

Play-Based Adaptations for the Decision Wheel

A taster resource for those supporting children's rights and participation, and for play and expressive arts therapists ready to step into this space

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Developed in collegial response to the Mapping Children's Involvement in Decision-Making Toolkit (Lundy, Heard & Graty Hood, 2026), with the kind encouragement of Prof. Laura Lundy. These adaptations extend and enrich the original toolkit; they do not replace it. Please download, use, and cite the original toolkit alongside this resource.

Contents

1	Play and Arts.....	2
2	Adaptation A: Miniatures on the Wheel	3
3	Adaptation B: The Expressive Arts Wheel	4
4	Adaptation C: Combining Miniatures and Arts Materials	5
5	Adaptation D: The Big Group Wheel	7
6	The Self-Figure at the Centre: Agency and Voice.....	9
7	Who This Is For, and How to Work Together.....	9
8	References.....	10

1 Play and Arts

This resource is for two groups of people, and it asks something different of each.

If you work in children's rights, participation, or education

You may already use the Decision Wheel (Lundy, Heard & Graty Hood, 2026) or be interested in trying it. This taster introduces you to what play therapists and expressive arts therapists can bring: specialist skills for helping children access their own voice when words alone are not enough. These practitioners are your allies in this work. I hope this resource helps you understand what they offer, and prompts you to invite them in.

If you are a play therapist or expressive arts therapist

You already have the skills this work needs. The Decision Wheel is a rights-based participation tool asking children to map the decisions that shape their lives and say what they want to change. This is deeply familiar therapeutic territory, now oriented toward children's rights rather than clinical outcomes. This resource asks: what would it look like to bring your practice into the participation space? We think you belong here.

The Decision Wheel asks children to identify the decisions that shape their lives, locate their current level of involvement across five domains (home, education, health, community, online), and articulate what they would like to change. Used across 17 countries with 154 children, it is grounded in UNCRC Article 12 and Lundy's (2007) model of meaningful participation.

The original toolkit already invites creativity: children can write or draw on their wheels, add digital sticky notes, or build floor-scale group wheels from tape and beanbags. These adaptations extend that invitation into the full range of expressive arts and play-based approaches. They are not a replacement for the original toolkit. They are an invitation to bring specialist practitioners into the room alongside it.

Malchiodi (2020) describes how expressive arts approaches reach beyond the limits of language by tapping into sensory and bodily experience: the modes of knowing that many children are most fluent in, particularly those who have experienced adversity, communication differences, or environments where their voice has not historically been welcomed. A wheel a child has painted, collaged, filled with miniatures, or surrounded with drawn landscapes is not just more engaging. It is more genuinely theirs.

Lundy's (2007) four conditions for meaningful participation: Space, Voice, Audience, Influence.

Play and expressive arts therapists are trained to create Space and Voice: safe, boundaried environments in which children can express views without being required to translate inner experience into adult-preferred verbal formats. Rights and participation practitioners are typically better placed to ensure Audience and Influence: that what children express reaches the adults and systems with power to act on it. These two groups working together can fulfil all four conditions.

What every adaptation in this resource shares

- The Decision Wheel structure, domains, and three rings of agency are preserved in every adaptation.
- Children still identify decisions, locate their level of involvement, and indicate what they would like to change.
- Facilitator prompt questions from the original toolkit remain fully applicable.

- All adaptations begin with informed, ongoing assent from the child, and parental/guardian consent where required.
- Photographs or documentation of the completed wheel should be taken before it is dismantled.

2 Adaptation A: Miniatures on the Wheel

Drawing on Gil, E. (2014). Play in Family Therapy (2nd ed., Chapters 7–8). Guilford Press; and Homeyer, L. E., & Sweeney, D. S. (2023). Sandtray Therapy: A Practical Manual (3rd ed.). Routledge.

The core idea

In *Play in Family Therapy*, Eliana Gil describes inviting a teenage boy to select miniatures to express his thoughts and feelings about his father. Rather than asking him to explain the relationship, she asked him to *show* it. He chose a life raft, an aeroplane, an elephant, an army man, and a man carrying sticks. Each figure opened a conversation that words alone had not reached.

In this adaptation, children select miniatures and place them directly on a large printed or hand-drawn Decision Wheel. Each figure stands for a decision, a feeling about that decision, or a person involved in it. The three rings of the wheel (Things I decide / help decide / don't decide) give the placement spatial meaning without requiring verbal explanation. What a child reaches for, and where they put it, tells us something important about what they are ready to hold.

Homeyer and Sweeney (2023) note that the range of miniature categories available communicates to the child that all aspects of their world are welcome here. If the collection is narrow, so will be the child's ability to represent their life.

Miniature categories to have available

- People: family groups (diverse), occupational figures, stage-of-life figures
- Animals: wild, farm, domestic, prehistoric
- Fantasy and spiritual figures
- Buildings and structures
- Vehicles and transport
- Natural items: stones, shells, plants, driftwood
- Fences, gates, bridges
- Household objects
- Miscellaneous items (e.g. medial items)

Two ways to work

Option 1: Select first, then map

The child browses freely and selects any figures that speak to them, without a domain in mind. Facilitator and child then explore which segment each figure belongs in and which ring of agency. Selection precedes interpretation.

Option 2: Domain by domain

The facilitator introduces one segment at a time and invites the child to find a miniature for a decision in that area of life. More structured, well-suited to children who find open-ended choice overwhelming.

Steps

1. Print the wheel at A3 or larger draw on thick card — miniatures need space to be placed meaningfully.
2. Lay out the miniature collection accessibly.
3. Invite the child to browse and choose freely — no right or wrong answers.
4. Work through domains or let the child lead. Place figures on the wheel.
5. Once populated, invite reflection: talk about what they placed and why.
6. Use arrows (as in the original toolkit) to show where the child wants more or less say.
7. Photograph the completed wheel before anything is moved.

Facilitation prompts

- Which figure feels right for this part of your life?
- Where on the wheel does this one live?
- Is it close to the centre or further out? Why?
- Who/what else might you place near this figure?
- What would this figure say if it could speak?
- Is anything missing — something you can't find a figure for?

3 Adaptation B: The Expressive Arts Wheel (Individual, A3)

Drawing on Malchiodi, C. A. (2020). Trauma and Expressive Arts Therapy: Brain, Body, and Imagination in the Healing Process. Guilford Press.

The core idea

The standard toolkit provides a printable A4 wheel template. This adaptation expands and enriches it. Printed on A3, or hand-drawn on A3 card, the wheel has room to breathe: space for colour, texture, background environments, and decoration that transforms the diagram into something genuinely the child's own.

Malchiodi (2020) argues that expressive arts approaches reach beyond the limits of language, tapping into bodily and sensory experience as a foundation for exploring emotions and personal narratives. A child who fills the Home segment with dark paint and pressed leaves is communicating something that a sticky note cannot carry.

Collage in particular, a central modality in Malchiodi's framework, allows children to work with found imagery and materials without needing technical drawing skill, making it one of the most accessible and expressive options across age groups. The colours chosen, textures applied, images collaged, and environments drawn all carry meaning alongside the decisions themselves.

Materials

- Decision Wheel printed on A3 paper or drawn on A3 card
- Coloured pencils and markers
- Watercolour or acrylic paint (optional)
- Oil pastels (crayons for younger children)
- Collage materials: magazine images, tissue paper, fabric scraps, etc
- Stickers and stamps
- String, wool, ribbon

- Washi tape and masking tape
- Glue sticks and PVA
- Scissors (left and right-handed)
- Natural items: leaves, feathers, pressed flowers, etc

How to invite the expressive arts wheel

8. Offer the A3 wheel alongside a full spread of arts materials — laid out accessibly, not stacked away.
9. Introduce the wheel domains using the original toolkit language and prompt questions.
10. Invite the child to decorate AROUND the segments, not just write IN them.
11. ‘What does this part of your life feel like? Could you show that with colour or texture?’
12. ‘What is the landscape behind this decision — what world does it live in?’
13. String or yarn can show connections between domains or between figures and decisions.
14. Stickers or small sticky notes can mark decisions.
15. Once complete, use the arrow system from the original toolkit to indicate desired change.
16. Photograph the finished wheel. Invite the child to give it a title/or name.

Age-differentiated suggestions

Early childhood (4–7 yrs)	Middle childhood (8–11 yrs)	Adolescence (12+ yrs)
Large segments, bold colours. Sticker-based or pre-cut collage images. Mark making and finger painting welcome. Facilitator scribes the child’s words around their marks. Simplified three-part wheel: I decide / we decide / grown-ups decide.	Collage and magazine images for each domain. Drawing characters. Captions or speech bubbles. Colour-coding for agency levels. String connecting related decisions across segments.	Mixed media: photography, printed images, painted backgrounds. Journalling prompts alongside the wheel. More nuanced agency gradients. Can work independently with facilitator for reflection.

On the environment behind the symbols. Invite children to consider the world their decisions live in. ‘What does home look like around this decision?’ ‘Is the sky in your school segment sunny or cloudy?’ These questions invite children to contextualise their experiences rather than simply categorise them. Context is where meaning lives.

4 Adaptation C: Combining Miniatures and Arts Materials

The core idea

Adaptations A and B are distinct starting points, but for many children the richest engagement comes from combining them: a large wheel that holds both placed miniatures and painted or collaged surroundings. Miniatures provide three-dimensional, tactile, moveable expression. Arts materials provide background, environment, atmosphere, and connection. Together they offer genuine choice across 2D and 3D modes, so children can work in a way that fits each part of their world.

This is not a more complicated version. It is a more generous one. Some children will go straight for the miniatures and never touch a pencil. Others will cover the wheel in colour before a single figure is placed. Some will do both at once, building a landscape around each miniature as they go. The facilitator's role is simply to make everything available and follow the child's lead.

What each mode offers

2D: paint, collage, drawing, stickers

Communicates atmosphere, feeling-tone, and background context. Particularly suited to: the emotional landscape around a decision, what a domain looks and feels like, the relational environment a decision lives in. Collage lets children work with found imagery when their own mark-making feels exposing. Colour as language when words are not enough.

3D: miniatures, clay, natural objects

Communicates specificity, relationship, and agency through placement. Particularly suited to: identifying who is involved in a decision, how close or far the child feels from the centre of that decision, the presence or absence of significant others. Figures can be moved and rearranged — the wheel is not fixed until the child says so.

Note: Consider the practicality of mixing paint and miniatures. It may be that paint is only offered in the art-based expression wheel option only.

Setting up for combined working

Layout matters. Miniatures and arts materials should be equally visible and accessible: neither tucked away nor so overwhelming that the child freezes. A practical arrangement:

17. Print or draw the wheel at A3 or larger on thick card — it needs to hold both arts materials and miniatures without curling.
18. Lay arts materials to one side: pencils, collage, stickers, natural items.
19. Arrange miniatures by category on the other side.
20. Introduce the wheel domains. Then simply say: 'You can use any of this to show me.'
21. Let the child move between modes. The wheel can hold 2D and 3D expression simultaneously.
22. Once the child indicates they are done, invite reflection using the original toolkit prompts.
23. Photograph the wheel from above and again at an angle to capture the 3D elements.

Materials

- Wheel printed or drawn on A3 card (thick, to hold both arts materials and miniatures)
- Full miniature collection by category
- Coloured pencils, markers, oil pastels
- Collage: magazine images, tissue paper, fabric
- Stickers, stamps, washi tape
- String or wool for connections
- Natural items: leaves, shells, stones, feathers
- Glue sticks and PVA
- Scissors (left an right-handed)
- Camera to photograph from above and at angle

Facilitation prompts

- Would you like to draw, paint, or use a figure for this?
- What colour is this decision? Where does it go?
- Is there a figure AND a background for this domain?
- What is the environment or weather like in this part of your wheel?
- Could string show who is connected to this decision?
- What would you make if you could make anything for this space?
- Is anything missing — in the figures or in the picture?
- Now you can see it all together — what do you notice?

On following the child's mode. Some children will use miniatures to represent the adults who hold power over their decisions, and colour to show how that feels. Others will draw the world their decisions live in, then place a single figure at the centre to represent themselves. Neither is more correct. The combination of 2D and 3D simply ensures that every child has a medium that fits for them in the moment.

5 Adaptation D: The Big Group Wheel (Butcher's Paper, Collective)

The core idea

The original toolkit includes a creative group example from Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland, where children taped a giant wheel on the floor and used sticky notes and beanbags. This adaptation extends that idea into a full expressive arts collective experience.

A large butcher's paper wheel, drawn by the group or pre-prepared, becomes a shared canvas (consider cardboard underneath if working on carpet or a soft ground surface). Children can move around it physically, contribute at their own pace, and use a full range of arts materials as well as miniatures. The wheel becomes a living collaborative document: part map, part artwork, part rights statement.

Materials

- Butcher's paper or craft paper roll (1.5–2m)
- Thick markers for drawing the wheel
- Miniature figures (shared collection)
- Sticky notes (multiple colours)
- Collage materials: magazines, fabric, paper
- Stamps and stickers
- Wool or string for connections
- Natural items
- Tape for securing to floor or wall
- Camera to document throughout

Setting up

The wheel can be drawn on the paper in advance by the facilitator, or co-constructed with the group as an opening activity. Laying it on the floor works well for younger children and groups who benefit

from physical movement. Pinning it to a wall or hanging it from a display board suits groups who prefer to stand and work vertically. Both orientations are valid but wall-based may limit the use of miniatures.

Steps

24. Lay out the large wheel. Introduce domains using the original toolkit language and PPT.
25. Give each child sticky notes in two colours: one for 'decisions that affect me', one for 'want more/less say'.
26. Invite children to write, draw, or stick images on their notes before placing them. Be flexible if children choose not to use sticky notes or choose other options than the sticky notes.
27. Children place notes AND can add miniatures, drawn figures, or collage to their domains.
28. String or yarn can connect related decisions or show who is involved in a decision across domains.
29. Facilitate group discussion using the original Stage 4 and Stage 6 prompt questions.
30. Invite the group to decorate the wheel itself: backgrounds, borders, shared symbols.
31. Photograph the completed wheel from multiple angles. Consider displaying it as a group rights document.

Facilitation notes for group work

- Assign a note-taking facilitator. One person introduces and guides; another records verbal contributions separately. Or consider consent and assent for audio-recording to capture a transcript.
- Allow children to work at different paces. Some will populate multiple domains quickly; others may spend the full session on one.
- Sticky notes can protect individual voice: children may write privately before going public to the group.
- Miniatures on the group wheel can represent shared experiences. Invite consensus: 'Where do we all agree this sits?'
- The completed wheel can be photographed, transcribed, and presented as collective evidence of children's views to relevant adults and decision-makers.

What arts materials add to group work

When children decorate, paint, collage, and add miniatures to a shared wheel, they are doing something beyond data collection. They are asserting that their inner worlds matter, that beauty and meaning belong together, and that this process is worthy of care and creativity. A decorated group wheel, displayed in a school or community space, communicates children's participation more powerfully than a spreadsheet ever could.

Wall display option

Consider leaving the completed group wheel on display for a defined period (with children's assent). It becomes a visible, ongoing statement of children's views on the decisions that shape their lives. Adults in that space encounter children's perspectives as they move through the environment. This enacts Lundy's 'Audience' and 'Influence' conditions in a tangible, embodied way.

6 The Self-Figure at the Centre: Agency and Voice

In Gil's family play genogram work (2014, Chapter. 8), each family member is invited to choose or create a miniature that represents themselves. This act of self-representation anchors the child in the exercise as a subject, not an object: *I am someone who makes decisions, who is affected by decisions, who has a view*. In all four adaptations, consider inviting the child to begin by choosing or representing themselves in an art-based way (i.e., collage image or drawn image), placed at the very centre of the wheel.

This self-figure becomes the point from which all domains radiate. It communicates, at the level of embodied experience, the message that the Decision Wheel is designed to convey: you are at the centre of your own life.

Two ideas for the self-figure

Choose a figure from the collection

Invite the child to find a miniature that represents themselves, or how they feel about decision-making in their life right now. There is no right answer. Arts-based materials can also be used for this representation of self.

Create a figure from clay or collage

Invite the child to make or create a self-figure before beginning the wheel. This can be abstract: a shape, a colour, a texture that 'feels like me'. For some children, especially adolescents, creating a self-representation is a rich and meaningful starting point for the whole conversation.

7 Who This Is For, and How to Work Together

Two audiences, one purpose

This resource is deliberately written for two different readers, because the work it describes is most powerful when those two readers are working together.

For rights and participation practitioners

If you work in children's rights, participation, schools, or community settings, these adaptations show you what becomes possible when you bring a play therapist or expressive arts therapist into the room. You do not need to become a therapist to use this resource. You need to know that this kind of specialist exists, what they bring, and why a child who struggles with the standard toolkit might flourish with their support. Consider this a referral guide as much as a practice guide.

For play and expressive arts therapists

If you hold a clinical qualification in play therapy or expressive arts therapy, you are the specialist this resource is calling on. The Decision Wheel offers a structured, rights-based framework that your expressive methods can bring to life in ways the standard toolkit cannot always reach. This is an invitation to understand the children's participation field, to position yourself within it, and to offer your skills in service of children's rights, not only their healing.

Important ethical principles

- **Informed and ongoing assent.** Children must understand what the activity is for, who will see the outcome, and that they can stop or change direction at any time. This mirrors the original toolkit's consent requirements and applies equally here.

- **Therapeutic work vs participation work.** These adaptations sit at the intersection of expressive arts and rights-based participation. Facilitators who are not trained play therapists or counsellors should not use these methods to explore trauma or offer clinical support. If a child's responses raise clinical concerns, refer to an appropriately qualified professional.
- **Cultural responsiveness.** Miniature collections should reflect cultural diversity (Homeyer & Sweeney, 2023). Facilitators should reflect on whose world is represented in available materials and supplement accordingly.
- **Documentation and ownership.** The child's wheel, in any form, belongs to the child. Photographs taken for research or reporting purposes require explicit consent. Where wheels are displayed publicly, children's identifying information must be protected.
- **Supervision.** Practitioners using expressive methods with children in any context should have access to reflective supervision. The material that emerges through play and art can be powerful and unexpected. Registered Play or Expressive Arts Supervisors can offer supervision.

A closing thought for both audiences. Children's rights to participate in decisions that affect them are well established in law and in the evidence base. What is less established is the infrastructure that makes that participation real for every child, including those who cannot or will not express themselves through words on paper. Play therapists and expressive arts therapists have spent careers building exactly that infrastructure, one child, one session, one sandtray at a time. This resource is an invitation to bring those two worlds into the conversation. Play is not preparation for participation. Play *is* participation. And the children who most need their rights upheld are often the ones who most need play and the arts to access them.

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