

Child First?

Examining children's perspectives
of their 'effective' collaboration in
youth justice decision-making

Executive summary



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The Nuffield Foundation is an independent charitable trust with a mission to advance social wellbeing. It funds research that informs social policy, primarily in education, welfare and justice. It also funds student programmes that provide opportunities for young people to develop skills in quantitative and scientific methods. The Nuffield Foundation is the founder and co-funder of the Nuffield Council on Bioethics and the Ada Lovelace Institute. The Foundation has funded this project, but the views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily of the Foundation. Visit: www.nuffieldfoundation.org.

Executive Summary

Introduction

This Child First research project was commissioned by the Nuffield Foundation to gain a greater understanding of what children think about their collaboration in youth justice decision-making processes. Participation and engagement of children in youth justice processes and practice is vital, particularly since the Youth Justice Board's adoption of Child First justice as its guiding principle and key strategic objective. Child First is an evidence-based framework for working with children incorporating four tenets: see children as children; develop pro-social identity for positive child outcomes; collaboration with children and promoting diversion away from the justice system. The focus for this project is the third tenet, 'collaboration with children'.

Purpose

Children's voices have traditionally been neglected within youth justice policy, practice and research, which have mainly been undertaken and developed by adults for adults. Consequently this project sought to re-address this imbalance with its child-focus of facilitating children to share their genuine perspectives and experiences of their involvement in decision-making processes. The study explored children's collaboration in decisions affecting them at all stages of the Youth Justice System and focused on four interconnected research questions relating to: **collaboration understandings, collaboration objectives, collaboration effectiveness and collaboration practise development.**

Methodology

The qualitative methodological framework of **Participatory Interpretivism** was chosen, which prioritises co-constructing the research with justice-involved children to ensure child-centric, Child First, co-creation of all research elements. Two different sample groups of justice-involved children were identified from a range of community and custodial settings, in order to address the research questions through participatory and co-created methods and analyses:

Project Reference Group (PRG) of justice-experienced children (n= 22) collaborating together with researchers throughout the life of the project to co-create the project design (including exploring creative methods), implementation processes and interpretation of findings, recruited from one hosting Youth Justice Service (YJS).

Research Participant Children (n = 66) recruited from six geographically and institutionally diverse research sites to take part in *system journey interviews and complete digital/paper diaries* for reflecting on involvement within- and between-stages of the Youth Justice System (3 x youth justice services, 2 x youth offending institutions and 1 x secure children's home).

Summary of Findings and Discussion

Findings provided a rich description and interpretation of children's views from the PRG sessions and interviews undertaken with participant children at the research fieldwork sites.

PRG session observations highlighted the development of the project methodology throughout the fieldwork to:

- ✓ ensure child-friendly, child appropriate ways of communicating with children about the research concepts and questions
- ✓ trial creative activities/methods to neutralise power dynamics and encourage engagement
- ✓ interpret research findings from the participant sample to provide an opportunity for children to discuss, challenge and validate emerging themes and sub-themes
- ✓ disseminate research findings – children chose a pre-recorded rap backing track and, using quotes from participants and their own words, recorded a full rap song in a professional studio.

Participant children sample findings in relation to the research questions:

- ✓ identified what children considered to be the essential elements of 'collaboration', summarised as being encouraged to engage in respectful conversations, being spoken to appropriately, being provided with clear information and having their views considered and taken into account
- ✓ revealed that children wanted professionals to ask them about their aspirations, listen to what they were saying and offer support to help them to achieve their goals so they could move forward with their life
- ✓ indicated that effective collaboration practice needs to be based around building authentic, positive, non-hierarchical relationships with professionals who cared about them, in a comfortable environment, to facilitate the development of effective and relevant support
- ✓ identified the main areas for practice development which they believed would improve Child First practice as:
 - wanting professionals to listen to children and their ideas for improvement
 - acknowledging and breaking down power imbalances by creating child-friendly environments
 - keeping children continually informed throughout their involvement with youth justice agencies
 - involving children in decision-making about them at both strategic and practice levels to benefit their experience and improve outcomes across the whole of the Youth Justice System

Furthermore, findings revealed that children's experiences of Child First collaboration practice are inconsistent, with some parts of the Youth Justice System better than others. For YJSs, collaboration experiences were generally positive; within custody, it varied depending on the establishment and incentive scheme level; whilst interactions and engagement with the police, courts and children's social care services were mostly negative. A discussion of the findings provides an overview of the main themes/sub-themes developed and an exploration of how they consolidate and extend existing knowledge related to children's collaboration and youth justice decision making and children's views of effective youth justice collaboration practice.

Overview of Recommendations

The report concludes with a number of recommendations identifying where children have indicated practice needs further development, and where their experiences have indicated barriers to their effective collaboration.

Recommendations for *all* agencies associated with youth justice, including: YJSs, Courts, Police, Custodial institutions, Solicitors

- **Recommendation 1:** Collaboration within all agencies needs to include ALL FOUR key collaborative elements identified by children: asking children their opinions, listening to children, respecting children's views and keeping children informed
- **Recommendation 2:** Children's *self-identified goals and aspirations* need to inform all youth justice interventions and activities
- **Recommendation 3:** Children need to be actively involved in youth justice decision-making at all levels
- **Recommendation 4:** Youth justice personnel need to actively facilitate effective collaboration and neutralise power imbalances including child-friendly environments and utilising creative activities
- **Recommendation 5:** Collaboration needs to be consistent across the *whole* Youth Justice System, recognising the 'collaboration' tenet of Child First as the facilitator of all the other tenets
- **Recommendation 6:** To fully embed Child First into youth justice, all policy and practice guidance bodies need to include collaboration principles into their processes
- **Recommendation 7:** Providers of youth justice services are invited to contribute ideas towards, and make use of, the practitioner pack, which will be distributed as part of this project. (e.g., practitioner training, posters for youth justice spaces, link to the rap recorded by members of the project PRG containing the words of some of the research participants). The pack will be made available on the YJB Resource Hub and sent to all YJS managers.

Recommendations for *specific* agencies associated with youth justice

- **Recommendation 8: Police** services should examine their own practice, according to the principles of good collaboration identified in this report that align to the National Police Chief's Council (2024) Children and Young Persons Policing Strategy 2024 – 2027
- **Recommendation 9: Courts** should examine their own practice, according to the principles of good collaboration identified in this report, including how children can be meaningfully facilitated to be involved in sentencing decision and ensuring child-friendly environments
- **Recommendation 10: All custodial provision** for children should be Child First in approach, facilitated by robust practice supporting collaboration with children (e.g., creating a Child

First environment, ensuring that initiatives to become involved in decision-making are available to all, ensuring that all four stages of collaboration are followed for both individual children and those involved in organised initiatives)

Recommendations for academics embarking on youth justice research

- **Recommendation 11:** Ensure that the voice of the justice-involved child is incorporated into all research into youth justice matters to be sure that findings do not privilege adult-centric approaches, assumptions, knowledge and understanding
- **Recommendation 12:** Incorporate some level of child involvement in the conception, development, execution and dissemination of youth justice-related research, to better incorporate children into its heart
- **Recommendation 13:** Commission future research to further examine the cross-agency complexities raised by this project by conducting an in-depth examination into individual youth justice agencies, particularly the police and courts, incorporating recommendations 11 and 12

They asked me what sorts of things I wanted to do and I did some work about peer pressure and positive relationships, friendships – what makes a good friend ... I can talk more confidently

If you're going to arrest me yeah, talk to me with respect ... like the way they speak to their own kids. Don't speak down to us and listen, speak to us on the level and we'll listen too

It should be based around the child, so like for me Health and Social Care is my goal, so they organised for me to be on the interview panel for social workers. All the stuff I want to do in the future

It's child friendly and so far it's been a positive experience and they've included me in what's happening all the time, I don't want to go back to offending and that, I want to go forward now in life

They [police] shouldn't be treating under 18s like that, I'm a minor and they know how they treat people ain't right, it's just a power thing with them innit

Just hire people that actually care, a lot of people just take the job to get paid, but then you also get people who actually want to help young people

The rooms are good, it's a nice calm environment, the people are nice and friendly, they listen to what you have to say, they care about what you think, there's a nice vibe, cos that's what I go on. If it doesn't feel good how can I be involved in what's going on

The pressure in there [court] is bad, so it makes you not want to say anything, because it's so stressful, everyone is looking at you, eyes from all directions, so it makes you feel very uncomfortable

We get the opportunity to say how we feel but nothing gets done about it, just because they ask us about things doesn't mean anything will get done ... They just need to listen, take what we're saying into account and actually act on it

To view the PRG rap made from participant responses, go to:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L2EwPihKC1g>