learn these obligations, children must be involved in different activities where they can cooperate with people who are older and more experienced than they are.

In the examples we have looked at, children and young people have been involved in different activities, they have been given the opportunity to practise, with the help of adults. They have gently become motivated and inspired into participating and making decisions, and they have been listened to. This has led to a confidence, a belief in that it's possible to influence things and, as I perceive it, also to increased self-esteem.

A number of children within BAMB wanted to continue doing research, and have expressed many new and exciting ideas. Some of the young people in the film project worked on the school project after-

wards, which they more or less have run themselves. Several of the young people in the Bunker have become involved in associations, they arrange their own gigs, and I have heard about young men in a band helping younger, beginners in another band.

Participation and influence spread like rings on water.

## In closing

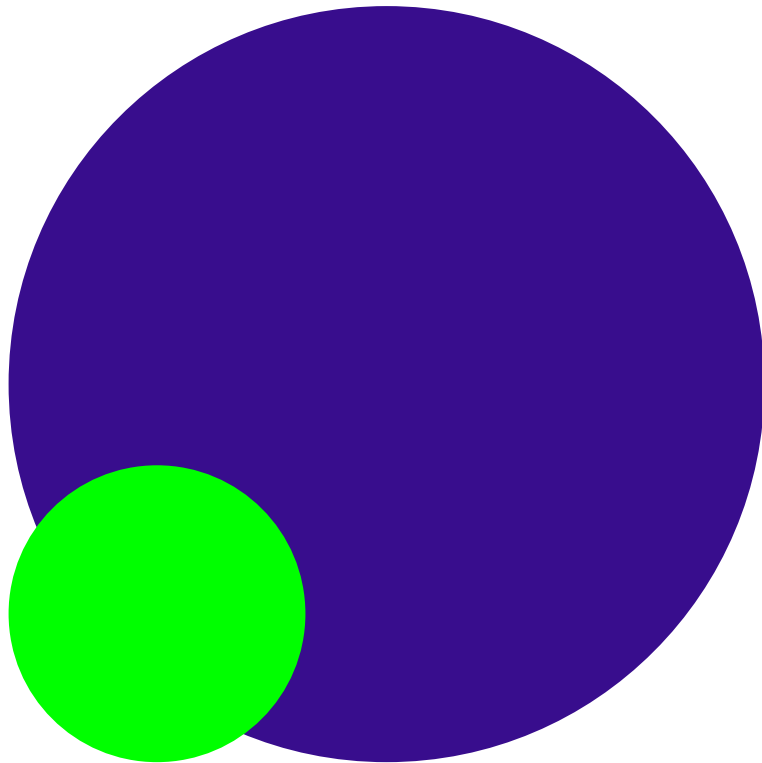
The above examples show that there are many possibilities inherent in allowing children and young people to take part and give them influence in different activities. Among other things it has emerged that the children and young people in all the examples see opportunities of being able to influence different processes, which in turn has spurred them to further involvement. The young people's involvement was developed with the help of adults, through adults' ability to be attentive and open and through their way of giving support.

It is important to think about adults' attitudes towards children and how we create the conditions for participation and influence, but there are also further aspects to ponder. These include the possibility that different contexts and structures can strengthen different roles for children as well as for adults, and that these can be hard to get away from. Further, it appears important to afford children and young people a lot of time to give their points of view. We all have our own "baggage", and it can take time to build trust. There is no method for influence that suits all ages. Children, young people and adults all express themselves in different ways, and all modes of expression have to be taken seriously. Maybe, in the end, it is all about being attentive and open in every encounter. Every human being is unique and every situation is new.

Korczak opened this report, and I would also like to give him the final word. He dearly deserves it, the old doctor. Janusz Korczak - a true inspiration!

*Let us demand respect for those clear eyes and smooth temples, that young effort and trust. Why is it that we show respect for that spiritless expression, that wrinkled brow, bristled greyness, stooped resignation?*

(1992, p. 185)



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