

Children's Rights in Early Childhood Music Therapy: From Global Policy to Everyday Practice

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Across international human-rights and early childhood frameworks, policy discourse has shifted years ago towards young children being recognized as individuals with present-day rights, rather than as passive recipients of care or participants whose voices are deferred until later developmental stages. These children's rights emphasize that infants and young children are entitled to express perspectives, influence matters that affect them, and have their expressions considered in ways appropriate to their age, communication, and developmental context.

For early childhood music therapy, these policy developments provide a clear context for practice. Music therapy engages children through sound, movement, play, and embodied interaction—forms of expression explicitly protected within international children's rights instruments. As such, early childhood music therapy provides a meaningful setting for supporting participation in developmentally responsive ways, provided that global policy principles are intentionally aligned with everyday clinical practice.

This article offers a policy-driven synthesis of internationally respected children's rights frameworks—including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), interpretive guidance from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, and implementation frameworks from UNICEF and the World Health Organization—and examines their implications for music therapy with young children.

Global Policy Foundations: Children as Rights-Holders

International children's rights policy is clear on one point: young children have the right to participate, and adults, institutions, and systems are responsible for creating conditions that support participation through developmentally appropriate forms of expression and decision-making. These principles are not aspirational; they are grounded in binding legal instruments and authoritative interpretive guidance.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, UN, 1989) is the most widely ratified human-rights treaty in history and serves as the foundational legal framework for children's participation rights worldwide. Several articles are particularly relevant to early childhood and music therapy practice.

The Convention establishes children's entitlement to express perspectives on matters that affect them and places an obligation on adults to take those perspectives seriously, with attention to children's age, communication, and developmental context. The Convention also recognizes that children's expression is not limited to spoken language, encompassing a wide range of communicative forms chosen by the child, including play, sound, movement, and other non-verbal modalities that are especially salient in early childhood. Within this framework, children's autonomy is understood as developing progressively, with adults expected to provide guidance that supports increasing agency through scaffolded choice rather than imposing control (United Nations, 1989). At the same time, the Convention establishes that decisions affecting children must prioritize their well-being, while subsequent interpretation clarifies that such determinations must incorporate children's expressed experiences

rather than override them (United Nations, 1989; UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2013).

Authoritative Interpretation for Early Childhood

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has provided specific guidance on how participation rights apply in early childhood. Interpretation emphasizes that rights apply fully during infancy and early childhood, underscoring that these years are not preparatory stages for participation but periods in which children's rights are already operative. Participation must therefore be age-appropriate, culturally responsive, and embedded within everyday interactions across early childhood systems, including health, education, and early intervention services (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2006).

Further guidance highlights that participation extends beyond speech and includes non-verbal, embodied, and relational forms of expression. Adults carry responsibility for recognizing these expressions and for creating environments in which young children can communicate views meaningfully and safely (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009). In combination, these interpretations shift attention away from children's communicative abilities and toward adult responsibility, professional judgment, and system design.

UNICEF and WHO: From Rights to Implementation

UNICEF (2023) operationalizes participation as a quality and ethics standard, emphasizing that meaningful participation must be voluntary, respectful, inclusive, safe, and supported by appropriately trained adults. Within this framing, participation is not treated as a discretionary practice choice, but as a core component of rights-based service delivery.

The WHO–UNICEF Nurturing Care Framework (WHO & UNICEF, 2018) situates participation within early childhood development systems by identifying responsive caregiving as a central mechanism through which children’s agency, preferences, and expressions are recognized and acted upon. For young children, participation is most often enacted through adults noticing, interpreting, and responding to children’s cues and preferences in everyday interactions.

Policy-Driven Quality Criteria for Participation

Across global frameworks, participation is described not as a discrete activity but as a set of conditions that must be present for children’s rights to be realized meaningfully and ethically (UNICEF Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia, 2021). UNICEF-aligned guidance identifies quality criteria that can be used as a policy lens for evaluating participation across early childhood settings, including music therapy. Figure 1 summarizes these policy-driven participation criteria in a concise checklist format applicable to early childhood services. The following section translates these policy principles into concrete considerations for early childhood music therapy practice, with particular attention to expression, participation, evolving capacities, and ethical responsibility.

Figure 1. Policy-driven quality criteria for young children’s participation.



Note. Adapted from UNICEF child and adolescent participation guidance (UNICEF Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia, 2021).

Translating Policy into Music Therapy Practice

Global children's rights policy establishes participation as a core entitlement of young children. Early childhood music therapy provides a natural context for enacting the rights through sound, movement, play, and relationship—modes of expression explicitly recognized in international policy (United Nations, 1989; UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009). When children's expressions guide clinical decisions, music therapy becomes not only developmentally appropriate, but explicitly rights-based.

Young Children as Active Participants, Not Passive Recipients

International policy clearly positions children as contributors to decisions and processes that affect them, regardless of age or verbal ability (United Nations, 1989; UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2006). In early childhood music therapy, this requires a shift away from viewing children primarily as recipients of intervention toward recognizing them as active participants in the therapeutic process.

In practice, this means treating children's musical and embodied responses—vocalizations, movement, gaze, rhythm, repetition, withdrawal, or silence—as intentional expressions rather than behaviors to be managed. Musical engagement becomes a dialogic process in which children initiate, respond, and influence the direction of the session.

This orientation aligns with Article 12 of the UNCRC, which emphasizes that children's views must be given due weight, and with General Comment No. 12's explicit recognition of non-verbal expression as participation (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009).

Participation Through Choice, Agency, and Response

Policy guidance consistently emphasizes that participation must be meaningful, voluntary, and developmentally appropriate (UNICEF, 2023). For children ages 0–5, participation is most often expressed through small, frequent, and contextually embedded choices, rather than through formal decision-making processes.

In music therapy practice, autonomy is supported through micro-decisions: choosing instruments, deciding when to begin or end an activity, selecting tempo or volume, determining proximity, or choosing how to engage (e.g., listening, moving, watching, playing). These choices reflect the principle of evolving capacities articulated in Article 5 of the UNCRC, which recognizes that autonomy develops progressively and must be scaffolded by adults (United Nations, 1989).

Equally important is the recognition of assent and dissent. Participation includes the right to refuse, pause, or disengage. In early childhood music therapy, dissent may be communicated through turning away, changes in affect, withdrawal, or physical cues. Respecting these signals aligns with children's participation rights and supports ethical, responsive practice (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009).

Music as a Primary Language of Participation

Article 13 of the UNCRC explicitly affirms children's right to express themselves “through any media of the child's choice,” a provision that directly supports music, sound, movement, and play as legitimate communicative forms (United Nations, 1989). For young children, music is not a supplementary tool but a primary language through which meaning, preference, emotion, and identity are expressed.



In early childhood music therapy, participation is enacted through improvisation, repetition, rhythmic exchange, and embodied interaction. These musical processes allow children to lead, respond, and co-create within the therapeutic relationship. Music supports shared attention, turn-taking, emotional regulation, and relational connection—core elements of early participation identified across policy frameworks (WHO & UNICEF, 2018).

Recognizing music as a rights-consistent medium reframes therapeutic goals: rather than using music solely to elicit targeted behaviors or skills, music therapy becomes a space where children's expressions are received as valid contributions to the therapeutic dialogue.

Participation is Relational and Supported

Policy frameworks emphasize that participation in early childhood is inherently relational. Young children rarely participate independently; instead, their expressions are supported through responsive interactions with adults (UNICEF, 2023; WHO & UNICEF, 2018).

In music therapy practice, this places responsibility on therapists to notice, interpret, and respond to children's cues without replacing or overriding their expressed experience. Caregivers often play a crucial role in this process, acting as partners who support interpretation while remaining attentive to the child's perspective.

This relational model aligns with the Nurturing Care Framework's emphasis on responsive caregiving as a mechanism for participation in early childhood (UNICEF, 2023; WHO & UNICEF, 2018). Music therapy sessions

that prioritize attunement, co-regulation, and shared musical engagement enact participation through relationship rather than instruction.

Inclusion Without Lowering Participation Rights

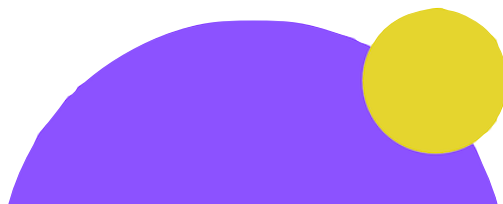
International policy affirms that participation rights apply equally to all children, including those with disabilities, developmental differences, or limited access to conventional communication modes (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2006). Inclusion is achieved not by lowering expectations for participation, but by adapting environments, methods, and supports.

In early childhood music therapy, inclusive participation may involve the use of accessible instruments, AAC supports, sensory-responsive environments, or flexible pacing. Offering multiple ways to engage—listening, moving, touching, vocalizing—ensures that participation remains possible across diverse developmental profiles and cultural contexts. This approach is strongly supported by recent evidence demonstrating that arts-based practices—including music—enhance participation, belonging, and agency for children with disabilities when designed inclusively (UNICEF Innocenti, 2025). Embedding inclusive design principles supports participation as a universal right rather than a developmental achievement.

Integrating Participation into Best-Interest Decision-Making

Ethical music therapy integrates participation into best-interest decision-making rather than treating it as separate.

Article 3 of the UNCRC requires that children's best interests be a primary consideration, while General Comment No. 14 clarifies that best-interest assessments must include the child's expressed views (UN Committee on



the Rights of the Child, 2013). In early childhood music therapy, this requires integrating participation into ethical decision-making rather than treating it as separate from therapeutic goals.

Practically, this means attending to children's musical engagement, affect, and relational responses as indicators of well-being. When children's expressions suggest misalignment with planned goals or activities, therapists are ethically obligated to adapt their approach. Documenting children's choices, preferences, and responses supports accountability and aligns clinical reasoning with rights-based practice.

Figure 2. A policy-to-practice framework, illustrating how UNCRC principles align with everyday clinical behaviors.

Figure 3. A child-facing translation of participation rights, emphasizing expression, choice, safety, and belonging in music therapy.



Conclusion

Grounding early childhood music therapy in global child-rights policy is not an abstract or legalistic exercise—it is a call to listen differently, design differently, and relate differently. When children’s rights guide practice, music therapy becomes a space where young children are not only supported, but genuinely heard, respected, and included as partners in their own therapeutic journeys.

Within this rights-based framework, participation is not an outcome to be achieved once developmental milestones are reached, but an ongoing, relational process embedded in everyday musical interaction. Children’s evolving capacities are supported through meaningful choice, responsiveness, and respect for assent and dissent, while inclusion is realized through thoughtful adaptation rather than lowered expectations. Respecting participation rights coexists with adult responsibility to foster learning, persistence, and skill development. It further heightens professional accountability for how expectations, support, and therapeutic challenge are introduced, sustained, and responsively adapted when children encounter difficulty, frustration, or resistance.

As global policy continues to emphasize children’s agency from the earliest years, early childhood music therapy stands at an important intersection of rights, development, and relational practice—offering not only therapeutic support, but an example of how young children’s voices can shape the spaces designed for their care, learning, and well-being.

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Dr. Petra Kern is an internationally recognized leader in early childhood music therapy. A Fulbright Specialist, former World Federation of Music Therapy President, and editor of *imagine*, she advances rights-based, evidence-informed practice through research, clinical innovation, and advocacy, emphasizing children's participation, inclusion, agency, and family-centered, developmentally responsive care worldwide.

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