

# The realisation of the children's right of participation in the community children's care home: The analysis of the children's experiences

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**Abstract.** The objective of the study is to reveal the realities of the realisation of the children's right of participation in the community children's care home based on children's experience. For the study, qualitative study was chosen while using a semi-structured interview method. Eight children living in the community children's care homes (henceforth referred as CCCH), which are located in different sites in Lithuania, participated in the study. The study revealed the realization expression of the child's right of participation and difficulties in realising it at CCCH. The realization expression of the children's right of participation at CCCH should be attributed to the respect of employees for the right of the child of participation. It is expressed through the openness of employees to the opinion of the child, giving an opportunity for the child to speak out their opinion, and listening to the opinion of the child. Discussion of the child with the adult should take place as well as adhering of the adult to the opinion of the child when taking decisions, and the encouragement and support for the autonomy of children. The child's right of participation is also realised in everyday situations while allowing the child to manage his personal space according to his needs, involving the child in the leisure planning and organisation. The child should have an opportunity to participate in leisure activities according to their likes and interests, as well as consulting with the child regarding household chores. The study identified that the realisation difficulties of the children's right of participation at CCCH are attributable to the dominating position of the employee and the child's lack of trust towards himself and his own opinion. The dominating position of the employee is expressed through the non-listening to the opinion of children, disagreement with the child, the devaluation of the opinion of the child, the lack of adhering to the opinion of the child and the overriding of the opinion of the child. The child's lack of trust towards himself and his own opinion is linked with the belief of the child that his opinion is insignificant due to negative experiences in the past, the timidity of children to speak out their opinions and the unwillingness or fear of children to worsen their relationships with employees.

**Key words:** child, right of participation, community children's care home.

## 1 Introduction

The child's rights are a significant element of human rights, therefore, the way in which a country implements and develops the rights of the child, a public attitude towards child protection also indicate the development process of human rights [1]. One of the rights of the child is a right to participate in decision-making. The right of the child to participation in decision-making is enshrined in Chapter 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child [2], which provides that the right of the child to express his opinion and to participate in decision-making on issues relating to him should be ensured. The implementation of the right of the child to participate in decision-making, according to A. Franklin and P. Sloper [3], has become the political priority of the countries, which adopted the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Lithuania adopted this convention in 1995. Scientific sources state that the effectiveness of the ensuring of the right of the child to participation is affected by the informing of the child on their right to express their opinion and to participate in decision-making. It includes listening to the child's opinion, provision of an opportunity for them to express it verbally and nonverbally and the consideration of the child's opinion when taking decisions [4, 5]. Children's participation is a multifaceted process and encompasses various aspects of decision-making process: children should be seen, informed, heard and involved in decision-making [6].

The children's right to participation is unique, because it recognises that, although children are dependant on their parents and other adults, they have a right to participate when taking decisions, which are related to them [7]. The conducted researches indicate that the opportunity for children to participate in processes, which are related to their well-being, develop their self-esteem, self-confidence and independence skills [8]. Children's participation in decision-making processes builds their self-confidence, improves their dignity and the sense of their self-esteem, produces a positive effect on their mental well-being and general sense of security. In addition, the appreciation of the child's opinion and the consideration of it, when taking decisions, and an encouragement of the child to take decisions independently increase his ability to cope with arising difficulties in the future [9, 10].

Recently both the political and scientific discourse is increasingly taking notice of the realisation of the right of the children, who live in institutional care, to participation. Both international [11] and Lithuanian [12] documents, regulating the restructuring of institutional care, underline the importance of the realisation of the child's right to participation when taking decisions related to them. In Lithuania, when performing the restructuring of childcare, community-based services, which are alternative to institutional care, are being created. One of them is a community children's care home (further on CCCH) established in separate premises (e.g., a house, a flat) in the community and operating under a family-like environment model in which up to 8 children live. The description of the activities of a community children's care home [13] points out that CCCH must provide the child with conditions to participate in making decisions which directly or indirectly affect his life, situation and future. The participation of the child should be ensured in a child-friendly environment while providing the child with all necessary information to take a decision in a language that the child can easily understand and creating conditions for the child to express his opinion in the ways as deemed appropriate for him. The child's opinion should be reckoned with when taking a final decision which has to be in the best interests of the child [13].

Having performed the analysis of the studies, which analyse the restructuring process of childcare institutions in Lithuania (which started in 2014), it was established that there is a lack of studies, which reveal the realisation of the children's right to participation at CCCH on the basis of children's experience. In order to ensure the children's right to participation

at CCCH, the child's opinion, when analysing his personal experiences, is important. The purpose of the study is to reveal the realities of the realisation of the children's right to participation in the community children's care home on the basis of children's experience. The research questions are raised: How is the right of the child to participation realised at CCCH? What difficulties do children encounter at CCCH when realising their right to participation?

## 2 Research methodology

**Research methods.** In order to reveal the realities of the realisation of the children's right to participation in the community children's care home on the basis of children's experience, qualitative research was chosen. A semi-structured interview [14], which allows coming close to the experiences of the study participants, daily contexts, reality construction, opportunities to the situation improvement, to clarify existing knowledge, to trigger new ideas, was chosen to collect the study data. The topics of interview questions were formulated based on earlier presented research questions: How is the right of the child to participation realised at CCCH? What difficulties do children encounter at CCCH when realising their right to participation? In order to obtain significant information for the research, during an interview, additional questions were asked.

The data obtained during the study were analysed by using the method of qualitative content analysis. Qualitative content analysis was performed based on inductive category formation logic grounded on the study data. When qualitative content analysis was made the following consistency was adhered [14]: multiple reading and reflection of transcribed interview texts, data coding by distinguishing units of meaning in the text, the grouping of codes into subcategories, the formation of categories out of subcategories, the integration of categories/subcategories into the context of an analysed phenomenon, and the interpretation of the study data.

The study data were analysed by the two researchers. According to V. Žydžiūnaitė and S. Sabaliauskas [15], if only one researcher analyses the findings, it is difficult to ensure the validity and reliability of the results. Before beginning to analyse the data, the researchers agreed regarding the data analysis. The researchers made the initial data analysis separately by coding the data and forming initial subcategories and categories. After that, the researchers compared initial subcategories and categories, discussed, and completed their formation by consensus.

**The sample of the research.** Targeted sampling of the study participants was used in the study. The study participants were selected according to the following criteria: 1) children living at CCCH for at least 2 years, 2) children aged between 16 and 18. According to Rupšienė [16], criterion sampling is effective, because it assists in collecting high-quality data. The study was conducted in the April-June of 2022. Eight children participated in the study.

**Research Ethics.** The study based on the respect for a person's self-determination to participate in the study, the informing on the study, goodwill, and inclination not to harm the person, confidentiality and anonymity principles [17]. The study participants participated in the study on a voluntary basis and agreed that their interview would be recorded. They were briefed on the purpose of the study, the method of the study data collection and the procedure of the study, their anonymity and confidentiality and an opportunity to withdraw from the study were ensured. The study participants were assigned a code by using a letter (A, B, C, etc.).

### 3 Analysis of research results

#### 3.1 Good practice in the field of the implementation of the right of the child to participation at CCCH

During the study, it was sought to reveal the good practice in the field of the implementation of the right of the child to participation at CCCH on the basis of children’s experience. Having analysed the study data, two categories, which are associated with the good practice in the field of the implementation of a child’s right to participation at CCCH, were distinguished: the respect of the employees for a child’s right to participation and the realisation of a child’s right to participation in daily situations (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Good practice in the field of the implementation of a child’s right to participation at the community children’s care home.

Categories	Subcategories
The respect of the employees for a child’s right to participation	The openness of the employees to the child’s opinion
	An opportunity for the child to express their opinion
	Listening to a child’s opinion
	A child’s discussion with the adults and the consideration of his opinion when taking decisions
	Promotion and support for the child’s self-determination
The realisation of a child’s right to participation in daily situations	The child can arrange their personal space according to his needs
	The child is involved in the planning and organisation of their leisure time
	The child can participate in leisure time activities according to their likes and interests
	The child is consulted regarding their household work

The study revealed that, when realising a child’s right to participation, the respect of the CCCH employees for the right of the child to participation is of particular importance. The study indicates that one of the expressions of the CCCH employees respect for a child’s right to participation is the openness of the employees to a child’s opinion. According to the study participants, “it’s good that the employees care about our opinion and they encourage us to speak up” (F), “I can say that I can openly talk with the employees, to talk over my concerns” (H). In addition, the study identified that children, at CCCH, are provided with an opportunity to express their opinion. The following statements of the study participants prove it. “That’s not the case that only the opinion of the employee is important and that only it is the guiding rule, we have an opportunity to express our opinion, our opinion is sought” (B); The employee often tells me: “So tell me your opinion, what do you think about it” (A); “I like that I can speak up” (G). The study established that listening to a child’s opinion is one more expression of the respect by the CCCH employees for a child’s right to participation. The study participants noted: “I feel good, because the employees listen to my opinion and it seems to me that they care about me” (E), “it’s good that I can be heard, it’s good that I’m understood” (C), “the employees listen to us, our opinion, it seems to me it’s important to them, otherwise they wouldn’t listen (D). The study indicates that listening to a child’s opinion is an important condition for the realisation of a children’s right to participation, however, only it is not sufficient. In order to realise a child’s right to participation, a child’s discussion with the adults and the consideration of his opinion, when taking decisions, are important. According to the study participants, “I like that we can talk with the employees, talk over our issues, that these are not the employees, who decide, but

we decide together while talking” (B), “I’d say that my opinion, my decision are important, because the employees talk with me, we look for solutions together” (D). In addition, the study highlighted that the CCCH employees not only inquire about a child’s opinion and discuss it with him when taking decisions, but they also encourage the child to take decisions autonomously and support him when taking his decision. The study participants maintained: “Although I want to decide myself, I don’t always know what to do and how, I’m torn apart by different decision I can take, then the employees help me make my mind up when it comes to decisions” (F); “I like that the employees encourage me to take decisions autonomously, they allow the variety of possible decisions, but I take them myself, although what I decide is not always good, but I like that the employees encourage me to take decisions, devote their time to talk about it, they say that, before doing it, I need to think it over very well, although I’m not good at that” (H). This indicates that the employees encourage the CCCH children to take autonomous decisions and teach them, before taking decisions, to consider thoroughly the consequences of the made decisions. In addition, when it is difficult for the child to take decisions, the employee assists in taking a decision, but his assistance, when taking decisions, is aimed at promoting the independence in the child while respecting and recognising the wish of the child and not taking decisions for him. This indicates that, when taking decisions, children are not provided with substitutionary, but auxiliary assistance while taking them and children are not deprived of their right to take autonomous decisions. J. Strömpl and K. Luhamaa [18] maintain that every child has different abilities. Therefore, the adults must find appropriate methods and means to assist them in expressing his views. This requires developing a positive relationship with the child. The adults must first invest their time in communication with the child, hear the child, and meet their needs. It should be noted that children, who are involved in decision-making, assess themselves more positively, their personal and social skills improve, respect for other person increases [7]. According to S.A. Vis et al. [10] children’s participation, when taking decisions, has a manifold impact: children cooperate more, their relationships with the employees improve, the level of their self-esteem increases, not only their social skills develop, but their interest in living circumstances is also enhanced, their stress and anxiety decrease.

Children’s rights should not only be nurtured and protected, but also properly implemented in real daily situations. On the one hand, according to B.W. Head [19], the listening to a children’s opinion indicates the respect for children, their opinion, on the other hand, it is important to hear a children’s opinion, interests, in order to achieve the efficacy of services, programs and their greater impact for children. In addition, the implementation of a child’s right to participation contributes to the multifaceted education of children, the preparation for their independent life, improves the state of their mind, their dignity and self-esteem [20]. This is supported by the data of the conducted study. The study indicates that children realise their right to participation in various daily situations at CCCH. The study established that children at CCCH can arrange their personal space according to their needs. According to the study participants: “We arrange our room and decorate it as we wish” (G); “The employees allow me to arrange my room in a way which is acceptable to me, it is important that it be clean, in order... it is important to me that I can decide myself, I somehow feel good that I can do it myself” (C); “we talk over and agree what will be acceptable in the room to both of us, what and where we will put, how we will decorate, it’s good that we can decide themselves, when we don’t know, we discuss with the employees as well, but we do it themselves” (A). This indicates that children at CCCH can create their personal spaces according to their wishes, needs, take care of them and maintain order there. The opportunity to arrange their personal spaces, with which children are provided, assists in developing and maintaining independence skills. The excessive care for the dependants, decisions, which are taken for the child, have a reverse effect: it limits

their possibility to act autonomously, to solve their problems, to take decisions in various areas, decreases their motivation to act [21]. According to A.M. Salazar et al. [22], having left institutional care, such people are more vulnerable, are less aware of their rights, more inclined to act on the orders of others than to take autonomous decisions.

The study identified that children realise their right to participation by getting involved in the planning and organisation of their leisure time. Children, who participated in the study, indicated: “We talk over and plan together what we’ll all do in our free time, maybe we’ll tidy our surroundings, maybe we’ll all go somewhere...”(E); “While getting ready for holidays, we decide who is responsible for what, we help each other” (B); “It’s fun to plan together, to talk over how to better spend our leisure time together or what festival to organise...We sometimes have all kinds of different opinions, so we need to hear each other, to agree” (H). The study indicates that the CCCH children can participate in leisure time activities according to their likes and interests. According to the study participants: “We spend our leisure time variously, we attend various clubs according to what we’re into, I attend a sports club, so, at home, I also organise some sport games, for example, in the yard” (F); “During leisure time, I like drawing, so I draw, I have framed a few of my drawings, I decorated my home” (G); “We spend our free time variously, we can choose according to what somebody likes” (D). This indicates that the CCCH employees provide children with opportunities to spend their leisure time both individually and together according to their likes, interests, they teach them to spend their leisure time meaningfully and to plan, as well as to organise it.

The study established that the children’s right to participation is realised not only by spending their leisure time meaningfully, but also by performing household chores at CCCH. This is indicated by the following statements of the study participants: “It’s good that we talk over how to tidy our home, we divide the tasks” (A); “It so happens that we need to talk over for a long time, because when someone doesn’t want to contribute to the tidying, then we discuss till we agree and we all have responsibilities, if we disagree on something, then we all talk about it, each of us speaks up, we reason and so we look for an agreement” (D); “We negotiate daily what and how we’ll cook, who and what will prepare, who will go to the shop and what goods he will buy” (B). This indicates that there is consulting regarding household work at CCCH, arising difficulties are addressed together. The children are taught to assume obligations and to meet them responsibly. The organisation of a daily activity involves the CCCH children in the decision-making, in the planning of various activities, as well as affords them greater independence when performing various activities. In addition, when cooperating more in their daily activity, children have more opportunities to develop decision-making, activity planning, organisational, problem-solving, responsibility, self-confidence skills, to learn from each other, if need be, to assist each other, what is very important when preparing children for independent living [23]. International [11] and national [12] documents, regulating the restructuring of institutional care, make us aware of the necessity to create an educational environment, which is personality-oriented, empowering the personality by meeting the child’s needs, enabling him to actively function, providing him with an opportunity of a personal choice, ensuring his participation when taking decisions related to them.

### **3.2 Difficulties to implement a child’s right to participation at CCCH**

The study revealed that, although, at CCCH, conditions are ensured for children to realise their right to participation, however, certain difficulties, when realising this right, also arise. Difficulties for the realisation of the right to participation should be attributed to the domineering position of the employee and the child’s distrust towards himself and his opinion (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Difficulties for the realisation of the right to participation.

Categories	Subcategories
The domineering position of the employee	The child’s opinion is not sought, there is no consulting with the child
	A child’s opinion is underrated
	Disregard for a child’s opinion
	The child’s opinion is overridden
The child’s distrust towards himself and his opinion	The child thinks that his opinion is insignificant due to negative experiences in the past
	The child is reluctant to express his opinion
	The child’s unwillingness to aggravate his relationships with the employees

The study identified that one of the difficulties for the realisation of the right of the child to participation at CCCH is the domineering position of the employee. When analysing children’s experiences, it was established that, at CCCH, there are instances when children’s opinion is not sought, there is no consultation with the child. According to the study participants: “It so happens that they don’t ask for my opinion and take their own decision and I don’t like it” (H); “They don’t ask for my opinion, they say that they’re older and know better” (F). The study revealed that the children’s right to participation is not realised not only then, when the child’s opinion is not sought, but also then, when, after the expression of a child’s opinion, it is underrated and disregarded. The study participants: “There’s no point in speaking my mind, they don’t pay attention to it anyway, because they think that I’m not able to take a decision, I don’t have experience, well, too small” (C); “If because of my opinion something negative is said and there’s no normal explanation, then I don’t want to express it” (E). In addition, the study indicates that there are instances when the CCCH employees override a children’s opinion. A study participant says: “It happens that they ask for our opinion, we speak up, and then it appears that their opinion doesn’t coincide with our opinion, so they express their opinion one more time on top of our opinion and it is taken as our decision... it happens that one thing is promised, then another is done, so how can you believe them?” (D). Basing on the study data, we can establish that when the employees do not seek a child’s opinion, do not consult with the child, downplay a child’s opinion, disregard or override it, over time, children begin lacking initiative to express their opinion. It means they have understood that decisions are taken without taking into consideration a child’s opinion. According to J. Strömpl and K. Luhamaa [18], when implementing the child’s right to participation, it is important that children trust the adults, that their safety be guaranteed and all the promises be fulfilled during the decision-making or later on. L. Lundy [24] notes that it is important to talk with the child and to explain in the way they understand why the decision, which was taken, did not coincide with child’s opinion in order to pursue the best interests of the child and not to leave it without discussion with the child. Practitioners take different decisions regarding the child’s participation depending on how they interpret the maturity and age of children [25]. It is important that the employees focus on how to involve all the children and not to assess their ability to participate by concentrating on their age and maturity. A children’s ability to take decisions grows proportionately to the opportunities they are provided with. Therefore, it is necessary to empower children, when taking decisions, practically, and not to consider this right as a theoretical factor. The lack of favourable approach regarding children’s participation in the decision-making on the part of the adults not only worsen the children’s involvement itself, but it can also become a serious obstacle to ensure the quality of social services [9].

The study data indicate that the difficulties for the realisation of the child’s right to participation at CCCH should be attributed to the child’s distrust towards himself and his

opinion. On the one hand, children think that their opinion is insignificant due to negative experiences in the past. The following statements of the study participants illustrate it. "So I don't express it, because I wasn't asked for it at home, nobody listens to it at school, nobody cares about my opinion" (A); "It's difficult for me to give my view, because it seems to me that I may say something wrong and others will laugh at me again..." (G). On the other hand, the child's right to participation is not realised at CCCH due to the fact that children are reluctant to express their opinion: "I don't express my opinion, because I think that I don't have enough experience to decide" (C); "I sometimes fail to express my opinion, because I can't explain what I have in mind here" (B); "I'm unable to talk reasonably and, when I'm told, "Tell me your arguments," I get lost and say nothing (H). Furthermore, the study highlighted that children are reluctant to express their opinion, because they are unwilling to aggravate their relationships with the employees. The study participants explain: "...sometimes my opinion doesn't coincide with the opinion of employees, but you've got to stay silent in order to preserve good relationships, although I don't want to do as the employee sees it" (D); "You don't agree with the employee's opinion, you remain silent about your own opinion in order that he wouldn't get offended or wouldn't understand it wrongly, so I try to please, not to resist and the like" (A). Therefore, on the one hand, children, in order to maintain good relationships with the employees, because of negative experiences, are as if at a crossroads when choosing whether to express their opinion to the CCCH employees, or not to express it, in order to protect the relationships, they have and themselves. On the other hand, when the employees regard themselves as experts and take decisions for children, and not together with them, they fail to create conditions for the expression of the child's right to participation. The studies of other scientists [10, 26] indicate that specialists, who work in the child protection system, while having a protectionist approach, are inclined to take decisions for children. In addition, scientists [25, 10] note that practitioners, in order to protect the child from the burden of responsibility for their decisions, which are taken, can treat child participation as a risk for children. However, children do not need protection from their participation. The child's participation and his protection should not be set against each other.

## 4 Conclusions

The study identified good practices of CCCH in the field of the implementation of the child's right to participation, which should be attributed to the respect of the employees for the child's right to participation and the realisation of the child's right to participation in daily situations. However, there are difficulties for the realisation of this right, which should be attributed to the domineering position of the employee and the child's distrust towards himself and his opinion.

The study revealed that children, at CCCH, are provided with the opportunities to realise the right to participation. When realising the children's right to participation at CCCH, an important role is played by social workers, working with children. The study highlighted that in order to realise the child's right to participation, the respect of the social workers for the child's right to participation and the creation of conditions to realise the child's right to participation in daily situations are important. The study identified that the respect of the social workers for the child's right to participation should be attributed to the openness of the employees to the children's opinion, the encouragement of children to express their opinion on various issues related to them. In order that the child would express his opinion, it is important to establish with the child, close relationships, which are based on the respect for the child and trust, by showing the child that he and his opinion are important for the employee. Respect for the child's right to participation are inseparable from the listening to the child's opinion while providing the child with opportunities to



discuss with the adults issues of concern to him and related to him and having an equal relationship with the child. When taking decisions, it is important not only to consider a child's opinion, but also to search for approaches leading to solutions together with the child when assisting the child not only in seeing the variety of solutions, but also discussing their possible consequences and encouraging the child to take decisions autonomously and supporting him when taking his decision. The study indicates that it is difficult for children to take decisions, therefore, the assistance of the employee, when taking decisions, is important. It should be noted that the assistance of the employee for the child, when taking decisions, should not be substitutionary, but auxiliary, aimed at promoting independence in the child while respecting and recognising the child's opinion and without taking decisions for him.

The study indicates that it is important that children are provided with opportunities to realise the right to participation in various daily situations. Children, who live at CCCH, have an opportunity to arrange their personal spaces according to their needs. Children also realise their right to participation by getting involved in the planning and organisation of their leisure time. As a result, children can express their opinion, participate when planning and organising their leisure time, realise their needs, interests. They also learn to listen to each other, to accept the opinion of others respectfully, to take account of the needs and interests of others, to search for decisions and to take them without infringing the right to participation of other children. While planning and organising their leisure time, the CCCH children not only learn to spend it meaningfully, but they also maintain and expand communication, cooperation, activity organising and personal skills. The study findings indicate that children realise the right to participation by performing household work at CCCH, consulting with others concerning household work distribution, assuming responsibility for it, and performing it responsibly.

The study also revealed the difficulties for the realisation of the children's right to participation at CCCH, which is related to the domineering position of the employee and the child's distrust towards himself and his opinion. The domineering position of the employee shows disrespect for the child's right to participation, when the employees do not seek the opinion of the child, fail to discuss with him, downplay or override a child's opinion and disregard it when taking decisions, which of importance for the child and which are related to him. Attention should be drawn to the fact that, in the long run, the domineering position of the adults decreases the child's confidence both in himself and the adults as well as his willingness to express his opinion, because the adults, when taking decisions, disregard it.

The difficulties for the realisation of the child's right to participation at CCCH should also be attributed to the child's distrust towards himself and his opinion. Children, having been exposed to negative experiences in the past, when their opinion was not sought, was downplayed, disregarded, or they experienced humiliation because of their opinion, are inclined to think that their opinion is insignificant, nobody cares about it, therefore, they are not inclined to express their opinion. In addition, children, having experienced negative experiences when due to the expressed opinion conflicts ensued and the relationships with the adults deteriorated, are reluctant and unwilling to express their opinion, because they are unwilling to aggravate their relationships with the CCCH employees.

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