FAQ 11: Is it okay to interview parents as informants on their children?

What's the issue?

Ideally, to understand how children use the internet at home, both children and parents would be interviewed, so as to triangulate the two data sources, to permit parents to provide a check on responses from young children, and to permit children to report on their experiences themselves, especially since parents may not be aware of the range of their activities and perceptions. However, this is complicated in terms of both recruitment and data analysis, and thus it is a relatively expensive approach to research. Researchers are therefore often left with having to decide which one to interview when their resources are limited.

Common practice

- Rules of thumb are to include both children and parents (or teachers) as respondents, wherever possible.
- One cost-efficient route to combining data sources is to ask just a few, key questions of parents when recruiting children.
- If both can be included, children should be reassured that parents will not see their responses.
- In reporting, care must be taken when assuming that one set of responses are more "correct" than the other – it is probably safest to regard the discrepancy as indicating the upper and lower bounds for a response.
- Note that, as a rule, children tend to report higher estimates of internet use and risk, and lower estimates of parental mediation and internet-related anxieties, compared with parents.

Pitfalls to avoid

If only parents/adults are interviewed, care must be taken in interpreting their claim if they relate to phenomena to which their access may be limited (e.g. accounts of what children do in their bedroom, in private, on their mobile, or at school).

Only interviewing children has other disadvantages: most notably, it is difficult to get reliable information on socio-economic status (whether parental income, education, or some combination thereof), and so findings regarding inequalities or exclusion cannot be obtained. One solution is to sample schools in more and less advantaged neighbourhoods. Hence, for example, the Mediappro project, which surveyed 7,393 12- to 18-year-olds in nine countries, used a stratified sample of schools in which researchers conducted a pen-and-paper survey (see www.mediappro.org).

A researcher's experience

> The SAFT surveys interviewed both children and parents, using the same questions for each. Where children and parents gave fairly similar answers (e.g. 31% of children and 21% of parents said the child did instant messaging), the 'truth' may be taken to lie in between. But where answers were different (e.g. 56% of children but only 8% of parents said the child downloaded music), it was clear that relying on parents to provide reliable information about children was insufficient and misleading. Furthermore, significant findings emerged precisely from these discrepancies. For example, since 64% of children said their parent never sat with them when they went online, while only 11% of parents said they never sat with their child, one can conclude both that children may be 'saving face' by under-reporting how often a parent sat with them, but also that parents were both relatively ignorant of their children's actual use and overconfident of their own safety practices (Elisabeth Staksrud, Norway).

Example of a study using only answers from parents

Less useful, by contrast, is the reliance in the Eurobarometer survey on adults reporting about children. Although this survey has provided much useful information regarding children and parents' internet use across Europe, it is significant that survey respondents were adults over 15 years old who were responsible for, or caretakers of, a

child under 17. Thus, not only does this survey of children's internet use rely on reporting by adults, but these adults may not be the child's parent (but could be a childcare employee or older sibling, for example).

Example of a study using parents as informants as well as children

The recruitment strategy used by the Youth Internet Safety Survey in the US efficiently obtained two sources of data (asking a few questions of parents when recruiting children), got informed consent from both parents and children, and established an appropriate context for a sensitive interview, in a single telephone call, as follows:

> When contacting a household, interviewers from a national survey research firm screened for regular use of the internet by a youth in the target age group. Interviewers then asked to speak with the parent who knew the most about the youth's internet use, conducted a short interview assessing household rules and parental concerns about internet use, and gathered demographic characteristics. The interviewer requested permission from the parent to speak with the youth. Parents were assured of the confidentiality of the interview and were informed that the interview would include questions about 'sexual material your child may have seen.' Upon achieving parental consent, interviewers described the study to the youth and obtained his or her oral consent. Youth interviews, which lasted about half an hour, were scheduled at the youth's convenience and arranged for times when he/she could talk freely. (Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2001, p. 3011)

References and further resources

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