



## RESEARCH SHORTS #3B

### Child Assent: Methods and Methodologies

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#### Traditional Assent Methods

Obtaining participant assent for research with children has become the norm across disciplines. However, Lambert & Glacken (2011) highlight that descriptions and examples of the specific methods and methodologies for gaining assent have been vague or absent from the literature. The most commonly used method of obtaining child assent is to create a modified version of the parental consent form, using accessible, child-friendly language. Similar to the informed consent process, a researcher typically reads aloud the information contained in the assent form, provides participants with time to read the form independently and to ask questions or express any concerns s/he may have, and obtains the participant's signature, dependent on the participant's age and ability.

“The TCPS 2 and other international regulatory standards are consistent in their requirement that researchers seek child assent...However, it falls short in providing a broad, practical framework to guide the development and review of research assent protocols involving children.” (Constand, Tanel, & Ryan, 2015, p. 17)

Finding creative and fun ways to present assent information to young children can help encourage participant engagement, facilitate comprehension and support children to make informed choices.

#### Beyond Forms: Innovative Approaches

As a part of their study exploring how families of children undergoing chemotherapy cope with eating problems, Kumpunen et al. (2012) developed two innovative play activity approaches to supplement a traditional child assent form: a storyboard for ages four to six, and a word search for ages seven-twelve. The storyboard contained pictures depicting different stages of the study, and was used to facilitate an interactive dialogue. The word search contained key research terms and participants were asked to define each one once found in the word search. The researchers found that using methods that were both familiar and fun seemed to help maintain interest and facilitate understanding for young participants. They also advised that more time and adaptations to the process may be needed to accommodate differing ages and levels of development (Kumpunen et al., 2012).

## Visual Methods: Pictures, Video and Multimedia

Using large print, bright colours and incorporating pictures and/or diagrams are popular strategies for adapting written consent materials for children (Lambert & Glacken, 2011). Interestingly, while children tend to prefer and enjoy assent documents that contain colourful illustrations over a traditional text-based form, pictorial approaches do not necessarily increase comprehension and retention. Adcock, Hogan, Elci, & Mills (2012) assessed the ability of children ages 7-11 years of age to comprehend a traditional assent form and a colourful assent booklet containing pictures and text. Though participants reported they liked and understood the assent booklet with pictures better than the traditional form, there was no significant difference in level of comprehension when assessed (Adcock et al., 2012, p. 233). O'Lonegan & Forster-Harwood (2011) found that using videos with real or animated depictions can be similarly problematic. While both parents and children enjoyed video depictions of assent better than a standard assent form, the video only resulted in improved comprehension for parents, with no significant difference for children (O'Lonegan & Forster-Harwood, 2011). O'Lonegan & Forster-Harwood (2011) also tested a multimedia approach to assent, using a PowerPoint presentation with hyperlinks to short video clips that further depicted the research methods and processes. Differing from the pictorial and video approaches, the multimedia presentation resulted in increased levels of comprehension for child participants, particularly in understanding risk management (O'Lonegan & Forster-Harwood, 2011). That today's youth have grown up with and are comfortable using digital technologies, may have contributed to the effectiveness of a multimedia approach to assent for children (Prensky, 2005).

## The SEAK Project and Child Assent

In collaboration with Socially and Emotionally Aware Kids (SEAK), a project of the Canadian Mental Health Association Nova Scotia Division, researchers at The Young Lives Research Lab (YLRL) are leading an evaluation of the scale-up of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) in Atlantic Canada. As part of the evaluation, the research team is conducting focus groups with children who have taken part in SEL programming in their schools. The YLRL team designed and pilot tested a developmentally appropriate visual means by which to garner informed assent from the student participants, using a colourful *Prezi Assent Map*. The researchers use prompt discussion questions and encourage an open dialogue throughout the assent process. It is proposed that using a visual, non-linear, digital format, while also providing a printed copy of the assent map, will both engage and interest child participants, as well as help facilitate collaborative discussion, understanding and retention, thus supporting the children to make informed choices about their participation in the project. For more information about the SEAK project visit <http://seakproject.com/>.

### References

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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.*

For further information visit [katetilleczek.ca](http://katetilleczek.ca) or contact us at [ylrl@upe.ca](mailto:ylrl@upe.ca)