

# Children's voice crucial for a better society

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CHILDREN'S participation in decisions that affect them is essential for improved service delivery, the latest South African Child Gauge 2011 has revealed.

Released in Cape Town yesterday, the annual review by the University of Cape Town's Children's Institute put children's political rights under the spotlight and explores ways in which listening to children can help strengthen democracy and children's development.

The Gauge makes the point that children's right to participation is protected by law and adults have a responsibility to include children in decisions that affect them.

For example, the Children's Act allows children aged 12 and older to agree to their own medical treatment – as long as the doctor is satisfied that the child is able to understand the decision he or she is taking.

Doctors and nurses must explain things in a way that even very young children can understand. They must encourage children to ask questions, listen to what children have to say, and take children's views seriously before making decisions. This helps children feel more in control of their lives, and cope better with pain and illness.

"The benefits of this approach should outweigh the accompanying challenges for stressed service providers," said Minette Coetzee, professor of child nursing at the University of Cape Town.

She said research showed that children's participation in health-care settings could ease staff workloads, help children cope better with pain and illness, reduce hospital errors and improve health outcomes.

The Gauge also pointed out that children had the right to participate in the running of schools and learning centres.

The first way was through the Representative Council of Learners that had representa-

tives from grades 8 to 12.

Children also formed part of the school governing body made up of parents, two teachers and two pupils.

Analysis of the latest general household survey showed that there were 18.6 million children in South Africa – primarily concentrated in the Eastern Cape, Limpopo and KwaZulu-Natal.

National data often obscured children's situation, which meant service delivery planners could miss the mark. For example 71 percent of households had access to adequate sanitation in 2009, but this applied to only 63 percent of children.

The gauge shares an example of how listening to children can contribute to positive change.

## Concern

A 15-year-old from the Eastern Cape heard about the drafting of the Children's Bill at a conference, and expressed concern that young girls in her community were often abducted for forced marriages.

She was so shocked to learn that people who forced children into marriage could be fined a mere R200, that it spurred her to take action.

Working with the Children's Institute, she wrote a submission on the Children's Bill that called for a heavier fine or prison sentence. Her recommendation was adopted by Parliament, and today people can be imprisoned for up to 10 years for forcing a child into marriage or engagement.

Yet despite this, reports on child abductions and forced marriages continue, and not one case has been prosecuted under the new law, according to the Children's Institute's Lucy Jamieson: "Children's right to protection will only become a reality when professionals such as teachers, doctors... listen to children and take what they have to say seriously." – Health-e News