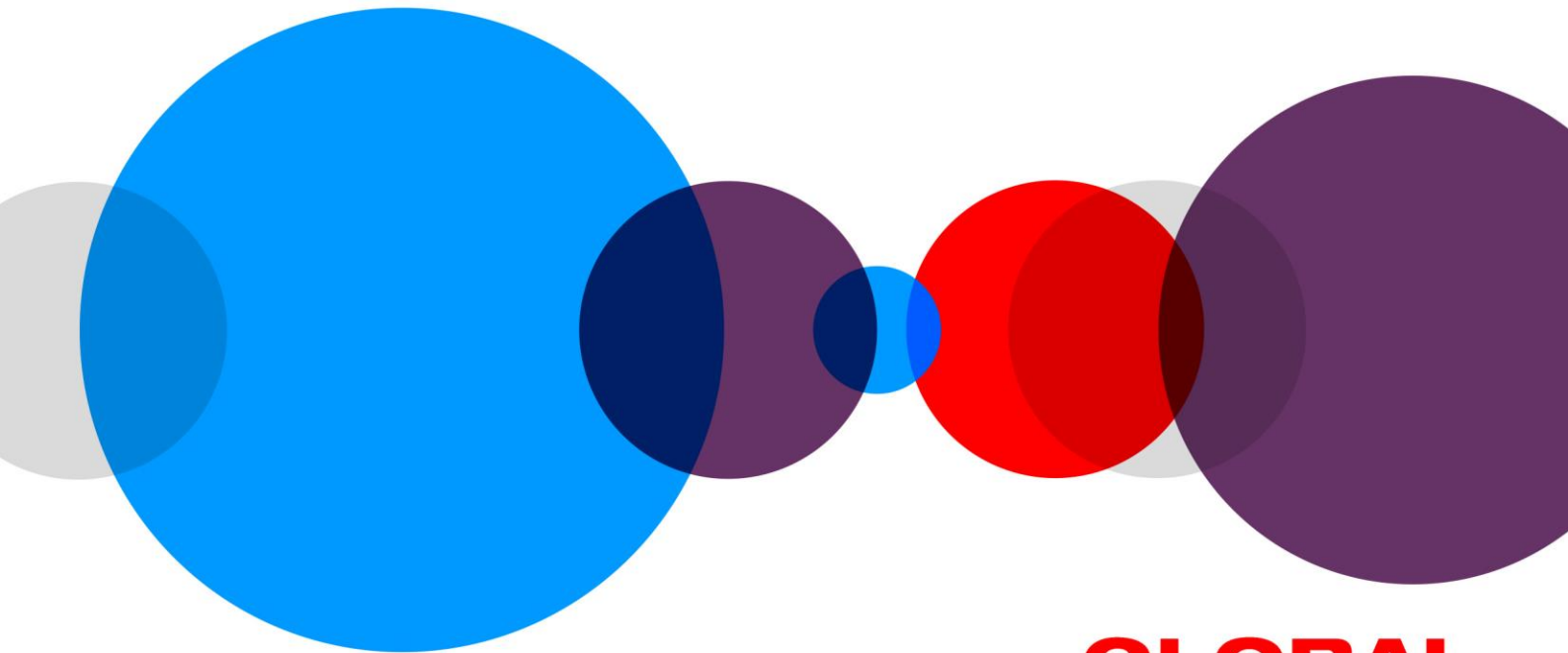


# METHOD GUIDE 8

## Participatory methods: Engaging children's voices and experiences in research



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**GLOBAL  
KIDS  
ONLINE**



[www.globalkidsonline.net](http://www.globalkidsonline.net)

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# GLOBAL KIDS ONLINE

Global Kids Online is an international research project that aims to contribute to gathering rigorous cross-national evidence on children's online risks, opportunities and rights by creating a global network of researchers and experts and by developing a toolkit as a flexible new resource for researchers around the world.

The aim is to gain a deeper understanding of children's digital experiences that is attuned to their individual and contextual diversities and sensitive to cross-national differences, similarities, and specificities. The project was funded by UNICEF and WePROTECT Global Alliance and jointly coordinated by researchers at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), the UNICEF Office of Research-Innocenti, and the EU Kids Online network.

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# ABSTRACT

This Guide lays out the case for participatory research with children, as well as explaining key research design principles and methods. Research that treats children merely as respondents to heavily adult-framed research is likely to miss key aspects of their lives, so participation can raise research quality. Further, from a rights-based perspective, children should be allowed to actively participate in research designed to inform policy that will shape their future. We offer an overview of the diverse methods available, including drawing, storytelling, digital photography, participatory audio or video, SMS surveys, as well as research, monitoring and evaluation co-led by children.

Cross cutting these methodological approaches are the principles of participatory research, such as considering carefully the unequal life realities of children in the same country, often resulting in additional efforts having to be undertaken to amplify the voices of otherwise overlooked groups. This also involves recognising the different levels of digital literacies along gender, class, education and rural/urban lines. Ethical considerations also play a role where children are asked to produce online content and use digital images responsibly. Overall, participatory methods tend to involve longer-term, intense relationships between researchers and children that require careful framing and are often best undertaken with local partners.

# KEY ISSUES

## The limits of non-participatory research

Projects like Global Kids Online (GKO) are landmark efforts to generate large-scale multicountry data on children, internet use and digital rights. The findings will include quantitative data that is highly prized by policy-makers seeking easy-to-absorb evidence on which to build or justify policy, and by advocates keen to tell a simple, compelling story. The fact that standardised data can be used for comparisons between countries is a further incentive for researchers and policy-makers to become involved.

The risk is that survey results offering easy comparisons flatten the Earth into a set of statistics in an unrealistic way. Boyden and Ennew (1997: 10) worry about formal structures and questionnaires that 'reinforce adult power and preconceptions as well as failing to take children's own idea and language into account.' Such research often assumes a 'Western childhood' and may not reflect the priorities of the 'informants'. It may miss cultural differences between countries, regions and milieus, and it may not pick up the differences in life realities of children living in the same country but under different circumstances. There may, for instance, be fewer differences in the life realities of the most privileged children across countries such as the UK and the Philippines, than exist within each of these countries between the children of urban elites and the least privileged children (such as children in poor rural areas, children in care, or street-connected children).<sup>1</sup> Despite the risk of losing in-country nuances, findings of many surveys will be reported mainly from a country comparison perspective.

To capture the reality experienced by children from a wide variety of cultures and life realities, the GKO team is using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. There are strong efforts to include in the

samples not just the children in urban centres, but also harder-to-reach children such as those in remote regions and street-connected children.

**“To capture the reality experienced by children from a wide variety of cultures and life realities, the GKO team is using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods.”**

Interviews and focus groups are more open to unexpected responses than surveys. However, all methods constructed by largely adult researchers (who tend to be educated, middle-class and frequently living and working in urban centres locally and abroad) run the risk of embedding assumptions in the questions that are not shared by the children. These assumptions might be about the nature and construction of childhood/adulthood, about gender roles (especially roles and aspirations of girls and boys; heteronormativity), assumptions about parenting (such as assumptions about a nuclear two-parent family), and assumptions and framings about technologies (for instance which ones are more or less high status, which ones are used individually and collectively). Children are asked to express their life reality through the medium of words within the framing of the questions they are asked. We do not know whether they share this frame or imagine it differently. Further, if we then translate words into numbers (such as survey results) we further de-contextualise their utterances, pulling their views through our frame as researchers.

In the meantime, in their everyday lives children express themselves, for example, through movement, words, drawing and music. Further, children are notoriously good at surprising adults by seeing the world differently.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Gudmundsdottir (2010) in Cape Town, South Africa, for a comparison of digital literacy levels of children from the most socially advantaged backgrounds at a formerly 'all-white' South African school and of children from less advantaged backgrounds at other schools.

## The instrumental case for participatory research

Research on children that treats them as passive respondents to adult-framed research questions is likely to miss key aspects that matter to them. The answer, we argue, is to conduct (or at least include) participatory research with children.

It is worth noting that while this applies to all research with children, it applies in particular to research about (a) children and (b) digital technologies across (c) cultural contexts. Different cultural contexts make it likely that unforeseen issues will arise. Working with a different generation of children, some of who are experiencing a digitally infused childhood that few of the current generation of researchers have experienced (Richman, 2007), makes it likely that unforeseen perspectives will arise. Finally, the speed of technological change makes it inevitable that we cannot foresee the usage of digital technology in even a few years' time. For all these reasons the unforeseen features prominently in multicountry research on children, online use and digital rights.

## The rights-based case for participatory research

The instrumental arguments for including participatory research with children as a core element in any research project in this area are clear – we will achieve more meaningful results. Beyond that, there are ethical arguments to include young people as active participants in research about their future. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) calls for children to be consulted on issues that concern them. They have a right to co-determine what questions are being asked, what usages are being counted, and which opinions are being tested for agreement and disagreement. UNICEF is considered a champion of the rights of children, and UNICEF-related research should reflect this commitment to self-determination.

Further, some participatory methods show that the research process itself empowers the participants to discover not just a given issue and its roots, but also what they as active citizens (individually, but more often as a group) might do about it. Participatory research can mobilise young people to co-shape their

futures, including their digital futures. They may be given the chance to co-formulate policy arising from research or get involved themselves in imagining, designing and coding solutions.

Rather than children being 'objects' of research, they can become co-researchers, co-constructors of knowledge and meaning, and agents in their own personal and community development. Participatory methods aim to bring people together to discuss issues that affect them; they often progress into collectively imagining and, to a degree, taking action towards solutions. Participatory methodologies fluidly connect research and action. Regarding this action dimension, a recent UNICEF-commissioned study that interviewed 35 academic experts, policy-makers and practitioners about success and failure factors in information and communication technology (ICT) and development projects (Kleine et al., 2014) found broad agreement around two points. First, technology that has been co-designed by users is more likely to work for and be adopted by them. And second, projects that have been designed using participatory methods are often based on a better understanding of local needs, and achieve a higher sense of ownership by local people, thus increasing the likelihood of project sustainability.

**“Rather than children being ‘objects’ of research, they can become co-researchers, co-constructors of knowledge and meaning, and agents in their own personal and community development.”**

This Guide offers a short overview of participatory methods with children and young people, and reflects on the limitations and critiques of these methods. It then presents design principles applying to a variety of participatory methods with children before identifying some concrete examples of good practice.

# MAIN APPROACHES

## Participatory research methods with children

Qualitative methods already include photos and digital video, ICT and media use diaries, instant messaging and online chat as well as interviews and observation notes (Bulfin & North, 2007). 'Participation', however, is developmental, and entails the growth of understanding and the accumulation of new skills by everybody involved, including the researcher/facilitator and the participants (Boyden & Ennew, 1997).

Participatory Action Research (PAR) 'nurtures two-way relationships between researchers and children that minimise negative effects and builds the capacity of child participants to take action' (IDS, 2009: 1). The adult researcher is no longer mimicking an 'outside observer' but aims to develop rapport and is allowed to be an engaged action researcher, exploring the perspective of the children in order to (in collaboration with them) use research findings to work with them towards positive change in their lives.

**"Participatory Action Research (PAR) 'nurtures two-way relationships between researchers and children that minimise negative effects and builds the capacity of child participants to take action' (IDS, 2009: 1)."**

In a seminal book for participatory research in development, Robert Chambers (1997) described the shift towards PAR. He suggested the earlier methods were closed, measurement-obsessed, individual-focused, heavily verbal, extractive research conducted by the powerful and practiced on local people. By contrast, PAR is open, group-focused, visual, comparison-based, rapport-focused and characterised by handing over power to the participants so they can create change in their own lives.

In the context of research with children, it is worth modifying Chambers to say that change here will almost always be co-created with adults, and thus the aim must be to empower children and allow adults to become their allies.

Typical participatory methods include drawing, mapping (spatial, social), temporal sequence (trend lines, seasonal calendars), listing, sorting, ranking (matrices), institutional diagrams (including Venn diagrams), time use analysis, participatory digital mapping, participatory digital photography or digital film.

Participatory methods with children are characterised by:

- **Relevance:** the subject of research relates to children's priorities and is facilitated in a way that allows them to relate to the topic and find it meaningful.
- **Creativity:** creative methods keep children motivated and help them to communicate freely.
- **Participation:** by being given the opportunity to give feedback on the approaches used and the knowledge generated, children can influence and co-shape the research, and feel empowerment and ownership of the results.
- **Flexibility:** research processes must remain open and responsive.
- **Empowerment:** research processes should allow space for children to reflect on their new knowledge and understanding, preferably within peer groups, as well as build their confidence in their ability to act and voice their views.

(Based on IDS, 2009).

## Participatory research: general design principles

There is a clear trend towards participatory approaches in research about children (Bradbury-Jones & Taylor, 2015; Mallan et al., 2010). While the diversity of children, settings and topics to explore precludes specific best practice prescriptions, there are some useful design principles for participatory research with children:

- Participatory methods strongly value local knowledge and inductive findings. Thus the research process needs to be designed to be open-ended and leave space for surprises to



emerge from the gap between the implicit or explicit framing of the research and the reality of the participants. For instance, Barker and Weller (2003) stress the importance of choosing the right spatial set-up to put participants at their ease.

- Participatory research seeks out a diversity of participants and of perspectives. It often tends to take sides with the less powerful groups and individuals within a group. For research with children this might mean considering equity issues: relatively more urban, income-rich and educationally advantaged children are often also easier to reach/cheaper to reach in research. Researchers might choose to work with more disadvantaged groups or (to avoid unintentional stigma) to include them in the overall group (Alderson, 2012).
- Participatory approaches call for researcher triangulation (the use of multiple researchers who compare their analysis) and, where possible, collaboration with participants as co-researchers. This is meant to reduce the power imbalances and offset biases. Since this approach assumes that researchers are not bystanders but play an active role in a research situation, participatory researchers are asked to maintain a constant high level of self-critical awareness and reflect on their own actions, perceptions and the way they represent them.

**“Participatory researchers often collaborate closely with community organizations and activists experienced in practical development work, social work and activism.”**

- Research data is seen not as an end in itself, but as a means toward empowering people with knowledge, and triggering or informing change processes. Thus precision, inconvenience to participants, intrusiveness and timeliness of results are traded off against each other. The result is ‘appropriate imprecision’ (Chambers, 1997) which produces meaningful and valid results through a process that is empowering and does not objectify participants by prodding for details of minimal relevance. The ethics and empowering quality of the data collection process form part of the judgement of the overall quality of the research

and cannot be divorced from the data.

- Participatory researchers often collaborate closely with community organizations and activists experienced in practical development work, social work and activism. When working with children, working alongside organizations with strong, long-term community ties is recommended, to minimise the risk of psychological distress to children and to provide a safe space for continued discussion and support for action (IDS, 2009).

**“The ethics and empowering quality of the data collection process form part of the judgement of the overall quality of the research and cannot be divorced from the data.”**

- Digital tools themselves are often used in development work related to improving the lives of children and young people. For an overview of such tools and a list of principles of participatory design when designing digital technology to improve children’s lives, see Kleine et al. (2014) (especially the checklist on p. 24).

### Case study: Participatory design guide

Participatory methods are beginning to take centre-stage in much research about children’s online practices, and numerous resources are now available to support researchers deploying participatory methods. One such resource, developed by the Young and Well Cooperative Research Centre, lays out a process for engaging cross-sector stakeholders and children and young people in the design of evidence-based technological interventions to support children’s well-being. The full participatory design guide can be found at <http://researchdirect.westernsydney.edu.au/islandora/object/uws:18814>.



# IDENTIFYING GOOD PRACTICE

## Creative visual methods, including drawing

Creative visual methods are useful for engaging children in joint knowledge production, as literacy is not required, and such methods are less associated with formal settings such as school. Although visual data may be difficult to analyse, if paired with spoken feedback from children (often recorded), such data can convey in-depth information. Visual methods can be used with children of all ages, particularly those who have received little education. Although the quality and complexity of drawings develop with age (Literat, 2013), visual methodologies go some way towards reducing barriers of understanding between the researcher and (among) participants.

**“Creative visual methods are useful for engaging children in joint knowledge production.”**

Here we present three examples of how visual methodologies have been used in research with children in different contexts. Biggeri and Anich (2009) used thematic drawing while working with street-connected children in Kampala, Uganda. In this study, 175 children were asked to draw pictures showing how they passed their time on the street, and what they liked and disliked about living on the street. The open questions allowed the children to draw scenarios that were most significant to them and those that they were willing to share. Following the drawing exercise, they were offered the opportunity to explain their pictures to other participants.

Presenting a case study from the US, Chung and Gerber (2010) discuss the medium of storyboarding as a tool for understanding how children overcome negative emotions. In order to design a colouring book for helping children to understand and negotiate negative emotions, Chung and Gerber asked 66 children to create an emotional story using emotional storyboarding. The children’s participation in this project helped the researchers to appreciate some of the different ways that children relate to the world, and

therefore to develop designs that would be more meaningful to other children.

In 2014, Third et al. conducted a large-scale study with 148 children aged 6–18 across 16 countries from the global North and South in order to understand their perspectives on their rights in the digital age. Among the methods utilised in this study was a technology use timeline. This versatile method, similar to diaries, encouraged children to plot their daily, weekly or monthly digital media use, and to reflect on how technology related to their rights as children. The technology use timelines were used in a subsequent participatory workshop to allow the children to reflect on the process and to produce a list of rights that they felt were necessary when engaging with technology.


Visual methods can thus be effective in helping children to recall both positive and negative experiences, and to participate in research and the impact of research (such as related design decisions or campaigning) in an active way.

## Storytelling

Storytelling is a useful methodology for allowing children to talk about matters that concern them in a relaxed environment. Key to participatory research is giving participants control over what topics are discussed and what information is relevant to them. Biggeri and Anich (2009) encouraged 54 street-connected children to interview each other regarding their life histories. The children were given a thematic ladder of areas for discussion, and were encouraged to follow this structure.

**“Storytelling is a useful methodology for allowing children to talk about matters that concern them in a relaxed environment.”**

This methodology is particularly useful when working with illiterate children. A similar longitudinal study working in three African cities (Accra, Bukavu and Harare) trained six street-connected young people (two in each city) to collect information from ten children each, based on a list of ten indicators that had



been previously developed by the children themselves (see [www.streetinvest.org/guots](http://www.streetinvest.org/guots)). These six young researchers fed the accounts of their ten participants back to a project manager each week, who recorded, transcribed and translated these oral accounts.

Storytelling is also effective when using digital tools. Désilets and Paquet (2005) used wikis with primary-level students to promote personal empowerment and communication between learners. Children worked in groups of up to five to design and write stories using wiki platforms. Although this research was not used to analyse the content of the stories, it does show how even young children are capable of collaborating and co-producing stories with minimal adult intervention.

## Digital photography

Children are likely to engage, use and view the world in different ways to adults. Engaging children in digital photography allows children to capture images of things that are meaningful to them, which helps adult researchers to see the world through their eyes. Gabhainn and Sixsmith (2006) used participatory photography with children aged 8–12, asking them to take photographs of things that represented well-being to them. With terms like ‘well-being’, which are notoriously difficult to define, the children’s use of photographs offered concrete examples for children and adult researchers to discuss together to develop a more inclusive definition of this concept.

**“Engaging children in digital photography allows children to capture images of things that are meaningful to them, which helps adult researchers to see the world through their eyes.”**

Thompson and Gunter (2007) used a photo elicitation method with child researchers to engage children on issues regarding school governance. They trained eight students to act as researchers in a school-wide evaluation, and the student researchers used photo elicitation, with other visual and role-play methods, to engage with other students on topics such as bullying. The authors argue that using photo prompts rather than traditional interview structures allowed student researchers to engage with their peers meaningfully; the approach also mediated some of the intimidation

and superficiality of more structured and writing-based research methods.

Digital photography methodologies can provide challenges for researchers when it comes to securing ethical approval, due to issues of confidentiality and disclosure. Allen (2009) used photo diaries with young people aged 16–19 to gain a greater understanding of sexual culture in two New Zealand secondary schools. She writes how the resistance to her methodology betrayed inherent prejudices which viewed young people as irresponsible and recalcitrant – a view the author herself challenges. This example further emphasises the need to respect ethical approval processes while also changing perceptions regarding children and young people’s ability to fully participate in research and to have their views respected.

## Participatory audio or video

In participatory audio or video methodologies the basic principle is to put the equipment in the hands of the children to encourage them to become content creators and curators of radio shows or video films. The audience might include just the research group, or it might include a larger group such as an imagined or real public audience, researchers, other groups of children, or designers or policy-makers who the content is meant to educate or influence.

**“In participatory audio or video methodologies the basic principle is to put the equipment in the hands of the children to encourage them to become content creators and curators of radio shows or video films.”**

When working with street-connected children in the northeast of Brazil, Hecht (1998) handed over the tape recorder and asked the children to interview each other for a mock ‘radio show’. He thus created the impression that the children’s voices mattered so much that they would be worthy of broadcasting.

In the large-scale research project ‘Children’s rights in the digital age’, Third et al. (2014) worked with partner organizations in 16 countries and ran workshops in eight languages to combine different methodologies with children. At one point the children were given the choice of different media (including video and audio),

and asked what they would like to tell the Committee on the Rights of the Child about the way digital media gave them opportunities or challenged their ability to live a good life.

Participatory digital video can also be used as a mobile method to better understand the social, emotional and sensory experience of children. Working on children's negotiation of risks of their journey to school, Murray (2009) replayed the video footage taken by children themselves, and asked the filmmakers to talk him through their emotions, sensations and decisions. There might be similar opportunities to ask children to film their online surfing behaviour and then asking them to comment on the footage.

**“Seeing young people engage with local politics via digital media and online channels makes a powerful case to the public and to policy-makers for the rights of children to have access to such digital tools and online platforms.”**

One of the most involved ways of using participatory video is the fairly open-ended approach in which groups of children, with minimal or no previous film experience, are brought together in a workshop, handed some basic digital film equipment and taught to make short films on topics of their choice. The Food Futures project ([www.youthandfoodfutures.org](http://www.youthandfoodfutures.org)) held a one-week participatory film workshop with young people from disadvantaged backgrounds in London and Rio to teach them how to express their views on food justice.

The workshop was followed by a film competition and a public screening of the films. The winning teams of filmmakers from each country travelled to the other city to meet young people there, and to screen and explain their films and exchange perspectives on digital filmmaking and food justice. The film is available online. Local policy-makers in charge of school meals, licensing of local markets and the retail mix in new housing developments will be invited to public screenings of the films and subsequent discussions with the young filmmakers. Seeing young people engage with local politics via digital media and online channels makes a powerful case to the public and to policy-makers for the rights of children to have access to such digital tools and online platforms.

## Case study: Negotiating the choice of digital media in participatory digital filmmaking

Working with an emancipatory Freirean pedagogical approach, the team on the ESRC-FAPERJ Food Futures project wanted to impress on the young people (16- to 24-year-olds from low-income neighbourhoods in London) who were taking the filmmaking workshop that they had “the means of film-production in their pockets” and to use their digital phones. However, in an intense one-week workshop based on iterating short film production in groups, editing with recording formats from multiple phones did not prove feasible. So the team borrowed two and bought two cameras with the same recording format, and then demonstrated that similar filming could have been done on a mobile phone. After discussing their media usage with young participants from London and Rio, the project used Facebook, Instagram, a wordpress site, vimeo and YouTube as ways to publish films and stimulate comments. See [www.youthandfoodfutures.org](http://www.youthandfoodfutures.org) or the Facebook page: [www.facebook.com/Food-20-1669504199981391/?fref=ts](https://www.facebook.com/Food-20-1669504199981391/?fref=ts) or Instagram: [itds.coppe.ufrj](https://www.instagram.com/itds.coppe.ufrj) and [#food2ponto0](https://www.instagram.com/#food2ponto0)

## SMS surveys with questions generated by young people themselves

SMS communication with children and young people has played a key role in many development-related projects. For instance, the Kenyan multiplatform daily radio programme ShujaazFM uses storytelling about a character called ‘DJ B’ to engage with young people and offer practical ideas for them to improve their lives through entrepreneurship, personal development, farming, employment and citizenship. ShujaazFM is linked to a comic book and – crucially – encourages feedback from listeners to the story editors via SMS, Facebook ([www.shujaaz.fm](http://www.shujaaz.fm)) and Twitter.

UNICEF’s U-Report innovation uses SMS to ‘survey’ young people and to publicise the results. U-Report started in Uganda ([www.ureport.ug](http://www.ureport.ug)) to augment the voice of children and young people, and has been

rolled out to 14 countries. In Uganda, more than 300,000 young people have signed up to take part in these SMS surveys. Designed as a campaign tool, U-Report does not claim to reach the accuracy levels of a scientific survey, and it would not be possible to use U-report for a scientific survey until key challenges have been overcome. These include the issue of multiple respondents per phone and the problematic mixing of campaign messages via SMS interspersed with supposedly open-ended (but actually contextually framed) questions (Berdou & Abreu-Lopes, 2016). While it is an excellent campaign tool, these issues make its use as a quantitative survey instrument unreliable. However, it would be worth exploring how the network of U-Reporters could be usefully invited to generate qualitative data about digital rights via SMS. This would be a self-selecting group with relatively higher digital literacy and a strong urban bias (Berdou & Abreu-Lopes, 2016), but their ideas about perceived risks and opportunities would be of great interest, and SMS could prove a useful tool in such a participatory, crowdsourcing methodology.

## Research, monitoring and evaluation by and with children

UNICEF has been actively seeking to include children in impact evaluation, in line with the UNCRC that states that children should have a say in decisions that affect them. Guijt (2014) details some of the participatory methods that can be used to collect quantitative and qualitative data to assess projects involving children and young people. The report sets out the different levels of participatory engagement (nominal, instrumental, representative and transformative). Depending on a project's objectives and stage of development, different levels of engagement may be appropriate. Guijt demonstrates that communities can be involved in initial and ongoing evaluation through an example of a project in Bangladesh, where community members defined monitoring indicators and conducted analysis through a process of workshops. Guijt stresses that involving children and young people in monitoring and impact evaluation in a meaningful way requires time and concerted investment in building participants' capacity.

In Malawi, Donahue and Mwewa (2006) evaluated a community empowerment project designed to assist families living with HIV and AIDS through income generation, micro-credit and additional care services.

The project operated alongside local mobilisation committees, including orphan and youth sub-committees. Villages with functional sub-committees were found to provide more tangible and collective action regarding the care of people living with HIV and AIDS. Furthermore, community ownership and participation were found to be crucial for initiating sustainable community action, with youth committees playing a pivotal role. This is a powerful example of an engagement with marginalised young people on issues characterised by stigma and social taboos.

## Young people as peer researchers

Children can be involved as peer researchers in secondary research, primary research and in PAR (Laws & Mann, 2004). However, there are ethical, methodological and practical challenges that need to be recognised. Bradbury-Jones and Taylor (2015) identify six challenges:

- Children lack research competence.
- A comprehensive training programme is needed.
- Insider/outsider perspectives are difficult to balance.
- Remuneration is complex.
- Power differentials need to be overcome.
- Children need to be protected.

They discuss each of these challenges, suggest practical solutions, and conclude that despite these challenges, 'children as researchers are a powerful conduit for other children's voices.' (Bradbury-Jones and Taylor (2015: 161). Young people can be involved in both problem identification at the start of a research project and later in the data analysis (Foster-Fishman et al., 2010). In a co-designed research project that included government, non-governmental and academic partners in Australia, 33 children with disabilities (under the age of 8) and their parents (n = 40) were engaged in participatory research to generate greater understanding of the places and relationships that influenced children and families' sense of inclusion. Families from Aboriginal communities were recruited to co-design a project that helped improve families' sense of belonging and connectedness through capacity building. After the project was funded, key individuals, including children, provided ongoing oversight and advice on the design of the project. This



research employed creative visual methods combined with oral feedback to involve the children in the knowledge production.

In another project exploring the journeys of young people who had run away from home or care (Thompson et al., 2015), peer researchers interviewed 32 other young people in three different cities. Interviewees were only recruited through existing projects to ensure that support by youth workers was in place. Interviews were audio-recorded and password-protected before being sent for transcription. The follow-on questions put by peer researchers showed that they were relating the responses to their own experiences; their emphases differed from those of adult professional researchers. This began to influence the fieldwork and the analysis, in which the peer researchers also participated. Even though children are not a homogeneous group and their experience with digital media will differ accordingly, there are strong arguments for involving children as peer researchers in research on the opportunities and risks of digital media. However, the challenges listed above will need to be addressed. The following section highlights some additional ethical challenges that apply for all participatory research with children.

### Case study: Peer research among street children

Growing up on the Streets is a longitudinal research project hosted by StreetInvest, working in partnership with the University of Dundee and the Backstage Trust. The research is being carried out over three years in three cities across Africa: Accra, Bukavu and Harare. Six teenagers in each city have been trained in basic ethnographic methods, and meet weekly with the project researchers to provide a commentary on their lives growing up on the street, and also offer observations on the experiences of other young people within their social network. A Knowledge Exchange Pack has been developed detailing the four-part training for peer researchers that includes resources to help street-connected teenagers grow in confidence, and presentation skills in order to help them in their role as researchers and advocates. The Pack can be accessed at [www.streetinvest.org/control/uploads/file](http://www.streetinvest.org/control/uploads/file).

## Words of caution

In addition to the considerations set out in the general UNICEF guidelines on Ethical Research Involving Children (ERIC, see <http://childethics.com/>), unique ethical aspects to participatory methods require additional caution:

- Participatory methods tend to involve long-term and potentially intense research relationships between children and researchers. Therefore all researchers must be fully checked against criminal records before being allowed to work with children, and pastoral care should be integrated in the facilitation process, provided by research team members with relevant experience. In some cases, pastoral roles can be played by members of community organizations collaborating in the research.
- Some participatory methods might entail children creating digital content, including photo or video content showing other children. It is vital to obtain parental/guardian consent for this, and to discuss with the children (as co-researchers) the issues of other children's right to their own image and the responsible use of images.
- Participatory methods relying on digital devices might encounter different levels of digital literacies along gender, class, education and rural/urban lines. It is vital to mitigate these to ensure that existing inequalities do not translate into inequality of voice within a project.
- Participatory methods are frequently used by practitioner or campaign organizations as well as in academic participatory research. It is vital to define at the outset what the aim of the project is, and not to conflate research and campaign objectives. For instance, as a research tool participatory video with children might generate films that contain factual inaccuracies but nevertheless represent the perspective of the young people. For research purposes, diverging and unexpected perspectives should be embraced, while a campaign approach might seek to edit and micro-manage the message. Collaboration agreements between researchers and campaigners should reflect on this tension before the start of a project.



# CONCLUSION

There are good intrinsic and instrumental reasons why children should actively participate in research on the opportunities and risks of the digital age. There is by now a rich methodological literature on participatory methods, produced by academics, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international bodies. It is appropriate that a special subset of this literature covers work with children, who are frequently even more disempowered than adult participants in conventional research. Further, their preferred ways of engagement may differ from adult perspectives, in that (for instance) they may prefer visual over text-based methods. On the other hand, some groups of children might have higher skill and interest than adults in using digital tools in expressing their views, for instance, in digital film.

However, there are important equity aspects to consider. Children are not a uniform group: they differ in their age, class, disability status and sexuality, cultural and religious background, ethnicity and digital literacy, level of articulacy and extroversion as well as in the urban or rural environments they grow up in, and the degree of adult support or surveillance they receive. These differences will affect the methods that children, as active participants or co-researchers, prefer to use. Researchers should ask themselves who they want to engage with in the research and how. The most important questions for this kind of research are: What positive change for the children might emerge from the research? and How can children be empowered to play a part in bringing this change about?



# USEFUL ONLINE RESOURCES

## Resources provided by the author

Boyden, J., & Ennew, J. (no date). *Children in focus – A manual for participatory research with children*. Stockholm: Save the Children Sweden.  
[www.unicef.org/videoaudio/PDFs/Children-in-Focus.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/videoaudio/PDFs/Children-in-Focus.pdf)

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Insightshare (no date). *Better participatory video practice*. <https://betterpvpractice.wordpress.com/>

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## Additional resources

Alderson, P. (2012). Rights-respecting research: A commentary on 'the right to be properly researched: Research with children in a messy, real world', *Children's Geographies*, 2009, 7, 4. *Children's Geographies*, 10 (2), 233–9.

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Christensen, P. (2004) Children's participation in ethnographic research: Issues of power and representation. *Children & Society*, 18, 165–76.  
[www.researchgate.net/publication/229800998\\_Children's\\_Participation\\_in\\_Ethnographic\\_Research\\_Issues\\_of\\_Power\\_and\\_Representation](http://www.researchgate.net/publication/229800998_Children's_Participation_in_Ethnographic_Research_Issues_of_Power_and_Representation)

Fleming, J. (2011). Young people's involvement in research: Still a long way to go? *Qualitative Social Work*, 10 (2), 207–23.  
[www.researchgate.net/profile/Jennie\\_Fleming/publication/249675158\\_Young\\_People's\\_Involvement\\_in\\_Research\\_Still\\_a\\_Long\\_Way\\_to\\_Go/links/0046352cd36c68dd45000000.pdf](http://www.researchgate.net/profile/Jennie_Fleming/publication/249675158_Young_People's_Involvement_in_Research_Still_a_Long_Way_to_Go/links/0046352cd36c68dd45000000.pdf)

Hagen, P., Collin, P., Metcalf, A., Nicholas, M., Rahilly, K., & Swainston, N. (2012). *Participatory design of evidence-based online youth mental health promotion, prevention, early intervention and treatment*. Melbourne, VIC: Young and Well Cooperative Research Centre.  
[www.westernsydney.edu.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0005/476330/Young\\_and\\_Well\\_CRC\\_IM\\_PD\\_Guide.pdf](http://www.westernsydney.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/476330/Young_and_Well_CRC_IM_PD_Guide.pdf)

Institute of Development Studies (2009). *The importance of participatory child-centred research for climate adaptation*.  
<http://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/123456789/2549/The%20Importance%20of%20Participatory%20IDS%20In%20Focus%202013.6.pdf?sequence=1>

Spyrou, S. (2011). The limits of children's voices: From authenticity to critical, reflexive representation. *Childhood*, 18 (2), 151–65.  
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University of Bedfordshire (2012). *Challenging sexual violence in Europe: Using participatory methods with children*.  
[www.beds.ac.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0004/213277/desk-top-review-oct-2012-final.pdf](http://www.beds.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0004/213277/desk-top-review-oct-2012-final.pdf)

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Thompson, J., Lanchin, S., & Moxon, D. (2015). *Be real with me: Using peer research to explore the journeys of young people who run away from home or care*. Railway Children Report. Available at [www.railwaychildren.org.uk/media/37981/be-real-july-2015-peer-research.pdf](http://www.railwaychildren.org.uk/media/37981/be-real-july-2015-peer-research.pdf)

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# CHECKLIST

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- 1 Think of children as active participants or even co-researchers, not just as passive research subjects.

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  - 2 Where possible, include children's input when shaping the research project.

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  - 3 Consider what participants will get out of the research. Is it appropriate to link the research with an advocacy or development aim?

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  - 4 Consider whether you can partner with relevant local community organizations that might benefit from the research findings, provide pastoral support, ensure sustainability of empowerment gains made by participants, and that can take the research findings forward in practice and policy.

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  - 5 Where possible, include children as co-researchers or peer researchers. In most cases it is appropriate to combine this with other methods (methods and researcher triangulation).

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  - 6 Choose informal, playful methods where appropriate.

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  - 7 With visual methods, document both the product and the process/explanation the children give.

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  - 8 Consider the opportunities digital methods offer, while remaining aware of digital divides among the participant group.

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  - 9 Be open for new directions, suggestions and surprises emerging from the perspective of the children in your research.

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  - 10 Engage children (for instance, in workshops) in analysing the findings, identifying implications, and in devising and executing research impact plans.
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