

A Child Voice model for children with disabilities to thrive in the future

A child's voice is a phrase describing an authentic involvement of children in their life decisions to become independent young adults.

Teaching children to recognise and use this is one of the most important roles for parents. For example, we start with familiar ideas such as buying food or choosing clothes to wear and increase complexity as they get older.

However, research has found that it is hard for children with disabilities to have their opinions heard when it comes to planning services and support. It happens to many children in schools, too.

Parents' opinions are usually included in developing learning plans with professionals, but without the child's participation, they may inadvertently set goals that do not use the child's strengths and interests for the best outcomes. It's never too early to start giving children opportunities to make choices.

Developing a Child Voice model

In response to this gap between policy and practice, Plumtree CEO Sylvana Mahmic and Plumtree Learning Research Director Dr Annick Janson have developed an evidence-based Child Voice model. It draws from their lived experience as a parent raising a child with disability.

The model promotes coaching children in the art of making the right choices and including them in planning with professionals as soon as possible. As understanding grows over the years, they become more confident and capable of taking control of their life's direction. The parent's role gradually changes from coach to consultant.

The Child Voice model builds on the Parent Professional Relationship* and Leaning into Relationships* with Professionals statements. Developed by parents for parents at the 2017 and 2018 Now & Next alumni conferences, the statements advocate building an authentic relationship between families and service providers that enables the child and family to thrive.



Support from professionals

The initiatives were acknowledged at a symposium that brought together Australian and international academics, researchers, parents of children with a disability, and professionals from early intervention and disability support services.

According to Associate Professor Peggy Kern of the University of Melbourne’s Centre for Positive Psychology, amplifying the voices of children combined with the Now & Next program’s notion of family empowerment could inform changes to the NDIS in the future.

“When you look at the [current] legislation, it is adult formulated,” she says. “We must widen opportunities for children to have a say at different ages and build it into NDIS planning and funding procedures. We need to describe what that looks like and what professionals and parents must do at different points for the child to participate.”

Learn more about Plumtree’s award-winning Now & Next* program and Dr Pippa Murray’s keynote presentation on promoting the voice of children* at 2018 Now & Next Alumni Conference.



* **Parent Professional Relationship** - citizen-network.org/library/parent-professional-relationship.html
Leaning into partnership with professionals' statement - plumtree.org.au/downloadable-resources/?keywords=Leaning+into+partnership
Now & Next program - plumtree.org.au/for-families-by-families/now-next/
Promoting the voice of children - plumtree.org.au/promoting-the-voice-of-children-in-education-inclusive-education/