# 1 Researching with Children: an Introduction

## Objectives

- To introduce and contextualise the basis for the text
- To establish the terminology associated with children and the context in which it will be used
- To summarise the relevance of cognitive and social development
- To explore how and why researching with children is different to researching with adults
- To consider how to expand ideas on ways to research with children and to discuss how to develop aim(s) and objectives

## Introduction

*Ask the young. They know everything.*

Joseph Joubert (1754-1824)

Joubert suggests that the young are knowledgeable and asking them what they know about a variety of different topics sounds reasonably straightforward. Yet the reality of researching with young people can be complex, not least because of what young people are prepared to divulge and the extent to which the young people engage with the research and the researcher. In addition there are a wide-ranging number of issues that need to be taken into consideration before the research can begin (e.g. ethics, research design and approach, engaging techniques and planning) and deliberation ought also to be given to the interpretation and dissemination of findings. The objective for this book is to provide an accessible text which will guide the (novice) researcher who seeks clarity and illustration through the entire process of researching with children. Whilst there have been

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a wide-ranging number of papers written about researching with children, these tend to focus on innovative research practices, ethical approaches or the nuances of ethics and interpretation. Not only are these articles diverse in what they focus on (see Box 1.1) but they represent studies conducted in a variety of different disciplines. This text will draw together the various contributions made by researchers who have conducted research with children and will endeavour to illustrate best practice across disciplines.

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| Food choice | Bullying |
| Hospitalization | Inter-personal violence |
| Exercise | Counselling provision |
| Space (and use of) | Materialism |
| Ridicule | Romance |
| Dislikes and disgust | Shame management |
| Health provision | Smoking and cessation |
| Advertising and brands | Extra-curricular involvement |
| Street children | Music use and consumption |
| Fashion | Self-esteem |
| Learning disabilities | Dyslexia friendly environments |
| Parents' involvement in education | Pester power |
| Hard to reach children and teenagers | Anti-social behaviour |

**Box1.1:** Examples of research topics explored with young people

This book is designed to be a practical guide to researching with children whilst at the same time being underpinned with academic concepts. This text is primarily be designed for final year undergraduate or MSc/MA students studying research methods courses, education modules or associated dissertation modules (although it could also be used by PhD students in the initial stages of their studies). The book is akin to a guidebook for those researching with children. It summarises seminal papers and salient issues (ethics, access, engagement, etc.) and provides actual examples of research projects (see Appendices 1, 2 and 3 for extended illustration of research practice) that have been conducted with children – how they were planned, how the research was designed, how consent was achieved, how the data was collated, the way in which the data was analysed and the 'equipment' used to facilitate the process.

There is a need for this book as there are an increasing number of students who choose to research with and write about children for a variety of courses and often their final-year dissertations. The research environment in relation to children and 'young people' is contentious and students are often unsure how to progress their ideas. However, children are an interesting and tempting group with which to conduct research. This book will guide novice researchers in terms of what they must do in relation to research planning and design and provides clear and concise guidelines as to how to approach the salient issues (ethics, access, engagement, etc.). For more experienced researchers, the book provides new and innovative approaches to facilitating research (specifically with adoles-

cents – see Chapter 9) and will detail the way which greater insight can be generated with regard to topical child and adolescent related issues. This text will also facilitate the role of dissertation supervisors and project managers.

The complexities of researching with children and adolescents are be explored. Research guidelines and professional codes of conduct are provided and illustration of how to follow these guidelines will be given. 'Equipment' to facilitate research with children will be explored and help on developing the 'topic' to be researched will be posited. Research design (consent, the role of experts, gatekeepers, teachers, ethics committees etc.) will be discussed. Interpretation of data will be examined and how to present the data will also be included. What to do once the research project is completed is also to be addressed. The book will cut through jargon and will be clear and concise in terms of what is appropriate when researching with children and how to achieve the greatest insight or understanding in relation to the chosen topic.  This book, however, will not be appropriate for those researching highly sensitive issues in relation to children (e.g. mortality, abuse, etc.) where the highly experienced and well trained researchers in this area will follow their own very specific codes of practice in relation to these areas of vulnerability.

Although this text is designed to be easily accessible, the gravity of the principles of researching with children should mirror those observed (albeit in a more complex manner) across disciplines. As the practice of researching with children can vary in health, business, education, sociology and social work, researchers in different disciplines have the opportunity here to learn from one another (see for example: Richardson and McMullan, 2007). This text, whilst comprehensive, does not claim to be exhaustive on researching with children and further reading is both suggested and recommended throughout.

This chapter specifically will dispel any myths the reader has about researching with children and will ensure that the (novice) researcher seriously considers the implications of working with this unique group. It will also differentiate between children and adolescents and will address the key concepts relative to the child, including socialisation and development. It will also help the researcher when deciding on a research topic and/or exploring the nature of the research project to be undertaken. Having decided on or having considered the research topic to be explored, the way in which aims and objectives can be developed will be addressed. Finally preparing to research with children will be summarised.

## 'Children', 'adolescents' and 'young people'

The terms 'children', 'adolescents' and 'young people' are often used interchangeably and use of this terminology can sometimes simply denote that the individual(s) being discussed is less than 18 years of age. This can be confusing as

the cognitive and social development of a 'child' will differ significantly depending on their age as well as their socio-cultural environment. Often researchers will justify the age of their sample by 'interpreting' age-related boundaries and attempting to reflect the abilities the age group are expected to display. Lind *et al.* (2003), for example, suggest that 'adolescence' has been broadly considered to extend from puberty to relative independence from parental control which could include the ages of approximately 10-18 years. Others would argue that at 10 years of age, comparatively with older adolescents, children do not possess the maturity or skills to process information and communicate in a more adult-like way. As such it would appear that defining the 'boundaries' of childhood or adolescence is somewhat problematic and calls for flexibility. Each group of young people then should be considered relative to their own social development, skills and abilities as detailed below (see the section below 'Cognitive and social development'). The gatekeeper(s) may be able to guide the researcher when research approaches are being planned and designed in this respect.

This text will consider researching with young people between the ages of 8-17 years. There is a difference researching with 8-year-olds and 17-year-olds and Chapter 3 illustrates the way in which a variety of methods can be employed to appeal to different age groups. In this text, young people have been categorised into three different groups; those aged 8-11 years for researchers interested in researching with children in the latter stages of primary school; those in early adolescence (12-14 years) and those in late adolescence (15-17). Harvey and Byrd (1998) indicate that early adolescence (12-14 years) is mostly about acquiring information and experience, while late adolescence (15-17 years) is characterised as being a period of identity development in which the information obtained earlier is used to build and consolidate a new identity. As such, the importance of the social context might change over the course of development and it appears to be appropriate to subdivide older children into these two age groups. This is considered as an 'ages and stages' approach.

However, it is accepted that child development models are not universal but socially and culturally specific (Woodhead, 1998). Social constructivism, that is, who we are and how we come to see ourselves is increasingly viewed as the ongoing and changing story we tell about our lives. It is a story that begins in the early childhood years and is actively constructed from the '*relational matrix*' of home, school, and community. Children 'construct stories of who they are in relation to others' (Korn, 1998: 223). As such, it is to be expected that children will have different experiences as a consequence of their role within the home, school and the community which may not be related to their age. Choosing to employ the research methods or techniques suggested here then should be done by taking into account the social development as well as the age of those you are researching with.

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**Chapter extract**

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