Youth participation in HeadStart:

review of youth participation activity across a diverse, multi-service youth mental health and wellbeing programme
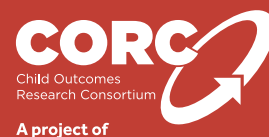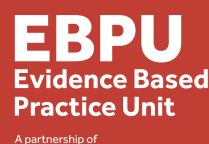
March 2023

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COMMUNITY FUND

EBPU
Evidence Based Practice Unit
A partnership of

UCL   Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families

CORC
Child Outcomes Research Consortium
A project of
Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families

About HeadStart

Six years

£67.4m in funding

Ages 10-16

Six local authorities
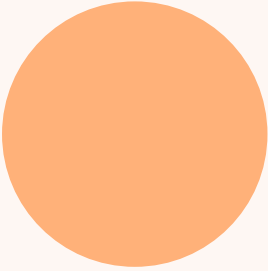
Started in 2016, HeadStart was a six-year, £67.4 million National Lottery funded programme set up by The National Lottery Community Fund. It aimed to explore and test new ways to improve the mental health and wellbeing of young people aged 10–16 and prevent serious mental health issues from developing. To do this, six local-authority-led HeadStart partnerships worked with local young people, schools, families, charities, community and public services to design and try out new interventions aiming to promote young people's mental health, wellbeing and resilience. The six HeadStart partnerships were based in Blackpool, Cornwall, Hull, Kent, Newham and Wolverhampton.

As a test and learn programme, the HeadStart programme ended in July 2022, with many of the approaches having been sustained and embedded locally. The national evaluation of HeadStart will be completed in mid-2023.

The Evidence Based Practice Unit (EBPU) at the Anna Freud Centre and University College London (UCL) is working with The National Lottery Community Fund and the HeadStart partnerships to collect and evaluate evidence about what does and does not work locally to benefit young people, now and in the future. Partners working with EBPU on this evaluation include the University of Manchester and the Child Outcomes Research Consortium (CORC), a project of the Anna Freud Centre. This collaboration is called the HeadStart Learning Team. Previous partners in the HeadStart Learning Team include the London School of Economics (LSE) and Common Room.

Guide to implementing participation

Matrix of participation
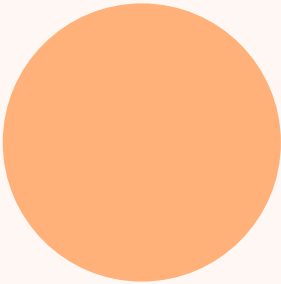
Visual heatmap

Examples from HeadStart

Summary

This briefing forms part of a series of publications on youth participation in HeadStart. It is intended as a guide for those who are considering implementing participation in a new or existing project. It will be of use to those who want to review the participation aspect of a programme or service. This could include young people, parents and carers and professionals interested in learning more about participation models, and how the HeadStart partnerships applied participation approaches throughout their programmes.

We recommend reading our previous briefing, *Youth participation: models used to understand young people's participation in school and community programmes,* for an overview of the various models of participation that currently exist within the field (Dolaty et al., 2022).

In this briefing, we selected the model 'matrix of participation' (Davies, 2009) to capture the diversity of participation activities that took place across the six HeadStart partnerships. We then created a visual heatmap to get a clear idea of the breadth, depth and forms of participation activities carried out within HeadStart. We discuss each stage of our process including the gathering and reviewing of evidence from partnerships and the approach we took to deciding where each activity or event fits on the matrix.

The examples from HeadStart presented in this briefing demonstrate the range of participation activities that can exist within school and community spaces. In our final publication of this series, we will present research on both the benefits and challenges of youth participation within school and community spaces.
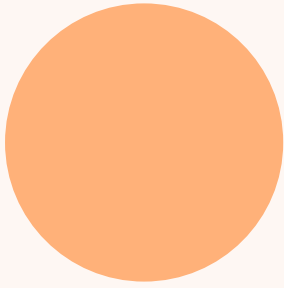
Introduction

Youth participation enables young people to actively engage in decision making and have a voice in processes that involve them. Participation should be accessible to children and young people from all backgrounds and with any support needs, enabling them to feel empowered, valued and respected (United Nations & Un-Habitat and the Focal Point on Youth, UNDESA, 2022).

When implemented effectively, youth participation can be invaluable to developing responsive programmes and services for all involved. In addition, it can support young people's growth in areas such as skills development, self-esteem and confidence, and collaborative working.

> **"** I enjoyed having the responsibility to make decisions and having a say in how HeadStart were helping my community as a result. **"**
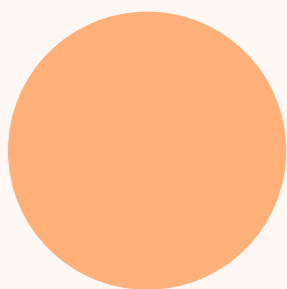>
> *- Young person, HeadStart participation group*

> **"** I had a good mix of control within HeadStart, I feel like my ideas are important and feel workers listened very well to what I had to say. **"**
>
> *- Young person, HeadStart participation group*

Review of HeadStart youth participation activity

Our aim was to review the participation work delivered by HeadStart partnerships. We sought to explore the diversity of participation opportunities facilitated within HeadStart, and to better understand the extent to which participation activities engaged children and young people. In total, we reviewed 76 participation activities from across the six HeadStart partnerships and were able to classify 53. This included contributions from all the partnerships and reflects activity over the course of the programme.

A wide range of youth participation activities have taken place as part of HeadStart. We found that all of HeadStart partnerships were committed to prioritising youth participation within their programmes. An example of one partnership's vision statement highlights their commitment:

Our vision is that through committed collaboration with young people, their families, schools, and the community, Newham is recognised as a place that promotes, values and respects the dignity of all people and builds resilience in our vulnerable young people so they can be champions of their own emotional wellbeing.

Referring back to the five types of participation models outlined in our previous briefing, we selected the matrix of participation model (Davies, 2009) to help us review and present the types of participation activities that took place across HeadStart, as it captures both the depth and breadth of participation work.

The review process took place in three stages:

Stage 1:

Drawing on existing outputs, resources and consultation with the HeadStart partnerships, we collated the available information about participation activity within each of the HeadStart areas. We then identified the activity and work that took place, the participatory elements and the perceived outcomes for young people.

Stage 2:

We then classified activities into the most relevant section of the matrix. We acknowledged that some activities could be placed in one or more sections, so as a team we took a 'best fit' approach to categorisation to ensure different perspectives informed the categorisation of activities.

Stage 3:

We created a heatmap of activity (Figure 1). The heatmap shows the range of activity types, as well as the frequency with which these types of participation activity were happening across HeadStart.
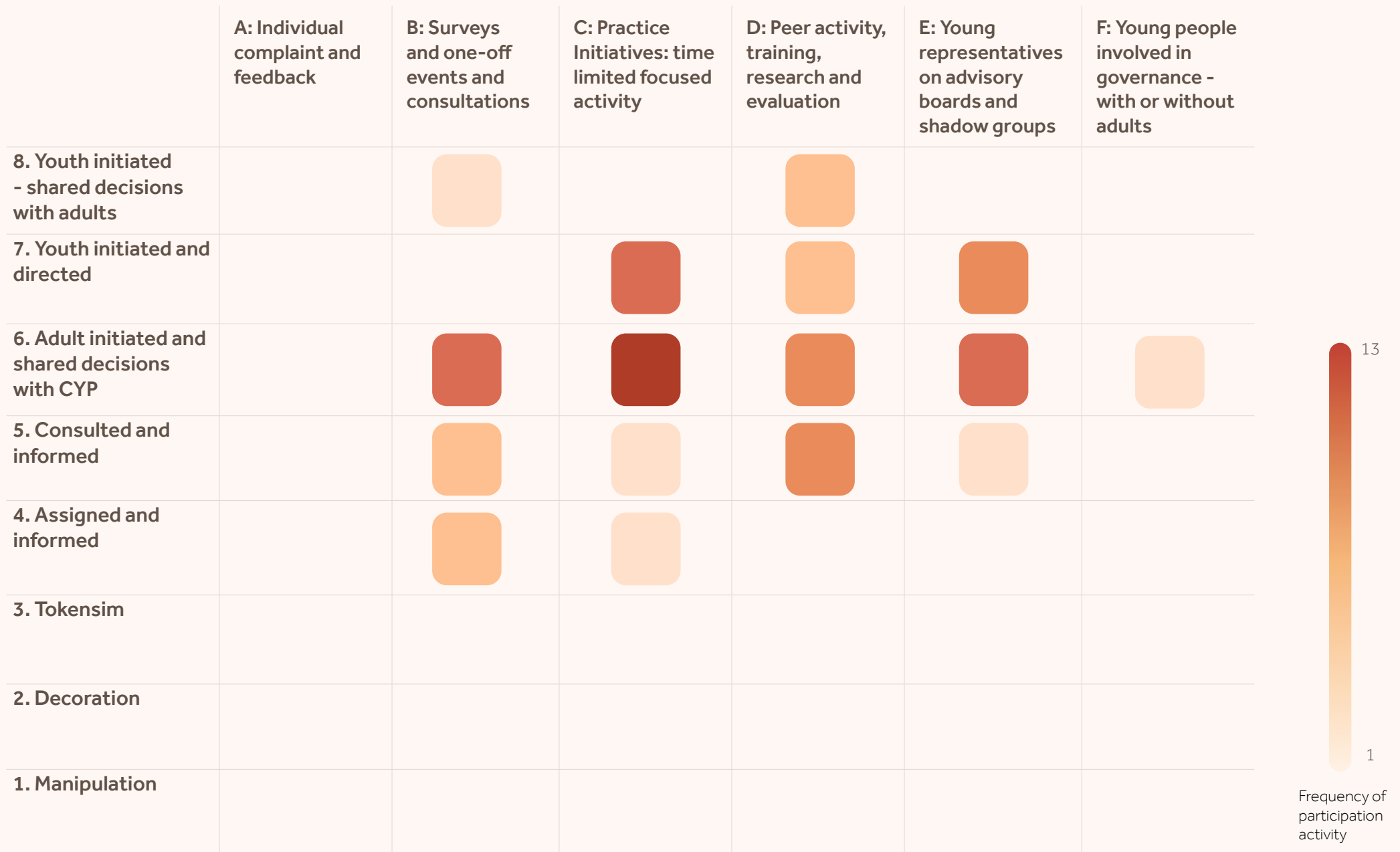
1

2

3

> "I could tell we were listened to by the way workers responded to me when I had ideas, their responses were always positive, and we saw things get done."
>
> *- Young person, HeadStart participation group*

Figure 1: Participation activity across HeadStart: 2018–2021

	A: Individual complaint and feedback	B: Surveys and one-off events and consultations	C: Practice Initiatives: time limited focused activity	D: Peer activity, training, research and evaluation	E: Young representatives on advisory boards and shadow groups	F: Young people involved in governance - with or without adults
8. Youth initiated - shared decisions with adults		�		▪		
7. Youth initiated and directed			▪	▪	▪	
6. Adult initiated and shared decisions with CYP		▪	▪	▪	▪	▪
5. Consulted and informed		▪	▪	▪	▪	
4. Assigned and informed		▪	▪			
3. Tokensim						
2. Decoration						
1. Manipulation						

Frequency of participation activity (scale: 1 to 13)

Interpreting the heatmap: darker areas indicate activities with the highest frequency, with lighter shades indicating types of participation occurring less often. Blank spaces show no participation activity was reported within that area of the matrix.

Participation activity examples across HeadStart partnerships

B8

Young person conferences

Young people consulted with schools in the HeadStart partnership to network with other youth groups in their area. This led to young people hosting three conferences that focused on subjects the young people identified as important to them at that time.

B6

Mystery shoppers

Young people were asked by project leaders to attend youth events and services in HeadStart areas and anonymously evaluate their experience. Their feedback provided valuable insight into the achievements of the events and services, as well as potential areas for improvement.

B5

An interdisciplinary group of individuals with an interest in and passion for climate change

Three young people worked with their local council to look at specific world issues. As a result, networking sessions and a conference were co-designed and delivered by young people for young people.

B4

Multiple consultation sessions on support offered to young people

Several hundred young people completed anonymous questionnaires and over a hundred engaged in face-to-face consultations about possible service provision across one HeadStart partnership.

C7

A youth film project

Over one hundred young people collaborated and were involved in the creation, design and development of several films and resources. The content focused on the issues young people felt were important to them that they wanted to teach others about. A focus of the work was reducing stigma.

C6

Summer programme planning

Young people were involved in the organising and co-production of community summer programmes for other young people within their local areas.

C5

Developing wellbeing strategy for a whole-school approach

A group of young people, supported by co-production practitioners, developed a strategy for pupil wellbeing in schools.

C4

Social action projects

Young people co-produced a social action project to be delivered in schools or communities. Young people identified the topics, shared tasks and responsibilities and helped deliver the training.

D8

Young researchers' groups

Two young people led focused research groups to generate ideas for research. They led on the design, fieldwork, analysis, write up and dissemination of findings.

D7

Training

A group of young people met to co-produce training for multiple organisations in their HeadStart area. They re-developed an in-person training into an e-learning offer for staff. Young people also had a say on the design and delivery of this training. The training was delivered to more than 200 people including senior staff within the council and commissioners, as well as staff from schools and local health providers.

D6

Young people advisory groups

Young people co-developed and co-delivered projects that helped promote the formation of advisory groups within a HeadStart partnership. This aimed to gain insight into how to engage younger audiences in participation work and help build resilience among the community. Additionally, the young people shared views on the project as a whole and supported events delivered in schools (for example, assemblies and awareness events).

D5

Online resilience tool

Around 1000 young people from primary and secondary schools co-designed and co-created a resilience tool around online safety. They did this through workshops and discussion groups over a period of three years. The tool teaches users how to identify both harmful and unharmful behaviour for young people online, in addition to offering a guide on how to manage harmful behaviour.

E7

Youth networks

As part of a resilience-building initiative, a group of young people developed an accessible youth-led space for young people with an interest in politics. The young people came from different organisations and groups and used the space to network with one another and discuss issues they were passionate about.

E6

HeadStart Steering Group

The HeadStart Steering Group had a diverse membership of young people, those who support young people and senior decision-makers within the local authority. Steering group members met quarterly to discuss issues and work collaboratively to develop solutions.

E5

Youth voice groups

Groups of young people met once a month at the weekend to review the local HeadStart offer with their local HeadStart team. The groups worked through projects and changes to services and consulted on marketing aspects of each project.

F6

Citizen's assembly

A group of young people delivered several online sessions over a two-day period on the topic 'climate emergency', to improve young people's knowledge about climate change and to relieve anxieties surrounding the topic. Young people co-designed a co-produced a zine about climate change.
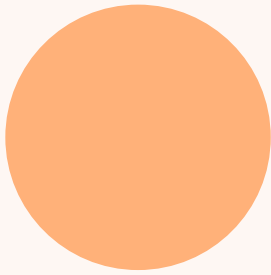
What did young people think?

Not only did each partnership embed participatory practices and activities within their own delivery of HeadStart, the HeadStart Learning Team also had a youth participation group whose aims were to contribute to research and review research findings, as well as contributing to dissemination of programme findings. They regularly met at workshops facilitated by the CORC engagement and participation officer. Most young people on this group were also involved in local participation work within their HeadStart partnerships.

We asked the HeadStart National Young Person's Participation Group (who were aged 10–21) about their experiences with participation in HeadStart. Their feedback was positive, with all young people in the group reporting that they felt empowered to make change. The group believed that workers across the projects they had been involved in actively listened to young people's opinions and worked towards making changes based on their input.

"Enjoyed being able to come up with ideas myself but liked a bit of both, young people leading, and, adults leading if I knew less about the subject."
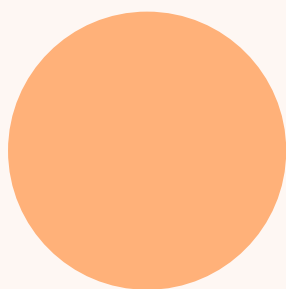
- Young person, HeadStart participation group

"It helped me; I would recommend others to these types of projects."

- Young person, HeadStart participation group

Limitations to this approach

Reviewing and categorising participation activities in a large, diverse programme such as HeadStart comes with challenges. We found that some participation activities did not fit perfectly within the sections of the matrix. For example, one activity might consist of several elements, meeting the description for several sections of the matrix. Furthermore, the nature of participation and co-production work is that it commonly evolves – for example, planned participation projects or activities often develop over time, responding to the engagement and needs of children and young people. As a result, participation can look different at the beginning of a project compared to the end of a project.

Additionally, we recognise that the degree to which children and young people are involved in an activity, and the extent to which power is shared with them, is not always clear. This makes it more difficult to accurately identify and categorise the types of participation work. We made every effort to gather as much information as possible to incorporate into our review. However, the scale of HeadStart means that we may not have fully captured the participation activity taking place.

> **I felt listened to, the group ideas were valued but we listened to the adults' ideas too which created a good balance in a meeting with professionals.**
>
> *- Young person, HeadStart participation group*

Guidance on the use of Davies' matrix of participation

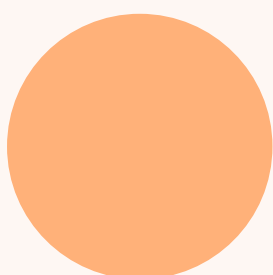| Before participation:	During participation:	After participation:
Identify where you fall on the matrix *"What form(s) of participation will this project take on?"*	Reassess your location on the matrix *"Have we implemented participation the way we said we would?"*	Evaluate and plan next steps using the matrix *"What did we do well and what can we improve on in the future?"*
• Be transparent about how youth participation will be implemented in your activity or project. • Set expectations between staff and young people for the ways young people will be involved and roles young people will play in the project or activity. • Discuss any limitations of participation that may exist within current form(s) of participation.	• Consider whether the project or activity has evolved and whether it falls in a different area of the matrix. • Use the matrix as a tool for checks and balances; have ways of involvement and roles of professionals and young people been honoured? If not, why? • Have ongoing conversations with young people about perceptions of their involvement and satisfaction with their role(s) within the project or activity.	• Discuss challenges and facilitators of collaboration within area of matrix. (I.e., what limitations or strengths existed within the form[s] of participation implemented?) • Feed back and follow up on the participation activity or project that took place and of the roles that those involved played. • Plan future participation projects: acknowledge the 'blank spaces' in the matrix and outline how to expand on depth and breadth of participation activities.

Throughout participation activity:
- consider the diversity of provision of opportunities for children and young people to engage.
- consider that children and young people have a range of preferences, skills, abilities and commitments.
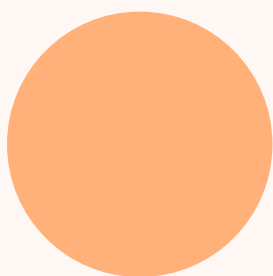
# Recommendations on implementing participation activity with children and young people

- Review the capacity for change: can the organisation adopt participation as its approach, and who needs to be included in development plans to make this happen?

- Consider the diversity of opportunities available to children and young people.

- Use examples from the HeadStart programmes in this briefing to show young people and participation groups how they could be involved in decision making, collaboration and co-design of projects.

Reflections

We hope that sharing our processes, observations and recommendations will support you when evaluating participation activity within your own projects. We also hope this briefing has inspired some to start youth participation development plans.

While we have chosen this way to review youth participation work, we recognise that we used a process and a model that suited our aims and objectives. For more information on other processes and models that may be of benefit to your teams, please read the recommendations in our previous briefing (Dolaty et al, 2022). Our next steps for reviewing youth participation will include a report on the benefits and challenges of collaborating with young people within school and community spaces.
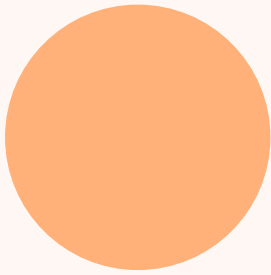
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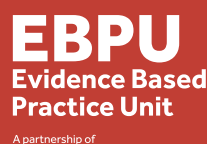
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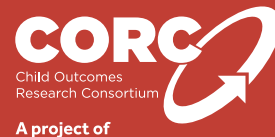
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