

# Child First: Seeing children as the solution, not the problem

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In this Info Sheet the authors analyse the Child First approach, which informs youth justice responses in England and Wales, and examine the principles that underpin meaningful co-production.

In response to **longstanding concerns** that the Youth Justice System in England and Wales was operating without a clear and coherent rationale, with children feeling marginalised and disempowered as a result, Child First youth justice has now become the **'strategic approach and central guiding principle'** of the **Youth Justice Board** (YJB / the body responsible for overseeing the youth justice system in England and Wales). **Child First** has brought to the fore the importance of children working together with professionals collaboratively to shape youth justice policy and practice, alongside the principles of seeing children as children, positive strengths-based working, and diverting children away from criminal systems wherever possible. This is an evidence-based and progressive model of practice, supported by international **research**.

The Child First principle of 'collaboration' can catalyse meaningful and interactive ways of working positively with children. Co-production is a case in point. Whilst it has been subject to scrutiny due to the contested nature of the term and the extent to which it can be mobilised in a criminal justice context, it has been defined as **'equal partnership and for equal benefit'**. In other words, it can broadly be described as a **collaborative process** that views children as experts through their lived experiences and is committed to addressing power inequalities between children and youth justice professionals to maximize opportunities for participation. Co-production aligns to the third principle of the YJB's definition of Child First, which proposes to: **"Encourage children's active participation, engagement, and wider social inclusion. All work is a meaningful collaboration with children and their carers"**.

Evidence of children's active participation and engagement can be found through the **Youth Advisory Network** (established by the YJB) ensuring that the voices and influence of children and young adults with lived experience are used to shape policy and practice developments that **better meet the realities and needs of justice-involved children**. This is an example of how co-production is used with children in criminal justice, but there are several principles that must be considered to ensure that 'meaningful collaboration' is being fully implemented across the whole youth justice sector. This CYCJ Info Sheet explores the benefits and challenges of working collaboratively with children. It examines how the principle of co-production (equal partners and co-creators), as an essential component of a Child First approach, can be applied to improve justice for, and with, children.

## Realising co-production in practice

Co-production is a **type of participation in public services** that can enable a focus on upholding children's participatory rights, alongside promoting their strengths. Co-production advances our awareness of how children participate more effectively and challenges the way adults and children work together. Despite there being no single formula for co-production, key principles necessary for the development of this approach include: **partnership working, power sharing, trust, and safe spaces**.

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### Partnership working with children

When working with children who are subject to court orders, aspects of supervision may appear non-negotiable, where they feel **obliged or compelled to engage in interventions**. In this context, efforts to empower children to embrace principles of partnership working and reciprocity can be challenging because they have **limited autonomy of whether or not to participate**.

Seeing children as co-producers involves empathic and non-judgemental attitudes, and treating them as equal partners in decision making, enabling them to exert influence by sharing their experiences or viewpoints on matters that affect them. Relationships should be nurtured and founded in trust, respect and inclusion, and can help to facilitate positive outcomes. Practitioners also nurture relationship-building by informing children of the influence and/or impact their contributions have made.

### Power sharing opportunities

Children may be willing to build relationships with adults and are capable of processing information and making recommendations for change. However, a lack of opportunities to influence decision making at governance levels will disempower. A lack of ability (or willingness) within organisations to think creatively about ways to overcome or **navigate power inequalities**, and scant appreciation of the resultant beneficial effects that can result from relinquishing their authoritative status as 'knowers', only exacerbates this. Children may not feel motivated to participate when they perceive activities as being tokenistic (box ticking) and not focused on what they want. For example, Referral Order panels allow practitioners to work creatively with children, but professionals exert **power and authority** through pre-written reports recommending certain responses, which may appear as non-negotiable to panel members and children alike.

Practitioners should seek to democratise the decision-making process by devolving power to children, enabling them to exercise agency and relative freedom to decide upon interventions. Alongside being responsive to children's needs and receptive to their wishes, practitioners need to carefully reflect on how children's accounts are trusted, ensuring their perspectives are valued equally and their voices make a difference.

### Inclusion/co-creation

Relationships remain unequal when professional judgements are based on seeing children as a risk to others or themselves. Despite challenges from Child First thinking, this appears to still dominate supervision arrangements and support offered to children. One area where this has been seen to be problematic is **High-Risk panels**, where offender-first mentalities and children seen principally as 'a risk to others' prevail, limiting opportunities to work with children in positive and strength-based ways. In this context, Youth Justice Services have retained (and continue to operationalise) the categorical distinction between so-called 'risk levels', reinforcing and thus sustaining inequalities of power. It remains necessary to take a critical look at this process, paying particular attention to a child's lived and living experiences.

It is important to cement the notion that children are knowledgeable beings, able to participate in discussions and share valid insights, especially on matters that affect them. Children must be enabled to 'express views freely' and be periodically **reassured that they will be heard by power holders** (Article 12, UNCRC). Nurturing safe spaces and adopting a rights-respecting approach is conducive to co-creating holistic, empowering, pro-social and non-punitive interventions. It is necessary to create a **comfortable environment** that helps children to feel calm, and experience a sense of belonging.

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These principles are the prerequisites for driving effective co-production in youth justice, required to facilitate credible opportunities for children to actively participate, to empower them and uphold their rights. Embracing co-production can improve justice for, and with, children, emphasising their skills, knowledge and expertise. Emphasising pro-social development for children and giving them the opportunity to co-construct decisions about their lives (alongside trusted adult professionals) results in clear benefits to wider society.

As indicated above, Child First is not always being used as a guiding principle, nor is it being consistently employed to frame practice to co-produce goals, address organisational issues or transform the balance of power. Wider organisational constraints, resource limitations, and a history of seeing children as offenders causes problems in facilitating children's voice and expertise. Nevertheless, significant change has been underway in youth justice for several years now. It is imperative that Child First participation focuses on the wider system barriers and adult professional responses to children. Practitioners may feel challenged if asked to adopt a co-producer approach to how they operate. Training is necessary to equip them with the tools to advance this type of practice, but this has been slow to materialise, leaving practitioners in a knowledge vacuum.

When professionals view children as the solution, such as for co-producing an effective intervention plan, then children and adults can become equal decision makers. This creates a much more ethical and moral way of working with children. Child First participation as a discourse and set of ideas, has scope to mount a challenge to deficit-based depictions of children as 'objects of concern' or passive recipients, and co-production secures a practical way of working in an equal partnership with those in receipt of interventions. Although there is more work needed to unpick the barriers to children as co-producers in practice, the time is ripe for co-production to be embraced and utilised as an organising principle to cultivate genuine collaborative practices.

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