

Chapter 2


Children's Participation in Research on Violence Affecting Them: A European Overview

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Abstract

The objective of the chapter is to provide an integrative appraisal of recent participatory research projects with children on violence and maltreatment conducted by members of the COST Action CA 19106 working group on children's participation (WG3) and their colleagues to identify what is working well and what needs to change in future research. The evaluation of research examples clustered around four key questions: Why, when, how and how much do children participate in research? Data were collected using a unified tool designed to characterise participatory research, which was distributed among WG3 members. In addition, chapters of the current book were another source of data about participatory research. Overall, data on 19 studies involving 46,761 children were collected and analysed using Shier's matrix. Findings show that most studies ($n = 10$) engaged children as consultants to adults in data collection, whereas a few studies ($n = 5$) demonstrated a more children-led research approach. The analysis uncovered specific areas where more progress is required, including engaging children in decisions about the research topic, involving young children, utilising methods that are more natural and familiar to children, and gaining children's reflective accounts about their participation experience. The authors encourage scholars to publish their work to advance evidence-based knowledge and skills in participatory research with children about sensitive topics.

Participatory Research on Child Maltreatment with Children and Adult Survivors, 27–49

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Introduction

Participatory research with children is a highly controversial issue in the scientific literature (Kiili & Moilanen, 2019; Liebenberg et al., 2020; Pavarini et al., 2019; Schelbe et al., 2015). Generally, children's participation in research is an ideological or rights-laden issue, depending on the social and cultural contexts, that in practice imposes particular logistical, methodological, and ethical considerations – for example, in relation to gaining access via gatekeepers, managing informed consent, ensuring freedom to decline or withdraw participation at any time, dealing with possible breach of confidentiality in high-risk situations and providing compensation (Carnevale, 2020; Lundy et al., 2011; Nigel, 2015; Schelbe et al., 2015). In addition, as demonstrated throughout this book, when aiming to empirically study children's realities of abuse, neglect and violence, the challenges and complexities of participatory research increase to a great extent (Bovarnick et al., 2018; Kiili & Moilanen, 2019). See Chapters 1 and 5 for discussions about influences of sociocultural factors on children's participation, Chapter 3 about data protection practices and Chapter 4 about ethical considerations.

Nonetheless, inclusion of children in research was shown to enhance the quality of empirical investigation and its outcomes – for example, by refining data collection tools and adding to the richness, relevance and credibility of research findings (Bovarnick et al., 2018; Pavarini et al., 2019). Evidence of the impact of participation on children is very scarce (Pavarini et al., 2019). Scholars have suggested that involvement in research can be beneficial for children as an opportunity to enhance confidence, resilience and agency; acquire new knowledge and skills; and offer a therapeutic quality in the context of violence victimisation (Bovarnick et al., 2018; Lundy et al., 2011).

Although children's involvement in social science and health research has grown markedly during the last few decades (Nigel, 2015) and especially in Europe (Schelbe et al., 2015), participation in research about violence and maltreatment is still insufficiently developed (Bovarnick et al., 2018).

The objective of the current chapter is to provide an integrative appraisal of recent participatory research projects with children on violence and maltreatment conducted by professionals and researchers, members of the COST Action CA 19106 working group on children's participation (WG3) and their colleagues to identify what is working well and what needs to change in future research. Outcomes of our analysis can direct future avenues of investigation and shed light on the skills and knowledge required to facilitate meaningful, ethical and effective participation of children in research in this field.

To advance progress, the evaluation of practice examples purposefully focused on recognised weak points or shortfalls of research with children in general that have been reported in the literature. The exploration of practice clustered around

four key questions: Why, when, how and how much do children participate in research?

Why, When, How and How Much?

Starting with the issue of why children participate in research, this topic draws attention to research objectives and questions. [Lundy and her colleagues \(2011\)](#) argued that the actualisation of children's right to participate via engaging them in research should not undermine their right to have their best interest considered (United Nations, 1989, Article 3). This can be interpreted in this context as expectations that research outcomes will be beneficial for children – for example, by leading to improvements in their communities and services. By and large, participatory research with children focuses on problems identified by adults in children's environments such as schools, communities and services settings with the aim of generating effective solutions or services ([Nigel, 2015](#)). In other words, in general, the best interests of children, in most cases, arise from adults.

In terms of when children participate in research, this question has two distinctive dimensions: (a) the child's age and (b) the stage in the research process. In relation to children's age, evidence shows that children younger than eight years old are less involved in research than older children ([Lundy et al., 2011](#)). Although some researchers have argued that young children lack the competence and skills to engage in research, others posited that children's contribution to research is not age dependent but rather a factor of the child's life experiences, including in research processes, and how research is tailored to the child's developmental level and meets the child's supportive needs ([Lundy et al., 2011](#); [Schelbe et al., 2015](#)).

Turning to the research process, in general, participation is not consistent along all research stages and is most common during data collection phases ([Kiili & Moilanen, 2019](#)). There is limited evidence of children being involved in decisions about research questions, study design, data analysis or interpretation processes, although their participation at these stages is essential to ensuring the findings reflect their realities in an accurate and insightful way ([Kiili & Moilanen, 2019](#); [Liebenberg et al., 2020](#); [Lundy et al., 2011](#); [Nigel, 2015](#)). In addition, examples of children's involvement in research outcome dissemination and utilisation initiatives are also scarce ([Carnevale, 2020](#); [Kiili & Moilanen, 2019](#)). Scholars have argued that children's engagement in data analysis and dissemination is essential if researchers are to meet their obligation to give children's views due weight ([Liebenberg et al., 2020](#); [Lundy et al., 2011](#)).

The question of how children participate directs our attention to research methodology. Some researchers highlighted the advantages of using qualitative data collection techniques in gaining a meaningful, thorough and contextual understanding of children's life experiences and perspectives ([Carnevale, 2020](#); [Schelbe et al., 2015](#)). In addition, [Carnevale \(2020\)](#) argued for using qualitative data collection approaches that emphasise the relational dimension of the interaction to promote trust, neutralise the power imbalance between adult researcher

and child and follow the natural ways children engage and communicate with their environment. For example, researchers could use participant observation, informal interviews, art-based research and play (Carnevale, 2020).

Evidence shows a wide range of age-appropriate creative strategies to involve children in research as participants. For example, research with young children with limited or lack of literacy and numeracy skills could emphasise visual and kinaesthetic strategies such as drawing, storytelling, tours and photography (Kiili & Moilanen, 2019; Lundy et al., 2011), whereas research with young adults could involve the use of digital games and applications, text messages and social media (Kiili & Moilanen, 2019; Liebenberg et al., 2020; Pavarini et al., 2019). For more discussion about the utilisation of digital applications in research, see Chapter 8.

Finally, the question of how much children participate is directly linked to the discussion presented in the introduction chapter about the lack of a unified, agreed-upon definition of participatory practice (Kiili & Moilanen, 2019). As mentioned, the concept of participation is used in the literature to describe varied forms of children's engagement in research, ranging on a continuum from children being consulted on issues such as research design and tools, to child–researcher collaboration on different research tasks, to children coleading or independently leading the research process (Kiili & Moilanen, 2019; Lansdown & O'Kane, 2015; Shier, 2019). The lack of precision and clarity in the use of the concept of participation in research can be interpreted as a barrier to children's participation (Skauge et al., 2021).

Methods

Data Collection

Data collection for this chapter was not designed to meet standards of representativeness. Rather, we sought to provide an overall comprehensive reflection about current work by researchers and professionals, members of WG3 and their colleagues.

During our group's regular bimonthly online meetings in 2021, we asked colleagues to gather local examples of successful participatory research with children about violence and maltreatment. Members received a unified data collection tool drafted by the authors for this purpose to support documentation of detailed information. Seven group members used the tool to report on 12 studies carried out by them or their colleagues. In addition, we included in the data analysis studies presented in Section 2 of this book (see Chapters 6–12). All in all, data on 19 studies¹ were collected and analysed.

The key merit of such approach is the ability to collect data that goes beyond articles published in peer-reviewed journal, including grey literature such as research reports. Moreover, we could access data published in languages other than English that otherwise would have not been accessible in the international literature.

¹Studies included in the analysis are marked by asterisks in the reference list.

Data Analysis

For the analysis of data collected, we used an adaptation of Shier's (2019) matrix for analysing children's engagement in research processes. The tool was originally designed to help researchers explicitly consider children's involvement when initially planning and designing a study, yet it can also be used to evaluate research retrospectively (Shier, 2019). The tool breaks down the research process into nine distinctive stages or tasks related to framing, conducting and disseminating the study's results. Specific stages include generating the research question; designing the research and choosing methods; preparing research instruments; identifying and recruiting participants; collecting data; analysing the data and drawing conclusions; producing a report; disseminating the report and its findings; and advocating and mobilising to achieve policy impact. In relation to each stage, children's engagement is evaluated according to the level of decision-making power and control they employ – ranging from no involvement, to children being consulted by adult researchers, to children collaborating with adult researchers, to children directing and deciding on research processes for themselves, which is the highest level of exercising power and control. Through data analysis, each of the 19 studies was assessed according to the adopted matrix.

Results

The main characteristic of the 19 studies analysed are presented in Table 2.1.

As can be seen in the table, overall, 46,761 children were included in 19 studies about sensitive issues such as experiencing violence, maltreatment, discrimination, social deprivation, poverty and living in out-of-home placements. The earliest study reported on was conducted between 2010 and 2012, and the latest is still in progress. About half of the studies ($n = 9$) were recent, conducted from 2020 onward. Studies were conducted in Hungary ($n = 4$), Romania ($n = 2$), Portugal ($n = 2$), Spain ($n = 2$), Iceland ($n = 2$), Sweden ($n = 2$), Greece ($n = 1$) and Norway ($n = 1$). In addition, three studies were international research projects involving between three and nine European countries. The most common research settings were community institutions or facilities such as schools ($n = 7$) and culture and leisure facilities ($n = 4$). Some studies were conducted in child protective services or placement settings ($n = 6$), and two studies were conducted online.

Why Children Participate

Most studies ($n = 9$) explored children's exposure to violence of different types (e.g. cyberbullying) and settings (e.g. home, school, community), aiming at identifying the degree and features of the problem and possible solutions. Second, some studies ($n = 6$) were designed to evaluate the quality of child protection systems' support and care services and their ability to address children's service needs. In addition, a few studies ($n = 3$) investigated the experience of living in severely deprived environments or transnational families, and one study focused on the ethical dimension of participatory research.

Table 2.1. Summary of Studies Main Characteristics.

| Author (Year), Country | Study Duration | Setting | Sample | Children's Key Vulnerability | Research Aim | Research Design |
|---------------------------------------------|----------------|------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Árnadóttir and Einarsdóttir (2023), Iceland | 2016–2017 | Community art exhibition about the UNCRC | 1,437 notes (wishes) by children aged 3–17 attending preschool and compulsory school and three children aged 16 or 17 years from Child Welfare Youth Council | Exposure to violence | Develop art-based means to promote children's discussion of violence and abuse | <i>Qualitative:</i> Children provided written comments (wishes) following participation in an exhibition. Wishes were hung on a 'wishing tree' or placed into a bird box inside the exhibition area |
| Árnadóttir and Isdóttir (2019), Iceland | 2019 | Library in a culture centre | 11 children aged 7–12 years | Living in poverty (parents depend on income support) | Understanding the experiences of children living in poverty | <i>Qualitative:</i> Semistructured interviews including the use of drawings and pictures |

Table 2.1. (Continued)

| Author (Year), Country | Study Duration | Setting | Sample | Children's Key Vulnerability | Research Aim | Research Design |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Beremenyi et al. (2016), Romania, Spain, United Kingdom, Lithuania, Italy, Cyprus, France, Bulgaria, Ireland | 2012–2015 | Schools, communities, nongovernmental organisations | 500 children aged 12–18 years | Roma youth victims of discrimination and violence in community and schools, early forced marriage, educational neglect, and poverty | Design antidiscrimination policies to meet children's needs | <i>Mixed design</i> <i>Quantitative:</i> Survey carried out by children <i>Qualitative:</i> Interviews carried out by children <i>Action research:</i> Development and implementation of action plans |
| Change Factory (2020), Norway | 2020 | Local child protection offices | 110 children aged 6–12 years | Involved with child protection system (receiving care or support) | Evaluate the service of child protection system | <i>Qualitative:</i> Semistructured focus groups including individual and group assignments. Most children participated in two meetings |

Table 2.1. (Continued)

| Author (Year), Country | Study Duration | Setting | Sample | Children's Key Vulnerability | Research Aim | Research Design |
|-------------------------------------------|-------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| David-Kacso et al. (2021), Romania | 2021 | Schools in poor rural communities | 2,029 children aged 9–18 years attending elementary, middle, or high school | Victims of school violence (by peers or teachers) | Improving school climate and reducing violence in schools | <i>Mixed design</i> <i>Quantitative:</i> Online survey of school climate <i>Qualitative:</i> Focus groups about the survey's items <i>Action research:</i> Development of action plans to improve school climate and reduce violence |
| Fuentes-Peláez et al. (2023), Spain | 2021 | Nonkinship foster care | 17 children aged 6–11 years or 12–17 years | Live in foster care | Evaluate the service of foster care | <i>Qualitative:</i> Gamified interview: 'Play & Talk', including a version for each age group |

Table 2.1. (Continued)

| Author (Year), Country | Study Duration | Setting | Sample | Children's Key Vulnerability | Research Aim | Research Design |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|----------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Korhonen, Lindholm, et al. (2023), Sweden | 2021 | National competence centre (Barnafrid) | 14 children aged 15 or 18 years attending high school | Exposure to violence of different types, e.g., at school, domestic, online | Understanding the types of violence children are at risk of being exposed to | <i>Qualitative:</i> Workshop |
| Korhonen and Mattelin (2023), Sweden | 2022 | Schools and libraries | 36 newly arrived children with refugee backgrounds aged 13–18 years attending high school | Exposure to community violence | Evaluate exposure to violence and other adversities among refugee children in the country of resettlement | <i>Qualitative:</i> Workshop including different activities, e.g., identify critical words related to violence in public places |
| Laszlo et al. (2023), Romania, Republic of Moldova, Ukraine | 2020–present | High schools in Romania | 12 children aged 15–18 years originally from Moldova | Left behind by parents who engaged or are engaging in labour migration | Understanding the life experience of stay-behind children and its impacts | <i>Qualitative:</i> Individual interviews, family interviews, focus groups |

Table 2.1. (Continued)

| Author (Year), Country | Study Duration | Setting | Sample | Children's Key Vulnerability | Research Aim | Research Design |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Montserrat et al. (2022), Spain | 2021 | Carried out online, children participated from their homes or school | 45 children, active members of local children's councils aged 10–16 years attending primary or secondary school | Exposure to gender-based violence in school | Explore children's perspectives on gender-based violence and the barriers and facilitators to disclosure in the school context | <i>Qualitative:</i> Focus groups |
| Nikolaidis, Petroulaki, et al. (2018), Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Macedonia, Greece, Romania, Serbia, Turkey | 2013 | School | 42,194 children aged 11, 13, or 16 attending school | Exposure to violence | International comparison of the prevalence of exposure to violence | <i>Mixed design</i> <i>Quantitative:</i> ICAST-CH survey: Child violence exposure screening tool (a 38-item self-report measure for children developed by ISPCAN) |

Table 2.1. (Continued)

| Author (Year), Country | Study Duration | Setting | Sample | Children's Key Vulnerability | Research Aim | Research Design |
|---------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Nikolaidis, Ntinapogias, et al. (2018), Greece | 2018 | Open hospitality centres (camps) | 38 Farsi- and Arabic-speaking refugee children aged 8–17 years | Refugee | Evaluate the municipal child protection system services for refugee and migrant children | <i>Qualitative:</i> Focus groups including 392 children <i>Qualitative:</i> Structured focussed groups including group protocol and a series of mock cases (vignettes) |
| Fernandes and Pereira (2023), Portugal | 2013–2015 | Schools and neighbourhoods in deprived communities associated with crime and deviant and risk behaviours, e.g., domestic violence, negligence, and abuse | 38 children aged 9–12 years old | Living in social deprivation and neglect | Evaluate children's needs and means to achieve them | <i>Qualitative:</i> Interviews, observations, analysis of text, field notes drawing, photographs, and videos |

Table 2.1. (Continued)

| Author (Year), Country | Study Duration | Setting | Sample | Children's Key Vulnerability | Research Aim | Research Design |
|------------------------------------|-------------------|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Rácz (2017), Hungary | 2013–2014 | Foster care, residential care | 35 children aged 15–20 years | Living in institutional care (victims of neglect) | Evaluate the service of child protection system | <i>Qualitative:</i> Parliament discussion on one general open question (children write their answers) |
| Rácz (2019), Hungary | 2017–2020 | Foster care, residential care | 21 children aged 14–18 years or 19–25 years | Living in institutional care (victims of neglect) | Evaluate the service of child protection professionals and understand the meaning of family | <i>Qualitative:</i> Semistructured focus groups for each age group |
| Rácz and Sik (2023), Hungary | 2020–2021 | Local child protection services | 50 children aged 14–25 years | Involved with protection system e.g., mental health problems, psychosocial disabilities, no contact with family of origin, neglect and abuse, living in foster care | Develop apps to support young people in everyday life situations when moving out of care | <i>Qualitative:</i> Focus groups and interviews about the design of the app as well as later feedback on using the app |

Table 2.1. (Continued)

| Author (Year), Country | Study Duration | Setting | Sample | Children's Key Vulnerability | Research Aim | Research Design |
|---------------------------------------------------|-------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Rockinghorse Childrights (2021), Hungary | 2021 | Online | 101 children aged 14–20 years attending elementary and secondary schools | Exposure to internet violence | Evaluate children's knowledge and opinions on internet violence (i.e., cyberbullying) | <i>Quantitative:</i> Online survey |
| Sani et al. (2021), Portugal | 2018 | Clinics or sport facilities | 40 children aged 12–18 years attending school: 20 undergoing psychological counselling (clinical group) and 20 without clinical follow-up (nonclinical group) | Multiple exposures to violence | Comparison between clinical and nonclinical children in relation to multiple victimisation and polyvictimisation | <i>Quantitative:</i> Survey on exposure to 36 types of victimisation |
| Voicu et al. (2016), Romania | 2010–2012 | Schools | 30 children aged 11, 14, or 16 years | Victims of family violence | Understanding children's opinion on research ethics (i.e., necessity of parental consent) | <i>Mixed design:</i> <i>Quantitative:</i> Survey <i>Qualitative:</i> Structured focus groups |

When Children Participate

Children's age ranged from 3 to 18 years, with some studies also including young adults up to 25 years old. Only four studies involved children younger than eight, including one study with children as young as three.

Turning to the stage in the research process in which children were engaged, relevant findings are summarised in [Table 2.2](#). As shown in the table, children were not included in all stages of the research process.

In many studies ($n = 10$), children were only engaged in one task, and in a few studies ($n = 6$), children were involved in either two or three tasks. In three studies, children engaged in either four, five or six research tasks.

Children's involvement was most missing in the initial stage of framing the study, including making decisions about the research questions, design and methods and preparing the study's instruments. Only four studies indicated children's participation in the task of preparing tools: In two studies, children were consulted about the study survey via focus groups ([David-Kacso et al., 2021](#); [Nikolaidis, Petroulaki, et al., 2018](#)); in one study, children tested the tool in a pilot study ([Fuentes-Peláez et al., 2023](#)); and in one study, children and adults worked together on designing the research interview guide and invitation letter for possible participants ([Laszlo et al., 2023](#)).

Children were mostly involved in the stage of conducting the study, particularly the data collection task. All studies ($n = 19$) included children in collecting data. Four studies also involved children in analysing the data and drawing conclusions.

Participation in the final stage of the research process that focuses on dissemination of study results was infrequent and reported in only six studies. In these studies, children were involved in tasks such as producing the final research report, drafting recommendations and action plans, or presenting outcomes to professionals and policy-makers at conferences or official meetings ([Beremenyi et al., 2016](#); [David-Kacso et al., 2021](#); [Korhonen, Lindholm, et al., 2023](#); [Laszlo et al., 2023](#); [Fernandes & Pereira, 2023](#); [Rácz & Sik, 2023](#)).

How Children Participate

Many studies ($n = 13$) applied a qualitative research design, using mainly interviews and focus groups as data collection methods. A few studies incorporated child-friendly interviewing techniques such as using drawings and pictures ([Árnadóttir & Isdóttir, 2019](#); [Fernandes & Pereira, 2023](#)), the 'play and talk' game ([Fuentes-Peláez et al., 2023](#); for more information, see Chapter 6) or asking children to hang notes on a 'wish tree' ([Árnadóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2023](#); for more information, see Chapter 9). Four studies used mixed-methods designs that integrated data collected by surveys and focus groups. Two studies applied a quantitative approach, using surveys to collect data.

How Much Children Participate

Using [Shier's \(2019\)](#) matrix, we classified children's participation in distinctive research tasks according to the level of decision-making power and control they

Table 2.2. Summary of Studies ($n = 19$) by Tasks in Which Children Participated and Level of Participation (No Participation, Consulted, Collaborated, Led).

| Research Stage | Framing the Study | | | Conducting the Study | | | Disseminating the Study Results | | |
|---------------------------------|-------------------|-----------------------------|----------------|-------------------------|-----------------|---------------|-----------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Author (Year) | Research Question | Research Design and Methods | Research Tools | Participant Recruitment | Data Collection | Data Analysis | Production of Report or Recommendations | Dissemination of Report or Findings | Advocacy for Policy Impact |
| Árnadóttir and Isdóttir (2019) | | | | | | | | | |
| Change Factory (2020) | | | | | | | | | |
| Rockinghorse Childrights (2021) | | | | | | | | | |
| Korhonen and Mattelin (2023) | | | | | | | | | |
| Rácz (2017) | | | | | | | | | |

Table 2.2. (Continued)

| Research Stage | Framing the Study | | | Conducting the Study | | | Disseminating the Study Results | | |
|----------------------------------------|-------------------|-----------------------------|----------------|-------------------------|-----------------|---------------|-----------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Author (Year) | Research Question | Research Design and Methods | Research Tools | Participant Recruitment | Data Collection | Data Analysis | Production of Report or Recommendations | Dissemination of Report or Findings | Advocacy for Policy Impact |
| Montserrat et al. (2022) | | | | | | | | | |
| RÁCZ (2019) | | | | | | | | | |
| Sani et al. (2021) | | | | | | | | | |
| Voicu et al. (2016) | | | | | | | | | |
| Nikolaidis, Ntinapogias, et al. (2018) | | | | | | | | | |
| Fuentes-Peláez et al. (2023) | | | | | | | | | |
| Nikolaidis, Petroulaki, et al. (2018) | | | | | | | | | |
| RÁCZ and Sik (2023) | | | | | | | | | |

Table 2.2. (Continued)

| Research Stage | Framing the Study | | | Conducting the Study | | | Disseminating the Study Results | | |
|------------------------------------|-------------------|-----------------------------|----------------|-------------------------|-----------------|---------------|-----------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| | Research Question | Research Design and Methods | Research Tools | Participant Recruitment | Data Collection | Data Analysis | Production of Report or Recommendations | Dissemination of Report or Findings | Advocacy for Policy Impact |
| Árnadóttir and Einarsdóttir (2023) | | | | | | | | | |
| Korhonen, Lindholm, et al. (2023) | | | | | | | | | |
| Beremenyi et al. (2016) | | | | | | | | | |
| Fernandes and Pereira (2023) | | | | | | | | | |
| David-Kacso et al. (2021) | | | | | | | | | |
| Laszlo et al. (2023) | | | | | | | | | |

Note: White represents tasks in which children were not involved; light grey represents tasks in which children were consulted by adults; dark grey represents tasks in which children collaborated with adults; and black represents tasks that children led.

exercised, as illustrated in Table 2.2. Overall, as shown in the table, for most research tasks ($n = 19$ of 39 tasks), children had a low level of decision-making power and control, mainly being consulted by adult researchers. For example, most studies ($n = 15$) involved adults surveying or interviewing children (as individuals or in groups) on their opinions.

Next were tasks ($n = 14$) on which children collaborated with adult researchers. Adults and children worked together mainly on data collection activities – for example, through a joint workshop (Korhonen, Lindholm, et al., 2023) or by conducting interviews and observations (documented in notes, pictures and videos) in schools and neighbourhoods (Laszlo et al., 2023; Fernandes & Pereira, 2023). They also collaborated on data analysis procedures, such as identifying key problems in school and neighbourhood environments (David-Kacso et al., 2021; Fernandes & Pereira, 2023), and presenting the research findings at conferences and meetings with formal policymakers such as local authorities, either themselves (Beremenyi et al., 2016; David-Kacso et al., 2021) or by generating materials later presented by the researchers (Laszlo et al., 2023). In one example, a video was presented at a national meeting on violence against children (Korhonen, Lindholm, et al., 2023).

Less common were tasks ($n = 6$) that children led, directed and decided independently, which were evident in four studies. For example, in a study about transnational families affected by labour migration, children identified and recruited research participants (Laszlo et al., 2023). They later had the opportunity to choose whether to attend interviews led by an adult researcher or conduct the interviews themselves (individually or in pairs) with adult supervision. In an international study focused on the Roma population, children organised and carried out independent data collection activities using surveys and interviews (Beremenyi et al., 2016).

Of note, children in some studies engaged independently in activities to disseminate study outcomes. Children used various means to raise awareness, advertise their ideas for solutions and promote policy change, including newspapers, documentaries, puppet shows and approaching influential policy-makers such as a city mayor (Beremenyi et al., 2016; Fernandes & Pereira, 2023). The international study among Roma population also described a few cases in which young people's endeavours had on-the-ground consequences, such as building a bicycle path to the Roma community or establishing better public lighting (Beremenyi et al., 2016).

Discussion

The objective of the current chapter was to provide a comprehensive reflection on recent participatory research projects with children on violence and maltreatment carried out by WG3 members and their colleagues to review current achievements and inform future progress. In particular, we wanted to know why, when, how and how much children participate in research.

In general, our analysis shows that children can participate in research about highly sensitive life experiences involving, for example, interpersonal violence victimisation, family breakdown and growing up in severely deprived environments, such as refugee camps and poor neighbourhoods. Nonetheless, a more nuanced inspection revealed that children's participation has been actualised in very different ways in research.

In this overview, we considerably expanded [Shier's \(2019\)](#) matrix for analysing children's engagement in research processes. Originally, the tool was designed to help scholars plan participatory research by purposely directing them to consider the level of power and control assigned to children regarding decisions during the nine stages of the research process. In this chapter, we utilised the tool to analyse the studies' actual rather than intended participatory arrangements. Furthermore, the utilisation of the adapted matrix in our analysis went beyond assessment of an individual study and enabled comparison of studies and identification of common patterns. This approach increased our knowledge of the application of the participatory approach in a transparent way.

Generally, we identified two key types of participatory research, following the conceptualisation of participation as a continuum ranging from a traditional adult researcher-led approach to children as researchers or co-researchers ([Kiili & Moilanen, 2019](#); [Lansdown & O'Kane, 2015](#); [Shier, 2019](#)).

In effect, most studies only slightly diverted from the traditional arrangement of an adult researcher-led study. In 10 studies, children only engaged as providers of data – i.e., as consultants to adults in data collection ([Árnadóttir & Isdóttir, 2019](#); [Change Factory, 2020](#); [Korhonen & Mattelin, 2023](#); [Montserrat et al., 2022](#); [Nikolaidis, Ntinapogias, et al., 2018](#); [Rácz, 2017, 2019](#); [Rockinghorse Childrights, 2021](#); [Sani et al., 2021](#); [Voicu et al., 2016](#)). In four other studies, children were involved in a second task, yet other than one exception, still as consultants ([Árnadóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2023](#); [Fuentes-Peláez et al., 2023](#); [Nikolaidis, Petroulaki, et al., 2018](#); [Rácz & Sik, 2023](#)).

Fewer studies ($n = 5$) actualised participation in a way that inclined towards the other end of the continuum marked by children-led research ([Beremenyi et al., 2016](#); [David-Kacso et al., 2021](#); [Korhonen, Lindholm, et al., 2023](#); [Laszlo et al., 2023](#); [Fernandes & Pereira, 2023](#)). In these studies, children's participation was highly meaningful in terms of both quantity and quality. Children were engaged in more tasks (between three to six research tasks) and had more decision-making power and control – i.e., as collaborators and leaders. In addition, children's participation in these studies was also very effective because children utilised the research findings to raise awareness, make an impact in the research community and influence policy change. Considering the argument by which participation should be defined by its results ([Skauge et al., 2021](#)), these studies demonstrated successful participation.

We hope that these examples of participation that enable children to incorporate their perspectives throughout the research process will inspire scholars to involve children in studies in a more significant and equal way.

Our analysis also uncovered specific areas where more progress is required. Accordingly, we suggest the following:

- (1) It is important to openly discuss the aim of children's inclusion in research. Our overview shows that children don't have an impact on the topic of empirical inquiry. None of the studies engaged children at the initial stage of deciding on the research question. Arguably, that for participatory research to guarantee children's best interests, studies should address questions or problems that are important to children from their perspective. Research whose starting point is problems framed by children can serve important launch pads for later developments of more pertinent and appropriate solutions or interventions. Moreover, allowing children a leading role in deciding on research objective is particularly important in this field, because there are no clear, unified and agreed-upon definitions of child maltreatment and violence against children (Gilbert et al., 2009; Nouman & Alfandari, 2020).
- (2) Greater attention should be given to increasing opportunities for young children to participate in research. Studies in our overview followed the general tendency found in participatory research (Lundy et al., 2011) of being skewed towards older children and young people and, thus, insufficiently represented young children's perspectives and life experiences. These younger age groups have relationships with adults that are marked by the greatest asymmetrical power differences (Lundy et al., 2011) and are excluded from the exploration and understanding of experiences of violence and maltreatment. The lesson learned from the limited available literature on the topic is that under facilitating conditions – for example, provision of guidance and support – younger children can meaningfully participate (e.g. as co-researchers) in some aspects of the research process and effectively contribute to research outcomes (Lundy et al., 2011).
- (3) Research can benefit from utilising more child-appropriate data collection methods that are less foreign to children than self-report questionnaires and formal interviews (Carnevale, 2020). The overview provided examples of creative participatory data collection strategies, particularly used for research with very young children (e.g. games, wish tree, drawing), which can inspire future research (Árnadóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2023; Árnadóttir & Isdóttir, 2019; Fuentes-Peláez et al., 2023). Allowing children influence over decisions relating to the research methodology can provide significant understanding of how to enable them to express their opinions and share their experiences.
- (4) In the wake of scholars' outcry over insufficient guidance on how to engage children meaningfully, authentically and effectively in the research process (Liebenberg et al., 2020; Pavarini et al., 2019; Schelbe et al., 2015), we call on researchers to share their experiences, achievements, disappointments and missteps when including children in empirical studies. Scholars from non-English-speaking countries are particularly encouraged to publish their work in international journals and conferences. As shown by this overview, their work can support the accumulation of valuable evidence-based knowledge and skills regarding participatory research with children about sensitive topics.

- (5) Finally, we suggest that future research should also strive to capture children's reflective accounts about their participation experience, a topic that was very much missing in the studies reviewed and has gained little attention in the literature (Pavarini et al., 2019). In one study included in the overview, children appreciated being listened to and able to express their opinions (Korhonen & Mattelin, 2023). Encouraging children's ongoing reflection throughout the research process is particularly important when exploring their difficult and violent life experiences. Children's feedback and reflections should be given serious weight in the development of future participatory research.

Conclusions

Meaningful and effective participation of children in research about violence and maltreatment is highly challenging and yet a feasible practice. Building on the existing evidence base, we suggest that further efforts are needed to advance participatory research with children. Providing children with decision-making power and control over the subject or focus of the scientific exploration and giving considerable weight to children's reflective accounts about their participatory experience are important steps forward.

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