

TOP TIPS



FOR CONDUCTING QUALITATIVE RESEARCH WITH *Young children*

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child adopted in 1989 emphasised the rights of children to participate and express their views and for their opinions to be given due weight. In the field of research, there has been a shift from 'research on' to a more inclusive 'research with' approach. This shift requires appropriate methods to engage children and gain their perspectives. Research with children can't be conducted the same way as with adults. Although many of the guidelines used for adult interviews are relevant when interviewing children such as attentive listening, building rapport, and using familiar terms, additional methodological and practical considerations should be taken into account. Here we provide some top tips for conducting research with young children using qualitative methods mainly focusing on interviews and focus groups. You will also find examples from the BRUSH project which involved conducting play-based focus groups to gain the perspectives of young children (aged 3–5 years) about supervised tooth brushing clubs.

Recruitment and gaining consent

To recruit young children you will need to engage their parents/carers. In certain settings, you need to engage gatekeepers before you approach parents/carers. Some settings where young children are commonly recruited include nurseries, schools, and playgroups you could also consider using social media and internet forums.

You must gain parental/carer consent before you begin your research. Ensure that parents/carers are fully informed about the following:

- What the research is about
- What their child will be asked to do or involved in
- Any anticipated risks however small and how they will be mitigated
- Who is conducting the research
- How the information will be recorded, for example, audio or video
- Who will see this information
- What will you do with this information
- They are free to withdraw at any time

Always provide the information in writing, even if you have discussed it with them in person. Avoid jargon and use lay language, the Gunning Fog Index is a tool you may find helpful. Make sure to include your contact details if they would like to ask questions or have any concerns.

Once the parent/carer has consented you should also gain the child's assent. Provide the child with written information using language that is clear, simple, and familiar to the child. The information should be provided in a format appropriate for the child's developmental competency. For example, for very young children you may want to use fewer words and more visuals (photos, drawings) and ask the parent/carer for their help in supporting their child to understand.

Consult them!

When planning and preparing for your interview/focus group consult, parents/carers and teachers about the children's preferences and the activities they are familiar with. Find out as much as possible about their routine and what they would be comfortable with.

It's good practice to conduct a pilot interview to refine your approach. This will help you adapt your methods to match the children's developing cognitive, linguistic and social competencies enabling the children to express themselves to the best of their abilities.

If feasible, set up a patient and public involvement and engagement (PPIE) group and include both children and adults.



Informal and inviting environment

It's important to have an inviting, relaxed and open atmosphere where children can be gently encouraged to share their views. Choose a familiar location to help the child feel safe and comfortable such as at home or nursery/school. The location can have an impact on children's engagement for example an unfamiliar setting may be intimidating for very young children. Also, children taking part in research conducted at school may feel the need to give 'correct' answers to questions. Children need to be reassured that there are no right and wrong answers and it's their opinion that matters. You can explain this to the children when setting out ground rules before you start the interview. Also, it is important to remember and address the power dynamic that inherently exists in adult-child interactions where adults hold greater power.

To help create an informal and relaxed setting consider:

- Wearing informal clothing rather than smart office clothes
- Have an adult present that they feel safe with
- Having ground rules can be a helpful way to let children know what to expect from the interviewer and what is expected of them.
- Reflect on the relational power difference between yourself and the child
 - Sit with the children at their level to create better rapport. Either sit together on chairs or for very young children sit together on the floor.
 - Reflect on the language used when talking to children be careful to not use language of power that assumes they will participate. Try phrases such as 'I would like to learn from you about ...' or 'I would like to know what you think about' or 'I was hoping you could help me understand more about....'



Choosing the right methods

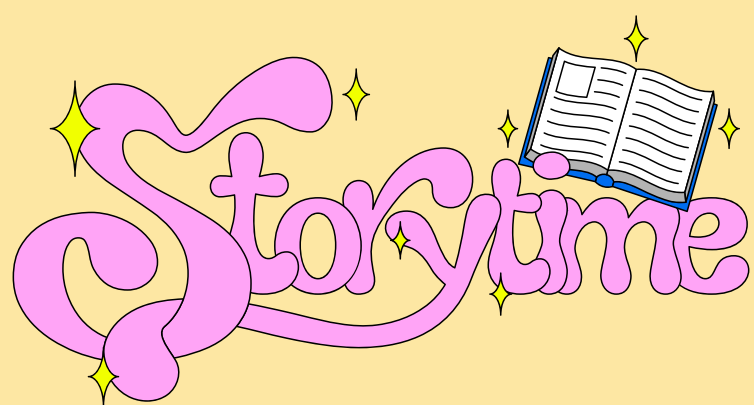
Two common approaches are often used for interviewing young children individual and group interviews. The younger the child the less formal and structured the methods should be. For example, for very young children rather than using a traditional topic guide a less structured approach where research questions are operationalised into narrative or play-based interviews is more appropriate. Children express themselves less verbally the younger they are and children under six years old do not engage well with a question-and-answer format and it's a good idea to have them engaged in a task or activity during the interview.



Recognise the different ways children may choose to express themselves and offer a variety of fun and age-appropriate activities to keep children engaged and interested such as drawing, role play, creating collages, vignettes, games, singing songs and storytelling.



The activities you choose to employ will depend on the child's age, abilities and preferences. Remember the task or activity is a conversation tool, it's not what they draw that is important but listening to their narrative and interpretation of their drawing should be your focus.



Focus groups

For very young children (3–6 years old), focus groups may be more engaging than a one-to-one interview. Small group conversations replicate the group setting they are familiar with from nursery/school. Group interviews allow space for children to discuss the questions and remind each other about details.

When conducting focus groups be mindful of the age range and size of the group. A group of 3–4-year-old children will have very different competencies from a group of 7–8-year-olds. Children within the group should be in the same age range within 1–2 years so that the materials, discussion, and activities are appropriate for the whole group.

Also, the size of the group matters. When deciding the number of children consider both their age and your experience and skills in managing the group dynamic to allow for each child's opinion to be heard.

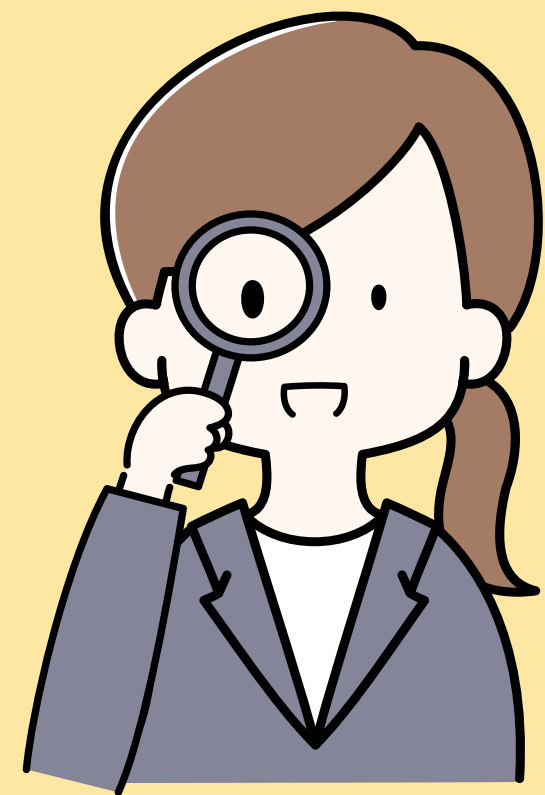


Listen and observe

When working with young children the interviewer should do more than listen but needs to observe and be attentive to the child's facial expressions, body language, and physical movement throughout the session. This is essential to both understanding what they are trying to say and being responsive to maintain engagement.

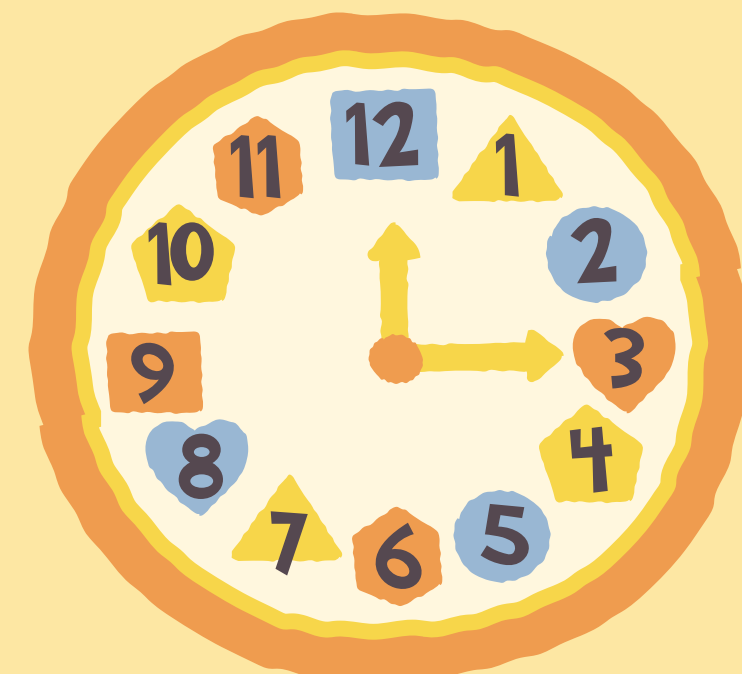
This also includes recognising nonverbal cues indicating that the child is uncomfortable and may no longer want to participate. For young children, you may want to consider providing them with a 'stop' card to use when they no longer want to participate and explain how to use it as part of the ground rules. You can also ask the children to be creative and come up with a code word they can say if they don't want to answer a question or feel uncomfortable this activity can also be used as an ice-breaker.

When asking children questions use open-ended questions and using nonverbal gestures to encourage them such as eye contact, head nods and friendly facial expressions that convey that you are genuinely interested in what they have to say.



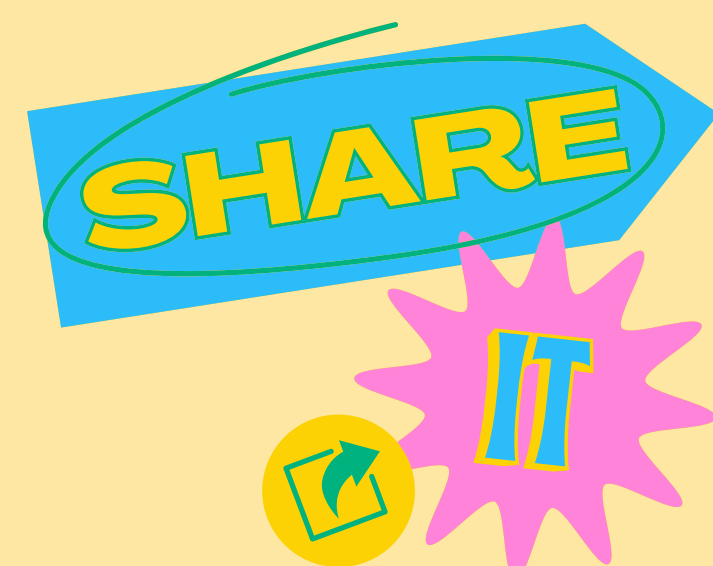
Timing and duration

Consider the time of day when the interview or focus group is taking place. For example, think about how energetic or tired the child may feel. When planning the duration of the interview/focus group consider the child's age: the younger the child the shorter it should be. If more time is needed, consider having breaks. Remember to consult their parents or teachers on the child's normal routine.



Share your findings

It's good practice to share your findings with participants and show them the impact of their contribution. This helps to build trust and show respect so participants feel valued. This applies to children as well!



I can make a difference

REMEMBER!

- Responsiveness and flexibility are central aspects of the art of interviewing children
- Meet them at their level
- A single method that suits all children and circumstances does not exist
 - Children of different ages prefer different methods
 - Children have different ways of communicating and may prefer different methods to express their views so offering a variety is important for gaining insight into children's perspectives
 - Be attuned to the children's developmental needs and abilities and apply child-centred methods accordingly
 - Different approaches can reveal new aspects and a new breadth of understanding
- Be creative – you can make your own fun interactive activities and props for example use a white travel neck pillow with googly eyes for a tooth
- Reflexivity should be a central part of the research process with children. Reflect on your role, assumptions, choice of methods and application

Helpful resources

[NIHR Involving children and young people as advisors in research \(learningforinvolvement.org.uk\)](https://learningforinvolvement.org.uk)

[Toolkit Archive - eYPAGnet](#)



The BRUSH Project



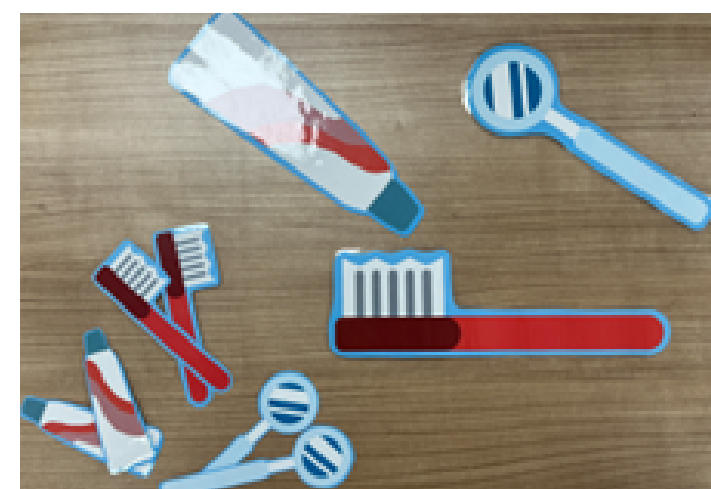
The BRUSH (optimising toothBrushing pRogrammes in nUrseries and ScHools) project engaged a range of stakeholders to learn how best to implement supervised toothbrushing programmes in nurseries and primary schools across England. This included exploring young children's views about toothbrushing using a range of creative methods.

Focus groups were conducted with children aged 3-5 years old at their nursery. Gatekeepers were engaged and shared the participant information and consent sheets with parents. Consenting parents were given child assent forms (mostly pictorial) to share with their child. Teachers were consulted about the children's normal day routine and what activities they normally engage in at nursery.

The focus group interview was designed as a narrative and play-based interview through interactive storytelling, songs and activities. A 20-minute session was designed, based on the research questions, and included three different activities. A PPIE session was held with a group of children and early years staff. This was used to refine the session plan.

The session plan included 3 core activities and an additional activity in case there was extra time or children were not engaging with a particular activity.

Activity 1: Interactive storytelling covering key oral health message and using props – large toothbrush, toothpaste, teeth model, laminated dentist equipment (e.g., mirror). Songs were also incorporated when modelling brushing.



Activity 2: Happy teeth and sad teeth. Children were asked about food that makes teeth 'happy' or 'sad'. This involved having large happy and sad tooth posters and asking the children to stick on pictures of food items.



Activity 3: Toothbrushing – Numeracy activity with sugarbugs. Children played an interactive game of counting the different coloured sugarbugs in the mouth and brushing them off. A large, laminated mouth was used and each child had a laminated toothbrush



Activity 4: Role play involving dental-related props

The BRUSH Project



Before the interview began the facilitator introduced themselves as someone interested in knowing more about healthy teeth and toothbrushing. An ice-breaker involving making silly faces and writing names on name tags was used. For the session the facilitator wore denim dungarees with a bright striped colourful top and sat on the floor with the children this was aimed at minimising the power differential. Throughout the session, age-appropriate language related to oral health was used. For example, rather than using the terms bacteria, dental exam, and injection, child-friendly terms such as sugar bugs, count teeth and put tooth to sleep were used.

