

Listening to Children to Strengthen Public Responses to Homelessness



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UNICEF France shares an innovative approach to involving children experiencing homelessness in public decision-making, based on their lived experience and right to be heard.

Through workshops and direct exchanges with parliamentarians and public authorities, children developed and presented their own recommendations, while gaining confidence and agency.

The experience also highlights the conditions needed for meaningful participation, including safe spaces, adequate support, safeguarding and a genuine commitment to giving children's views influence.

Child and family homelessness has become a structural feature of housing exclusion. In France, people with families account for 63% of people who, after calling the 115 helpline, are unable to access accommodation¹, while children represent one-third of those living in homeless shelters and emergency accommodation². Yet, despite their growing numbers, children are largely overlooked in policies aimed at addressing homelessness.

In light of this, UNICEF France advocates for greater consideration of children's needs and rights in housing and shelter policies and actively involves the children concerned. This practice not only fulfils the obligation to respect children's rights to be heard and to have their views taken into account but also contributes to improving public policies. Indeed, children possess valuable "user expertise", grounded in their lived experiences and everyday realities. They understand homelessness from the inside, and their perspectives are essential to designing policies and programmes that truly meet their needs.

Listening to homeless children: an innovative project

Thus, in autumn 2025, UNICEF France conducted focus groups with 15 children aged 11 to 16 living in emergency accommodation and a social hotel in the Paris suburbs and supported by the Samusocial de Paris. During these sessions, the children developed their own recommendations to improve their living conditions and those of their families. These recommendations were then presented by the children themselves to around ten Members of Parliament at the French National Assembly in October 2025. A few months later, UNICEF France and Samusocial de Paris were invited by the Interministerial Delegation for Accommodation and Access to Housing (DIHAL) to support the children in presenting their recommendations at a conference focused on improving children's living conditions and care in emergency accommodation settings. After an additional preparatory workshop, three teenage girls from the original group presented their recommendations to experts.

An impactful and empowering approach

One of the most striking outcomes of the project was the shift in perspective among the parliamentarians and DIHAL staff

who took part. By engaging directly with children, decision-makers discovered first-hand the value of listening to young voices. Several parliamentarians said they were impressed by the depth and quality of the children's insights, which shed light on realities and challenges they had previously been unaware of. The experience not only broadened their understanding of the issues at stake but also convinced them that children's perspectives should play a greater role in public decision-making.

The project also proved to be a powerful confidence-building experience for the children involved. Over the course of the workshops, participants who had initially been hesitant to speak began to express their views with growing ease and conviction. Their confidence and ability to speak spontaneously increased throughout the workshops, culminating in their presentations to parliamentarians and their contribution to the DIHAL workshop. Their journey illustrated not only the value of creating spaces for children to be heard, but also the remarkable capacity of young people to find their voice when given the opportunity.

Finally, another key outcome is that UNICEF France can build on this experience to promote children's participation in political decision-making. Several government bodies have been inspired by the project and are now interested in involving children in their own discussions and policy reflections, particularly on issues related to the digital environment.

Challenges in involving children and young people in decision-making

However, for children and young people's participation to be both ethical and effective, it must adhere to key principles. Indeed, the risk of tokenism is significant, as children's participation in decision-making can easily become a mere "tick-box" exercise, meaning a superficial or symbolic attempt to involve children without genuinely considering or acting upon their views.

Thus, UNICEF France relies on the well-established Lundy Model of child participation, which is built around four key elements: providing children and young people with a safe and inclusive **space** in which to express their views; providing them with the information and support necessary to facilitate the expression of their **voice**; ensuring that their views are communicated to an **audience** with the power to make decisions; and ensuring that children's views are given due consideration and have an **influence** on decision-making.

Furthermore, UNICEF France also followed the nine basic requirements for the implementation of the right of the child to be heard, as set out by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in its General Comment No. 12 (2009), stating that "all processes in which a child or children are

heard and participate, must be: transparent and informative; voluntary; respectful; relevant; child-friendly; inclusive; supported by training; safe and sensitive to risk; and, finally, accountable³.



Laura Lundy's Child Participation Model (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, *National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making 2015 – 2020*, 2015)

Despite this theoretical framework, UNICEF France and Samusocial de Paris still faced challenges in involving seldom-heard children and young people in decision-making processes. A key difficulty lay in balancing the need to adapt workshop pacing to children's rhythms with tight deadlines for presenting recommendations to members of Parliament. Other logistical issues arose, such as ensuring transport for the children, as the emergency accommodation centre was over an hour away from the social hotel, requiring close coordination to ensure appropriate support for children during transport.

Ensuring meaningful participation also proved challenging. At times, children's accounts of their daily lives were corrected during workshops, some adults used language that was not child-friendly or addressed accompanying adults rather than the children themselves. Questions regarding voluntary participation also emerged, as some children later reported being strongly encouraged by their parents, occasionally finding themselves conveying their parents' demands.

However, despite the length and intensity of the workshops, children remained engaged throughout the process. This was largely due to the transparency of the adults leading the project and the creation of a safe environment for participation. Children were informed about the purpose of their involvement, reminded of their freedom to participate or withdraw, and made aware of their rights. Participatory, childfriendly tools—such as games and photobased discussions—were used to promote learning and meaningful engagement.

An important step was the close monitoring of the initial workshops. This made it possible to identify shortcomings, such as overly long sessions, inappropriate adult behaviour, or forced participation and to adjust practices accordingly. Lessons learned informed the subsequent workshop for the DIHAL conference, which was more carefully planned, shorter, and supported by clearly defined adult roles.

Ensuring meaningful influence: a critical aspect of child participation

Crucially, the project addressed a key and often overlooked dimension of child participation: the real influence of children's voices. During the presentation at the National Assembly, parliamentarians listened attentively to the children's recommendations, as did experts at the conference.

A feedback session with the children and their families reinforced the sense that their opinions mattered. Children reported feeling genuinely heard by decisionmakers, particularly following a senator's visit to the emergency accommodation centre after their presentation.

Following this project, DIHAL committed to organising workshops on topics related to the children's recommendations and publishing national guidelines on accommodation conditions for children. Although the children's recommendations have not yet led to direct legislative outcomes, UNICEF France continues to advocate for them with public decisionmakers, ensures follow-up and promotes the institutionalisation of such participatory mechanisms.

In conclusion, this experience demonstrated the significant value of involving children in political decision-making. Not only can children's participation help improve the relevance and effectiveness of public policies, but it can also serve as a powerful empowerment tool for young people themselves. This is particularly true for children experiencing poverty, as they are subject to "double silencing": due to their status as children and their social exclusion⁴. Thus, they are often underrepresented in formal participatory bodies such as local youth councils in France⁵. Fostering a culture that encourages children to speak out, and establishing mechanisms to gather and value their voices, is also an essential tool for protection.

When children have safe spaces to speak out, they can report, challenge, or denounce violations of their rights.

At the same time, meaningful child participation cannot be improvised. To be ethical, safe and truly effective, it must be guided by clear principles and supported by adequate resources. Engaging children in decision-making requires time, skilled professionals, appropriate training and a child-friendly environment, including robust safeguarding procedures and participation tools tailored to children's age and abilities.

Child participation should therefore never be treated as a box-ticking exercise. Yet, when implemented thoughtfully and with genuine commitment, it becomes a powerful democratic tool, enabling public institutions to make better-informed decisions while strengthening children's confidence, agency and sense of citizenship.

ENDNOTES - LISTENING TO CHILDREN TO STRENGTHEN PUBLIC RESPONSES TO HOMELESSNESS

1 UNICEF France, FAS, [Baromètre “Enfants à la rue” 2026](#)

2 Direction de la recherche, des études, de l'évaluation et des statistiques, [Les centres d'hébergement et les logements adaptés accueillent 374 000 personnes en 2021](#)

3 UN Committee on the rights of the child, [General Comment n°12, The right of the child to be heard](#) (2009)

4 Tess Ridge, “Childhood poverty: a barrier to social participation and inclusion” in [Children, Young People and Social Inclusion. Participation for What?](#), Bristol University Press, pp. 23-38, 2006.

5 UNICEF France, [Vers une démocratie inclusive : intégrer la voix des enfants dans les décisions politiques](#), 2024.