

FAQ 25: Is it better to research children at home, at school, or elsewhere?

What's the issue?

Children can be more relaxed at home, and interviewing children at home permits direct observation of their interaction with siblings and parents, as well as evidence of the arrangement of media goods around the home, but it may restrict the child's freedom to report on parental rules or values regarding media, and they may feel much freer to discuss this at school. At school, on the other hand, the gaze of teachers and peers is considerable, constituting another kind of social pressure. A child may be shy at school but open up to the researcher at home. Children surveyed in the classroom may worry that teachers will see their answers but be confident that parents will not. Research in school settings involves other difficulties such as obtaining consent from the individuals who will be asked to provide data in the study, the school system itself, which rarely allows researchers to take all student participants and randomly assign them to conditions, access may be difficult to obtain and further complications may hinder the research process as it is ideally conceived (Mertens, 1998).

Common practice

As a rule of thumb, children should be interviewed in settings where they feel comfortable and where they feel at enough ease to open up.

Questions to consider

Which is the location where children will feel most relaxed? Are the questions you'll ask sensitive or embarrassing? Are the answers fairly factual or could they be influenced by the presence of peers? How long do you need for the research? Will you also interview either teachers or parents? What are the issues involved in gaining permission to work with children in schools, and/or at home, in your country? Where can you obtain a quiet room for recording a conversation? What are the implications for interviewers' (or interviewees') travel time and expenses at one site over another? Care is particularly required if approaching children outside either home or school; indeed, this may be excluded altogether for ethical reasons.

Pitfalls to avoid

Avoid interviewing children in a setting (such as school) where they feel that they should try to be clever and provide the "right answers". Avoid interviewing or observing children in a place which, though they may be relaxed there, is inappropriate for the questions to be asked or the activities to be observed by the researcher.

Examples of good practice

Non-formal environments (such as internet cafés) are, in my opinion, the most appropriate places to interview children. During my investigation, I had the chance to interview them in a park, during their summer holidays. However, this is a hard period not only to find children to be interviewed, but also to get them to concentrate. The presence of adults can also constrain the interview. When I interviewed children, some of them asked if the conversation was only with me or if there would be any other adult. I also noticed that they were more open to tell me – a stranger who wouldn't come back – some confidences, than their own teachers. (Cátia Candeias, Portugal)

In the UK Children Go Online Survey, conducted in the home face-to-face, the section on sensitive questions (about seeing pornography, race hate, violence, etc.) was conducted using a self-completion questionnaire on the computer. Neither the interviewer nor the parent could see the screen. Specific instructions were:

For the next few questions I'd like you to use the laptop yourself as you may find that you'd like to answer some questions by yourself. You don't have to answer any questions you don't want to. To show you how to use the computer, I'll do a few practice questions with you. If at any time you have any problems, just ask me.

In both the UK Children Go Online Survey, and in Ofcom's Media Literacy Survey, parents were gently requested not to be present for the entire interview. The interviewer also recorded whether the parent complied, thus permitting responses to be filtered according to parental presence after, if desired. The questionnaire instructions thus stated:

SAY TO PARENT – Thank you very much for answering those questions. I'd now like to ask (CHILD TO BE INTERVIEWED) some questions on their own if that's OK?

WAS THE CHILD TO BE INTERVIEWED PRESENT DURING THIS INTERVIEW WITH THEIR PARENT? SINGLE CODE

Yes, and child conferred with parent as the interview was taking place

Yes, but they did not comment during the interview

No, they were not present

INTERVIEWER – OK FOR PARENT TO STAY, BUT WOULD PREFER TO INTERVIEW CHILD ALONE, IN CASE PARENT BEING THERE ALTERS THE CHILD'S RESPONSES. (Sonia Livingstone, UK)

Research for my PhD dissertation was carried out in school. All participants were first surveyed by the researcher in their classrooms during school time. During the administration of the survey most teachers left the room. However, when they did not we asked them not to interfere with the survey administration and explained to them that this responded to the need to assure the reliability of children's responses as, in some cases, the teacher's presence might trigger socially or academically desirable responses from students. In all cases teachers were understanding and willing to cooperate. For the second phase of our data collection we requested each school to provide a place where no teachers or other school authorities were present so as to favour the creation of a more relaxing atmosphere for the interviews. Finally, by means of the establishment of rapport and an open and relaxed attitude with the adolescents interviewed, many of the inconveniences associated with school settings were certainly diminished and, consequently, a proper interview environment could be created. (Veronica Donoso, Belgium)

Where users' tests are carried out and (usability) laboratories are employed, it is not always easy to provide a 'natural' atmosphere. However, by means of arranging labs as a more familiar environment and by trying to create an appropriate level of rapport with the subjects being tested, it is possible to minimize the tension and bias associated with being the subject of an 'experiment'. At the Centre of Usability Research (CUO) at the Catholic University of Leuven much research is carried out by means of a usability lab. However, the stationary usability lab employed is arranged as a living room (with armchairs, a side table, a television set, a desk, etc.) so that test-users may experience new applications in a situation that is close to a real life experience. Moreover, the usability lab at the CUO is arranged in a cosy, homelike manner so that it gives subjects the impression that they are not in a lab or in a workplace, but rather in someone's living room. (Veronica Donoso, Belgium)

In our research, questionnaires were given to the teachers. I had a prior conversation to explain that these were not meant to assess the children's knowledge about television but to perceive their opinion about children's programming. Therefore, there was no 'correct' answer, and the children should not be pressured to give any answer. The teachers told the children that only their opinion mattered so they should not make comments or ask their colleagues' views. Given that the task took place in an educational context, I took into consideration the roles that both children and teachers are expected to play, and the fact that the tasks normally performed are 'assessment'-driven. Still, the children did not seem to have considered this as an assessment exercise. They were quite at ease and enjoying the exercise; they laughed and showed eagerness to talk about the programmes. The only concern was to get the spelling of the cartoon titles right. The younger children might have been a bit uncomfortable with the researcher's presence in the class, also tending to look for confirmation on the correctness of certain answers. The older children were very comfortable with my presence from the moment we were introduced; they were curious about the nature of the task and asked questions about its purpose. (Sofia Leitão, Portugal)

References and further resources

Mertens, D. M. (1998). *Research methods in education and psychology: Integrating diversity with quantitative and qualitative approaches*. London: Sage Publications.