

Conducting Research with Children and Adolescents


6

Design, Methods and Empirical Cases

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 Published by Goodfellow Publishers Limited, Woodeaton, Oxford, OX3 9TJ
<http://www.goodfellowpublishers.com>

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 Design and setting by P.K. McBride

6 In the Field: Preparing for What may Happen During Research

Objectives

- To illustrate how to listen effectively to the children with whom you are researching
- To establish what the children may want to know about the researcher
- To explore ways in which to overcome issues that might arise during research such as children talking too much or not speaking at all
- To discuss the role of the gatekeepers during research with children
- To consider practical matters associated with collating data.

Introduction

The previous chapters describe exactly what needs to be done before a research study with children can be conducted and addresses issues such as an ethical approach to research, research design and engaging the children you are researching with. The chapters that follow this one consider the best approach to analysing, presenting and disseminating the data that has been collated during the research study. This chapter, however, is designed to ensure that the researcher is prepared for what may happen *during* the research study.

It may be that you have planned your study ethically and have incorporated a variety of techniques to engage the children you are researching with. The plan-

ning chapter, Chapter 5, detailed the need for contingency planning and the research design chapter, Chapter 3, posits a variety of methods for different age groups and encourages careful thought in both planning and executing any proposed research study with children. Yet novice researchers in particular may be surprised at what can happen when conducting research with children and this chapter is specifically designed to dilute that element of ‘surprise’.

Regardless of how well a research study has been planned if, as a researcher, you are unfamiliar with children, there are a number of issues that may arise during the research that can cause confusion or cause for concern. The quality of the interview, for example, may not ‘conform to expectations’ (Irwin and Johnson, 2005) and the brevity of some responses may cause the researcher to question the quality of the data. Additionally, a commonly asked question by a (novice) researcher conducting studies with children is, ‘what did they mean when they said that?’ and this can be exacerbated if the child/ren does not or seems unable to elaborate on what he/she has said. Simply not understanding the response is commonplace when researching with children. This following section then will provide useful ‘probes’ and ideas to ensure the researcher is able to identify during the research process what the child is trying to express and how to develop or provide a context to the answers that are being given. This chapter will also explore the following: listening to what children say; children who like to talk and those who do not; children who want to become gatekeepers; gatekeepers who want to become researchers; gatekeepers, power and advice; setting parameters; and boundaries and technology and equipment.

Understanding what Children Say

Scenario 6.1

Joanna was interviewing Daniel, an 8 year old boy, about what food he brought to school in his lunchbox as the focus of her research was about peer group influence on what food children ate at school. The research considered ‘swapping’ of lunch items, shopping for lunch items and what the children’s friends thought about the food choices the children made. Daniel had chosen a picture of fairy cakes from a pile of food items cut out of magazines by the researcher to help discuss food choice and volunteered that his Mum made fairy cakes. ‘That’s lovely’, said Joanna. ‘I really like fairy cakes’, said Daniel. Joanna asked if Daniel brought the fairy cakes his Mum made into school in his lunch box. He nodded vigorously. Joanna asked Daniel if his friends brought fairy cakes to school too. He shook his head. ‘If they don’t have fairy cakes in their lunch boxes,’ Joanna said, ‘what do they have?’. ‘Fish’, replied Daniel emphatically. ‘Fish?’, repeated Joanna, somewhat surprised, ‘Like tuna fish?’ she said, just to make sure. ‘I love tuna’, smiled Daniel and went back to looking through the pictures of food items. Joanna was more than a little confused.

Chapter extract

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