

Fieldnotes v5.0 / Position Statement

An Independent Field Report

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When Process Progresses Beyond Participation

A note on parental inclusion, vulnerable families, and the quiet movement of decisions

This note arises from a specific concern, but it is not only about one parent, one child, one worker, or one case.

It concerns a wider pattern that can occur when formal processes continue to move while a parent is still trying to understand what has happened, what is happening next, what they are entitled to know, and how their views are being included.

The concern is simple, but serious:

What happens when a parent is informed after movement has already taken place, rather than included before that movement occurs?

There is a significant difference between being told that a decision has progressed and being given a meaningful opportunity to participate before that progression. There is also a significant difference between a parent being “kept updated” and a parent having their views, preferences, concerns, and knowledge properly sought, recorded, and considered.

That distinction matters especially where decisions involve a child’s future, family relationships, contact, care planning, permanence, or adoption-related processes.

A parent may be told that they will receive minutes, decisions, or further information in due course. But if the parent’s relevant views were not sought before key movement occurred, then the later provision of information does not repair the earlier absence of participation.

This is not simply an administrative issue.

It is an ethical issue.

The wider concern

In my own situation, I am actively trying to remain engaged. I document correspondence. I ask questions in writing. I use a solicitor. I seek advocacy. I try to regulate my responses under pressure. I try to separate anger from what needs to be recorded clearly.

Even with those efforts, I have found myself receiving major information after the fact, while still trying to understand when my views were supposed to be sought and how they were recorded.

That raises a much wider concern.

If this can happen to someone who is actively documenting, asking, seeking support, and trying to participate, what happens to families who cannot do that?

What happens to parents who are frightened, ashamed, traumatised, overwhelmed, unsupported, verbally less confident, digitally excluded, distrustful of services, affected by poverty, struggling with literacy, or already worn down by previous experiences of authority?

What happens to people who cannot phrase their concern in the language the system recognises?

What happens to parents who do not know which question to ask until the decision has already moved?

What happens to families who interpret silence as exclusion, tone as threat, delay as rejection, or process as something already closed to them?

These are not abstract questions.

They go to the heart of whether participation is real or merely procedural.

Being informed is not the same as being included

A system can appear to communicate while still excluding.

A parent may receive an update. They may be sent minutes. They may be told what has been agreed. They may be invited to a later review. They may be told that a child is doing well.

All of that may be true.

But none of it automatically proves that the parent was included at the point where their views could still meaningfully shape the process.

There is a difference between:

“You will be told what was decided.”

and

“Your views will be sought before decisions progress.”

There is a difference between:

“You will receive the minutes.”

and

“Your concerns were properly recorded before the meeting moved forward.”

There is a difference between:

“You are being updated.”

and

“You are being treated as someone whose knowledge of the child and family relationship matters.”

That difference is where many families may disappear from the process while still appearing, on paper, to have been contacted.

Tone and participation

Participation is not only shaped by formal invitations.

It is also shaped by tone.

A parent may technically be present in a meeting, but if the tone used toward them is dismissive, sharp, intimidating, impatient, or morally loaded, their ability to participate may be seriously affected.

This matters because many parents involved in care processes are already carrying shame, fear, grief, trauma, confusion, or a history of being spoken to as a problem rather than a person.

A harsh tone can close down speech.

A dismissive tone can make a parent feel that questions are unwelcome.

A superior tone can turn participation into endurance.

A parent may then appear quiet, defensive, emotional, resistant, or difficult, when in reality the conditions for safe participation were not present.

If services are serious about participation, then tone is not a minor interpersonal detail.

Tone is part of process.

The quiet narrowing of parental involvement

There is also a risk that once direct contact is stopped, wider parental involvement begins to narrow quietly around it.

A parent may no longer be seeing the child, but that does not mean they have ceased to be a parent. It does not mean their views no longer matter. It does not mean their knowledge, concerns, hopes, preferences, or questions can be treated as secondary.

Stopped contact must not become stopped parenthood.

Where involvement is reduced, clarity becomes even more important. The parent needs to know what processes are continuing, what decisions are being considered, what their rights are, what information they are entitled to receive, and how their views will be gathered before further movement occurs.

Otherwise, a parent may be left in the position of trying to catch up with decisions that have already acquired momentum.

That is not meaningful participation.

It is retrospective notification.

Why this matters for children

This is not only about fairness to parents.

It is about children.

Children's lives are shaped by the quality of the processes around them. If adult systems move forward without properly seeking, recording, and weighing the views of those connected to the child, then the child's story may become narrower than it should be.

A child's future can be shaped not only by what is known, but by what was never properly asked.

This is especially serious where very young children are concerned. A baby or toddler cannot later review the file and say:

That was not what I meant.

That was not what I showed.

That was not the full story.

That relationship mattered.

That question should have been asked.

Where the child cannot speak for herself, adult process carries unusual power.

That power has to be handled with care.

The link to record language

The same concern appears in record language.

Records can make a process look more complete than it felt to the person inside it. A phrase such as "father was updated" may appear sufficient. A note that "minutes will be provided" may appear orderly. A record that "parent was invited" may appear to evidence participation.

But those phrases do not, by themselves, answer the deeper questions:

Was the parent's view sought before movement occurred?

Was the parent given enough information to respond meaningfully?

Was the parent able to participate safely?

Were concerns recorded before conclusions hardened?

Was the parent's knowledge of the child treated as relevant?

Was the process genuinely open, or already moving toward a settled direction?

Without those questions, records can become administratively correct while ethically thin.

The central concern

The central concern is not that every parent will agree with every decision.

They will not.

The concern is not that difficult decisions should never be made.

Sometimes they will be.

The concern is that serious decisions must not progress in ways that leave parents discovering key movement after the fact, especially where earlier assurances, expectations, or ordinary fairness suggest that their views should have been sought first.

Where a parent is later told that a plan has progressed, or that adopters have been identified, or that minutes and decisions will follow, the key question becomes:

At what point was the parent meaningfully included before the process reached that stage?

If that question cannot be answered clearly, then there is a problem.

A standard worth holding

A fairer process would make several principles explicit:

Parents should be told clearly what stage the process is at.

Their views, preferences, and concerns should be sought before key movement occurs, not simply after.

Where promises or assurances are given, they should be recorded.

Tone should be treated as part of participation, not as an irrelevant interpersonal matter.

Advocacy should be offered early enough to matter.

Minutes should not be used as a substitute for prior inclusion.

Updates should distinguish between information, consultation, and decision.

Stopped direct contact should not be treated as the end of parental relevance.

Records should make clear not only that a parent was contacted, but whether their views were sought, what was asked, what was recorded, and how those views were considered.

These are not unreasonable demands.

They are basic conditions for trust.

Closing position

This note is not written from a wish to attack individual workers.

It is written because the pattern matters.

If a system is serious about children, families, rights, participation, and repair, then it has to become serious about the difference between informing people and including them.

It has to understand that tone affects participation.

It has to recognise that process can exclude people quietly while still appearing functional from the outside.

It has to ask what happens not only to the parent who can challenge, document, seek advocacy, and keep asking, but to the parent who cannot.

Because if families are only truly included when they already have the confidence, language, support, and resilience to insist on being included, then the system is not yet protecting the vulnerable.

It is relying on them to survive the process well enough to be heard by it.

That is not good enough.

The question is not only whether decisions are recorded.

The question is whether the people affected by them were meaningfully present before the record began to close around them.