

FAQ 23: What's the best way of asking children sensitive questions?

What's the issue?

With any research method, you have to work on gaining children's trust in order to ask about sensitive issues, such as unpleasant chat experiences, dangerous situations, bullying, or sexual harassment. This is important both to ensure valid answers and to meet ethical requirements. Hence, judging whether (or how) certain questions can be asked of children at a certain age is crucial.

Common practice

You should know as much as possible about the child's "sensitive issues" before the interview (diruage, and the terms use possible to the everyday terms children use.

The range of response options provided, if a closed-ended question, is vital, as the responses suggest to the child what kind of answers you are expecting, and the kinds of answers

From SAFT (Children Norway, 2005/06), question about bullying and distress: 'In the past 6 months, have you ever been harassed, upset, bothered, threatened, or embarrassed by anyone chatting online?' Yes/No/Don't know.

From the Pew Research Center's Parents & Teens 2006 Survey (12–17 years old): 'Have you, personally, ever experienced any of the following things online? You can just tell me yes or no.'

(a) Someone spreading a rumour about you online; (b) Someone posting an embarrassing picture of you online without your permission; (c) Someone sending you a threatening or aggressive email, instant message or text message; (d) Someone taking a private email, instant message or text message you sent them and forwarding it to someone else or posting it where others could see it.

From UK Children Go Online, questions about children's concerns: 'Which of these things, if any, do you worry about when you use the internet?' SHOW LIST. PROBE: WHICH OTHERS?

Response options: Being contacted by dangerous people/People finding things out about you that are personal or private/Seeing things that might bother or upset you/Spending too much time on the internet/Possibility of getting a computer virus/Don't know/None of these.

From the 2005 National Center for Missing and Exploited Children survey (Finkelhor, 2006), questions about sexual risks:

'Now I have some questions about things that happen to some young people on the internet. In the past year, did you ever feel worried or threatened because someone was bothering or harassing you online?' Yes/No/Don't know/not sure/Refused/not ascertainable/Not applicable.

'In the past year, did anyone ever use the internet to threaten or embarrass you by posting or sending messages about you for other people to see?' (response options as above)

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- Tourangeau, R. & Smith, T. W. (1996). Asking sensitive questions: The impact of data collection mode, question format, and question context. *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 60(2), 275–304.