

How to do research with children

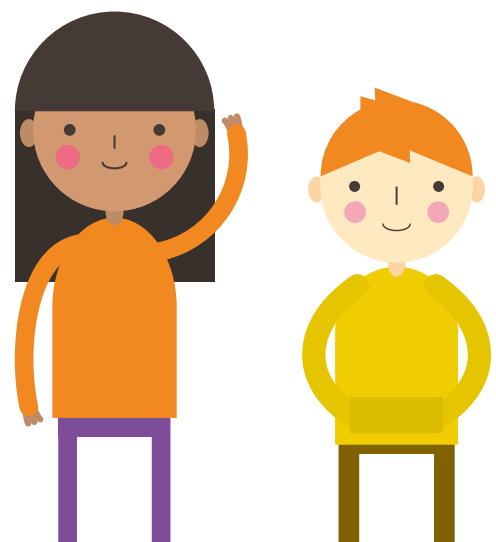
Children and young people (by which we mean people aged 16 and under) can be a crucial group to do research with. You may need to involve children and young people in research because;

- 1** The research area is particularly relevant to this group (i.e. use of social media or experiences of school);
- 2** Children and young peoples' views may provide an alternative or additional perspective relevant to the research area (i.e. research into aspects of family life);
- 3** Having views from children and young people can improve the validity of your research, by ensuring that the views of all stakeholders affected by the topic are considered.

While it may seem daunting to work with this group, by following our practical steps and tips, conducting research with children can be a rewarding experience and add value to your research project.

To help you effectively do research with children, we have split guidance and tips into the following sections:

- 1** Ethical and legal considerations
- 2** Methodological approaches
- 3** Research techniques and activities to engage children
- 4** Recruiting children to take part in research
- 5** Practical steps for conducting the research session



1


Ethics and legal considerations

The starting point for doing research with children and young people is to consider key ethical and legal issues. These areas can be broken down into: **preventing and minimising harm; safeguarding, and informed consent.**


Preventing and minimising harm to children and young people

This means making sure that your research will not put children or young people at risk of any physical or psychological harm; or if there is a risk, that steps are taken to minimise this as far as possible.

Creating a risk log can help you think through any possible risks, and how you can mitigate or minimise these.



Risk (Physical or Psychological)	Mitigation / Solution



For example, if you are asking children to do group activities using magazine images to create a collage, have images and pictures already cut up to avoid children using scissors and provide blue-tac rather than glue to make collages.

You should also consider the location and setting where the research will take place. Your venue should be in a secure location, which children can easily access, be away from members of the public, and be free from outside interruptions and any hazards. Children need to feel safe and comfortable in your chosen location. Good options include using places that children are already familiar with and routinely use, such as a school classroom, school library area or youth group meeting venue.

Safeguarding



What is "safeguarding?"

Safeguarding is the action taken to promote the welfare of children and protect them from harm. It means:

- **Protecting children from abuse and maltreatment;**
- **Preventing harm to children's health or development;**
- **Ensuring children grow up with the provision of safe and effective care;**
- **Taking action to enable all children and young people to have the best outcomes**

(HM Government, Safeguarding children and young people, 2014; NSPCC)

When doing research with children, you need to be aware of safeguarding issues from:

- The potential for exploitation of children through interactions with adults during the research process;
- The potential for children to disclose safeguarding issues to the researchers during the research process.



You must ensure that you create and implement a clear safeguarding plan for your research. This should include the steps to escalate any incidents that might come to your attention through the research process and contact details for the appropriate person to raise incidents with. Schools should have a Designated Safeguarding Officer, and further contact details for escalating safeguarding incidents can be found through the website for the relevant Local Authority, the NSPCC or if a child is in immediate danger, call 999.

Every person involved in the research who will have direct contact or interaction with children and young people should know and be supported to follow your safeguarding plan, and be aware of their specific responsibilities towards children to safeguard them. They should also have a completed Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check, with appropriate clearance and be able to present a valid DBS certificate. More details can be found here:

www.gov.uk/government/organisations/disclosure-and-barring-service



Informed consent

What is “informed consent”?

Safeguarding is the action taken to promote the welfare of children and protect them from harm. It means:

- **Protecting children from abuse and maltreatment;**
- **Preventing harm to children’s health or development;**
- **Ensuring children grow up with the provision of safe and effective care;**
- **Taking action to enable all children and young people to have the best outcomes**

(HM Government, Safeguarding children and young people, 2014; NSPCC)

Ensuring that informed consent can be given by children and young people to take part in your research is extremely important. This is because their capacities, competencies, views and frames of reference for understanding the world are still being shaped and developed, in part based on factors including their age, experiences and learning from role-models.

Children under the age of 16 can give consent if it can be shown that they have the competency to do so. This means that they have been given enough knowledge to understand the given situation, and have the ability to be able to make a decision in relation to it, using their knowledge and understanding.

To obtain informed consent from children, you need to clearly show that each child taking part understands:

- What you are researching;
- What they will be doing through participating in your research;
- The limitations of confidentiality (that any issue involving harm to themselves or another person will be passed on);
- That taking part is voluntary (they can choose not to take part) without any negative consequences for them if they choose not to take part;
- That if they give informed consent, that they have given this freely (without coercion, threat or persuasion)



There are a number of options to explain these points in relation to your research to children to be able to obtain their informed consent. These include information leaflets, tapes, letters and verbal presentations to children. You should also create a simple consent form including these points, and ask each child to sign their own copy if they give their informed consent, before taking part in the research. These forms should then be collected up and stored safely by the researchers.

When conducting research with children under 13, it is also good practice to obtain consent from each child's parent or guardian. The best way to obtain this is to communicate with parents in advance of the research session, via email, letter or group meeting, to give them a description of the project (what the objectives are, why you are doing this research and what methods you intend to use), and adapt the consent form for children to ask each parent to sign and return a copy to you if they agree to their child taking part in the research. You should also provide parents with the contact details for someone they can get in touch with if they have any questions or want further information on the research project.

2

Methodological approaches

When you consider the possible research methods you could use, think about two key questions: What are the research objectives? How can I most appropriately involve children to address these objectives?

You might find it helpful to list the specific objectives of your research, and then list the possible methods you could use to do collect data to address these (e.g. individual interviews, focus groups, co-creation workshop, surveys, observation, story-telling, and drama...). Then, consider which method will enable you to most effectively address the research objectives while being the most appropriate for the children and young people involved.



For example, to explore children's views and experiences of using social media, you might initially consider in-depth-interviews with each child. However, a focus group might be a better option, as you can facilitate group discussions that prevent unnecessary intrusive and direct questioning, which might upset some children, while still obtaining information about their views and experiences of using social media. In-depth interviews might be a better option for a more sensitive or personal subject area, as the interviewer can provide a confidential listening environment and adapt the discussion for the wellbeing of each child.

Peer-to-peer interviews can be a useful method for research with older children, on topics where the researcher may be keen to attain a more complete and unfiltered understanding of how children perceive a topic with limited direction and influence. This method allows children and young people to be both interviewer and interviewee under the supervision of the researcher, where children can facilitate and direct the interview based on what they think is important to explore.

3

Research techniques and activities to engage children

There are a range of activities and techniques you could incorporate into your chosen research methodology (interviews, focus group...) to make it more fun and interesting for the children taking part, and help them to stay motivated and focused.

Activities and techniques include:

- **Using photography** – asking children to take photographs, and use these as prompts for children to explain what their photograph shows and means to them, and use these photos as stimuli to start discussions or conversations;
- **Using drawing** – asking children to draw or create collages to represent something in relation to your research topic, and use these as prompts for discussions relating to their pictures;
- **Using role-play** – asking children to do role-play of a scenario or situation, and then explore their emotions and thoughts in doing the role-play;
- **Describing a hypothetical scene** up until a certain point, then asking children "...what do you think happens next?" or "...what would you do next?";
- **Creating and describing a vignette** (a brief evocative description or account of something) and asking children questions in relation to it;
- **Grouping or ranking exercises** – asking children to group or rank sentences, cards, pictures or photographs in order of importance to them;
- **Diary and other life narrative techniques** - asking children to tell their own stories or describe particular thoughts, experiences or emotions in relation to your research topic in a diary, memory book or life map;
- **"Story-games"** – allow children to create a story, where the researcher starts a story, and each child is then asked to give a line to continue the story, so that it goes around a group until the story is finished;

- **Observation** – where you watch, listen, reflect and engage children in conversation as they are doing certain activities. This is especially useful for younger children;
- **Questionnaires** – presented in a child-friendly format.



These activities and techniques can help break down any “power relations” between adult researchers and child participants that might lead children to hold back in what they explore or talk about. They can give children time to think through what they want to say or express, and give them more control in the direction and focus of what they explore and how they express themselves. These activities and techniques, especially those involving non-verbal communication, can support children to explore more complex, sensitive or abstract topics, as they provide ways for children to express things they might not be able to verbalise or thing they might not consciously be aware of.

4

Recruiting children to take part in research

The most appropriate, and often easiest way, to find and recruit children and young people to take part in research projects is to go through established routes with people who are already working with children. These routes include:

- **Primary and secondary schools - you should contact your local school liaison officers, safeguarding officer or outreach lead;**
- **Brownies, Cubs, Scouts, and Guides – you should contact the overall group leader;**
- **Community and local activity group for children and young people – you should contact the overall group leader.**

Going through established routes should also make it easier for you to address issues of safety and safeguarding for the overall research project. Set out and agree on a clear recruitment process with your contact to enable you to work together quickly and effectively to find children to participate in your project.

5

Practical steps for conducting research sessions

It can be helpful to start your research session with an “ice-breaker” activity, to enable children to relax into the session and establish rapport between yourself and the children. This could be a simple “fact about me” statement from each person, or sharing your favourite animal or colour.

Following this, you could lead into the research session by asking children things that are “easy” to explain or they see as unthreatening to explain; this will support them to settle into the routine of working with you, and allow you to get a better understanding of each child’s communication style and any additional things to remain aware of during the session.

Throughout the session, you should remain aware of any changes in children’s behaviour, actions or communication styles, and adapt to these by moving on from painful topic areas, offering a break, or changing activities if children become stressed or anxious. It may be helpful to have another adult who the children know, who they can go to if they decide to leave a research session.

Using cues to show children they are being listened to and that encourage further conversation can be helpful. These include sounds such as ‘mm’ or ‘really’, prompts such as ‘tell me more about that’ and nodding. However, cues that express any judgement such as “great”, or “terrific” may not be suitable, as they may influence the course of what children talk about, and any possible negative judgements may discourage children from talking and lead them to hold back in what they say and explore.

At the end of a session, it is good practice to have a “de-brief” where you can sum up your understanding of what has been explored together, and allow children to share any thoughts or feelings they have. This will allow you to take action for any follow-up steps, support options or signposting to support that might be needed if any child’s wellbeing has been affected by the research session.

