



RESEARCH SHORTS #3A

Child Assent to Participate in Research

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Ethical Research with Children

Childhood is not a universally defined concept. The way we understand and value childhood, including our expectations of it, continue to develop and change culturally, and over time. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) offers a broad definition of a child as anyone under the age of 18 “unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier” (UNCRC, article 1). Though childhood is not defined by international law, the UNCRC is recognized and has been ratified by most countries.

Context specific, socio-cultural, institutional, economic and political factors further influence the way we understand and experience childhood (Graham, 2013, p. 7). Life experiences and intersecting characteristics, such as race, class, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity, also challenge and shape conventional ideals and practical implications of what it means to be and become a socially and self-aware adult individual (O’Kane, 2008; Tilleczek, 2012). Interconnected with the development of the self as both being and becoming, young people must also navigate and negotiate the complex ways of belonging in society (Tilleczek, 2014). Notably, as children learn and are shaped by society, they are simultaneously actively engaging in creating and challenging the social worlds they inhabit (Connolly, 2008).

In recent years there has been a substantial shift away from research *on* children, to research *with*, and when possible *by* children, respecting individual agency and recognizing the important contributions children can make to the research process and outcomes (Tilleczek, 2014). As such, children must be encouraged to express their views, ideas and feelings with and within the research process (Masson, 2004), and must be involved in decisions that directly and indirectly affect their individual and collective lives (Lambert & Glacken, 2011). Though not legally binding, research assent is akin to consent in process and purpose, allowing participants to be informed about a research project and choose whether or not to participate. Obtaining child assent as well as parental consent acknowledges that children are active agents in their social worlds and knowledgeable in their own experience. Assent is essential to a research *with* children perspective (Danby & Farrell, 2004).

The TCPS2 (2014) states that while child “assent would not be sufficient to permit them to participate in the absence of consent by an authorized third party, their expression of dissent or signs suggesting they do not wish to participate must be respected” (p. 44).

Obtaining Child Assent: Things to Consider

The unequal power dynamics between adults and children in our society are a significant challenge for those who seek to conduct research with children and obtain authentic informed assent (O’Kane, 2008). Danby & Farrell (2004) highlight that “the sensitivities of listening to young children in ways that respect their competence, on the one hand, and recognizing the power differentials between adults and children, on the other, require ongoing consideration and negotiation” (p. 41). The underlying and explicit power differentials within parent-child, teacher-child, care-giver-child and researcher-child relationships can impact the child’s actual and perceived agency and engagement with the project. For example, when a parent enthusiastically provides consent for their child, the child may then feel obligated to participate (Kumpunen, Shipway, Taylor, Aldiss & Gibson, 2012). Children may be influenced or hindered within the research process because they want to meet the perceived expectations of the adults involved. As relationships are not only inherently formed through, but are integral to, the research process, the multiple, interrelated power dynamics involved must be examined (Connolly, 2008), and sometimes challenged and redefined. Accordingly, it must be clearly expressed and demonstrated that no one will be upset if the child chooses not to participate in any or all of the research project (Lambert & Glacken, 2011), regardless of parental consent.

While the child participant is central to a research *with* children approach, the researcher is also an integral and inseparable part of the research process. Researchers must engage in ongoing reflexivity, surfacing the complex ways a researcher’s own experiences, and perceptions of childhood, influence the process and outcomes of research with children (O’Kane, 2008). Furthermore, careful consideration of the child participant assent process is an important avenue for reflection on the extant assumptions within the broader research methods and methodology. What is the child expected or assumed to know about the project, and about research more generally, prior to and following the assent process? What can/should the child be in control of or have a choice about throughout the process? Does the child have sufficient opportunity, strategies and comfort level to ask questions and to be heard? Utilizing a flexible, collaborative dialogue approach to assent, rather than a more traditional one way process of information transfer (Lambert & Glacken, 2011), supports complex navigation of the unique qualities of children as a social group and as individuals.

Research Short #3B will explore innovative approaches to child assent, and introduce a new approach developed by researchers at the Young Lives Research Lab.

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The **Young Lives Research Lab**, under the direction of Dr. Kate Tilleczek, engages in research on: the impacts of technology on young lives, youth pathways into and out of mental health, re-imagining education, and emerging theory and methodology. *We are dedicated to witness and speak about young lives in global and local contexts.*

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