

Interviewing children while doing research



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ABSTRACT

Traditional research focusing on children has been carried out by collecting information from the children's parents, teachers, and other adults. Information acquired from the children themselves has been considered of secondary importance. As the number of studies focusing on children has increased, it is important to consider the children themselves as research subjects. This article investigates the following areas: (1) how to encourage 5 to 7 year-old children to talk, (2) how a researcher, as an adult, can understand the child's world, and (3) how a researcher can free him/herself from the adult-centered perspective. This article clarifies the features of a method for child interviewing, and demonstrates how vividly and easily Finnish daycare children (N = 29) are able to talk about their experiences in a research interview.

Key words: Child-centered interview, early childhood research, daycare children, experiences of children.

INTRODUCTION

This article is based on doctorate research (Kyrönlampi- Kylmänen, 2007) that studied the experiences of Finnish daycare children in everyday life using an existential- phenomenological method. The empirical research data was collected in Northern Finland in the spring of 2003 from children in three different daycare centers. The results illustrate the factors that construct a child's everyday life and the importance of play, age mates, and parents. The research suggested (1) developing a combination of work and family life from a child's perspective, and (2) advancing child research by developing the child interview. This article concentrates on discussing the challenges of the child interview that were brought up during the research. The special features of a child interview are reflected in this article and the prerequisites for a successful child interview are described. Twenty-nine children (aged 5 to 7 years) participated in the research; 14 were girls and 15 were boys. Quotations from the children's interviews are extracted from the researcher's diary. The children are referred to by the letters B (boy) or G (girl) and the researcher by I (interviewer). To protect anonymity, only the age of the child has been disclosed.

WHO IS THE INTERVIEWER FROM A CHILD'S PERSPECTIVE?

The methodological literature related to child interviews frequently suggests methods for how a researcher can enter the children's culture and gain their approval. Entering the children's experiences requires an equal, confidential, and open interaction, and co-operation between the researcher and children. Therefore, a researcher has to plan enough time to get acquainted with the children in order to win their trust. In addition, before a researcher can approach a child, he/she must win the trust of several adults. Research permission is needed from both the child's parents and other partners at the daycare center (Alderson, 2004; Fraser, 2004; Kvale and Brinkman, 2009). The research data was acquired from three different daycare centers, where the researcher spent abundant time before carrying out the interviews, and thereby became familiar to the children. As time went on, the children noticed the difference between the

researcher and the staff. From the children's perspective, the researcher was someone who played with them, but did not have an educative or authoritative relationship with them. The researcher did not intervene in the children's everyday tasks and ways of action, even if it may have been warranted. Controlling and guiding the children's tasks were left to the staff. The researcher followed the rule agreed upon with the staff that the researcher would intervene only if the child was in "a dangerous situation." The researcher was a guest at the daycare center, and little by little, the children got accustomed to the researcher's presence and that the researcher acted differently than the other adults; the researcher took part in the children's play and entered the area where the children played alone. One time, when the researcher arrived at the daycare center, the children sang out cheerfully from the table: *"Hey, the interview auntie has arrived."* After that, the children started to talk about that day's happenings in a joyful manner.

Sometimes, it felt like the researcher caused chaos and noisiness because the children's speech and volume was not controlled. Even the children seemed to consider the researcher's role and position in the daycare environment as a detective, interrogator, interviewer auntie, or "oddity." One of the interviewees, a seven-year-old boy, revealed the children's thoughts

"... do not mind if he [one of the children] asks why you [refers to the researcher] are interrogating so much. Are you Miss Marple or something? He might say something like that too."

In order to successfully carry out the children's interviews, it was important to enter their world. Their games were observed and participated in actively by the researcher. For example, during the lunch breaks, the researcher sat at the children's table, which caused excitement and talk at the children's table, and the staff had to intervene. Karila (2009) writes about how children are skilled in reading the prevailing norms in everyday life at the daycare center, such as in eating situations, and would note that it was exceptional that an adult was eating at the children's table. The researcher's presence changed the eating norms, so the children took advantage of the new situation, and started talking and murmuring with their

neighbors in a way that disturbed the peace. The daycare staff had to intervene and reinforce the rules. At one of the daycare centers, there was a children's room called "the mattress room," and the children played there often and tended to keep the door shut. This room was a good place to observe the children's play, because in it, the children had the chance to play alone and secretly (from the adults). There they would tell their stories in a relaxed way—such as jokes—as the following quote from a six-year-old boy shows: "B: Do you know what the best thing in the school is?

I: What?

B: Well, the detentions, as you do not have to do anything but sit."

The mattress room was the children's secret place. By going to the places where the children enjoy spending time, an adult has the chance to peer into the children's culture. This is discussed with a seven-year-old boy in the next quotation.

"I: What do you find amusing here at the daycare center?

B: Well, when you build all kinds of guns and we look at those moths and those. We had the moth- man here. (the child shows from the album).

I: So you like to do all such things in the mattress room?

B: You see, we often peep into those closets, and then we saw just today, and I peeped and there was just in the front a mummy. Well, when I and ... are such easily led, we have the courage to go into that closet with lights switched off and the door shut. Then, suddenly someone grasped my shoulder and I was scared at once and artfully took off there ... ran for it."

SETTING UP THE CHILD INTERVIEWS

To set up the interviews, a file was made for every child that included the subjects for the drawing tasks related to the research themes. There were papers in the file and the drawing

subjects inside a plastic folder. A colored paperboard was glued to the inner binding of the file on which the children drew a self-portrait and wrote their name. The work with the files represented building up a confidential relationship between the child and researcher. The drawing subjects were the following: Me, My Family, What I Do at Home, My Day at the Daycare Centre, Dad's Work, and Mom's Work. The children were gathered around the researcher in one room at the daycare center. The files were in a big cardboard box underneath a quilt between the researcher and children. The children were told about how they are being interviewed and a book will be written. First, the children found a recorder in the cardboard box, and everyone was allowed to tell a story in turn. Everyone's story was listened to by the group. Telling jokes was the most popular type of story, and the children enjoyed telling their stories on the recorder. After telling the stories, the children got the files and they started to draw about the themes related to the research. Some of the children could read the subject from the task cards, but for others, these were read by either the researcher or the staff. The methodological reviews emphasize how much easier it is for children to talk about the things that are related to their lives using their own drawings (Brooker, 2001; Langston et al., 2004). Working with the files helped in getting to know the children. At the beginning of an interview, discussing the drawings with a child functioned as leading and preparing issues for the interview questions.

RESEARCHER'S BURDEN OF ADULT-CENTRALITY

Adults know how to produce information about families with children, but not about the children's families. It is not easy to ask in a child-centered way the questions that are meant to decipher what it is like to be a child, what the child's experiences are like, and what the acting in the child's position is like (Alanen, 2009; Karlsson, 2004; Samuelson, 2004). It is difficult for the researcher to address these issues. Next, the challenges faced during the child interviews are discussed.

Difficulty of reaching the child's world

During the first interviews, it seemed that some of the questions had been drawn up from an adult-centered point of view. The prepared questions were not important in a child's world. Creating questions suitable for the children was challenging because as an adult, the researcher looked at the world quite differently. Those questions that were from outside the children's world of experiences were: "What is your mother's education?" and "Would you like to tell me something about yourself?" Questions related to the parents' work were complicated, as shown by the following answer from a six-year-old girl: "I: Where does your dad work? G: Well, he is there far away".

The researcher did not know that when doing the interviews, these questions should have been omitted. In the next example, a six-year-old boy bravely shows how he understood the question. His example also illustrates how seriously the children viewed the research:

"I: Have you ever talked about your mom's education?"

B: Some bank... I: Some bank?

B: Money...at least they do money counting at her work place ...my mom's"

Interview research is a researcher-dependent way to collect data, and this feature is emphasized when doing child research through interviewing. In general, a researcher enters a foreign land for himself/herself where an interviewee can decide how far they will travel and how much to reveal about his/her experiences. Encouraging them to reveal other people's experiences always requires consideration and humility, but this feature becomes particularly important with child interviews (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004; Huber and Clandinin, 2002; Oakley, 1994). Sometimes, it is difficult for an adult to keep track of a child's story; in the current study, the children's vividness and talkativeness also confused

the interviewer, which did not seem to bother them. The following excerpt from a conversation embodies how the interviewer's and a seven-year-old child's thoughts take slightly different routes.

I: What do you usually do at home?

G: Hmm... I play ... with my big sister and we were doing, because we have a garage and it is like a oti and a wooden back terrace. Behind that, there is a cabin. We have those, have you seen those, "strets", a little like a monster.

I: No.

G: Those were then, and when we will get a boy bratz, but a cabin for him. Then they go into that garage. Because we planned that we will make a cabin so that they can go to spend a summer holiday there. Then as she will have that boy "bjorn," then that, and then they will move off there and then, uh, two months, we agreed... also two months and then they will have a baby

I: So are your parents having a baby... or the "strets" G: She will have in two years, no two months ago, a baby. It is quite big. It is just like a two-year old when I had Annastiina who is quite tall. Now, it is about the same size. It is the same size as Antti is. Antti is Leksa's baby, so he is four years. That girl. Annastiina is four although she is much bigger. And then that baby is the same size as the girl, so it is a baby. It is not even one".

Child's eagerness to tell

The children eagerly talk about their games and friends, what things they like and what they do not, and what they do at home. A five-year-old boy describes his activities:

"In the evenings, I tell my mom that I go cycling and then I go to play with my neighbor Ville. Then sometimes we play police or firemen. That pedal tractor came off, you see, it broke down. You see, so we fixed it yesterday with my daddy. Now I can pedal that

tractor...“

The children's skill and enthusiasm in talking about important experiences supported giving more time for the children to tell the researcher about the everyday experiences that were significant to them. The researcher allowed the children to move and play during the interviews, and usually sat by a small table or on the floor with the children. During the interviews, the children tended to roll on the floor, do somersaults and hand walking, and play. For example, one girl wondered during the interview:

“Should that plant be watered?”

A child can easily reject the adult-centered way of action (example, changing the subject). In the following interview situation, the researcher did not realize how interview situation, the researcher did not realize how significant it was for a six-year-old girl to talk about play:

I: What are your mom and dad like at home in the evenings?

G: Very busy. And dad may sometimes ask to participate in a play. And then we play outside together when there are no friends, if Johannes did not come or something. I always have to go get Johannes with me; and one day, when he was, last week's Thursday or Friday, when I went to get Johannes, it was raining, so I had the umbrella over my head. Then, Johannes was not at home. Krista was sick then, so she was not allowed to go out. I went to my own room to play.

I: Are your parents sometimes tired after work?

G: Yes and sometimes, like now this week I have been playing with a Barbie doll and played since from Thursday, last week's Thursday. With three Barbie dolls I have been playing, but Krista took one Barbie doll, so she started to play with me. Yeah, and with two gee-gees, too. I was playing that was called the prince and the princess and also some Ken. It has been made a film”.

The interview's tedium for the child

An enthusiastic researcher may forget to listen for a child's request to end the interview early. Next, two examples describe the situation where an interview was not suspended although the child was obviously tired. The first example is quoted from an interview with a five-year-old girl:

I: You have been drawing very well. And you answer in a great way. I have still a few questions here.

G: And then the end. (The child played with the tools that were on the table during the interview) I: I: What do you like to do here at the daycare center?

G: Well, I like to play games, play, and everything Maybe when the other children are sleeping, so are we here as long as the other children wake up?

I: We are not quite that long. Is there something here at the daycare that you do not like?

Undoubtedly, the interviews were an effort for the children, which is clear in a six-year-old boy's blunt remark: "Luckily this does not take as long time as the speech therapy... This goes a little bit faster."

Equality of the dialogue between a child and adult

The interview as a method is adult-centered. The children do not interview each other and the research process is usually controlled by the researcher and not the child. Academic research does not always favor an equal relationship between the researcher and research subject. The latest childhood studies (Alanen, 2009; Christensen and James, 2001; Corsaro, 2005; Vanderbroeck and Bouverne-De Bie, 2006) emphasize the child's creativity and social activity. Based on these studies, it seems relevant to a researcher to contemplate the interactional relationship of the interview between a child and adult (Suominen and Partanen, 2010). A non-

verbal expression, such as a look and smile, is an important way to support a child in an interview situation. It is important that the researcher expresses, both by non-verbal and verbal communication, that he/she really wants to listen to the child and what the child has to say. The interview situation should enable the child and adult to enjoy being together and give the child a chance to talk about difficult and troublesome matters (Einarsdottir, 2007; Masson, 2004; Woodhead and Faulker, 2001). A fluent and democratic dialogue is based on equality and respect, so both the child and adult should express their thoughts in turn. The conversation proceeds chain-like and the participants do not know the answers beforehand; a research interview should resemble an everyday conversation as much as possible. The word “chitchat” could describe the spirit of an interview in which the conversation moves on by a dialogic and equal interaction between the child and adult. The adult’s active and intensive listening influences the child’s will to carry on the dialogue (Engel, 1995; Karlssonin, 2004). The next quotation is excerpted from a seven-year-old boy’s interview, which was more “tentative” than equal dialogue by nature. A different research method would have been more suitable for him.

“I: Do you remember what you have drawn here? B: I do not remember.

I: Could it represent what you do at home? B: Yeah.”

The children talk while playing; therefore, interview situations should resemble play. An interview can be carried out with playing, as it is a natural way of action for a child.

Exercise of power and winning trust

An interview is also a case of power. At times, a researcher controls the course of an interview more and sometimes less carefully. The next example illustrates how the adult ignores the five-year-old boy’s story and uses uncompassionate power:

“B: Guess what? I: What?

B: We got this big pike (show with his hands) by a fish trap.

I: Who usually wakes you up in the mornings before going to the daycare?”

A conversation where neither of the participants uses power nor agrees to be the leader is an awkward situation according to Suoninen and Partanen (2010). A child may take the reins in an interview situation where he/she can control the course of the conversation and ensure that the adult takes part. In this sense, the exercise of power might be even a necessary quality of a good conversation (Suoninen and Partanen 2010). The next quotation exemplifies how a seven-year-old girl directs the dialogue, and thus, is the authority:

“G: Particularly, the second day, before the last day, was a nice day when I went to the zoo. When I rode on a horse, on a small one.

I: I have never been there.

G: Well, there were those donkeys, too. You can also ride on a donkey.

I: That is true; you can surely ride on a donkey.

G: It just looked weird, the donkey. It made strange voices. Then there was, you know, a ram. It had horns too.

I: Did it nod, that ram?

G: It just lay. Then there was such an adorable sheep. It came next to the fence all the time. One way of showing trust is when a child tells his/her secrets to an adult.

I: What things do you like to do at home?

B: At home, every now and then I go to play and cycle with my friends. And I go floundering in the woods. Guess why?

I: Well

B: There is Petteri’ and Nikke’s hut and we always go there with my friend. And we do not tell my dad and mom at all because they do not ever give permission so we are not allowed to go

there. So then we just go there along the bikeway. Then there is a really good hiding place where nobody sees us. And we would go off floundering in the woods. We would find the hut and visit there” As the interviews continued successfully, the children’s confidence increased. The next example shows the frankness with which a five-year-old girl talked about her everyday life:

“I: What do you think: do your mom and dad like to go to work?

G: Oh yes, but I know why my mom and dad got divorced. It was because they did not like each other. And especially my mom did not like dad’s snore. Once, when I woke up in one of our houses where my dad loved my mom, so one day when I woke up, I heard huge snoring from the living room

’zzzz’. That is how my dad snored”.

How openly the children speak, or whether they think of pleasing the researcher depends partly on power sharing and how the children see the researcher. The following example expresses how a six-year-old girl trusted the interviewer and told the interviewer honestly about her thoughts:

“I: What are your mom and dad like after work? G: So tired.

I: How do you know that mom and dad are tired?

G: They always have some purple here (The child shows under an eye.) You have some here too. You are probably tired.

I: Yeah ... what is fun there at home on these weeknights?”

The child uncovered the truth—collecting empirical data is a demanding process. Meeting several new people, concentrating on the interviews, and creating a connection with the new children and adults require accuracy, sensitivity, and courage, and are laborious. Empathizing with the children—their joys and sorrows— was also draining, but sustaining.

THE RESEARCHER-ADULTS' RESPONSIBILITY

When children are research subjects, ethical issues control the research and the ultimate direction. A researcher has to make ethically sustainable choices in every phase of the research process (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004). When doing research on children, a researcher must understand and protect the child's privacy, and the child's development must not be endangered at any point. A researcher has to be aware of the possibility of the exercise of power and to be sensitive to it (Huber and Clandinin, 2002). Generally, the discussion of research ethics is concerned with the voluntary participation in the research and the participant's protection. Both of the preceding matters are problematic in child research. However, when adults try to understand things from the children's point of view, the children still need protection in terms of what kinds of questions are asked and what method is used. Before doing the research interviews, a researcher has to consider his/her questions carefully so that they will not be too difficult, problematic, or stressful for a child. An interview must not be an oppressive experience. It is also important to thank the child warmly at the end of an interview. In fact, it is good practice to ask the children whether they want to ask something at the end of an interview (Estola et al., 2010; Leeson, 2007; Lahikainen et al., 2003):

"I: Do you want to ask me something? G: How many children do you have?

I: I have two sons. Matias is aged five and Topias two. Do you want to ask something else?

G: No".

The researcher was not able to predict all the things that the children would say in an interview situation, which made the researcher's work with the children fascinating, but also challenging. The next example illustrates how a question that seemed harmless and ordinary produced a sad answer:

I: Do your mom or dad go on work trips somewhere farther?

B: Well, yes they are often and if I and my big brother are together in the evening, then my mom and dad comes to say from that place, outside, that we go over there now... And then they leave. I know

where it ... is. It is there, near the stores. You see, there is that...the store is all the way back there and next to it.

I: Is it a sort of restaurant? B: I guess so.

I: With whom are you when your mom and dad go to "the restaurant"?

B: With my big brother. It is because they go there always in the evenings; I am not allowed to go out then.

I: You stay at home together with your big brother?

B: Then there is not much to do. Playing with the playstation and you cannot play with it all the time.

I: Yeah"

The researcher should not take on a therapist's role, and time is a central factor that prevents an intensive therapeutic relationship from developing between a researcher and a child. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) refers to a researcher's sensitivity when a researcher can step back if he/she notices that an interviewee wants to talk more about his/her problems. One boy wanted to be interviewed three times. In the first interview, all the questions were talked through. During the two other interviews, it was considered best to discuss his drawings briefly. The boy was encouraged to talk about his issues with the daycare staff. A child can be helped by a research interview, as the adult's role is to be a listener; however only the authorities can help a child with their actual problems—a researcher cannot. At its best, an interview is a positive experience for the child in which he/she gets undivided attention from an adult (Einarsdottir, 2007; Masson, 2004; Woodhead and Faulker, 2001).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The child's place will remain marginal in society if the children's own empirical information is not regarded as valuable. Children's opportunities to influence their own lives are usually limited to those matters and situations where their opinions do little to disrupt the adult's life and short-sighted management of finances. In our culture, a child is regarded as "a person in need," but a child's right to be heard in the matters concerning him/herself—like the United Nations agreement on human rights provides—is rarely recognized. In our society, the day-care centers and schools are waiting rooms where a child is brought up and waits to become an adult. Traditionally, the starting point in education has been that a child has not been developed until he/she functions as an adult, and therefore, children have been made to adjust to the adult's constructions, instead of using the children's natural ways of action and conquering the world. A child's point of view is often left in the background, and adults' opinions of children become erroneous and one-sided. An adult's perspective is different than a child's. When concentrating on the child's perspective, a child's skills, abilities, and experiences are highlighted by using various methods. Although there is plenty of information about children, very little comes from the children themselves (Alanen, 2009; Hood et al., 1996; O'Kane, 2001; Qvortrup, 1994; UNICEF, 2008).

Traditionally, parents, teachers, or other actors have been asked permission for gathering information about children. The children themselves have been asked too rarely. One central question has focused on the reliability of children's information, as it has been seen as inadequate for research purposes. The reliability of the information from children is questioned particularly because of the development stage of the children compared to an adult's developmental stage, and there is doubt as to whether children's speech is reliable in general. When researching children, the aim of triangulation is not to diversify the phenomenon studied, but to discover a more complete truth than the children are able to tell. The children's

experiences are left in the background, behind so-called more important societal quarters. The children's absence is understandable due to the child conception prevailing in our society. This invisibility may be connected with the children's words not being regarded as a resource because they are understood as persons in need. The children have needs and problems, and the parents and other adults who belong to a child's circle of acquaintances have the resources (Alanen, 2009; Malone and Hartung, 2010.) A complete picture of a situation cannot be reached when certain groups talk and the others are silent. Child research and the methods for collecting children's information are relatively new and have not been studied much. Researchers and educators should have the courage to collect information directly from the children, which often requires untraditional methods. Studying the children should start from the children's culture. The children's and adult's ways of thinking are dissimilar, which requires effort from the adults in order to determine the children's message and opinions

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