

What Constitutes an Ideal Space for Children?

Indicators & Positive Practices

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This booklet represents the final outcome of a project in collaboration with the Human Rights Space, initiated during a World Café at the Angewandte University of Vienna. As part of her Master's in Applied Human Rights, the author developed her own student project focusing on child rights and child participation – finding great partnership with the Human Rights Space's team.

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Child Participation and Children's Spaces

Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child states that “the child who is capable of forming their own views, [has] the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, [and] the views of the child being [...] [have to be] given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.”¹ This implies two important positive actions: (1) encourage the child to form a free view; and (2) provide an environment in which these views can be freely expressed. However, the Committee on the Rights of the Child has noted that, in most societies around the world, this right continues to be impeded by many longstanding practices and attitudes, and political and economic barriers as well as socio-cultural and legal deep-rooted traditions, with an accentuated disadvantage and difficulties for children belonging to marginalised and discriminated groups.² Therefore, it is paramount to boost child participation and engagement in the society, and this should be done by listening to young people themselves –to design effective, successful, and appropriate children-related practices, projects, and policies – and by supporting child-adult exchange knowledge.

Because of the urgency of the issue, many governmental entities and non-governmental organisations, as well as local/regional projects worldwide, have committed to the establishment of such spaces to provide children with information on the rights they are entitled to, and with an environment that enables for constructive discussions and dialogues on human rights issues. Whether following the guidelines of Child Rights Officers or undertaking a more bottom-up approach based on community-led directives, different actions have been taken to engage in child-led or child-centred activities in relation to human rights. The ultimate objective is to increasingly include young people in decision-making processes at all societal levels, yet this would only be possible once children are aware of their rights and are given equal and adequate opportunities to enjoy these rights. At the same time, there is a need to raise awareness on child rights amongst the wider public as well, hence adult stakeholders need to be properly informed on the benefits of involving children, on the duties that exists towards youth, and the rights and needs that must be respected and met.

Notwithstanding the growing number of projects that are being undertaken and the expanding information in regards to child participation and children's spaces, there are many specifications one has to consider. Indeed, despite the relative success these projects can have in raising awareness on child rights, essential elements are often not considered, such as an inclusive attitude and approach, which results in not taking into account the needs of **all** children. Those projects often lack fora for young people to give feedback, the groups are often too homogenous and there is no inclusion for or attention to diversity, as well as a lack of child participation in decision-making processes, amongst many other problematic neglects.³

Thence, how can one assess the extent to which children's projects / spaces are really in the best interest of the child? And how is it possible to understand whether the environment that is being created successfully encourages child participation?

This booklet's goal is to present indicators that can be used to define positive / negative practices, and can be taken into consideration when establishing a children's space. To give practical examples, some good practice models of children's spaces are represented in this publication. Namely, the [Children Leadership Team](#), the [26Letters Schools](#), and the [Human Rights Space](#) are hereby presented as exemplary projects dedicated to advocacy and protection of child rights and child participation, whilst being first-hand instances of youth activism and engagement in the field of human rights. Further on in this paper, these projects will be explained in detail, and will be analysed by confronting their activities and approaches to the established indicators.

With purpose of transparency, it is pivotal for the author of this booklet to acknowledge the process of information gathering and research. Facts and data have been collected from international organisations' reports or statistics, as well as from academic literature and databases. The selection of the indicators has been achieved by consulting publications of experts in matters of child participation and child rights, as well as through guidelines and reports published by international and regional institutions and organisations. Lastly, the information on the specific selected best practice models has been gathered through individual meetings and interviews with available contact persons, and by consulting their websites and the internal documents they kindly shared for the aim of this booklet. In order to obtain more detailed facts on how these projects handle their activities to meet the indicators that this booklet has found essential, a questionnaire has been prepared and sent out to all three projects representatives with very specific and definite questions to understand their approach and practical action.

Targets and indicators

Many studies and scholars have focused on the importance of child participation and on how to foster it meaningfully and in the best interest of the child. Before going into specifications on framing targets and indicators, it is important to fully understand two concepts that are essential for this paper: child participation and children's spaces. UNICEF has defined the former as "children (individually and/or collectively) engaging with opportunities to form and express their views and to influence matters that concern them directly and indirectly. Meaningful participation involves a transfer of power from adults to children, which transforms the status of children from passive recipients to active agents, who are informed and able to influence decisions affecting their lives."⁴ The latter, on the other hand, is understood in this text as any forum, whether physical, virtual, or relational, that is fully centred on children and provides them with necessary knowledge on, support for, and responsiveness to their needs and rights. Despite the shortness of this definition, this concept will be clarified by presenting some of the essential characteristics for an ideal children space based on child participation.

One of the major scholars focused on presenting essential elements to establish meaningful child participation is Laura Lundy. Elaborating on CRC's Article 12 on children's right to express their views and to have these views given due weight, Lundy has argued that in order to boost child participation, there is a need of four components: space, voice, audience, and influence.⁵

The ideal model of children's spaces that this booklet is presenting is based on Lundy's framework, and outlines the indicators that are derivable from these four components, if merged with the existing legal framework and child-approved existing practices.

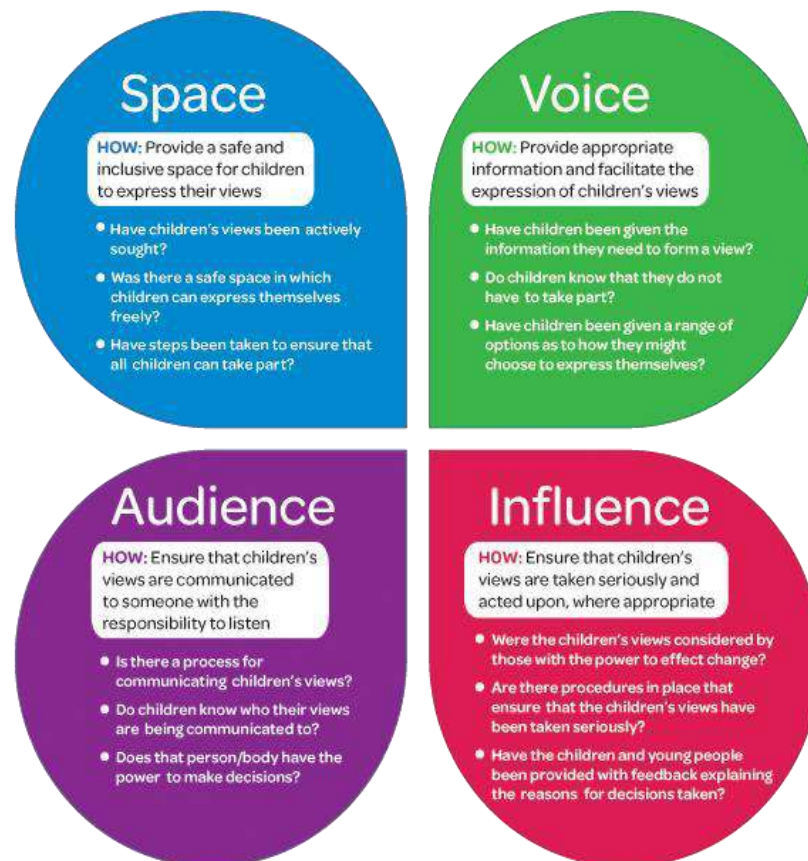


Figure 1. From Lundy's model

- ◆ **Space:** needs to be actively created and must be safe (CRC Art.19) and inclusive (CRC Art.2).
- ◆ **Voice:** it is a right and not a duty. Children must have the opportunity to choose their mode of expression, and it must be afforded to all children capable of forming a view.
- ◆ **Audience:** relates to the concept of children's view being given due weight (CRC Art.12) – meaning that their opinions and views are actively listened to, and there is a need to establish formal channels of communication for these opinions to be shared.
- ◆ **Influence:** in order to allow children's views to be transformed into concrete action and consequently influence current scenarios, there must be established feedback-tools about the extent of influence they have had. It is pivotal to create the conditions where it is uncomfortable for adults to solicit children's views and then ignore them.

Drawing from these notions, this research on assessment and identification of positive practices of children's spaces understands the following indicators as necessary:

INDICATOR	DESCRIPTION
Cultural and regional relativity / consideration	Time, space, and activities are in accordance with the local habits and needs, as well as of all children's religious and cultural necessities.
Safe, inclusive, and non-discriminatory space	There is an objective to include diverse group of children by also reaching out to children in local communities when they are not aware of the existence of the space. Access to the space/activity is possible to anyone, despite their background, gender, religion, and social/ethnic origin. There is a specific strategy to ensure safety of the children.
Ensure children's right to express their voice and opinion	Established formal child-friendly tools and channels for communication and feedback.
Ensure children's right to have their voice and opinion be given due weight	Established formal child-friendly tools to implement the feedback received.
Children have the right and opportunity to have influence	Children are involved in all processes of decision-making, from setting-up the activities until the implementation process. Children are always aware of the influence they can have and on which type of groups.
Ensure the inclusion of youth in any decision-making process	There is a detailed strategy in place with distinct and coherent focus, set of goals, established lead responsibility, and specific sources allocated that ensure it.
Accessibility for every child	Any space / activity / initiative is accessible for all children, regardless of physical or cognitive differences. All the information is provided in a child-friendly way.
Human Rights and Child Rights awareness	Children are provided with adequate and sufficient information about their role and about their human rights (child-friendly information and organised space of discussion).
Competent team and support	Depending on the topical focus, different team members are needed, i.e. spaces focusing on violence and mental health might require psychologists for example, whilst spaces focusing on discrimination and education might need educators and teachers – amongst others specialists – so not the same standards for every children space.
Positive child participation	(1) Transparent and informative, (2) Voluntary, (3) Respectful, (4) Flexible to respond to needs, expectations and contexts of action, and (5) Responsive to existing patterns of discrimination / child rights violations.

Examples of Positive Practices

1. The Children Leadership Team – “CLT”

The Global Campus of Human Rights (GCHR) is an internationally renowned network of academic institutions that proactively engages on human rights issues and discussions. Yet, it goes beyond the educational arena by also being an important international actor in the field, with a specific focus on child rights. The GCHR, in collaboration with the Right Livelihoods, has been organising for many years international conferences on different human rights issues, bringing together many actors from all the regions. Notwithstanding numerous discussions on how to implement child participation in these conferences, it was in 2022 that children finally and meaningfully became an active part of these meetings thanks to the creation of the Children Leadership Team –within the context of the International Annual Conference creating a child-led process.

What is this Children’s Space?

The Children Leadership Team is a group of 110 children coming from different countries of the world, that, collaborating with the GCHR and the Right Livelihoods, aims to achieve the ultimate goal of realising **meaningful child participation** in regard to the most pressing human rights issues. In order to realise this objective and establish the children group, regional Child Rights’ Officers have been called upon to reach out to national child-centred NGOs, projects, and diverse organisations to find children (aged 12-17) that wanted to become part of this new global network that not only brings together youth of different backgrounds in human rights activism, but that can also inspire other children to proactively participate and advocate for their rights. The CLT is still at the beginning of its work, and it is establishing new projects and objectives for the upcoming years to grow and become increasingly more influential. The Children’s Rights Department at the Global Campus is committed to supporting children in creating and structuring their own space, and in designing the activities they would like to undertake for ensuring and advocating for their rights. At the moment, children that decided to be part of the team come from Nepal, India, South Africa, Armenia, Lebanon, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, and Italy. They have been working together through their national representatives and their regional Child Rights’ Officers –in collaboration with the GCHR Children’s Rights Department based in Venice– to ensure the success of the CLT’s first activity: ensuring meaningful child participation in the 2022 GCHR International Conference held in Kathmandu on 31st January to 1st February, centred on child participation itself.

How does the Children Leadership Team work in practice?

Despite greater and more comprehensive activities and events coming in the next two years as the GCHR is planning longer-term project for it, the CLT’s work prior to the Kathmandu event is great evidence of their positive and inclusive space. Before the conference, the children had several country-level preparatory workshops where children decided on three thematic areas of human rights that they found most pressing, as well as 2-3 representatives who would represent them and their communities within the CLT global network. These discussions led to many cross-cutting areas of concern such as climate change and violence, but finally the team decided to focus this event on the aspect of mental health. As

part of their participation in the decision-making process, not only did they choose the topic of focus, but they also decided whom to invite and whom amongst them would have been moderating the Conference sessions. From the children's view as well as the wider public's, the event was a success and its end outcome was the "Mental Health Action Plan", written by the expert team with consistent and periodic children's feedback and reviews. This Action Plan comprises of all the demands and needs children raised during the conference in relation to mental health improvements, and it is already being distributed by the children and it is planned to be shared with wider group of key stakeholders (NGOs, child-rights experts, and the academia).

At the moment the CLT's two-years plan consists of: 1) the dissemination of the Mental Health Action Plan and the inclusion of children from new backgrounds to increase the diversity of the group; 2) finalising the Handbook on the CLT and the child-participation model; 3) providing the CLT's children with regular trainings and workshops to establish regional groups; and 4) ensuring the creation of child-led projects and programs from the discussions of the above-mentioned three thematic issues in collaboration with the regional Child Rights' Officers.

Does the Children Leadership Team meet the selected indicators?

Cultural and regional relativity / consideration	Yes
Safe, inclusive, and non-discriminatory space	Yes
Ensure children's right to express their voice and opinion	Yes
Ensure children's right to have their voice and opinion be given due weight	Yes
Children have the right and opportunity to have influence	Yes
Ensure the inclusion of youth in any decision-making process	Yes
Accessibility for every child	Yes (in process)
Human Rights and Child Rights awareness	Yes
Competent team and support	Yes
Positive child participation	Yes

2. The 26Letters Schools

The state of Children's rights in Lebanon has been highly affected by the socio-political insecurity and unrests. Since the civil war at the end of the 1990s, the country has undergone several other conflicts and socio-economic crises that did not allow for a linear, constant, and successful reconstruction of institutions and human rights protection for the population. Despite some improvements, young people's rights and opportunities have been limited. First and foremost, around 80% of the Lebanese population live under the poverty line, which consequently mirrors in not having adequate standards of living. The high poverty rate surely affects children in many connected areas, such as forcing them to work to help their family, not allowing them to attend school and receive an education, and living in a context of insecurity that inevitably leads to high rates of violence and low levels of protection from it. At the moment, children's right to education seems to be in the most worrying state, as it influences all aspects of life and leads to the hindrance of other human rights. Not only do many children have to work and not access their basic right of having an education, but when they have the opportunity to attend school, the institutions do not provide for adequate spaces and quality formation of the child – leading to low employability and high rates of unemployment. Moreover, many schools have been shut down by the government, leaving many children in the streets – exposed to high levels of violence not having a safe space. Lastly, because of the major migration flows, especially from Syria, Iraq, and Palestine, there is a huge group of children (with migration backgrounds) whose right to education, living standards, protection from violence and discrimination, are not guaranteed.⁶

In this context of insecurity and lack of protection of child rights, the 26Letters was founded to address the issue of education – whilst, consequently affecting the protection of other rights.

What is this Children's Space?

The 26Letters children space was born out of the encounter of a Spanish exchange student and a Syrian child who sought refuge in Beirut, Lebanon, in 2015. When the latter asked for English classes to the Spanish student, and many other children seemed to be interested and appealed by receiving an education by another young person, the idea of establishing a **free school for all** came into being. Nowadays, since 2015, many things have changed and improved, and the 26Letters NGO is now a fully child-led school, which welcomes every child with no discrimination and provides quality education with innovative methods and personalised paths of learning. From being very dependent on the international community's support, it is now becoming local and self-sustainable.

The children involved are mostly of Syrian background because of the above-mentioned low levels of security and rights' protection that affect their lives. They give and attend classes, trainings, vocational workshops, as well as being provided with psychological support when needed. To ensure the functioning of the school and meaningful child participation, the 26Letters has an organisational team made of six teenager-managers, supported by a vast number of volunteers (both children, young people, and adult experts). Yet, being based on the values of mutual aid and friendship, every child is included in the non-hierarchical decision-making process and treated equally.

How does the 26Letters School work in practice?

The School is a space for every child above the age of 3, therefore students are divided into 5 age-based groups: 1) children between 3 and 6; 2) between 7 and 9; 3) between 10 and 12; 4) between 13 and 15; and 5) between 16 and 22. As explained by one of the founders Janira Taibo herself, these groups meet individually every two weeks to decide on matters that affect their age group particularly, as well as solve together matters that affect participants both individually and collectively. Each team is led and overseen by a team leader (a student selected democratically among the group), a chieftain (a student from group 5 capacitated in leading the meetings) and a reporter (a student from group 5 capacitated in M&E techniques to assess the satisfaction and learning of children). Decisions taken during the meetings are directly applied and monitored by the team leader, the chieftain, and the reporter with the participation of students, which are amended or showcased during the next meeting with students. Therefore, children themselves decide the most pressing issues they want to explore and advocate for.

Despite this, there are also many classes of a more traditional knowledge education: Math, English, Science, Arabic, Ethics, and then a specific curriculum for toddlers. These classes are taught with specific educational methods, such as the Montessori method and scaffolding strategies, game-based learning, or using VARK learning style. Moreover, the 26Letters School develops its own books, depending on students' needs and demands. However, the work of the NGO goes beyond the educational goal. It also provides the community and children with humanitarian aid through basic-needs-package deliveries, as well as with health support (by accompanying children to doctors, financing the visits and medicines, and ensuring psychological support within the school). Lastly, the 26Letters School is also focusing on labour assistance for children who have to work, as well as offering above-16-youth the opportunity to work and seek better vocational opportunities in a safe, caring, and empowering environment. With the development of the project, a "Mom's school" has also been created to provide support and education to the mothers of the community, with the aim of granting parenting skills, project management courses, as well as psychological assistance. Hence, the goal is the constant development of a safe space where children can feel empowered and respected, whilst bringing attention to the urgency of providing young people in Lebanon with an adequate education and allowing meaningful participation for them.

Does the 26Letters School meet the selected indicators?

Cultural and regional relativity / consideration	Yes
Safe, inclusive, and non-discriminatory space	Yes
Ensure children's right to express their voice and opinion	Yes
Ensure children's right to have their voice and opinion be given due weight	Yes
Children have the right and opportunity to have influence	Yes
Ensure the inclusion of youth in any decision-making process	Yes
Accessibility for every child	Yes
Human Rights and Child Rights awareness	Yes
Competent team and support	Yes
Positive child participation	Yes

3. The Human Rights Space

Human Rights experts have defined *human rights education*⁷ as one of the most pivotal means to make citizens aware of their rights and, consequently, able to be active in the socio-economic and political arenas, putting pressure on governments and holding them accountable for their actions, whilst making conscious demands. Nowadays, human rights education is mostly reserved for graduate / post-graduate programs, yet it is a field that is growing and expanding across all ages. Increasingly more curricula and trainings have integrated references to human rights, and schools are broadening up to include such education. Yet, the current state of implementation of *human rights education* is not sufficient, and the OHCHR is trying to build a case for a **right to human rights education**.⁸ The importance of ensuring such education lies in the fact that many human rights abuses occur because of the lack of citizen's interventions or by taking advantage of people's incomprehension of such actions being violations. Allowing everyone the access to human rights education would, indeed, empower citizens of all ages to use their critical lenses in recognizing "symptoms and sources" of human rights violations, which would ultimately lead to increased human rights activism and potentially to the diminution of human rights violations worldwide.⁹

Following such principles, the Human Rights Spaces was conceived with the objective to establish a safe space for children, youth, and adults from all backgrounds to discover and learn about human rights, specifically child rights, without barriers – hence, a space for human rights education.

What is this Children's Space?

With the original scope of building an interactive exhibition on human rights with a focus on child rights, a meeting space, and a think tank to support children and youth to become active on human rights issues, the Human Rights Space was founded as a private initiative in June 2020, became a non-profit association officially in January 2021, and opened its own exhibition at the Vienna Board of Education in November 2022. The process of creation of this space was two-years-long and mostly based on voluntary work at the beginning.¹⁰ It was based on a constant exchange between the team, cooperation partners from the fields of education, the arts and Human Rights¹¹, and different types of schools and extra-

⁷ **Human Rights Education (HRE)** is hereby understood as 'education through the human rights lenses, on human rights concepts and values, and for the enjoyment of human rights through empowerment of people. It makes great use of non-formal and innovative teaching methods, whilst also focusing on the conceptual learning'.

¹⁰ *The association received two fundings (from the Austrian Research Promotion Agency – FFG – and from the [Action for Sustainable Future \(ASF\) hub](#) – the Ludwig Boltzmann Gesellschaft and the University of Applied Arts Vienna) and conducted a crowdfunding campaign to build the exhibition space. Still funding is a big issue for continuing the work. The ASF hub also accompanies the Human Rights Space in terms of content. Additionally, the Human Rights Space is supported by the Start-up Service at the FH Campus Wien.*

¹¹ Amnesty International Austria, UNICEF Austria, Austrian Commission for UNESCO, Human Rights Office of the City of Vienna, The Ombudsmen for Children and Young People in Vienna, The Austrian's Children's League, The Austrian National Youth Council, The IZ, FH Campus Wien, Vienna Master of Arts in Applied Human Rights, Zentrum Polis – Politik lernen in der Schule, ZARA Training, Youth Council for the Independent Tyrolean Monitoring Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Verrückte Jugend Aktion und Blindernverband WNB, Verein Start Stipendien, FIAN Austria.

curricular groups of children that were connected with the association (aged >10 years old), mostly from Vienna and some groups from the Tirol region and Lower Austria.

The team involved is composed of expert educators, artists, academics, and trainers that have worked, in constant consultation with the children, in order to provide them with what they defined themselves as a safe, inclusive, and engaging space. The children included were not only asked to describe the ideal space they would have expected to have (in terms of furniture, smell, sounds, environment, topics, and activities), but also what kind of workshops would be helpful and needed in their opinion. Moreover, as a result of an anonymous feedback-questionnaire, it resulted that 96,04% of children and youth involved felt encouraged by the workshops to become active on Human Rights in the future.

Therefore, child participation was greatly valued and pursued throughout the whole process. With the opening of the interactive exhibition, the Human Rights Space is not only addressing those children involved in the creation-process, but it also amplifies to a broader public – school classes, extra-curricular youth groups, families, adults, and/or organisations, which can book workshops, discovery tours, and trainings to visit the Space.

How does the Human Rights Space work in practice?

The Human Rights Space, therefore, currently offers two segments of activities: (1) the physical exhibition open to the public and (2) specific workshops, discovery tours – “expeditions”, and/or trainings, organised for children, youth or adults. The former is composed of 5 module panels, each of which with a specific focus, information presentations, and alternative and interactive learning points. The first panel is an introduction to main concepts of human rights and child rights, whilst the other four on the topics that children identified as most pressing and interesting to address and talk about – namely, mental health, protection from violence, the right to education, and protection against discrimination. Each panel has the objective to give sufficient knowledge on the concepts and human rights issues, to inspire through stories of activists, provide helpful contact details in case of need, and several interactive and playful tools to interact with in order to learn through practice. Moreover, to make it as most inclusive as possible, each panel has descriptions in braille, pyramid font, and subtitles to the videos/audios – rendering the exhibition non-discriminatory and accessible to youth and adults with auditive and visual impairments. Moreover, all interactive elements are to be found in a height that is reachable in a wheelchair, and easy and child-friendly language has been applied for the texts.

Similarly, in regards to the workshops and trainings organised within the context of the exhibition, children are not approached with a one-for-all methodology. During the creation-process, each group of youth was asked for their expectations, established their own rules for their spaces, and decided the focus of discussions and how to address the different issues. A great support of experts and a specialised team (including human rights educators, psychotherapists, pedagogues and mediators amongst others), as well as period scheduled feedback rounds with the children, made possible that the best interest of the child was respected, child participation enhanced, and children’s needs met. Workshop cycles were both held online and in person, with an average of 4 sessions per groups. Once the young people involved expressed their vision on their ideal version of this children’s space and once the exhibition was

established accordingly, the format of workshops and training changed. It now mostly revolves around the exhibition itself, and on discovery tours of the space, led by a reduced team made of mostly experts on and certified staff for human rights education and discussions on the selected topics.

Generally, the Human Rights Space team has pursued the aim of including diverse groups, constantly engaging with children of different backgrounds. In the present time, the team aspires to continue reaching children and youth from different backgrounds, to establish discussions on both already selected and new human rights topics. At the same time, the objective remains that of working with and supporting them in finding ways on how to better implement their rights.

Does the Human Rights Space meet the selected indicators?

Cultural and regional relativity / consideration	Yes
Safe, inclusive, and non-discriminatory space	Yes
Ensure children's right to express their voice and opinion	Yes
Ensure children's right to have their voice and opinion be given due weight	Yes
Children have the right and opportunity to have influence	Yes
Ensure the inclusion of youth in any decision-making process	Yes
Accessibility for every child	Yes
Human Rights and Child Rights awareness	Yes
Competent team and support	Yes
Positive child participation	Yes

Final remarks

This booklet has showcased the importance of boosting child participation and creating spaces with and for children, based on values of respect and enhancement of child rights. The three positive cases brought as examples also demonstrate that the notions provided in the first part of this booklet are not just theories and ideal presumptions. It is **doable and necessary to establish children's spaces**. Young people have to be included as an essential part of the decision-making and creation processes. This is the only way that can ensure that the best interest of the child is respected. At the same time, it is important to have a competent team, with knowledgeable and experienced professionals that value a constant cooperation with children themselves. Furthermore, it is clear that a one-for-all methodology cannot be successful. Each group of children is different and diverse, because of cultural, regional, and personal backgrounds. Yet, diversity and inclusion should be taken as an element of power rather than of failure, as this would enhance the learning experience of children involved and would accustom children to engage in a diverse society. This has also been presented in the positive practices presented, each different in objectives and structures – based on the needs of the children involved. The CLT has a broader scope and a larger group, with children aiming at becoming change-makers for the international community and for regional youth activism, starting locally first. The 26Letters has been very much developed around the demands and needs of the community in Beirut and has a more local and family-like format. Lastly, the Human Rights Space has the broad scope to include children, youths, and adults with an interactive exhibition in a safe space, whilst tackling child rights and boosting child participation and activism in the human rights field with personal interactions and workshops.

Overall, it has been proved that child participation and engagement is crucial, and including children can be key not only in the context of children's spaces, but for all segments of social activities and change.

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