FAQ 6: How young a child can one work with?

What's the issue?

In any research with children, including that relating to media and the internet, age differences are consistently amongst the most important background factors. Reporting findings by age, charting age trends, or comparing age groups is expected by most readers. It would be the absence of age differences, not their discovery, that would be counterintuitive, if and when it occurred. A useful principle, therefore, is to assume that each child is capable of providing valid and insightful information, provided that s/he is approached appropriately and that the data are interpreted carefully.

The problem is that even younger children are going online and it is difficult to get information straight from them. Children were not used, for example, as survey respondents before the 1990s because their responses were not considered reliable and valid (Bell, 2007).

Lately children have seemed more and more capable of constructing and defining their own social lives. Therefore researchers have to study carefully what kinds of research methods are valid, especially amongst the youngest children.

Common practice

A range of principled or common-sense rules of thumb is evident in published accounts of research. In general, two major turning points can be assumed, with key adjustments in methods being made for respondents older or younger than 7–8, and older or younger than 11–12. It is worth noting that these age transitions tend to mirror the transition points in Piaget's stage mode.

However, researchers have to keep in mind that sociologists in particular have criticized developmental psychology treating children as a mass, disregarding other variables as gender or social class. Childhood is no longer seen as biological, but also as a social state (see Kellett, Robinson, & Burr, 2004; O'Kane, 2000; Scott, 2000).

For children younger than 6, it is common to rely on proxy respondents such as parents or teachers, but it is also possible to use other methods such as drawing, role-play, and observational methods over interviews.

Besides these general rules, consider questions related to the use of each research method with children from particular age groups and its adequacy regarding the problem at hand:

- Interviews: interviews and research in general are cultural practices where childhood is not only described but also constructed (Woodhead & Faulkner, 2000). Therefore interviewing children needs special discretion. Children are not familiar with research and interviewing processes and need a familiar and fearless interviewing atmosphere. It is also important to tell children what the research is about, how findings will be used, and that a child has the right to refuse to participate to the research or to be part of it.

  Cognitive interviewing has been considered a better way to produce data quality in surveys of 7- to 12-year-old children than standard interviewing. This has been used to study the manner in which children understand, mentally process, and respond to the questions (Ogan *et al*., 2012).

  Individual and group semi-structured interviews are usually used with children older than 7. For younger children less structured methods are used (Christensen & James, 2000). As for individual interviews with young children, even children as young as 4 and 5 are effective in referential communication (i.e., describing an object to a listener). This is only true on the condition that they have to describe familiar objects in a face-to-face interaction in a familiar, naturalistic setting (Bukatko & Daehler, 2001). Children can give important information when they show what media devices and contents they use and are interested in, how they play digital games, go to use the internet, etc.

  The best places for interviews with younger children are usually their homes where they feel comfortable and are free to move and play. Interviewers may need to participate in the play as a part of the interview. A hand puppet can be a perfect medium to engage with the child and to adjust to her/his language. Interviews should

be arranged in terms of the child's timings and usually need more time because children should have the opportunity to leave the room, come back, play, and do other things during the interview. It is also important to see when a child is too tired for the interview.

- Adolescents interviewing children: adults usually interview children and the interview is thus marked by inequality between an adult interviewer and a child. Children often suppose that adults want to have the "right" answers to their questions and have a habit of answering an adult even when they do not know the answer (Scott, 2000). It may also be difficult to get honest answers in questions dealing with, for example, control. Younger interviewers nearer the age of the respondents may change the interview situation more informally – they may be closer to the respondents' media world and experiences and represent the same kind of social world. A similar way of speaking may bring the interviewer and respondent closer (Pääjärvi & Toukonen, 2012). However, adolescent interviewers as some kind of mediator between children and adults are rarely used due to numerous difficulties, such as training of interviewers, research ethics, etc.
- Participative observation: interviews with younger children are partially participative observation when children show how and what media they use. This method also enables observation of how children interact with each other while using media. Thus, emphasis can be placed on how a single child deals with the media, or on exposure of a social system in which children are growing up (e.g. family, nursery school, school) to the media.
- Children's drawings and photographs: the advantage of children's drawings is the possibility of revealing aspects that cannot be verbalized. They provide an insight into the visual and intellectual capabilities of children, the emotions experienced while they are drawing, as well as their level of development. But children's explanations of their drawings are needed in order to interpret them adequately. Children also like to use media devices such as cameras or mobile phones as a vehicle to record their everyday life experiences.
- Experiments: these are often favoured when dealing with very young children who aren't yet able to verbalize their experiences and mindsets. However, young children, even preschoolers, have the language skills to describe what they remember. Young children remember familiar (repeated) events in terms of scripts. It is remarkable that all children recall older items better (recency effect), whereas a good recall for early items (primacy effect) is more apparent with children aged 7 and older.

Questions to consider

When researching with children, particularly in the case of very young ones, combined approaches and alternative methods should be tried as well as different perspectives on media and internet use. Otherwise, research could be partially compromised at best, or completely beyond reach at worst. Sometimes solutions to problems rely on methodological imagination.

Pitfalls to avoid

A common flaw in research with children is addressing the child as more mature, or more competent, than they are – overestimating their linguistic skills, for example, or underestimating the gap between competence (what they can really do) and performance (what the researcher has been able to observe them doing).

Another flaw is to address a child as not capable of being a social actor in order to define his/her own social life. The starting point for the research is the child and his/her experiences, not the adult's expectations. Adult researchers too often try to reinforce their own opinions and lead a child to a specific direction, for example, in his/her answers. Child-centric research needs a special consideration towards the child's world and experiences.

Researchers should carefully consider if a child is capable of estimating the time he/she uses for media practice or how often he/she uses special media. Even 7-year-olds find it difficult to estimate how much time they spent with the media.

Examples of a project using adolescents as interviewers

The Children's Media Barometer (2011) in Finland was conducted partly using adolescents as interviewers of 7- and 9-year-old students in schools. The interviewers were students from the upper level of elementary school. They were trained to manage the interviews, with the training lasting 90 minutes. In addition, they received

written instructions about the interview techniques and the ethical principles of the research. The interviews usually took place in the school corridor and took about 10–20 minutes; 194 students took part in the project, and 620 interviews were conducted.

The interview method was found to be fluent and efficient. The relationship between the interviewers and respondents was informal, and younger children found it easy to talk with their older students. Ninety-eight per cent of adolescents mentioned that interviewing was a positive experience, and 95% were interested in participating again in some research. The Children's Media Barometer researchers did not encounter any unreliability in the data collected by the peer students.

The problems were mainly the lack of specifying questions and the great amount of leading, although this is usually problematic in traditional interviews as well.

The project also enhanced young people's agency, both within research and the school world.

Example of a project using an experimental method with very young children

The "this-or-that" method, which is used in experiments, is found to be useful with preschoolers between the ages of 4 and 6 to conduct likeability research (Zaman & Abeele, 2007). At the beginning of this experiment, each child was asked to play with two objects, for example, games (the order in which the games are presented are counterbalanced). The researcher tried to interfere as little as possible and undirected play was supported (no tasks, since these conflicted with the explorative nature of the games). After both games were finished, a likeability questionnaire was administered. Likeability was measured with five questions: (1) Which game did you find most fun (most fun); (2) Which game would you want to receive as a gift (wanted gift); (3) Which game would you like to take home with you (take home); (4) Which game would you like to play again (play again); and (5) Which game did you find the most stupid (most stupid)? – this question was reversed in the final likeability measure. These answers were triangulated with free play at the end of the test: as a "reward" for participating the child could choose one of the two games and play the game again. As well as quantitative measurements, qualitative material was also gathered. Interaction styles and comments uttered by the young child when playing the game were video recorded. Only after the complete test was finalized (playing the two games and answering the likeability questionnaire) did the researcher follow up on this qualitative information and ask the child to explain a little more why one game was chosen over another, according to the contextual laddering method (Zaman, 2008).

References and further resources

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