

November 2016

global kids online Qualitative research toolkit

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## **Focus group topic guide**

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| Core themes (INCLUDE ALL) | Example questions (SELECT AS APPROPRIATE) | Adapting – points to consider (ADD AS DESIRED) |
| **Introduction**  **Start by welcoming the children and thanking them for helping. Introduce yourself and the project. Introduce some basic rules of the focus group.**  ***When conducting the focus group, it is important to be sensitive to the considerable diversity and inequalities in children’s lives, including differences based on gender, sexuality, age, ethnicity/cast, socio-economic status, language, disability, confidence levels and context.*** | *Suggested description of the project*   * We are studying how children are using the internet around the world. This means we are talking to children, and sometimes the people who look after them, in lots of different countries. We want to find out how children get online (e.g., do they use a computer, mobile phone, tablet, etc.) and what kinds of things they do when they are online. We also want to understand what children think of as being potentially negative or problematic when using the internet, but also what they find useful. * It would be really helpful if you could tell me about your experiences of using the internet and help me understand what you like and don’t like about it. I will ask you some questions to help you with this, but please remember that there are no right or wrong answers. | * The language used to describe the project, and during the interview more generally, needs to be appropriate to the children’s age, level of understanding, and sensitive to their native/main language, cultural and socio-economic background. * The reference to devices, activities and platforms used by the children needs to be adapted based on what is/might be available to particular children, paying attention to access inequalities (possibly a sensitive issue to children). Note that children tend to name services by brand name (e.g., Facebook) rather than type (e.g., social networking site), or to be unclear whether a service is online or not (especially for messaging and for gaming) – explain as appropriate. * Allow sufficient time for ‘warming up’ and developing rapport with and between the children. * Consider breaking up the session, varying the activities, and re-arranging the space to maintain the children’s concentration. Different approaches might be necessary based on the children’s age, background, cognitive abilities, etc. * Make the children feel they are the experts. * Prepare a plan for handling spontaneous disclosure of traumatic experiences and how to introduce the more sensitive subjects, such as risk and harm. * Be prepared to refer the children to support services and consider alternative options in cases where formal services are not available (see *Method guide 2: Ethical research with children* at [www.globalkidsonline.net/ethics](http://www.globalkidsonline.net/ethics)). * Further guidance is available in the Global Kids Online *Method guides* ([www.globalkidsonline.net/guides](http://www.globalkidsonline.net/guides)). |
| **Discuss ethics:** **consent, recording, confidentiality, explain that the children do not have to talk about any issues they find difficult or upsetting. Invite the children to ask questions.** | * Do you still want to take part? * If you change your mind at any point, just tell me that you want to leave the focus group; it is absolutely fine to do that. If there are any issues you don’t want to discuss, just tell me and we can move on. * I would like to record this conversation so that it will help me write my notes later. I am not going to share this with any people and I will change your name in my notes to protect you. Is it okay to record the conversation? * Is there anything you want to ask me before we start? | * Setting the scene in a way that encourages informal discussion and spontaneous participation, creating a trusting atmosphere. * Making the children feel in control of the situation; it is particularly important to accommodate children in vulnerable situations (consider gender, age, ethnicity/cast, language, disability, confidence levels). Continue monitoring throughout. * Making any child feel comfortable to stop at any point (continue monitoring, offer again, if necessary). * Making sure the children agree to being recorded and understand how the recording will be used. * Giving an opportunity for questions. |
| **Warm-up (getting the children talking).**  **Start with the children’s view of the internet and what they like about it.**  **If prompts are needed use examples about the last time or occasion when something interesting happened.**  ***Pay attention to diversity and inequalities in children’s lives by monitoring responses and non-verbal communication.*** | * At the beginning we will introduce ourselves. You will each tell your name and you can also tell us what you enjoy the most on the internet. * Tell me how it was the last time you used the internet – who were you with, what did you do, was it fun? * Has anything interesting happened while you were online recently? | * Note and adopt the language the children use to describe their experiences. * Build confidence and trust. * Ensure the ground rules are followed (listening, respect, equal contribution). * Consider different strategies that allow the discussion to flow but also give a chance of quieter children to contribute (e.g., occasionally asking the children one after the other in a circle). * Note when the children might be speaking from the perspective of norms and expectations, and try to get beyond the socially desirable answers, continue monitoring. * Be sensitive to inequalities that children might be facing – think in advance about what might make some children uncomfortable and continue monitoring during the discussion. |
| *The core themes (column 1) can be explored by using some of the example questions (column 2). Additional questions relating to the specific context and research should be developed (some ideas in column 3). The aim is to allow children’s own voices, experiences and preferred forms of expression to direct the discussion, so the topic guides need to be used flexibly to allow this. Researchers might decide to reorder the topics (to make children feel more comfortable or follow the flow of the discussion, as well as to change under which topics certain questions appear). Time spent on each of the core themes will also depend on the particular study. Please, note that it is ambitious to cover all topics in great depth.*  *Perhaps include some activities appropriate to the children’s age to vary the situation; note that the theme order does not follow the model (*[*www.globalkidsonline.net/framework*](http://www.globalkidsonline.net/framework)*) but rather suggests a child-friendly flow to the questioning.* | | * Try to break up the focus group into subsections, each with a short introduction. * Some children find it hard to sit still. Try to give them reasons to move about if the focus group is lengthy – consider varying the activities or re-arranging the space. |
| **Theme 1: OPPORTUNITIES**  **Ask for details about the online activities, probe around different activities and seek further details. You might want to focus in particular on different types of learning, socialising and communication, sharing with others, community and civic participation, creativity, entertainment, information-seeking.**  *Pay attention to diversity and inequalities in children’s lives – opportunities will vary* | * Tell me more about the things that you usually do online (prompts: games, videos, music, chat, messaging, photos, creating a profile, searching for information, uploading/downloading things, reading, buying things, discussing social problems, getting involved in a campaign). * What do you and your friends usually do online? * Do you share things with others online? What? With whom? * Prompts for details: What exactly do you do there? What games do you play? What are they about?… What do you like about it? * Can you think of anything else you do online? * When you go online, what are the things that you find most useful (why)? * Do you use the internet for learning new things? What? Recent example? Finding information? * Do you use the internet for school/homework? * Are there any things that you can get only from the internet? * Which of your [media/devices/sites/online activities] would you miss most if it disappeared tomorrow? Why is that? | * Getting a good sense of the range of opportunities. * Keeping in mind that what is available and accessible would vary between children/contexts. * Adapt for out-of-school children where necessary or for differences based on diversity and inequalities (e.g., gender, age, disability, etc.). |
| **Theme 2: ACCESS**  Discuss access to the internet (devices, comparison with peers, sharing with others), difficulties getting online, time spent online.  *Pay attention to diversity and inequalities in children’s lives – what is available to children will be different.* | * So, how do you usually get online (e.g., do you use a computer, mobile phone, tablet, etc.)? What’s the best way to get online? What about other children you know, what do they use? * Where are you usually when you are online? * When online do you do this with others? * Do you share devices with others? * Do you sometimes have any difficulty getting online? Why? * How often do you go online? Where? For how long? When do you go online the most (time of day/week)? | * Children who face barriers to access might find these issues sensitive. * What constitutes average/normal use will vary. * Notice agreements and disagreements. You might consider inviting different opinions to foster diversity. * Sometimes asking about ‘children like you’ might make a child more comfortable to talk. |
| **Theme 3: SKILLS AND PRACTICES**  Ask about what the children feel competent doing and also what they find difficult. Distinguish between different types of digital skills (operational, information, social, creative, mobile). Probe further about skills to stay safe online.  Aim for a balanced discussion of skills related to online opportunities and those related to preventing risks.  *Pay attention to diversity and inequalities in children’s lives – children will have different abilities and interests.* | * What kind of online activities are usually the easiest for you (why)? * Prompts about specific skills: saving photos, downloading things, changing privacy settings (operational); finding information, visiting the same sites (informational); removing/adding people, sharing information/content (social); creating videos or site content, uploading things (creative); installing apps, making payments on mobile (mobile skills). * What about things that are more difficult (why)? * What do you do to solve such problems? Can you think of an example? * Anything you want to do better (why)? * Have you ever done anything to make you safer online (prompts: privacy settings, passwords, blocking people, blocking content like ads or junk mail, deactivate function showing location, changing content sharing options)? | * Children might feel reluctant or vulnerable to admit they do not know certain things or may not realise their own limitations. * Careful probing and requests for concrete examples can be helpful, as long as this does not make the children feel uncomfortable. * Aim to have a good balance between the discussion of skills related to taking advantage of the opportunities available online and those related to preventing online risks. * Help-seeking (and support generally or the lack of it) might be a sensitive topic. |
| **Theme 4: RISKS**  Ask about things that were not very pleasant, not quite right, things to be careful about. Probe for further details on particular risks that are of interest.  Note key incidents of risk exposure to ask later about harm.  *Pay attention to diversity and inequalities in children’s lives – both risks and harm will vary.* | * Are there things on the internet (on Facebook, while playing a game, etc.) that children might find worrying or upsetting? Can you think of any (other) examples? * Are you careful about anything (on the internet, while playing)? * Are there other things on the internet that are not all right? What do you think about the ways that children can be mean to each other on the internet? Or that adults can be mean to children? Do you see things like that happening when you go online? * What other things can happen on the internet that might bother or upset children of your age? Can you tell me about this? * What other things are you careful about? * What about people you or your friends don’t know personally – is it okay to be in touch with people you haven’t met on the internet, to exchange images or play games with them, for instance? * Can you think of anything else? | * Risk exposure is potentially a very sensitive topic; children might get reminded of unpleasant experiences and get upset/feel vulnerable. * Asking about ‘you or others’ or ‘people of your age’ might make it easier for children to talk about risk. * If necessary, offer to pause the focus group to decide if the children want to have a break or stop participating. * Consider referring to professional services. If these are not available, consider other options. * Children are likely to have different reactions to risks and ability to cope. * Ideas of what constitutes risk behaviour will vary between children, but also in relation to different cultures, socio-economic factors, age, gender, ethnicity, disability, etc. * Note that exposure to risk does not necessarily lead to harm, and that children might have different experiences (including positive ones) of things that might be seen as risky (e.g., contacting unknown people). * There are lots of risks to ask about, and the children may be concerned about different risks from adults/researchers. The research should not introduce children to risks (e.g., information about self-harm) that they are not already aware of. * Consider that there might be some vulnerable children in the focus group (such as victims of online sexual abuse, online bullying and socially underprivileged children) who might need special support. * When discussing online risks, try to use neutral terms such as ‘hurtful online behaviour’ rather than ‘cyberbullying’ – often those who say or do hurtful things are also at the receiving end of such comments. * You might want to create an information and risk awareness leaflet to give out to all children participating in the focus group. |
| **Theme 5: WELL-BEING and RESILIENCE (coping and help-seeking)**  Asking directly about well-being and resilience is difficult, and this information might have to be deduced from the overall discussion and from asking about coping and help-seeking.  Key issues to address in this theme are: coping with and response to risk exposure, seeking help and helping others, vulnerability and harm, health consequences, feelings when online/not online, consequences from excessive use.  *Pay attention to diversity and inequalities in children’s lives – try to capture the different approaches children might have and what is available to them.* | For each key incident of risk exposure mentioned earlier, probe for a response – coping, harm, help- seeking:   * You mentioned that you (or your friend or someone you know) experienced things that are not okay on the internet. What happened next? How would you say you (or they) felt about it? What did you (or they) do about it? * Is there any help available when things like that happen? Where can children get help? Have you been asked for help by others? * What (other) help do you think should be provided for children? * How would you react if something similar happened again? * When would you say that situations like that turn out to be fine and when do things get worse? What makes the difference? Can you think of examples? * Can anything be done to prevent worrying or upsetting things online from happening to children in the future? * What do you think having internet access adds to your life? What’s the best thing about it? And what’s the worst? * Have you ever ignored other activities so that you can be online? (e.g., eating/sleeping, seeing family or friends, studying)? * How would you feel if you had much less access to the internet than you do now? | * Aim to get a good sense of the particular circumstances and response/coping of the children. * Both positive and negative outcomes are important to look in to – the balance between them will vary between children. * Consider how to distinguish between exposure to risk and harm. * Have a prepared plan of how to handle disclosure of traumatic experiences and how to introduce support options. * Again, consider possible additional needs of vulnerable children (such as victims of online sexual abuse, online bullying and socially underprivileged children). * Note that well-being can be related to a sense of protection, security, support and empowerment derived from social relations more generally. |
| **Theme 6: MEDIATION**  **(family, educators, peers, community)**  Ask about the extent to which others (family, educators, peers or community) are involved in the child’s online activities, e.g., by being there, discussing, providing advice or support, setting limitations.  *Pay attention to diversity and inequalities in children’s lives – aim to get a good understanding of what is available to children and how effective mediation is for their circumstances.* | * Do you talk to others about what you do on the internet (who)? Why them? Anyone else? What do you usually talk about? * Does anyone ever check what you do online? * Do you sometimes go online with other people sitting next to you or near you (who)? Why them? Anyone else? What do they usually do/say? * Are there any things you are not allowed to do online (what)? Why these things? Who is not allowing you? Do you sometimes do them anyway? * Have you ever asked anyone for help related to something online (who)? Why them? Anyone else? What kind of help did you need? * Are there other kinds of information or support that you would like, that you would trust? * Have you ever been asked by anyone for help related to something online (by whom)? Anyone else? What kind of help did they need? * Do adults around you (parents/carers, older siblings or teachers) know enough about the internet to help you? * Have you ever discussed with anyone how to be safe online (who)? Why them? Anyone else? What did you talk about? * Have you ever discussed with anyone things online that are not right? Or that are upsetting (who)? Why them? Anyone else? What did you talk about? * Who else do you talk to (friends, family, school, service providers) about things online? | * This group of issues/factors is particularly dependent on the particularity of the socio-cultural context and what is available to each child. Consider carefully how to best capture the context (technical specificity, online-related culture and social norms, broader social context, the social environment of the particular child). * Consider possible differences within societies and socially marginalised groups. |
| **Theme 7: DIGITAL ECOLOGY**  The ‘internet’ is not the same in every language or country or on every device. Be ingenious in finding ways to discover what ‘the internet’ is – what is available, what it offers – for this particular child. This information might have to be deduced from previous discussion of internet activities, access and difficulties. | * If you could change something about the internet, what would you change? Or if you could talk to the person who designed your [mobile phone, tablet, social networking site, etc.] what would you tell them works well or works badly? * Are there enough good things for you to do on the internet? (Tell me about them – what would you like more of?) * Do you read the terms and conditions for the sites you visit? (If not, why not…) * Some sites ask you for your real name and some don’t – why do you think that is? Does it matter? How do you respond? * Do you have a profile on any gaming or social media sites? (If ‘yes’, tell me more – information about you, how many friends/contacts, how used.) | * Asking direct questions about this topic might be difficult, especially for young children. * Yet it is important to consider how digital design and ecology influence the user experience. * This theme may require some ingenious questioning from the researcher to identify the online world available to this group of children – what is it like, what options they have, whether they are in a world designed for their age or for much older people, etc. |
| **Close the focus group**  **Final opportunity to add anything, contact details, further support.** | * Sum up some points from the discussion, compliment and thank the children. * Ask: is there anything you’d like to add? Anything important to you that we haven't talked about? * Remind them what the research is for, and how the findings from the focus group will be used. * Provide materials – brief source of guidance and support (including contact details for the interviewer). * If the interview included upsetting or problematic elements, consider more substantial follow-up support. | * You might want to talk to the children about how they felt during the interview and make sure they are not upset. * Answer any questions the children might have. * It is important to acknowledge the children’s contribution and make sure they know how the findings from the focus group will be used. |

***Other useful resources from the Global Kids Online research toolkit:***

* Additional qualitative toolkit resources: qualitative toolkit guide, individual interview topic guide, guidance on data analysis and fieldwork preparation documents are available at [www.globalkidsonline.net/qualitative](http://www.globalkidsonline.net/qualitative)
* *Quantitative toolkit*, available at [www.globalkidsonline.net/survey](http://www.globalkidsonline.net/survey)
* *Getting started* guide, discusses the purpose and approach of Global Kids Online and explains what resources are available in the research toolkit, available at [www.globalkidsonline.net/tools](http://www.globalkidsonline.net/tools)
* *Method guides* on key issues related to researching children’s online risks and opportunities with case studies, best practice examples, useful links and checklists, available at [www.globalkidsonline.net/guides](http://www.globalkidsonline.net/guides)
* Further information on adapting the toolkit is available at [www.globalkidsonline.net/adapting](http://www.globalkidsonline.net/adapting)