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The practicalities and pitfalls of researching with children

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I studied applied psychology and had a particular interest in developmental psychology. As part of my degree I studied dyslexia and attitudes to children with disabilities, then I carried out academic research into down syndrome, autism and specific language impairment before training as a primary teacher. I taught children with autism and severe to profound disabilities before moving into design research ten years ago.

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Nightingale Design Research

- We're a small design research consultancy based in Beeston, Nottingham.
- We work with public and private sector, established companies and startups
- Our clients include NHS England, The Pensions Regulator, the Department for Education and a range of Innovate UK-funded startups. We've also worked with LEGO.

Working with children

There is a huge difference between a six year old and a ten year old and everything has to be adapted to the particular needs of the child you're working with.

You can't assume a child can read or that they can understand what you're saying - you have to be able to modify your approach on the fly depending on their reactions and responses.

You need to be very aware of how you might be influencing the interaction, through your approach, your language, power dynamics and how you're interpreting things.

Safeguarding and ethics

All researchers who work with children in the UK should be DBS checked

The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children has tools, courses and advice to ensure you have appropriate safeguarding in place

Ethics is the same as for adults, with the added caveat that parents are consenting on behalf of the child - usually this isn't a problem but sometimes they're signed up when they don't really want to participate

If you're ever unsure, stop the session, write down your concerns. Talk to the parents if appropriate, if not, source outside help - NSPCC

Power dynamics

It’s very unusual for a child to be asked seriously, by an adult who isn’t their relative or teacher, for their experiences and opinions. It’s a very unfamiliar interaction and one they don’t have a script for.

In general, children will feel pleased and excited to be involved in the research (much like adults often are) but they can be overwhelmed and take time to warm up

It’s very important to be aware of how comfortable the child is and to take into account that they won’t necessarily feel able to speak up if they’re not happy.

Energy and focus

Some children are very energetic and chatty, others are more reserved and quiet. The energy of the session needs to be brought to a stable middle and sustained (which can be very tiring!).

Small talk is vital, to assess the child's language skills and to make them comfortable. School, toys and siblings are usually good conversation topics, but be aware that a child may tell you things an adult wouldn't - like their dog recently died or their parents have just split up.

Staying on task can be a challenge, especially if a child has an interest they **really** want to tell you about!

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Designing the research

Timing and location

Consider when the research will be carried out - after school, children are often tired and hungry and might not be in the right frame of mind to engage. Weekends/school holidays may be better.

Home is a safe space, but it can be too relaxed. Offices can be intimidating. School can be the perfect combination of familiar but structured, depending on the method.

Be kind to parents - remember they may have other children to deal with. Allow siblings to come along too and provide a space for them to play. Provide smaller incentives for siblings - eg stickers.

Methods

As with all research, the suitability of the method depends on what you're researching/trying to find out. With children, you also need to consider how the method might affect their ability to engage. Good screening is very important.

Remember:

- You can't assume any level of knowledge or experience - some children don't watch TV, for example
- Reading ability and language comprehension varies hugely
- Be aware of physical and cognitive variations, including disabilities (visible and invisible)

Starting the session

Use small talk at the start of the session to quickly determine the level of energy and engagement the child has, their language level, their interest in the area you're researching.

Remember to tell the child they can go to toilet or leave whenever they want. Assure younger children that their parent/carer is nearby.

Set the scene very clearly so the child understands what's expected of them. Don't overload them with information - if there's a lot to cover, break the session down into multiple steps and explain each step as it arises.

Questions and prompts

The research materials have to be designed to suit all the age groups you're working with - they can't be too complicated or too 'babyish.' You need to be prepared to adapt quickly to each individual participant.

Identify in advance the points where children might not understand. If you ask 'Do you ever play on a tablet?' the child might answer 'no' because they call it an iPad, not a tablet. Instead, you might point to a tablet and say 'do you ever play on one of these?' and listen to what the child calls it.

Children can be very literal. If you ask 'do you own a tablet?' they might answer no because they share it with a sibling. If a question is important, it might be worth coming at it a few different ways to confirm the answer.

Prompting vs helping vs stopping

A child may approach a task very slowly or without much concentration. It can be tempting to jump in quickly and move them forward, but doing so can seriously bias the results. It can also frustrate the child or make them feel rushed.

Deciding when to prompt, when to step in and help and when to simply stop the session takes careful judgement. The main thing is not to upset the child - no research is worth that.

Judge the level of encouragement the child needs - some children need constant verbal feedback, others find it annoying.

Pitfalls to avoid

One of the biggest dangers of researching with children is that you'll end up with messy data that's difficult to interpret.

This problem is usually caused by:

- vague questions/questions children can't answer
- over-prompting
- over-interpreting responses
- overloading the session so the child becomes tired/frustrated

Focus on what it is you really need to find out and ensure those questions are answered - other details are a bonus.

Key points

- You can’t assume anything about your participants - this fact makes you focus very tightly on what it is you’re trying to find out as you have very little room for manoeuvre
- Use the first few minutes to ‘assess’ the child - their language, demeanour, engagement and adapt accordingly
- Read body language carefully and respond to what the child needs
- Approach important questions from multiple angles to ensure you’re getting an accurate answer

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Questions

Stay in touch

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