

# So what works? Our top 7 tips for qualitative research with children and young people

Tuesday 30 August 2016

By:

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Previously in this blog series we have looked at [challenges and ideas when using baseline surveys](#) and how to [measure soft skills](#) when working with children and young people. In this post I talk through some ideas around approaching qualitative interview-based research and the importance of being creative and flexible in this work.

Working with children and young people calls for a more bespoke approach than the traditional research methods we tend to use with adults. I have recently been putting this into practice in a project for Essex County Council where we are evaluating the impact of early help for families, children and young people who need support with emerging difficulties to prevent the problems getting worse.

Here are a few things we have built in to the project so that children and young people feel comfortable engaging with the research.

## **1) Find out how the children and young people like to communicate**

The popularity of smartphone apps and communication tools changes quickly these days, and children and young people are at the forefront of these technological developments. So it's important not to assume that what you knew about their communication preferences still holds true, and to remember that what might be true in one location may not be in another.

For this project we arranged a workshop with a group of young people in Essex to find out what methods of communication they and their peers prefer to use, what they feel uncomfortable with, what barriers we might come across, and what methods might encourage young people to engage with our research. This gave us a great starting point for designing our approach.

## **2) Find out what settings or surroundings the children and young people feel comfortable in**

In this project we are working across a range of different provider organisations and types of early help, so before starting the research with children and young people, we arranged to speak with the practitioners delivering the support.

We asked them what they thought the children and young people they tend to work with would prefer, for example, speaking on the phone, meeting face-to-face on a one-to-one basis, or getting a group together for an interactive session. We also asked them what surroundings they might feel most comfortable in, for example at school, at the provider's premises, or in their homes. This has all given us a good steer as to how to set up the research to be most effective.

## **3) One size doesn't fit all**

Based on all this information we have been able to take a bespoke approach to designing the qualitative research, working in different ways with children and young people of different ages, in different locations, and using a variety of methods and interactions. These decisions are informed by the insights above, but ultimately the approach we take is guided by each individual, within a clear set of ethical research parameters.

#### **4) Take your time**

Depending on their experiences of interacting with adults, young people can sometimes feel suspicious or defensive when meeting someone for the first time. In these situations building rapport is a vital part of the process, so always build in additional time for this before diving straight into interview questions. To an extent this is a standard research approach but it's especially important for working with children and young people.

#### **5) Think about creative incentives**

Typically, research incentives take the form of gift vouchers, and these can be really effective. But there are all sorts of other incentives that might encourage children and young people to take part. As part of this project we're planning to produce videos, either as case studies that follow a few personal journeys, or in animated form. We will involve some of the children and young people in these final products, to help them see that they have contributed to something tangible and engaging, and how this might improve the help that others receive in the future.

#### **6) Focus on a small number of questions**

With young children in particular, it's vital not to get too attached to your interview topic guide. To build trust, the interaction needs to be led by them and this is likely to mean that the conversation takes some 'interesting' directions before finding its way back to what you're trying to understand for the research! Keep your research aims simple so that you can stay clear about where you're trying to get, without worrying about exactly how you end up getting there.

#### **7) Have plenty of materials up your sleeve**

Again, for young children in particular, have plenty of options to hand to encourage conversation based on what they feel comfortable with. Children often feel uncomfortable with one-to-one face-to-face conversation – it's not how they interact with the world. But give them a game to play, something to build, or some paper and pens and they start to relax and tell you their [stories](#). Having said that, what works for one may not work for everyone, so always have a few options available.

#### **It's all worth it**

This might all seem like a lot of work just to do a few interviews, but the benefits really outweigh the effort. For me the two most important benefits are:

1. The children and young people feel comfortable and enjoy the process.
2. We get more valuable and relevant insights because the children and young people feel at ease and in control.

And even if it takes a bit more time and effort to get there, it's still worth it every time.

Peach, B. (2016) *“So what works? Our Top Tips for Qualitative Research with Children and Young People.”* OPM: London. Available at: <http://www.opm.co.uk/blog/so-what-works-our-top-7-tips-for-qualitative-research-with-children-and-young-people/>