

# The Starting Out with Scarba project:

## Facilitating children's participation in child protection processes



the benevolent society  
initiating change



Report on a collaborative research  
project between the Social Justice  
and Social Change Research Centre,  
University of Western Sydney and  
The Benevolent Society.

by Jan Mason and Annette Michaux





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# Contents

- 1. Introduction ..... 1
  - 1.1 Rationale – difficulties in implementing child participation principles ..... 1
- 2. The research project ..... 2
  - 2.1 Specific aims ..... 2
  - 2.2 The agency context ..... 2
  - 2.3 Research methods and structure ..... 2
- 3. Findings on children’s participation in assessment for the Scarba service ..... 5
  - 3.1 Children as objects of concern rather than subjects whose voices were heard ..... 5
  - 3.2 Adults as the focus of assessments ..... 6
  - 3.3. Strategies for effective participation by clients with Scarba ..... 7
- 4. The significance of the early stage findings for a Scarba assessment model ..... 8
  - 4.1 Alternative models of assessment ..... 8
  - 4.2 Discussion ..... 9
  - 4.3 Conclusion from the early stage findings ..... 10
- 5. Responses by Scarba in the later stages of the research: enhancing children’s participation ..... 12
  - 5.1 The starting point: Participation principles for Scarba services ..... 12
  - 5.2 Participation Action Plans ..... 13
  - 5.3 Tools and processes ..... 13
  - 5.4 Systems-level actions ..... 14
- 6. Outcomes of the research project ..... 15
  - 6.1 Changes in practice by including children in participation in assessment ..... 15
  - 6.2 Implications for workers and the agency of enhancing children’s participation ..... 16
- 7. Conclusions ..... 17
  - 7.1 Participation of children can contribute to promoting their best interests ..... 17
  - 7.2 Participation of children challenges agency practice ..... 17
  - 7.3 Hearing children may mean reflecting on assumptions ..... 17
  - 7.4 The importance of systemic change towards participation ..... 17
- 8. References ..... 19
- Appendix A: Scarba booklet for kids ..... 20
- Appendix B: Supervisor’s checklist for children’s participation in initial assessments ..... 25



# 1. Introduction

The research project described in this report was an attempt to examine some of the issues and obstacles confronting practitioners as they seek to involve children in child protection decision-making processes.

## 1.1 Rationale – difficulties in implementing child participation principles

The right of children to participate in decision-making about their own welfare is increasingly being acknowledged in policy. This is evident at an international level, in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and at a local level, in the New South Wales *Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998*. Section 10 of the Act states that children subject to child protection intervention must have: access to adequate information in a manner they can understand; the opportunity to freely express their views; assistance to express those views; information on how their views will be taken into account; information on the outcome of any decision and an opportunity to respond to any decision.

The principle of children's right to participate in decision-making about the delivery of services to families was implicit in policy established by The Benevolent Society's Scarba child protection services. This principle was explicitly reflected through the statement in Scarba's service documentation that '(t)he critical perspective which underpins our framework is the child's eye view of the family'. However, the Scarba teams recognised that their assessment processes lacked a way of holistically identifying the needs and experiences of children in ways consistent with the participatory principle. This concern was also reflected in anecdotal

evidence of dilemmas experienced by other practitioners in responding to the participatory aspects of the New South Wales (NSW) legislation.

Difficulties in responding effectively to participation principles have been documented in the United Kingdom, where legislative developments on the participation of children in child protection processes preceded those in NSW. A UK Department of Health document noted the difficulties of implementing participative principles (Katz, 1995), as did Thomas and O'Kane in their research on decision-making in child welfare (1999). In relation to child protection decision-making forums, Parton et al (1997) and Holland (2001) have identified an 'ongoing silencing' of the voices of children.



## 2. The research project

This research project was conducted through a partnership grant from the University of Western Sydney (UWS) and funds from The Benevolent Society's Scarba child protection services.

### 2.1 Specific aims

The explicit aims of the research were to:

- Explore the obstacles to including children and other family members in child protection assessments for intervention
- Develop a tool or process for participatory assessments
- Evaluate and refine the tool/process
- Examine the feasibility of extending the research to a larger research project on children's participation in child protection decision-making processes.

### 2.2 The agency context

The Benevolent Society is a not-for-profit agency employing about 650 staff across the areas of ageing, women's health, social leadership and children. It operates a variety of children's services in metropolitan Sydney and on the NSW Central Coast, including early intervention services, child care centres and child protection services. The Benevolent Society's three Scarba teams work with high need families where there are child protection concerns.

Two of the three Benevolent Society Scarba teams were involved in the project, one based in inner Sydney, the other in the south-west suburbs of Sydney. The teams comprise a manager trained in either social work or psychology and caseworkers who are social workers, family workers or psychologists. Scarba teams work long term with children aged 0–12 years, where there is ongoing statutory agency

involvement. Most referrals come from the NSW Department of Community Services (DoCS). The Scarba teams work closely with DoCS to monitor safety concerns in families. This means that Scarba is involved with DoCS in case meetings, case planning processes and any other major planning processes. The workers from both agencies are in regular contact, often weekly, with the families and children, especially at the start of Scarba involvement.

### The Scarba assessment

At the time the project commenced in mid-2002, the Scarba teams had a six to eight week structured family assessment, working with each family to identify the changes needed in family functioning to reduce any risk to the well-being of the children. The assessment took the form of a report given to the parent/s or discussed with them (depending on which Scarba service was involved). A copy was also provided to DoCS. The report could include recommendations and suggested actions relating to safety and well-being.

### 2.3 Research methods and structure

This was a small research project, which used qualitative methods within an action research framework. Action research can be described as 'a family of research methodologies which pursue action (or change) and research (or understanding) at the same time' (Dick, 1999). It is considered useful in establishing an ongoing dialogue between social scientists, fieldworkers and organisations, including people actually using services as research partners, as a way of assessing problems and considering practice from within (Durrant, 1997). The present research project was designed to include as participants various stakeholders in the

assessment process – children, parents and workers. Participants were able to choose to contribute through individual interviews or focus groups. Additionally, the project was informed by an analysis of literature on assessment and by an analysis of a small number of program files. In the file analysis the focus was on the construction of the child and the voice of the child in the assessment process.

The benefits of the action research framework for this research were considerable. It facilitated flexibility, enabling the researchers to modify the stages and process of the project on the basis of input from the participants in the early stages. The limitations of the project were related to the small numbers of participants and the fact that the qualitative and action elements limited the extent to which comparisons could be made between data collected at different stages of the research.

The **first stage** of the project was based on individual interviews and focus groups. The interviews were conducted with 10 workers on the Scarba teams and with

family members who had been clients of Scarba. There were six parents (four mothers and two fathers) and nine children (including sibling groups). Additionally four files were examined.

Questions to the workers focused on strategies for, and consequences of, involving adult family members in the Scarba assessment and the extent to which children had been, and could be, involved in the assessment. Questions to the parents focused on their understanding of Scarba processes, their involvement in these processes and ideas they had for improvements. Questions to the children focused on how they were involved in Scarba processes, if they would like to be further involved, and how.

In the **second stage** of the project a summary analysis of the data from the contributions of all stakeholder groups was presented to the workers. This formed the basis for a forum, at which the two Scarba teams focused on what changes were needed for developing a participatory model of assessment. It became evident during



the dialogue that it would not be possible to develop a clear-cut child participatory model of assessment. Instead it was decided to develop a process to improve the current Scarba assessment by more explicitly including children as participants in the assessment process. This would involve building on child participation methods already employed by the teams and confronting the identified obstacles to including children more systematically in the assessment process.

This evolutionary process became the **third stage** of the project, with other adjustments being made in line with the action research framework of the project. The most significant adjustment followed the decision that further interviews with clients, as part of an evaluation, would be inappropriate. The ongoing dialogue between the workers and the researchers, which became central to the third stage, was supplemented by consideration of relevant literature, opportunities for workers to reflect on their practice in structured ways within their work situation, and workshops to improve their skills in engaging and working with children.

A **fourth stage** of the project, running in parallel with the latter part of the third stage, included the gradual adoption of new elements into the Scarba assessment process and (approximately six months later) follow-up interviews with workers, as well as a review of two files and analysis of the data. The findings of this research were presented to an interagency forum of those involved in child protection work. Additionally, findings of early stages of the project were presented at the 9th Australasian Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect and the complete findings at the 2004 International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (ISPCAN) conference.

# 3. Findings on children's participation in assessment for the Scarba service

Three main findings emerged from the analysis of diverse forms of data in the early stages of the project. Data was compiled through file analysis, worker interviews and discussion, parent interviews and researcher attempts to engage children as participants in interviews. Two of the findings related to the positioning of children and adults within the assessment process. The other finding – identified largely from client input, but also taking note of some worker comments – related to strategies for improving parents' and children's experiences of the assessment process and their interactions with Scarba. These findings are detailed below and discussed in part 4.

## **3.1 Children as objects of concern rather than subjects whose voices were heard**

The 'silence' of children in the assessment process was evident from the results of an examination of a small sample of files, where assessment had been completed before the research began. Our examination of these files indicated that children were not viewed as 'subjects' in the assessment process, being more typically seen only as part of the family unit, not as individuals. Children's opinions and views were generally not on file. Some workers did indicate on files that they had talked with particular children and older children's views were at times recorded in the files. However, there was no indication that the input of these children was actually taken into account in the final assessment. The construction of children which prevailed on the files was as objects of

concern with perceived behaviour problems, with all attention focused on the 'normality' of the behaviour and/or the need for boundaries around this behaviour.

Workers in their interviews acknowledged the invisibility of children in the assessment process. They explained it as a result of their understanding that children are still developing the capacity for participation, and until they reach certain developmental stages it is difficult for them to participate effectively. Workers expressed concern that children's participation may increase their vulnerability in contexts where they are 'at risk' of abuse. Workers commented that even when children did talk with them, they were unsure of what use to make of the information, as children are often concerned about parents/carers knowing what they said. Some workers considered they needed to be responsive to parents' apprehension about workers talking with their children, as rapport in the worker–parent relationship was defined as crucial to engagement for intervention. Workers also expressed concern about the children's lack of power in relation to their parents, as parents can use information obtained from workers to hurt their children.

The process of interviewing children added another dimension to worker concerns. In these interviews, in spite of participatory research methods, children expressed hesitancy about the interview topic (their own and their family's involvement with Scarba). Children, in their interviews with the researcher, were wary of being interviewed without a parent being present and seemed concerned in case their parent, usually their mother, felt threatened by the interview. They appeared distrustful of the research

process, feared being misrepresented and wanted to place their parents in the best light and ensure their parents' voices were heard. They frequently exercised their right to choose the form of the interview in order to request that their parent be present in the interview, and were keen to demonstrate that they valued their parents and their connections with them.

### **3.2 Adults as the focus of assessments**

It was evident from the files and in the data from worker interviews that the assessment process was adult dominated. For example, the voices of professionals, including caseworkers, were central, with the views and expectations of DoCS being given major emphasis. The views of parents and issues around engaging them were also given significant space. Parents were able to refuse to let their children speak with workers and in one service the fact that the parent would receive a copy of the assessment report influenced what feedback from the children could be

included. Some workers' concerns that engaging children could threaten parents and have an outcome which was punitive to children were paralleled some children's concerns that talking about issues could threaten their parents and consequently have a negative impact on them and/or their parents. Workers also suggested that the reason for the focus on adults was because it was easier to obtain information from adults. They considered that engaging children and obtaining their opinions would take more time and require different skills than those needed for engaging adults.

In their interviews, parents generally stressed the importance to them of maintaining some control in a situation where they felt vulnerable to the threat of removal of their children. Those feelings of vulnerability were compounded for some parents by their lack of information about the Scarba interventions and the services' relationships with DoCS. Parents expressed wariness of disclosing vulnerabilities in the context of the assessment process, because of fears of being judged negatively



and losing their children. Parents' reluctance to label their child as 'bad' can be linked to concerns about avoiding being labelled as a 'bad' parent.

### **3.3. Strategies for effective participation by clients with Scarba**

In their interviews, children and parents identified strategies which they considered would help in their interactions with Scarba workers.

#### **Children want information and choice**

Some children talked about needing a trusting relationship with workers. They wanted workers to be very honest and clear about what the sessions were about. When workers asked about risk, children wanted them to be explicit. They preferred workers to focus on the reasons Scarba is involved with them and their families, rather than on children's feelings.

Children generally wanted to avoid any parental misunderstanding about aspects of their sessions with the Scarba worker. They considered this could be done by having the worker feed back information on the session to the parent, or to have the parent present at the session.

Additionally, some children expressed a need for choices about the use of their time with workers, and a say over whether they attended sessions individually or in sibling groups. For some children in particular, there was a concern about being in groups that did not take into account their cultural differences. Younger children considered the sessions usually fun, whereas some older children wanted account taken of the fact that they might prefer to spend that time with their friends or on school activities.

Some children indicated that they are likely to initiate contact with anonymous services, such as help lines, if they are concerned about their safety.

#### **Parents value having choice and assistance with resources**

When interviewed, some parents indicated they would value having opportunities for choice of worker and worker accessibility at times of need. Men would value the option of having male workers. Parents wanted less focus on their competence as parents and more help in solving problems, particularly through the provision of resources and counselling. For example, they valued Scarba's provision of playgroups for their children as it gave them access to something that was available to others in the community, but not usually to them.

# 4. The significance of the early stage findings for a Scarba assessment model

In this part of the report, analysis of the data from the early stages of the research includes data obtained from interviews and also workers' responses to this material. The findings are discussed in relation to other relevant reported findings. A conclusion is drawn on the significance of the findings in terms of participatory practice in child protection contexts.

## 4.1 Alternative models of assessment

The matrix that follows (Figure 1) was developed by the researchers in an attempt to conceptualise the findings that emerged from the aggregated data for this stage. The grid was designed to inform discussion by researchers and workers of different approaches to assessment of families for intervention for child abuse. This grid inevitably simplified these approaches, and discussion with workers emphasised that the boundaries between what Kemshall (2002) contrasts as 'risk-based' and 'needs-based' approaches to assessment for services are, in practice, blurred.

Our analysis of the findings showed that some workers in the Scarba teams were influenced in their approach to assessment by the statutory agency DoCS' model of intervention, which could be likened to a 'risk-based' approach (see column (a) in Figure 1). Scarba workers and their clients are very aware that DoCS may read and take into account the Scarba assessment report and that interactions with clients occur within a context in which Scarba teams may report back to the statutory agency. The statutory agency is often required to operate in a context of risk management in which, as described by

Kemshall, there is a forensic approach to investigation, with professionals constructed as experts and blame for children's situations allocated to parent(s) or child. In the Scarba interventions, as described in the data, power flows from the statutory agency to the 'expert' Scarba workers by default through the process of reporting back to DoCS. Parents and children perceive this process as being about determining blame.

The 'needs-based' model of assessment, that parents (mostly mothers) indicated they preferred in their responses, is depicted in column (b). This model is premised on shared power, with the parent having some choices and influence in the helping process and the worker being a facilitator of resources. A needs-based model of welfare is associated by Kemshall with a child abuse prevention focus and places the worker as advocate. This approach does not necessarily make the child any more visible. However, by placing the focus of assessment on negotiation rather than the expert orientation of 'risk', the worker has space to focus on intervening to prevent further abuse, rather than seeking to allocate blame for what has already occurred. This opens up opportunities for responding to the child as subject.

These two models contrast with a model emerging from the literature, shown in column (c), which locates the child more centrally and where workers share some power with the children, as well as with the parents. In this model the worker becomes a facilitator of children's engagement and assessment is about negotiation between all participants, as well as advocating for children with other agencies.

Discussion with workers on the models identified focused on whether, and to what extent, Scarba workers should be assessing risk in their interactions with clients. Some workers, in their discussion of these contrasting models (a, b, and c), highlighted that a move away from a 'risk-based' model to a 'participatory' model in their interventions with families referred to Scarba posed too great a 'risk' to children. Discussion identified the tensions in attempting to protect children and at the same time facilitate their participation. These tensions surfaced in relation to the child's position in the family and the agency's position in relation to DoCS. The child's powerless position in the family, to which they returned after their interactions

with Scarba workers, was a major factor to be considered in risks associated with children's participation.

### 4.2 Discussion

The findings from this stage of the research were generally consistent with findings from other relevant empirical research. For example, the invisibility of children in child protection practices has been documented by Parton et al (1997) and Holland (2001) and is referred to earlier. Further, our finding on the construction of children as objects of concern, rather than subjects in their own lives, echoes a finding by Holland (2000) that workers conducting in-depth assessment of families where child protection was a concern described children's life

**Figure 1: Approaches to assessment**

	<b>(a) Risk-based (current)</b>	<b>(b) Needs-based (parent preference)</b>	<b>(c) Child participation</b>
<b>Agency worker role</b>	Professionals as experts, powerful – seen as collaborator with DoCS	Worker as facilitator, advocate, shares power with parents	Worker as facilitator, advocate, shares power with parents and children
<b>Parent</b>	Fearful, no power	Choice, validated, respected, shares power with worker	Choice, respected, validated, shares power with children
<b>Basis of relationship of agency with child</b>	Protection	Support	Collaboration
<b>Child position</b>	Invisible, bad, object, no power	May still be invisible, object, power must be negotiated	Competent, choice validated, subject, shares power
<b>Mechanics of assessment</b>	Investigation (forensic)	Negotiation with DoCs, parent and agency to prevent abuse	Negotiation with DoCS, parent, agency and child to prevent abuse

experiences only as mediated through interactions with their parents. Workers did not talk about children's experiences that might be important to them, for example, school or out-of-home care.

The dominance of adults in the assessment process again reflected Holland's findings where 'much of the assessment process concentrated on intensive interviews between social workers and parents' (2001, p.323), while reports on UK Department of Health research identified tensions for workers in attempting to add children's voices to decision-making processes. They noted it is a complex balancing act for workers to ask children about their thoughts and feelings and at the same time retain their responsibilities as adults (Department of Health, 2001).

The fact that adults communicate more easily with other adults and that effectively engaging children can take longer and requires different skills from engaging adults is increasingly recognised in the literature. For example, it has been noted that children and adults typically have different priorities in interview situations and, because adults have more power, their priorities usually dominate (Delfos, 2001). Engaging with and hearing children who may have experienced abuse may be particularly difficult, as these children tend to be extremely wary of trusting adults (Bannister, 2001). Importantly, however, research indicates that children who have experienced abuse are likely to also have particularly strong concerns about getting their voices heard (Neale, 2002) and that when adults take the time and have the skills to listen to them, children and young people are able to communicate their needs and concerns to adults (Bannister, 2001). Arguably then, the focus in working with children needs to become 'not whether children have an opinion or information at their disposal, but how we can talk to children in order to find out their opinions or obtain information' (Delfos, 2001 p.33). The importance of acquiring

this skill was recognised by the workers in this study and became a major focus for this project in adapting the assessment process to be more inclusive of children.

The dominance and oppressiveness of a 'risk-based' model of assessment is significant in terms of MacKinnon's (1998) analysis of issues confronting practitioners working with families referred for treatment in relation to child abuse. She notes that authoritarian practices of the statutory agency may have the effect of stopping abuse or punishing the offender but do not contribute to the attitudinal or behavioural changes sought in therapy. MacKinnon argues that the use of greater power and authority by workers 'fits well with abusive parents' constructions of the world' but may at the same time 'serve to reinforce the very premise on which an abusive parent's behavior is based' so that 'it is likely that these parents will use verbal abuse and intimidation, even if they restrain themselves from physically striking out' (1998, p.234).

### **4.3 Conclusion from the early stage findings**

In their discussion of the 'riskiness' of moving towards a participatory approach, the Scarba workers were making explicit the tensions inherent in the juxtaposition of the rights of children to protection and to participation (enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child as a right and in the NSW *Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998* legislation as a principle). These tensions can be seen to be associated with opposing constructions of the child and childhood in the two principles.

Protection tends to be aligned with a construction of the child as passive, vulnerable and essentially dependent on adults – hence a risk-based assessment, which is adult-centric in its focus. Participation, in contrast, is aligned with a construction of the child as autonomous

and competent, and facilitates taking children seriously as people with rights. The UN Convention, in juxtaposing these two constructions of childhood, leaves it to those at the forefront of promoting children’s rights to struggle with the ambiguities of implementing two contradictory paradigms and responding to the individual needs of children across these paradigms. In many respects this is what the Scarba project was about – Scarba workers’ struggles to develop and implement strategies to move to more inclusive participatory practices for children within the protection setting. In struggling with the dilemma of how to facilitate the participation of children in the assessment process, workers were confronting an issue that is significant beyond formal protection contexts – the ways in which the broader adult community addresses supporting children’s autonomy and also protecting them in a ‘risky’ society.



# 5. Responses by Scarba in the later stages of the research:

## Identifying and implementing new processes to enhance children's participation in assessment

Following workshop discussion of the research findings and conclusions, the worker teams identified ways in which they would seek to increase the participation of children in assessment for intervention. These included the integration of child participation principles throughout The Benevolent Society, drawing up action plans at team level, developing processes for hearing children's voices and taking them seriously, and identifying systems level responses so that participation principles could be effectively implemented.

### **5.1 The starting point: Participation principles for Scarba services**

A set of principles was developed, to be implemented at different levels in the agency as a framework for the development and introduction of new tools and processes to facilitate children's participation.

#### **Individual and service-level principles**

- Children have the right to express their opinions and to have those opinions taken into account
- Children have the right to access information to help them make a decision
- Children have the right to a response as to why their opinion is not acted on
- Children must have the principle of participation explained to them in a developmentally appropriate way
- Skilled and respectful interactions with children are intrinsic to participation

- Children will have opportunities to contribute to evaluation of service and practice and their feedback will be used to improve practice with children
- Workers require the skills to facilitate children's participation
- Workers will have opportunities to develop and review their skills in facilitating children's participation
- Employees will be aware of, and will access, specialists for particular child and family needs.

#### **Organisation and systems-level principles**

- The Benevolent Society will advocate for children's participation and their right to be heard in broader systems
- The Benevolent Society will explore the resource implications of children's participation
- The Benevolent Society acknowledges that systems may need to be adjusted because engaging children in decision-making processes may take more time
- The Benevolent Society acknowledges that the child protection context presents particular challenges for participation but it is crucial that these challenges are understood and overcome so that participation occurs.

## 5.2 Participation Action Plans

Each team developed a Participation Action Plan and the senior manager responsible for the teams developed an action plan for organisational level support of participation. A number of actions planned by the teams went beyond the assessment process, as the workers extended their thinking into applying participatory processes to other aspects of their work.

The action plans outlined detailed processes for developing participatory practices in each service and included as strategies:

- Building in reflection time for workers to think critically about their practice and discuss their struggles with participation
- Scheduling days for professional development and workshops to build on skills in working with children
- Developing timelines for working on children's contracts
- Establishing mechanisms for feedback from children
- Ensuring ongoing supervision around workers' facilitation of children's participation in scarba interventions.

## 5.3 Tools and processes

The teams developed a number of tools and processes for participatory practices. These tools and processes included the following:

- Responding to children's need for information when they are introduced to Scarba. Child-friendly booklets already introduced in the agency were further developed, explaining what Scarba does and how Scarba works, providing children with a visual and verbal explanation of the organisation's role (see Appendix A).
- Collaborating with parents to minimise conflict over their children's participation, being much clearer with parents about

why the workers want to speak to their children during the assessment and seeking their assistance in explaining to the child exactly what Scarba does.

- Changing the assessment process by introducing a protocol to engage children early in the process and hear their stories.
- Developing a template for individual agreements with children, in addition to those completed by parents.
- Developing a range of creative media to communicate with children eg. scrapbooks, calendars, message boards and fun workshops.

Strategies were implemented to place children's voices centrally in decision-making, including:

- Protocols to ensure that children's views are tabled at Protection Planning Meetings with DoCS and that Scarba workers assume an advocacy role in promoting these views



- A supervision checklist for managers to ensure that participatory processes are in place during the assessment (see Appendix B)
- Processes for negotiating with children and their families if the intervention is cut short due to the child being removed (in such instances Scarba makes sure a final session or conversation is organised with the child)
- Processes for conveying respect to children for their contributions to Scarba processes, such as seeking their consent to activities such as taking photos and going on outings, and recognising that consent may change over time
- Evaluation forms designed for completion by children
- Visual representation by children of what Scarba means to them to be used in introducing the service to other children.

## **5.4 Systems-level actions**

Following worker feedback to senior managers, organisational barriers to participation were confronted. An action plan was developed to address some of the processes required for organisational change. These included:

- Conveying the findings from the project to DoCS and other relevant agencies
- Consideration of the implications of extra skills and resources required by workers
- Implementing participation principles across The Benevolent Society's children's services by incorporating them into a set of new participation policies and procedures
- Requiring all Benevolent Society children's services to include participation strategies in their business plans.

# 6. Outcomes of the research project

## 6.1 Changes in practice by including children in participation in assessment

Follow-up interviews with workers and an examination of two client files identified a number of changes influencing their practice:

### **Gains in child-centredness**

As a consequence of hearing children more directly, workers reported experiencing more accountability to them. This was manifested in later discussions with workers during the preparation of this report when they referred to the way their practice after the initial assessment had changed from being child-focused to 'child-led', so that the child's world had become the platform for therapeutic work with parents on their issues. As a result, some of the workers' therapeutic directions were led by the child, instead of by a professional agenda. For example, one child had been seen individually for some time in child-focused interventions, however when they began to really 'listen' to what this child was saying, workers were able to identify a need for the mother to address issues with the child about the father, something which had not been addressed up to that point.

### **Awareness of the powerlessness of children**

In putting forward the child's views, workers became more aware of the imbalance of power between adults and children. The powerlessness of children means that even when their views are heard and promoted they are unlikely to have equal status with adult views. Children's views can be more easily dismissed than those of adults, particularly adults in positions of authority.

### **More respect for parents and of parents for children**

Workers developed increasingly respectful attitudes to parents, as they sought to involve them in their child's participatory activities. This enabled parents to talk more easily with workers about their child. Further, workers found that demonstrating a more respectful attitude to children had the effect of modelling such behaviour to parents, who then began to employ it in their own interactions with their children.

### **Awareness of the need to respond to children individually in providing information**

In providing information to children, workers learned they had to provide it in an individualised way. Workers found that they could not rely on one booklet applicable to all children, but began tailoring written information for individual children.

### **Impact of attempting to gain and record children's views**

The increased effort to record children's views had consequences for decision-making. One file showed barriers to gaining the child's views were experienced in interactions with the school and in communicating with the child concerned. On the other file, the views of the child were recorded. Here, there was a great deal of focus on the child and it was possible to trace the influence of these views on decision-making in the case plan.

### **Impact of the project on the wider agency**

The Benevolent Society is following through the knowledge gained from this project and integrating it with knowledge obtained elsewhere in the agency. For example, in another agency program it has been demonstrated that training can improve the extent to which the voices of



even babies can be heard and can influence decision-making.

A particularly important consequence has been the introduction of participation principles and policies throughout The Benevolent Society's children's services. All children's services now have participation strategies in their business plans.

## **6.2 Implications for workers and the agency of enhancing children's participation in assessment**

Follow-up interviews with workers identified the following implications for workers and the agency:

- The process of working more directly with children was found by most workers to be inspiring and rewarding.
- The process of involving children as participants can be more time consuming and more emotionally draining for some workers. It has also

made supervision more demanding, as managers have to process more emotional content in the work.

- Workers are required to change their practice: emphasising inclusion of children in the assessment has required more advocacy for children. This in turn may isolate Scarba workers from agencies who are less focused on child participation.
- New processes may change the relationship with DoCS, as the process requires greater cooperation between agencies. Workers were concerned this might be experienced as irritating for DoCS, given their scarce resources. Indeed, as discussions with workers crystallised during preparation of this report, workers identified that their attention to listening to the child's voice was presenting other agencies with dilemmas likely to remain unresolved unless opportunities are provided in other agencies for reflective practice.

# 7. Conclusions

From the implementation of this small action research project a number of conclusions can be reached.

## **7.1 Participation of children can contribute to promoting their best interests**

There is evidence from this research that the participation of children in decision-making on child protection issues which affect them has the potential to make a difference in promoting their interests. This is due to increased worker knowledge of the children in families and of changes in interpersonal relations between workers and parents and parents and children. This has important practice implications when advocating for the child with other agencies and within the child's family. Additionally, the evidence that workers listening to children can influence the adoption of similar behaviour in parents warrants consideration in further research.

## **7.2 Participation of children challenges agency practice**

Inclusion of children involves policy and practice changes which are fraught with difficulties and challenges for any agency which moves in this direction. At the practice level, participation principles are most effectively implemented when workers can grapple with the issues in manageable chunks. At the policy level the agency needs to have an ethos of supporting workers through resources and advocacy and a continuous focus on children's participation in decision-making. Workers are likely to require specifically structured time for reflecting on their practice with both peers and supervisors. They also have a greater awareness of the

need for additional training to supplement their skills in direct work with children.

## **7.3 Hearing children may mean reflecting on assumptions**

This study highlights the importance of workers reflecting on assumptions about what children's participation may mean to children themselves. This was exemplified in workers' concerns that children's safety may be endangered by parents feeling threatened by the inclusion of children as participants in the assessment process. Workers' concerns that children's safety may be endangered as a consequence of enabling children to say 'too much' must be taken seriously. However, they should also be considered in the context of children's somewhat different concerns about excluding parents. In participating, children seemed to want their parents to be heard, not necessarily because they were afraid of them, but because they valued them and wanted their connections with their parents to be emphasised. In wanting an inclusive approach towards their parents, children were foreshadowing an approach to assessment where both they and their parents are included as participants in the process.

## **7.4 The importance of systemic change towards participation**

The extent to which participation by children can be useful in furthering their protection will be linked with how well different agencies can cooperate around placing the child's 'voice' centrally, so that children, as well as adults concerned for them, can be heard. Our research highlighted a lack of shared understanding of the principle of child

participation amongst agencies working simultaneously with the same children, and a lack of acceptance of the value of incorporating children's concerns in decision-making for their welfare. When an individual agency attempts a more child participatory approach in its work, the issue of how they should follow through with other agencies about what they have learnt from children regarding decision-making remains largely unresolved. Some resolution of these issues may be most effectively achieved through a larger research project, extending on the findings presented in this report and involving collaboration between The Benevolent Society and other agencies, including DoCS, the statutory child protection agency. That research would be focused on exploring the issues and obstacles inherent in developing a more systematic approach to children's participation in decision-making about their welfare.

Participation by children and young people has been accepted as an important principle in the policies of agencies

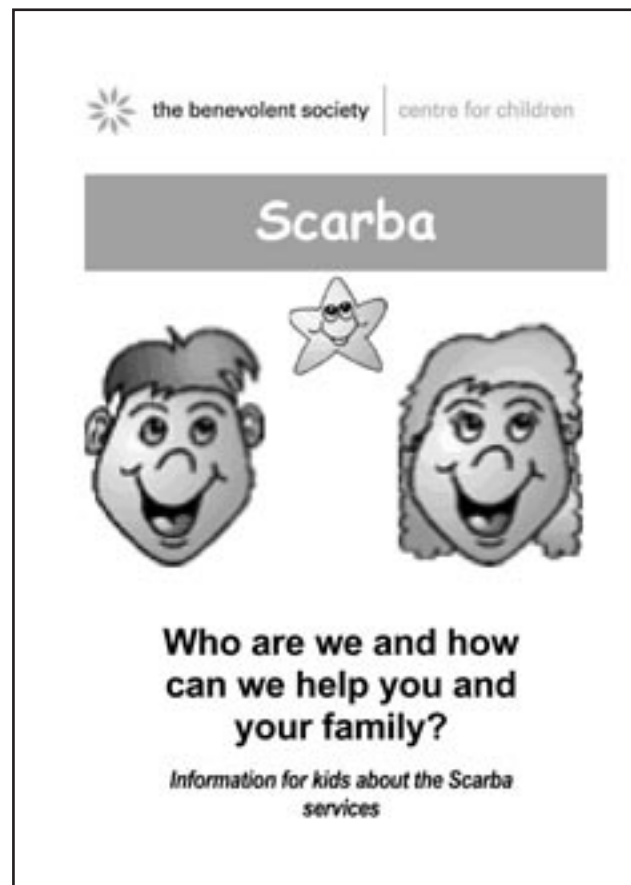
whose work is focused on children. Research, such as the findings reported here, highlights some of the difficulties in putting this principle into practice. This project has indicated that action research, enabling dialogue between all stakeholders, has much to contribute in actualising the principle of child participation.



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# Appendix A: Scarba booklet for kids



## What other kids say they like about Scarba:

“The toys Scarba brings to our home.”

“Playing with my brother and sister with the toys and helping them build.”

“Taking us places like the circus.”

“Mum was able to take us to the zoo and movies.”

“Mum now lets us do heaps of things.”

“Helping mummy.”

“Scarba has helped stop Mum screaming at us.”

## What is this booklet about?

This booklet has information about how Scarba can help children and families.



## What is Scarba?

We are people who work with children and families.

## What do we do?

Our job is to talk to you and your Mum and Dad about things happening in your family.



## The Scarba Office

These are the places where we work:



Eastern Scarba



South West Scarba

At the office we have computers, desks and telephones to help us with our work.



We have a big room full of toys and painting stuff and a sandpit. We have a library with lots of books in it. You can come here to play and read and do fun things.



Central Scarba



## How did we meet you and your family?

Usually your case worker at DOCS will have telephoned Scarba to see if we could help your family.



Then usually there is a meeting to talk about how best we can help. We usually drive to people's homes to meet them.



## Why are we involved?

Scarba works with families where children may have been hurt, not looked after properly or there are some other family problems.



## There are lots of different ways that kids can be hurt

Kids can be hurt in their feelings or in their bodies.



Kids can be hurt when they are hit or when they see their mum being hit or yelled at.



Kids can also be hurt when their parents can't look after them because they have a problem with drinking too much or perhaps don't have enough money.



## How do we help kids and their families?

We come to your house and talk to you and your Mum and Dad about all sorts of things:

- ❖ you can talk about your problems and worries
- ❖ your Mum and Dad can talk about their worries or problems



- ❖ you and your Mum and Dad can tell us what needs to happen to make things better
- ❖ we can help your Mum and Dad organise holiday activities and housing
- ❖ we can take you or your Mum and Dad to appointments



We can also bring you toys to play with and do fun things!



## Some of the questions other kids have asked us

- ❖ **Do all kids see you?** *No, only kids who have a DOCS worker*
- ❖ **Does everyone know that I come here?** *No, only your Mum and Dad, DOCS and sometimes your teacher. We will ask you first before we tell anyone else.*
- ❖ **Am I in trouble?** *Definitely not!*
- ❖ **Is Scarba involved because I've done something wrong?** *Not at all!*
- ❖ **What is DOCS?** *DOCS is an organisation that is in charge of protecting children in NSW.*
- ❖ **Are you from DOCS?** *No, Scarba is not part of DOCS.*

You can use this space to write down any questions that you want to ask us.



## Can I tell anyone that I come to Scarba, or is it a secret?

You can tell people if you want, but some kids or parents don't want to tell others. Scarba will need to ask your permission before we tell anyone else.



## Will you tell people what we talk about?

What we talk about is private.

When we are talking together, I'll explain to you what things are private:

1. between you and me
2. between you, me and your parents
3. or if I have to tell other people – an example of this would be if I don't think you are safe.



## What other kids say they like about Scarba:

“Going to the circus program – I want my friends and sister to go.”

“I liked getting away from our old place.”

“I like our new place... it's bigger and better.”

“Talking to mummy now. Before we didn't.”

“Happy now with new friends and my own bedroom.”

“I enjoyed going to the playroom at Scarba.”

“Going to the beach was good for all the family.”

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# Appendix B:

## **Supervisor's checklist for children's participation in initial assessments at The Benevolent Society's Scarba Services**

<b>ASSESSMENT ACTION</b>	<b>YES</b>	<b>NO</b>	<b>COMMENTS</b>
1. Has the child been seen?			
2. Has seeing the child been recorded on the file?			
3. Worker has provided the child with information on Scarba's role – with examples of what the role is and what it isn't.			
4. Tools (if any) the worker used to provide information on Scarba.			
5. Explanation to the child as to what the assessment process is for and why we would like to get their views about school, family, neighbourhood etc.			
6. Has the worker set boundaries (behavioural or other) with the child – documented and discussed?			
7. Child has been seen individually during the process.			
8. Separate space for talking to the child is considered with the child.			
9. If the child has not been seen individually, reasons are documented and discussed in supervision (ie child preferred to have parent, sibling there).			
10. Documentation/discussion of the child's reactions to worker wanting his/her views.			
11. Consideration of the need for separate worker for child and parent and result and reason documented.			
12. Consideration of the barriers to participation for a particular child (age, stage, culture, violence) – what can be done about this?			
13. Has the worker 'heard' the behaviours and non verbals – have these been documented – has the worker responded appropriately to non verbals?			

<b>ASSESSMENT ACTION</b>	<b>YES</b>	<b>NO</b>	<b>COMMENTS</b>
14. Discuss, debate and document with the worker different tools for gaining the child's views.			
15. Discuss confidentiality issues with the child.			
16. Child's views recorded separately – in assessment and copy of assessment report to the child where applicable.			
17. Dilemmas of recording information/child's views if he/she doesn't want worker to do so – discussion of how to deal with this.			
18. Does the child get an opportunity to add page to file of views or drawing about views?			
19. The child has been told what will happen with the information gathered in the assessment.			
20. Overall reflection on extent to which the child's views sought and taken seriously and document and discuss, including any strategies for doing differently next time.			
21. If PPM takes place during or immediately after assessment – the child's views are formally presented at this meeting in a way approved of by the child (where the child is able to).			
22. If no PPM – discuss the process for ensuring child's views are known to DoCS to inform their decision making processes.			
23. Following on from 22, recording of DoCS response to the child's views or any further action to advocate for the child's views.			
24. The child informed and reminded of what happens next with Scarba.			





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