

The right to be heard: child participation, a foundation for democratic societies



*A summary of
the Parliamentary Assembly Report
for children and young people*

COUNCIL OF EUROPE



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Definitions

- ▶ **Children's rights** are laws and standards about what children should have or be able to do. Governments have a responsibility to make these things happen.
- ▶ **Child participation** is a way children can be heard and have their ideas included in decisions.
- ▶ **Parliaments** are the places where people make decisions about what happens in an area, for example a national parliament. The people chosen to be in parliaments are called **parliamentarians**.
- ▶ **Democracy** is a form of government. People share their opinions on important issues and vote to choose who should make decisions in parliaments.
- ▶ **The Council of Europe** is an international organisation. It includes 46 countries, called member States, from across Europe. They work together to try to make Europe a better place for adults and children. It is based on principles of human rights, democracy and the rule of law.
- ▶ **The Parliamentary Assembly** is where parliamentarians of the Council of Europe member States present reports and discuss how to solve different problems. They make recommendations about what states in Europe should do to promote rights and democracy.

This Report

This is a short version of a report about children taking part in the work of parliaments. The report explains how the Parliamentary Assembly tried out ways of supporting children's participation. It is also about plans to make sure that more children in Europe can have a say about government decisions that affect their lives.

Who wrote this report?

Baroness Doreen E. Massey, who is a parliamentarian from the United Kingdom and a member of the Parliamentary Assembly. She worked on this report for more than two years.

Who was listened to?

Baroness Massey talked to many parliamentarians and adults working with children. But, most importantly, she and other parliamentarians met regularly with groups of children from France, Ireland and the United Kingdom, and heard ideas from children and young people from Azerbaijan and Belgium. The children said that they felt their ideas were important and that they can make a real difference when parliamentarians listened to them.

The full report is here:

<https://pace.coe.int/en/files/29686>

Main concerns

Baroness Massey wants the Council of Europe to involve parliamentarians in children's participation in more ways. She is concerned that **the importance of children's participation is not always recognised**. She understands that some children lack information and they do not always get feedback about how their ideas are used. So she set up ways to try out listening to children to help write a report.

The children involved said that they can make a difference if they are informed, and they have opportunities and spaces to be heard and to engage, for example in national Parliaments.

Children were worried about climate change, why adults are not doing enough to stop it and how the world will look like when they grow up.

They said that the Covid-19 pandemic had changed many things in their life in a bad way and they cannot wait to go back to school.

Children believe that the online world is exciting, but it can be dangerous too and children need protection and support from adults to stay safe.

Principles

- ▶ **Meaningful and sustainable:** The Parliamentary Assembly should prepare for and support children's participation in deciding things related to their lives.
- ▶ **Inclusion:** All children have the right to participate. Adults should ensure that children in difficult or vulnerable situations can participate.
- ▶ **More than talking to children:** Adults need to listen and think carefully about including children's views and ideas. If some of their ideas are not used, children have the right to know why not.
- ▶ **Children are involved from the start to the end:** They need opportunities for space, voice, audience and influence. They can help take decisions, plan and lead their own projects, and work with other children.
- ▶ **Training:** Everyone needs to have training and preparation. Organisations need to keep on learning to support children's participation.
- ▶ **Respect and safety:** Children need to feel respected and be kept safe while they are participating. For example, everyone should respect rights and follow rules to help keep everyone safe.



RESPECT

RIGHTS

PLANS

PROTECT

RESOURCES

LISTEN

ACT

CHANGE

LAW

What laws, rules and plans already support children's participation?

- ▶ **United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child**
- ▶ **The Council of Europe Recommendation on Children's Participation**
- ▶ **The European Union Strategy on the Rights of the Child**

What are the next steps to improve children's participation?

When a parliamentarian is writing a report about matters related to children's lives they should always listen to children and take their ideas into account.

Resources are needed. This can help make sure that parliamentarians listen to children, act on their ideas and change things.

The rules of the Parliamentary Assembly need to change to make sure that children's participation always happens.

Final Words

- ▶ Child participation must be supported with enough preparation and money. It should be connected into the work of parliaments.
- ▶ Children who are vulnerable, underprivileged or suffer prejudice should not be disregarded.
- ▶ Children feel empowered when they are involved throughout the whole process and when they have opportunities to meet other children.



**Democracy is facing many challenges.
Child participation is an essential tool for laying the foundations of
a future Europe that is prosperous, peaceful, fair, and caring.**

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The Council of Europe is the continent's leading human rights organisation. It comprises 46 member states, including all members of the European Union. All Council of Europe member states have signed up to the European Convention on Human Rights, a treaty designed to protect human rights, democracy and the rule of law. The European Court of Human Rights oversees the implementation of the Convention in the member states.

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To prepare this report children and young people

- ▶ **Wrote reports** about their ideas for children's participation in the Parliamentary Assembly.
- ▶ **Met with parliamentarians** in primary and secondary schools, youth groups and online.
- ▶ **Worked with their parliamentarian** to create ideas for this report.
- ▶ **Came to some meetings** of the Parliamentary Assembly, to ask questions and share their ideas.
- ▶ **Convinced their parliamentarian** to present the issues they cared about when speaking in parliamentary debates.
- ▶ **Created this summary report**, so that children all over Europe can learn more about these plans for children's participation.

This included children and young people from:

- ▶ **Foróige**, Youth Development Organisation, Ireland
- ▶ **Burntwood School**, United Kingdom (UNICEF Rights Respecting School)
- ▶ **Joan of Arc High School**, France
- ▶ **Romains Primary School**, France
- ▶ **Themis Association**, France
- ▶ **Youth Council** of the City of Strasbourg, France

Additional advice was provided by Anne Crowley, Cath Larkins, Mieke Schuurman and Zsuzsanna Rutai.

Parliamentarians also discussed children's participation activities that had worked well in the past

In **Austria**, the Parliament runs a Youth Parliament. Young participants talk about different topics, argue and vote. The sessions are videorecorded. A newspaper publishes articles about what they say.

In **Denmark**, in the last three weeks of every year they organise School Elections. Students aged 13-16 do everything that happens during the real elections. They announce the dates on TV, they go to vote, and they share the results on TV too.

Examples of parliaments listening and taking action with children and young people with support from schools, voluntary groups and local authorities



- ▶ **Agreeing common rules**
- ▶ **Assessing progress**
- ▶ **Co-operation**
- ▶ **Experience democracy**
- ▶ **Consultation leading to change**

The Parliamentary Assembly listened to this report and adopted a Resolution

*With millions
of children across the world
taking to the streets to claim their right
to a future, it is time for governments and
parliaments to ensure that children's views
are taken into account whenever decisions
affecting their lives are made and put into
practice*



In **Slovenia**, children took part in consultations about the new law on Child Protection. The Minister of Justice met the children and listened to their ideas about how to improve the draft law before the Parliament adopted the final text.

In **Germany** and **Turkey**, the Parliaments have special committees to work on laws related to children. These committees invite children regularly to share their ideas and views.

The Resolution

<https://pace.coe.int/en/files/29686/html>

The Parliamentary Assembly is going to:

- ▶ **Consult children on future reports that relate to issues that concern children.** This will be done by:
 - Welcoming children's ideas in writing
 - Inviting children to speak at hearings and meetings
 - Keeping children safe while they participate
 - Telling children how their ideas are used
- ▶ **Follow up to see whether future PACE reports respect children's rights and include children's participation.**
- ▶ **Share information and link up with other European institutions and organisations.**
- ▶ **Think about whether to have a yearly review of child participation in parliaments.**

The Parliamentary Assembly ask that member States and governments support sustainable child participation.

This means following existing guidance on how to do it well by:

- ▶ Being inclusive and assessing progress
- ▶ Taking children's ideas into account
- ▶ Telling children how their ideas are used
- ▶ Training all professionals
- ▶ Using handbooks like Listen-Act-Change and Compasito
- ▶ Keeping children safe, particularly if they live in vulnerable situations
- ▶ Supporting local and regional authorities and other organisations to promote child participation
- ▶ Considering lowering the voting age to 16
- ▶ Co-operating internationally to support child participation.