FAQ 15: What are the best ways to interview children?

What's the issue?

In general, good practice in interviewing children applies to everyone, including adults. But since children are generally interviewed by adults, and since they may not find it so easy to express themselves, reildres(t)-a.3(i)reermIn tIn 3intervi

Researchers' experiences

In focus groups with 9- to 11-year-olds, we got the children talking about the internet by telling them a story thus: 'an Alien from another world has been watching people here on the planet Earth very carefully. It has been able to see everything but meeting you is the first opportunity it has had to ask questions about things it has seen. It wants to know what the internet is, and you have to explain….' The researcher placed a large sheet of paper (flip chart) on the table and gave each child a coloured felt pen. In the middle was a picture of a little green alien with speech bubbles around it: the children were asked to fill out the speech bubbles in answer to questions like, what is the internet, where do you use it, what is the best or worst thing about the internet, what is fun or boring about it? Later in the discussion, they were also asked if there were rules for using it. (Sonia Livingstone, UK)

We were examining the use of social media among 9- to 12-year-olds in Greece. During a focus group, a 10-year-old made a reference to pornography, teasing one of her friends. We managed to respond instantly, picking up the new discussion thread. Despite the sensitive nature of this experience, the children in the focus group opened up as a result of the relationship of trust we've built with them, thus helping us improve an already existing dataset with rich new data. The bottom line is that interviewers need to be alert and ready to respond to whichever (new) turn the discussion may take, if this is useful for their research scope. Another time, the teacher who was initially present at a focus group which was taking place in the classroom, left the room following our advice; the children immediately opened up and became more talkative and spontaneous after her departure. (Greek team)

When interviewing people about their use of the internet, I have often found it helpful to give examples of particular search terms or sites that they might visit, to encourage interviewees to go beyond generalities and to respond in more detail. Once when interviewing a group of young teenagers about their use of the internet for music, I gave examples of the kinds of music or bands they might search for (e.g. 'Suppose you wanted to find some music by Boyzone, how would you go about it?'). My interest lay in their internet literacy (did they search for leisure content with more competence than when they searched for schoolwork?). But my examples of bands were a couple of years out of date, and so in one simple question, I lost all the rapport I had carefully built up with the group, reminding them that I was old and adult, quite unlike them, and so occasioning great hilarity and scorn amongst the group. (Sonia Livingstone, UK)

References and further resources

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