

# Co-creating health interventions for and with children and young people

November 2024



# Sharing research

At the World Playground Research Institute, we are dedicated to sharing valuable insights from research studies and reviews through concise and accessible publications called Briefs.

Briefs provide summaries of key research findings and their implications, serving as valuable resources for policy and decision-makers.

All briefs focus on topics related to the development and design of playground as well as the impact of playgrounds on children's physical activity, mental and social health and motor skills.

To access our briefs, simply visit our website at [www.playgroundresearch.org](http://www.playgroundresearch.org).





## Introduction

In recent years, health research has increasingly focused on the **importance of involving those directly affected by health issues**, including children and young people.

Their insights, knowledge, and experiences can play a crucial role in shaping effective health interventions. However, many researchers still face challenges in identifying the most effective ways to involve these young people in the process.

In this brief, we showcase an overview of a scoping review by Larsson and colleagues (2018), providing important insights into studies with varying levels of children and young people's participation in health research.

Furthermore, we offer recommendations on methodological choices that support meaningful involvement with youth, based on an integrative review by Shamorav and Cummings (2017).

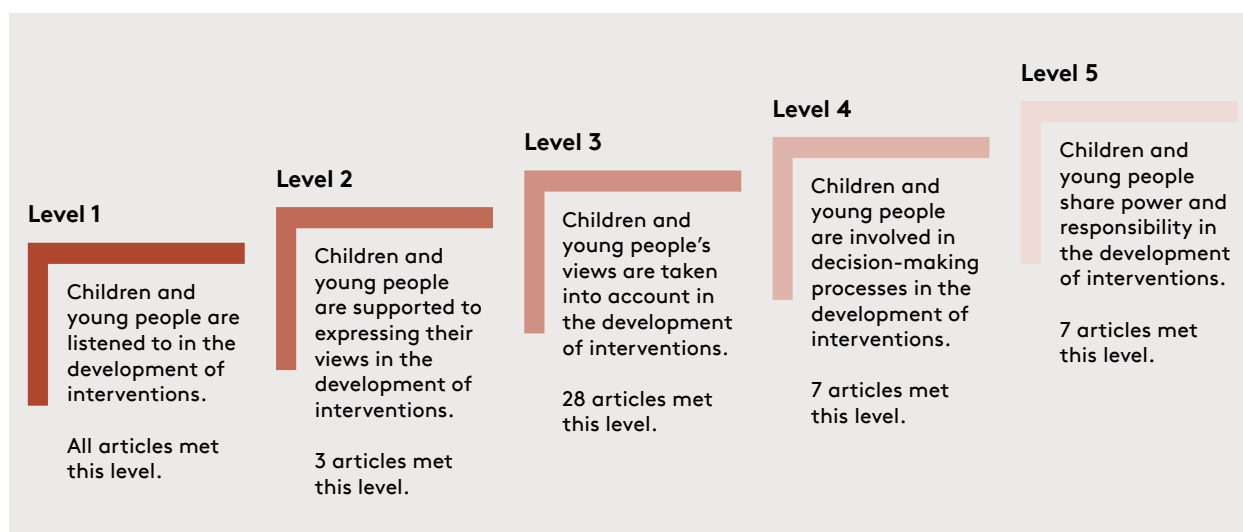
In the end, we highlight the EU YoPA project (2023–2027) as a case study to show how a participatory approach, such as participatory action research, can co-create social and physical environmental interventions with youth.

This brief is particularly valuable to researchers, health and public care specialists, social workers, and other professionals interested in exploring strategies for engaging children and young people in the development of health and well-being interventions.

## Levels of participation

Larsson and colleagues (2018) conducted a review of 41 studies examining the varying levels of youth participation in health interventions.

The authors classified the articles according to Shier's (2001) **Pathways to Participation Model**, assigning them levels ranging from 1 to 5:



**Figure 1:** The figure presents the results of the 41 included studies in Larsson and colleagues' (2018) scoping review, listed in Shier's Pathways to Participation Model.

Most studies involved children and young people primarily as informants (level 3), whereas studies at levels 4 and 5 exhibited a more collaborative approach with less emphasis on expert-driven control.

What set level 5 studies apart was the high level of youth participation, where children and young people were not only informants but co-researchers, often described as **designers** or **partners** who worked collaboratively with researchers throughout the development process.

## Recommendations for involving children and young children in health and well-being research

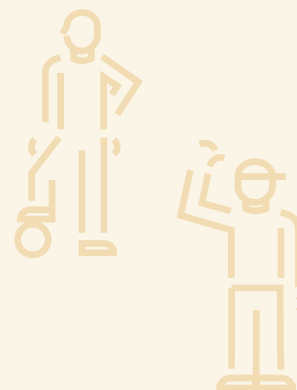
Successfully including children and young people as active participants in research requires making deliberate and appropriate methodological choices.

In a review, Shamrova and Cummings (2017) selected 45 studies on **Participatory Action Research (PAR)** outcomes for children, organizations, and communities for analysis.

The authors identified **four methodological choices** that support meaningful involvement, offering valuable insights for researchers and practitioners seeking to involve their organizations in participatory action research with children and youth.



## Four methodological choices that support meaningful involvement



### 1 Training

Building **trust** and **confidence** requires pre-project training, especially for marginalized children and youth who may feel uncertain about their abilities.

This training fosters a strong connection between participants and researchers, and including younger researchers in the process can furthermore enhance trust and training outcomes.

### 2 Participant-friendly tools

Using **age-appropriate data collection tools** helps maintain participants' interest and focus across different age groups.

Especially children find activities like body mapping, social service mapping, visioning trees, and 'Family Album Techniques' easy and fun ways to share information with adults.

### 3 Involvement in data analysis

**Engaging** children and young people in data analysis through group exercises, games, or workshops provides a space for them to voice their opinion about the findings and collaborate on the recommendations.

### 4 Meaningful dissemination

It is crucial for children and youth to **present their findings to decision-makers** who can address their concerns; otherwise, they may feel their efforts are undervalued.



## CASE:

# How the EU YoPA project uses a co-creation approach to involve youth in socially and physically activating environmental interventions



**The Youth-centred Participatory Action project (YoPA)** aims to design, implement, and evaluate evidence-based co-created interventions to improve the lifestyle of adolescents (12–18) living in vulnerable urban life situations across Denmark, the Netherlands, Nigeria, and South Africa.

YoPA focuses on enhancing both physical and social environments, acknowledging how friends, peers, and social networks impact physical activity and well-being.

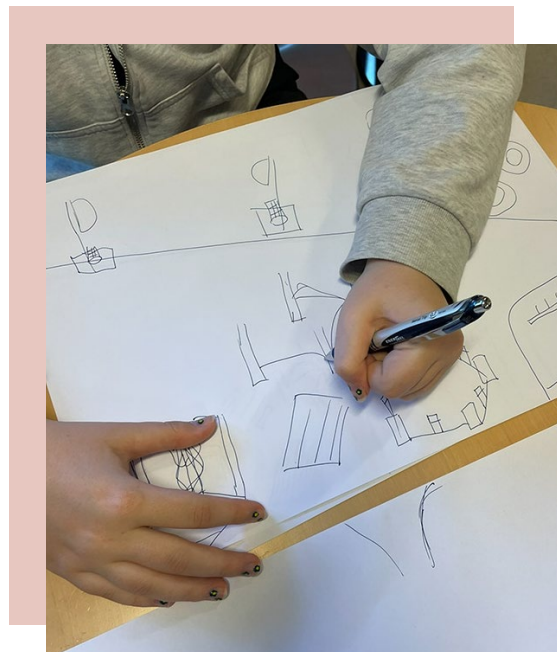
## The YoPA approach

The YoPA project involves youth as co-researchers throughout the co-creation process. In the first phase, they lead two key activities: mapping the local community and conducting a needs assessment to identify challenges and opportunities.

Their insights from this phase guide the project as they co-design, implement, and evaluate interventions, sharing in decision-making to shape relevant, impactful outcomes.

YoPA employs a participatory, mixed-methods approach to address key evaluation questions - such as assessing the potential of interventions to drive system-wide change.

This approach combines participatory action research with a rigorous evaluation framework, integrating scientific evidence with local knowledge to generate insights that are both evidence-based and contextually relevant.



**Images:** Young participants sketching during a creative session in the YoPA project. The session focused on designing intervention ideas for a local outdoor space.



This collaborative, co-creation model emphasizes empowering youth by enhancing their personal and collective agency, strengthening autonomy, and promoting better health outcomes.

Building on Shier's Pathways to Participation Model, the youth's participation is positioned at level 5, where they **share power and responsibility** in the development of socially and physically activating environmental interventions.

## Developing practical protocols for youth-centered co-creation

Currently, there are no practical protocols for co-creation that help tailor evidence-based interventions to specific contexts and assess them with adolescents and stakeholders.

YoPA is, therefore, in the process of creating a toolbox of materials and training on youth-cen-

tered co-creation, along with formal guidelines and policy recommendations for researchers, public health professionals, urban planners, policymakers, and community organizations. The toolbox and guidelines are expected to be published in 2027 on the YoPA website ([yopa-project.eu](http://yopa-project.eu)).



**Image:** A design created by one of the young participants, showcasing their intervention idea for a local outdoor space.

tered co-creation, along with formal guidelines and policy recommendations for researchers, public health professionals, urban planners, policymakers, and community organizations. The toolbox and guidelines are expected to be published in 2027 on the YoPA website ([yopa-project.eu](http://yopa-project.eu)).

## This brief is based on

- Larsson, I., Staland-Nyman, C., Svedberg, P. et al. (2018). Children and young people's participation in developing interventions in health and well-being: a scoping review. *BMC Health Serv Res* 18, 507. [10.1186/s12913-018-3219-2](https://doi.org/10.1186/s12913-018-3219-2)
- Shamrova, D. & Cummings, C. (2017). Participatory action research (PAR) with children and youth: An integrative review of methodology and PAR outcomes for participants, organizations, and communities. *Children and Youth Services Review*. 81. [10.1016/j.chidyouth.2017.08.022](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chidyouth.2017.08.022)
- Chinapaw, M. J. M., Klaufus, L. H., Oyeyemi, A. L., Draper, C., Palmeira, A. L., Silva, M. N., Van Belle, S., Pawlowski, C. S., Schipperijn, J., & Altenburg, T. M. (2024). Youth-centred participatory action approach towards co-created implementation of socially and physically activating environmental interventions in Africa and Europe: the YoPA project study protocol. *BMJ open*, 14(2), e084657. [10.1136/bmjopen-2024-084657](https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2024-084657)
- Shier, H. (2001). Pathways to Participation: Openings, Opportunities and Obligations. *Child. Soc.* 15, 107–117. [10.1002/chi.617](https://doi.org/10.1002/chi.617)



# Contributors

## Internal collaborator

---

*If you have any questions regarding this specific brief, please contact:*



**Line Madsen**

*World Playground Research Institute*

*lmat@health.sdu.dk*

## Editor

---



**Sasha Dilling**

*World Playground Research Institute*

*sdilling@health.sdu.dk*