

## Chapter 9

# Using Community Art to Encourage Children to Participate in Discussions About Violence

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### Abstract

Increased emphasis is being placed on developing creative approaches when working with children in research settings, especially with sensitive research topics like violence against children. Community art is a social form of art that gives artists the opportunity to work in collaboration with the public, with the aim of highlighting and addressing specific social issues. This chapter reflects on an art exhibition organised in Reykjavík called *Wishes of Icelandic Children*. The project was a collaboration between artists and children. The aim of the chapter is to present how an art exhibition may put violence that children experience into focus and encourage attendees to reflect on the subject by looking at descriptive pictures and texts from the Convention on the Rights of the Child and then writing comments about their thoughts and feelings. The research questions are: How do children express themselves about sensitive topics such as abuse and violence? Can community art enable professionals to better support increased participation of children in discussions about abuse and violence? This study involved a qualitative thematic analysis of comments written by children after having seen the exhibition. Three students took part in the analysis process as co-researchers. The exhibition was successful in creating a platform where children could express themselves on topics concerning abuse and violence. Many comments expressed an ardent desire to end violence in society, especially emphasising bullying, which can limit young people's capacity to feel safe and express themselves.

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## Introduction

Visual art is a form of artistic expression that has long been used to address social injustices and inequalities and call for societal change (Butler, 2001; Huss & Sela-Amit, 2019; Phelps, 2017; Visser-Rotgans & Marques, 2014). Addressing social issues and presenting them through artistic lenses help bring attention to the position of specific groups while also calling for increased attention to the community, potentially channelling discussions towards social reform (Campana, 2011; Capous-Desyllas & Bromfield, 2020; Visser-Rotgans & Marques, 2014). Community art is a visual art form in which artists work collaboratively with citizens to shed light on a particular social situation or challenge facing society. The process of participating in the artwork is often considered more significant than the product. This is an interesting method that provides participants with opportunities to take an active role and express their opinions about issues in the environment, sometimes sensitive ones, and create a more participatory process (Huss & Bos, 2022). Using art in this way sheds light on the diversity of communities and cultures. Although it does not necessarily create substantive change in society alone, it does change perceptions, increase understanding and promote discussion in the community about what could be done better. With community art, it is possible to create an important space for children to be active participants and express their thoughts and experiences (Huss & Bos, 2022; Huss & Sela-Amit, 2019; Visser-Rotgans & Marques, 2014). Knowledge and perceptions about children and their place in society have developed from children being viewed as vulnerable and in need of protection towards being seen as social agents with rights. The role of the child as a social actor is grounded in theory about children's competence (Aldridge, 2017; James et al., 2012; Mayall, 2009). This is supported in legislation concerning children's rights and well-being (Child Protection Act No. 80/2002, 2022; United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child [UNCRC], 1989). Accordingly, although welfare service practitioners and researchers have increasingly sought to involve children as participants, the views of marginalised children on various sensitive issues are still not commonly heard (Brady et al., 2012; Collings et al., 2016; Garcia-Quiroga & Agoglia, 2020; Kennan & Dolan, 2017). One reason why children are not included when sensitive issues are being discussed is, according to professionals, the lack of tools and methods to discuss sensitive issues with children (Martins et al., 2018; Mossige & Backe-Hansen, 2013; Vis et al., 2012).

By using appropriate tools and methods to increase children's participation in participatory research, arts-based methods such as photography have increasingly been used to involve children in a discussion that concerns their lives and circumstances, especially if the issues are defined as sensitive. These methods can empower children and provide an appropriate environment to participate in discussions about difficult feelings and experiences (Desmond et al., 2015; Drolet

et al., 2022; Huss & Bos, 2022; Pavarini et al., 2021). Therefore, this study analysed data created by children who visited an exhibition titled *Wishes of Icelandic Children*. The aim was to examine whether community art can serve professionals when engaging children to participate in discussion on violence. The following research questions were addressed: How do children express themselves about sensitive topics such as abuse and violence? Can community art enable professionals to better support increased participation of children in discussions about abuse and violence?

### ***Ways to Increase Children's Participation***

With the growing adoption of the UNCRC, nations around the world have confirmed that children's participation is a necessary component of the development of society. The aim of the UNCRC was to safeguard the human rights of children and ensure their participation in issues that concern them (UNCRC, 1989). Children's participation is defined as their right to participate and receive support in making decisions that relate to their lives and conditions, while simultaneously emphasising and respecting their need for protection (Gallagher et al., 2012; Mason, 2008; Pölkki et al., 2012). Critics of children's participation have raised doubts about whether such ideas exercise appropriate caution and whether children are capable of participation (Daley, 2015; Hammersley, 2017; Jensen et al., 2020; Moore et al., 2021; Taplin, 2020). Many professionals echo these criticisms, with reactions that often seem to be informed by the idea that children are defenceless and volatile (Mossige & Backe-Hansen, 2013; Sandberg, 2018). Other researchers have argued that protecting children does not conflict with encouraging their participation; such support entails creating conditions that are conducive to participation with methods suitable for children (Brady et al., 2012; Fern, 2014; Jensen et al., 2020; Mossige & Backe-Hansen, 2013; Sandberg, 2018). Despite a growing knowledge base regarding work with children, professionals have been criticised for failing to adopt diverse professional methods, which often results in difficulty relating to children (Brady et al., 2012; Donnelly, 2010; McLeod, 2007). Applying relevant professional methods involves, among other things, creative ways to encourage children's participation (Capous-Desyllas & Bromfield, 2020; Morrow, 2008; Phelps, 2017). Professional methods entail offering children support that is suitable for their developmental stage. It is important to create conditions and an environment that inspire and encourage children on their terms (Kennan et al., 2018; Lesson, 2007). An emphasis is placed on applying proven methods when working with children, and professionals are increasingly encouraged to adopt such practices, use creative approaches and appeal to children's visual perception to better relate to them (Denov & Shevell, 2019; Munro, 2011).

### ***Children as Key Informants About Their Lives***

Munro (2011) highlighted that children are key informants about their lives and the impact of any problems on them. Children's perspectives and experiences in

relation to difficult situations provide practitioners and authorities with a deeper understanding of the problems children deal with; this can produce new opportunities for reform (Bruce, 2014; Hill, 2006; Mossige & Backe-Hansen, 2013). It is important to open the discussion about abuse and violence and involve children in that conversation. Abuse can cause serious developmental complications and disrupt the relationship between parents and children. Abuse has a broad meaning and can refer to sexual abuse, mental abuse or bullying; it can also entail witnessing violence committed against others (Freysteinsdóttir, 2012; Lloyd, 2018). Violence can negatively affect children's health, well-being, education and relationships with friends and family; moreover, it is often a well-guarded secret in families (Blair et al., 2015; Kristinsdóttir, 2014; Lloyd, 2018; Mandara et al., 2021).

### *Icelandic Context*

Iceland is still an ethnically and culturally homogenous society as of 2021. Most inhabitants, about 85%, were born in Iceland and speak Icelandic, which is a dominant language at all levels of society (Statistics Iceland, n.d.). How children are empowered to participate takes various forms in different cultural and legal contexts in each country. In Iceland, the declared role of statutory social services is to create an environment that supports the well-being of children and their families; it is responsible for providing alternative support for children who receive insufficient care from their parents and helping families meet their children's needs (Social Services Act No. 40/1991, 1991). The Child Protection Act No. 80/2002 (2002) and Children's Act No. 76/2003 (2003) forbid the use of violence of any kind against children. It is, therefore, clear that any kind of violence against children is illegal in Iceland.

It has been difficult to achieve widespread public recognition of the problem of domestic violence against children, due to the indirect effects of the violence. But its recognition is considered by many to be a prerequisite for working on prevention and improving treatment and resources for victims of violence. Research results have indicated that children often show signs of discomfort if they experience domestic violence (Einarsdóttir et al., 2004). Between 2,000 and 4,000 children experience domestic violence every year in Iceland. Using the lower estimate, only 14% of these cases are reported to child protection authorities (Arnadóttir, 2011).

The UNCRC (1989) drafted two articles dealing with violence. Article 19 asserts the right of children to protection against all forms of violence and neglect, and Article 34 insists on the protection of children from sexual violence. Following the UNCRC (1989) and its subsequent 2013 ratification in Iceland, the legal position of children in Iceland has improved with an emphasis on strengthening the status of the child. One element is ensuring the right of the child to participate, which is based on the idea that active participation promotes children's involvement in a democratic society (Fridriksdóttir & Gísladóttir, 2015). A child's right to participate is particularly important for children in

precarious social conditions (Martins et al., 2018). Elevating the voices of children in these situations strengthens their identity and provides them with the experience of enjoying respect and human dignity (Eriksson et al., 2013; Kristinsdottir, 2014; Lundy, 2018).

In 2014, the city of Reykjavik launched a campaign against domestic violence in collaboration with the police, the Women's Refuge and the Health Service. The cooperation among these organisations is intended to ensure the safety of city residents in their homes, provide better services to victims and perpetrators and improve the situation of children living with domestic violence. Here, domestic violence is defined as violence against a person by those close to them. The violence can be physical, mental, sexual or financial and includes the use or threat of force. If children are at the scene of domestic violence, a child protection worker and worker from social services must be informed of the situation and called to the scene immediately (Gunnarsdóttir, 2019; Ríkislögreglustjóri, 2018).

The event *Wishes of Icelandic Children* took place in 2014 on the 25th anniversary of the UNCRC and included a photography exhibition organised by Barnaheill – Save the Children in Iceland (Barnaheill, 2014). The exhibition was held in the capital region, but also in various smaller towns around Iceland. The exhibition of photographic art can be defined as community art in light of its goals of raising awareness of child violence, abuse and poverty in Icelandic society and generating discussions on the issue. It featured images of children accompanied by paragraphs from the UNCRC, along with text fragments based on the experiences of Icelandic children who had been subjected to abuse. The exhibition was aimed at children, but professionals working in compulsory schools were especially encouraged to attend the exhibition with their students. Additional instructions were developed to achieve the aims of the exhibition and support professionals in exploring the experiences of children who attended. Concurrently, a digital space was created for child guests that allowed them to express their experiences and make their voices heard on these sensitive topics of children undergoing poverty and violence, as stated in Article 12 of the UNCRC (1989). Children thereby had the opportunity to express themselves and influence other people visiting the exhibition. Having the possibility to see their comments in the digital space of the exhibition became an important part of children's awareness about violence and abuse, and it facilitated their active participation in a democratic society.

## Methodology

This study used a qualitative research method. The study design was participatory, such that data came from written notes in the form of wishes from children who visited the art exhibition, and children participated in the data analysis process. The exhibition was interactive. Children came and looked at pictures and then created a space to make their voices heard. The children's messages were then used to highlight children's experiences and ideas in an important conversation about violence, while simultaneously creating opportunities to gather data

that could be viewed and used to better understand the effects of violence on children and how to work against violence. These data came from the exhibition, where children provided input by writing down their wishes, including their feelings and thoughts after they observed the artwork about violence and abuse. The data seemed promising for this research project. The study was conducted in 2016 and 2017. The goal was to examine whether community art can engage children in discussions on violence and prompt creative ways to talk about the impact of violence and abuse against children.

The participants in the study were preschool and compulsory school children who attended the exhibition *Wishes of Icelandic Children* and documented their wishes on notes that were stored in the exhibition space. Children in preschool are 2–5 years old, and most of them have not yet learnt to write. Children in compulsory schools are 6–16 years old, and most of the wishes came from that group of children. The exhibition was mainly targeted at children and their teachers, and although members of the public were also welcome to attend, they were not asked to write notes or wishes. Many children wrote their age on the note, though not all of them did. Of those who noted their age, the youngest was 3 and the oldest was 16.

The research data consisted of written notes by children who attended the exhibition *Wishes of Icelandic Children*. The exhibition was open for 2 years, between 2014 and 2016, and data collection took place throughout that period. After viewing the exhibition, the children were encouraged by their teachers to write a note in the form of a wish. They hung the notes on a ‘wishing tree’ or placed them in a box inside the exhibition area. In this way, the exhibition entailed an interactive process intended to further expand on the children’s experiences. A total of 1,751 wishes were collected. Of these, 314 were deemed unusable as data because it was impossible to read the wishes. It was difficult to determine whether each child wrote only one wish, and some notes had two wishes written on them. It is likely that the youngest children had received assistance writing down their wishes.

### ***Data Analysis***

We applied thematic analysis as described by [Braun and Clarke \(2013\)](#), following the procedures of coding the messages by identifying and reporting themes, then highlighting the meaning of data. Three young co-researchers aged 16 or 17 from the Child Welfare Youth Council attended the analysis process and contributed as co-researchers, offering their perspectives regarding the interpretation of the data. The co-researchers’ role was to read the wishes with the researchers and participate in making coding decisions. Together, we produced descriptive and semantic codes, categorised the themes and applied the coding criteria to the messages to include or exclude them in the identified codes (see [Fig. 9.1](#)).

Wishes were included if they related to issues of violence and therefore to our aim and questions. We excluded wishes that we could not read or did not seem related to our study. After reading all the included wishes repeatedly, we started



Fig. 9.1. Analysing the Wishes.

the coding the wishes on small post-it notes, one wish to each note. The notes were in variety of colours. We used one colour for each code and sought to categorise similarities and differences in the wishes. The next step was to identify categories and themes that emerged in the data, which were classified in view of the research questions. In this chapter, we introduce three themes related to 630 notes.

## Findings

The wishes were diverse, but most reflected children's experiences or ideas of violence. The sheer number of wishes ( $n = 1,437$ ) suggests that children had a strong need to express themselves about their experiences and attitude despite the difficulty and sensitivity of the topic. They appreciated the exhibition and the opportunity to express themselves. One child communicated this appreciation by wishing 'that every day would be like this one'.

The children's experiences sometimes manifested as wishes for their lives to be different, whereas other wishes involved dreams of transforming into an animal or gaining the ability to fly. Some wishes suggested that the children had suffered serious abuse. One child wrote: 'I wish he had never undressed me and touched me'. Many of the wishes expressed a powerful desire to end violence in society. Other wishes called for stronger measures against bullying and that it should be eradicated so that everybody would be allowed to express themselves, without being criticised or bullied.

Using thematic analysis, children's wishes were grouped into the following dominant themes, which we associated with either abuse or neglect. Of the 1,437

wishes, 630 were related to themes of ending abuse and neglect: (a) being spared from experiencing violence ( $n = 258$ ), (b) being allowed to be oneself ( $n = 114$ ) and (c) insecurity and lack of care ( $n = 258$ ).

We analysed another category – children wishing to be allowed to express themselves freely – connected to the topic of children’s rights to their identity, non-discrimination and participation in social life.

The messages in these thematic groups indicated that the children were aware of violence in society and its effects on children. Some messages suggested strongly that the person who wrote them had personally experienced abuse or neglect, which can be one manifestation of abuse. Other messages indicated that the children were aware of violence or neglect in their environment and wanted it to be prevented in one way or another and that they not be subjected to discrimination.

### *Being Spared From Experiencing Violence*

The children communicated a clear wish not to experience violence in their community, in their family, among friends or personally. Many wishes involved worries about global peace. Many children wished that wars did not exist and that no one should have to be subjected to that level of threat, as exemplified by three notes:

I wish there were no wars, only peace on EARTH.

I wish the world could be a good place for all.

I wish that all violence against children would be erased.

The wishes expressed the children’s view that violence was terrible and that the world’s resources were unevenly distributed. Many people suffered injustices. Several wishes stated sentiments like ‘this disgusting violence should end’ and ‘the world would become more just’.

Figs. 9.2 and 9.3 are from the exhibition *Wishes of Icelandic Children* (Published with permission from the photographer, Asta Kristjansdóttir, in 2016). The figures are connected to the [UNCRC \(1989\)](#) Articles 19 and 34, which state that children have the right to protection against any physical, mental, and sexual violence, abuse, indifference, and neglect inside and outside the home.

The children communicated the wish not to be exposed to violence and conflict in their families, as can be seen in the following three notes:

I wish my mom would stop shouting.

I wish I didn’t have such an angry mom.

I wish no one would fight and I wish we were all good friends.

Three other wishes had to do with distress from witnessing alcohol use in the home:



Fig. 9.2. I Wish I Were a Princess. 'It Is Also Possible to Hit Children With Words. It Hurts a Lot' (6-Year-Old Child).

I wish mom and dad would stop drinking.

I wish dad would stop drinking and start talking to me again.

I wish mom and dad wouldn't fight when dad drinks.

Some children wished that their siblings would refrain from using violence against them. One child wrote:

I wish my brother wouldn't be so violent and he'd be a good boy.

Another wished:

That . . . my sister would stop teasing me and calling me an idiot.



Fig. 9.3. I Wish I Could Fly Away. ‘I Told Him to Stop, but He Didn’t’ (13-Year-Old Child).

The exhibition gave rise to thoughts about bullying and violence experienced by the children. Some of these children wrote:

I wish I wasn’t left out in school.

I wish that no one could hurt me.

### ***Being Allowed to Be Oneself***

Many wishes suggested that children felt hindered in being themselves or they felt that others were prevented from being the way they wanted. This theme was often associated with bullying. One child said:

I wanted the kids to have fun with me. I feel bad at school.

The children wished 'there was no bullying' or 'that no one would have to experience bullying or violence'. They were, therefore, not only thinking about freeing themselves of bullying but also freeing others. These thoughts were reflected in two wishes:

I wish that bullying did not exist.

I wish that we could stop bullying.

One child sent the following message:

Though something is a joke it can still hurt someone.

Physical appearance was also a common theme among the children, with some wishing to be accepted as they are. They wished that people 'would stop judging people based on their appearance', though a few children expressed that they wanted to live up to society's unwritten standards concerning appearance. Three notes contained the following messages:

I wish I wasn't so fat.

I wish I was skinny.

I wish I was beautiful.

Some children wished that everyone could receive respect, regardless of appearance:

I wish people would show respect to everyone no matter what they look like.

Other children wished that everyone would look the same to avoid violence and bullying:

I wish everyone could be like everyone else.

### ***Insecurity and Lack of Care***

Some of the children's wishes indicated insecurity, difficulty in connecting with others and a lack of care. Many children wished they had a better or stronger connection with their parents.

One child wished for a life in which they would no longer have to always 'miss mom and dad'. Another wished they could 'spend time with mom all the time', whereas other wishes indicated a desire to have stronger bonds with their parents or visit them more frequently. Four participants left these wishes:

I wish I could have a good and healthy relationship with my father.

I wish I could go home to mom.

I wish I could meet my real parents.

I wish I could meet my father.

Some wishes came from children who had lost their mother or father. The following was written on two notes:

I wish dad was still alive.

I wish mom could come back to life.

The art of the exhibition seemed to provoke a variety of emotions and thoughts in the children, which often were linked to a desire for a better life and better world for themselves and others.

## Discussion

It is important to keep in mind that the findings of the study are only based on the wishes of children who chose to write notes after they had attended the exhibition *Wishes of Icelandic Children*. Therefore, it is difficult to assert that the wishes speak for the experiences of all children who viewed the exhibition. The exhibition was well attended by students, many whom arrived under the supervision of teachers from many Icelandic compulsory schools. It is likely that the socio-economic status of attendees was more diverse than is generally the case for art exhibitions.

The findings of the study suggest that community art can be used to include children's voices on issues that they confront in their environments. Using participatory methods that involve visual art can be a way to access important knowledge and experiences of children, especially marginalised children, regarding violence.

The children's messages indicate that the exhibition achieved its aims. The diverse wishes describe the children's experiences, often transmitting a clear and direct meaning. Many children seemed to have reflected on the content of the exhibition and sought to communicate their thoughts and feelings honestly in response. Some children wished for the end of violence, which highlights that those children are aware of the devastating impact of violence and shows that they can discuss the issue on their own terms (McLeod, 2007; Vis et al., 2012). Violence can be well hidden (Blair et al., 2015; Kristinsdottir, 2014; Lloyd, 2018), and the wishes indicate that some children who visited the exhibition had suffered violence of some kind. In this way, community art is important and can increase people's awareness of violence and strengthen the discussion of this issue (Lloyd, 2018). The children found it important that individuals are allowed to be themselves, free

from teasing and bullying due to being different from others. These wishes suggest the negative emotional impact resulting from experiencing or witnessing bullying, which is in accordance with previous findings relating to the far-reaching and serious impact of violence on children (Lloyd, 2018; Mandara et al., 2021). Therefore, it is important to talk to children about the consequences of being victims of bullying and collaborate with them to change the culture of schools and enhance the value of friendship in the school community.

Our findings are in line with other research findings that children are ready to participate, discuss and reflect on difficult issues such as violence. If they seek to express their thoughts regarding these issues, it is important to create platforms through which they can feel safe communicating their thoughts and feelings. Children's position in society is strengthened by listening to and considering their wishes. In this way, children can be acknowledged as important participants in shaping society (Gallagher et al., 2012; Lundy, 2018; Mason, 2008).

Based on the number of wishes received from the children and how they describe their feelings and thoughts, we conclude that community art can be used as a creative tool by practitioners to increase children's participation and talk about sensitive issues such as violence. It is important to introduce these kinds of methods to practitioners to support them in identifying injustices and challenging situations faced by certain groups, with the aim of increasing the public's understanding and awareness of violence. More open discussion is needed to help prevent abuse, optimise outcomes for children and improve the situation of children in society.

This research was a pilot study combining participatory research with a multifaceted collaboration involving an artist, social organisations, children who visited a certain art exhibition and children who participated with the researchers in reading and analysing the study data.

Our results indicate that children are aware of different manifestations of violence. Professionals who work with children, like teachers, could be trained to offer advice on sensitive issues using these methods and then invite children to participate in solving the problems in their environment. Such solutions could be used in classrooms and school community to improve the school's atmosphere, children's environment and children's lives.

### ***Limitations***

We have limited knowledge about the participants who wrote the comments. The researchers received access to the exhibition guestbook to extract information regarding the participants and their origins, but the guestbook lacked information concerning the total number of visitors to the exhibition. Another limitation is that the data consisted not of continuous text but rather messages written as individual sentences, which proved relatively difficult to contextualise. Whether data between 2015 and 2016 are still interesting and relevant today might be questioned; we concluded that they were important. However, a great strength of

the study is the sheer number of children who expressed their thoughts following the exhibition by writing down their wishes.

## Conclusion

Based on the number of wishes received from the children and how they describe their feelings and thoughts, we conclude that community art can be used as a creative tool by practitioners to increase children's participation and talk about sensitive issues such as violence. It is important to introduce these kinds of methods to practitioners to support them in identifying injustices and challenging situations faced by certain groups, with the aim of increasing the public's understanding and awareness of violence. More open discussion is needed to help prevent abuse, optimise outcomes for children and improve the situation of children in society.

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