

Research with Children – The State of the Art – Admap April 2009

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Introduction

Research with children and teenagers is fun, creative, and often innovative, but can sometimes appear daunting and complex. International criticism about the way food and drink products are advertised to children has highlighted the way in which children are treated as consumers. Add to this global change in social and family structure, working in this market can appear to be a minefield, and research with children and young people has to tread a careful path between meeting clients' need for clear and informed insight, and listening to children's views in the most effective but responsible way possible.

How does research with children and young people differ from adult research?


Children's research can take many guises. Global research is carried out by respected organisations such as UNICEF (see box 1), or UK's Ofsted annual 'Tell Us' survey which asks children important questions about their wellbeing, much of this coming about through the passing of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (see table 1). And then there is the easy to criticise research which gets linked to and confused with marketing practices such as using viral marketing techniques with children as young as 7. What is clear is that children are being taken seriously as consumers, not just of goods that are directly marketed to them (e.g. food and drink, digital technology, toys and games), but also as consumers of services that are provided to serve their best interest. This means that many children from around age 7 at schools are becoming familiar with completing questionnaires, and taking part in discussions about matters that are important to them.

Box 1 Unicef ‘Voices of Youth’



Voices of Youth
 Voices of Youth, UNICEF’s international website for young people, has been asking young people what they want to see in the media. Overall, young people on Voices of Youth feel that the media is a powerful, but untapped, tool for change. They believe it has the power to educate a wide group of people, provide direction for both adults and young people, and encourage people to be involved and active in the global community.

Table 1 – United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

	<p align="center">United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child</p> <p align="center">entry into force 2 September 1990, in accordance with article 49</p>
<p>Article 12</p> <p>1.</p>	<p>States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.</p>
<p>Article 13</p> <p>1.</p>	<p>The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice.</p>

Types of Research – expertise, online, social networking, ethnography

The scope of research with children is wide, but much of it does rely on the expertise of the researcher, and it would be foolhardy to attempt without an understanding of child development. For instance it is possible to carry out research with very young children, but this calls for highly skilled researchers with training in child psychology, and, inevitably, usually involves observation as much as interviewing¹. Commonly the start age is 7, and while each child is different, it is around this age when children begin to move away from an entirely family-centric world and become more rational, able to express an opinion about how they are feeling. It is not until around 10 though that children are able to reason and begin to consider abstract ideas and concepts, so careful consideration needs to be given about the subject of the research, and an acknowledgement that research with young children is not like research with adults; face to face sessions need to be carefully constructed, and not too long. Ethnography works if it is highly skilled, producing detailed and rich description of children and young people's lives, and insight into the reality of today's families; it can be described as looking from the 'inside out', rather than the outside in of other observational research.

Increasingly online research is the preferred method for quantitative research. With most children in developed countries now online² and adept at using keyboards this works well, although some would argue that this should not begin until 11 as many children may not have the written skills to answer questions online without considerable help and input from adults. There is though some interesting work being done currently that allows children to complete questionnaires in a visual rather than a verbal way online, and this is certainly the way forward. Using schools for online research with large numbers of children means there is an in-built check in terms of authenticity of answers (it is easier to check that the children are the right age / gender), but can sometimes create problems with nationally representative samples. Online research using pre-existing panels such as Ciao or YouGov are good if parents are contacted first (and asked a few background questions) before handing over to the child.

Web 2.0 and Web 3.0 Research

The prevalence of children's online social networking gives a good opportunity to observe children's behaviour online. Known as 'lurking' there has been some concern expressed about the ethics of this (Brownlow & O'Dell 2002). Online groups and bulletin boards are also being used, and are good for exploring the perception, motivation and response to ideas or concepts. Like traditional focus groups they take place at a set time and last for approximately $\frac{3}{4}$ - 1 hour. Bulletin boards usually last for 3-5 days, and respondents visit

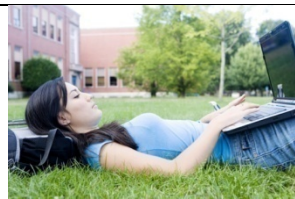
¹ see for example Judy Dunn's excellent work on children and friendship

² There is though a socio-economic divide with less C2DE households having access to broadband at home.

each afternoon/evening. Ideas, concepts and designs can be altered and fed into the next day's group. A cautionary note is that a focus group or bulletin board is only as good as the moderator, online or off-line, and it is essential to ensure that the person doing the moderating has experience in communicating with children, and an understanding of what questions will be understood.

Exciting opportunities are emerging from the world of the semantic web. Kevin Kelly (2008) has said 'total personalisation requires total transparency, total surveillance.' This sounds alarming, especially where children are concerned, but if it were possible to protect their identity, there may be real opportunities here for marketers to fully understand children and their families. (see box 2 – Richard Somerville). More companies are emerging that utilise the new digital world that children inhabit, companies such as Peanut Labs in the US that uses social networking sites (SNSs) to interview adults and children over 13³. With SNSs now overtaking email as the main form of online communication, this appears to make sense.

Box 2 – Web 2.0 and 3.0 Research



Richard Somerville, an online market researcher since 1998 whose company conducts full audio-visual online remote interviews with adults, comments, 'As technology develops, we are gathering more and better data, at greater speed and at less inconvenience to respondents. But equally, respondent security and data protection risks also change, so these new methods will only work for us if our industry self-regulation keeps pace with the technology.' He also suggests that, if parental consent-based recruitment methods are to continue to work as intended for youth research, parents need to be fully informed about the exact technologies and methods being used.

Responsible research with children – good practice, and the law

One of the main issues here is *what is market research*. Most of us working in the industry are quite clear that it is asking children their opinion about a particular subject or set of subjects that have been carefully considered and that we do not believe will harm or upset them. We follow strict guidelines and codes of conduct set down by our industry

³ Social networking sites have a minimum age for use of 13, although many children are joining younger. See Clarke (2009).

organisations, ESOMAR (worldwide) and national organisations such as the MRA in the US and the MRS in the UK.

There are several important issues to consider. First is consent (see box 3 – ‘Informed Consent’), and the age of the child. One difficulty, as the guidelines of ESOMAR point out, is that there is ‘no common international definition of ‘child’, ‘young person’ etc. Even within a single country the definition may vary with the activity under consideration’. Currently ESOMAR and the MRS define a child as being under 14, for whom permission must be sought for interviewing from a parent or guardian. But many of us in the industry have felt that this is too young, and have been seeking permission from parents of children up to 16 for some years. The MRS in the UK is now seeking consultation on its Code for interviewing children, and is recommending that this be raised to 16, a move which many of us welcome. Interestingly, because research with children calls for special skills, some of us are also psychologists, therapists, academics, and as such must also abide by the tighter and more stringent rules and regulations laid down by organisations such as BPS (British Psychological Society), which defines a child as ‘under 16’. No research with children would be done in universities without approval from an ethics committee, or without CRB checks⁴.

Box 3 – Informed Consent



All the codes of conduct refer to ‘informed consent’, that is the child knows exactly what is being asked of her or him, and research should be clearly distinguished from marketing. Second is parental consent. Responsible companies will always ask the child to give parental details, so that the parent or guardian may be contacted and permission be given, but passing on parents’ email address could contravene other regulation (Mayo & Nairn 2009). Many of us believe that the safest way here is to stipulate that it is parents and guardians who are recruited, and then permission is given for their children to take part in the research. That way the grey area of parental permission being sought retrospectively is overcome. Where this is not possible, for instance in a school, it is the Head Teacher who gives permission, and parents are mostly only informed or contacted if the research is deemed to be of a sensitive nature, for instance it is about drugs, or smoking, or sexual behaviour.

⁴ CRB (Criminal Record Bureau) checks are not stipulated by Codes of Conduct but all responsible children’s researchers will ensure that their entire teams have been CRB checked. Many of us believe that such checks not only ensure the wellbeing of children, but also protect the researcher, as many parents, and all schools demand that such checks have been made and seek evidence of this.

Paul Massey, a solicitor specialising in legal issues concerned with children and the internet at international law firm K&L Gates believes that children's growing use of the internet is challenging. He comments 'Researchers should think carefully before obtaining information from research subjects, particularly children. Researchers should determine whether any information constitutes personal data, subject to protection under the Data Protection Act, and obtain legal advice in relation to particular obligations regarding the use and storage of children's personal data.'. He continues 'A law which is often cited by legal practitioners on both sides of the Atlantic is the US COPPA law (Children's Online Privacy and Protection Act), which stipulates that websites collecting information such as age, date of birth, or age revealing demographic questions, from children under the age of 13 should obtain 'verifiable parental consent' from the child's parent *before* collecting, using or disclosing personal information from a child'. The implications of this are that a child cannot be recruited directly online to take part in research through a children's website. The market research community's Codes of Conduct tend to say that consent for children's panels online can be 'front loaded', that is the parent is consenting to multiple contacts on a range of specified topics. It may however be best practice to seek parental permission on each occasion that a child is contacted to take part in research. Paul Massey also emphasises that once a research subject reaches the age of 18 he or she should always be given the option to confirm or renounce previous consents given by a parent or guardian.

Moving Forward

The world of Web 2.0 and 3.0 will produce increasing opportunities for communicating with children, but we need to ensure that as an industry we are very aware of ethical considerations, seek clarity on what research is, and when it becomes marketing, and what might harm or upset children. The right to withdraw at any time, informed consent, parental or guardian permission under 16, assurance and adherence to confidentiality is, it goes without saying, essential in terms of good practice. In my experience children's researchers, and our clients, welcome the increased scrutiny of our industry, and see the future as one where professional expertise and good practice go hand in hand.

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Barbie set up Family Kids and Youth six years ago and was previously Director of NOP Family (now GfK NOP). She has been a children's researcher for over 20 years, has trained in research methods at the University of Cambridge, and is shortly to submit her PhD which has looked at children and adolescents' use of digital media. Barbie sits on the BBC children's editorial board, regularly gives papers at international conferences, and appears on TV and radio commenting on youth research.

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