

Nothing about them, without them

Children's Civic Participation and Inclusion in AI

Reema Patel, Founder & Director

UNCRC - United Convention on the Rights of the Child - Right to Be Heard

Right to be heard / Participation (Article 12):

Children have the right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them, and those views should be given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child was held in 1989. The convention set a precedent that children are not just objects under the guardianship of their parents, but they are subjects who are interacting in the greater social context. The convention determined that children were capable of participating in the greater social context.

Despite these principles - we have a way to go....and technology is not helping

Conversation about children has not historically centred **on their agency, relationships, or rights.**

Instead, the focus has been on harm, safety, content moderation & safeguarding - procedural and risk based rather than children centred.

At risk of overlooking the core question - **how can the digital world serve and enhance children's rights, agency, life chances and outcomes?**

‘Hey Siri, do you love me?’



AI toys are shaping children at the earliest stages in their development

“What’s different about young children is that their brains are being wired for the first time and developmentally it is natural for them to be trustful, for them to seek relationships with kind and friendly characters,”

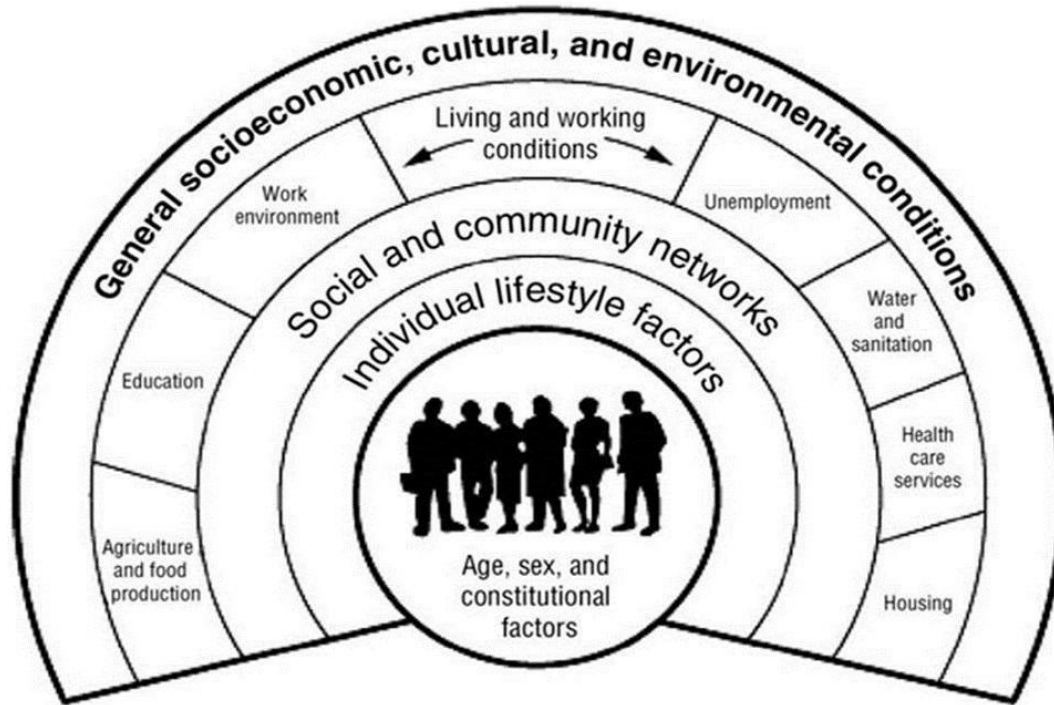
said Rachel Franz, director of Fairplay’s Young Children Thrive Offline Program.

Because of this, she added, the trust young children are placing in these toys can exacerbate the types of harms older children are already experiencing with AI chatbots.



SPOTLIGHTS

Advocacy groups urge parents to avoid AI toys this holiday season

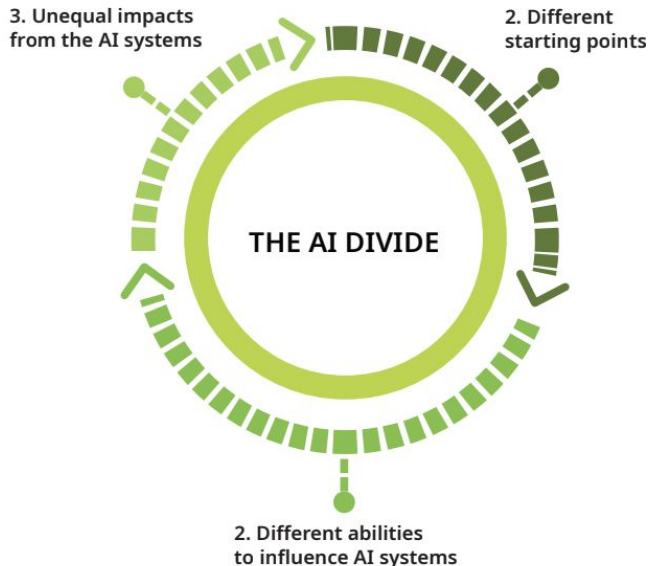


Source: Dahlgren-Whitehead rainbow
(1991)

Children view,
live and
experience
technology
from different
standpoints

**What does it mean
to 'include', given
that 'children' is
not homogenous?**

Children do not experience technologies equally - their life chances and outcomes are determined and shaped by their environment

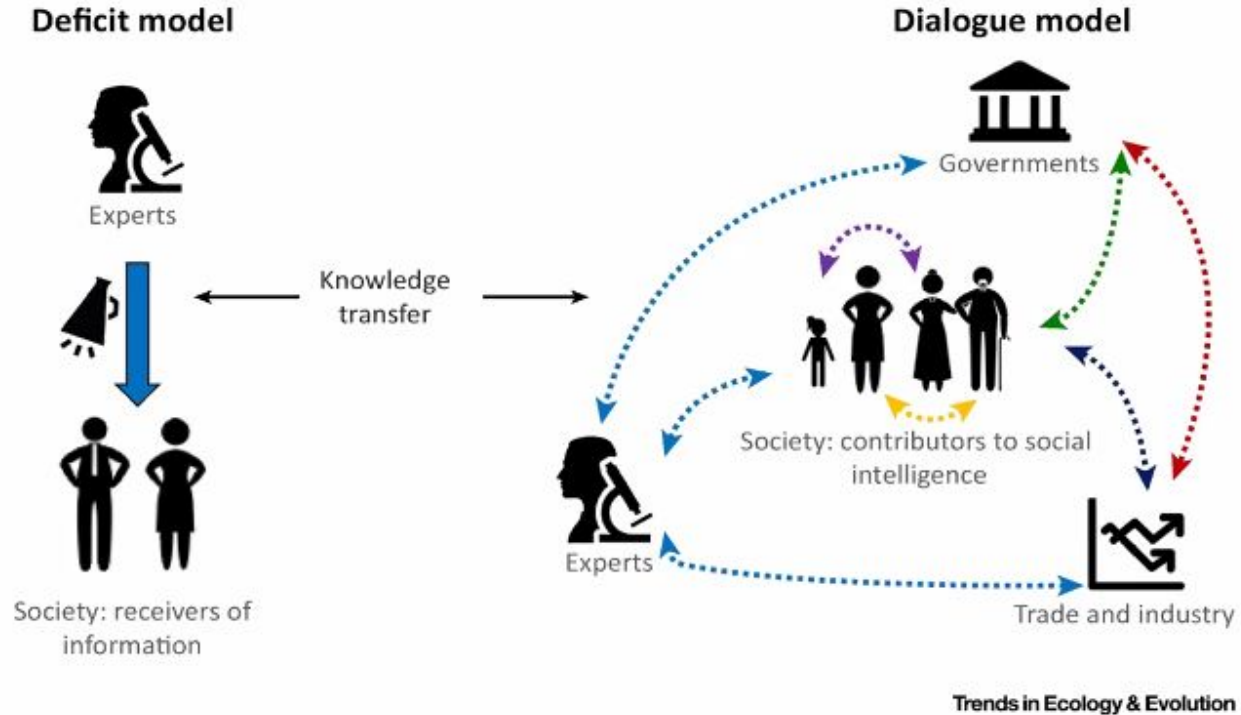


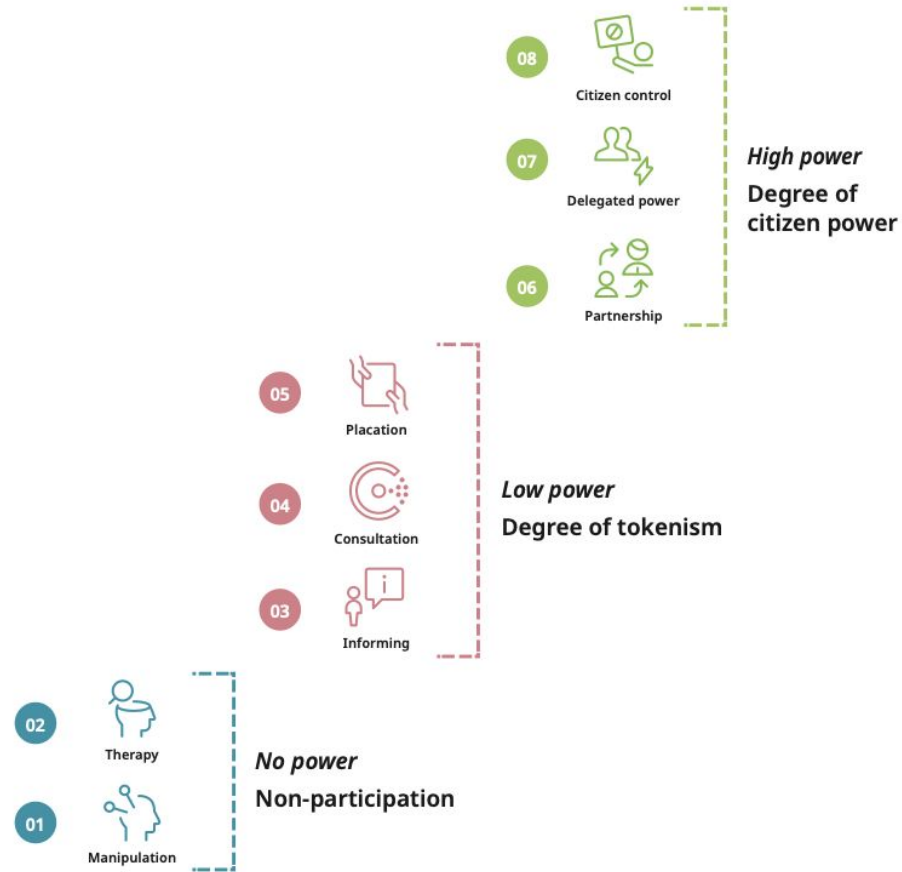
Rethinking pedagogy - early years and beyond

1. **Dialogue and Critical Consciousness:** the importance of dialogue as a tool for mutual understanding and the development of critical consciousness, enabling individuals to recognise and challenge oppressive structures.
2. **Transforming Education:** an educational approach that encourages learners to actively question and investigate their world, rather than passively receiving knowledge, fostering a more democratic and participatory learning environment. He critiques the Western 'banking model' of education.
3. **Praxis:** Central to Freire's philosophy is the concept of **praxis**, the integration of reflection and action. He argues that **true liberation comes from the transformative action**.
4. **Solidarity and Collaboration:** Freire emphasises the need for solidarity and collaboration among the oppressed to collectively confront and transform oppressive systems, emphasizing the importance of unity in the struggle for liberation.

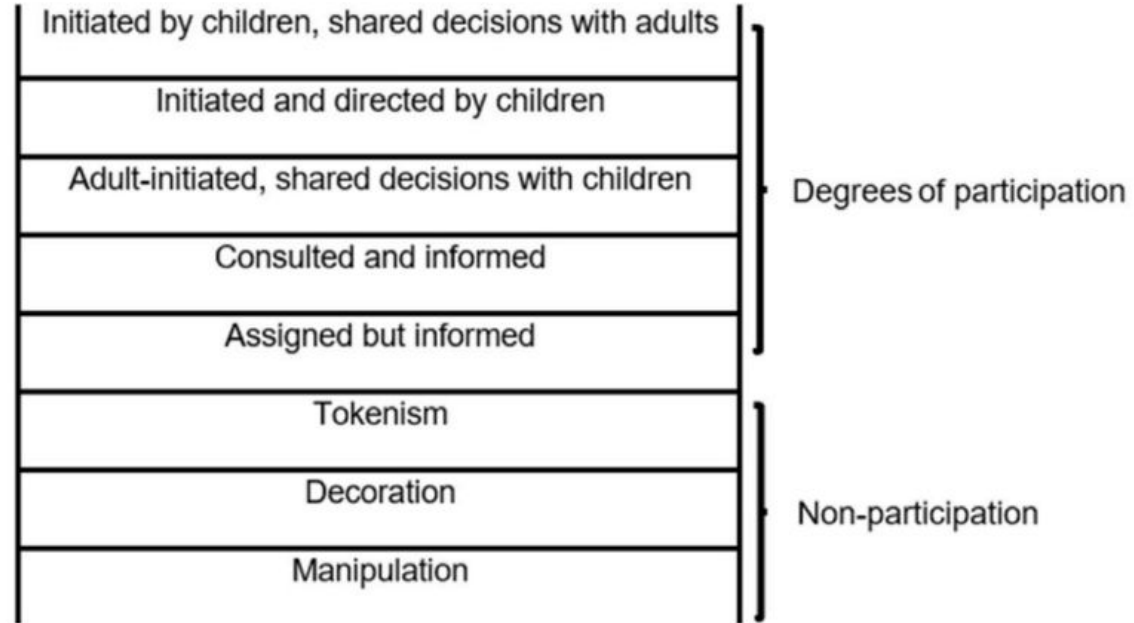


Moving from deficit to dialogue....



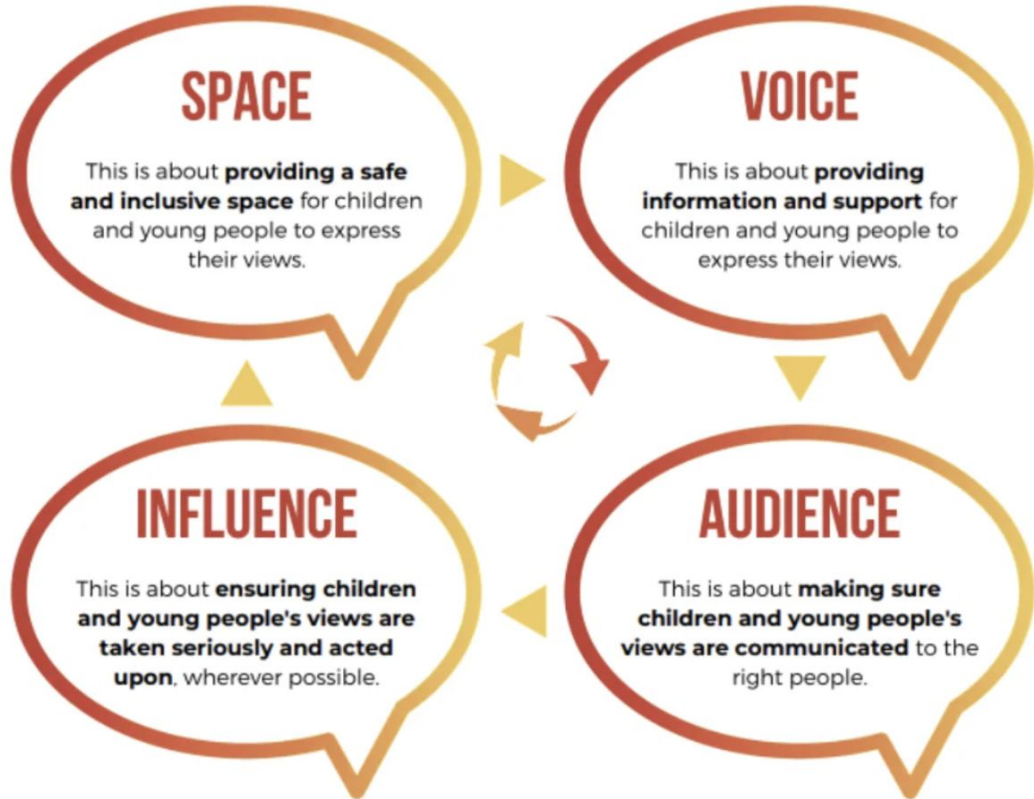


Sherry Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation (1969). Diagram above developed by Reema Patel, Elgon Social Research (for the 'Including Public Voices in AI Framework, 2025).



Hart, R. (1992). *Children's Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship*. Florence: UNICEF International Child Development Centre.

From voice to power shift



Lundy, L. (2007). 'Voice is not enough: conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child'. British Educational Research Journal, 33(6), 927-942

Implications for early
childhood education -

How do we apply Freire, et
al?

The goal of participation is
participatory justice,
activating a power shift
for children.



Play and creativity as mediating choice, self-expression, affordance and participation for children



Agency, power and participation for children (Gallagher, 2019)

- **Agency is Shaped by A Network ('Assemblage'), Not an Trait:** Children don't exercise independence in isolation; their capability depends entirely on surrounding adults, environment, and tools. Agency is therefore constructed socio-technically.
- **Physical and Digital Objects Shape Power:** Material and digital items like Wi-Fi routers, door locks, or smartphones actively permit or restrict what a child can accomplish. As the digital world is changing, childrens' agency is being affected.
- **Routine vs. Inventive Action:** Children operate within pre-set adult rules (routine), but frequently adapt physical items in unexpected ways to create new possibilities (inventive).
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- **Environmental Design Matters:** Instead of asking if kids are "independent," evaluate how surrounding systems, rules, and objects enable or limit their growth.

Engaged 150 children....

Education & Empowerment: Using AI to improve learning access and support students while ensuring kids understand the tools they use.

Safety & Wellbeing: Demanding better online and offline protections against harmful algorithms, grooming, and bullying.

Ethics & Trust: Strong worries regarding deepfakes, misinformation, and systemic biases built into data models.

Environmental Impact: Raising alarms over the heavy water usage and carbon footprints generated by massive AI data centers.

Child-Centred Policy: Insisting that young people have an active voice in tech regulation rather than being left out of major decisions

The Children's Manifesto for the Future of AI

Making our voices heard

Pwani Childrens' Voice Conference

- **What happened:** The Kenya Alliance for the Advancement of Children (KAACR) organized a two-phase initiative to include children in national development. This process involved collaborative planning via a Children Planning Committee, the 2015 Pwani Children Voices (PCV) Conference, and a public hearing where children lobbied officials at the Mombasa County Assembly to present a memorandum regarding their needs and rights.
- **How many:** 200 participants total, which included 116 children.
- **Age of children:** The children involved were between 8 and 18 years old.

Mombasa County incorporated some of the children's views in the *Mombasa County Child Care Act 2016*, in which they have proposed employing teachers and equipping the daycares/nurseries alongside the new schools they are building.

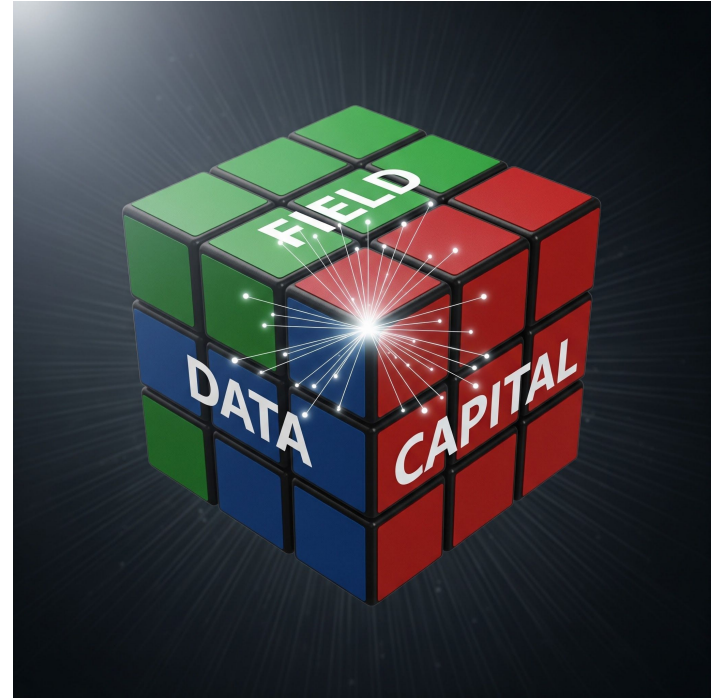


So - where next for agency, power and participation?

Children **can** be actively involved in shaping and mediating the digital spaces around them - not just reacting and responding to the spaces.

We can think of tech/AI/digital as akin to a Rubik's Cube rather than a Black Box that is more static, fixed and hard to shape/change.

These faces are always rotating and interacting. The "ethical task" is not to "solve" the Rubik's Cube, but to ensure that children, young people, adults and all actors in society "remain in relation to it" (keeping it visible and contestable).



Source: Patel, R. (forthcoming, 2026). *Accountable AI - Beyond the Black Box*. Palgrave Pivot.

Image above was generated using GPT, prompt engineered by Patel.