

FAQ 15: What are the best ways to interview children?

What's the issue?

In general, good practice in interviewing children applies to everyone, including adults. But since children are generally interviewed by adults, and since they may not find it so easy to express themselves, researchers have developed a range of strategies for interviewing children. In particular, a standard, lengthy series of questions and answers may not work as well for children as for adults.

Common practice

- Try to break up the interview into meaningful subsections, each with their own short introduction, mixing one-to-one interviews with other kinds of tasks such as asking children to draw a picture relevant to the topic, or using puppets or dolls in role-play games for very young children, or using various pen-and-paper exercises.
- Some children may feel uneasy or afraid of making a mistake. Encourage the child and make him/her feel comfortable in answering despite what the answer may be, even if this may mean disclosing sensitive information.
- Use cards with images or words on them (e.g. pictures of media) and ask the child to sort them into meaningful groups (e.g. Which are cool? Or which could you not live without?). Ask them to explain their classification. Include some blank cards in case they want to add something. Be ready to respond to the needs of different children who may have different needs. Not every child will appreciate working with cards or words, so vary interviewing patterns depending on your audience.
- Ask them to draw a picture related to an event or topic and then to tell a story to go with this. The researcher and the child may play turn-taking games, switching the roles of teller and told.
- In group interviews, children may talk about the topic in pairs, and then each pair can tell another what they discussed.
- You could construct a mind map, using a large piece of paper, and invite the children to call out ideas or examples linked to the central topic.
- Children may find it hard to sit still, and so try to give them reasons to move about if the interview is lengthy. Alternatively, try changing your body position.
- If asking them about something nearby or in the room, you could ask them to show you (e.g. Can I see your favourite website? Can you show me how your phone does that? Can I see a story you wrote?).
- Towards the end of the interview, it is good practice to feedback to the child(ren) the understanding you have gained, and ask them if it's right or if they wish to correct or add anything.
- Don't forget to remind them that the research is anonymous and confidential and that they can stop at any time. This might make them feel more relaxed.
- Be careful about your clothing – if it is too formal, you risk alienating your young audience; if it is too casual or too trendy, you may come across as “trying too hard” to impress them.
- Whenever possible, it's best to avoid having other adults (parents, teacher) supervising the interview or focus groups, as this may impinge on how spontaneously children respond.

Pitfalls to avoid

- Never give a child the impression there is a right answer, nor laugh at them if they make a mistake. Avoid leading questions at all times (not “Why do you like the internet” but “Do you like the internet? Why do you say that?”).
- Take care that your response options are not implicitly leading: if you ask, do you spend 1, 2, or 3 hours a day online, neither the child who never goes online nor the child who spends 5 hours online will tell you this.
- Think about the order of the questions you ask – begin with a warm-up of easy questions rather than diving straight in to more revealing ones.
- Try not to assume you know what a website, or story, or image means – ask the child to show you, and then ask him/her to describe it (“Why do you like that? What's good about it?” Etc.).

Researchers' experiences

In focus groups with 9- to 11-year-olds, we got the children talking about the internet by telling them a story thus: 'an Alien from another world has been watching people here on the planet Earth very carefully. It has been able to see everything but meeting you is the first opportunity it has had to ask questions about things it has seen. It wants to know what the internet is, and you have to explain....' The researcher placed a large sheet of paper (flip chart) on the table and gave each child a coloured felt pen. In the middle was a picture of a little green alien with speech bubbles around it: the children were asked to fill out the speech bubbles in answer to questions like, what is the internet, where do you use it, what is the best or worst thing about the internet, what is fun or boring about it? Later in the discussion, they were also asked if there were rules for using it. (Sonia Livingstone, UK)

We were examining the use of social media among 9- to 12-year-olds in Greece. During a focus group, a 10-year-old made a reference to pornography, teasing one of her friends. We managed to respond instantly, picking up the new discussion thread. Despite the sensitive nature of this experience, the children in the focus group opened up as a result of the relationship of trust we've built with them, thus helping us improve an already existing dataset with rich new data. The bottom line is that interviewers need to be alert and ready to respond to whichever (new) turn the discussion may take, if this is useful for their research scope. Another time, the teacher who was initially present at a focus group which was taking place in the classroom, left the room following our advice; the children immediately opened up and became more talkative and spontaneous after her departure. (Greek team)

When interviewing people about their use of the internet, I have often found it helpful to give examples of particular search terms or sites that they might visit, to encourage interviewees to go beyond generalities and to respond in more detail. Once when interviewing a group of young teenagers about their use of the internet for music, I gave examples of the kinds of music or bands they might search for (e.g. 'Suppose you wanted to find some music by Boyzone, how would you go about it?'). My interest lay in their internet literacy (did they search for leisure content with more competence than when they searched for schoolwork?). But my examples of bands were a couple of years out of date, and so in one simple question, I lost all the rapport I had carefully built up with the group, reminding them that I was old and adult, quite unlike them, and so occasioning great hilarity and scorn amongst the group. (Sonia Livingstone, UK)

References and further resources

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