



STORY 2

Learning from children and young people about barriers and enablers to sharing concerns

June 2024

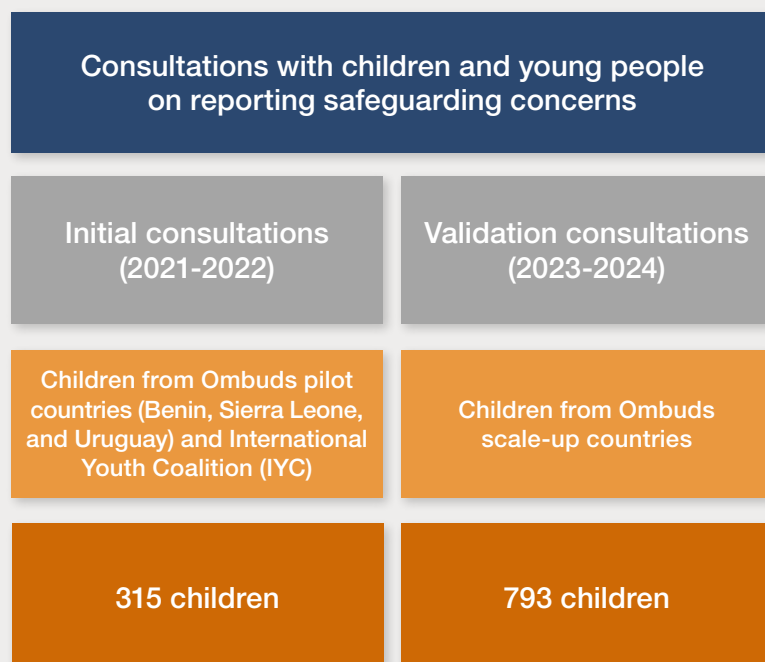
Introduction

The Ombuds Office for SOS Children's Villages is actively listening to and learning from children and young people's experiences, views, and suggestions to:

- improve children and young people's safety and well-being.
- strengthen child safeguarding systems.
- increase accountability to children and young people.
- design and implement an ombuds approach that is accessible, relevant, and responsive to the needs and rights of children and young people ([see Story 1](#)).

This story shares children and young people's perspectives on barriers and enablers to sharing safeguarding concerns and complaints within SOS Children's Villages programmes and services. To date, over 1,100 children and young people have been consulted. They range in age from 10 to 24 years old; approximately half were female. They live in many regions and countries, and have diverse abilities and backgrounds (religion, ethnicity, school status; see Figure 1).¹

FIGURE 1. Overview of consultations held with children and young people on reporting and sharing safeguarding concerns



Those consulted include children and young people living in SOS Children's Villages alternative care services and those involved in Family Strengthening Programmes. Consultations are ongoing as the Ombuds Office scales up across SOS Children's Villages in more than 70 countries.

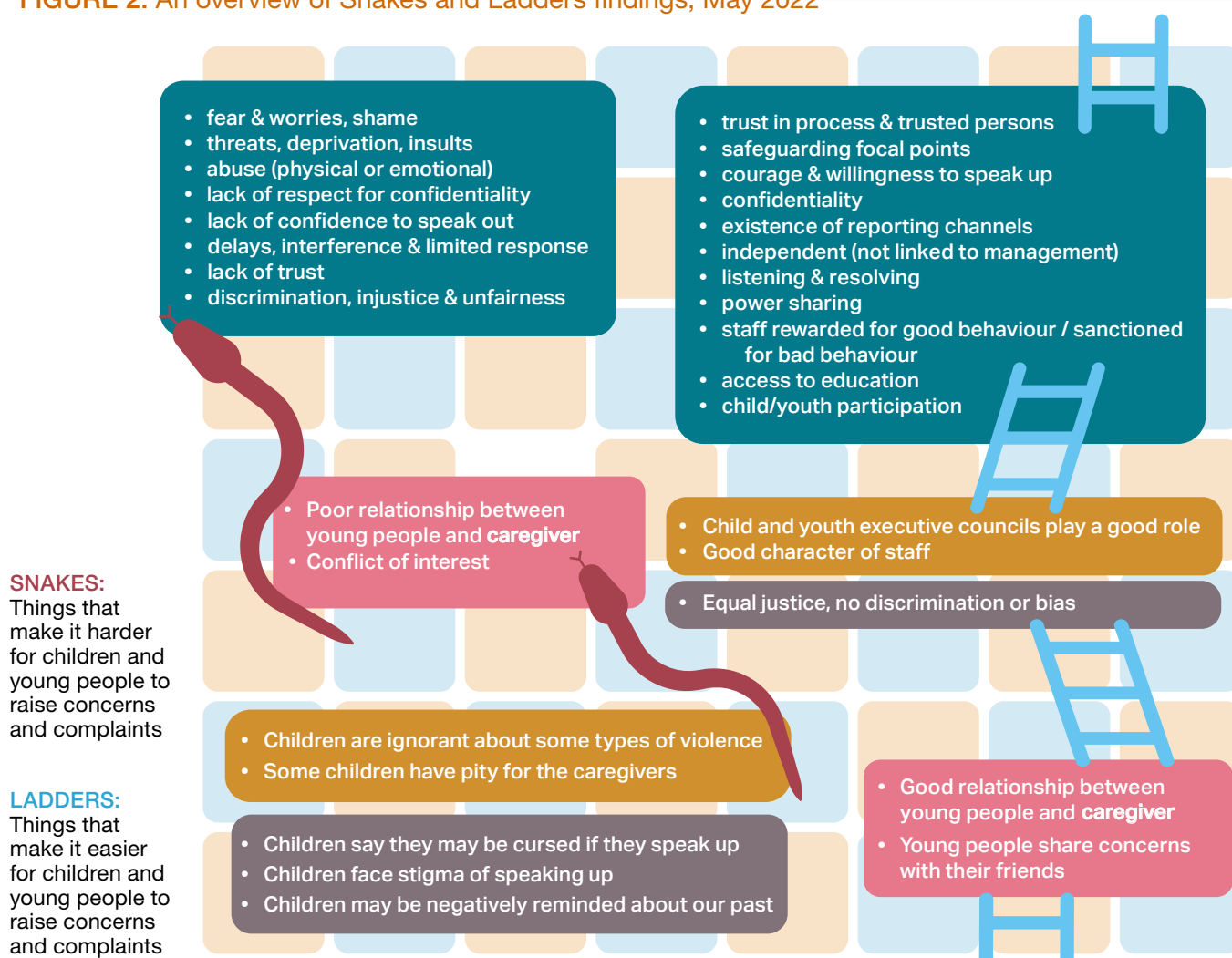
Methodology

The global ombuds team, led by [Proteknôn Foundation](#), developed [consultation guidelines](#) for SOS Children's Villages national Ombuds Advisory Groups to organise, facilitate, and document an initial information-sharing and trust-building

session and a half-day consultation with children and young people in specific age groups.

Consultation activities were designed to be child-friendly and participatory. One activity included an adaptation of the "Snakes and Ladders" board game that was conducted with gender-based groups. Children and young people reflected on the most significant barriers (snakes) and enablers (ladders) to raising concerns and complaints within SOS Children's Villages programmes and services (Figure 2). They also identified groups of children who face additional barriers to raising concerns. Lastly, they identified the ideal qualities they would want in an ombuds.

FIGURE 2. An overview of Snakes and Ladders findings, May 2022



Key findings

●● “WE THINK THAT IF WE COMPLAIN
WE WILL NOT BE TAKING SERIOUSLY.”
———●● (14-17-year-old participant)

The consultations provide insights into the key barriers and enablers for children and young people who wish to raise safeguarding concerns or complaints related to SOS Children's Villages programming and services. Note that these findings represent young people's responses to specific questions. They do not represent any child's full experience of care in SOS Children's Villages. Nor can the findings be generalised. Rather, they remind us of factors that help and hinder safe reporting in any context.

Factors that hinder safe expression of concerns and complaints

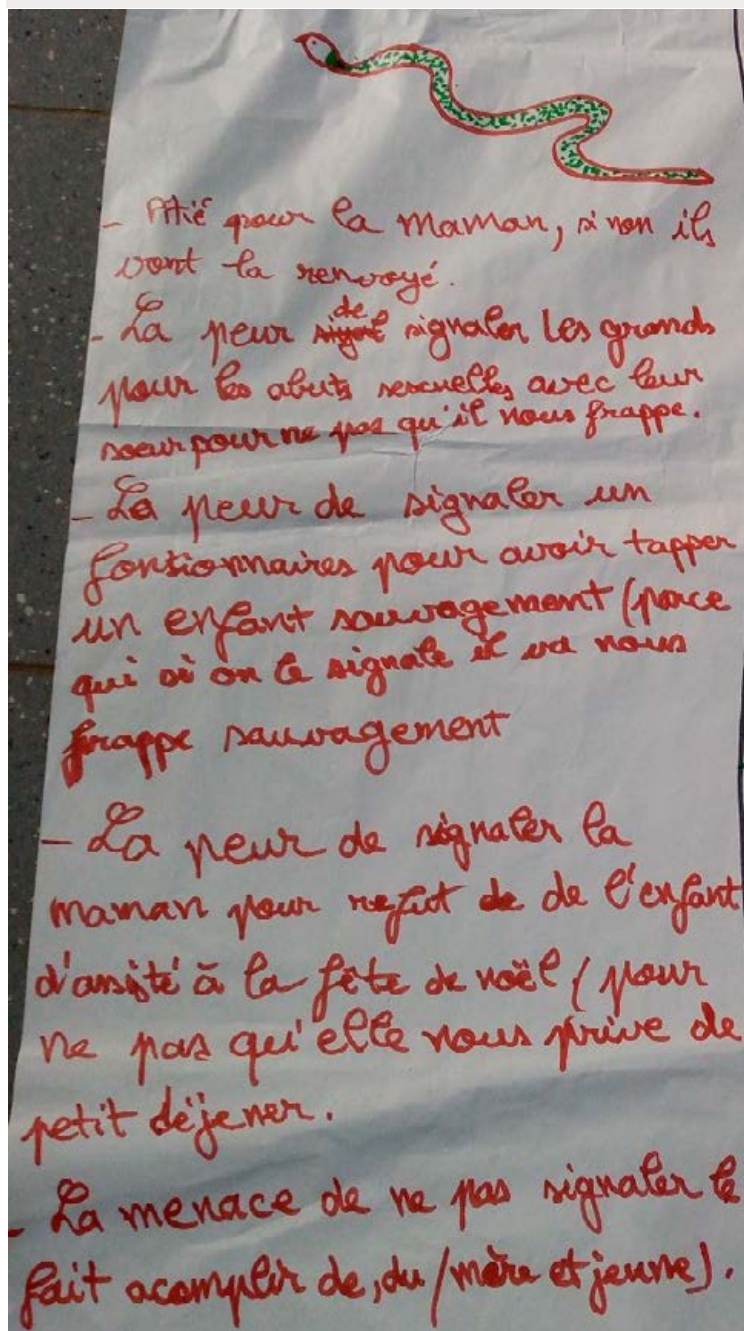
Children and young people shared that the most significant barriers to expressing concerns and complaints within SOS Children's Villages programmes and services are:

- fears and worries about the repercussions of reporting
- threats, deprivation, insults, abuse, and emotional violence
- lack of respect for confidentiality
- lack of confidence to speak out

Children and young people across the pilot countries, and International Youth Coalition (IYC) members, all identified these same barriers (see examples in Figure 3). Children and young people in the Ombuds Office scale-up countries have also identified these barriers in consultations.

These barriers are intertwined: If children share their concerns in a setting where confidentiality is not respected, they face increased risks of threats, deprivations and other forms of violence and abuse, which then increases their fear and worry and reduces confidence to speak out.

FIGURE 3. Examples of “snakes”



●● “WE HAVE AN ANTI-SNITCHING CULTURE. SO, IF YOU SEE SOMETHING THAT IS WRONG, IT IS BETTER TO KEEP QUIET ABOUT THIS. IF YOU SAY SOMETHING, YOU GET INTO REALLY HOT WATER.”

———●● (Female youth)

Additional barriers mentioned by children and young people across countries include:

- lack of availability of child safeguarding focal points
- conflicts of interest
- lack of trust in the reporting process, especially due to delays
- interference or limited responses to concerns
- discrimination, injustice, and unfairness
- shame and stigma

Fears and worries about the repercussions of reporting

●● “WE ARE AFRAID OF STIGMATISATION, INTIMIDATION, DEPRIVATION, AND ISOLATION BY THOSE AGAINST WHOM CONCERNS ARE RAISED.”

———●● (14 to 17-year-old participant)

Across each location and age and gender group, children and young people expressed fears and worries about repercussions from reporting concerns and complaints. Worries included pity for the person they wanted to report, and concern that the caregiver or staff member may be sent away.

Fears included:

- being blamed for someone being fired
- being mistreated, deprived, or punished
- being misunderstood or ignored
- giving SOS Children’s Villages a bad reputation

Threats, deprivation, insults, abuse, and emotional violence

●● “WE FEAR BEING BEATEN UP FOR NO REASON BY THE PERSON WE HAVE REPORTED.”

———●● (10–13-year-old participant)

Children and young people described a wide range of threats they may face if they report concerns and complaints, including deprivation and physical and emotional abuse by their caregivers, other staff, and/or their peers. IYC members emphasised that their fears are enhanced - and risks of emotional abuse increase - when children and young people have a poor relationship with their SOS Children’s Villages caregiver.

Lack of respect for confidentiality

●● “THEY WILL EXPLAIN OUR CONCERNS TO THOSE AGAINST WHOM WE HAVE RAISED SUCH CONCERNS.”

———●● (22-year-old participant)

Lack of respect for confidentiality is a key barrier to children and young people sharing their concerns and complaints, and it enhances their fears of negative repercussions. Young people described the importance of anonymity to reporting concerns.

For instance, a youth explained that if a beneficiary is seen entering the office where concerns are to be raised and an investigation is later initiated, the beneficiary may be targeted as the one who raised the concern. The child may even be stigmatised and subjected to food deprivation, discrimination, and isolation.

Lack of confidence to speak out

●● “WE ARE NOT TAUGHT TO SPEAK UP IN OUR CULTURAL CONTEXT. WE ARE TOLD TO KEEP QUIET, TO RESPECT ADULTS. THERE IS A CULTURAL CHALLENGE; YOU DON’T GET TO SPEAK UP ON A LOT OF THINGS.”

●● (Female youth)

Many children and young people lack the confidence to speak out about concerns and complaints due to concerns about confidentiality and the fear of negative repercussions. Existing socio-cultural norms around child-adult relationships also make it harder to raise concerns. Children are often not encouraged to express their views and feelings and are expected to not question an adult’s behaviour, even if they know the behaviour is wrong.

●● “IGNORANCE OF CHILDREN’S RIGHTS EXISTS AMONG SOME CHILDREN IN THE FAMILY STRENGTHENING PROGRAMME.”

●● (10–17-year-old participant)

Children noted that those who experience insufficient care and protection are more likely to have poor self-esteem, which further undermines their confidence to express their views and concerns.

●● “I WANT TO TALK ABOUT COURAGE AND WILLINGNESS TO SPEAK UP. MANY CHILDREN IN SOS VILLAGES ARE NOT USED TO HEARING GOOD THINGS ABOUT THEM. ALL THE TIME THEY FACE INSULTS AND MANY BAD THINGS. IF IT IS LIKE THIS, THEN THEY DON’T HAVE THE COURAGE TO SPEAK UP. THERE IS A LACK OF CONFIDENCE.”

●● (Female youth)

In some situations, children may also lack information and awareness about their rights, where to report concerns, or different forms of violence.

●● “NOT HAVING ENOUGH KNOWLEDGE ON CHILD PROTECTION AND SAFEGUARDING ISSUES MAKES IT DIFFICULT TO SHARE OUR CONCERNS.”

●● (18-year-old participant)

Lack of availability of safeguarding focal points and conflicts of interest

●● “WHEN CHILDREN OR YOUNG PEOPLE RAISE CONCERNS AGAINST STAFF, THE AUTHORITIES LISTEN AND BELIEVE IN WHAT THE STAFF SAYS MORE THAN THEY WOULD DO FOR THE CHILDREN.”

—————●● (18–24-year-old participant)

Young people explained that the safeguarding focal point and other key staff are not always available to listen to them. This may be due to being busy with other professional activities (many focal points are not in the role full-time), being on holiday, or due to a perceived conflict of interest. For example, young people described how their concerns may not be taken seriously by the safeguarding person or by senior management if those individuals have a close relationship with the caregiver or staff they are complaining about.

Lack of trust in the process, especially due to delays, interference, or limited responses

●● “IT IS VERY COMMON THAT THEY DON’T BELIEVE US. ADULTS ARE BELIEVED.”

—————●● (16-year-old participant)

When a young person’s perspectives are given less weight than an adult’s, it undermines the child’s trust in the safeguarding and complaint-handling process. Limited responses, interference, and/or delays also decrease children and young people’s trust in the process.

●● “THERE IS A LACK OF TRUST... WHEN I WAS LIVING IN THE VILLAGE, I WANTED TO REPORT ABOUT SOME OFFICIAL STUFF TO THE DIRECTOR. WHEN I TOLD THEM ABOUT MY REPORT, THEY SAID THEY WOULD TAKE ACTION, BUT THERE WAS NO PUNISHMENT FOR THE OTHER SIDE.”

—————●● (Male youth)

Discrimination, injustice, and unfairness

●● “THERE IS INJUSTICE, REVENGE BETWEEN CHILDREN, AND UNFAIRNESS OF BROTHERS WITHOUT REASON.”

—————●● (10–13-year-old participant)

Across the pilot countries, children and young people mentioned examples of discrimination, injustice, unfairness, and power dynamics that influence the way concerns or complaints are processed. For instance, adolescents discussed factors linked to gender inequality, and adolescent girls mentioned the prevalence of machismo (strong, aggressive male pride) that increases girls’ risks of violence. A boy mentioned regionalism, implying there was discrimination based on ethnicity.

●● “[WE EXPERIENCE] NOT BEING UNDERSTOOD, NOT BEING LISTENED TO, DISCRIMINATION, BULLYING.”

—————●● (14–17-year-old participant)

Shame and stigma

●● “A LOT OF CHILDREN WHO TALK ABOUT SEXUAL ABUSE, THEY ARE ASHAMED AND FEEL AFRAID. THEY FEEL THAT THEIR STORIES WILL BE SHARED. I THINK IT IS CONNECTED TO THE LACK OF TRUST AND SHAME.”
—————●● (Male youth)

Children and young people from different settings described feelings of shame that are associated with raising and reporting concerns. Shame was especially felt if a child or young person had experienced sexual harassment or abuse. Participants described the stigma associated with speaking up about concerns, being cursed, and the stigma associated with being reminded about their past:

●● “AT TIMES THEY SAY THEY WILL PLACE A CURSE ON US, AND THAT MAKES US AFRAID TO SHARE OUR CONCERNS.”
—————●● (18–24-year-old participant)

Factors that enable safe expression of concerns and complaints

The most frequently mentioned factors that enable safe expression of concerns and complaints by children and young people within SOS Children's Villages programmes and services are:

- trusted persons
- trust in the process
- safeguarding focal points, reporting channels, and a variety of ways to raise concerns
- courage and willingness to speak up about concerns
- an adult's ability to listen, resolve complaints effectively, and respect confidentiality

Each of these factors was emphasised by children and young people across the pilot countries and by IYC members. They have since been highlighted in wider consultations in Ombuds Office scale-up countries (see examples in Figure 4). Additional enablers some groups of children and young people mentioned were:

- independent, non-discriminatory mechanisms
- strong child and youth participation mechanisms
- self-care and support from friends
- access to education and good character
- rewards for good behaviour and sanctions for bad behaviour

Groups of children and young people who face additional barriers to raising concerns:

- **Children and young people in the Family Strengthening Programme**, as it is harder for them to confidentially raise issues with the safeguarding focal point, especially if their homes are in rural settings and/or far away from the SOS Children's Village where the safeguarding focal point is based
- **Younger children**, as they can be more easily threatened by their caregivers
- **Children with disabilities**, especially those who face challenges to expressing their concerns
- **Those who experience discrimination** due to sexual orientation, skin colour, or physical appearance, such as being overweight

Trusted persons and trust in the process

●● “IF YOU HAVE A RELATIONSHIP WITH SOMEONE YOU TRUST, IT MAKES IT EASIER TO TALK ABOUT YOUR CONCERNS. IF THERE IS AN SOS MOTHER OR AN SOS CAREGIVER THAT YOU TRUST, THEN IT IS REALLY, REALLY EASY TO SHARE CONCERNS. ALSO, IF YOU FEEL THAT SOMETHING IS GOING TO BE DONE ABOUT, IF I SEE THAT IT IS AN ORGANISATION THAT TAKES THINGS SERIOUSLY, YES, I WILL SPEAK UP.”

●● (Female youth)

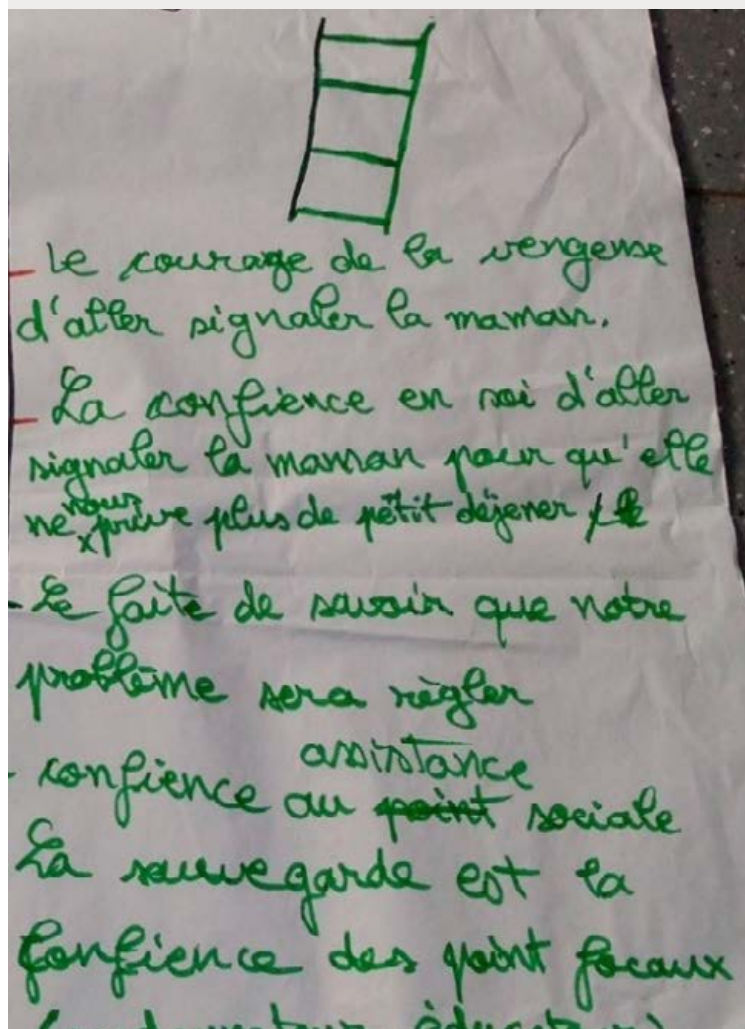
Children and young people emphasised the importance of having a trusted person to talk to. IYC members particularly highlighted the importance of a trusting relationship between the mother and the child/young person as well as the need for a shared understanding of children's rights.

Other trusted persons included:

- a friend
- a caregiver
- an SOS Children's Villages coordinator
- the safeguarding focal point
- a social worker
- the national director

Also important is trust in the safeguarding process and a belief that the person confided in will take concerns seriously, act promptly, and protect their rights to privacy and confidentiality.

FIGURE 4. Examples of “ladders”



●● “THE LADDERS ARE COURAGE, TRUST IN THE PERSON TO WHOM ONE WANTS TO COMPLAIN... TRUSTWORTHY PEOPLE.”

●● (18–24-year-old participant)

Safeguarding focal points, reporting channels, and a variety of ways to raise concerns

● ● “THE OFFICE WHERE WE CAN REPORT OUR CONCERNS SHOULD BE LOCATED OUT OF SOS CHILDREN’S VILLAGE BUT WITHIN THE COMMUNITY WHERE NOBODY SEES US WHEN WE GO THERE TO SHARE OUR CONCERNS...[ALSO] HAVING A DIRECT CONTACT NUMBER (HOT LINE) SO THE COMPLAINT COULD BE CHANNELLED WITHOUT PHYSICALLY GOING TO THE OFFICE.”

————— ● ● (18–24-year-old participant)

Children and young people described the importance of having clear reporting channels and safeguarding focal points within SOS Children’s Villages programmes. Moreover, children should be offered a variety of ways to report and raise their concerns in confidence with the safeguarding focal point or another trusted person. Young people in Sierra Leone described how the location of the person they report to - or the future Ombuds Office - should help ensure anonymity when making a report. Awareness raising among children and young people on the reporting channels and safeguarding focal points is also important so that all are aware who to tell if they feel unsafe or uncomfortable.

The safeguarding focal point should have skills to respectfully listen and respond to children’s concerns and feelings. They should also have the power to act to prevent and protect children from harm. It is critical that children and young people have opportunities to build relationships of trust with the safeguarding focal point.

● ● “[WE NEED] DIFFERENT REPORTING CHANNELS... COMPUTERS, FOCAL POINTS, INTERNET, WHATSAPP, CHILD/ YOUTH EXECUTIVE COUNCIL, HELPLINE, THE SUGGESTION BOX.”

————— ● ● (14–17-year-old participant)

Courage and willingness to speak up about concerns

● ● “I NEED TO BE SELF-CONFIDENT AND BELIEVE THAT MY FEARS SHOULD NOT STOP ME FROM SEEKING SUPPORT FROM THE SAFEGUARDING OFFICE.”

————— ● ● (14–17-year-old participant)

Participants in different locations emphasised the need to be courageous and willing to speak up. Being courageous was linked to being self-confident and knowing to whom to bring concerns. Young people in Uruguay concluded that being open with people is a key aspect of sharing concerns. Due to cultural attitudes that make it harder for children to speak out, IYC members suggested increasing efforts to cultivate freedom of expression, such as supporting clubs, youth training, public speaking, etc.

● ● “[WE NEED] ...CONFIDENCE TO REPORT THE MOTHER SO SHE WON’T DEPRIVE US OF BREAKFAST ANYMORE.”

————— ● ● (10–13-year-old participant)

Adults' ability to listen, resolve complaints effectively, and respect confidentiality

●● “OFFER THE OPPORTUNITY TO YOUNG PEOPLE TO SPEAK PRIVATELY AND ENSURE CONFIDENTIALITY. YOUNG PEOPLE VIEWS NEED TO BE TAKEN SERIOUSLY, AND THEY WILL NEED TO SEE AN ACTION.”

●● (Male youth)

Attentive listening and prompt action by adults is needed to resolve children and young people's concerns and complaints. All concerns raised by children and young people need to be taken seriously, without discrimination. As mentioned, confidentiality is key to making it easier for children and young people to share their concerns. Children need to trust that their concerns will not be shared widely with others; they will only be shared with those who most need to know *in order to act*.

●● “IMMEDIATE ACTION NEEDS TO BE TAKEN FOR ALL COMPLAINT/ CONCERNS AND JUSTICE GIVEN IN A VERY TRANSPARENT MANNER.”

●● (14–17-year-old participant)

Independent, non-discriminatory mechanisms

●● “THE OMBUDS SHOULD BE A NEUTRAL PERSON, NOT LINKED TO THE MANAGER OR DIRECTOR.”

●● (Male youth)

FIGURE 5. The National Ombuds' 10 commitments to young people



Young people highlighted the importance of independent reporting mechanisms—such as the Ombuds Office—to provide transparent, unbiased, non-discriminatory follow-up and resolution of concerns. To avoid conflicts of interest, the Ombuds should not be managed by SOS Children's Villages or have personal relationships with staff members. IYC members suggested that there be more transparent power sharing among caregivers and senior management so that caregivers were also unafraid to share concerns.

●● “[THERE SHOULD BE] NO PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP WITH OTHER STAFF TO PREVENT COMPROMISE OF MATTERS/ CONCERNS...EQUAL JUSTICE SHOULD BE GIVEN TO ALL NO MATTER THE AGE OR GENDER...TAKING EVERY CONCERN SERIOUSLY, NO DISCRIMINATORY TREATMENT.”

—————●● (18–24-year-old participant)

Children and young people also called for greater accountability. They wanted inquirers (i.e., those who go to talk with the Ombuds) to receive clear feedback on how their concerns were considered. They also felt greater efforts were needed to hold perpetrators accountable, to have sanctions for bad behaviour, and to reward the good behaviour of caregivers and other staff.

Child and youth participation and the role of existing child/youth councils or groups

●● “HOLDING SESSIONS BETWEEN CHILDREN AND AUTHORITIES ALLOWS CHILDREN TO EXPRESS THEMSELVES FREELY.”

—————●● (18–24-year-old participant)

Children and young people mentioned roles that they could play to enhance safeguarding and the resolution of concerns. For example, they can raise awareness among their peers about safeguarding and reporting mechanisms. They can encourage follow-up. Representatives from child/youth councils or groups can also play an important role in enhancing accountability to children and ensuring that children’s concerns are seriously considered.

Self-care and support from friends

●● “[WE VALUE] BELIEVING AND BEING BELIEVED, ENCOURAGING EACH OTHER, ADVISING, EMPATHY, TRUST, SUPPORT...”

—————●● (14–17-year-old participant)

Children and young people in Uruguay specifically mentioned the value of self-care and supportive friends. IYC members described how young people often confide in their peers; thus, it is important to train and support young people to assist their peers.

Access to education and good character

●● “FROM THE BEGINNING, EACH CHILD SHOULD BE GIVEN EDUCATION WHERE THEY GAIN KNOWLEDGE AND BUILD CONFIDENCE TO SPEAK TO SOS ABOUT THEIR PROBLEMS. IF THEY ARE NOT GIVEN THE RIGHT EDUCATION, THEY WILL LOSE CONFIDENCE, AND THEY WILL BE UNABLE TO SPEAK TO THEIR REPRESENTATIVES.”

—————●● (Male youth)

Children and young people identified access to education and their choice of skill training as a factor that enabled them to speak up. They felt that being educated or involved in relevant training increased their self-confidence. Having good character, being loyal and moral, and helping one another were also mentioned by children in Benin as factors that promote confidence.

Conclusion

By engaging children and young people in consultations about barriers and enablers to sharing their concerns and complaints, we gain a clearer picture of what children and young people need to safely and confidently speak up, particularly in alternative care contexts.

Their insights also inform us about what it takes for an organisational culture and environment to feel and be safe and promote child wellbeing. The Ombuds Office is a key intervention that creates safe spaces for open dialogue, which helps foster safe culture and environments.

Findings from these consultations demonstrate that children and young people in SOS Children's Villages need an **independent, confidential, and impartial** ombuds to listen to their concerns and help them find solutions. By establishing and collaborating with an independent Ombuds Office, SOS Children's Villages is demonstrating

its ongoing commitment to learn from and be accountable to the children and young people it cares for and serves.

These consultations have informed, and continue to inform, the development of the Ombuds Office and how it operates. Learning and feedback from children and young people are continually evaluated and integrated into Ombuds Office practice and the scale-up process. In this way, child participation ensures accountability and improves the accessibility, effectiveness, quality, and independence of the Ombuds Office.



Read the other stories in this series to learn more about child participation in the Ombuds Office for SOS Children's Villages.



STORY 1:
Children and young people's participation in the design and implementation of the Ombuds Office



STORY 3:
Children and young people's participation in recruitment for the Ombuds Office

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¹ The countries involved in the Ombuds Office scale-up consultations include Albania, Angola, Bangladesh, Burundi, Cabo Verde, Cote d'Ivoire, Gambia, Mauritius, Niger, the Philippines, and Zambia.