

FAQ 21: Who should interview children – what difference does it make?

What's the issue?

The asymmetry in power between adults and children can create distortions when adults interview children. Children may become anxious, try too hard to please, their privacy may be easily invaded, and so forth. The risk is that the researcher will obtain misleading information containing social desirability biases.

Common practice

- One strategy is to assign the child interviewee an “expert role” – for example, let them know that they are the expert on their own media use, and explain that you would like to understand better what the child already knows.
- Another strategy is to pay careful attention to the dynamics of the situation, including such practicalities as making sure you sit at the same height as the child.
- Some researchers train one child to interview others, perhaps asking an older child to talk to younger children while the researcher listens in.
- If the researcher is visiting the home, parents and children may feel more comfortable if the researcher is female.

Pitfalls to avoid

- Try to let the child, not the adult interviewer, set the tone and pace of the interaction.
- Don't stand over a child.
- Try not to surprise them but explain what is coming next.
- Dress informally, not formally.
- Don't underestimate the child's awareness of the power relations in an interview.
- Try to use the child's language, glossary, and expressions.

A researcher's experience

Even though one researcher can be sufficient in research with adolescents, two researchers may occasionally be needed with younger children. In a normal usability lab situation, the researcher takes both the roles of observer and facilitator. Zaman (2005) explains that, because of the need to make younger children feel comfortable during the usability tests, speaking through an intercom system (from the observing room) is too impersonal for children who are sitting alone in the living room (the testing room). In this special case, to prevent children from feeling left to their own devices, a second researcher, who sits next to them and guides them through the test, is needed. The quality of the information gained by the user's answers can thus be improved. (Veronica Donoso, Belgium)

In the TIRO research project the qualitative studies were realized by a male researcher (in the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium) and a female researcher (in the French-speaking part of Belgium). Both researchers were in their early twenties and this definitely helped to create a confident and open atmosphere in which the teenagers were willing to share their practices. Although the parents also were ready to tell about their own experiences, it is clear that they had less confidence in the young researchers, asking them questions about their parenthood without being themselves (young) parents. Furthermore, on several occasions, the male researcher encountered parents who scrutinized him when he interviewed their teenage daughter or who only hesitantly gave permission to let their daughter show the researcher her bedroom (in order to get rich descriptions of their private life world and how ICT is part of it). (Joke Bauwens, Belgium)

References and further resources

Zaman, B. (2005). *Evaluating games with children*. Paper presented at the Proceedings of Interact 2005 Workshop on Child computer Interaction: Methodological Research, Rome, Italy.