

# Children's Social Participation with Peers – Some Manifestations and Conditions from the Perspective of Children

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## **Abstract:**

Peers can be regarded as important for the development of children's and youths' social participation, since they provide the chance of reciprocal relations and cooperation between equals. Therefore, in this article, manifestations and conditions of children's social participation with peers are analyzed on the basis of interviews with children at the age of ten to twelve years who took part in an empirical study on children's and youths' participation in Switzerland. In contrasting participation in peer groups with participation in adult-centered contexts, some specific aspects can be depicted based on the descriptions the children gave in the interviews. Furthermore, this article looks at different family backgrounds with respect to experience of participation and its significance for social participation with peers.

**Keywords:** social participation, children, peers, family

## Introduction

In this article, various aspects of social participation in the context of peers are analyzed. By using the term "social participation," we refer to the concept of taking part in shaping social contexts that are relevant for children's and youths' everyday life and being involved in decision making processes in these contexts (Hart, 1992, p. 5). In comparison with the term "political participation," which mostly refers to a more narrow understanding of taking part in political procedures of older adolescents or young adults (Hoecker, 2006; Levine, 2007; Youniss and Levine, 2009), "social participation," in contrast, refers to a wider spectrum of activities and contexts, even relevant for children and younger adolescents (Hoecker, 2006, p. 11). Research on contexts that are important for children's and adolescents' learning to participate socially refers to family and school in most cases. Besides these adult-centered contexts, peers also seem to be relevant for participation. James Youniss (1980) argues that social relations with peers that are symmetrical and characterized by reciprocity enable children and adolescents to cooperate among equals –

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unlike relations with adults, which can be characterized as asymmetrical and complementary. Against this background, adults know and teach children the correct solution, whereas mutual solutions are developed in the context of peers. As a consequence, in regard to children and youths growing up, attention has been directed to the integration of peer contexts for some time now. It can be shown that most adolescents report being integrated in a group or that they maintain individual friendships and relationships with peers that are especially important to them. Against this background, peer relationships are considered to be a virtually indispensable element of growing up, which help children and youths to meet developmental challenges and to participate socially (Adler and Adler, 1998). As a consequence, peers seem to be important for learning processes regarding social participation, but there is still very little research with enough precision in the understanding of what is learned and how this learning occurs (Moser, 2010).

Against this background, it needs to be clarified in what specific ways the relationships with peers are shaped and what consequences arise that concern the social participation of children and youths. This article starts with a short overview of some research in the field of social participation of children and youths. The second part provides some information on the empirical study which serves as the basis for the following considerations. We then present the results – in the first section with reference to various aspects of social participation in the context of peers and in a second section, the different family backgrounds of the children, especially their experience with participation in the family, are studied in relation to their participation with peers. The concluding remarks resume and discuss these findings in order to generate some theoretical insights which supplement existing views on the relevance of peers for participation.

## State of Research on Social Participation of Adolescents

In recent years, research has often focused on the lack of political and social participation of young people. Especially in the field of traditional politics and with respect to organized forms of engagement, there are low rates of participation reported (e.g. various contributions in Youniss and Levine, 2009; Hoecker, 2006). On the other hand, a remarkable willingness of youths and young adults can be attested to take part in more open and flexible contexts where participation is associated with fun and seems to be relevant for young people's everyday life (Knauer and Sturzenhecker, 2005, p. 51). Furthermore, new forms of civic engagement can be observed which are associated with internet-based communication (e.g. social networking, blogging, online-petitioning), can be shaped individually, do not require long-term engagement or organizing, but are realized when related to an occasion and spontaneously (Levine, 2007, p. 94).

Research consistently shows substantial individual differences concerning the ability and willingness of young people to participate in the various contexts of political and social engagement (e.g. Rieker et al., 2016). With reference to social participation, these individual differences hardly correlate with traits like gender, migration, or class, as can be stated for the engagement in the field of traditional politics (Youniss and Levine, 2009; Hoecker, 2006) on the one hand. On the other hand, research has shown that the willingness of young people to participate socially is linked to experiences made in childhood.