

Additional guidance on surveying children and young people

Authors: Debbie Collins, Jo d'Ardenne, Sophie Pilley and Kate Green

Ethical guidance on conducting research with children

The points below provide a summary of the key ethical guidelines on conducting research with children. If you require more information, please contact us.

- Ensure research staff have DBS clearance, including enhanced status if required;
- Inform the potential participant about the research in an age/ability-appropriate way;
- Gain informed consent from both the young participant and a parent/guardian;
- Ensure that the child understands what the research task involves and that their participation is voluntary;
- It is important that all permission is verifiable, i.e. check that the parent/guardian is who they say they are;
- Enable the young participant to skip questions, take a break or end involvement;
- Reassure children that the research is only interested in what they think and all answers are acceptable;
- Abide by the Data Protection Act obligations in dealing with personal data for children and parents;
- Provide anonymity for all participants, but explain limitations on confidentiality;
 - Inform participants that their names will not be used in the research; instead all participants will be given a code to link their answers throughout the research.
 - Inform participants in recruitment and at the start and end of surveys that what they say may have to be shared with appropriate authorities if there is indication that someone may be at risk of significant harm;
- Incentives can be valuable in encouraging participation. Incentives should be framed as recognising a child's time and input to the research. Options for incentives include: retail voucher; online voucher;
- At the end of the survey, use clear language to show that the research has concluded;
 - Thank for their participation, offer any incentives and remind about anonymity;
 - Provide information sheet / link to information on support organisations.
- Ensure the parent/guardian and young participant is aware of their role (if any) in the rest of the research;
- Ensure participants are aware that any subsequent engagement will be voluntary.

Developing new measures to evaluate your programme

Whilst we have developed a number of measures to be used, you may find that you need to write some additional questions. This may be due to a topic area you wish to explore not having been covered or to add context to a set of questions you will be asking.

The benefit of using validated or pre-tested measures is that measurement errors are kept to a minimum. Some of the measures in our spreadsheet have been pre-tested or used on other surveys and where possible it is best to use these. The pre-test should have identified any problems with the questions and allowed for adaptations to be made. Where possible we suggest that these measures are used.

However it might be that the question which already exists is not appropriate for your target audience and therefore a new question should be written which is targeted to who you want to speak to. This could also be the case if a topic area is not covered. The benefit of writing new questions is that you can these can be designed specifically for your area and audience of interest. However it is important to remember that any new measures which are developed may not be as reliable as pre-existing measures and should be pre-tested.

The following section contains information on Questionnaire design should you need to write your own questions.

1. Questionnaire Design Principles

A good survey should be:

- Valid - questions measure what they are supposed to measure so the target concepts you are trying to measure and not others.
- Reliable - the instrument is consistent and responses do not contain too much random variability so each time you use the instrument you collect the same information.
- Sensitive - responses reflect important real differences or changes.
- Unbiased - questions do not produce responses which are skewed in relation to the true distribution.

There is a considerable literature on the “do’s and don’ts” of questionnaire design, which stems back more than half a century (Cantril & Fried, 1944). Below is a summary of what are regarded to be the main things to avoid in questionnaire design because they compromise the accuracy of the data obtained.

- **Do not ask people for information they do not have**

When designing questions it is important to consider whether respondents will have the information required to provide an answer. Avoid asking questions that are overly taxing of respondents’ memories.

- **Do not ask more than one question at a time: avoid double-barrels**

Always ensure each question is only asking the respondent one thing. If a question is asking about more than one thing at once the respondent may want to answer yes to one part and no to the other rendering them incapable of providing a valid answer. Furthermore, from an analysis point of view, interpreting answers to a double-barrel question is problematic – which part of the question is the respondent answering?

- **Avoid double-or implicit negatives**

This is particularly important to consider when writing questions with an agree/disagree response scale. The respondent should not have to engage in a double-negative when answering e.g. by disagreeing that they feel less confident now to indicate that they feel more confident now.

- **Avoid long lists of response choices**

If a long list is presented visually, people tend to only look at the first few items whereas if a long list is read out people are more likely to only remember the last few items. If long lists are necessary, it is better to divide them into a number of short ones.

- **Beware of questions that include hidden contingencies**

Some questions may not be relevant for all groups. For example the question “How often do you drive your car to work?” clearly only applies to people who a) can drive, b) have access to a car that they can drive, c) who work and d) who do not work at home. If possible, filter questions should be asked, in advance of the question to establish who should be asked it. Alternatively including response options such as ‘does not apply’ allows the person to say that this question is not relevant to them.

- **Avoid questions that start with response choices**

Response options should always come after the question not during.

- **Avoid ambiguous words and questions**

Questions should be specific and clearly worded.

- **Avoid jargon, technical terms, acronyms and abbreviations**

These should always be avoided as they may be interpreted in different ways by different respondents, or not understood at all.

- **Beware of leading questions**

Be careful when wording your questions that they do not lead the respondent towards a desired answer as this can result in biased data.

Open vs closed questions

Questions can be open, where respondents can answer in their own words, or closed where response categories are provided for the respondent to use.

Open questions are useful for collecting explanations or descriptions about things. They are useful for when you do not want to inadvertently influence what answers are given, or if you want to give your participant the opportunity to provide feedback in their own words. When using open questions, thought needs to be given to how the text data will be analysed. In many cases open answers will have to be coded post-data collection, and this can be time-consuming.

Closed questions are most common in questionnaires. They closed response categories which can be easily analysed quantitatively (counted and used to generate statistics) without further coding post data collection. Response categories which are used for closed questions need to be clear and include everyone’s situation.

Example open question	Example closed question
Imagine you want to open a bank account. What things could you check to make sure you picked the best bank account? OPEN RESPONSE.	How often does your child ask you to buy things because their friends have them? 1. Often 2. Sometimes 3. Rarely 4. Never 5. Don't know
Example code list for an open question	
1. Child mentions interest rates 2. Child mentions whether account has debit card or similar 3. Child mentions whether the account is online 4. Child mentions a promotion or toy 5. Child mentions whether the account is easy for children to use 6. Child cannot answer 7. Uncodeable response	

1.1 Measuring behaviour

When designing questions to measure behaviour it is important to first consider the following stages:

- **What is the behaviour you are interested in?** You will need to define the behaviour the behaviour you are interested. Behavioural questions tend to include a key verb that you need participants to consider e.g. ‘buy’

‘talk to’ ‘give’. This verb is often qualified with a description. In the example below the verb is ‘to encourage’ and the description is ‘your child to...’

- **How will the behaviour be counted?** You will need to decide the level of accuracy required when quantifying how often the behaviour in practice. If a high level of accuracy isn’t required you may wish to opt for a verbal frequency scale (e.g. never, rarely, sometimes, often). If a higher degree of accuracy is required you may need to quantify the behaviour using numbers or numeric bands (Never, 1-2 times, 3-5 times etc). Which numeric bands you choose will be determined by how often you think people will perform the behaviour of interest in practice.
- **What time period are you asking about?** If you are asking about behaviours you may wish to include a reference period. Do you want to people think about how often they do behaviour in a day, or in a week, or in a month? Do you want to know if people have ever done a behaviour? Or do you want them to think more generally? If you are delivering an intervention you may wish to ask people how often they did a behaviour before the intervention, and ask them the same question again after the intervention.

An example behavioural question is shown below. The reference period in the question is open. Instead the respondent is guided by the response options to know that they are thinking generally.

Example behaviour question
<p>How often do you encourage your child to save up for things they want to purchase?</p> <p>1. Often 2. Sometimes 3 Rarely 4. Never 5. My child does not have their own money</p>

1.2 Measuring attitudes

Rating scales are the most common form of attitude measure and can include numerical scales (e.g. ‘on a scale of 0-10 how would you rate X’), verbal scales (e.g. ‘would you say you are very happy, fairly happy, neither happy nor unhappy, fairly unhappy or very unhappy with X’) or agree-disagree statements. Examples of common answer scales are shown below.

Example verbal rating scale	Example numeric rating scale
<p>How important is it to help your children learn how to manage their money?</p> <p>1. Very important 2. Fairly important 3. Neither important nor unimportant 4. Fairly unimportant 5. Very unimportant [6. Don't know]</p>	<p>How important is it to help your children learn how to manage their money, where 0 is very unimportant and 10 is very important.</p> <p>0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</p>

Example agree/ disagree rating scale	Example statement selection
<p>To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement. How you manage your money now will influence how your child manages their money in the future?</p> <p>1. Strongly agree 2. Agree 3. Neither agree nor disagree 4. Disagree 5. Strongly disagree [6. Don't Know]</p>	<p>Which of the following best describes you:</p> <p>I think the government should increase tax credits I do not think the government should increase tax credits</p>

It is important to consider the number of categories you include in rating scales. Using fewer points may be more appropriate if you are interested in attitude direction. Using more points may be more appropriate if you are interested in the strength of an attitude or whether there are subtle differences in attitudes between groups. For younger respondents longer rating scales are not appropriate.

Use of midpoint should also be considered. Including a midpoint allows a neutral or ambivalent opinion to be expressed whereas omitting a midpoint forces a respondent to give the direction of an attitude. You may also want to consider offering a 'don't know' or 'no opinion' option if the topic area is obscure or if respondents are likely to not have an opinion (this is particularly important if the scale does not have a midpoint).

1.3 Measuring knowledge

Measuring respondents' knowledge will be very useful in the context of a programme evaluation. There are several ways in which this can be measured.

The first is using 'quiz' style true or false questions to test the persons knowledge on particular subjects. This can work particularly well with children who are usually used to taking short quizzes at school or in magazines.

You can also use task based questions. For younger children this could include selecting coins in the order of their value and for older children looking at a payslip and identifying how much the person was paid that month after tax.

Open questions can also be used to measure knowledge. However code frames will need to be thought about in advance to aid the analysis process and determine when a respondent has given a 'correct' answer.

Example 'quiz' questions	Example multiple choice questions
<p>Please say true or false to each of the following: The same toy can cost more in one shop than in another</p> <p>1. True 2. False</p>	<p>If the inflation rate is 5% and the interest rate you get on your savings is 3%, will your savings have more, the same or less buying power in a year's time?</p> <p>1. More 2. The same 3. Less 4. (Don't Know)</p>

Example task based question	Example open question
<p>Each month, Jane's salary is paid into her bank account. This is Jane's pay slip for July.</p> <p>(A payslip is shown)</p> <p>How much money did Jane's employer pay into her bank account on 31 July?</p> <p>A. £500 B. £750 C. £1,000 D. £1,500</p>	<p>What can parents do to help children develop good money management skills?</p> <p>OPEN QUESTION:</p> <p><i>NOTE ON ADMINISTRATION: A codeable list of acceptable responses should be developed based on the intervention content/ primary aims of the course. This could include points allocated for each of the following (the following list is not exhaustive):</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Parents give children their own money -Parents give a set amount of money to children and stick to it - Parents act as role models in how they manage their own money -Parents talk to children about saving, budgeting and the role of money in society - Parent praise children for managing money well -Parents positively comment on others who are good with money etc <p><i>A score system should then applied e.g:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 0- No answer provided/ No course content mentioned 1- Parent identified 1 thing they could do 2- Parents mentioned 2-3 things 3- Parents mentioned 4 or more things

2 Designing measures for different age-groups

This section includes advice on collecting information from children and young people of different age groups. It covers when to collect information from young people directly and when to collect information from proxies (such as parents or teachers). It also discusses what types of questions are appropriate for different age groups.

Children and adolescents answer questions differently to adults. Their abilities, for example their communication, literacy and social skills are still in development. In addition, as children develop at different rates abilities can vary widely between individuals of the same age (see for example d'Ardenne & McGee, 2009).

In order to allow for these differences questions need to be child centred and child-friendly as children may have limited or no experience of answering questions of this nature. Ideally adult assistance should be on hand during question completion to address the needs of individuals who encounter problems.

The following list is suggested as best practice when designing measures for children:

- ✓ Keep the overall questionnaire as short and simple as possible.
- ✓ Ensure the research topic is meaningful and of interest to children.
- ✓ Provide instructions on how to answer. Children may have no experience of questionnaire completion so may be unfamiliar with standard question formats such as tick boxes, grids or scales. Ensure instructions are

comprehensive and unambiguous. Walking children through a 'demonstration question' can be helpful where this is possible.

- ✓ Word questions simply and directly.
- ✓ Keep response options to as few as possible.
- ✓ All survey instruments designed for use with children should ideally be pre-tested as children may interpret questions in ways unanticipated by researchers.
- ✓ Ensure assistance from adults is to those children who require it.

Further considerations for different age groups are detailed below.

2.1 Aged 3-7

A number of research studies have suggested that the minimum age a child can take part in a survey interview or answer a self-completion questionnaire is seven years (Scott 2008). This is because children's communication and literacy skills before this age may not be adequate to capture survey information reliably.

Therefore most of the outcome measures designed for this age group in the framework are proxy questions which would be asked of parents, with the others being picture questions. Simple observation based tasks are also appropriate, for example when children are given a task (such as putting coins in order of value) and observers record whether or not the task is completed accurately or not.

Measures collected from proxies (such as parents) should always include a 'don't know' response option in case the proxy does not know the information. We also recommend that attitudinal measures (such as 'does child believe X is important?' or 'does child worry about Y?') are not collected via proxies. This is because proxies do not have direct exposure to the child's attitudes and may not be able to reliably report what the child thinks about key issues. Instead, attitudinal outcomes may have to be assessed indirectly by asking parents about observable things such as their child's abilities or behaviours.

2.2 Aged 7-11

Children aged 7-11 are able to provide meaningful answers to simple survey questions. However key skills (social, cognitive and literacy) must be considered when designing the questions. For example, during the cognitive interviewing some individual children found it difficult to read the certain words in the measures developed. As children will vary in terms of ability adult assistance should be on hand to address the needs of individuals who encounter problems. An interviewer administered questionnaire may be preferable. If a self-completion mode is used an adult should still be available to provide help.

2.3 Aged 11-16

Children of this age group should be able to answer survey questions. However, as with younger children, questions should still be kept simple to allow for difference in ability. At this age children have been known to be susceptible to social desirability reporting. Therefore self-completion modes may be helpful to counteract this. However, an adult should still be on hand to help those that need it.

2.4 Aged 16-18

Children of this age group should be able to answer questions which are similar to those used for adults. Whilst ability may still vary they are likely to be able to manage more complex tasks than younger age groups.

3 Pre-testing new questions

Any new questions which are developed should ideally be pre-tested with the key age group to see if they work as intended. This is particularly important with young people where understanding and ability can vary. Questions can be tested qualitatively where questions are administered and follow up questions are asked to check understanding. This method is called cognitive interviewing and is the technique we used to test some of the new questions which were developed (see Collins et al 2015).

A pilot could also be conducted. This is a 'dress rehearsal' when all measures are used as a smaller scale survey to test the instrument for ease of administration and length. Feedback can be provided from those administering the questions on how well young people are able to answer them and if there are any problematic areas.

4 Useful resources

Information about research with children and young people:

Heath, S., Brooks, R., Cleaver, E., Ireland, E. (2009). *Researching Young People's Lives*. London: Sage

Ronald M. Sabatelli., Stephen A. Anderson (2005). *Assessing Outcomes in Child and Youth Programs: A Practical Handbook*. Revised Edition, available at :

<http://www.ct.gov/opm/lib/opm/cjppd/cjjyd/jydpublishations/chilyouthoutcomehandbook2005.pdf>

Information on how to carry out cognitive interviewing:

Collins, D. (ed) (2015) *Cognitive Interviewing Practice*. London: Sage

Information on conducting evaluations:

Coe, R.P., Kime, S., Nevill, C., Coleman, R. (2013). *The DIY Evaluation Guide*. Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) Publication.: Available at

https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/uploads/pdf/EEF_DIY_Evaluation_Guide_2013.pdf

5 References

Bagwell, S., Hestbaek, C., Harries, E., Kail, A. (2014). Financial Capability Strategy for the UK, NPC report, available at: <http://www.thinknpc.org/publications/financial-capability-outcome-frameworks/>

Cantril, H., & Fried, E. (1944). The meaning of questions. Gauging public opinion, 3-22.

McGee, A., & d'Ardenne, J. (2009). Netting a winner: tackling ways to question children online: A good practice guide to asking children and young people about sport and physical activity. Prepared for the Sports Council for Wales

Scott, J. (2008). Children as respondents, the Challenge of Quantitative Methods, Research with Children, practices and perspectives, eds. Christensen, P. & James, A., 2nd Edition, Routledge, New York.
