

# Children in child protection need more say about their care, says study

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New Australian Catholic University (ACU) research shows that more must be done to support children's participation in child protection to ensure they have a voice when making decisions about their protection. ACU social work lecturer and study lead Dr. Elise Woodman said the new research revealed gaps between policy and practice.

It also identified the ongoing challenge of implementing best practice in [child protection](#) when workers had high caseloads and limited time to build relationships with [children](#).

Dr. Woodman, from the School of Allied Health, worked with ACU Emeritus Professor Morag McArthur and Dr. Steven Roche from Charles Darwin University. They conducted in-depth interviews with 18 child protection practitioners to determine how they understood children's participation.

The results, published in *Child & Family Social Work*, showed most practitioners understood and valued participation but found it difficult to implement. Some discussed participation as child-focused decision-making but did not refer to the child's involvement in the process. Children's participation is essential to achieving good outcomes for children involved in child protection systems, Dr. Woodman said.

Despite this, research has consistently found children report low levels of participation, are poorly consulted, and feel inadequately involved in decisions about their lives.

"The findings show that children's participation may be overly reliant on the skills of individual practitioners, which can be further constrained in complex practice settings where children's safety is the primary concern and time to work with children is limited," Dr. Woodman said.

"Sharing power with children, especially in creating child-accessible organizations and processes, while also developing environments where children can participate at the times and in the ways they want to, may allow children to further influence decisions about their lives and maximize children's rights to both participate and achieve personal safety."

Study co-author Dr. Steven Roche said the results showed decisions were often being made about a child's protection without any [input](#) from the child.

"The research suggests that there is a gulf between the theory of participatory decision making in child protection and the practice because there is not much reference to listening before acting," Dr. Roche said. "There is also a wide interpretation of what participation actually means in practice to decision makers."

**More information:** Elise Woodman et al, Children's participation in child protection—How do practitioners understand children's participation in practice?, *Child & Family Social Work* (2022). [DOI: 10.1111/cfs.12947](#)

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