FAQ 27: How do we maximize the reliability and validity of children's answers?

What's the issue?

It is commonly supposed that children are unreliable informants. While designing and conducting research with children takes care, so does research with adults. Parents, for example, are subject to considerable biases (social desirability, third person bias, etc.) when reporting on their children's media use; teachers may also provide a partial and overly positive account of children's activities in class.

Every effort must be made to address the possible circumstances that might undermine children's responses in research (as reiterated throughout this guide). But the notion of children as unreliable must be traded against the benefits of direct questions to children. Who else can report on what a child does with media when alone, or in their bedroom, or how they feel about violent content, or what pressure they feel from their friends? A useful principle, therefore, is to assume that each child is capable of providing valid and insightful information, provided that s/he is approached appropriately and that the data are interpreted carefully.

Common practice

In qualitative interviews, you have the chance to address inconsistencies and contradictions in what children might say. Thus you should check for misunderstandings, verify interpretations, and explore contradictions in what children say, to check if this indica

Pitfalls to avoid

Forgetting to pilot all research materials. Failing to use the interview situation to clarify possible interpretations of what children say, or to clarify whether inconsistencies and contradictions are the result of methodological confusions or the genuine ambiguities and ambivalences in their lifeworlds.

Examples of good practice

Zaman (2005) combines observations of children playing electronic games in natural environments with observations in controlled settings (in the usability lab), allowing her to get a more accurate picture of children's actual gaming behaviour. She argues that children must not only be observed while exploring and playing a game, but they must also be given the chance to express their opinions and perceptions. In order to fulfil these two objectives, Zaman employs different techniques that allow her to evaluate the usability of the game being tested. These include (1) the 'think aloud' method, in which children are asked to provide a running commentary as they play a game (also taking into account non-verbal responses, if possible); (2) the 'active intervention' method, in which the researcher 'actively intervenes' by asking relevant questions during the task performance (but only after children have explored the game at their own pace first); and (3) the 'laddering' method, in which the researcher asks users why they like or dislike something; when the user answers, the researcher asks 'why' again; this process results in a list of connected elements: 'a ladder', at the end of which the personal value(s) of the user will be revealed. (Veronica Donoso, Belgium)

In our research, asking children to write an essay proved to be reliable – as evidenced by the wide range of viewpoints on sensitive political issues, instances of political incorrectness and the use of slang, all of which can be interpreted as a sign of pupils' frankness. What children produce may provide answers to questions not foreseen by researchers at the beginning of the study. The same strengths, and even greater possibilities, obviously characterize what children produce online as a data source. (Veronika Kalmus, Estonia)

References and further resources

Lobe, B., Livingstone, S., & Haddon, L. (eds) (2007). *Researching children's experiences online across countries: Issues and problems in methodology.* London: EU Kids Online Network, LSE.

Zaman, B. (2005). *Evaluating games with children.* Paper presented at the Proceedings of Interact 2005 Workshop on Child computer Interaction: Methodological Research, Rome, Italy.