

# Children's Parliament **Schools on the move**

A report for the MRC/CSO Social and Public Health  
Sciences Unit on the physical and social barriers to  
children's engagement with physical activity  
December 2019



MRC/CSO Social and Public Health Sciences Unit



**Children's  
Parliament**  
*giving ideas a voice*

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## Introduction

SPACES (Studying Physical Activity in Children's Environments across Scotland) is the first nationally representative study involving device-measured children's physical activity and Global Positioning Systems (GPS) in the UK. The main aims were to measure population levels of physical activity and explore children's exposure to the built and natural environment as major determinants of health and health behaviours (e.g. access to and use of health-enhancing facilities and amenities such as green space). Researchers from the MRC/CSO Social and Public Health Sciences Unit, University of Glasgow (SPHSU) asked 2000 children to wear devices for 8 days to measure levels of physical activity and the environment's impact on health behaviours.

Given the importance and significance of the findings, the research team from SPHSU are working collaboratively to create a range of engagement and dissemination resources and activities to promote knowledge exchange.

As part of this wider project to share the findings of the SPACES study and to ensure that children's voices are included in the process, the SPHSU invited Children's Parliament to develop a series of workshops, called 'Children Create', to allow children to think about and translate the research results into language and forms that are understandable and accessible for children and teachers.

This will allow the SPACES study to have a wider impact through resources that encourage children to engage in positive health behaviours and outcomes related to their physical activity.

Children spend 7.5 hours a day sedentary.

## A rights-based approach

Children's Parliament's work focuses on children's human rights as outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Every space we create is a children's parliament. When children come into this space, we want them to bring with them their knowledge of what it is like to be a child, their ideas and their opinions, and to be willing to voice and explore them. Children's Parliament is not about advocating on children's behalf, we believe children can advocate effectively for themselves if the right environment is created and support is in place. Such approaches are rich in learning for adults if they listen carefully.

Children's Parliament's aims, activities and outcomes are underpinned by a children's rights-based approach. This is reflected both in what we do and how we do it:

- A children's rights-based approach seeks to rebalance power between adults and children – this can be as simple as sitting with children at the same level in a circle on the floor.
- All answers are valid, no matter how trivial or irrelevant they may appear. We emphasise opening up discussion rather than closing down ideas.
- Children have a right to be treated with respect and so we do not shout or raise our voices as we know it inhibits children's participation and wellbeing.
- We recognise that all behaviour is a form of communication and we therefore seek to understand and support children who struggle rather than punish them.
- All children are encouraged to participate at a level that they are comfortable with. We recognise this will not be the same for all children.
- We focus on building positive relationships based on respect and trust between children, between adults and children, and between adults. One example of this is beginning and ending each workshop with a 'check-in', to allow the children and adults to express how they are feeling before and after the workshop.

## About the Workshops

Children's Parliament facilitated a series of three half-day workshops in each of the two schools to help the children to explore and understand the research in relation to their own views and experiences before identifying key messages for children and ideas for how these could be shared with other children and teachers.

**What is 'physical activity'?** In the first workshop, the children were introduced to Children's Parliament and the 'Children Create' project. The children began by building a giant jigsaw featuring the 54 Articles of the UNCRC which was then the focus for a group discussion about 'physical activity' and its relationship with

children's human rights. We then explored children's daily experiences of physical activity, using a giant clock to record all the instances when children are 'active' in an average day. We ended with 'Agree / Disagree', an activity in which children listen to a series of statements related to physical activity and choose to stand at either end of the room (or in the middle), depending on whether they agree or disagree with what has been said. We then asked children to explain the reasons why they agreed or disagreed.

**What does this mean to children?** In the second workshop, we presented key findings from the SPACES research to the children and invited them to consider these findings in the context of their own lives. Using an 'Activ-o-meter', we asked the children to consider the intensity of different types of activity. We then invited the children to reflect on the key barriers for children with regards to physical activity in terms of the physical and social environment. Then, the children were asked for possible solutions and calls to action to address these barriers.

**How to share these messages?** In this workshop, the children highlighted key messages from their understanding of the research, creating posters with messages and images that are understandable and accessible for other children and teachers. The children also considered how to translate these messages digitally, looking at other digital media/content to see what works and what doesn't work for children, and producing a list of calls to action to inform the next phase of the project.

## About the children

Children Create involved 30 Members of Children's Parliament (MCPs)<sup>1</sup> between the ages of 9 and 11 years. 21 boys and 22 girls took part. We worked in two schools in the local authorities of City of Edinburgh and Scottish Borders. These areas were selected using SIMD data, enabling us to work with children from diverse backgrounds, experiences and abilities so that a range of views would be reflected in this report.

The quotes and artwork in this report come directly from the children.



<sup>1</sup>All children who participate in our projects and consultations become Members of Children's Parliament. Unlike other parliamentary bodies, Children's Parliament is not an elected body. Rather it is a participatory one, engaging with children across a range of settings in order to include as many children as possible.

## What is physical activity?

In a simple word association activity, children highlighted the following words as being the 'first' word they associate with physical activity.



Throughout the workshops, we explored a specific component of the physical activity construct- namely 'intensity'. Intensity forms a critical component of the UK Chief Medical Officer's physical activity guidelines and is often confused by children, young people, and adults alike. Two different types of physical activity intensity, and another independent but related construct, were explored as defined in the SPACES research:

1. Sedentary Activity
2. Light intensity Activity
3. Moderate to Vigorous intensity Activity (MVPA)

Considering these definitions, children recognised that physical activity can encompass many different types of activity and that not all activity will necessarily fall into the MVPA category.

Many children have a high awareness of the benefits of physical activity both in the immediate term - keeping children happy and healthy - and for children's health and wellbeing in the future. Children also recognise physical activity as an important way of developing social skills, such as cooperation and teamwork:

*"It will be helpful for the future as it helps you work in a team."*

However, children recognise that not all children have knowledge and understanding of the importance of physical activity and as a result, have limited opportunities to be active:

Children also highlight that whilst physical activity is essential for children's development, health and wellbeing, it is important to emphasise that too much physical activity can be detrimental for children and that children also have the right to relax, as outlined in Article 31 of the UNCRC.

*"Some children aren't getting out to play and not as much fresh air. It's not good for their health and happiness."*

*"It's good to have it [physical activity], but not too much."*

*I think Children's Parents should give there children a time limit on a tv of a iPad or a Phone and tell them to go outside. Teacher's Should do daily mile Mde often.*



## Key Findings

**68% of children meet the recommendations of 60 minutes per day (on average)**

*"I'm surprised of that because where I live, everyone is active."*

**11% of children meet the recommendations of 60 minutes physical activity every day**

*"I thought it was strange how only 11% of children meet recommended 60 minutes. It makes me feel like most children spend time on their phone."*

**Children are more active in spring and summer**

*"I honestly wasn't that surprised since cold weather isn't perfect for exercise. I often am discouraged from exercising in winter since my muscles get really stiff afterwards."*

*"This didn't surprise me because children like doing activities in the sun than snow because in the snow they will get cold."*

*"It didn't surprise me that children were spending so much time sitting down. I think the reason is that they're sitting down in school for nearly all of the lessons."*

**Children spend 7.5 hours sedentary on average**

*"I was a bit surprised but it sort of makes sense that children spend 7.5 hours a day sedentary."*

*"I was not that surprised that children spend 7.5 hours sitting down because lots of kids play video games."*

*"I felt that this was unfair for girls. I don't like that there are more boys' sports clubs that they can attend for free."*

**A greater number of boys meet the guidance per day than girls**

*"This might be because lots of girls feel pressured by boys because of their gender."*

*"When at first I saw this, I felt offended because I really love to get exercise and to run. I feel that this statement is unfair!"*



# Physical Barriers

## Rural / Urban Differences

There was a lack of consensus amongst children about whether living in a rural or urban context necessarily influenced the amount and type of physical activity children do.

Some children, from both urban and rural contexts, felt children living in cities were more likely to do more physical activity due to the amount of facilities, clubs and activities available. They also highlighted the fact that cities are better served by public transport as being a key reason for why children may be able to access more opportunities to be active than children in rural areas.

*"There's more to do in the city."*

*"In cities, there's more to explore. Like you can walk there and do different activities."*

Children, from both urban and rural contexts, were not surprised to hear that children from rural areas do 13 minutes more light activity each day (on average) than children living in urban areas. Some children living in Edinburgh discussed that although they can walk to school as well as nearby parks, sports centres and clubs, living in rural areas would grant children more freedom to walk around due to there being fewer roads.

Despite this, children from the Scottish Borders confirmed the challenges of attending certain clubs and activities, which were based in larger rural towns as their participation in most structured activities was dependent on public transport or parents/carers picking up and dropping them off.

*"You normally have to take a car to get somewhere in the countryside so you get more exercise [in the city]."*

At the same time, children in the Scottish Borders reflected on their natural surrounding and felt that living in rural areas offered them unique opportunities for being active – especially with regards to spending time outdoors.

*"There's things to explore in the city but we have more opportunities in the countryside."*

*Teachers should take their class to do more MVPA outside. Teachers should also support children in the city as well*

## Call to Action!

**Children want public transport to be more accessible for children in both rural and urban areas, particularly for children from low-income families and for those with limited access to indoor facilities, centres and clubs.**

*Rural children spend 13 more minutes per day doing 'light' activities.*

## Accessibility

Children in both schools discussed the key physical and social barriers for children with disabilities with regards to meeting the daily recommended physical activity guidelines. They discussed how many play areas, sports centres and schools are not suitably equipped with resources and equipment to make physical activity more accessible to children with disabilities. They also described the need for more adults to understand what children with disabilities need by making sure children with disabilities are having their views and experiences heard. Children recognised that children themselves might not realise there are ways to adapt or modify types of physical activity if they have a disability and so adults must support children to make physical activity fully inclusive.

*"Some people don't want to do physical activity because they might be disabled but actually they could go and do something in a wheelchair."*

## Call to Action!

Children want there to be more accessible activities and resources available for disabled children and support for disabled children who wish to participate in group activities or other types of physical activity.



## Safe Environments

In both schools, children discussed how their local environment impacts upon children's physical activity. Many children highlighted the lack of safe spaces to play near their home and school as reasons for staying indoors, with children based in Edinburgh also noting the dangers of traffic making their surroundings unsafe. Children highlighted a general lack of green spaces for children to play in both contexts, although children in the rural context did discuss that they had more access to natural spaces than urban children might have.

Across both schools, children identified "trashed" parks as being a reason many children do not engage in unstructured play and physical activity outdoors.<sup>2</sup>

Some children called for more "risky" adventure parks, noting that many of their local parks have a lack of age-appropriate equipment for older children. They felt this would attract older children to get outdoors, play and be active.

## Call to Action!

Children want there to be more street lighting, cleaner, safer parks and more green spaces available for children to play in. Children also want there to be more "risky" play areas for older children in both urban and rural contexts.

<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that this is a common issue children raise across Children's Parliament's projects and consultations; children frequently highlight that their right to play in safe, fun, inclusive play parks are being compromised by littered, vandalized and damaged parks; broken, unsuitable equipment for children; abandoned alcohol and drug-related debris and poor street-lighting.

## Weather / Seasons

Before even introducing the research findings, children recognised the impact weather and seasons have on children's motivations and ability to do physical activity. In Scotland, often unpredictable and at times, adverse, weather conditions can limit children's opportunities to do physical activity outdoors. The research findings, which concluded that children are more active during spring and summer months, resonated with the children involved:

"You get outside because the sun's shining. When it's raining, people don't bother."

"[In spring and summer] it's better weather and you can get outside more."

"People normally go on holiday [in spring and summer] when there might be a swimming pool."

Furthermore, the children discussed that because of limited daylight during autumn and winter months, it is often dark - and colder - by the time children are finishing school in the afternoon. Several children discussed their preference to stay indoors and play video games during the winter months. Other children highlighted that they found doing physical activity outside to be more physically challenging in autumn and winter due to the cold and at times, hazardous conditions.

"The weather can make it unpleasant and difficult."

"Children do less [in winter]...it's hard."

"I do less - I just play video games in winter."

Children in both schools emphasised the importance of having appropriate clothing for all weather, with one child stating: "There's no such thing as inappropriate weather, just inappropriate clothing!" A number of children recognised that having appropriate warm, outdoor winter clothing as well wet-weather clothing were costs some families may not be able to afford and that this would exclude children from playing outside at break-time or joining in with after-school activities even if other children were able to.

## Call to Action!

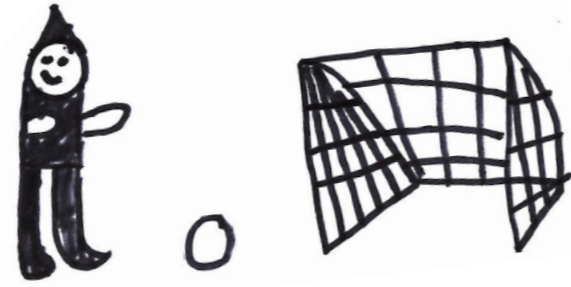
Children understand that although the weather cannot be controlled, there are things that could help children to keep physically active during the autumn and winter months. They suggest building more indoor facilities and encouraging more indoor sports and activities during school time. In order to make physical activity accessible to everyone, they want all children to have access to appropriate clothing for different weather conditions.





# Social Barriers

## Financial



One of the most common themes to emerge in the workshops was around the costs attached to physical activity and how, for many children, this is the most significant barrier to physical activity. Children in both schools frequently brought up the financial barriers many children face to being able to join clubs, participate in activities and have adequate clothing to be able to do physical activity. They recognised that whilst some forms of physical activity might be free – such as playing at home, walking to school or taking part in PE during class time – many extra-curricular activities and out-of-school activities come at a cost that many children can't afford.

*"Some children can't do anything because they don't have enough money."*

*"It's not always free. It's free because there are some things that you can do in your house."*

*"Most schools have clubs but not all are free. More schools should make free clubs, like running clubs."*

Some children also recognised that for some children, the cost of transport, equipment and appropriate clothing would be a barrier to participating in activities even if the activities are free.

*"Nothing is truly free. You still might have to pay for the bus fare."*

*"For some types of physical activity, you need to have equipment, but you might not have enough money."*

Children highlight child poverty as being a children's human rights issue recalling Article 24 of the UNCRC (all children have the right to best possible health), Article 27 (children have the right to a decent standard of living) and Article 26 (the right to government help if they are poor or in need). They recognised the responsibilities of duty bearers to ensure all children have the opportunity to be physically active, emphasising the indivisibility and interdependency of children's human rights:

*"Poor families have the right to do physical activity."*

*"Children have the right to government help. Sometimes you have to pay to do activities and not all children can afford it."*

## Call to Action!

Children feel strongly that all children should have the opportunity and necessary equipment and clothing to participate in physical activity, regardless of the socio-economic status. Children want schools to provide children from low-income backgrounds with free sports kit, free access to clubs and activities in and after school hours and to work with families to ensure children are getting sufficient amounts of physical activity each day.

## Relationships with Adults

The children frequently discussed their relationship with adults as being one of the main barriers to doing physical activity. Children discussed feeling held back from playing outside because of parent/carer's worry or concern over children's safety. Children in the urban context discussed this in greater depth, highlighting the risks of playing in spaces where there may be "kidnappers" or "strange adults and bullies in the area".

"Some parents don't let you as it might be harmful."

"Playing it depends on which kind of communities there are. There are some kidnappers so you can't go alone."

"I'm allowed to play in our shared garden which we play but whenever we want to walk on trees or walls, people worry about me and tell me not to do it."

They emphasised that playing without adult supervision was often not an option, (particularly for younger children) and that this had implications on how often and when they could play outdoors.

"It depends on how old you are."

"It depends on what the parents are doing."

They did recognise that these might not be the experience of all children across Scotland and that some children might be able to play outside on their own.

"It depends on which community."

The children also discussed how children with difficult or stressful home lives might encounter more barriers to doing physical activity than others – especially if parents do not have the time to accompany or transport children.

Many children agreed that more children would do physical activity if their parents were interested and enthusiastic about doing physical activity themselves and if they played and did activities together.

"Parents and carers should play with us!"

"The parents and carers should take more time to spend with their children."

"Parents and carers should be kind and encouraging!"

The children recognised that other adults, such as teachers and coaches, play an equally important role. They discussed how kindness, encouragement and support from teachers and coaches was important for ensuring children are getting enough physical activity.

"Demonstrating activities really helps me."

"You need encouraging coaches. I was scared, then my diving coaches helped me overcome my fear and when I did, it felt amazing!"

Children also discussed the importance of adults taking time to listen to and understand children's individual needs and circumstances that might impact upon their ability to participate in physical activities such as their individual health, cultural and religious backgrounds. For example, as our workshops were held during Ramadan, some of the children reflected on the challenges of doing physical activity whilst fasting.

*"If I'm not fasting, I can do more than now."*

*"If you're with somebody who doesn't give you the best support, they might not give you the best opportunity and you might be sad."*



## Call to Action!

Children recognise that adults play an important role in ensuring children are getting enough physical activity. They want adults at home, school and in the community (for example, coaches and activity leaders) to be encouraging and supportive towards children and to set an example for children by being physically active themselves and, where possible, being physically active with the children.

## Relationships with Peers & Friendship

Many children highlighted how relationships with friends and peers can impact upon children's experiences of physical activity. On one hand, most children felt children are more interested in doing physical activity if it is with their friends, either at school or outside of school.

*"I think you do want to do more activity if your friends are doing it. See if you see your friend doing it, you'd feel much more excited to do it and you'd feel braver."*

On the other hand, children frequently discussed how other children could be a barrier to participating in clubs and activities. They discussed if children are teased or, in some cases, bullied, they may be discouraged from attending a club in order to avoid certain children, or because of low self-esteem and feeling 'not good enough'.

*"More children will want to do physical activity if their friends are doing it."*

*"Some people might say to others...say someone is really good and someone is also great then someone would say 'I'm better than you' or 'you're not very good' and that might discourage you from doing it."*

*"Some children... say to some other children that they're not as good as them at some things."*

## Call to Action!

Children want teachers to support children to develop positive relationships with one another and to listen to and support children who are experiencing bullying and teasing from other children.

# Gender

Reflecting on the findings from the SPACES research, the children discussed how gender plays a role in children's experiences of physical activity.

The majority of children (both girls and boys) were initially surprised and frustrated to hear that, on average, boys are more physically active than girls. At first, some children struggled to accept this finding, stating that this was "sexist" and unrepresentative of the experiences of many girls. However, as the group discussed why this finding is a reality in Scotland, the children came to agree that there are prevailing gender inequalities and especially barriers for girls when it comes to physical activity.

The children discussed whether boys' higher levels of physical activity was because of physical differences between girls and boys. Whilst one child felt this might be the case, children generally felt that physical differences did not contribute to the finding that more boys are found to be more physically active than girls.

"Some boys are stronger, but it doesn't mean they do more physical activity."

"Boys have a bigger body so have more strength for physical activities."

"Some women can do lots, some women can do less."

"Some girls do a lot, some boys don't."

"Girls can do just as much as boys!"



Children felt that gender social norms, such as ingrained expectations and stereotypes of girls and boys, were key barriers to physical activity. Some children felt that beliefs that boys are "more active" meant more opportunities designed and were offered to boys, than to girls.

Some children noted that boys were often more likely to sign up to physical activity clubs whilst others highlighted that girls had a tendency to sign up for activities that were less active, such as choir.

"I don't know why but they [girls and boys] levels of physical activity] should be the same but boys have more opportunities."

"Most of the boys sign up to lots of activities. Some girls do but most [don't]."

"Girls sign up more for choir and stuff."

However, some girls felt it depended on where children grew up. For children from the rural school, they felt girls did have access to lots of activities and places to play and were as active as boys in their school.

Children in both schools discussed that certain types of sport and physical activity targeted boys or girls, such as football clubs and netball clubs. One child reflected on the fact that even though their netball club had eventually opened up to include boys, the opportunity to compete was limited to girls.

"Because of clubs at school such as guides, netball, cycling, girls can do more activity here [than in the city]."

"Letters for netball club only went out to the girls, but eventually it was extended to boys. But Boys can't be in the competitions."

Some girls discussed feeling “uncomfortable”, “self-conscious” and “discouraged” from doing physical activity if boys were taking part and suggested that this might be why less girls than boys are active across Scotland.

Children recognised that boys too experienced teasing or bullying for wanting to do stereotypically “female” sports or activities, and that they too might be discouraged from taking part:

Some children discussed how these stereotypes continue to play out in the ways men and women are valued in sport more generally. One child discussed how women in sport are paid less than men and another discussed how, as a member of the Hibs girls team, she isn’t allowed to play at the Hibs’ main pitch where the boys’ team practices.

*“Yeah, it’s a fact but I think maybe some girls feel under pressure by boys because boys say boys are better than girls. If some of them do it as a joke, some girls take it seriously.”*

*“Gender stereotypes – if a boy likes gymnastics or dance but the girls in the group are sexist and mean and say they can’t dance. Some people might be discouraged or sad or they may think it’s not for them.”*

## School

Children in both schools described school as being one of the main barriers for children meeting the recommended daily amount of physical activity. Children frequently attributed the low levels of physical activity found in the SPACES research to the fact that children spend the majority of the school day (between 9am and 3pm) sitting down, either on the floor or around tables in the classroom. They also highlighted the limited time children have to play or move about during breaktimes when at school.

*“A lot of time you only get two times to out to play. At home, you have more free time.”*

*“It didn’t surprise me that children were spending so much time sitting down. I think the reason is that they’re sitting down in school for nearly all of the lessons.”*

*Bring spare clothes for children who don't have winter clothes so they can join in winter activity outside. Teachers should also organise activities + games like hide+seek inside.*

## Call to Action!

**Children want girls and boys to be treated equally and for adults and children to work together to end gender stereotyping. Children recognise that there are barriers for girls when it comes to doing physical activity and that more awareness of how girls and boys feel is needed to change attitudes. Suggestions include making a film which challenges gender stereotypes and involves children talking about their experiences, supporting young girls to get into physical activity from a young age, developing free clubs for girls to help them build their confidence around physical activity.**

## Call to Action!

**Build in more movement and physical activity into the school day so children are not sedentary for long periods of time. Listen to children’s ideas on how to make school a more active experience for children.**

## Screen Time & Gaming

Across both schools, children highlighted children's use of digital technology such as iPads, video games and smart phones as key reasons why many children are not physically active. Some children attributed this to the fact that children have grown up with digital technology and the internet and therefore consider it to be an essential part of their lives. For many children, digital technology and video games are a significant part of social life.

Others discussed the fact that gaming culture has become so popular amongst children that for some children, "when they do go outside, they act like they're in games".

There was a widespread consensus amongst children that if children had greater knowledge of the importance of physical activity and were incentivised to do physical activity with their friends, they may be less likely to spend so much time online or using digital technology. They also argued that limits on screen-time might help both children and adults make the most of opportunities to be physically active at home, school and in the community.

*"Video games are a big reason why children don't get enough physical activity. Kids get caught up in their video games so don't go outside."*

*"It makes me feel like most children spend time on their phone."*

*"We've grown up in a society of the internet so we're just used to it. That's why we don't do enough. It makes us addicted to video games and technology."*

## Call to Action!

Children call for limits to be placed on the amount of screen-time children are exposed to in order to help them understand the importance of physical activity and spending time playing with friends.

## Spreading the Word: Using Digital Tools

This project sought to explore children's views and ideas for creating a digital tool to share key messages and calls to action with teachers and other adults, helping to ensure that all children are meeting the recommended daily amount of physical activity. In partnership with Agile CIC, University of Glasgow will host and promote the final materials through 'Actify', Scotland's first digital platform for practical physical activity resources. Here are children's ideas and top tips for creating resources and materials that will both educate and inspire:

- Create fun tutorial videos of children (real or characters) playing games, dancing and moving around in the classroom.
- Use animation with characters instead of children to convey key messages.
- Use storytelling as a way to communicate key messages.
- Use digital polls, quizzes and games to encourage children and teachers to reflect on key research findings.
- Create a digital 'agree / disagree' to help children and teachers reflect on key research findings.
- Use humour! Make the resources lighthearted, uplifting and encouraging.
- Develop a series of memes with important messages to display in classroom.
- Ensure materials are colourful and vibrant.

# About Children's Parliament

Children's Parliament is Scotland's Centre of Excellence for children's participation and engagement.

Children's Parliament works for a future where all children in Scotland are actively engaged in shaping our world so that everyone is healthy, happy and safe. We believe all children should live and grow with dignity and be valued for what they can offer the world.

We work creatively through projects, consultations and training programmes to improve communication between children and adults and to build relationships based on mutual respect and understanding. This enables us to explore our world together. We provide children with opportunities to share their experiences, thoughts and feelings so that they can influence life at home, in school and in the community through change at a local and national level. Our interest is in working with children, the adults who love and care for them, and the wider community in which they live in order to support our country to meet its obligations to our youngest citizens.

Children's Parliament uses a rights-based approach and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) as the foundation for all of our work.

In 2017, Children's Parliament turned 21 years old. To celebrate our birthday, we reviewed our work and published "What Kind of Scotland?". This reflective and celebratory report highlights the voices of Scotland's children:

<https://www.childrensparliament.org.uk/what-kind-of-scotland/>

