

CHILDREN AS CHANGEMAKERS

*Learnings from Prerana's
Children's Collective Model*



This document is intended as a practical resource for child protection practitioners, community-based organizations, and program implementers seeking to adapt or replicate the model in diverse community settings.

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Scope of This Document

As Prerana's Children's Collectives have grown, children's participation has evolved across multiple levels. This document reflects on that journey. It captures not only what the Collectives did, but what we learned as children gradually began influencing programs, community action, child protection responses and what became possible when participation was treated as a continuous relationship built on trust, information, dialogue, and shared responsibility.

It aims to document and share Prerana's approach to establishing and strengthening Children's Collectives as **platforms for child participation, leadership development, peer support, and community engagement**. It provides practitioners and organizations with a **practical, experience-based framework** for creating safe spaces where children can build confidence, understand their rights, develop life skills, and contribute to positive change within their communities.

Prerana's Approach to Child Protection

At Prerana, child protection is understood through an intersectional lens that recognizes how caste, disability, gender, economic distress, and family circumstances shape children's vulnerabilities, access to protection, and lived experiences. This understanding informs both our analysis and our interventions, ensuring that child protection responses are grounded in the realities of children's lives. **We believe that children learn and grow best when they take part instead of just listening.** Give a child a map, and they will find the path. Knowledge is power, but for a child, age appropriate knowledge is protection. The Children's Collective provides an important platform for children to reflect on these realities, identify challenges, and collectively explore solutions.



What Our Children's Collectives Do

A cornerstone of child protection is child participation. This has been a central part of the Children's Collective journey. Participation at Prerana goes beyond seeking children's opinions or ensuring that they feel heard. It involves **creating spaces where children can collectively identify challenges, propose solutions, and contribute to decision-making processes**. Equally important is the **shared accountability** that follows. As duty bearers, we consider it our responsibility to report back to the children on the commitments made, actions undertaken, and progress achieved against agreed plans.



Within Aashiyana, this understanding shaped the evolution of the Children's Collective across the communities of Sathe Nagar and Vashi-Turbhe where our team works. Established as regular community-based forums, the Collectives created **safe and consistent spaces** where children could come together to discuss issues affecting their everyday lives, learn about their rights, support one another, and collectively explore solutions.

Since June 2025, **22** Children's Collective meetings have been conducted with children independently coordinating weekly study sessions, referring nearly **30** children requiring support to social workers, participating in **10** community campaigns, electing **10** child representatives, and establishing **One Child Safeguarding Committee** that now leads peer awareness activities.

What changed over time?

Children moved from participating in meetings to coordinating study sessions, referring peers, participating in campaigns, and taking representative roles.

Children Shaping Interventions

The Collectives were designed around the belief that children are, in age-appropriate ways, **experts in their own lives**. Their experiences of school, family relationships, public spaces, safety, discrimination, and access to services provide valuable insights into the realities of childhood within their communities.

Influencing Program Design

One of the clearest examples of this approach was the evolution of study classes. Initially conceived as spaces to support children's education, the classes gradually became **platforms where children regularly reflected on their learning experiences, discussed challenges, and proposed improvements**.

During Collective meetings, children shared that study sessions often conflicted with household responsibilities or school schedules and requested changes in timings to ensure that more children could attend consistently.

In response, facilitators revised study schedules to suit their needs. Rather than remaining beneficiaries of educational support, children began contributing to the planning and implementation of the learning spaces themselves.

Participation became meaningful when their feedback actually changed programme decisions.

Co-Designing Psychosocial Support

Children also influenced the content and approach of psychosocial support activities. Facilitators encouraged children to identify issues they wanted to explore collectively. Discussions on friendships, peer relationships, emotional well-being, communication within families, online safety, consent, gender equality, and bullying emerged directly from children's own experiences.

This ensured that life skills education and counselling sessions addressed concerns that children considered relevant to their everyday lives rather than topics selected solely by program staff.

Creating opportunities for children to shape these conversations also encouraged greater openness, as discussions reflected their lived realities and were grounded in situations familiar to them.

Celebrating Child Rights Week

Children actively participated in planning Child Rights Week by reflecting on previous activities, identifying what they found meaningful, proposing new ideas, and collectively deciding programme priorities.

Their suggestions—including sports events, movie screenings, puppet-making workshops, stakeholder interactions, and community awareness rallies—were incorporated into the final programme design.

Children also played an active role in implementing several of these activities directly influencing programme decisions and outcomes. This participatory planning process strengthened children's ownership, decision-making skills, and confidence in shaping initiatives that reflected their interests and priorities.



Organizing Kishor Melawa

During Collective discussions, adolescent boys expressed that while several programme spaces existed for girls, there were comparatively fewer opportunities for boys to openly discuss issues affecting their lives, including gender expectations, emotional well-being, relationships, consent, and responsible decision-making. **The recommendation to organize a dedicated program for boys emerged from these discussions.** Children subsequently contributed ideas regarding the format, themes, and activities that would make such a space relevant and engaging. The Kishor Melawa of June 2026 therefore reflected children's own identification of an unmet need and their contribution to designing an appropriate response.

Children can identify gaps in programmes that adults may not have recognised. The Kishor Melawa emerged because adolescent boys themselves identified the absence of spaces to discuss issues affecting them.

Children Strengthening Communities

Throughout the year, the Children's Collectives demonstrated that children are not only capable of identifying risks affecting their communities but can also contribute to **preventing harm, supporting their peers, and strengthening community-based child protection mechanisms.**

Leading Community Action

During Collective meetings, members reflected on the reasons **why some children in their communities remained out of school**, identifying migration, financial hardship, lack of awareness among caregivers, and limited follow-up after school dropout as recurring challenges.

Children volunteered to participate in the **School Chalo Abhiyan** campaign alongside Prerana's social workers. They joined **door-to-door outreach visits**, identified children who were not attending school, **informed families** about admission procedures, and **assisted Help Desks** by recording basic information and **guiding caregivers** through the enrollment process.



During review meetings, **children discussed concerns relating to child labour, school dropout, neglect, family distress, and other situations affecting their peers.**



Children were no longer identifying only issues affecting themselves. They began noticing risks affecting other children and connecting them with trusted adults and services.

As a result, children **referred nearly 30 vulnerable children** to Prerana's social workers, contacted the Child Helpline in situations requiring intervention, **linked families with educational support, and informed trusted adults** when they believed a child might be at risk. Through street plays and the **Chalo School Chale** campaign, children also became active agents of awareness and mobilization.

Championing Consent and Child Protection

Discussions within the Collectives drew upon children's everyday experiences, including situations where photographs were taken without permission, adults made decisions on behalf of children without explanation, or physical punishment was normalised within homes and communities.

Through these conversations, children developed a **stronger understanding of personal boundaries, privacy, and the importance of choice**. As a result, children began actively promoting the understanding of boundaries and respecting them, understanding the **importance of seeking consent** within their communities and during campaigns began reminding visitors, volunteers and partner organizations to ask their permission before taking photographs.

Children Engaging with Systems

Meaningful participation is closely linked to children's right to influence decisions that affect their lives. **Participation extends beyond expressing opinions**; it also enables children to understand democratic processes, engage with public institutions, exercise collective responsibility, and recognise themselves as active members of their communities.

Driving Community Change

During review meetings and leadership camps, members identified poor sanitation, waste accumulation, child labour, school dropout, and child marriage as issues requiring collective attention. Together, they **discussed possible responses, identified the government departments** and local representatives responsible for addressing each concern, and **developed simple action plans**. Concerns relating to sanitation were subsequently raised with municipal authorities.



Through **Children Speak 2025**, children from partner organizations collectively presented the **Children's Manifesto** ahead of municipal elections, identifying issues they considered important for **creating safer and more child-friendly communities**. The initiative demonstrated children's growing confidence to participate in civic processes and advocate for issues affecting their lives.



Exploring Governance Systems

During Collective discussions, members requested an exposure visit to the Child Welfare Committee (CWC), explaining that they wanted to learn how decisions concerning children are made, what responsibilities different authorities hold, and how children can seek support when required. Rather than treating this request as an isolated activity, programme staff incorporated it into future planning as an opportunity to strengthen children's legal literacy and understanding of child protection systems.

Building Safer Communities

Perhaps the strongest example of shared governance emerged through the establishment of the **Child Safeguarding Committee**. The committee was created through a participatory process in which children discussed the purpose of such a mechanism, identified the qualities required in committee members, selected representatives, and collectively defined the committee's responsibilities. Rather than functioning as a symbolic body, committee members assumed responsibility for promoting child protection within the community by conducting awareness sessions, encouraging children to use anonymous suggestion boxes, explaining available reporting mechanisms, and supporting peers in accessing appropriate services, including the Child Helpline when necessary.

The Evolution of Participation

Children moved from learning about systems → wanting to engage with systems → taking responsibility within community protection mechanisms.

Children Transforming Relationships

Throughout the Children's Collective journey, one of the most significant changes observed was the gradual transformation in how adults engaged with children—not as passive beneficiaries, but as individuals whose experiences and perspectives could strengthen programmes, inform community action, and improve child protection responses.

Participation changes adults too.

Parents approached programme staff after hearing about activities through other children, while referrals from Child Safety Forums, Bal Mitra Groups, and neighbourhood volunteers increased as community confidence in the Collectives grew. When Anganwadis stopped functioning, parents collectively approached the ICDS department to demand action. Similarly, when a child was being publicly scolded by an adult, another community member intervened and offered support. Child protection therefore became a shared community responsibility rather than remaining solely the concern of NGO social workers or statutory authorities.

The experience of the Children's Collectives demonstrates that participation is fundamentally relational. Sustainable participation cannot be achieved simply by encouraging children to speak; it also depends on adults being prepared to listen, reflect, adapt, and remain accountable. When this reciprocal relationship develops, participation moves beyond consultation to become a shared practice that strengthens families, communities, and systems of child protection.



Children Breaking Norms

Reflecting on the Children's Collectives, a Prerana Social Worker observed that one of the most significant changes during the year was seeing girls become more confident, find their voice, and recognise the importance of speaking up.

One adolescent girl shared:

Earlier, I was a very quiet girl. After joining the Children's Collective, I found the confidence to speak. Now I understand how important it is to express what we think.

Participation also encouraged children to question and challenge gender stereotypes. Reflecting on the Life Skills Education sessions, another adolescent shared:

I used to believe that girls should not step outside the house. Through the Life Skills Education sessions, I unlearned many of those ideas. I now understand that girls have their own opinions, dreams, and choices, and that these deserve to be respected.

These reflections remind us that participation changes not only what children do, but also how they understand themselves and others. ***It changed not only children's confidence to speak, but how some children understood gender, choice and their own agency.***



The Children's Collectives demonstrate that meaningful child participation is both a right and a powerful strategy for strengthening community-based child protection. When children are provided with information, safe spaces, supportive adults, and genuine opportunities to influence decisions, they become active contributors to their families and communities rather than passive recipients of services. Equally, participation transforms adults by encouraging them to listen, share decision-making, and remain accountable to children. Prerana's experience reaffirms that sustainable child protection is built through partnerships between children and adults, where children's voices are respected, acted upon, and recognised as essential to creating safer, more inclusive, and responsive communities. Children's participation therefore becomes not only a right but an essential strategy for building sustainable community-based child protection systems.



* Image blurred to protect the identity of the children

What the Field Taught Us

- ***Participation must lead to influence.***
Children need to see that what they say can change decisions.
- ***Children identify things adults may miss.***
Their everyday experience gives them a different understanding of programme and community needs.
- ***Children can contribute to protection, but should not carry the responsibility for protection.***
Their role works when trusted adults, social workers and referral mechanisms remain accessible.
- ***Participation requires adults to change too.***
Listening is meaningful only when adults are prepared to respond, adapt and remain accountable.
- ***Participation grows gradually.***
Children may begin by expressing opinions, but with information, trust and opportunities, they can move towards collective action, engagement with systems and shared decision-making.

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