FAQ 13: What are the ethical issues involved in researching children?

What's the issue?

With regard to research ethics when interviewing children, the most common issues raised in the introduction of interviews concern data confidentiality, the purpose of the study and of interviews, as well as the use of audio or video recording of the interviews. Less often, there are references to the voluntary character of the interviews, the right of children not to answer questions if they do not want to, and the signing of consent forms. In any case, not all studies treat issues of research ethics in the same way, and not all emphasize the same aspects of research ethics.

Common practice

- Seeking to safeguard the interests of all affected by the research, including considering the possible consequences of the study or the misuse of the results.
- A commitment to listening to and including the perspectives of children and young people in the research.
- Inviting freely given written consent from all children participating in the research, and from the parent or guardian of those under 16, while ensuring that all understand that they can refuse any question or withdraw at any time.
- Informing children and parents, through discussion and the provision of age-appropriate leaflets, what the research is about, how it will be disseminated, and how their data will be stored.
- Keeping all data confidential, removing all personal identifiers, and assigning pseudonyms where appropriate, plus storing the data in accordance with the Data Protection Act (UK).
- Informing participants that if they divulge information suggesting that they or others are at risk of harm, the researcher has a duty of care to report this and to ensure support for the child (and to inform the participant that this is occurring).
- Providing a debriefing after each research interview, leaving all participants with a written record of the researchers' names and contact information.
- Providing feedback on the research process to all who ask for it (e.g. sending a copy of the summary report to participating schools or homes if requested).

Pitfalls to avoid

Avoid upsetting or offending participants. Avoid introducing new and sensitive information to children (e.g. introducing the idea of pornographic sites to children previously unaware of them).

Questions to consider

What are the ethical guidelines that are to be followed in the country where your research will be carried out? What information should participants know before deciding to take part (or not) in your research? When is parental consent necessary in order to involve children in the research?

Researchers' experiences

> I started my visit by explaining the objective of my presence to the children. I informed them that their participation was not compulsory and that they could refuse to take part. From a total of 20 children and teenagers, only two girls refused to participate and left the room. After that, I asked if I could record the conversation, so that I could remember at home what we had been talking about and their opinions. Everyone agreed. At the beginning of each conversation, I also tried a different approach, to find out more about their interests, intentions for the future, desires, and so on, in order to create a familiar environment and to 'break the ice'. It worked quite well, since they got much more comfortable and, when the interview started, they weren't constrained. (Cátia Candeias, Portugal)

In relation to consent, my first concern was to capture the teacher's interest and obtain approval to approach the children. Then it was explained to the children that their participation was not compulsory and that they could simply say no. None of the children refused to take part. In fact they were keen to participate. The parents were not directly asked for consent. The classroom in Portugal is the teachers' domain, and they are trusted to decide what activities happen inside it. The only situations in which parents are usually consulted are those when the activities involve children leaving the school. Their consent was, nonetheless, implicitly given by answering the questionnaires addressed to them. In fact, some parents took the opportunity to praise the research and to call for more projects assessing the provision of children's television. The children were asked if they agreed to the use of a tape recorder so that I could remember what they said afterwards. No one disagreed and they were all interested in listening to the recordings of their voices at the end. (Sofia Leitão, Portugal)

The UK Children Go Online project set out to interview and survey children aged 9–19 about their internet use, including their experience of various risks (pornography, bullying, race hate sites, etc.). This involved asking sensitive questions; in a face-to-face interview, children may feel pressured to reply; in a written survey, the researcher may not know how children respond to the questions asked. In addition to careful pilot research to check the phrasing of all questions, informed consent from respondents is crucial. The research team first read the guidelines provided by professional associations (in the UK, these are produced by the major children's charities, by the professional associations for academic psychology and sociology, by the Market Research Society and, internationally, by the Association of Internet Researchers). A set of ethical principles for the project was drawn up, applying and adapting those produced by these associations (this was submitted to the researchers' university ethics committee, and posted on the project website, www.children-go-online.net). (Sonia Livingstone, UK)

An appropriate ethical framework is especially important when researching children and young people. Children's views are to be respected (Morrow & Richards, 1996) as well as their freedom to take (or not take) part in a research project. In our research we followed the ethical guidelines required in Chile for research carried out at schools. These include the obtaining of informed consent from each school and from the children participating in both school-based surveys and interviews. During our first encounter with each group of respondents they were told that they were not obliged to participate in our study, and that if they wanted to, they could drop out at any stage of the data collection. At the beginning of each interview we also emphasized that they could avoid answering any questions that made them feel uncomfortable. Moreover, the anonymity of our respondents was guaranteed and upheld throughout the whole research process, and consequently all the names used are, obviously, fictitious. (Verónica Donoso, Belgium)

Examples of forms for obtaining children and parent consent

Obtaining consent of children: example from *Children, young people and new media* (Shade, 2002–05):

This research is being done to learn about the ways in which the internet, specifically internet services (like shopping, downloading music, and using internet chat) is being integrated into your everyday life. For this specific project, I'm interested in how children are using the internet. You've got a copy of the information sheet about the project. My main goal is.... Participating in this project is entirely voluntary. If you would rather not, you don't have to go through this interview. If you don't mind talking to me, I'd like to either tape record or video record this just to make sure I have an accurate report of what our conversation is like. If I videotape the interview, I will be recording you as well as some of things you do on the internet screen. If you feel uncomfortable with this I can instead take notes by hand. And if I you agree to tape and then change your mind, or realize you said something that makes you uncomfortable, just reach out and turn it off, or wave at me and I will, and then we can erase the tape. In other words, I want you to be as comfortable as possible with this. Is it okay to go ahead with a few questions? As we go through, if you don't want to answer a question, that's fine, or if you aren't sure what I'm getting at, please ask. This is not a test. There are no right or wrong answers. We just want to learn what using the internet means to you.

Example from *Cyberbullying report to Anti-Bullying Alliance* (Smith *et al.*, 2006), regarding confidentiality and anonymity of answers for children aged 11–16 who participated in the survey:

Our names are _____ and we are researchers at Goldsmiths College which is part of the University of London. We are interested in how children and adolescents get on with each other in and out of school. You do not have to answer this questionnaire, but we would be grateful if you did. Anything that you write will be treated as most confidential. You do not have to put your names on the questionnaire. Your teachers, the headteacher and your classmates will not be shown your answers. No one in the school will know what you write, so please answer truthfully. Please only turn over each page when you are told to do so.

Good practice example of youth consent from the Finkelhor Survey (child interview) (Finkelhor, 2006):

I would like to ask you some questions that are part of a study about young people using the internet. When I say 'use the internet,' I mean going 'online.' The interview will last about half an hour. To thank you for your help, we will send you a check for $10. The questions have to do with things that have happened to you on the internet, including whether you have come across people or pictures that made you uncomfortable or upset, along with some questions about safety in other areas of your life.

This is part of a national survey of 2,000 young people, ages 10 to 17. You were chosen completely at random to represent the ideas and experiences of young people. You don't have to talk to us if you don't want to, but your help will make a big difference. Everything you say will be completely confidential. We are not allowed to tell your parents, your school, or anyone else anything you tell us.

We would like you to try to answer every question that you can, but if there is any question that you don't want to answer, that will be OK. You can stop the interview at any time. Also, if there is any question that you don't understand, please say so. If there are too many people around for you to talk freely, just let me know and I can call back later.

Obtaining parental consent:

Thank you for answering our questions.... It will help our study a lot if we can talk to your [age] year old also. We want to find out what kinds of situations young people come across on the internet, what they've learned about internet safety, and what kinds of life experiences make young people more or less protected when they are online.

To thank your [son/daughter] for [his/her] help with this survey, we will send [him/her] a cheque for $10. The interview would take about half an hour, and we can schedule it at [her/his] convenience. Some of the questions will be about sexual material your child may have seen. [Her/his] answers will be completely confidential. Your child's participation is voluntary, and we can skip over any questions that [s/he] doesn't want to answer. (Once again, you can call our toll free number [1-877-......] to confirm information about this study. We would also be happy to send you a letter explaining more about who we are and what this survey is about before the interview, if you would like that.) Would it be possible to interview [him/her] now, or would another time be better? (Panayiota Tsatsou and Sonia Livingstone, UK)

References and further resources

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