

This article was submitted under its original title
"Top tips for Playworkers: what can children tell
us about implementing Article 31"

What we really, really want

What can children tell us about implementing Article 31? Harry Shier of the Article 31 Action Network has been listening to children to find out...

Theory into practice

"How can we demonstrate what Article 31 might mean in real life?" This was the question facing the group that sat down to plan the launch of the Article 31 Action Network in 1997. We needed something that would help us get our message across, so that people would say to themselves, "Article 31 - now I understand!". We decided to run a pilot scheme, where we would invite children to become specialist consultants, advising arts and recreational projects on how to make their facilities more child-friendly. And that's how the Article 31 Children's Consultancy Scheme was born.

The scheme attracted a lot of interest, at first mainly for its novelty value. However, the idea soon caught on. After our second pilot at the Victoria and Albert Museum, several trusts offered support and, before long, we found ourselves being asked to run children's consultancy projects all over the UK. The Article 31 Children's Consultancy Scheme was clearly 'no gimmick, but one of those obvious ideas that makes you

wonder why nobody thought of it before.

So now, in September 1999, we've just completed our twelfth children's consultancy project, helping over 100 Young Consultants (mostly aged between 8 and 12) to formulate their ideas into useful reports and recommendations, covering everything from parks and play areas to museums and arts centres. This seems a good time to reflect on the experience and ask, "what have all those Young Consultants taught me about promoting the child's right to play?"

Lessons learnt

To start with, I have learned one important principle, which is that only when you learn to listen to children with an open mind, do you start to hear what they have to tell you. The first thing we adults have to learn is to leave our own agenda on one side. A skilled adult can manipulate a group of children to endorse almost any decision, and we are so used to doing this that we don't even realise we are doing it. To help children obtain their rights, you, the adult, must learn to stop chasing after your preferred outcomes, and forget that you believe you already know what the children want. Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child says that every child has the right to express their

own opinions, and, most importantly, that we must give their opinions due weight in our decision-making. When the children want the same as the adults, this isn't a problem. But what happens when you consult the children and find they want something the adults don't want? You can always manipulate the situation to get your own way, and you can always justify this because you are an adult and know what is in the children's best interests. I wonder if this could ever happen at your project?



Bankside Young Consultants investigating a water-feature (pond) in a community garden

PLAY•TRAIN

So those are some of the things I have learnt about as a result of listening to what children have to say. Some were surprising, some were predictable. All are worthy of our careful consideration.

Harry Shier

Playwords

1 Improve the toilets

Children want clean, nice-smelling toilets in play and care facilities, and indeed everywhere else they are expected to spend their time. This in itself is not surprising: we all prefer clean toilets. What surprised me was how high a priority children give to it. I think toilets are significant to children for two reasons. First, they meet a basic physical need, but also, the state of the toilets sends a signal to the children that tells them how much the adults in charge really care about their comfort and well-being.

2 Install a drinking fountain

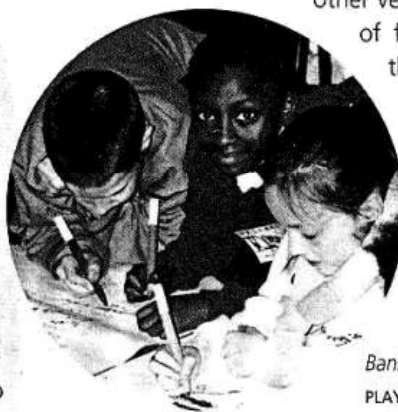
The next thing that surprised me was the high priority children give to drinking fountains. Once again, the provision of a drinking fountain outdoors, or a water-cooler indoors, meets a basic need for refreshment, but also has a symbolic value. It tells the children that the adults in charge value and care for them.

3 Invite celebrities to your play project

Another thing I didn't realise was how much children love to meet famous people (and they don't even have to be that famous). This is one area which most of us adults would consider a pretty low priority in our practice. We might say - maybe with some truth - that the children have fallen victim to a media-based "cult of celebrity". This raises a fundamental question: are we really interested in understanding what children want and trying to respond to this, or only when it suits our pre-existing ideas about what's in their best interests?

4 Improve access to your premises

On several occasions the children I worked with were appalled to find that members of their team who used wheelchairs could not gain access to play facilities or other venues. Children have a strong sense of fair play, and can easily recognise the injustice of this. When it comes to how we treat other people, "more is caught than taught". What kind of lesson are our children catching if they see us blithely operating play facilities from which certain children are physically excluded?



Bankside Young Consultants preparing their report.
PLAY•TRAIN

5 Improve your listening skills

Children often expressed the view that adults seldom pay any attention to their opinions. Most playworkers have little or no training in listening skills. Also this is an area where we adults often deceive ourselves. We like to imagine we are "good listeners", but few of us really are. Make listening to children a number one priority on your play project.

6 Organise great games

Most children love to play games. They often commented on games as the highlight of our sessions. This is one area which is lacking in many projects, and where the skilled adult can make a real difference. Build up your repertoire of games, and work on your games leadership skills (which mainly comes down to clear and positive communication). Include lots of non-competitive games, and those that involve creativity and imagination, so that everyone can join in on an equal basis.



Young Consultants on a fact-finding mission in Telford Town Park
PLAY•TRAIN

7 Use active, visual methods to find out children's views

Children generally don't enjoy formal adult ways of doing things, such as committee meetings and form-filling (though they can adapt very well when the occasion demands it). If you want to consult your users about any aspect of provision, try alternative playful methods to find out their views. Three things we have done successfully on the Article 31 Children's Consultancy Scheme are:

- Go out on trips to look at other local provision so you can compare it with your own. Then you can make lists of what you like and don't like about different places.
- Put giant sheets of paper on the floor (such as the backs of billboard posters) and have the whole group write or draw their ideas, aspirations, likes and dislikes. This provides an excellent basis for discussion on all kinds of topics.
- Play the "agree/disagree game": In advance, write out some statements about the topic under discussion on separate cards. Signpost one end of the room as "agree" and the other end as "disagree". Children can take turns to read one card out loud, then everyone has to move to the position in the room that shows whether they agree or disagree (or can't make up their mind). This can also lead to useful discussions on all kinds of things (and it works well with adults too!).

8

Make your play environment bright, clean and colourful

Another of those things that seems obvious, but where we often let ourselves and the children down: children told us repeatedly that they like bright, colourful environments, that are clean and well-looked-after (indeed, for many children, MacDonalds seems to represent their ideal - and the toilets there are always spotless too!). Don't get confused between "messy play", which most children love and should be heartily encouraged, and a messy place, which most children hate and makes them feel undervalued.

9

Include disabled children

If it was up to the children themselves, I think all play projects would be fully inclusive. None of the children I've worked with has had any problem about being in an inclusive environment, where disabled and non-disabled children play together. It's only we adults who seem to be frightened of making our projects inclusive. There are disabled children living in your neighbourhood: I guarantee this. Find out why they don't come to your project. Don't make any assumptions; it may have nothing to do with ramps or toilets. Listen and you will learn. Some of our most effective Article 31 Young Consultants have been disabled children.

"The Article 31 Action Pack" (PLAY(TRAIN, 1995 ISBN 0 9519013 1 1) is available from Community Insight, Pembroke Centre, Cheney Manor, Swindon SN2 2PQ: £11.45 + £1.50 p+p.

For more practical ideas read:

- Save the Children, Children's Participation Pack. 1996. ISBN 1 899120 51 3
- Treseder, Phil, Empowering Children and Young People: Promoting involvement in decision-making. Children's Rights Office/Save the Children, 1997. ISBN 1 899120 47 5