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### **Participation in diverse life situations for people with disability: a vision for the future**

The ultimate purpose of our work in health and education with children, adolescents, and adults with impairments, and their families, is to promote optimal participation in life. There has been confusion, however, about what constitutes ‘participation’. We have identified two essential elements of participation: attendance (i.e. being in the life situation) and involvement (i.e. the experience of participation while there).<sup>1</sup> These elements of participation provide clarity for intervention targets, intervention approaches, and outcome measurement.

In 2020, we know a lot about participation in childhood onset disability. We know, for example, that restrictions to attendance in life situations are common because suitable programmes may not be available, or if they are, may not be accessible. When attendance in life situations is possible, we know that involvement is dependent on needed accommodations to the activity or context (social, physical, attitudinal) being available. Whether those accommodations are acceptable to everyone in the situation will influence present and future involvement. We recognize that participation is not influenced by diagnosis, per se, and therefore, a ‘non-categorical’ approach<sup>2</sup> to practice and research is warranted.

Individual functional limitations do play a role in participation outcomes, but the most important barriers to participation are in the environment: both the broad social and physical structures of our communities, and, critically, the activity settings or situations where **This is the author manuscript accepted for publication and has undergone full peer review but has not been through the copyediting, typesetting, pagination and proofreading process, which may lead to differences between this version and the [Version of Record](#). Please cite this article as [doi: 10.1111/DMCN.14399](https://doi.org/10.1111/DMCN.14399)**

participation takes place. The environment and context are also where the greatest support for participation can be realized. Emergent evidence shows that increased participation can reduce impairments and improve mental health, cognitive ability, and physical performance.<sup>3</sup>

While there are still things to be learned, especially about the experience of involvement across the lifespan, we know enough to act now. The challenge is to change service structures and mandates and break down the silos between sectors, to enable delivery of ‘real-world’ interventions in natural contexts; this is where effective participation interventions are located. Cost-benefit considerations are essential, but so too is a longitudinal outlook. Our International Alliance of Academies of Childhood Disability (IAACD)<sup>4</sup> provides a new impetus and a platform for shared work, to increase the pace of change in this area around the world.

Participation strategies can be shared. Envisage an international bank of solution-focused strategies for environmental and activity adaptations developed in cocreation with children, adolescents, adults, families, and their community organizations. These interventions would aim to shift community knowledge and skills about what are, and how to make, suitable accommodations to ensure inclusion. When packaged, i.e. individualized, contextualized, and tailored for specific aspirations and needs, such interventions will also act to shift attitudes and expectations such that inclusive attendance and involvement become simply what happens. Participation-focused interventions that impact on body functions through enabling engagement in real-life situations make great sense in low-resourced settings, as well as throughout our richly resourced countries.

If we are to be visionary, we must set our sights on a future where all people, regardless of impairment/health condition or context, have equal opportunities to choose and experience the range of life situations that are important to them. This is a mandate for the Australasian Academy of Cerebral Palsy and Developmental Medicine (AusACPD) and the IAACD.

Reaching a vision requires strategy. The AusACPD has contributed to an Australia and New Zealand Cerebral Palsy Strategy that used diverse community consultation to set goals for a changed future for individuals with cerebral palsy.<sup>5</sup> Of the four goals, the first is to promote inclusion and active participation in all aspects of life, from an individual level to community and societal levels. The AusACPD’s 10th Biennial Conference – taking place in Perth Western Australia in March – has the theme ‘2020 Visionaries’. The programme is

inclusive and future-focused, providing evidence and skills for quality practices that will optimize outcomes for those with childhood-onset disability across their lifespan. See you there!

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