

FAQ 18: What are good tips for phrasing questions in a survey to children?

What's the issue?

Phrasing defines the extent to which children understand the questionnaire. It also influences the extent to which they feel comfortable with the survey overall (i.e., they might feel uncomfortable answering questions they do not fully understand or feel are not age-relevant).

Common practice

Researchers recognize the value of the following suggestions:

- Keep questions as short as possible. Ask one question at a time.
- Pilot questions before finalizing the questionnaire to ensure children understand what you are asking and that the response options fit their answers.
- Ask children to respond to affirmative not negative statements (disagreeing with a negatively phrased statement is a cognitively complex task).
- Always balance the number of positive (e.g. agree, agree a lot) and negative response options (e.g. disagree, disagree a lot).
- It can put children at ease if you preface a statement with an introduction that says, "Some children agree with this, and others do not. What do you think?"
- Always separate out the scale midpoint (e.g. partly agree, partly disagree) from the "don't know" response, and ensure the latter is always recorded.
- For attitudinal questions, think carefully if you wish children to answer on behalf of children in general or themselves in particular.
- In case of sensitive questions, it might be a tricky to use age-relevant phrasing (i.e., instead of "pornography", use "inappropriate content"). Make sure you use words that represent already existing cultural practices (in this case, pornography), that are already included in children's vocabulary, without, however, leading the question and without implying negative or positive evaluation ("inappropriate content" may suggest to children that viewing pornography is inappropriate for them per se, and thus lead them to respond accordingly).
- Reverse the direction of some questions to reduce response bias: for example, if saying "yes" to some questions means you like the internet and saying "yes" to others means you don't like it, you could minimize the effect of children's tendency to agree with statements presented to them.
- Use age-relevant terms as well as terms relevant to children's everyday life and use of media.
- If item lists are provided as response options (e.g. lists of media used, lists of activities), then always end with an "other" option. If you have the resources to hand code these, ask the child to specify what the "other" is.

Questions to consider

Is this a topic that can be well addressed using a survey? Do you know the kinds of answers that children are likely to provide? Have you piloted the survey and do you know how long it takes? For young children, will there be someone present to help them or to answer their questions? Should this topic instead be addressed using qualitative methods? If you ask open-ended questions, are you sure you have the resources to code their responses?

Pitfalls to avoid

The pitfalls are implicit in the above advice, and in essence are the same for children as for adults. If a survey questionnaire is too complex or confusing, uses difficult words, has inappropriate response options, doesn't provide a "don't know", "other", or "I don't want to say" response option where needed, asks leading questions etc., you may not know this from the survey administration until you come to analyse the answers. A "don't

know”, “other”, or “I don’t want to say” response option may increase the data quality, as it will reduce the amount of default (or misleading) selections. If the survey is administered as a pen-and-paper survey, children sometimes write rude answers if they don’t like or don’t understand the questions! Large amounts of missing data also provide a clue that you’ve got something wrong.

Examples of good attitudinal questions

From UK Children Go Online questions to low or non-users included: ‘How much do you agree or disagree that ... I’m missing out by not using the internet and email (more); I can find out all I need from books; The internet helps people get ahead in life; I sometimes feel left out when my friends talk about the internet; The internet makes it easier to keep in touch with people; I would like to use the internet more in the future.’ Response options: Agree a lot/Agree a little/Neither agree nor disagree/Disagree a little/Disagree a lot/Don’t know.

From the Parents & Teens 2004 Survey, ‘Do you agree or disagree or don’t know (Note: no scale midpoint provided) that ... If a child isn’t using the internet by the time they start school, they will fall behind their peers; Most teens are not careful enough about the information they give out about themselves online; Teens who use the internet to stay in touch with their friends have better social lives than teens who don’t use the internet to do this; Teens waste a lot of time online, when they could be doing more important things; The internet helps teens do better in school; Too many teens today use the internet to cheat on their schoolwork; Most teens do things online that they wouldn’t want their parents to know about.’

The 2005 National Center for Missing and Exploited Children Survey (Finkelhor, 2006) asked a simple question: ‘How important is the internet in your life, on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being not at all important and 5 being extremely important?’ (Range 1–5) Don’t know/not sure/Refused/Not ascertainable/Not applicable. (Sonia Livingstone and Panayiota Tsatsou, UK)

A researcher’s experience

In my ‘mobile phone’ questionnaire, I realized that it is not a good idea to have too many sub-questions under the same question as this confuses respondents. For example, a question about ‘use of camera on the mobile’ was subdivided to no less than 14 subsequent questions which sometimes confused the respondents. The lesson to be learned is to have fewer questions, and not too many sub-questions. Each sub-question has to be worded so as not to leave any space for misinterpretations or variable answers. (Liza Tsaliki, Greece)

References and further resources

- Finkelhor, D. (2006). *The Second Youth Internet Safety Survey (2005-2006)*. Crimes Against Children Research Center & National Center for Missing and Exploited Children.
- Fowler, F. J. (1993) *Survey research methods* (2nd ed.). Newbury Park, CA, London, and New Delhi: Sage Publications.
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- Saris, W., E., & Gallhofer, I., N. (2007). *Design, evaluation and analysis of questionnaires for survey research*. Hoboken, Wiley.