

FAQ 14: Should I provide incentives for children to take part in the research?

What's the issue?

Researchers are of different opinions when it comes to rewarding children for taking part in research. Some report that it is useful to motivate them; others claim that children should take part voluntarily.

Common practice

The researcher can, at the end, offer a small gift as a token of gratitude. However, this should only happen at the end of the interview.

Pitfalls to avoid

It is best to avoid promising children valuable incentives which can overstimulate their participation and therefore put in danger the quality of the findings.

Researchers' experiences

I did not provide any incentives and the children were free not to participate, but I did choose to give each child, after the research was completed, a symbolic token of their participation (a diploma of participation and a candy bag for each), though the ideal gift would have been to actually give them the opportunity to put their contributions into practice (I was asked several times whether their stories would indeed be adapted for television). I suppose that, as with adults, it is important to pass on the idea that their contribution is really going to matter. (Sofia Leitão, Portugal)

Marks obviously cannot be given. A strategy I used to motivate pupils to write substantial political essays was to give 'pluses' or 'small marks' (which were summed into real marks at the end of the term by the teacher) for the length and quality of argumentation, regardless of the content and direction of statements. The strategy justified itself: I received several solid essays representing a wide variety of opinions on sensitive political issues. (Veronika Kalmus, Estonia)

I encountered a problem regarding the seriousness with which young teenagers dealt with it. There were a number of instances where responses given were anecdotal, rude, even 'spicy' to the extent that they had to be disregarded. Although the respondents filled in the questionnaire in the classroom (rather than at home), it appears that some of them did not take it seriously enough all of the time. Solution: I'm not sure there is one. It's not as if they can be relied upon to give sincere and articulate answers in exchange for something (a gift, a prize) because, even in this case, there is no guarantee they will 'behave'. (Lisa Tsaliki, Greece)

This is a question on which custom and practice varies considerably, by country, by academic discipline, and by the age of the child. Psychologists are more used to providing incentives than sociologists; for example, teenagers expect them more than young children. There can be no hard and fast rules, therefore. In the UK Children Go Online project, children who participated in the focus groups, individual interviews, or the survey were given an incentive – typically a voucher that could be spent in a high street shop (for clothing, music, or books). The amounts varied depending on time commitment but were around 15–35 Euros. This is clearly an expense that must be built into the project budget in advance. For reasons of taxation, it may need to be termed an incentive to cover time and expenses, rather than a payment. Usefully, since a signature to acknowledge receipt is needed, this could be requested at the same time that the ethical consent form is signed. Incidentally, for family interviews I observe that, although the voucher has been offered to the family, it is generally handed to the child. (Sonia Livingstone, UK)