

Title: Hear our voice: social, cultural and contextual considerations in researching with young and developmentally young children

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Researching with young and developmentally young children offers opportunities and challenges for researchers in relation to issues concerning competency, understanding, vulnerability, power relationships and the role of various gatekeepers. The ethics of gaining consent and ensuring that children understand what is being asked of them requires a balance between preventing harm and ensuring adequate protection whilst at the same time ensuring all children have the opportunity to be included and have their voice heard. This article will discuss the social, cultural and contextual aspects of consent and understanding for including young and developmentally young children in research.

The United Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) stipulates that children have rights to non-discrimination, to have their best interests considered, to receive guidance from adults, to express a view, to have their views given due consideration/weight and to be safe. Strong support for children's involvement and participation and rights is explicitly stated in sections of Articles 12, 13, 14 and 15 of the CRC. For researchers and educators this means that children's views are taken into account, they are involved in the decision making processes, and supported in expressing their views.

The guiding principles for *adult* participation in research of ensuring freely given fully informed consent, the right to withdraw from research participation and the right to anonymity and confidentiality all apply equally to children (Punch, 2002) although the process of obtaining consent requires due consideration and respect for children's understanding of the world and their ability to predict likely risks and benefits of participation. Sammons, Wright, Young and Farsides (2016) suggest three paradigm scenarios when considering a child's or young persons' potential for input into a decision about research and the corresponding role of parents/gatekeepers, namely:

1. Children and young people who are unable to articulate their view about research (for example babies and very young children or older children whose

communicative and/or cognitive abilities don't allow them to express a view to researchers)

2. Children and young people who are able to articulate their view but need adult support to reach a decision (for example young children aged three above)
3. Children and young people who are able to make decisions but not yet legally treated as adults (for example older children under the age of 16).

For clarity, this article focuses on children and young people in scenarios 2 and 3.

Providing informed consent for children who are young or developmentally young requires comprehension of complex ideas and expression of choice. Assessing competence to provide consent is complex and requires understanding of children's life experiences, means and methods of communication and response to suggestibility. Recording consent is often conducted by written means. Extra consideration will be required where children's competencies and strengths lie in other areas than written forms of expression and / or the culture is transmitted and shared orally rather than by written means. Consent should also be renegotiable so that children may withdraw at any stage of the research (Gallagher, 2009).

Adopting an ongoing process of assent whereby the child's acceptance of the researcher within the setting can be taken as assent to participate in the research is sometimes considered appropriate although this term does not sit comfortably with all researchers as some argue that it may be used where children are simply too afraid or confused to refuse (Alderson, 2004). Researchers need to consider the non-verbal signs and cues from very young children in observing their enthusiasm or reluctance to be involved. Researchers have a responsibility to be respectful and responsive to the trust placed in them when children have provided consent, as noted by Smith and Taylor (2003, p.213) who argue that the issue of children of any age expressing their views is:

"Not so much one of the child's ability to provide information, as it is of the adult's competence to elicit (or observe) it in the context of a trusting, supportive and reciprocal relationship."

This stresses the important role of gatekeepers and key adults, including educators and parents, social workers, health professionals and the wider community in which children

grow and learn. Maguire (2005) argues that researchers should view children as "...embedded in a complex web of intimate and larger social relations beyond the immediate research context." For example, in some cultures community elders and other traditional authorities hold ultimate authority on consent for participation in research. In some cases parents and children will hesitate to participate in the research if such elders in their communities or families refuse their consent. Even if gatekeepers consent, this does not necessarily mean that child consent will follow. Ethical concerns may arise when parents or other adults may have given their consent and children may feel unable, therefore to refuse to participate.

The challenges for researchers then lie in developing participatory methods for involving young and developmentally young children in research that give value to children's views and diverse ways of demonstrating competency, comprehension, agency and choice within the social, cultural and political contexts in which they live and learn.

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Further reading:

Powell, M.A. and Fitzgerald, R. (2012) *International literature review: ethical issues in undertaking research with children and young people* [Online <https://childethics.com/> accessed 27.03.2018]