

Can young children have a say in national policy-making?

For any readers who are not up to speed on Article 31:

The **Article 31 Action Network** was launched in 1997 to bring together all those working for the implementation of Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child:

1. Every child has the right to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.

2. Member governments shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity.

In the last few years, many of us who work in children's play have become very competent at talking about children's participation, and have learned to quote the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child when we want to get something done. However, most of us aren't very good at putting it into practice, and we all have a lot to learn.

The Article 31 Action Network was launched in May 1997, and now has over 1,100 members. Giving children and young people a real say in developing the network has been one of our stated aims, but we are only now really starting to make progress. This article is partly an exploration of the issues we faced, and partly an appeal for the support of Let's Play! readers in making participation work.

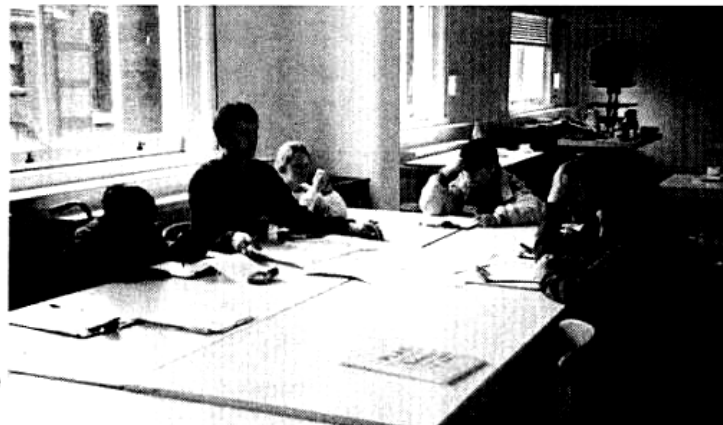
The Article 31 Action Network is run by a Steering Group, which, until recently, was made up entirely of adults. In this it was no different from 99% of the committees, panels and advisory groups that manage every detail of children's lives today. Also, whilst we were concerned about disability equality, and the Steering Group included several non-disabled representatives of disability organisations, we had no disabled people on the Steering Group.

I don't think there was any doubt of our good intentions, but we faced two tricky problems: we sought to operate across the widest possible geographical area, with members throughout the UK, and across the widest

possible age range. There are all kinds of ways to give children a say in decision-making at the level of a local play project. Involving children in running a widely dispersed national network seemed much more of a challenge.

Adults have established methods for running national organisations. We usually have formally organised meetings with a fixed agenda and lots of paperwork. Although new technology is making it unnecessary, people still travel long distances, at considerable expense, so they can meet together in one place (often London, for some reason). To make the journey worthwhile, we like a good long meeting, often a whole day. If we are paid workers, we prefer to meet during the week, in our employer's time. In all these respects, the Article 31 Action Network is no different from any other national play organisation.

One of the first rules of children's participation is that decision-making practices designed by and for adults generally don't work for young children.



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Some of the things adults do wrong when they start consulting children:

- *they ask leading questions, looking for answers they want to hear*
- *they somehow only hear the answers that suit them*
- *they ask questions that children can't relate to*
- *they consult children, then don't do anything with the result*
- *they ask children about what facilities they want, knowing that, whatever it is, there's no money to provide it anyway*
- *they abandon the idea, if it doesn't go the way they hoped it would.*

Long, formal meetings, detailed paperwork, travelling long distances, getting time off school and dealing with organisational or policy issues all militate against children having any real input. If you want to give children a real say, you have to look at changing your decision-making practice. But how?

In our Article 31 Steering Group we discussed these issues at every meeting, but two years on we seemed no nearer to finding a solution.

The first breakthrough occurred some months ago when we appealed through our newsletter for new Steering Group members. Louise Butler and Stuart Pointing of the National Children's Network saw the notice and volunteered their services. We were delighted to take up their offer. At the time, Louise and Stuart were aged 17 and 18, which put them at the upper end of the age range covered by the UN Convention, and well outside the age range we wanted to focus on. However, they could attend meetings and fit into our established way of working. And when, as usual, we came back to the problem of hearing the views of younger children, we found that involving these young people brought real benefits.

First, broadening the age range seemed like a real step in the right direction. We felt we were moving forward at last and this gave us new energy. Second, we found that Stuart and Louise had real expertise in this field, thanks to the work they had done promoting participation in their school. They brought direct and current experience, from the young person's point of view, of what makes for successful and unsuccessful consultation (see box for examples).

Our plan

With new motivation and new ideas, the Article 31 Steering Group has come up with a proposal we want to pilot over the coming year. We will keep our existing adult-run national Steering Group, and we won't try to get young children to join it (unless they choose to). Instead, we will extend our decision-making system by supporting and working in partnership with a number of Article 31 Children's Advisory Panels around the country.

These Panels will be groups of children who already meet together at play or out-of-school projects. We would like each to be based at a community play project, so the children who join it will have support from playworkers to make sure they have a real say.

Children's Panels could have a say in running the Article 31 Network in two different ways:

1. *They could discuss any issues they were concerned about, to do with play, leisure, culture and the arts (the subjects covered by Article 31). They could send their views and suggestions to the national Steering Group.*
2. *The Steering Group members would ask the Children's Panels for their views on all important issues, plans and proposals.*

The Steering Group would guarantee to give due weight to the views of the Children's Panels in all important decisions.

In this way, the children would have a real say in national decision-making, but would not have to sit through long adult-dominated meetings - unless they wanted.

We feel it is important that all panels work for equal opportunities, and include the

widest possible range of children. Apart from this, they should be able to decide their own rules and ways of working.

Playworkers will be asked to help send information between the Children's Panels and the Steering Group. Where play projects have access to e-mail and the internet, we would like to use these.

These panels will not discourage children and young people from joining the national Steering Group. On the contrary, the Steering Group will still welcome young people who want to become members, and will try to make its meetings accessible to all. Members of Children's Panels will always be welcome to come and present their ideas in person at Steering Group meetings if they wish.

Under the UN Convention, disabled children and young people have the same rights as everyone else to contribute to decision-making. The Article 31 Children's Panels can help make this a reality. Ideally, every panel should be fully integrated and inclusive. Our plan is to start where we can, and work towards this goal. That is why we are particularly keen to ask Let's Play! readers who provide play opportunities for disabled children, whether or not your project is fully integrated, to give serious thought to setting up a panel. It is important for us to start as we mean to continue, with disabled and non-disabled children having an equal right to participate.

The Article 31 Action Network can help meet any costs involved in setting up and

running the children's panels, and travel costs if children want to come to Steering Group meetings or other events on behalf of the Network.

How can you help?

Are you interested in setting up an Article 31 Children's Panel at your play project?

If you are, the first thing to do is to contact the Network on the numbers below so that we can have an informal discussion.

If you are a playworker, it is important you discuss the idea with the children at your project and make sure they are also interested, since it will be their panel.

Then, if you are still interested, we suggest that someone from the national Article 31 Steering Group comes to your play project, to meet the children and discuss setting up a panel with them. If everyone agrees, your group will then become an official Article 31 Children's Advisory Panel.

This is a new idea, and we can't be sure how well it will work at first. However, we will monitor and evaluate progress and keep improving the system over time.

As the panels get going, the Article 31 Steering Group will actively support the playworkers who facilitate them. We will keep in touch and visit you regularly, working with you to help you improve your facilitation skills.

Once a number of panels are running, we plan to hold a training seminar for all the playworkers involved. From sharing our

experiences, we should be able to develop guidelines on good practice in facilitating children's participation.

Which takes me back to where I started. We've all heard the rhetoric. Now we are trying to make it a reality.

Please discuss this proposal in your play project and consider setting up an Article 31 Children's Panel and help children have a real say in the Article 31 Action Network. ●



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