

## **Tips for Accommodating Children with Different Disabilities in Participation Settings**

### *Summary*

Children with disabilities need more opportunities for participation. Participation encompasses ways in which children can shape decisions that affect them through voicing their concerns or views. There are general considerations for engaging with children with disabilities such as speaking directly to the child (not the caregiver) and respecting children's independence by not making assumptions about what they can and cannot do. However, there are more specific considerations when engaging with children with specific disabilities. This document summarizes UNICEF's "Take Us Seriously: Engaging Children with Disabilities in Decisions Affecting Their Lives" report's recommendations for accommodating children with different disabilities but also reviews recommendations from Save the Children and Plan International. These organizations suggest the following tips for engaging with children who have: visual, hearing, speech/communication, physical/mobility, hyperkinetic, psychosocial, and intellectual impairments as well as autism.

#### Visual Impairments

- Ask children what mechanisms will help them participate. For example, would the child like texts provided in braille, read aloud, or in an audio format?
- Provide additional explanation (i.e. if you are showing a picture, describe it)
- Ask everyone to introduce themselves and use names when addressing someone, allowing the child to recognize others voices and know when they are being referred to
- In group activities, have children indicate they want to speak by saying their name rather than raising their hand
- When leaving a room or moving away, let the child know
- Make sure children who are blind know where doors, windows, and the toilet are
- When guiding a child who is blind, use words such as "left," "right," or "straight" rather than "here"<sup>1</sup>
- Remove any unnecessary obstacles and alert the child to any changes to the layout of the environment

#### Hearing Impairments

Keep in mind that there are different levels of hearing impairment and children may use different ways of communicating such as a hearing aid, sign language, lip reading, speaking, or a combination.

- Ask what mode of communication the child prefers (sign language, text messaging, notepads, pictures or visual aids, written language, etc).
- Some children are able to read lips but bear in mind that even if they can, often they only understand 3 out of 10 words<sup>2</sup>
- Gain the attention of the child before speaking (i.e. wave or gently tap their shoulder)<sup>3</sup>
- When speaking to a child who can read lips: face the child, make sure to speak in well-lit settings<sup>4</sup>, speak slowly and clearly (but normally). Never shout or exaggerate pronunciation<sup>5</sup> and do not cover your mouth.
- In group settings, have children speak one at a time so children who are deaf can follow the conversation better
- Ask children where they want to sit, allowing them to choose where they can hear most effectively
- Avoid places with loud back ground noise (especially if a child uses an assistive hearing device)<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Save the Children (2015) How to Communicate with Children with Disabilities? Manual for Schoolchildren:15

<sup>2</sup> Save the Children (2015) How to Communicate with Children with Disabilities? Manual for Schoolchildren:18

<sup>3</sup> PLAN International (1 Dec 2016) Guidelines for Consulting with Children & Young People with Disabilities:17

<sup>4</sup> Save the Children (2015) How to Communicate with Children with Disabilities? Manual for Schoolchildren:17

<sup>5</sup> PLAN International (1 Dec 2016) Guidelines for Consulting with Children & Young People with Disabilities:18

- Have a sign interpreter if a child uses sign language. An interpreter is also useful in settings where children want to speak privately (without a parent who may usually interpret).

### Speech/communication impairments

Children with speech impairments often times speak slowly or with difficulty.

- Be patient. Take time to listen to the child, avoid interrupting them or finishing their sentences, and do not assume the child did not hear or understand you
- Ask the child to repeat what they said if you did not understand it
- Consider other forms of communication like writing methods, symbol boards, computer technologies, etc.
- The child may want communication/translation/interpretation assistance from a person they know <sup>7</sup>

### Physical/Mobility Impairments

Mobility or physical disabilities can vary greatly but often times children will use assistive equipment like a wheel chair or prosthetic. They may have difficulty with movement.

- Ensure the facility you are using is accessible (i.e. are there ramps? Are the doorways wide enough to accommodate wheel chairs? Are the transportation options accommodating?)
- Assistive devices are part of the child's person, do not sit or lean on them
- When addressing the child, ensure you are at the same level as them (i.e. sit in a chair to be at eye level with a child in a wheel chair <sup>8</sup>)
- Choose activities that all are capable of participating in but during group hands-on activities, check if the child is having any difficulties and pair them with another child if they need help
- Be flexible and willing to adapt an activity based on the child's needs.

### Hyperkinetic Disorder

This is when a child's body or extremities move involuntarily<sup>9</sup>

- When speaking to the child, pay attention to them, not their involuntary movements
- Continue to speak normally even if the child is moving, drawing attention to the movement may cause the child to become anxious

### Psycho-Social Disabilities

This includes children with mental health disabilities which can take many forms such as depression or schizophrenia. The largest barrier these children face is the lack of understanding and acceptance surrounding their condition.

- Always treat the child with dignity and respect
- Keep discussions calm and speak in a normal tone of voice
- Be flexible and allow choice as the child may feel anxious or stressed when they feel they do not have control

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<sup>6</sup> UNICEF (June 2013) *Take Us Seriously: Engaging Children with Disabilities in Decisions Affecting Their Lives*:35

<sup>7</sup> PLAN International (1 Dec 2016) *Guidelines for Consulting with Children & Young People with Disabilities*:23

<sup>8</sup> PLAN International (1 Dec 2016) *Guidelines for Consulting with Children & Young People with Disabilities*:20

<sup>9</sup> Save the Children (2015) *How to Communicate with Children with Disabilities? Manual for Schoolchildren*:22

### Intellectual Disabilities

These include cognitive and learning disabilities as well as autism. These conditions vary greatly. Children may take more time learning or communicating information. They may also have difficulty understanding or remembering what is being said.

- Use simple language, summarize information, and use various communication methods such as gestures or pictures. But do not infantilize children
- Check in to make sure that they understand the activity or topic
- Be willing to repeat information or explain it more than once
- Tailor communication methods based on what the child prefers. For example, one may use visual images, music, or art for communication
- Give the child time to express themselves

### Autism

Many times children with autism may have difficulty interacting with others, either responding or initiating interactions. Many autistic children have delayed speech so incorporate other communication methods.

- When children do not use speech or sound, use gestures/facial expressions
- Encourage children to keep engaging in the activity and create opportunities for them to communicate. For example, UNICEF recommends placing something the child values in an out of reach but visible location to encourage them to ask for help<sup>10</sup>
- Praise the child when they make attempts to understand or communicate information
- When the child engages in an activity, continue until the child wants to stop, which encourages them to communicate to you when they are finished.

For more information on accommodating children with specific disabilities, please refer to:

UNICEF (June 2013) Take Us Seriously: Engaging Children with Disabilities in Decisions Affecting Their Lives. Available from: [https://www.unicef.org/disabilities/files/Take\\_Us\\_Seriously.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/disabilities/files/Take_Us_Seriously.pdf)

*Prepared by Emma Anderson for Child Protection Hub for South East Europe, December 2016.*

#### *Sources:*

- PLAN International (1 Dec 2016) Guidelines for Consulting with Children & Young People with Disabilities. Available from: <http://disabilitycentre.lshtm.ac.uk/files/2014/07/38106-BO.pdf>
- Save the Children (2015) How to Communicate with Children with Disabilities? Manual for Schoolchildren. Available from: <http://resourcecentre.savethechildren.se/library/how-communicate-children-disabilities>
- UNICEF (June 2013) Take Us Seriously: Engaging Children with Disabilities in Decisions Affecting Their Lives. Available from: [https://www.unicef.org/disabilities/files/Take\\_Us\\_Seriously.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/disabilities/files/Take_Us_Seriously.pdf)

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<sup>10</sup> UNICEF (June 2013) Take Us Seriously: Engaging Children with Disabilities in Decisions Affecting Their Lives:37