

INFORMED CONSENT

But, what *is* a researcher?: Supporting informed consent with young children

Background context:

It is now common practice to seek children's own consent for research participation, alongside (usually) that of a parent or guardian. This is advocated in the [ERIC Charter](#) and also represents a commitment to children's rights, as laid out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). Many researchers now use colourful, graphical informed consent forms aimed at children, animated participant information videos, comic strips, stories or playful processes to support children's understandings of a research project (Arnott et al., 2020; Dockett, Perry & Kearney, 2012; Grootens-Weigers et al., 2015; Knapp et al., 2021; Mayne & Howitt, 2022; Truscott, Graham & Powell, 2019). These sorts of creative materials cannot ensure an ethical informed consent process, but they can be valuable and engaging tools to support conversation with children, assisting them to understand a study and their participation within it (Mayne & Howitt, 2022; Pase, 2019; Rogers & Labadie, 2018; Ruiz-Casares & Thompson, 2016).

Recently, we led some knowledge exchange workshops on child research ethics at University College London (UCL). During these, researchers shared ideas and discussed the on-going challenges surrounding ethical research involving children, including informed consent. One challenge discussed, and something we have noticed in our own educational research projects, is that despite the many efforts and creativity around informed consent, young children are often not familiar with the role of a researcher. In trying to position a researcher within the realms of their experiences, they have sometimes wondered aloud whether we are, "someone's mum" or "really a teacher?" (Truscott, Graham & Powell, 2019). Inevitably children gain greater understanding of research, of a particular project, and of their participation within it through the experience of taking part. However, when asking young children to make their initial 'informed' choice, there is a bit of discomfort in asking them to consent to participate in 'research' when they have little knowledge or understanding of what it is. We have increasingly felt that there was an ethical obligation to educate them, in a simple and understandable way, about what 'research' actually is, as part of asking them whether they would



like to take part in a particular research project. This educational imperative is also enshrined in children's rights as laid out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Lundy, McEvoy & Byrne, 2011; Lundy & McEvoy, 2012; Rogers & Labadie, 2018; UN, 1989).

The ethical challenge:

Despite good intentions towards engaging in educational, informed consent processes with children, we have found funding constraints, time and expertise sometimes limit opportunities to develop creative, participant information materials on a project by project basis. Furthermore, having sufficient time for informed consent conversations can be challenging in reality in contexts where children are commonly involved in research, such as schools.

Choices made:

We undertook a pilot project to develop a short, engaging introductory resource to help young children (age approx. 3-7 years) better understand research. Our aim was for it to be relevant across a range of projects and by researchers from many different fields to help them explain to children what they do - to spark conversations and questions around research, ahead of inviting children to make decisions about taking part in a particular research project.

We initially considered developing a book, similar to the 'First Experience' type books (Going to the Dentist, Learning to Swim etc.) available for young children. However, in the end we decided to apply similar story-telling principles and illustrative style to the creation of a short video (2-3 mins long). In this way, we could distribute the resource readily to schools and families online, and share it widely and for free with other researchers. (A book format, either as an e-book or otherwise, may still be a possibility in the future).

We began by searching for definitions of research that would be understandable to young children and broad enough to encompass research involving children across different fields and approaches. In doing so, we consulted existing literature and with other researchers experienced in research with young children. We then worked with a small advisory group of children and parents. Drawing on their feedback, we developed a storyline, which went through a number of iterations to ensure the message, 'What IS a researcher?', came through in a clear and memorable way. Their feedback also helped us to build from young children's own life experiences and questions (e.g., surrounding the sorts of jobs adults do, what a question is, what they think researchers might do etc.).



We shared the final video with advisory group participants and also other children who had not previously seen it to check that the tone, style and messages worked well for our target age group (approximately age 3-7 years). The final, illustrated videos (a shorter version and a longer version) incorporate bright colours and attractive graphics of pirates, treasure and a magnifying glass to support children's engagement and understanding of research. It is freely available to view and use [here](#).

Reflexive questions / considerations:

In addition to questions relating to the storyline and the definition of research, we kept asking ourselves when and how we (and others) might best make use of the video as a part of the initial informed consent process with young children.

After gaining final feedback from children and families, we consulted with a range of researchers who had previous experience working with children to find out how they might use this resource within their own work. These were their suggestions for when to use the video:

- As an initial springboard for engagement with the research process.
- Prior to commencing the more project-specific, personalised narrative approach (see [ERIC Case Study by Fiona Mayne and Christine Howitt](#)).
- Sent out to parents/carers alongside information sheets and consent forms, to be watched with the children before deciding whether to take part in a research study.
- Sent out to class teachers to show their class in advance of a researcher visit.
- When introducing yourself as part of the rapport building process.
- At the beginning of a whole class/group session to explain the research process at the outset of a project.
- During initial visits to families in their home.
- As part of a feedback process or general education session.

And, how to build on the video:

- Explain your research question (in simple terms), describe your project and what children's participation would involve. Highlight anything that would be the same or different from what they've seen in the video.
- Explain more about anonymisation procedures and about how your research will be shared.
- Talk more about how your research could have a positive impact on children's lives.
- If you will testing/measuring anything describe more about what this could involve.



- Co-view the video with parent/carer, child, siblings to spark further questions/create a dialogue to support families to reflect more deeply on what the process of research in the home might involve.
- For children with additional needs show small bits of the video and pause to explain or check their understanding.

Reflexive questions for you:

- To what extent do your child participants understand research and the researcher role?
- How might a generic research video of this nature act as a conversation starter around research and informed consent in your project?
- What do you feel is missing from the video that you would want to discuss with children as part of the initial or ongoing informed consent process?
- What technical limitations can you see to your use / sharing of the video?
- Would it be beneficial to take the time to create additional videos (or expand the existing videos) to cover other aspects of research participation (such as anonymity, data analysis, confidentiality etc.)?

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