FAQ 23: What's the best way of asking children sensitive questions?

What's the issue?

With any research method, you have to work on gaining children's trust in order to ask about sensitive issues, such as unpleasant chat experiences, dangerous situations, bullying, or sexual harassment. This is important both to ensure valid answers and to meet ethical requirements. Hence, judging whether (or how) certain questions can be asked of children at a certain age is crucial.

Common practice

- You should know as much as possible about the child's "sensitive issues" before the interview (disability, abuse, neglect, trauma, nicknames, etc.).
- The more sensitive the issue, the more important it is for you to gain the trust of the children informants, in order for them to open up and talk about their experiences.
- The research questions should not use emotive language, and the terms used should be as close as possible to the everyday terms children use.
- The range of response options provided, if a closed-ended question, is vital, as the responses suggest to the child what kind of answers you are expecting, and the kinds of answers that other children might give.
- Slow down the rate of speech and use short sentences.
- Ask the child to repeat back if needed to ensure clarity of the information given.

Questions to consider

Did the child give consent to these questions? Does the child realize he/she can refuse to answer any particular question? Can anyone overhear the child's answers? Does the child understand that his/her answers will be kept anonymous? Are you asking about something that is part of, or new to, the child's experience? (If unsure, open-ended piloting is necessary first.) Do you really need to ask this question?

Pitfalls to avoid

Be careful not to put problematic ideas into children's minds. One qualitative study asked primary school children whether they ever used the internet for hacking, downloading music or movies, disabling filters on the home computer, or using someone else's email without their permission. Balancing these twin pitfalls is difficult – you must neither assume that children are only victims and never perpetrators of online risks, nor give them ideas for bad behaviour that they did not have before.

Be careful with linguistic and cultural differences. Be prepared for cultural values, practices, or beliefs.

Examples of survey questions about online risk

From UK Children Go Online, questions about risky disclosure of personal information were phrased as follows: 'While on the internet what information have you ever given to another person that you have not met face-to-face?' SELECT ALL THE INFORMATION YOU HAVE GIVEN

Response options: Personal email address/Full name/Age and date of birth/Phone number/Your interests or hobbies/A photograph of you/Parent's name/School/I have never given out information about myself/I don't want to answer/Don't know.

From the Pew Research Center's Parents, Kids and the Internet Survey 2001, questions about children's active role in risky activities: 'Here are some other things some people do online. What about you?' 'Have you ever...' (READ; ROTATE)? (a) Had someone give you fake information about themselves in an email or instant message; (b) Used email or instant message to talk to someone you had never met before; (c) Given your password to a friend or someone you know; (d) Pretended to be a different person when you were emailing or instant messaging someone; (e) Sent a prank email or an email 'bomb'.

From SAFT (Children Norway, 2005/06), question about bullying and distress: 'In the past 6 months, have you ever been harassed, upset, bothered, threatened, or embarrassed by anyone chatting online?' Yes/No/Don't know.

From the Pew Research Center's Parents & Teens 2006 Survey (12–17 years old): 'Have you, personally, ever experienced any of the following things online? You can just tell me yes or no.'

(a) Someone spreading a rumour about you online; (b) Someone posting an embarrassing picture of you online without your permission; (c) Someone sending you a threatening or aggressive email, instant message or text message; (d) Someone taking a private email, instant message or text message you sent them and forwarding it to someone else or posting it where others could see it.

From UK Children Go Online, questions about children's concerns: 'Which of these things, if any, do you worry about when you use the internet?' SHOW LIST. PROBE: WHICH OTHERS?

Response options: Being contacted by dangerous people/People finding things out about you that are personal or private/Seeing things that might bother or upset you/Spending too much time on the internet/Possibility of getting a computer virus/Don't know/None of these.

From the 2005 National Center for Missing and Exploited Children survey (Finkelhor, 2006), questions about sexual risks:

'Now I have some questions about things that happen to some young people on the internet. In the past year, did you ever feel worried or threatened because someone was bothering or harassing you online?' Yes/No/Don't know/not sure/Refused/not ascertainable/Not applicable.

'In the past year, did anyone ever use the internet to threaten or embarrass you by posting or sending messages about you for other people to see?' (response options as above)

'In the past year when you were doing an online search or surfing the web, did you ever find yourself in a website that showed pictures of naked people or of people having sex when you did not want to be in that kind of site?'

'In the past year, how many times have you made rude or nasty comments to someone on the internet? Would you say...' Never/1 time/2 times/3–5 times/6 or more times/Don't know/not sure/Refused/not ascertainable/Not applicable.

This survey included several follow-up questions. For example: 'You mentioned more than one (other) thing happening to you. Thinking only of the things that happened in the past year, which of these situations bothered you the most?' And: 'Why do you think this person was bothering or harassing you?' (write in below).

It asked several questions about meeting strangers online, as follows: 'I have some more questions about being on the internet with people you don't know in person. In the past year, have you met someone on the internet who you have chatted with or exchanged email or instant messages with more than once?'

'Sometimes when people get to know each other online, they want to meet in person. Did this person (any of these people) want to meet you in person?' (I mean people who were [R's age + 5] or older.)

'Did you actually meet this person (any of these people) face to face?' (I mean people who were [R's age + 5] or older.)

'In the past year, have you had a romantic online relationship with someone you met on the internet? I mean someone who felt like a boyfriend or girlfriend.' (Panayiota Tsatsou, UK)

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.

Irwin, L. G. & Johnson, J. (2005). Interviewing young children: Explicating our practices and dilemmas. *Qualitative Health Research, 15*(7), 821–831.

Kyronlampi-Kylmanen, T. & Maatta, K. (2011) Using children as research subjects: How to interview a child aged 5 to 7 years. *Educational Research and Reviews, 6*(1), 87–93.

Tang, C. M. (2006). Developmentally sensitive forensic interviewing of preschool children: Some guidelines drawn from basic psychological research. *Criminal Justice Review, 31*(2), 132–145.

Tourangeau, R. & Smith, T. W. (1996). Asking sensitive questions: The impact of data collection mode, question format, and question context. *The Public Opinion Quarterly, 60*(2), 275–304.