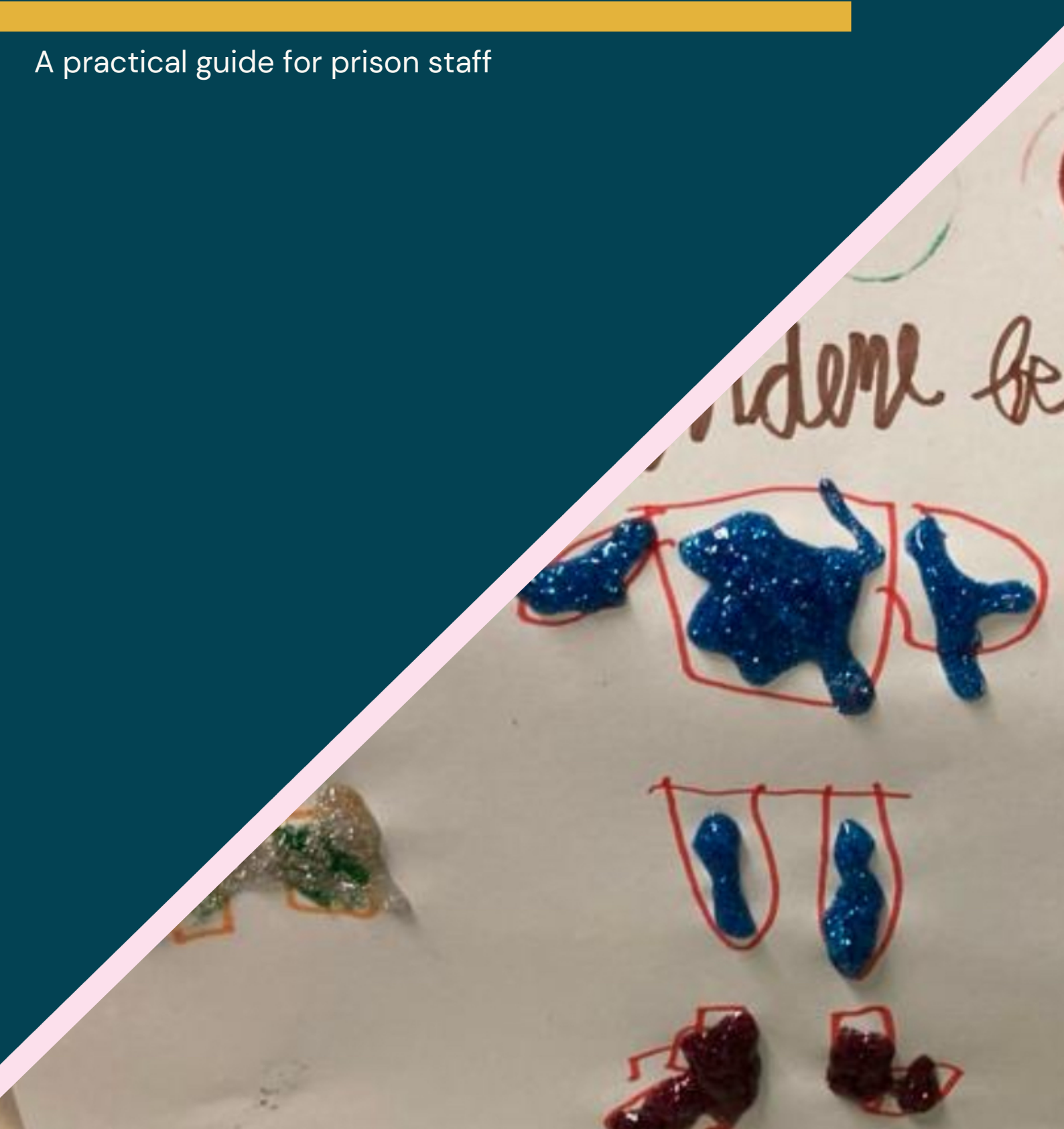


Getting Started with Child Participation in Prison

A practical guide for prison staff



Acknowledgments

This guide on child participation within the prison system was developed as part of the “Our Stories Matter” project (OSM). Within this project, we worked with national and international partners to strengthen the voice and position of children with a parent in detention.

The guide builds on the insights, experiences, and outcomes of this project and was developed with contributions from professionals, researchers, children with a parent in detention, and their parents.

We would like to extend a special thank you to the children and young people who shared their stories, perspectives, and insights with us. Their voices form the heart of this guide.

Illustrations: The drawings in this guide were created by the children who participated in this project.



Dienst Justitiële Inrichtingen
Ministerie van Justitie en Veiligheid



Co-funded by
the European Union

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**Poem created by a member of the Youth
Club of the "Our Stories Matter" project**

Dad and me

*We are separated from each other
We wait separated from each other
We live separated from each other
We sleep separated from each other
We miss each other, separated
We long for each other, separated*

Until sports day

*This one day
Actually, these two hours a year.*

Dad and me

*Playing together
Laughing together
Hugging together
Relaxing together
Enjoying together
Being together*

Two hours without walls

*Two hours of real contact
Two hours of dad, just for me*

Lindy (14)



Introduction

Introduction

Over the past three years, the Netherlands Helsinki Committee (NHC), the Exodus Nederland Foundation and its Centre of Expertise K I N D have worked together with Justitieel Complex Zaanstad (JC Zaanstad), the Dutch Custodial Institutions Agency (Dienst Justitiële Inrichtingen – DJI), Children of Prisoners Europe (COPE) and the European Organisation of Prison and Correctional Services (EuroPris) on the project ***Our Stories Matter***.

Funded by the Janivo Foundation and the European Union, this project aims to embed child participation in a systematic, meaningful, inclusive and safe way – at both the local and national level – within policy development and implementation processes in the Dutch prison system. Structurally embedding child participation in policy and practice within penitentiary institutions is essential to limit the negative effects of a parent's detention on children and to better align policy and practice with children's lived experiences. This guide enables prisons to structurally consider the experiences, needs and rights of children with a parent in detention when making (policy) decisions.

The central question of our project is therefore not ***whether*** prison staff should involve children within penitentiary institutions, but ***how*** staff can do so in a careful and responsible manner.

This practical guide is the final product of *Our Stories Matter* and is specifically intended for prison staff, policymakers and management teams within penitentiary institutions. The guide is largely based on input from children with an incarcerated parent.

In this document, the project partners explain what child participation is and what we believe is needed to enable it. We provide practical guidance and examples of how child participation can be implemented within the prison context. The aim is to ensure that child participation becomes structurally embedded in the daily practice of:

- senior management and directors;
- multidisciplinary case meetings (MDO);
- detention and reintegration processes;
- family moments and visits;
- prison-family communications.



The guide consists of three interrelated components:

1. An **overview of the process of child participation**, explaining how to embed participation in policy, monitoring and evaluation so that children's participation does not depend on individual staff members or temporary projects.
2. An overview of **evaluation methods**, tailored to different age groups, enabling the safe and developmentally appropriate involvement of children.
3. Clear **checklists** to embed child participation structurally within prisons, based on recommendations from the Youth Club¹ and the report *Our Voice Matters*.

“Child participation is not an extra task: it is about how you do your work – keeping parents and children in view”

WINIE HANEKAMP

¹Youthclub: a group of children with a parent in detention who, during the OSM project years, participated in activities focused on social interaction, play, and participation under the guidance of a coach, and actively contributed to advising the OSM implementation team and to the development of the OSM project.

Letter from Dirk

Dear prison director,

I hope you truly realise that children with a parent in prison also need attention and must be taken seriously.

We can't help that our fathers are in prison.

That was not our choice, but we still must deal with it.

They are still our dad or mum, just like you have - or had - a dad or mum.

Treat us the way you would want to be treated, and then everything will be okay.

Dirk (14)



What is child participation?

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child defines child participation as *"the processes ... in which children and adults exchange information and engage in dialogue with one another on the basis of mutual respect, and in which children learn how their opinions and those of adults are taken into account and how this contributes to the outcome of such processes."*

To address the right to child participation, as enshrined in Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the project's group used the model of Laura Lundy (2007). This model states that meaningful and effective child participation comprises of four interrelated elements:

Space

Children must be offered safe and inclusive opportunities to form and express their views.

Voice

Children must be facilitated to express their views.

Audience

There must be a designated and identifiable person or body responsible for listening to views expressed by children.

Influence

Children's views must be given due weight in decision-making processes, considering their age and capabilities. To ensure this, children must be informed of the decision that has been made, how their views were considered in the decision-making process, and why action is being taken in the manner decided upon. The project group has added the element **Intention** to this model.

ARTICLE 12 THE VIEWS OF THE CHILD

Paragraph 1 States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

Paragraph 2 For this end, the child shall, in particular, be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial or administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law.



The project group has added the element **'Intent'** to this model. This means that a participatory project must have a specific intention (supported by both the relevant authorities and the implementing organization). These parties must be able to articulate the rationale and added value of child participation within their mission.

This provision means that the Correctional Services, the management of a prison, and the rest of the prison staff must be committed to implementing child participation. They must therefore be able to articulate both the rationale for and the added value of child participation within the context of their mission.



Importance of child participation in correctional services

The prison system bears a special responsibility: children visit an environment for which the correctional services is responsible. Consequently, the decisions made by a correctional facility affect not only prisoners, but also have consequences for the lives, safety, and development of their children. This responsibility is part of a broader social mission: as a society, we collectively bear the responsibility to protect children and ensure they grow up as safely as possible.

In correctional facilities, however, child participation is commonly regarded as a challenge — the focus of the work is primarily on those imprisoned or detained, with their secure confinement and resocialisation emphasised as central. Additionally, many feel it is quite difficult directly engage with children.

Neither of these realities makes it any less important to involve children. In addition to the provisions of Article 12, 50% of those in prison are men and fathers, and 64% of incarcerated women are mothers. Time in detention is a promising period for working to maintain and/or restore the child-parent bond.

On the other hand, child participation can contribute to children's well-being. After all, we know that:

- Many children are implicated. A conservatively estimated 2.1 million children in Europe are affected by parental imprisonment². In the Netherlands, the number of children with a parent —father or mother—in detention fluctuated between just over 26,000 and approximately 22,000 from 2014 to 2019;³
- A large proportion of these children visit their father or mother in prison;
- Having a parent in detention is a profoundly traumatic childhood experience; children with a parent in detention often struggle with feelings of loss, guilt, shame, and insecurity, and they face an increased risk of emotional distress, behavioral problems, and social exclusion;
- The absence of a parent due to incarceration has a major impact on the family and on a child's upbringing and development;
- Children are greatly affected by policies and practices regarding incarceration and the structure of visits

² This is a conservative estimate based on a 1999 survey by the French Institute for Statistics, INSEE which established a parenting rate of 1.3 children per male prisoner. Children of Prisoners Europe extrapolated the estimated number of children with imprisoned parents based on this parenting rate. This figure was attained when Russia was a member State of the Council of Europe thus refers to 46 member States + Russia.

³ Verhagen-Braspennincx, A, Beijers, G, en Bart Claes. 2023. "Incarcerated Fathers and Their Children in The Netherlands: Demographic and Detention Factors That Affect the Father-Child Relationship: A Secondary Analysis".



An environment that fails to pay sufficient attention to children's voices and perspectives can further hinder their well-being and development and disrupt the process of rebuilding their bond with their parent.

We must therefore not underestimate the role of prison staff in child participation; it is the staff who act and make decisions!! The actions of the staff affect not only the incarcerated parent but also his or her child(ren).

Effective child participation in detention does not require major systemic changes, but rather:

- truly giving a voice to children;
- predictability and sympathy in existing rules;
- empathetic staff;
- structural safeguards for children's participation, established by management.

Read more about the Lundy model, current practices, and the challenges and opportunities of child participation within the prison context in our report [Our Voices Matter](#).



The process of child participation

Effective child participation in prison requires clear and consistent process steps:

1. Start with the children: prioritize their wellbeing and safety. This aligns with the principles of family-focused practice in detention; see in report '[Handreiking.gezinsgericht werken in detentie](#)' (Netherlands,2026).
2. Create the required conditions that make children's participation possible in practice.
3. Clarify roles and responsibilities: staff must know their role in enabling and safeguarding child participation within the prison.

Core Principles: children at the centre

- Children are in the lead: Child participation means giving children a voice to share what they experience, feel and need. Not every child wants or is able to participate in the same way. Offering different, age-appropriate forms of participation is essential.
- Children choose if and how they participate: Participation is always voluntary. Children should never feel pressured to take part.
- Respect differences between children: Children differ in age, development, personality and preferences. Some express themselves verbally, others through drawings, writing or anonymous feedback. Offering multiple options allows every child to participate in a way that suits them.
- Trust is the bedrock: Participation is more than methods or activities. Trust between the child and the staff member is essential and develops over time through consistency, predictability and respectful interaction.

Children first need to experience that they are taken seriously, that they do not need to share more than they want, and that they will not be judged (or have the feeling that they are judged). Only when a child feels safe, does the opportunity arise to share feelings, experiences, or ideas.

Sometimes participation starts "small": being present, observing or engaging without having to speak. Building trust is an ongoing process that underpins all forms of child participation.

Preconditions for child participation

Before meaningful child participation can take place, several conditions must be in place:

- **Safety and inclusivity**

Ensure children's physical and emotional safety. Activities and feedback moments take place in child-friendly environments, with staff adopting an open, respectful and approachable attitude. A child safeguarding policy must be in place. Communication—verbal and non-verbal—should be adapted to children's age and experience.

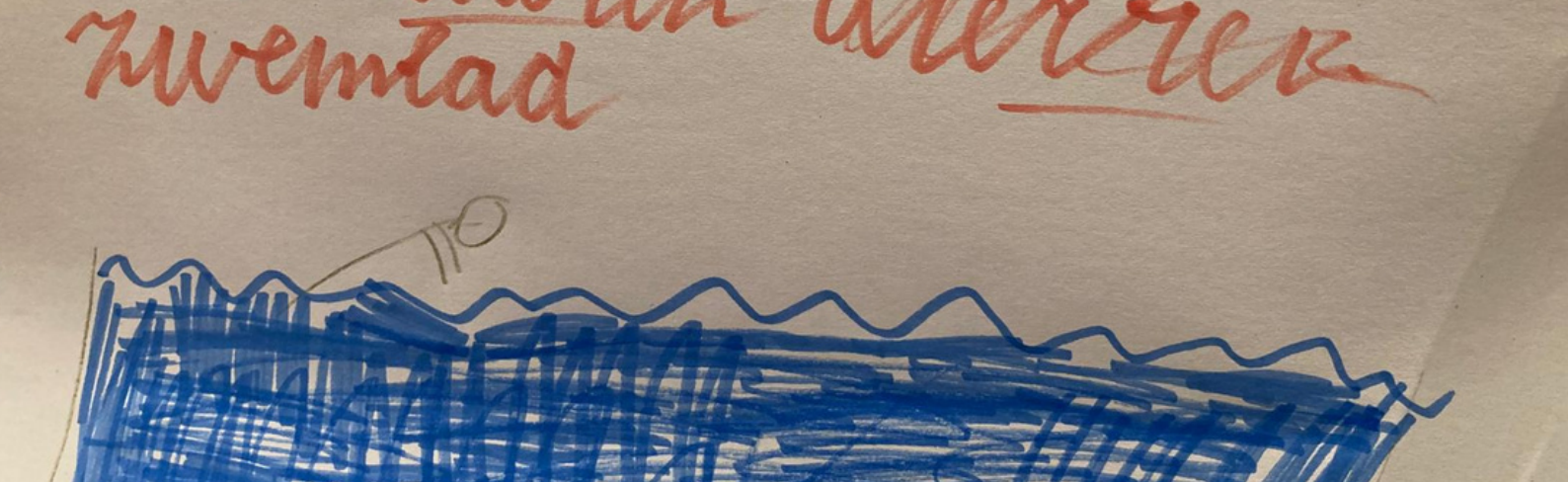
- **Mandate and ownership**

Child participation must be structurally embedded in policy and work processes, with clear responsibilities. Appoint child participation focal points or ambassadors, and work with external partners who have expertise in this field.



- **Knowledge and skills**

Invest in staff awareness, skills and support. This may include e-learning modules focused on child participation (f.e. The Dutch elearning 'Our Stories Matter- kinderpacticatie in de gevangenis' made by Centre of Expertise K I N D/Exodus Nederland), training sessions, guidance materials and collaboration with experts by experience.



- **Planning and logistics**

Align participation activities with detention practice. Avoid planning participation during visiting time so that children's limited time with their parent is protected and participation can take place in a calm and safe context.

- **Communication**

Provide clear, well-timed and audience-specific communication to children, parents/carers, staff and partners. Explain the purpose of participation, what will happen with the input, and what children can and cannot influence. Use child-friendly language and age-appropriate activities. Provide feedback to children and parents, and respond to any concerns or worries. Internally, ensure staff communicate consistent messages. Assign a child ambassador, who is dedicated to and available for families and children. Use appropriate educational materials such as posters, videos and flyers, to clarify the purpose of child participation and to invite children to share their views.

- **Dedicated staff**

Trust building requires staff who already have built — or can build relationships with families, such as family liaison officers, reintegration staff or other familiar faces. NGO Staff can contribute for example by support with dedicated volunteers organizing child-parent programmes. (f.e. Ouder-Kind Detentieprogramma (OKD) of Exodus Nederland). Familiarity helps children to speak up, making participation easier and more accessible. Another option is to appoint someone who can dedicate their time to maintain family contact.

“My brother is 18. He is still his dad’s child too. He also looks forward to father-child days. He needs it. I think the age limit should be raised to 21.”

ROGIER – AGE 11

Roles and responsibilities

Roles	Responsibilities
Management	• Embed child participation in policy and decision-making; • Ensure structural implementation and monitoring.
Designated Child officer	• Coordinate implementation, evaluation and feedback; • Organize annual evaluation moments with a Mini Youth Club;⁴ • Present children's feedback to management by staff (recognised by the 'go ahead' badge).
Staff	• Participate in child participation training ; • Support children during participation activities; • Apply this guide and associated checklists in daily practice.
Children	• Take part in annual evaluation and feedback via a child-friendly activity; • Access continuous feedback methods such as a mailbox or face-to-face contact to ensure their voices are heard and acknowledged in daily practice.

In the appendix, you will find various action sheets (organized by role/function) to facilitate children's participation in the prison through policy, existing projects, and decision-making.

⁴An annual one-time gathering of a group of children led by a staff member/childcoach, during which they share their experiences and feedback through creative and child-friendly activities

Evaluation methods for child participation

By now, you know what you can do to facilitate child participation in prison. To this end, we are providing you with various evaluation methods. The success of these methods depends, among other things, on the child's preferences. Familiarity—or lack thereof—with child participation also plays a role.

A. Feedback mailbox

Place a mailbox in a visible, accessible place (inside or around the prison) where children can easily leave a note (anonymously or with their name).

Ensure:

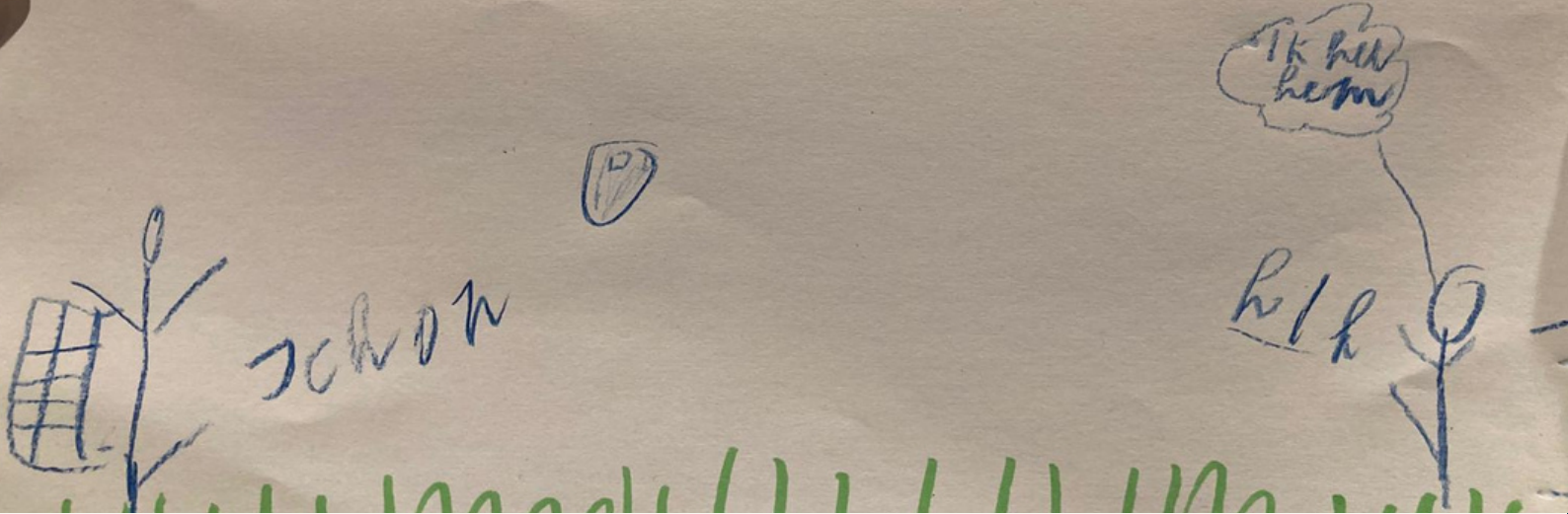
- clear explanation of its purpose;
- explanation of how feedback will be used and shared;
- accessible materials (paper, coloured cards, pencils);
- clear communication to families so they can find the mailbox.

Transparency builds trust. When children see that you take their input seriously (and act on it whenever possible), their trust in you grows.

B. Recognizable Staff (Badge)

Children benefit from knowing who they can approach. A visible badge makes staff approachable and makes accessing questions or sharing concerns less intimidating. In the “Our Stories Matter” project we used a 'go ahead'-badge (in Dutch: 'zeg het maar'- badge). This helped children identify which adults they could turn to for questions or remarks.





C. Interactive methods by age group

Young children (ages four to seven)

Appropriate methods:

- Organize a creatively-themed gathering;
- When drawing or crafting with the children ask them a specific question, for example: what would you do if you were the director of this place? Be aware that not every child knows that father/mother lives in prison;
- Short, informal conversations before, during or after the activity;
- Use of colours, symbols, smileys, or icons;
- Come up with a way to get the children to speak up. For example, bring a special box or suitcase that invites them to take something out of it. Combine that with simple imaginative questions (e.g. "If you could change one thing here, what would it be?" or "What can the people who work here do to be kind and friendly to children?");
- Get a 'magic wand' and ask: If you could perform magic, what would the prison and the people there look like? Then talk with the child about this "magical world."



Organize the creative session together with parents as well. First, give the families some time together, and then divide them into two groups: one group of parents and a separate group of children. Let everyone work individually and discuss their experiences with each other after. This may make participation more accessible for some children. Additionally, this approach offers different perspectives.



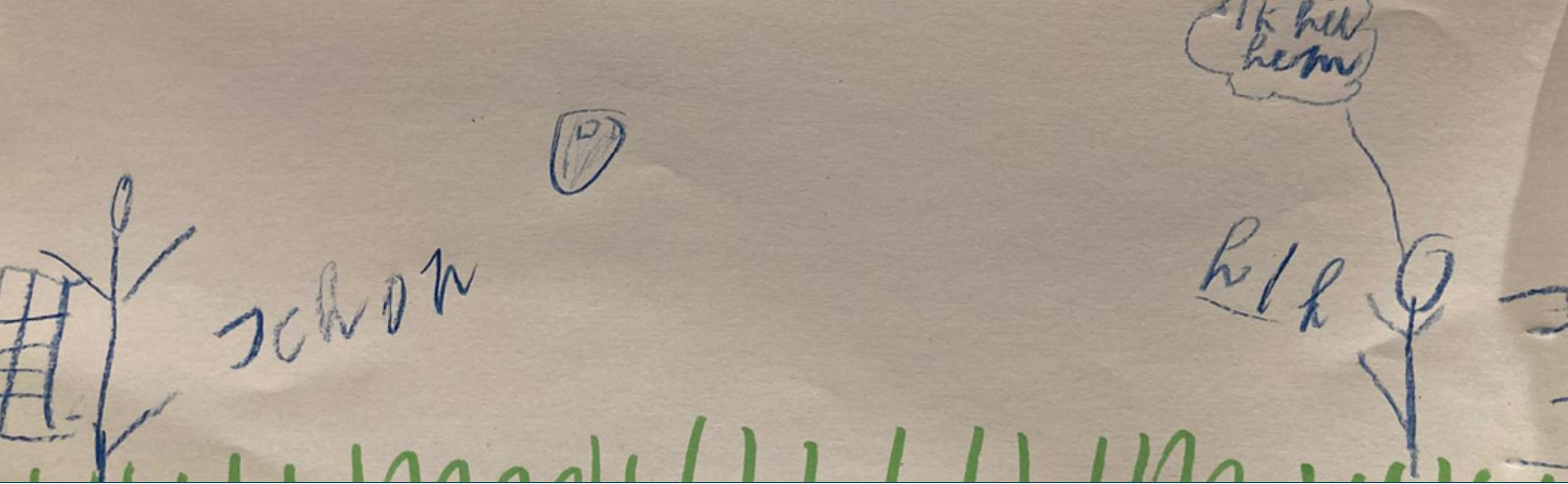
What is fun and positive about this place?

You! And dad!

Is there something you don't like?

The dog!

Sanne (9)



Elementary school-aged children (ages eight to twelve)

Appropriate methods:

- Organize a creatively-themed gathering. Encourage the children to draw or do crafts while asking a specific question. For example: What would you do if you were the prison director?
- Encourage the children to fill out the booklet 'Mijn Verhaal'. This is a journal designed to capture the experiences of children with an imprisoned parent. Through writing and drawing in this journal, children can make their voices heard and share what it means to them when someone they love dearly is in prison. 'Mijn verhaal' is based on a Scottish model: 'My Story'. This booklet was written by a Scottish author of children's books in collaboration with the family support team at the organization Families Outside.
- Conduct an individual conversation or opt for a group discussion.



Use the Rose, Thorn, Bud method. The Rose, Thorn, Bud method is a simple and effective technique often used for personal reflection or brainstorming sessions. It helps evaluate a situation or experience. This method helps children reflect in a positive, critical, and forward-looking way. Want to learn more about this method? Contact the centre of expertise K I N D.

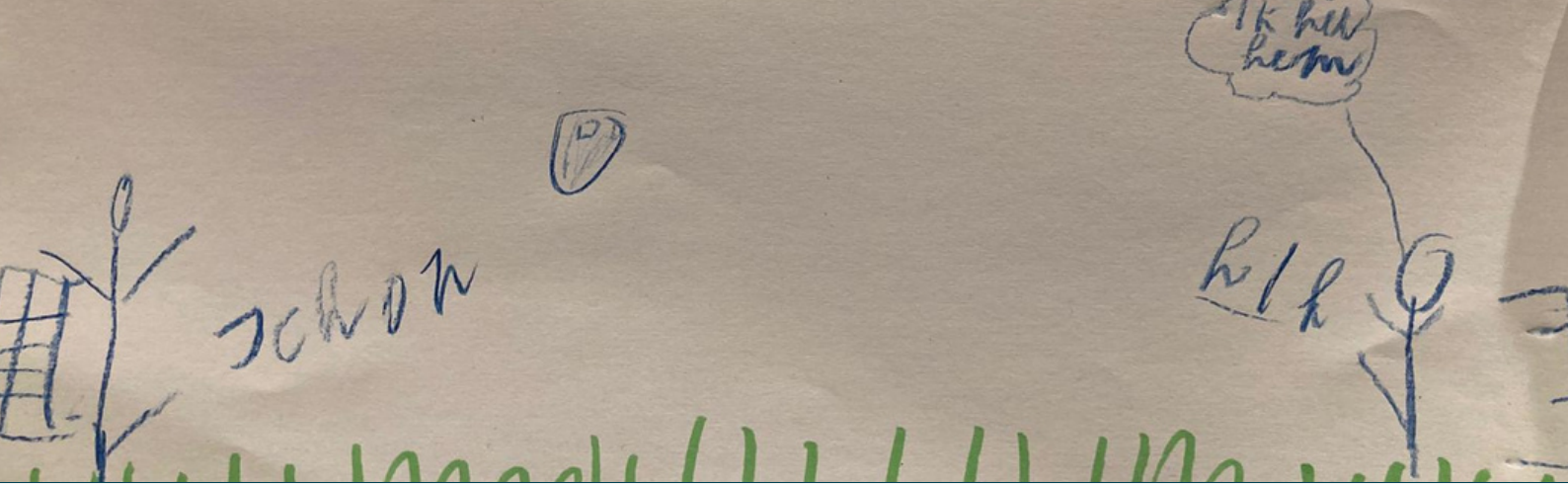
Young people (approximately thirteen to eighteen years old)

Appropriate methods:

- Conduct an individual interview or opt for a group discussion (in person or online);
- Give young people the opportunity to share their (anonymous) opinions digitally via a contact form or questionnaire from the prison;
- Ask young people what they enjoy doing. Maybe they would appreciate a drawing assignment or a game of soccer! Their input during this activity can yield different evaluation insights.



Use posters or business cards with a QR code that the children can easily scan. Important! Make sure these posters are visible on the outside of the building or displayed in a location before the children reach the reception desk. Examples you can find on the website of the Centre of Expertise K I N D.



Sample questions for an evaluation:

- What did you enjoy today?
- What did you find difficult or less enjoyable?
- What would you like to see changed?
- When do you feel comfortable here?
- If you could change one thing, what would it be?
- What advice do you have for the people who work here?
- What would you do differently if you were in charge here?
- What is going well and could be done more often?

To involve children in various ways, you can organize the following activities, among others:

- A (facilitated) discussion with the management team or executive board in which children voluntarily share their experiences and management or executive board explain why they make certain decisions or implement rules. Such a discussion is incredibly valuable, but it is important that management actually listen, provide explanations, and seriously consider whether any changes are possible;
- a themed meeting where children contribute ideas about visiting times or child-parent activities activities;
- Creative afternoons during which staff gather feedback in a playful manner, for example through various evaluation tasks during a game carousel.



Bonustips

- Whenever possible, organize an activity for children outside the prison walls. Children often feel more comfortable in a neutral, child-friendly environment. Consider an activity at a community center, sports hall, or creative space. An external setting can help promote a more relaxed environment and a sense of equal access. Connect with the child's world and organize an activity that aligns with their interests (such as sports, music, or creativity);
- When planning activities, keep in mind that children do not like it when an activity takes away from the time they can spend with their parent. If you still want to engage in an activity during a visit, schedule an extra session or give the children some extra time with their parent;
- It is crucial for mutual trust that you provide feedback on the input received in every form of evaluation. Explaining and responding to input is just as important as gathering the information and listening to the children!

Disclaimer

The examples, activities, and guiding principles in this guide may offer you direction and inspiration. They show you what is possible, but we do not prescribe how to do it. In practice, child participation often requires experimentation, fine-tuning, and adjustment. What works for one child at a particular moment may be less appropriate at another time.

Child participation is a learning process that allows room for exploration, practice, and refinement. The most important principle is always to align with the child's needs and to build support for organizing activities within the prison.

“When I went back to school after a week, I got bullied. And my friend asked me, ‘Did you wish you had a different dad?’”

COCO – AGE 8

Checklists to ensure child participation in prisons

In this section, you will find **the following** checklists to help promote child participation in prisons:

- A step-by-step guide to integrating child participation in prisons
- Child participation in practice
- Specific pillars project implementation

Checklist 1

A step-by-step guide to integrating child participation in prisons

This first checklist supports policymakers and management teams in structurally and responsibly embedding child participation within policies, projects, and decision-making. The checklist is based on the recommendations from the report *Our Voice Matters!* and the principles of *Our Stories Matter*. In this context, child participation is not a standalone tool, but an administrative responsibility.

A. Preliminary: prerequisites and decision-making

1. Is child participation explicitly embedded in policy?

- ☐ Documented in policy documents;
- ☐ Clear definition of child participation in the prison context;
- ☐ Clearly defined where child participation does/does not have influence.

2. Is the administrative responsibility clearly assigned?

- ☐ Portfolio holder for child participation at the management team level;
- ☐ Roles and responsibilities are defined (policy – implementation – monitoring);
- ☐ Child participation is part of existing responsibilities.

3. Are safety and ethics ensured in advance through a child safeguarding policy?

- ☐ There is an assessment framework for children's participation;
- ☐ There are agreements regarding informed consent (child + parent/caregiver);
- ☐ There is a protocol for dealing with safety concerns.

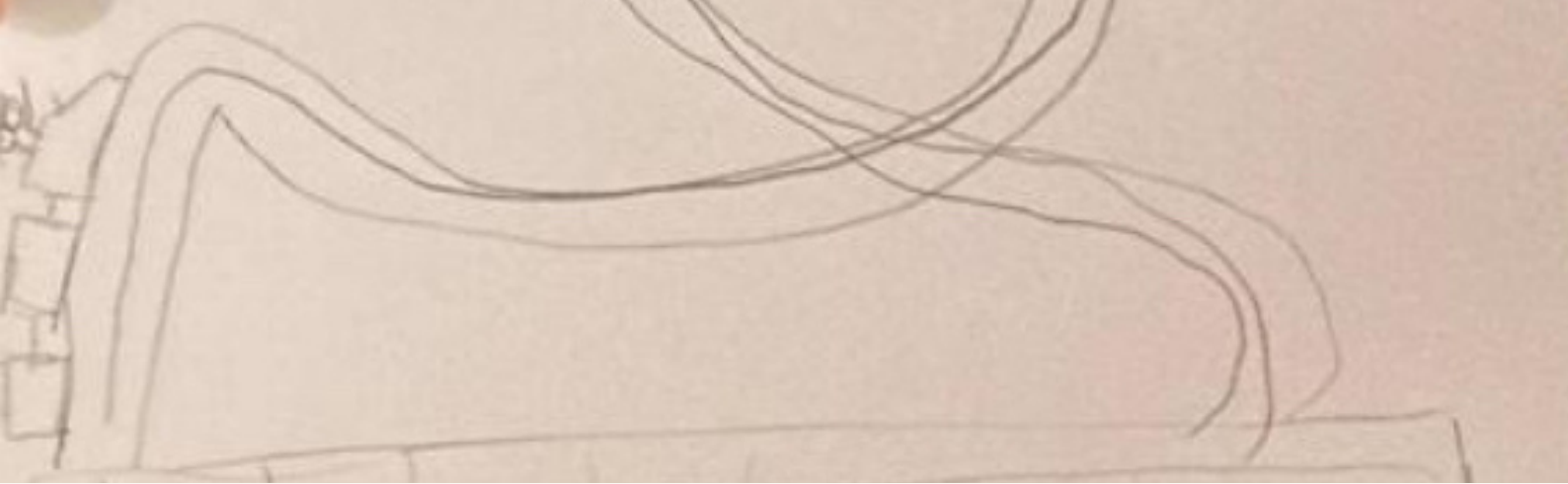
B. During: process and implementation

4. Is the participation appropriate for the child's age and context?

- ☐ Alignment with developmental level;
- ☐ Not exclusively verbal or language-based;
- ☐ The pace and timing are tailored to the child.

5. How do you incorporate children's voices?

- ☐ We have established in advance how we will incorporate their input into policy;
- ☐ We ensure a transparent process for translating children's input into policy;
- ☐ There is room for diverse voices and conflicting perspectives.



6. Do you actively monitor the quality of the process?

- ☐ Focus on emotional safety;
- ☐ Facilitators trained in child participation and restorative practices;
- ☐ Flexibility to pause or stop the participation process if necessary.

C. Afterward: accountability and assurance

7. How is feedback to children organized?

- ☐ Clear feedback on what we did with the input;
- ☐ An explanation of what we did and did not incorporate, and why;
- ☐ Feedback provided within a reasonable timeframe.

8. Do you evaluate and monitor participation?

- ☐ Systematic monitoring of the process and perceived influence;
- ☐ Evaluation of outcomes as well as of safety and experience;
- ☐ Results lead to adjustments in policy or procedures.

9. Is participation sustainably embedded?

- ☐ Incorporated into regular policy cycles;
- ☐ New projects are assessed for child participation;
- ☐ Continuity is ensured, even with staff changes.

Checklist 2

Child participation in practice

In this checklist, the Lundy model serves as a guide to help staff facilitate child participation. For each element, you will find:

- what action is needed;
- comments from children that make a difference to them;
- the practical approach.

When staff are available, honest, and compassionate, and strive to implement the checklist below, this makes child participation safe and possible, even if it isn't perfect.

INTENT – How can I make space for the children's voices?

Action

Be mindful of your attitude.

- ☐ I don't see children as "visitors," but as children with their own experiences.
 - ☐ I resolve to listen openly, curiously, and without defensiveness.
 - ☐ I realize that small moments (a greeting, an explanation, the tone of voice) have a big impact.
- Note: child participation doesn't start with a project or a form, but with genuine intention within a social interaction.*

"They were nice, and I can always ask Henk any questions I have."

SPACE – Is there room for children to speak up?

Action

Check beforehand: Is this a safe and appropriate environment for children?

- ☐ Is there enough time (no rushing, not at the expense of the visit itself)?
- ☐ Is the space quiet and child-friendly?
- ☐ Does the moment feel unforced? Is there enough time (no rushing, not at the expense of the visit itself)?

Practical guidelines:

- Schedule conversations outside of visiting hours.
- Don't force participation. Make it clear: "You don't have to say anything if you don't want to."

"Regular visits are boring, you just sit there quietly."



VOICE – Can children express themselves in their own way?

Action

Adapt to children's way of expressing themselves

- ☐ I use simple, open-ended questions.
- ☐ I adapt my language, taking the child's age into account.
- ☐ I explain rules in a way the child can understand
- ☐ I'm open to what children want to share through a drawing, a conversation, or other preferred ways of having a say.

Sample questions:

- What do you like about this place?
- What do you find difficult when you're here?
- If you were in charge, what would you do differently?

Avoid:

- unclear forms;
- vague questions;
- complicated explanations.

"That mailbox ... i don't know what you are suppose to do there, I'd rather just tell you."

AUDIENCE – Is there anyone listening who can relate to this?

Action

Make it clear that talking matters; you are listening to the child.

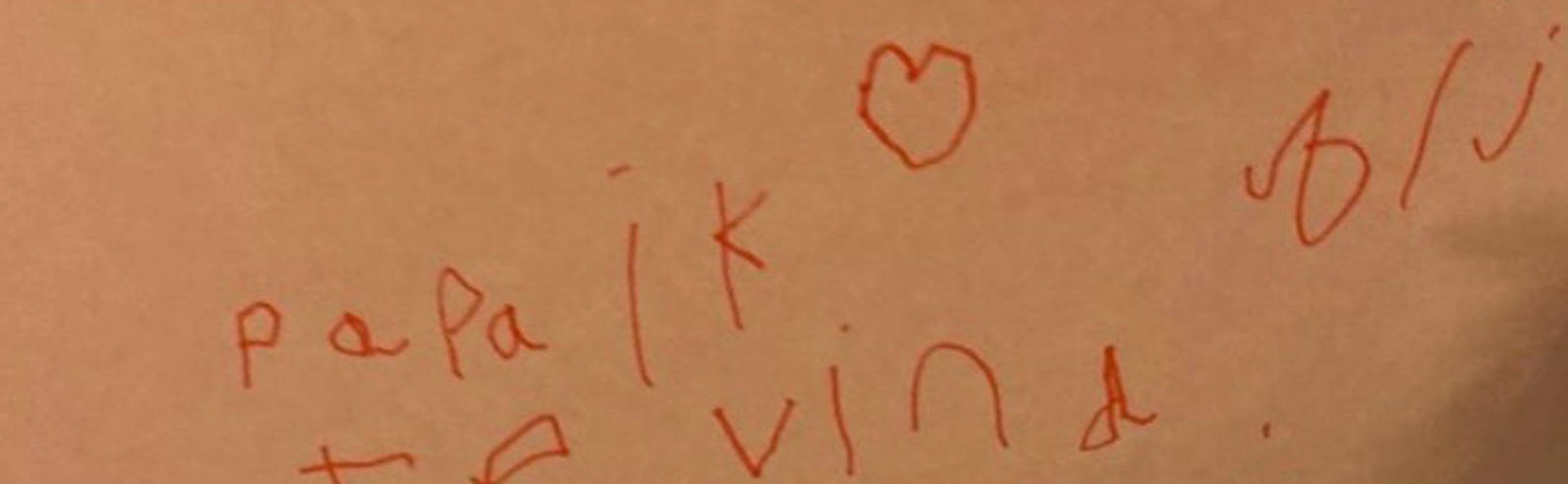
- ☐ Let the children know who is listening.
- ☐ There is someone present who has influence (or who will pass on the feedback received).
- ☐ I take children (and their concerns) seriously, even when something isn't possible

Practical guidelines:

- State your role: "I work here and I'm passing this on to..."
- Summarize what you hear: "So what you're saying is..."

"Henk always goes above and beyond for us."

"The director was there, which felt important."



INFLUENCE – Do children's opinions really matter?

Action

Always provide feedback.

- ☐ Children are told what happens to their input.
- ☐ I explain what is and isn't allowed – and why.
- ☐ I also point out small changes.

Sample phrases:

- We can do this differently right away.
- We can't do this right now, but we'll take your suggestion/idea into consideration.
- This was your idea; thank you for that. We can't do anything with this because...

Without feedback, it's not true participation. Feedback is crucial for building trust!

"Even though it's still a shame, I now understand better why this rule is, unfortunately, necessary."



In addition to the Lundy model, the project implementation has shown that children place enormous value on these three specific pillars.

RULES AND HUMANITY – How do I deal with the tension between rules and the child?

Action: Be predictable and explain.

- ☐ I enforce rules consistently.
- ☐ I explain rules in a way children can understand.
- ☐ I avoid being needlessly strict.

Practical guidelines

- Explain why something isn't allowed.
- Avoid counting down or sudden corrections.
- Use empathetic language: "I understand that this feels frustrating."

"It's okay for one person, but not for another."

CONTACT AND BEHAVIOR – How do I come across to children?

Action: Be mindful of your personal appearance

- ☐ I actively greet children.
 - ☐ I make eye contact and smile.
 - ☐ I pay attention to my tone of voice, even when speaking to parents.
- Keep in mind: To children, you are the face of the prison.

"Why does that lady always look so angry?"

IN CONCLUSION – Am I making the child feel better than when I first met them?

Action: Wrap up the interaction with the child in a positive and clear manner

- ☐ I explicitly thank the kid.
- ☐ I acknowledge their courage or contribution.
- ☐ I explain what the next step is.

"The conversation was nice, I felt taken seriously"

Worksheets

These worksheets are intended for use in your daily work in prison. You can print and laminate them if desired. The worksheets help employees in all departments apply child participation in everyday situations.

Each card begins with a quote from a child and includes a brief practical instruction. The last work sheet contains reflection questions for team meetings.

We distinguish the following roles:



Receptionist / Entrance



Visits / Supervision



Detention and Reintegration / Restorative Justice Counselor or Family Officer



Multidisciplinary Team



Executive Management



Universal work sheet for all staff who have contact with children



Work card with reflection questions for team meetings

Receptionist / Entrance

Initial contact

"I like it when someone smiles or strikes up a conversation."

"It shouldn't feel like I'm being punished too."

Your role:

You are a child's first point of contact.

You determine whether a child's anxiety increases or decreases.

Always do the following:

- Make eye contact and smile.
- Greet each child by name.
- Explain what happens at the security gate.
- Stay calm, even when it's busy.
- Respond calmly if a child gets startled.
- Use simple and easy-to-understand language.

Keep in mind:

To a child, you are (the face of) the prison.

Visits / Supervision

Parent-child interaction

Visits should be as relaxed an encounter as possible for children.

“One guard lets us hug, but the other doesn’t.”

“Playing sports together was the most fun.”

Your role:

You ensure both safety and the connection between parent and child.

Always do the following:

- Explain in advance what is and isn’t allowed.
- Be consistent with fellow staff members.
- Avoid counting down or sudden corrections.
- Show understanding when children are disappointed.
- Interrupt contact only when necessary.
- Make the visit more enjoyable for the child through your behavior.

Keep in mind:

Predictability gives children peace of mind.

Detention and Reintegration / Restorative Justice Counselor or Family Officer

Improvement and organization

“My father needs to know how to stay in touch with me: please help him with that.”

Your role:

You help translate and implement what children say to help work on the child–parent bond.

Always do the following:

- Schedule opportunities for children to have their say outside of visiting hours.
- Use methods appropriate for the child’s age.
- Collect recurring signals.
- Systematically identify bottlenecks.
- Support the incarcerated parent in maintaining contact with the child as part of their reintegration.
- Let children know what the staff did with the children’s contributions.
- Include contact with the child in the reintegration plan.
- Use the Child Check 2.0⁵. For more information, contact the centre of expertise K I N D.
- Provide parents with tools for remote parental involvement (for example; how to write a letter, what to keep in mind during video calls and reading aloud).
- Involve children—if possible—in the design or redesign of the visiting area.

Keep in mind:

Without feedback there is no participation.

⁵ The K I N D-check 2.0 is a conversation tool, under development, that supports professionals in forensic care to better understand the situation of children with a parent who is or has been incarcerated, as well as the parent–child relationship, and to incorporate these insights into their support and guidance.

Multidisciplinary Team

Decision-making

"When you talk about my dad or mom, do you think about me too?"

Your role:

Here, the child's voice influences decision-making.

Always do the following:

- Ask explicitly whether the detainee has children.
- Always ask how a decision will affect the child (or contact with the child).
- If there is a potential adverse impact on the child, consider: is there another possible alternative which aligns with the child's best interests which doesn't compromise something for the parent in prison?
- Check the impact of decisions on visiting arrangements.
- Consider collaborating with an organisation specializing in children affected by parental imprisonment, such as the Centre of Expertise K I N D, so that you can receive the necessary (tailored) information or request training.

Keep in mind:

If a topic hasn't been discussed, it won't be considered! Make sure to bring up the voices of the inmate's children as part of the conversation!

Executive Management

Direction & culture

*"You don't have to get to know us, but you do need to take us into account."
"It felt important that you were there." (Youth Club)*

Your role:

You create the necessary structure for child participation.

Always do the following:

- Embed child participation in policy and training.
- Make children and their interests a standard item on the agenda of the management team or executive board.
- Allocate time and resources for children's participation. This can be done through child-friendly visiting facilities and opportunities for children to have their say.
- Ensure visible feedback.
- Regularly ask the question: Why are we doing things this way?

Keep in mind:

Leading by example is how culture change begins.

When implementing new policies or making major changes (such as a prison renovation), don't forget the children.

All staff who come into contact with children

When a child is experiencing stress

“The first visit was nerve-racking; I didn’t know what was going to happen.”

Recognize signs of stress in children:

- They become quiet or withdraw.
- They act angry or restless.
- They cling to their parent or caregiver.
- They are afraid to speak or they cry.
- They are startled by noises or rules.

Do this right away:

- Lower your body to the height of the child or make eye contact at the child's level. Speak calmly and slowly.
- Briefly explain what’s happening.
For example: “We’re going through a gate that makes a noise, but that’s normal.”
- Give the child a moment to settle down.
- Name the feeling.
For example: “I can tell you’re feeling nervous.”

Avoid:

- rushing or putting pressure on them.
- correcting without explanations.
- talking about the child as if they aren’t there.

Keep in mind:

Don’t just list rules: explaining things calmly with a friendly attitude helps reduce any tension.

Questions for reflection during team meetings

Discuss these following reflection questions in your team meetings

1. Reflecting

- When was the last time you interacted with a child?
- What did you do that likely made the child feel safe?

2. Learning from practical experience

- When did you notice a child feeling anxious?
- What worked well, and what would you do differently next time?

3. Improving together

- Which rule or procedure is unclear to children?
- What can we do tomorrow to make things a little simpler or more human?

Tip for Team manager

Use one question per meeting. “Small” conversations lead to lasting cultural change.



Poem created by members of the Youth Club of the Our Stories Matter project

*We call out loud: please give us a voice!
We may be small, but our voice has a choice.*

*The grown-ups decide this and decide that,
Yet we want to say ourselves how and what.*

*The rules are carved deeply in stone and in law,
But no one explains what they mean or what for.*

*A place full of rules, of systems and schemes,
But who is there caring, who looks after me?*

*I wish there were someone who waits for my sight,
Who greets me, who smiles, who makes things feel right.*

*Someone who tells me just what will take place,
And shows me the way through each door and each space*

*If that were so, I would still be small,
But my visit would feel much kinder than all.*

Translation of the picture

Question: If you were a superhero, what would you do?
Answer: "Let the fathers go outside, but unfortunately
that's not possible."



Mila (6)

Conclusion

Conclusion

Child participation is a way of observing, listening, and working. In this guide, we have provided tools to strengthen and embed child participation within the prison system. At the same time, we know that every situation is different. What works always starts with genuine attention, safety, and a willingness to make space for the child's voice.

The stories, drawings, and words in this guide show what happens when children are given that space. We therefore invite you to continue listening, learning, and incorporating the child's perspective into policy, practice, and your daily actions. Only when children are truly heard, can we build an environment in which these children are seen, heard, and understood.



"You're making decisions that also have an impact on us. So don't lose sight of us!"

The Children's Participation Guide is one of the outcomes of the Our Stories Matter project. We would especially like to thank all the children and parents who participated. The project partners hope that this guide will serve as a starting point for putting children's participation in prisons on the agenda and keeping it there.



Dienst Justitiële Inrichtingen
Ministerie van Justitie en Veiligheid



Co-funded by
the European Union

