



Participation in decision making: What are the views of children and young people in out-of-home care?

Snapshot

- Involving children and young people living in out-of-home care (OOHC) in decision making empowers children and young people to shape their lives. It builds confidence and trust and reinforces the importance of respectful two way communication and problem solving, necessary skills for adult life.
- Three quarters (75%) of children and young people who completed the 2018 NSW OOHC Survey reported they usually get to have a say and feel listened to. The responses in the 2018 NSW Residential Care Survey were less positive with less than half (48%) of children and young people reporting they usually get to have a say and feel listened to.
- One quarter (25%) of children and young people who completed the NSW Residential Care Survey reported they don't usually get to have a say and don't usually feel listened to.
- Results from both surveys highlight the need for more collaborative casework with children and young people in OOHC to ensure they feel empowered, respected and valued as experts in their own lives.

Introduction

This Evidence to Action Note provides an overview of the views of children and young people about whether they have a say in decisions that impact on their lives and whether they feel listened to. We also discuss implications for policy and practice.

The findings are drawn from two surveys conducted by the Department of Communities and Justice (formerly Family and Community Services or FACS) in 2018 – the NSW OOHC Survey and the NSW Residential Care Survey. Participation in decision making was one of eight high-level indicators in these surveys. For the participation indicator, children and young people were asked three questions (Box 1).

Further information about the methodology, sample and survey responses for other indicators in these surveys are available in the FACSIAR Report, [‘The views of NSW children and young people in out of home care, 2018.’](#)





Box 1: Participation indicator survey questions

Children and young people aged 8-17 years were asked three questions related to the participation indicator:

- Do you get to have a say in what happens to you, such as where you live, your school and learning and your future?
- Do people listen to what you say?
- Do people explain the decisions made about you?

Why is participation in decision making important for children and young people in out-of-home care?

The introduction of child-focused human rights conventions and legislation has resulted in a shift in the way governments and services work with children and young people. Services are increasingly involving children and young people in decision making that affect their lives.

Participation in decision making is particularly important for children and young people who have been involved in the child protection system and placed in OOHC. Involving children and young people in OOHC in decision making and genuinely listening to their views and opinions not only promotes human rights but also reinforces the importance of respectful communication and problem-solving, necessary skills for life after care. It also helps to inform casework planning, including the support and services required, and it helps workers to understand the child or young person's strengths, skills, capacity and what they want for their future.

Van Bijleveld and colleagues¹ completed a literature review exploring the barriers and factors facilitating child participation within child protection and child welfare services from the perspective of children and young people and workers. The key findings from the literature include:

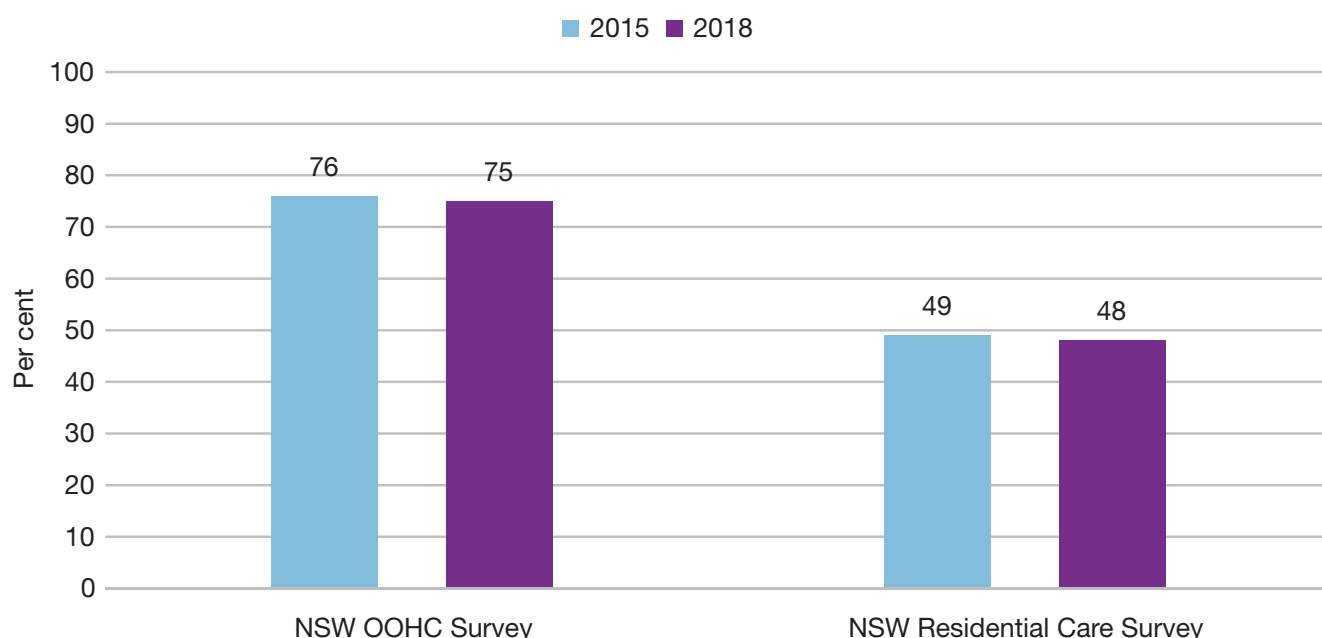
- Many of the studies found that children and young people had limited opportunities to participate in decision making.
- Most children and young people were not well-informed about decisions that were being made about their lives and the reasons why they were in care.
- When children and young people were consulted, they did not feel their views were valued or acted upon.
- Many children and young people reported being involved in decision making about trivial decisions but not decisions they considered important, such as choice of placement, birth family contact, choice of worker and choice of school.
- There was a lack of agreement among social workers on how to interpret participation and why it is important.
- Social workers identified a number of barriers to participation which prevent workers from forming positive relationships with children and young people. These include, concerns about case content and burdening children and young people with details and information that could be traumatic; perceived vulnerability and immaturity of children and young people; and organisational barriers such as high caseloads and inadequate staffing.

A small qualitative study of 28 young people in OOHC in Australia found that the majority of young people reported they were more likely to engage in negative behaviours when their views were ignored. They reflected that greater involvement in decision making could have resulted in a more successful placement, a better relationship with their caseworker and more positive experiences at school.²

What did children and young people say about participation in decision making?

Of the children and young people who answered the question about participation in decision making in the 2018 NSW OOHC Survey, three quarters (75%) reported they usually get to have a say and feel listened to. The responses in the NSW Residential Care Survey were less positive with less than half (48%) of children and young people reporting they usually get to have a say and feel listened to. Results for 2018 were comparable with those for 2015 for both surveys (Figure 1).

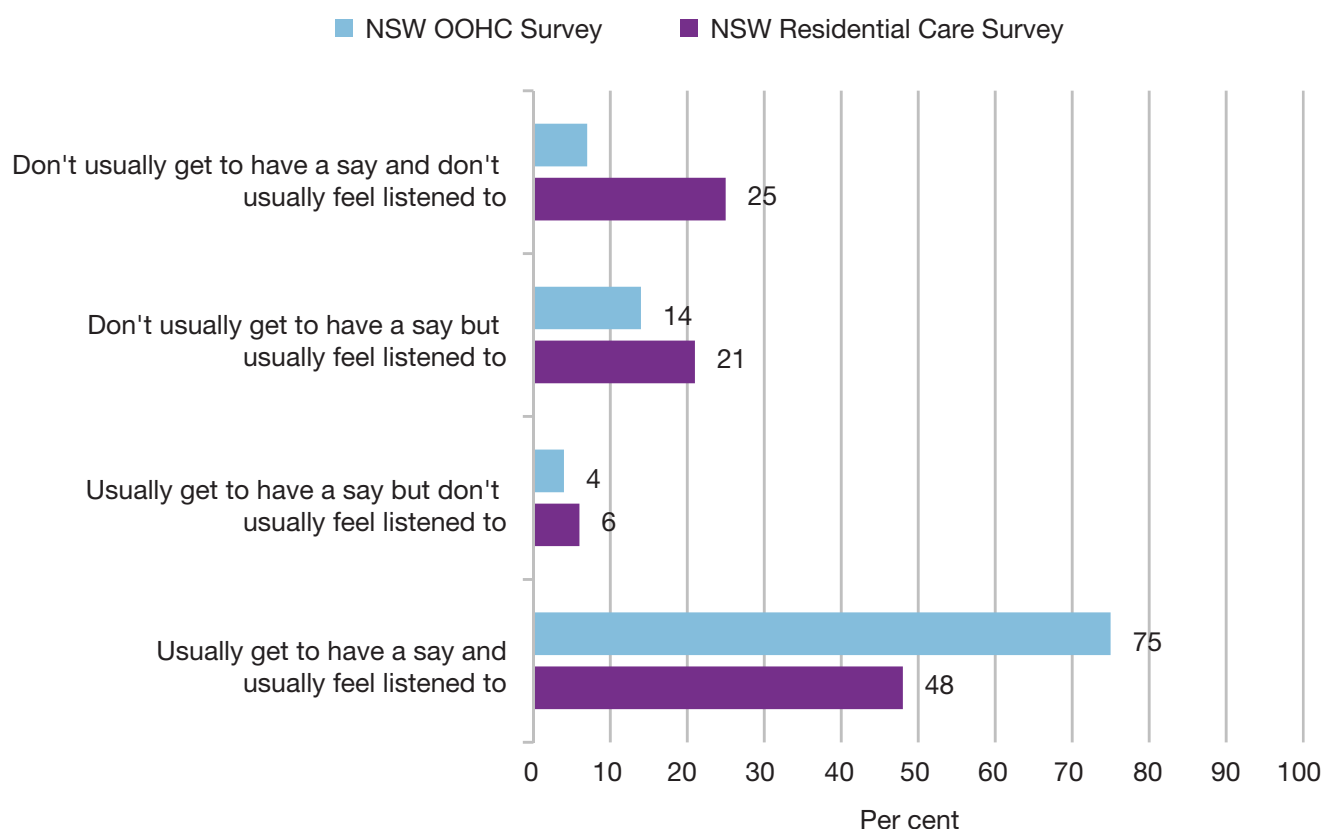
Figure 1: Children and young people in care aged 8-17 years who reported they usually get to have a say and feel listened to, 2015 and 2018



Source: 2018 NSW OOHC Survey dataset, 2018 NSW Residential Care Survey dataset 2015 NSW OOHC Survey Report, NSW FACS.

One quarter (25%) of children and young people who completed the NSW Residential Care Survey reported they don't usually get to have a say and don't usually feel listened to compared to 7% of children and young people who completed the NSW OOHC Survey (Figure 2)

Figure 2: Children in care aged 8-17 years by self-reported participation in decision making, 2018



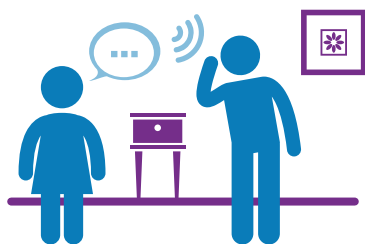
Source: 2018 NSW OOHC Survey dataset and 2018 NSW Residential Care Survey dataset.

NSW Residential Care Survey

Children and young people (8-17 years) self-reported participation in decision making

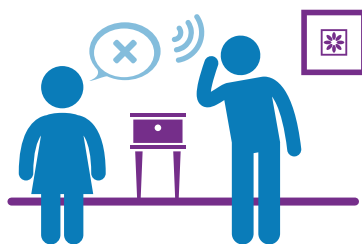
Usually get to have a say and usually feel listened to:

5 in 10



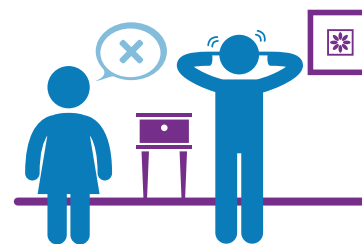
Don't usually get to have a say but usually feel listened to:

2 in 10



Don't usually get to have a say and don't usually feel listened to:

1 in 4



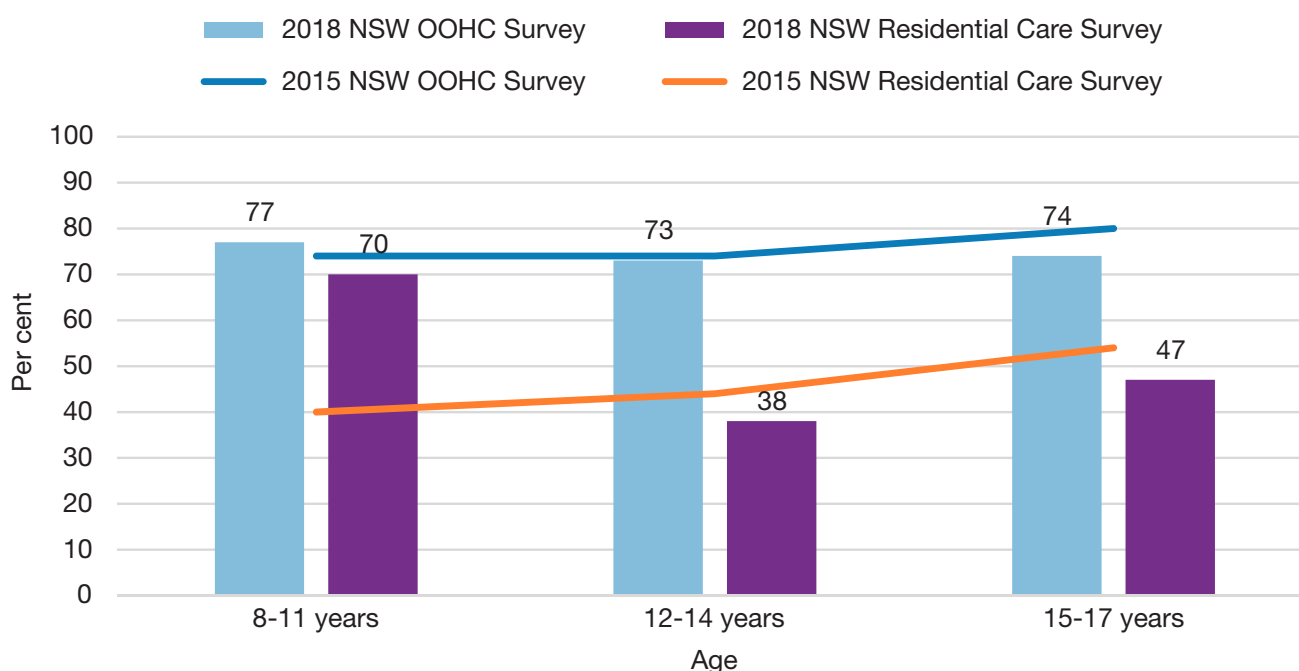
Source: 2018 NSW OOHC Survey dataset and 2018 NSW Residential Care Survey dataset.

Age

In the 2018 NSW OOHC Survey, 77% of children aged 8-11 years old reported they usually get to have a say and feel listened to compared to 73% of 12-14 year olds and 74% of 15-17 year olds. In the 2015 NSW OOHC Survey, 15-17 year olds were slightly more likely than the other age groups to report they usually get to have a say and usually feel listened to (80% compared with 74% of children aged 8-11 years and 74% of children aged 12-14 years).

In the 2018 NSW Residential Care Survey, 8-11 year olds were more likely to report they usually get to have a say and feel listened to than children and young people aged 12-14 years and 15-17 years. The proportion of children aged 8-11 years who reported they usually get to have a say and usually feel listened to increased by 30 percentage points from 40% in 2015 to 70% in 2018 (Figure 3).*

Figure 3: Children in care aged 8-17 years who reported they usually get to have a say and feel listened to, by age group, 2015 and 2018



Source: 2018 NSW OOHC Survey dataset, 2018 NSW Residential Care Survey dataset and 2015 NSW OOHC Survey Report, NSW FACS.

Aboriginality

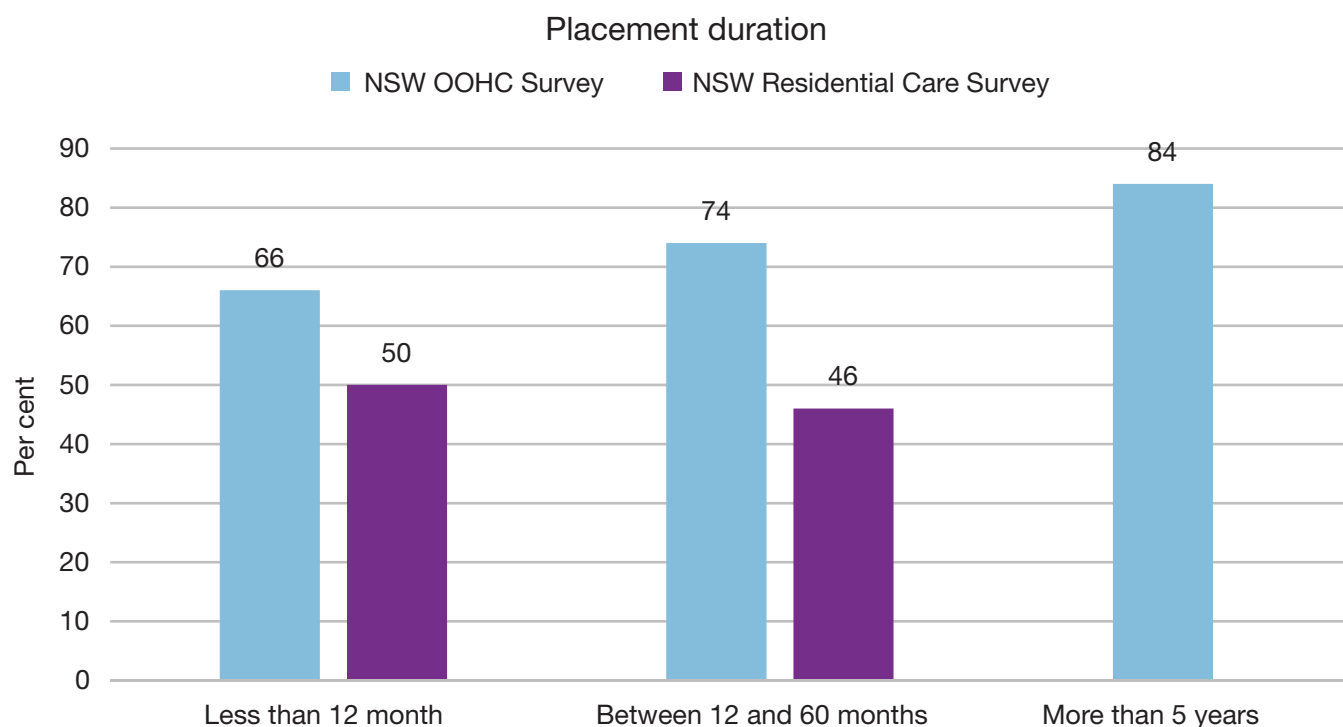
In the 2018 NSW OOHC Survey, Aboriginal children and young people were more likely to report they usually get to have a say and usually feel listened to than non-Aboriginal children and young people (around 80% compared with 73%). This finding was the same for the 2018 NSW Residential Care Survey where almost 56% of Aboriginal children and young people reported they usually get to have a say and usually feel listened to compared with 44% of non-Aboriginal children and young people.

Placement duration

Responses to the participation questions were influenced by placement duration. In the 2018 NSW OOHC Survey, 84% of children and young people who had been in a placement for more than 5 years reported they usually get to have a say and usually feel listened to. This compares to 74% for placements between 12 and 60 months and 66% for placements less than 12 months. This finding was not evident for children and young people who completed the NSW Residential Care Survey. For children and young people who had been in a residential care placement for between 12 and 60 months, 46% reported they usually get to have a say and usually feel listened to compared with 50% for placements less than 12 months (Figure 4).

* The number of respondents in the NSW Residential Care Survey in the 8-11 years and 12-14 years age groups are relatively small so these results should be interpreted with caution.

Figure 4: Children and young people aged 8-17 years who reported they usually get to have a say and feel listened to by placement duration, 2018



Source: 2018 NSW OOHC Survey dataset and 2018 NSW Residential Care Survey dataset.

Female versus male: How do they compare?

In the NSW OOHC Survey, the proportion of female children and young people who reported they usually get to have a say and usually feel listened to was 7 percentage points higher than male children and young people (79% and 72%).

However, for children young people who completed the NSW Residential Care Survey, male children and young people were slightly more likely to report that they usually get to have a say and usually feel listened to compared to female children and young people (50% compared to 47%).

What do these findings mean for policy and practice?

Results from both surveys highlight the need for greater engagement with children and young people to inform casework planning and decision making. Overall, children and young people who completed the NSW Residential Care Survey were less positive in their responses to all questions, highlighting a need for improved involvement in decision making and collaborative casework with this cohort.

Building rapport and a trusting relationship enables caseworkers to more effectively identify the tailored supports and planning required. A focus on early and ongoing participation ensures children and young people feel respected and valued throughout their time in OOHC. It also supports stability of placement as issues and worries can be more rapidly identified and addressed.

Greater participation in decision making can be achieved if the organisational barriers which prevent practitioners from forming positive relationships with children and young people are acknowledged and addressed. Practitioners can also strive to build a positive relationship with children and young people that is based on communication, trust, respect, understanding, time and reciprocity³ (Box 2).



Box 2: Practice points

Some practical strategies to assist practitioners to build a positive relationship with children and young people include:

- Being available to children and young people.
- Returning phone calls and responding to emails.
- Showing genuine interest in getting to know the child or young person and their likes and dislikes, how they are feeling and their hopes for their future.
- Organising case planning meetings outside of school hours and taking into account after school activities and commitments so children and young people can attend and participate in meetings.
- Being open and transparent with children and young people about major events in their lives and asking them to share their thoughts and feelings about these events. For example, Children's Court decisions, placement changes and birth family contact.
- Making changes to case plans and family contact plans based on feedback from children and young people.
- Asking children and young people for feedback about our work – What are we doing well? Where could we improve?

DCJ has a number of initiatives that aim to integrate client voice in our work (Box 3). Organisations such as Create, a national consumer body representing the voices of children and young people with an OOHC experience, help to ensure client voice remains at the forefront of our work. Ongoing commitment to these initiatives is needed so that we can continue to build positive relationships with children and young people in OOHC and increase their participation in decision making that affects their lives.

Box 3: Current DCJ initiatives



- **The Practice Framework** – Respect and promoting self-determination are core elements of DCJ's Practice Framework where all families and communities are given the respect to make decisions and choices about their lives and their futures. This framework adopts a systems approach to practice where systems, skills, evidence, culture and people intersect.
- **Youth Consult for Change group (UC Change)** – The primary purpose of the UC Change group is to consult and give feedback on projects being developed within DCJ so that young people are included in service design and delivery. Each member of the group has their own experience of being in OOHC. Group members are appointed for 12 to 24 months and are trained, supported and paid for their participation.

Resources

The Charter of Rights and other resources for children and young people in OOHC are available on the [DCJ website](#).

The [YOU website](#) is for 15-25 year olds who are currently or have been in OOHC. This website is about encouraging young people to plan for their future, to know their rights and what to ask for to support them to make informed decisions for their future.

About the Surveys

- The NSW OOHC Survey and NSW Residential Care Survey were last conducted in 2015. The 2018 NSW OOHC Survey was collected as part of the National OOHC Survey and was completed by 322 children and young people aged 8-17 years residing in OOHC under the NSW Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1988.
- The 2018 NSW Residential Care Survey was completed by 143 children and young people aged 8-17 years residing in residential OOHC under the NSW Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1988.
- Further information about the methodology, sample and NSW results are available in the FACSIAR Report, '[The views of NSW children and young people in out of home care, 2018.](#)'
- National results are available in the [Australian Institute of Health and Welfare \(AIHW\) report](#), The views of children and young people in out-of-home care: overview of indicator results from second national survey, 2018.



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Endnotes

- ¹ van Bijleveld, G, Dedding, C, & Bunders-Aelen, J 2015, 'Children's and young people's participation within child welfare and child protection services: a state-of-the art review', *Child & Family Social Work* 2015, vol. 20, pp. 129–138.
- ² Bessell, S 2011, 'Participation in decision-making in out-of-home care in Australia: What do young people say?', *Children and Youth Services Review*, vol. 33, pp. 496-501.
- ³ ten Brummelaar, M, Harder, A, Kalverboer, M, Post, W, & Knorth, E 2018, 'Participation of youth in decision-making procedures during residential care: A narrative review', *Child & Family Social Work*, vol. 23, pp. 33–44.