

# Involving children in research

Even young children can contribute to research if appropriate methods are used. Lisa Whiting reports and Jack Forbes (aged ten) gives his views

## Abstract

Children and young people should be involved in the research process when the findings could affect them. It is important to use research tools that will facilitate their engagement as they can offer valuable contributions that generate a knowledge base that is a unique reflection of their needs. Visual methods such as drawing, collage and photography can help them to express emotions and opinions. Reference groups of children and young people can inform every stage of the research process, ensuring appropriateness of information materials, consent forms and methods. There are challenges associated with the involvement of children and young people in the research process, but with careful planning, these are surmountable.

## Keywords

Children: rights, research methods

FROM THE United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) to the *Healthy Lives, Brighter Futures* strategy (Department of Health (DH) and Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) 2009), there is overwhelming support for the involvement of children and young people in any decisions that may affect them. The requirement to take account of their views and experiences whenever possible is just as applicable to research as it is to any other initiative. Children's nurses who undertake research have a responsibility, wherever possible, to include children and young people in any study whose findings may have implications for them.

This article explores some of the issues to be considered when conducting research with this client group with suggestions on how these can be addressed.

## Consistent use of terms

Different terms and phrases are used in documents advocating children's involvement. The Department

of Health (2004) suggests that children should be 'listened to'; the Children Act (2004) uses the word 'consult'; the Education Act (2002) refers to 'pupil participation'. These differences can be confusing for those working with children and those hoping to conduct research with them. There are distinctions between 'participation'; 'involvement' and 'consultation' (Table 1) and although each of these terms could be used when conducting research with children, it is essential that the researcher uses the chosen term consistently and appropriately.

There are a number of advantages to involving children and their families in research studies. The children and young people benefit directly as they are able to:

- Develop new communication, negotiation and teamwork skills (Participation Works 2007, Carnegie UK Trust 2008).
- Express themselves, acquire a sense of achievement and increase their self-esteem (Kirby 2004, Participation Works 2007, National Youth Agency 2007).

It has been recognised for some time that the most advantageous method of ensuring that services are appropriate to the client group is to consult them (National Youth Agency 2007, Carnegie UK Trust 2008). Organisations benefit as they are able to learn from children and young people, collecting evidence about their views and demonstrating that children are central to the service and that the policy goals and the standards of the UN Convention are being met (Participation Works 2007). Society benefits as involvement provides the opportunity for children and young people to work with other groups (Kirby 2004, National Youth Agency 2007, Carnegie UK Trust 2008).

There are benefits for research because children and young people can provide an alternative perspective, offering advice on research methodology and the development of research tools. In addition, children will gain more insight

**Table 1** Differentiating participation, involvement and consultation

Participation	Involvement	Consultation
The process of sharing decisions which affect one's life and the community in which one lives (Willow 2002)	The overall term for children and young people being included in the decision-making process, at any level (Fajerman and Treseder 1997)	Obtaining children's views and opinions (Hill <i>et al</i> 2004)
Refers to when children and young people have an influence on how decisions are made, as well as what decisions are made, usually with some adult support (and sometimes working in partnership with adults) (Hertfordshire Children's Trust Partnership (HCTP) 2007)	An overarching term often used to explain any process, at any level, which ascertains and includes children and young people's views (HCTP 2007)	Consultation can be an ongoing process (Fajerman and Treseder 1997)  Decision-making processes in which adults ask children and young people for their views about an existing agenda (HCTP 2007)

into service development and are more likely to develop an on-going dialogue with adults (Kirby 2004). Presentation of findings by children and young people may have a greater audience impact, supporting better dissemination of evidence (Kirby 2004).

### Approaches to research involvement

According to Kirby (2004), there are many ways in which children can be involved in the research process. She suggests that involvement at the earliest possible stage is beneficial as it will make the study more meaningful. Participation may also extend to conducting peer interviews.

The National Youth Agency (2007) is committed to the involvement of children and young people and suggests eight approaches that can be considered:

- **Consultations** These are usually single events that aim to ascertain children's views on a particular topic.
- **Practice initiatives** These may include children and young people conducting research themselves or organising workshops to highlight priorities.
- **Website** Useful for facilitating access to information by children and young people; can be used to foster debate and as a question/answer forum.
- **Large scale event** This draws on the views and opinions of a much larger group of children and young people.
- **Network of groups** This involves establishing a network of children's and young people's groups, often facilitated by a support worker. Children

and young people are able to raise issues and to share their thoughts.

- **Parallel structures** A children's and young people's group is set up in parallel to an adult committee. Their advice can then be sought as necessary.
- **Committee places** Children and young people become committee members.
- **Advisory or reference groups** Children and young people inform the planning of an initiative. Some of these strategies may be difficult to integrate into a research study, particularly if it is being undertaken by one person. Others can be more easily facilitated and can prove beneficial, for example, the advisory or reference group. This has been described as when 'a group of children and young people, perhaps with adults, advise and inform those planning, delivering or reviewing a piece of work, or who manage a team or organisation' (National Youth Agency 2007).

A number of advisory or reference group meetings could be held throughout the study or a 'one off' event arranged. This can be helpful in the planning stages; it provides the researcher with the children's views on issues such as:

- Information sheets for the children in the study.
  - Consent forms.
  - The suitability of the proposed research tools.
- This can be crucial if creative techniques such as

*Children and young people can benefit through development of new skills and being able to express themselves*

drawing, collage or photography are being used; it is important to confirm age appropriateness and whether the children and young people are likely to engage with the method.

The information gained from the reference group can be invaluable for refining the methods and enhancing the rigor of the research and the validity of the findings.

## Age of the children

Kirby and Bryson (2002) suggest that adolescents are more likely to be involved in research than younger children. However, Broome (1999) reported that children as young as six years of age are able to demonstrate understanding of research. Twycross *et al* (2008) go further: 'With appropriate engagement techniques and information material, children as young as two years of age can indicate assent or dissent as part of the ongoing process of agreement to research.'

Borland *et al* (2001) found that the younger age group provide as many thoughts and ideas as the older age range. Provided the research is well planned and appropriate, it is possible to involve children from a very young age.

## Appropriate methods

Researchers conducting studies with children and young people tend to draw on the same methods that are used with adult participants. However, methods need to be appropriate and relevant to children's skills (Punch 2002) particularly as children may have limited vocabulary and a shorter attention span (Boyden and Ennew 1997).

According to Hill (1997), the researcher must 'maximise children's ability to express themselves at the point of data-gathering; enhancing their willingness to communicate the richness of findings'.

Methods that are commonly used to enhance the engagement of children include:

- Drawings, posters, collage.
- Diaries.
- Worksheets.
- Spider diagrams and activity tables.
- Photography.

Visual methods can be particularly beneficial when conducting research with children, especially as they feel an affinity with this medium and enjoy using visual tools

## Involving children: Jack Forbes, aged ten years

I started being involved in the research project when Lisa came to our school to see all the children in Year 5. She told us about her project and said that she wanted to find out about what activities we like doing. Lisa said that she was doing the project and that she wanted help with it. I thought that it would be good to take part because it would be great to take pictures of stuff, what children like at my age.

Lisa gave us some information to take home and then we decided if we wanted to get involved. I decided that I did want to get involved, so Lisa came to our house and explained everything; she said that she wanted to find out more about the activities that children like. She gave me a disposable camera and told me to take some pictures

of objects or stuff that I like to do (see right). Then Lisa came round to my house and collected the camera, then she came back again with the pictures and asked me to talk about them; she said things like why did you take this picture? And what did you like about the activity?

The whole project took a long time, about four weeks; but it didn't feel too long because I needed enough time to do all the things. I really enjoyed doing it all because sometimes adults don't really know what all children like and I think I showed most of the things that some children like.

There was nothing difficult about the project and it was very exciting because I could use the camera and take pictures of things that I wanted

to as well as my friends. I took pictures of my bike and my basketball, a picture of me playing football and a picture of me and my brother. Lisa said she was going to publish it all in a journal, with faces blurred out, but that it would take a long time.

I think that it is important that children's views are listened to so if I was asked to take part in another project I think that I would take part especially as I enjoyed doing it. I really enjoyed being part of this project.

**The research that Jack has participated in has been subject to ethical scrutiny and has been granted the necessary approval; the study is being undertaken by Lisa Whiting, professional lead, children's nursing, University of Hertfordshire**



(Thomson 2008). Visual methods help children communicate their thoughts and emotions (Leitch and Mitchell 2007) and often elicit different perspectives than methods that focus on the spoken or written word (Kaplan and Howes 2004, Veale 2005). Perhaps, most importantly, visual methods provide satisfaction for children and give the opportunity for them to get something out of the experience (Thomson 2008).

### Gaining access

There are significant challenges for the researcher trying to gain access to children as participants. Schools can provide a successful indirect route (Grieg *et al* 2007) and there is evidence that schools are receptive to and benefit from such requests (Kaplan 2008). However, Hood *et al* (1996) discuss the problems of recruiting children through schools and healthcare settings.

One of the advantages of establishing a reference group is that this may provide the opportunity to create trusting relationships with key personnel, for example, if a local school or health centre was used as a conduit for setting up the group. These gatekeepers may be more receptive to being approached when the researcher is trying to access children or young people for the main study.

### Rewards for participation

The National Youth Agency (2007) has suggested that it is important for the researcher to consider how children are thanked for their involvement. Giving presents is a contentious issue as it could be construed as an incentive, leading to accusations of bias.

Frequently, researchers do give children and young people gift vouchers (usually in the region of £5 to £10) at the conclusion of the study, but this does have budgetary implications. If this strategy is employed, it is important that there is a choice of shop voucher – an inappropriate selection by the researcher can leave the child or young person feeling disappointed rather than valued. Younger children respond positively to stickers and certificates, as long as they are age, gender and developmentally appropriate.

All participants and their parents/carers should be offered refreshments, the reimbursement of any travel expenses and sent a 'thank you' letter at the conclusion of their involvement in the study.



The reference group can offer advice on research methods as well as the appropriateness of information materials

### Dissemination of findings

It is advisable to report findings to participants (Macnee 2004, Nieswiadomy 2002) and all children and young people who participate should be provided with a developmentally appropriate précis of the study and its findings. The sample may have been drawn from a local community such as a school, hospital or health centre. A poster summarising key aspects of the research could be designed, or an oral presentation given; this values their research contribution and enables them to share their experiences with peers.

### Additional challenges

- **Planning and preparation** Considerable time needs to be allocated to ensure that the research approach is appropriate to the developmental stage of participants.
- **Resources** Over and above the usual resource issues such as equipment and venue, there may need to be help from other personnel which can incur further cost. The researcher and any assistants will be required to undergo Criminal Records Bureau screening.

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- **Rationale** It is crucial that there is a sound, ethically supported rationale for involving children and young people.
- **Power relationship** It is important to foster a partnership approach that values the contribution of children and young people.
- **Over-involvement** It has been suggested that some minority groups of children and young people have been 'overused' in research. The researcher must give thought to who is asked to participate to promote equality.
- **Ethical issues** A range of resources is available that provide advice on the ethics of research with children (Alderson and Morrow 2004, Grieg *et al* 2007). A reference group can provide evidence that the proposed research methods are appropriate which can be hugely beneficial when seeking ethical approval.

## Conclusion

Although children and young people can be key to the success of a research study, they are not experienced researchers. The researcher may have spent months or years planning a study but he or she must have realistic expectations of participants who may not immediately understand what is required of them. It is essential to find ways of 'combining the authentic voices of young people with the skills and expertise provided by professional researchers' (Dyson and Meagher 2001). There are significant benefits to involving this client group in research, not least of which is the enjoyment and fulfilment that the researcher experiences. Children and young people are willing and happy to be involved in the future shaping of health services, therefore, we should rise to the challenge and give them the opportunity.

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