



Empowerment and Participation
Working with Children and Young People
World Education Program Australia Ltd
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Foreword

Children and young people have unique insights into their lives, needs and the world around them. It is their human right to be heard on matters affecting their lives.

Young people have much to offer organisations such as WEP who engage them, listen and take their concerns seriously.

In Victoria, Child Safe Standard 3 requires WEP to have strategies in place that empower young people to meaningfully participate in decisions that impact them. This requirement is intended to enrich WEPs' policies and processes; ensuring they best meet the needs of children they interact with. It is also intended to create a culture in which young people feel respected and valued and feel confident to report problems – particularly if they are harmed or feel unsafe.

WEP also recognises that children and young people bring unique capabilities, experiences and views that can assist the organisation to be child safe.

Empowerment and participation is particularly important for children and young people who are more likely to be misunderstood, marginalised or discriminated against. This includes children who are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, from newly arrived communities, who identify as LGBTQIA+ or who have a disability. WEP is committed to creating policy, programs and practices that are culturally safe, inclusive, welcoming and accessible benefits all children.

Empowering children and young people does not just improve their safety and wellbeing, it also promotes a healthy organisational culture across all of WEP's activities that is consultative, collaborative and open to feedback and improvement.



Introduction

WEP values and celebrates children and young people for who they are and the contributions they make. We also recognise that because of their age, children and young people can be disempowered and are at greater risk of experiencing harm.

WEP has an obligation to empower children and young people, and to uphold their human right to participate in decision-making that affects them.

Empowerment and participation are two different things.

Empowerment is about building up children and young people and changing the way organisations such as WEP operate. It helps children and young people to have greater confidence and to seek out support when they need it.

Across all of WEP's programs and activities, children and young people are empowered through their relationships with staff and peers, and through positive and affirming experiences. WEP ensures that they are given information and skills to overcome problems and challenges, and to enable them to have a say about things that affect them. Empowerment builds children and young people's confidence in themselves.

Participation is about giving children and young people opportunities to have their say and to inform decision-making. This requires WEP to listen, to hear, and to make appropriate changes based on what children and young people share. Participation contributes to empowerment when it builds children and young people's confidence. It strengthens relationships and helps children and young people feel valued.

Participation is not only about giving children and young people opportunities to have their say. It's also about WEP considering the needs and views of children and young people when making decisions that affect them. It's a conversation where ideas are shared back and forth. These discussions are built into decision-making processes, demonstrating a commitment to listening and responding.



Summary

WEP provides the opportunity for students both abroad and within Australia to experience life in a different country. The experience and personal development gained from an exchange allow students to walk out of their schooling and into the real world ready to take any challenges that come with it.

WEP prides itself on encouraging the participation of students during their time on exchange. All students have the right to participate in decision making and are encouraged to provide their opinion and feedback. Their opinions and feedback will be acknowledged and applied.

We ensure students are aware of their rights and are empowered to give feedback on our service and participate in decision-making processes in the following ways:

- All students must receive either an Outbound Student Orientation Handbook or Inbound Student Orientation Handbook and undergo a face-to-face pre- departure or on arrival briefing to ensure (at minimum) they understand:
 - WEP's statement of commitment to child safety
 - Safety measures and protective behaviours outlined in our Outbound Student Orientation Handbook or Inbound Student Orientation Handbook
 - The rights of children and young people
 - Expectations of the student and program rules
 - Expectations, responsibilities and obligations of host families, host schools, staff at WEP and their international counterpart
 - Support structures in place and how to access them
 - How to raise concerns and complaints through a range of different avenues including the Complaints Policy and Complaints Form
 - A cultural briefing about their chosen destination.
- Face-to-face briefings are conducted by a trained employee/s of WEP. It is the responsibility of this employee/s to ensure all students understand this information and be ready to answer any questions or concerns the students might have.
- WEP, through its orientation process clearly informs the students on both inbound and outbound programs of its commitment to child safety and requires a zero-tolerance approach to all forms of child abuse from all adults associated with our organisation, and to let us know if there are any issues throughout their exchange experience.
- It's important to WEP that we help children understand that any issues they have can be reported to us without fear of retribution or getting in trouble.
- WEP will also work hard to include children in decision-making processes and ensure they feel happy and safe in the following ways:
- If a child is unable to travel with a group/supervisor and must travel alone then the child and parent must give consent to this process.
- If an image or video of a student is used on social media, WEP will ensure they have permission of the student and their parents/caregivers through the signing of a Consent Form
- When WEP checks-in with the students, we ask them a series of questions, including:
 - Do you feel safe?
 - Have you felt unsafe on your exchange so far?



- If a student is feeling unsafe, WEP will act immediately. We will talk to the student at a time/place that they are comfortable with. Questions may include:
 - What has you feeling unsafe?
 - How did this make you feel? WEP will accordingly speak with our local coordinator, and parents/guardians of the students.
- In cases where abuse is suspected and/or disclosed, a report to the relevant governing and child protection bodies, including in Victoria, the VRQA, will be made as soon as practicable.
- All students whether inbound or outbound are requested to complete a feedback form. This feedback form enables WEP to continuously improve its methods and processes.
- All students and their parents/guardians will be given the contact details for the relevant registering authority, which in Victoria is the VRQA, regarding any mishandling of an issue by WEP.

What is empowerment and why is it important?

Children and young people have much to offer WEP, including their unique insights, talents and experiences. Their ability to participate develops as they build skills, knowledge and confidence in themselves and others.

Empowerment recognises and builds on the strengths of children and young people. It is a process of allowing them to become stronger and more confident. It gives them greater say in and control of their lives, and helps them understand their rights, so they can act on them if they need to.

By empowering children and young people, WEP aims to help them:

- become more resilient
- identify risks and know what to do if they are unsafe
- develop confidence to seek support if they need it.

For children and young people to be empowered, they need WEP to foster certain values and commitments, including:

- showing that they value children and young people and their contributions
- demonstrating a commitment to their rights
- taking their experiences seriously and responding to their views and insights
- demonstrating a commitment to keeping them safe.

Empowering children across WEP's programs

Empowerment is a critical element across WEP's programs. Children and young people's empowerment and participation can protect against abuse and harm across WEP's programs by:

- raising their awareness of inappropriate or unsafe situations
- fostering appropriate, trustworthy relationships with adults and peers who can help them
- building their confidence to report concerns by reinforcing that their views and wishes will be taken seriously
- increasing staff, volunteer and host family knowledge of their safety needs and concerns.

The four key principles WEP adheres to are:

- developing an empowering culture
- fostering empowering relationships among children and young people, their peers and the adults in the organisation
- building awareness, skills and knowledge to recognise unsafe situations and raise concerns
- supporting meaningful, positive participation in the organisation.

Empowerment model

In a child safe organisation, children and young people:



How children and young people can be vulnerable

Although all children and young people can be vulnerable to abuse, some are more vulnerable than others. They are at increased risk of abuse if they:

- have previously been the victim of bullying, harassment, abuse or maltreatment
- have encountered racism, sexism, homophobia or discrimination
- have disability or mental health issues and/or are socially isolated
- come from families facing poverty and lacking support, or that have experienced trauma
- have experienced stress, worry and challenges that have negatively impacted their physical and emotional health, hopefulness and wellbeing.

WEP understands the connection between disadvantage and disempowerment and takes steps to ensure all children and young people are empowered and can speak up and be listened to.

Children and young people with trauma

Childhood trauma – such as abuse or neglect, the loss of a parent or exposure to violence – can take a great toll on a child's outlook and affect their sense of safety and security.

Children and young people who have experienced trauma may believe that they and their needs don't matter or that trauma is part of life. They may have a history of feeling powerless, particularly when decisions are made without their input. Empowerment is valuable for these children and young people because it can help to restore their confidence in themselves and others. It can assist them to take more control over their lives.

WEP may not always know whether the children and young people they engage with have experienced trauma. We therefore consider it very important that our efforts to empower children and young people use a trauma-informed approach. WEP does this through:

- recognising that emotional, physical or sexual abuse – and other adverse life experiences such as racism or violence – can constitute a trauma
- understanding that the impacts of trauma can be profound, especially when the trauma occurs at developmentally vulnerable times, and this can greatly affect children and young people's sense of safety and trust
- creating culturally, psychologically and physically safe spaces
- working with children and young people in trauma-informed ways that give them opportunities to safely participate and have their say without causing them distress or harm.

Celebrating and responding to diversity

No child or young person is the same as another. Each has unique abilities, skills and talents and different experiences to draw on. They each also relate to other people, see the world and share their thoughts and feelings in different ways. The way adults involve children and young people and relate to them can be empowering or disempowering. WEP thinks about ways to ensure that every child is able to have a positive experience. They respond to the specific and additional needs children and young people might have.

Some groups of children and young people are more likely to experience disempowerment, discrimination, harm or abuse. These include:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people
- those from culturally or linguistically diverse backgrounds, including refugees
- those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex or queer (LGBTIQ+)
- those with disability.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people

Culture and community are often protective factors for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, strengthening their sense of safety, identity, confidence and connection. Where relevant WEP celebrates Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. We actively prevent racism and discrimination and take action when it occurs. We recognise that there are culturally appropriate ways of involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people that help them feel safer and more empowered, and when appropriate, we work with local communities and Elders to understand what this looks like.

Children and young people from culturally and/or linguistically diverse backgrounds

Many children and young people live in families where they or their family members were born overseas or have culturally diverse identities. They often speak languages other than English at home. Drawing on their cultural heritage, these children and young people enjoy different cultural practices, beliefs, values and celebrations. Cultural background plays an important part in the way they form their identities. It offers them a sense of belonging and connection.

WEP celebrates this diversity. We recognise and prevent racism and discrimination and create environments where children and young people can be involved and share their views in culturally safe ways. WEP also appreciates that cultural expectations and values differ from one community to another. We encourage children and young people to contribute and share their views in a variety of ways.

WEP spends time getting to know individual children and young people, to find out how they would most like to participate, whenever possible communicating in their mother tongue, or providing them support with reading, writing or speaking in English.

Because they are experts in their own lives and have a good appreciation of what is culturally appropriate and safe, children and young people from diverse backgrounds can offer WEP ideas on how to best empower them and support their participation in decision-making.

Cultural safety

Cultural safety is an essential precursor to the empowerment of children and young people from culturally diverse backgrounds. Children and young people won't feel empowered or able to speak up and participate if they don't feel that their identity, culture and background are respected. Children and young people feel more able to fully participate when they feel they belong and are safe from discrimination and harassment.

Cultural safety requires an environment that is free from discrimination or denial of culture. It is also about valuing and celebrating cultural difference and affirming the right of children and young people to enjoy and practice their culture. It requires awareness of cultural difference and a willingness to learn and a commitment to challenge both unconscious and overt discrimination and bias.

For WEP, this can include:

- being respectful, inclusive and welcoming of families from a range of backgrounds
- taking a zero-tolerance approach to racism and discrimination in all forms
- reflecting on and working to address unconscious biases in staff, systems and processes

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- representing and celebrating a broad range of cultures within imagery and activities
- communicating in ways that are accessible to children, young people and families from non-English speaking backgrounds
- celebrating diversity by recognising important cultural events
- fostering links with culturally diverse communities to strengthen awareness and understanding of different perspectives and facilitate cultural learning and connection.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and gender diverse, intersex, queer and questioning children and young people

Some children and young people do not identify as being heterosexual or may question their gender. They feel safest when:

- those around them understand what this means to them
- they are referred to in a way that makes them feel comfortable
- organisations create safe spaces for them where they aren't discriminated against, judged or bullied.

These children and young people may have shared experiences of discrimination, harassment and abuse. WEP empowers all children and young people by creating an inclusive environment that actively demonstrates that the organisation welcomes and values diversity and takes a zero-tolerance approach to discrimination. This may include:

- educating staff and volunteers about diversity in sexual orientation, intersex status and gender identity
- acknowledging people are not exclusively heterosexual or have a gender identity that aligns with the sex assigned at birth
- whenever possible including a range of representations of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and gender diverse, intersex, queer and questioning people in imagery and activities, including depictions of diverse families, including rainbow families
- supporting and respecting decisions that children and young people make about their own gender identity, including respecting their preferred names and pronouns.

Children and young people with disability

Children and young people with disability often experience the world in different ways to their peers. This means that they have unique perspectives and can make important contributions within child safe organisations. When organisations fail to understand or accommodate their needs, their involvement in programs and support and contributions to decision-making becomes restricted. This can be incredibly disempowering and frustrating and can also amount to unlawful discrimination.

Children and young people with disability often experience discrimination and harassment.

WEP recognises that children and young people with disability have a right to feel valued, to feel they belong and to have their say about things that are important to them. This often means ensuring that spaces are accessible, activities are inclusive, and their communication needs and preferences are met.

Supporting the empowerment and participation of children and young people with disability involves:

- communicating in a way that works best for them
- attending to any assistance that may be required for them to express themselves or raise concerns
- structuring spaces, processes, communications and activities to support them

- treating their views and insights with the same weight and respect as anyone else's.

Clear boundaries

WEP has a clear expectation that all staff (including third party providers), volunteers and host families involved in the development and implementation of WEP's programs:

- follow WEP's policies and Codes of Conduct
- treat all young people equally and don't have favourites
- are friendly but don't attempt to befriend children and young people
- establish rules that they expect all adults (including themselves) to follow
- respect the boundaries of children and young people in terms of what they are comfortable doing, and who they are comfortable sharing and interacting with
- are transparent with key personnel i.e. CEO, Managers etc about their engagement and interactions with children and young people
- don't ask children and young people to share things that are personal and private, except in the context of providing support or care
- don't share private information that is not relevant to their role
- don't interact with children and young people outside of the organisation (except with the knowledge and permission of the organisation and carers)
- use their power as adults to help rather than control, belittle or isolate children and young people
- have transparent relationships with children and young people, with clear goals and outcomes so that other adults are confident about what they are doing.

Empowering relationships: peers

Young people benefit from having strong friendships and feeling part of a team. They may see their friends as their primary source of support, information and advice, and go to them when they need help. Most often, young people will tell their friends about abuse before they tell adults. Because of this it is often the friend who will raise allegations of abuse rather than the person who has been harmed. This is why it is very important to empower all children and young people to act on concerns relating to themselves or to others. WEP encourages young people to develop positive peer relationships and build skills to support each other, while also seeking out adults if required.

Strategies for supporting positive peer relationships

Create a sense of team by:

- identifying and celebrating the strengths within the group and in individuals
- identifying shared goals and expectations
- spending time building trust and rapport.

Instigate buddy programs to enable:

- young people to pair up to give each other support and feel connected to others
- new participants in the group and those who feel isolated to have access to special support.

Promote partner or small group activities to:

- create opportunities for children and young people to find support from their peers

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- assist those who are more isolated or withdrawn to grow their confidence.

Monitor group dynamics, and be sure to:

- call out bullying or exclusion
- discourage unacceptable behaviour
- encourage positive team dynamics.

Celebrate successes to strengthen a sense of team and individual value. Whenever the opportunity arises, to ask team members to:

- share something about their peers that they admire
- thank their peers for something that they have done together.

Building awareness, skills and knowledge

Children and young people are empowered when they have the knowledge, skills and confidence to recognise unsafe situations, speak up, raise concerns and influence the organisation. WEP empowers children and young people by helping them to understand safety, what we are doing to keep them safe, how they can raise ideas and concerns, and what will happen if they do.

Building children and young people's confidence

Confidence in themselves	Confidence in adults and organisations
WEP seizes every opportunity to celebrate the children and young people in their care unique skills, talents and contributions.	WEP has an array of information – age and ability appropriate – about what is being done to keep children and young people in their care safe and feeling safe. This includes information about: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WEP's commitment to children and their safety • its expectations about appropriate relationships that have boundaries • what is in place to protect children from harm • what children and young people can do if they are unhappy, unsafe or need help.
WEP ensures that all staff are caring, supportive and appropriate, and strengthen a sense of team through clear expectations at employment and effective post-employment training.	
WEP has clear processes for children and young people to identify when things are unsafe and to find someone who can help.	WEP encourages children and young people in their care to build connections with volunteers and/or peer leaders they know and can turn to if they are unhappy or need something to change.

Empowering children: a shared responsibility

People at all levels of WEP's organisation have a role to play in empowerment. Adults directly involved in WEP's programs also need the awareness, skills and knowledge to empower children and young people. Through targeted policies, guidelines, codes of conduct and effective training programs, WEP ensures staff understand what empowerment means, how important it is to child safety, and what is expected of them in empowering children and young people. Additionally, leaders at WEP ensure from the top down that empowerment is practised at all levels of the organisation, including their own.

What the leadership team at WEP do to foster empowerment?

- Make accessible public statements that demonstrate WEP's commitment to young people, their rights and their safety.
- Create opportunities for staff and children and young people to develop shared safety and empowerment goals, through effective and ongoing feedback processes.
- Establish policies and procedures that support children and young people having input into decision-making processes, through effective and ongoing feedback processes.
- Ensure that plans are achievable and that sufficient resources – including time, staff, training, mentoring, budget, tools, equipment and ongoing support – are allocated to them.
- Provide ongoing support for child safe practices and mentorship so staff, volunteers and/or host families can learn from best practice examples.
- Ensure there are clear policies about appropriate conduct and clear reporting pathways for complaints or concerns.
- Model a commitment to empowerment and follow through on what they say they will do.

What WEP staff and volunteers do to empower children and young people?

- Demonstrate how they value and empower children and young people in their day-to-day practice.
- Participate in creating shared goals that empower children and young people, through effective and ongoing feedback processes
- Utilise resources such as time, training, tools and equipment to enable empowering interactions with children and young people.
- Know how to respond if a child or young person makes a disclosure of harm or abuse.

How WEP supports positive participation?

WEP has a high level of responsibility for young people and takes pride in having in place staff and practices that reflect a high level of expertise in engaging with young people.

When planning and delivering any of its programs to children and young people, WEP always consider what needs to be put in place from the outset to make sure it is a safe and positive experience. Any activity, planned or unplanned, must be run in line with WEP's policies and procedures, such as Codes of Conduct, and management and reporting policies.

Prior to any activity, WEP ensures all our staff, volunteers and home stay families understand our organisation's reporting policy, so they know what to do if a young person discloses abuse.

When planning and implementing its programs, WEP:

- Identifies and evaluates the risks of child abuse and has practical measures in place to mitigate those risks
- Ensures suitably skilled and experienced staff or volunteers to run the program
- Decides on the most suitable approach or tool for the program, and who will approve this activity
- Sets clear rules and boundaries. What will and won't be discussed, and how to establish clear expectations of a respectful and bullying-free environment
- Ensures staff or volunteers know what to do if a child or young person tells them concerning information.

Reporting back checklist

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Children and young people can be disempowered when organisations fail to let them know their views are valued and taken into consideration when decisions are made.

When reporting back to children and young people participating in its programs, WEP:

- lets children and young people know what has been heard
- explains why decisions were made and why WEP was unable to meet specific requests
- describes how WEP might respond in the future
- explains how their view led to change
- responds in various ways, such as written, phone call, emails, newsletters, annual reports, video and social media.