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Children’s Perspectives on Participating in Survey Research

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Finally, we would like to thank the Board of the NatCen Innovation Fund for sponsoring this work.
The report presents findings from a small-scale qualitative study with children and young people aged 7 to 15, exploring their views about a range of ethical issues related to taking part in survey research. The study was funded by NatCen (The National Centre for Social Research) under a scheme called the NatCen Innovation Fund, which sought to initiate projects that would break new ground in terms of substantive subject matter and/or research methodology, and produce findings that would be of benefit to the wider research community. While there is a substantial and rapidly growing literature both on research ethics and on the ethics of researching children, this study was considered to address two key information gaps. First, it sought to explore children’s own perspectives on ethical issues relating to their participation in research, and, second, it focused on surveys or quantitative research, which have, to date, received less attention in the literature than qualitative methods.

Eight mixed-gender focus groups were carried out in four London schools in 2006/7. The main tool used to stimulate discussion was a series of purpose-made video clips, using actors to depict scenes relating to various parts of the survey research process.

Discussion focused on four key areas:

- Information needs, informed consent and the role of others (e.g. parents) in consent procedures (Chapter 2)
- Ending interviews early, refusing questions and withdrawing data after an interview (Chapter 3)
- The presence of others during survey interviews (Chapter 4)
- Confidentiality and disclosure of information to third parties (Chapter 5)

Here we briefly summarise the views of the children and young people we spoke to on each of these key issues. Note that – due to a need to be concise - this overview does not attempt to summarise the ‘discussion’ sections in each of the substantive chapters, where we reflect on the implications of the findings presented for survey research with children and young people. Nor does it summarise our reflections on the methodology used for the study (Chapter 6) or our concluding thoughts from the findings (Chapter 7).

**Information needs, informed consent and the role of others (e.g. parents) in consent procedures**

- The types of information children and young people wanted to help them make an informed decision about taking part in a survey largely reflected existing best practice guidance, falling into the three key categories of ‘background to the survey’, ‘practicalities’ and ‘what will happen to my answers’.

- There is a preference for receiving information face-to-face rather than in writing.

- Factors which were seen as potentially influencing a child or young person’s decision about whether to take part in a survey were: the purpose and importance of the research; the salience of the topic; interviewer characteristics; perceptions regarding confidentiality and data use; and the perceived ability of the participant to answer the questions.

- Knowing their participation in a survey is voluntary was seen as something that might encourage, rather than discourage, children and young people to take part.

- It was clearly felt that potential participants should play a central role in consent procedures, and that others’ involvement in these procedures should not imply bypassing the child or young person concerned.
Children’s views about the consent role of parents took into account a number of factors: the respective rights of participant and parent; the parent’s controlling and protective roles; the age of the participant; the location of the interview; and the survey topic.

The need for parents to play a role in consent procedures was seen to reduce as children got older, though there was no consensus with regard to the age at which parents would no longer need to be consulted.

Although the sensitivity of the survey topic was perceived as having a bearing on parental involvement in consent, the nature of this was unclear. One view was that there was a greater argument for parents to be involved in decisions about children taking part in sensitive or ‘personal’ topics, but the opposite view was also expressed: that a child or young person’s participation in a survey on some sensitive topics ought to be kept private.

**Ending interviews early, refusing questions and withdrawing data after an interview**

- Children and young people were asked to identify reasons why a child or young person may wish to end a survey interview early. The reasons they identified were: interviewer characteristics or questioning style; a long or boring interview; wanting to do something else with the time; and questions that were too personal.

- Children were also asked how easy they thought they would find it to ask to end an interview early. A number of barriers to making such requests were identified, falling under the three headings of ‘expression’, ‘interviewer reaction’ and ‘guilt’.

- Concerns about giving ‘wrong’ answers were mentioned as a potential reason for ending an interview or refusing a specific question.

- Children thought they might refuse to answer a question if they did not understand it. They also saw explaining and clarifying questions as part of the survey interviewer’s role.

- Three reasons for asking to withdraw data after an interview were identified: correction, concerns about confidentiality, or regret at having shared something with the interviewer.

- The children and young people we spoke to felt that the legitimacy of data withdrawal depended on the reason for the request. A belief that data provided was incorrect or inaccurate was generally seen as providing the strongest grounds for data to be withdrawn.

- It was suggested that the scope of data withdrawal could be limited in various ways, for example by specifying a time period outside of which requests for data withdrawal will not be considered.

**The presence of others during survey interviews**

- The children and young people we spoke to acknowledged that there may be advantages and disadvantages to having somebody else present during a survey interview.

- The perceived advantages of having somebody else present fell under the three broad headings of ‘comfort’, ‘assistance’ and ‘safety’. ‘Assistance’ included help with answering questions and correcting wrong answers.

- From a personal safety point-of-view, there was general agreement that it would be acceptable for a child to be left alone in a room with an interviewer, assuming they had proved their credentials and a responsible adult was present somewhere in the home.
The children and young people thought that the presence of a third party could influence a survey participant’s responses, either because there might be something he or she did not want the observer to know, or due to embarrassment.

There was a range of views about whether the need for privacy is affected by the survey topic. It was suggested that sensitive or personal topics might both increase and decrease the need for privacy. Examples of such topics also were wide-ranging and sometimes surprising, e.g. ‘school life’ and ‘friends’.

Confidentiality and disclosure of information

Children’s views on whether or not it is acceptable to disclose information given by a child or young person during a survey interview were situated on a spectrum ranging from a fairly wide interpretation of ‘welfare-based’ arguments for disclosure in different situations, to ‘rights-based’ arguments for guaranteeing absolute confidentiality.

The ‘importance’ of the information was also seen as a factor that ought to influence disclosure decisions, although children’s views varied in terms of the importance assigned to different types of information.

What was promised in terms of confidentiality at the start of an interview was seen as important. If guarantees of confidentiality were qualified at the start, this was seen as ‘honest’ and facilitating trust. However, it was recognised that there might be issues with ensuring that all participants clearly understood these.

It was suggested that interviewers should ask participants before disclosing any information they have provided to a third party. However, it was not clear from the discussions what interviewers should do if a child refused permission for them to pass the information on.

The children and young people we spoke to felt that interviewers could play a role in providing advice to children and young people, or encouraging them to seek help from others, which might help avoid the need for them to disclose information to third parties.
1 INTRODUCTION

This report presents findings from a study entitled ‘Children’s Perspectives on Participating in Survey Research’, funded by the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen). The study was carried out by researchers based in NatCen’s Families and Children Research Group and Qualitative Research Unit, as well as the organisation’s Scottish arm, the Scottish Centre for Social Research (ScotCen). It was commissioned under the terms of NatCen’s ‘Innovation Fund’, an internal funding programme that sought to initiate projects which would break new ground in terms of substantive subject matter and/or research methodology, and that would be of benefit to the wider research community as well as NatCen.

1.1 Aims of the study

The overarching aim of the study was to explore children’s perspectives on a range of ethical issues relating to their participation in survey research. There are many important issues that we could have explored. However, due to time restrictions, we were obliged to prioritise. We therefore selected the following as the focus of our discussions.

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1.2 Design and methodology

We carried out eight focus groups with children aged seven to 15 in four London schools. We included children from age seven, as there is a broad consensus in the literature that this is the age from which children tend to be cognitively capable of participating in survey research (Borgers et al., 2000; Scott, 1997). A member of the research team made a preliminary presentation to each selected class, in order to explain the study and emphasise the voluntary nature of their participation. Each pupil in the class was given a leaflet about the study, and opt-out letters with leaflets were sent to their parents. Pupils who did not opt out of the study (or who were not opted-out by their parents) were selected randomly within gender, and teachers were given the opportunity to raise any concerns about the selection made.

All groups took place on school premises during lesson time. In order to make the best use of our time with the children and young people, and to keep discussions sufficiently focused, all our examples referred to face-to-face survey interviews. Apart from initial discussions of children’s own experiences of survey research, we did not discuss telephone interviews or self-completion, paper or online questionnaires.

It is important to acknowledge from the outset that this was a small, exploratory study, aimed at obtaining preliminary findings to stimulate further research and debate. While the design of the study is robust, the size of the sample inevitably implies that any conclusions drawn must be viewed as somewhat tentative, particularly those involving associations with particular sample subgroups (e.g. primary pupils, girls).

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1 'Children will occasionally be used throughout this report as shorthand for ‘children and young people’. The study involved participants aged seven to 15.

2 Throughout this report, we use the term ‘parent’ as shorthand for parents or other responsible adult carers.
1.2.1 **Data collection approach**

In designing this study, we faced a dilemma regarding whether or not to follow-up on a specific survey experience. To do so would have involved either ‘piggy-backing’ our study onto an existing survey with children and young people or providing participants with a purpose-made survey interview to be discussed subsequently. We perceived a range of advantages and disadvantages to each approach but in the end decided on a hypothetical rather than a follow-up design, for the following key reasons:

- Any real-life or purpose-made survey would have focused on particular substantive topics. We were concerned that this might skew subsequent discussions away from ethical issues as they relate to survey research in general.
- Equally, any single survey experience would have involved a set of specific practices (e.g. around consent), which could potentially have influenced participants’ views.
- There was no appropriate NatCen survey taking place at the time for us to ‘piggy-back’ onto.
- Following up on a real-life survey would have presented a range of logistical problems, particularly as it would have been important to conduct the follow-up research fairly quickly after the survey interview to ensure adequate recall.

The hypothetical approach posed some substantial challenges in terms of explaining and ‘bringing to life’ a range of (sometimes complex) ethical issues relating to the survey process, for participants who may never have taken part in a survey. We tackled these challenges by commissioning a purpose-made video using actors to depict short scenes illustrating different parts of the survey process, and used this as our main stimulus tool in the focus groups. Two versions of the video were made, so that the actor playing the survey participant appeared to be of a similar age to the focus group children.

1.2.2 **Research about research**

We realised at an early stage that it was likely to be difficult to explain the distinction between the qualitative methods we were using and the quantitative methods to be discussed. This meant that we had to take extra steps to try and distance the two experiences in children’s minds and avoid confusion. The video was key in this regard, as it enabled us to depict a survey interview as something bearing little resemblance to the focus group in which children were presently engaged.

We were also aware from the outset that we risked ‘leading’ children in their responses by our own practices relating to the present study. Indeed, this concern influenced some key decisions during the design of the study. For example we decided not to discuss the issue of gifts and incentives, as we felt that children’s responses were likely to be strongly influenced by their feelings about the approach we had chosen to take (namely, offering incentives to schools but not to individual participants).

We reflect on our key methodological decisions in Chapter Six. More details of the study’s design and methodology are provided in Appendix A.

1.3 **Background**

While the broader concept of professional ethics is an ancient one, traceable back to the Hippocratic Oath of fifth century BC, the notion of ethics in research is relatively modern (Alderson, 2004: 97). The earliest high-profile formal statement of a need for ethical practice in research was the 1947 Nuremberg Code, which emphasised the potential dangers of research and the importance of freely-given consent from subjects, in light of experiments carried out by the Nazis during the Second World War. Later, in the 1960s, the births of children with deformed limbs to mothers who took the drug thalidomide during pregnancy led doctors to check this balance by
emphasising the importance of thorough research and testing of medical treatments. The 1964 Declaration of Helsinki set out more detailed ethical standards for medical research, inspiring the growth of a new academic discipline - ‘medical ethics’ – among lawyers and philosophers in the US during the 1970s. Subsequent scandals relating to the conduct of medical research, such as the Alder Hey Hospital case concerning the retention and use of infants’ organs without parental consent in the late 1990s, have kept the issue of ethics in medical research at the forefront of public debate. Nowadays, all UK research that involves accessing human subjects via the National Health Service is subject to review by a Research Ethics Committee.

In comparison with medical research, however, social research is relatively unregulated. To quote the UK Social Research Association’s own ethical guidelines:

‘At present in the UK we have no reliable system of ethical governance or review. The sanctions we can apply to those who discredit our profession are limited. There is no comprehensive system of registration or licensing which can confirm the credentials or quality of a researcher for commissioners or the general public.’

(SRA, 2003: 5)

Nevertheless, concerns about ethics in social research have increased in recent years. Discussions have been influenced by developments in medical ethics and other factors including new legislation around human rights and data protection; globalisation and advances in information and communications technology; an increased emphasis on ethical investment and corporate social responsibility; and shifting public attitudes as a result of all these developments (SRA, 2003: 7; ESRC: 27). In the UK, both the Social Research Association (SRA) and the Government Social Research Unit (GSRU) have issued new ethical guidelines in the last few years (SRA, 2003; GSRU, 2005), as has a five-country consortium of socio-economic researchers funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) (RESPECT, 2004). Whether a system of Research Ethics Committees could be applied effectively to social research, given the vast range of topics, disciplines and methodologies under this umbrella, is still the subject of heated debate. Nevertheless, ethics are now firmly placed at the top of the social research agenda, and seem likely to stay there.

1.3.1 Research with children

Alongside the increasing emphasis on research ethics over recent years, interest has also been growing in gathering and responding to the views of children and young people. Since the United Nations agreed the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1989, increasing emphasis has been placed on respecting children’s rights and treating them as social actors in their own right rather than not-yet-competent ‘adults-in-waiting’. Article 12 of the UNCRC states specifically that children have rights to express their views on all matters that affect them. This is echoed in the UK government’s 2004 white paper Every Child Matters, which states:

‘Real service improvement is only attainable through involving children and young people and listening to their views’ (DfES, 2004)

The recognition not only that children and young people should be consulted, but also that they are in a position to provide a unique and important perspective on a range of issues, appears to have been embraced by the social research community. More and more studies are including children and young people in capacities ranging from participant to adviser to researcher, and a number of books on involving children and young people in research have been published in recent years (for example, Fraser et al., 2004; Lewis et al., 2004).

1.4 Inspiration for the study

The growth of interest in research ethics and researching children respectively has led, naturally, to some detailed discussion of matters of research ethics as they relate to children and young people in particular (see, for example, Alderson and Morrow, 2004). The study on which this report is based aimed to address two key gaps in this evidence base.
The first key gap is the perspective of children themselves in matters of research ethics. While a number of studies have explored the appropriateness of conducting various types of research with children (for example, Punch, 2002; Scott, 1997), as well as their capacities to answer questions, provide consent and so on (for example, Abramovitch et al., 1995; Borgers and Hox, 2001; De Leeuw et al., 2002; Masson, 2004), there appear to have been few attempts to seek children’s own views on participating in research. Indeed, one 1996 review concluded that virtually no systematic research of this kind had been done (Melton and Stanley, 1996).3

The second evidence gap concerns quantitative survey research with children and young people. Discussion of the ethics of researching children tends to focus on qualitative methods, and accordingly to assume that researchers are likely to enjoy a lot of scope to tailor approaches to individual groups or participants, to be relatively open to refusal and withdrawal, and to approach studies in an iterative way, improving ethical practices as they go. These assumptions may not apply to quantitative studies, for a range of reasons including the need to interview a larger number of people (and the cost and time implications of this); the need to interview a representative sample of people (and hence an interest in achieving high response rates); the implications of a relatively inflexible data collection instrument; and the consequences of employing and training a much larger number of interviewers. One purpose of this study was to highlight areas in which standard survey practices do and do not meet children’s own ethical requirements, and hence to inform thinking about potential changes to these practices and the appropriate use of survey research with children and young people overall.

1.5 Key research questions

Our key questions for the children and young people were:

- What information would you need or want in order to help you decide whether or not to participate in a survey?
- Who should have a say in whether or not you participate? If there was a disagreement, who should have the final say?
- What sorts of things might make you feel uncomfortable during a survey interview, and what would you do about this?
- Is it OK for someone to withdraw midway through a survey interview, or to refuse to answer a particular question?
- Is it OK for someone to withdraw some of his or her answers once the interview is completed?
- Would you want someone else present during a survey interview?
- Under what circumstances would it be OK for an interviewer to tell someone else something a child or young person said in their interview?

1.6 Report outline

We address each of these research questions in the subsequent chapters of the report. Chapter 2 covers the first two issues around the initial approach and consent processes. Chapter 3 then addresses a range of issues around the experience of taking part in the interview and participants’ ability or desire to refuse to answer particular questions or to withdraw their data. Chapter 4 reports on what children and young people said about having someone else present during an interview – the relative issues around privacy versus support and safety. Chapter 5 goes on to look further at issues around confidentiality and disclosure. Each of these chapters includes, first, a description of children and young people’s views on the relevant topic, and, second, a discussion of what these findings might mean in practice for survey researchers. These ‘discussion’ sections build on the direct implications of what the children and young people said to include our own interpretations.

3 In reviewing the existing evidence for our study proposal, we identified three studies bearing a degree of resemblance to ours, but there were considerable differences in each case, be it in terms of methodology (Edwards and Aldred, 1999), age of participants (Macdougall and Turner, 2003), or substantive content (Stafford et al., 2003). A further article was published after the commencement of this study (Hill, 2006) which is again somewhat different in scope, focusing on children’s views about inclusion, burden and data collection methods in both research and consultation.
and reflections. Thus, they are informed but not necessarily driven by the views expressed in the focus groups.

Before Chapter 7 provides some 'concluding thoughts' on some overarching themes which cut across our findings, we have included a chapter (Chapter 6) which reflects on the process of doing this piece of research and on some of the implications of our chosen methodology.
2 DECISIONS ABOUT TAKING PART IN SURVEYS

2.1 Introduction
The literature and guidance on obtaining consent from children and young people to take part in research focuses on two key issues:

- Who should be involved in deciding if a child can take part, and
- How to ensure children’s consent is ‘informed’.

This chapter addresses each issue in turn.

2.1.1 Who should be involved?
One of the most hotly-debated issues in research with children is whether or not it is necessary or desirable to seek consent from parents (or from someone acting in loco-parentis, such as a teacher) for research with their children. While there is no clear legal requirement to obtain parental consent for research with children, it is commonly considered good practice to do so. For example, ethics guidance produced by the Glasgow Centre for the Child and Society, the British Psychological Society, the Market Research Society and NatCen’s own guidelines on research with children all recommend that where research participants are under 16 years old, consent should be sought from the parent or guardian as well as from the child. Passive consent, where parents are informed about the study and given the chance to opt their child out (rather than actively having to opt their child in), is generally considered sufficient by many of these UK guidelines.

However, while it may be common practice, it is possible to argue that seeking even passive parental consent undermines the rights of children to be heard and to make their own informed choices about participation (see, for example Masson, 2004 and Morrow and Richards, 1996). Moreover, even if seeking parental consent to approach a child about research is considered desirable, there are still difficult questions to be answered. For instance, who should be approached for consent first – the parent or the child? And what should happen if the parent refuses consent but the child wants to participate?

2.1.2 Information needs
The debate about parental consent is generally conceived in terms of whether it is required in addition to consent from the child (rather than as a replacement). As the Glasgow Centre for the Child and Society state in their code of practice on research ethics:

> 'Unless circumstances indicate otherwise, researchers should operate on the presumption that children are competent individuals, in their own right, and able to decide whether to participate in research.'
> (Glasgow Centre for the Child and Society, 2006: 9)

Therefore, regardless of the position of social researchers working with children about parental consent, they view obtaining the child’s ‘informed consent’ as desirable – or essential - if research is to be regarded as ethical. According to Masson, ‘informed consent’ implies that ‘only the consent of someone who was fully informed of all the relevant issues before they gave their

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4 There is no legislation covering children’s participation in social research. See discussion in Masson (2004) of the possible implications of other areas of legislation for researchers.
5 The BPS recommends parents be informed of all studies on children and young people up to the age of 18 and given the opportunity to withdraw their child if they wish.
6 Although exceptions are sometimes made for observational research or research with very young children – see for example NatCen (2006) p7 or Glasgow Centre for the Child and Society (2006) p 10.
consent is valid’ (Fraser et al (eds), 2004). The onus is therefore on the researcher to provide children with sufficient information, in the right way, at the right time and in the right format to help them make an informed decision. A wide variety of guidance is available on what information children and young people need to help them decide whether or not to take part in research (see for example Glasgow Centre for the Child and Society, 2006; Alderson, 1995; Alderson, 2004). NatCen’s own guidance for researchers working with children and young people (which draws heavily on the wider literature in this area) suggests that young participants need information about:

- The nature and purpose of the research (e.g. who it is sponsored by, who is carrying it out and who will see the results)
- What they will be asked to do and how the information they provide will be recorded and used
- The extent to which information they give will remain confidential
- The fact that participation is voluntary and that their decision about participating in the research (or not) will not affect any services or benefits they may be receiving
- Their right to refuse to answer individual questions or to withdraw from the research altogether.

2.1.3 Chapter structure

In this chapter, we begin by exploring children’s views on who should have a say in whether or not children take part in surveys and discuss the range of different factors that affect their views on this. We then discuss views on other factors that may affect children’s decisions about taking part in surveys, and summarise the types of information children and young people would like to help them decide. In our ‘discussion’ section, we reflect on the potential implications of our findings for social researchers working with children, before summarising findings in our ‘key points’.

2.2 Details of video stimulus

An initial open question about who should have a say in whether or not children take part in surveys was followed by two video clips focusing attention more closely on the respective roles of parents and of children and young people in the consent decision. The first video clip (clip 1) shows a mother and father discussing a letter saying their child might be invited to take part in a survey about friends. They decide to sign the ‘opt-out’ letter without discussing this with their child. The second clip (clip 2) shows the parents discussing with the child whether or not they might like to take part. Verbatim transcripts of the script for each clip are shown in the boxes below.
VIDEO CLIP 1

LOCATION: Mother and father are making tea in the Kitchen. Emily/Tom is in the background, watching TV.

Mother: (Reading letter) According to this …
Father: (Stops tea making) What?
Mother: This letter is about a survey thing they’re doing at Emily/Tom’s school. We have to let them know if she/he can take part or not.
Father: Yeah, OK.
Mother: No, listen, it’s important. We have to decide…
Father: Well, what’s it about?
Mother: It’s about school and friends and things. They take the kids off one by one, and ask them all these questions. I don’t know. Do you think (s)he’d want to do it?
Father: Yeah, (s)he’ll be fine.
Mother: I’m not sure… (s)he might not like it. (S)he can be a bit shy. Maybe we should sign the form and get her/him out of doing it, just in case.
Father: Well, OK. Whatever you think is best (goes back to making tea).

Mother signs the form

VIDEO CLIP 2

LOCATION: Sitting room. Mother and Father are sitting on the sofa. Emily/Tom is in the background reading a magazine.

Mother: Emily/Tom, we need to talk to you about something…
Emily/Tom: (continues reading) Hang on …
Mother: It won’t take long…
Emily/Tom: Hang on a minute… (puts magazine down)…OK. What is it?
Mother: (holding letter) We’ve had this letter about a survey they’re going to be doing at school. Some people want to ask you some questions.
Emily/Tom: What about?
Father: About school and friends and things.
Emily/Tom: (looks puzzled) Why?
Mother: It’s for a survey they’re doing. You don’t have to take part if you don’t want to.
Father: But it could be interesting. Do you think you fancy it?
Emily/Tom: (looks doubtful) Dunno.
Mother: Well, think about it. If you’d rather not do it, we can sign this slip.
Emily/Tom: OK. I’ll think about it (returns to reading magazine).

These video clips led into more detailed discussion of the reasons that parents and children should or should not be involved in decisions about whether children and young people take part in surveys, as well as who should have the ‘final say’ if they cannot agree.

As discussed in Chapter One, two versions of the video were produced, so that the actor playing the survey participant was close to the focus group participants in age. The first version featured a teenager (Emily) and the second a younger child, around 10 or 11 years old (Tom).
2.3 Children and young people’s views about deciding to take part in surveys

2.3.1 Who should have a say?
When the children and young people were initially asked unprompted about who they thought should have a say in whether children take part in surveys, the two dominant responses were ‘young people themselves’ and ‘their parents’. Teachers were also mentioned, with children’s comments suggesting that an appropriate role for them might be in deciding who was ‘sensible’ enough or capable of taking part. Friends were mentioned as people who sometimes ought to have a say in the decision (one view was that this might be appropriate if the survey was about friends). It was also suggested that siblings might want to have a say (although it was not clear whether it was thought they ought to do so). Unsurprisingly, given that our video clips focused on parental consent, the rest of the discussion tended to focus very heavily on the role of parents vis a vis children in the consent decision.

2.3.2 Factors influencing views about who should have a say
In this section, we discuss the range of considerations that appeared to influence children’s and young people’s views about whether or not parents should have a say and how much weight their views should be given compared with the views of children and young people themselves.

*Children’s rights as subjects of the interview*
A recurrent reason given both for involving children and young people in the consent decision and for either not involving parents at all, or not giving them ‘the final say’, was that the child or young person is the one who will be doing the survey and therefore they should be able to decide.

> ‘If we don’t feel comfortable doing it, then we don’t have to do it. Where if we do, then there’s nothing wrong with doing it.’
> (Female participant, Year 8)

This reflects a rights-based argument, as outlined in Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child which states that any ‘child who is capable of forming his or her own views’ shall have the ‘right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child’. It was also suggested that it is important for young people to learn to make their own decisions. One view was that young people’s rights to make their own decisions should always outweigh the views of parents:

> ‘I make my own decisions and I don’t really want them to do it.’
> (Male participant, Year 8)

Another view was that the relative weight that should be given to the views of children and their parents depended on other factors, like age, where the interview was being held, topic etc. (discussed in subsequent sub-sections of Section 2.3.2).

A related reason that it might be inappropriate to involve parents in the decision (or at least not to give them the final say) was that they may not be aware of how their child feels about taking part. Children also suggested children and young people might feel that their parents were going ‘behind their back’ or that they ‘can’t trust me’ if they made a decision without consulting them. They would feel ‘sad’, ‘upset’, ‘very shocked’, ‘annoyed’, ‘angry’ or ‘left out’ if their parents behaved like Tom and Emily’s in clip 1.
Parents’ rights in relation to their children

Although the child may have rights as the person who will be doing the survey, it was also suggested that parents should have some rights of control over what their children do. The fact that they ‘raise the child’, they ‘set the rules’ and that children should ‘respect’ their parents were all given as reasons parents should have a say in whether they take part in surveys. One explanation as to why parents should have such rights of control was the belief that parents can be held responsible (‘blamed’) if their children are involved in something that goes wrong.

Protection from parents from (perceived) risks involved in participating

Another possible reason that children gave for involving parents in decisions is so they can protect their child from doing things that might be harmful or unpleasant. Parents can decide whether the survey is ‘safe’ for their child to be involved in or not. For example, it was suggested that a parent might be concerned that taking part in a survey about bullying could lead to an escalation in bullying of their child. It was suggested that if parents are uncomfortable or worried about their child taking part, they must have a reason for this and their views should, therefore, have some influence on the consent decision. Indeed, one view was that this protective role should sometimes take precedence over the wishes of the child. However, it was also suggested that if a parent does not want their child to take part they should explain why to them. Another suggestion was that if the parents say no, the researchers could send them more information to see if they change their mind.

Parental belief that the interview might involve risks for the child was considered a ‘good reason’ for parents to refuse to give consent for a child to take part. Other ‘good reasons’ for parents to say no were feeling uncomfortable with the interview being conducted one-to-one with their child, feeling their child is too young, feeling their child does not understand what they are getting involved in and being concerned that the child might be rude to the interviewer.

The age of the child

In terms of determining when parental rights to control and protect should outweigh children’s rights to make their own decisions, one view was that parents should be more involved in decisions about whether their child takes part in surveys when the child is younger. A young child might not understand what they are being asked to do and may not be ‘wise enough’ to make their own decisions. However, children’s comments suggested that the argument for parental rights of control over their child weakens as children get older. It was felt that when you become a teenager:

‘you become more independent, so you start living like your own life really and it’s not always controlled by your parents as much.’

(Female participant, Year 10)

Different ages were proposed as the age at which children and young people should start having a greater say than their parents, from when they start secondary school, to age 12, to when they are 16, to when they are 17 or 18. This suggests that some children at least may see 16 (the age at which it is commonly thought unnecessary to ask parents for even passive consent for their child’s participation in a survey) as a high cut off point.

The various cut-off points suggested were informed by considerations associated with the perceived cognitive and social abilities of children of different ages. For example, it was questioned whether younger (primary aged) children would understand what was involved in taking part and whether they would be able to ask questions about it. They also suggested that once you are at secondary school you feel ‘more responsible’, while another view was that age 12 was an appropriate cut off because this is the age that ‘you start thinking for yourself’. Another consideration was parents’ obligations with respect to children of different ages – one view was that parents need to know what children are doing until they are 16 because they can be blamed if anything goes wrong.
Where the interview is held

Views on when parents should or should not be involved in decisions about children taking part in surveys also varied depending on the location of the survey interview. One view was that school is the child or young person’s domain - if the survey is taking place in that context, the child’s right to decide should therefore take precedence over that of the parents. On the other hand, it was suggested that if the survey was at home, parents might need to have a greater say in the final decision. Parents ‘pay the bills’, and therefore it was felt they should have greater rights of control over what happens in the home. The fact that in-home surveys involve ‘a stranger’ coming to the house was also mentioned as a reason parents would need to have a say.

Interview topic

Children and young people raised the issue of who should have a say where the topic is ‘personal’ or sensitive. Several quite different suggestions were made about the implications of this. One view was that if the survey was about something ‘personal’ – examples of which included a family’s religion, their lifestyle, family issues or bullying – then parents should be more involved in the final decision. This was sometimes related to concerns about children sharing information with the interviewer. It was suggested that parents might not be happy about their child divulging ‘personal’ information (for example, about drugs) to a stranger. They might also be concerned their child would disclose information about home or family life or ‘say something bad’ about the parents. It was also sometimes related to parental ‘rights of control’ – for example, it was suggested that parents should have a say if they are unhappy about a child disclosing personal information ‘because they’ve brought us up and they should know that about us as well’ (Female participant, Year 8).

However, the opposite view was also expressed – that if a survey is on a ‘personal’ topic the decision to participate or not should be left to the individual taking part. In these situations, it was suggested some children might not want their parents to know about the survey at all. In relation to bullying, one view was that children might not want their parents to know about the study in case they became worried.

A third view was that the topic makes no difference - there are no topics where the parent should have the final say.

Order of consultation

Even if there is agreement that both parents and children need to be consulted about participation in a survey, the best order in which to do this remains an open question. Participants discussed arguments for consulting the child or young person first, the parent first, and for asking them together. Perceived reasons that researchers might want to ask the child or young person first were: that they are the ones who will actually have to do the survey; that if parents are asked first they might make a decision without consulting the young person (as in clip 1); and that there is no need to bother the parent if their child does not want to take part. It was suggested that whether it was appropriate to ask the parent first depended on the family situation – if parents would involve their child in the decision, one view was that they would prefer their parents to be informed about the survey first so that they could discuss it and decide together. One suggestion was that researchers should send a letter via the young person that has to be passed to the parent to sign, so that it is clear that both have been involved in the decision.
2.3.3 Factors influencing children’s decision to take part

Assuming ‘passive’ parental consent is given (or is not required), the onus in most social research shifts to gaining ‘active’ consent from the child – that is, they must decide whether they want to take part in the research or not. In this section, we discuss the key factors that children thought might affect whether or not children decide to take part in surveys, before summarising the kinds of information they would like to help them make this decision.

The salience of the topic

The salience of the topic to young participants is an important factor affecting whether children will want to take part in surveys. Comments reflected concerns both about how interesting the topic was and concerns that they might not know enough to take part. It was suggested both that they might not take part in studies that did not interest them and that there was ‘no point’ in taking part in a survey about something you do not know about. This was discussed explicitly in relation to a study about drugs:

‘Cos drugs have nothing to do with me, I don’t – I would have nothing to say about them.’
(Female participant, Year 10)

Perceived value of the research

Another key factor that might influence the decision to participate is belief about the likely value of the research. In particular, children mentioned wanting to know whether the research would ‘change’ or ‘improve’ things, either for themselves or for other people. We found some evidence to suggest that some children may expect to benefit personally from participating in research. For example, discussion among primary children about whether or not they would want to take part in a survey about bullying led to the suggestion that doing so might help you, as the survey would tell the bully how it felt and ‘they might stop them’.

In addition to any ideas about personal benefit, the idea that surveys might change things for the better was clearly seen as one reason why someone might decide to participate. Indeed, the fact a particular survey was used to improve a service was mentioned as something that had made taking part ‘quite good’. However, when challenged on whether research had to have a direct impact in terms of improving things for the participant or for other people, two views emerged. One view was that surveys are only worth participating in if the results are going to be used to improve things. On the other hand, it was suggested that research aimed at increasing knowledge in general was worth participating in too, because it helped someone ‘to see it from your point of view as well as others’ (Female participant, Year 8). On a related note, the fact that participating allows you to express your views was seen as a reason for taking part – for example, a previous survey experience was described as ‘quite good, because we could like express our views on our own local area’ (Female participant, Year 8).

Finally, it was suggested that participating in a survey might be ‘a good thing’ in itself. The survey being fun and helping participants to learn things were mentioned as important considerations in whether they would take part or not.
Beliefs about confidentiality

Children's comments suggested that beliefs about confidentiality could have an important impact on the decision to take part in a survey or not. The reassurances about confidentiality made by the researcher at the start of the focus groups were referred to as making participants ‘feel more safe’ in taking part. Children discussed the information they would want about where their answers would go. Their comments suggest that some children and young people may want quite a lot of detail about data use and security. For example, while it is commonplace for researchers to provide reassurances that no one outside a research organisation will have access to an individual’s data, another concern was that ‘everyone could just read it in the company … and see who you are’ (Male participant, Year 8).

Feeling comfortable about the interviewer

Children and young people expressed a desire to find out details about the specific interviewer who would be speaking to them before deciding whether or not to take part. One aspect of this was a desire for proof that the organisation and the interviewer were ‘professional’. It was suggested that interviewers should carry business cards and that potential participants should be given information about the organisation to show their parents to check they are happy with them taking part in a study for that organisation. A second aspect related to information about the personal characteristics of the interviewer. Children mentioned that they might want to know the age or gender of the interviewer or other characteristics such as ‘whether they speak soft or rough’ (Female participant, Year 3).

Preferences about interviewer age and gender were only discussed in the secondary groups. Although children did not indicate that they would necessarily refuse to participate if an interviewer was the ‘wrong’ gender, their comments indicated that interviewer gender might influence their decision. Girls and boys expressed somewhat different views on interviewer gender. Among girls, a recurrent theme was that (depending on the topic) they might prefer a female interviewer as they found women ‘less threatening’, ‘more personal’, ‘easier to talk to’ and ‘softer’ and they would therefore feel ‘more comfortable’ being interviewed by a woman. Among boys, more divergent viewpoints emerged. One idea was that a male interviewer might have a better understanding of what boys are saying and would see their responses ‘from a man’s point of view’. Another was that a female interviewer might be preferable (for similar reasons to those given by the girls), while another view was that interviewer gender makes no difference.

In relation to interviewers’ age, it was suggested that younger interviewers might be better able to relate to young participants, since they share similar life experiences. One view was that this might help participants where the questions were more personal (see Section 4.2.3 for examples of the kinds of things children considered ‘personal’). However, it was also suggested that young people might not want their interviewer to understand everything they were feeling, since this might be embarrassing or upsetting.

Do you have to take part?

Children and young people mentioned wanting to know ‘whether you’ll be allowed to choose to do it or not’ before deciding whether to take part in a survey. Not feeling pressured and knowing that you do not have to say anything you do not want to were both mentioned as factors that might positively affect the decision to take part in a survey.
Confidence and ‘feeling special’

Finally, it was suggested that children and young people’s own confidence may be an important factor in whether they take part in surveys or not – if they are shy they might not want to. Further, the fact that a child or young person has been chosen for a research project might in itself motivate them to take part. It was suggested that the fact you have been selected means people think you are capable of doing it, which could encourage you, and that being chosen can make you feel ‘special’.

2.3.4 Information needs

We asked children and young people what kinds of information they might want to know to help them decide whether or not to take part in a survey. Encouragingly for us as researchers, most of the types of information identified by the children reflected suggestions often made in existing best practice guidance. The kinds of information discussed fell into three broad categories, as follows:

1. Background about the survey
   - The purpose of the research (Why are we doing it? Will it change things?)
   - Who is it for?
   - What is it about?
   - Who is doing the interview? (information about the organisation and interviewer)
   - Who else is taking part? (age range of participants, how many people, and will their friends be doing it?)
   - Do you have to take part?

2. Practical arrangements
   - What you will be asked to do?
   - Where will the interview take place?
   - When will it happen?
   - How long will it take?
   - Who else will be there during the interview?

3. What will happen to their answers?
   - Will they be confidential?

Children and young people were also asked how they would prefer to receive information about a survey. Here, it is worth bearing in mind that their comments may have been influenced by how we provided information about our (qualitative) study. Potential participants were provided with both written information (in leaflet form – see Appendix B) and a face-to-face explanation of the study by a member of the research team. In this context, it is unsurprising that most of the discussion about different formats focused on the relative advantages and disadvantages of face-to-face versus written information giving.

Face-to-face delivery of information was consistently preferred to written leaflets for a number of reasons. It was seen as being ‘more personal’ and as allowing potential participants to ask questions. It was suggested that personal briefings ‘forced’ people to listen and were a better way of engaging their interest and attention. Finally, it was suggested that personal contact with the researcher helps potential participants to see that it is a genuine study being conducted by a bona fide organisation. Leaflets, in contrast, were seen as easy to ignore or throw away. It was also felt that written information sometimes ‘doesn’t go in’.
Children were asked what would be an acceptable way of delivering information about a survey if the researcher could not do face-to-face briefings. It was thought that involving teachers in explaining the research in combination with a leaflet about it might be alright. The style of the leaflet was felt to be important – it should avoid lots of small writing and should be colourful. Other formats for delivering information mentioned by children were business cards (to prove the interviewer is a professional), websites and posters.

2.4 Discussion

In this section, we reflect on some of the key findings from this chapter and their potential implications for survey researchers.

2.4.1 Order of asking parents and children

A common message from the children and young people we spoke to was that they would not be happy if their parents decided against their participation without consulting them. This raises the question of whether there are arguments for informing children and young people and their parents about research in tandem, encouraging them to discuss any concerns they have with each other. However, while this approach may have advantages in terms of ensuring children are included in the consent process from the outset, it does have the potential to create problems in terms of disappointed expectations for children whose parents subsequently opt them out.

2.4.2 Information about the consent process

Whatever the order in which parents and children are asked for consent, discussion in this chapter also highlights the need to explain the consent process and the reasons for asking for parental consent very clearly (something researchers perhaps do not always convey as well as they could). This is particularly important given the findings that some young people may not accept the rationale for obtaining passive parental consent up to the age of 16, or that they may not want their parents to know about surveys on specific topics.

2.4.3 Information for parents

Concerns about the negative effects of taking part, as well as concern about whether participating is 'safe' were raised as reasons a parent might refuse consent for a child to take part in a survey. Although we may feel that taking part in a survey only rarely has the potential to create these kinds of adverse consequences, these findings do highlight the importance of providing clear information about research to parents to avoid any misconceptions about the risks, as well as providing clear routes for them to raise queries or find out more about the study if they do have concerns.

2.4.4 Involving parents in decisions about surveys on ‘personal’ topics

Another key finding, which is echoed in other chapters in this report, is that while the topic of the survey clearly has an important bearing on children and young people’s attitudes to parental say in the consent process, in practice it is very difficult to draw categoric conclusions about appropriate procedures. As researchers, we need to be sensitive to the fact that the same topic may be viewed quite differently by different children and young people – either as a reason they would want their parents to be involved in the decision, or as a reason they would not want them to have any say at all.
2.4.5 Conveying the value of research to potential participants

There is some debate among researchers over whether or not studies involving children and young people must directly benefit either the participants or other young people before they can be considered worthwhile. One view, advocated by Schenk and Williamson (2005), is that:

‘If the information-gathering activity will not directly benefit the children and adolescents involved or their community, do not proceed.’

However, it is arguable that the benefits of research may sometimes be less direct or tangible than Schenk’s and Williamson’s model allows. For example, providing information about children’s views may in the longer term help to change attitudes among policy-makers and others (as suggested by Alderson and Morrow, 2004), but it may be difficult (if not impossible) to link these changes to specific individual studies.

Our findings suggest that children and young people themselves do place a high degree of importance on the ‘usefulness’ of research, although they may also be divided over how direct this impact need be, and whether sometimes advancing knowledge may be a good enough justification for research. The desire to know what the impact of a project will be poses problems for researchers, given that we may not be able to predict in advance what, if any, tangible impact a particular study will have. Moreover, comments from primary children that a survey about bullying might directly help those who are being bullied serve as a reminder of the dangers of ‘over-promising’ on what research can deliver. While it is clearly important that we do adequately convey why we think the survey will be useful, researchers should be very aware of the possibility of creating ‘false’ or ‘heightened’ expectations when explaining its possible uses and benefits to children and young people.

Further, although the wider purpose of the research may be a very important factor for some children and young people in their decision to take part or not, we found that the research task in itself may sometimes be perceived as beneficial or fun. Perhaps as researchers we could sometimes make more of the possible attractions of taking part in itself.

2.4.6 Reassurances that no special knowledge is needed

The finding that some children may have concerns about whether they will know enough about the topic to take part in a particular survey reinforces the need for researchers to be very clear that no special knowledge is needed to take part in surveys and that ‘don’t know’ is a valid response (also discussed in Chapter 4). It also reinforces the need to ensure that our questionnaires do, in fact, cater to participants with different levels of knowledge and experience of an issue, as well as highlighting the importance of conveying that we do want to hear from people who may have less strong opinions or less experience.

2.4.7 Information about confidentiality

Our findings on the level of detail that some children may want regarding who will see their answers suggest that researchers could be more explicit about exactly how identifiable information is stored and who has access to it, including within their organisation. Of course this would need to be accompanied by reassurances about how such data would, and would not, be used by those who do have access to it.
2.4.8 **Interviewer characteristics**

The personal characteristics of an interviewer is the one area identified in the focus groups that researchers do *not* commonly provide information on in advance of a survey. However, providing personal details about interviewers in advance of an interview, like their age and gender, could be problematic. The age or gender of an interviewer might put off a potential participant where in fact, had they met them, they might have found that the interviewers' ability to build rapport overcame these 'obstacles'. Moreover, many of the characteristics that children valued in interviewers of a particular gender or age (being easy to talk to, being 'less threatening', etc.) are not characteristics people possess as a biological consequence of being female/male or young, for example. Rather, they are behaviours or attributes that any good interviewer may possess or develop.

2.4.9 **Reassurances about voluntary nature of research**

The finding that not feeling pressured to take part may, for some children, make it easier for them to decide to participate reinforces existing good practice guidance on reassuring young (and older) participants about the voluntary nature of taking part in research. It also reflects the finding reported in a recent NatCen study exploring adults' attitudes to taking part in research studies, that 'the absence of a perceived pressure to take part was a positive facilitator of participation' (Graham et al., 2007). This appears to challenge the notion that there is necessarily a tension between emphasising the voluntary nature of research and obtaining good response rates.

2.5 **Key points**

- Views about both *who* should have a say in whether children take part in surveys and *how much weight* their views should be given varied depending on attitudes towards:
  1. the rights of children to make their own decisions;
  2. the rights of parents to control their children (and the types of information they disclose to others);
  3. parental duties to protect children from the (perceived) risks of taking part in research;
  4. the age of the child;
  5. where the interview is taking place (school vs home); and
  6. the topic of the survey.

- Parental rights of control were seen as weakening as children become older. However, there was no agreement over an appropriate cut-off age at which parents should no longer have the final say. One view was that this should be younger than 16 – the age most commonly cited in best practice guidelines as that at which parental consent is no longer necessary. Views about cut-offs were informed by beliefs about the cognitive and social abilities of children at different ages. Parents’ obligations with respect to children of different ages were also raised.

- Although survey topic was seen to have a bearing on parental involvement in consent, the exact nature of this was unclear. One view was that there was a greater argument for parents to be involved in decisions about participation in surveys on 'personal' topics, but the opposite view was also expressed.

- It was suggested that parents might need to be more involved in decisions about in-home compared with in-school surveys, since school is the child or young person's domain.

- A key message from the chapter is that children and young people may feel badly about consent procedures that they feel by-pass them. This needs to be considered carefully when researchers are deciding on the order of consultation (and may provide some support for seeking parental and child consent simultaneously) and how the consent process is explained to children and young people.
The purpose of the research is seen as a key factor influencing the decision to take part or not. This reinforces the need to convey why we think the research is important, although researchers also need to be aware of the possibility of creating ‘false’ or ‘heightened’ expectations by over-emphasising potential impacts.

The perceived salience of the topic may also affect children and young people’s decisions about whether or not they take part in surveys. There is a need to stress both the acceptability of ‘don’t know’ as an answer and the importance of hearing from people without strong opinions/specific experiences to encourage those who may feel they do not know enough about the topic to participate.

Reassurances about confidentiality can help children and young people feel the research is ‘safe’ to participate in. However, some children may want more detail about confidentiality and data use (e.g. who in the organisation will have access to identifiable data?) than researchers typically offer.

Various preferences around interviewer age, gender and other characteristics were discussed. While it is not possible to infer from the discussion that girls would necessarily always prefer female interviewers, for example, it may be worth considering whether we can do more to enable children and young people to request another interviewer if, for any reason, they do feel uncomfortable.

Rather than encouraging young people to opt out of surveys, knowing their participation was voluntary may encourage some children and young people to take part.

The types of information children wanted to help them make an informed decision about taking part in surveys largely reflect existing best practice guidance. Children and young people’s information needs fell into three categories: background about the research, information about practicalities and details of what will happen to their answers.

The children and young people to whom we spoke expressed a preference for receiving information face-to-face rather than in written form. Where the research team are unable to provide face-to-face briefings, it was suggested that involving teachers in introducing the research in combination with (well-designed) leaflets might be an acceptable alternative.
3 INCOMPLETE INFORMATION: ENDING INTERVIEWS EARLY, REFUSING QUESTIONS AND WITHDRAWING DATA AFTER AN INTERVIEW

3.1 Introduction

As the remit of this chapter is quite broad, this introductory section is divided into two. First we provide some background and outline what the chapter will cover with regard to ending interviews early and refusing to answer specific questions. We then come on to introduce the issue of withdrawing data after an interview.

3.1.1 Early endings and refusals

Researchers are agreed that participants should be free to refuse to answer any question, end an interview early or take a break at any time, for any reason and without explanation or fear of adverse consequences (see, for example, Alderson and Morrow, 2004:97, ESRC: 25). As indicated in Chapter 2, these rights are seen as representing an essential component of the information that researchers must communicate to potential participants when seeking informed consent (e.g. GCCS: 7, NCB: 3), and reinforce throughout the research process (e.g. Alderson and Morrow, 2004: 106, GCCS: 10). In addition, it is emphasised that researchers should be on the lookout for non-verbal signs that participants are uncomfortable or reluctant to continue throughout an interview, and, if necessary, inquire gently whether they are happy to go on (Alderson, 2004: 107).

Some participants may find it difficult to express a wish to refuse a question, take a break or end an interview completely. This may be particularly true for children, due to the power dynamics that tend to exist between adults and children, and the associations they may draw between the interview and other similar activities (e.g. tests) where answers to questions are required. For this reason, researchers need to consider how best to empower children and young people to express their wishes during an interview. For example, some researchers at the University of London's Thomas Coram Research Unit have tried equipping participants to signal such wishes non-verbally, by using a ‘traffic light’ system, where a yellow card is used to indicate that the participant does not wish to answer a particular question and a red card to indicate that he or she wishes to end the interview (Knight et al., 2006: 6).

3.1.2 Withdrawing data after the interview

The question of whether it is acceptable, or even feasible, for participants to request that all or some of the information they have provided be withdrawn from a study dataset is also addressed in this chapter. In comparison to the related issues of ending interviews early and refusing specific questions, this question receives little attention in the literature on research ethics.8

The code of ethics from the Glasgow Centre for the Child and Society states that researchers should inform prospective participants about ‘who owns the data’ but does not suggest who this might be (Glasgow Centre for the Child and Society: 14). The ESRC RESPECT code of practice addresses issues around intellectual property rights and plagiarism, making the following statement:

‘Lack of permission for a given use is considered as theft of intellectual property. Even if material, including data, sources, information or ideas drawn from the work of others, is not protected by copyright, it should be identified as third parties’ material.’

(RESPECT, 2004: 4)
But does this ethical principle extend to research participants’ responses? If a participant requests the withdrawal of some or all of their responses from a survey dataset, are researchers ethically obliged to comply? Let us imagine that they are. This clearly has implications for research practice. Researchers should be communicating this right to participants. In addition, there may be practical challenges. While it would seem relatively straightforward to remove some or all of a participant’s answers from a survey dataset during analysis, what happens if such a request is made once a report has been published? Could there be time limitations on participants ‘ownership’ of the data?

3.1.3 Chapter structure

In this chapter, we look in detail at the reasons why the children and young people thought a participant might wish to end an interview early; the perceived feasibility of doing this; and the strategies they thought they might use to do it. We also present their views about why a survey participant might refuse to answer a specific question, and how they would feel about doing this.

We then go on to present the suggestions of the children and young people we spoke to about the reasons why someone might wish to withdraw data. We also explore their views on whether data withdrawal ought to be allowed and the factors that they thought might influence them in deciding whether or not to request the withdrawal of some or all of their answers. We present children’s views on the role a survey interviewer should play in ensuring participants’ comfort during interviews, and empowering them to end interviews early, refuse questions or withdraw data if they so wish.

The chapter ends with a ‘discussion’ section, where we reflect on some of the key implications of our findings for survey practice.

3.2 Details of stimulus

We used two video clips to stimulate discussion about these issues in our focus groups.

The first illustrated a child wanting to end the interview early.

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8 While our focus group discussions were limited to data withdrawal, it is worth noting that very similar issues arise in relation to the question of whether participants ought to be allowed to change their answers after the event – a question similarly neglected in the literature.

9 The focus of this discussion is on quantitative research. There may be additional concerns in relation to qualitative data, such as whether removing part of the data provided destroys the integrity of the whole, and the analysis implications of removing one participant’s contributions from focus group data.
**LOCATION:** The Interviewer and Emily/Tom are sitting at a table in Emily’s/Tom’s Home. The Interviewer is asking Emily/Tom questions and typing his/her answers into a laptop computer.

**Interviewer:** …right, thank you very much for that. Now, I’d like to ask you some questions about what there is to do in your local area.

**Emily/Tom:** (looking a bit tired, glancing at his watch) OK.

**Interviewer:** In the last month, how many times have you been to the cinema?

**Emily/Tom:** (not very interested) Err…about twice.

**Interviewer:** (types answer into computer) And in the last month, how many times have you been to a sports or leisure centre?

**Emily/Tom:** About eight times.

**Interviewer:** And which, if any, of these things have you done in the last month: gone to watch some sport, been to see a play, been to a gig or concert, visited an art gallery, been to a dance or music group, played sport as part of a sports club, done some voluntary or charity work, or gone to a youth club?

**Emily/Tom:** Umm.. I played football. I think that’s it.

**Interviewer:** OK. That’s “played sport”. Right (types answer into computer). And how often did you play sport in the last month? Did you play every day, most days, about once a week, or did you play less often than that?

**Emily/Tom:** I played most days.

*The interviewer continues asking questions. His voice fades out and we can hear Emily’s/Tom’s thoughts as a voiceover.*

**Voiceover:** I’m getting fed up with this. Why does he need to ask all these questions? I’m not sure I even understand all of them. I’m not sure if I want to carry on….

We used a further video clip to stimulate discussion of data withdrawal among the children and young people in our focus groups.
LOCATION: Emily/Tom and the Interviewer are seated at the table. The Interviewer is packing up his laptop computer.

Interviewer: (zips up laptop bag) ... Thanks, that was very helpful. It's been really nice meeting you. Bye now (leaves).

Emily/Tom: Bye.

Emily/Tom walks into another room and sits on the sofa next to her/his Mother.

Mother: So, how was that?
Emily/Tom: (shrugs) It was OK.
Mother: You don't seem very happy. What's the matter?
Emily/Tom: No... it's OK...
Mother: Didn't you enjoy it?
Emily/Tom: No, it's just... I think I might've said some stuff...
Mother: What stuff?
Emily/Tom: I dunno, just stuff. Do you… if I wanted to, do you think I could change what I said or tell him to take it out, or whatever?
Mother: (thinking) Oh. I don't know.

3.3 Children and young people's views

3.3.1 Reasons for wanting to end an interview early

The participant in the video clip indicated that s/he was feeling 'fed up' during the interview. There was also some suggestion that s/he was experiencing discomfort caused by not understanding all the questions. We acknowledged this and asked the children and young people to discuss the range of reasons why a participant might want to end a survey interview. The reasons they identified fell into three broad categories: 'the interviewer', 'the interview' and 'the questions'. These are now presented in turn. There are further reflections on their implications in the 'discussion' section towards the end of the chapter.

The interviewer

It was felt that the interviewer's behaviour or characteristics could cause a child or young person to want to end an interview early. This might be because he or she was 'a stranger', unfriendly or 'scaring you'. One participant mentioned that she might not be able to understand what the interviewer was saying if he or she came from a different country, and this would make her feel uneasy. As discussed in Chapter 2, there was a sense that some participants might be happier talking to an interviewer of the same gender – this was seen as applying particularly to girls because women were felt by girls as being 'more personal' and 'share problems', although it was also mentioned that boys might prefer a male interviewer who could 'look at it from a man’s point-of-view'. However, not all children felt that interviewer gender was important:

'It doesn’t matter really. It’s just a person.'
(Male participant, Year 8)
Children also thought that discomfort could be caused by the interviewer’s style of questioning. In particular, they felt that a participant might want to end an interview if the questions were asked in an aggressive or demanding way, putting them under pressure to answer quickly:\(^{10}\)

‘if they [...] sort of, they weren't very friendly and they were asking these questions not very well and just saying them and then going onto the next one and not talking about how you felt and everything.’

‘Yeah and they might like tell you to hurry up and sort of like tense you and you don’t really want to say anything.’

(Male participants, Year 5)

*The interview*

Children felt that they might want to end an interview if it was too long or longer than they had expected. Another reason could be that the interview was ‘boring’, less interesting than expected or tiresome. One participant expressed this simply as ‘too much talking’. It was also suggested that participants might want to end an interview because they would rather be doing something else with the time, such as ‘important things’ or ‘Playstation’.

It was notable that the children and young people we spoke to saw taking a short break from a survey interview both as an alternative to ending the interview altogether and as providing an opportunity for a participant to think about whether or not to end it.

*The questions*

Children felt that questions requiring information that was too ‘private’ or ‘personal’ might make them feel uncomfortable in an interview. Examples of question topics mentioned in this context were asking about your parents’ jobs or relationship, and asking your weight. It was also felt that you might not want to answer a question that upset you because you would not want to show this in front of the interviewer. As mentioned in Chapter 2, children referred to a wide range of topics as sensitive or personal in different contexts during our focus groups. The implications of this will be explored further in the ‘discussion’ sections of this chapter and Chapter 4.

In some cases, concerns about the nature or topic of questions were linked with concerns about confidentiality and how the information provided might be used. Children identified that children or young people might feel uncomfortable in an interview situation if they were worried about somebody finding out their answers, for example if they felt that a bully might be able to find out the answers given in a survey about bullying. In other cases, however, the potential for discomfort appeared to be associated not with confidentiality, but just with a wish not to share certain information with the interviewer, for example about ‘what goes on in your family and your house’.

Children felt that they might not want to answer questions that seemed irrelevant to the topic. They also felt that they might become uncomfortable or ‘embarrassed’ during an interview if they found the questions difficult to answer and were concerned that they might give a ‘wrong’ answer or have difficulty expressing what they meant.

3.3.2 *The feasibility of ending interviews early*

Having discussed the reasons why they might want to end a survey interview early, the children and young people were asked to discuss how easy they thought it might be to do this. A number of barriers to ending an interview early were identified, falling under the three key headings of ‘expression’, ‘interviewer reaction’ and ‘guilt’. These are now presented in turn.

\(^{10}\) Conducting the interview at an unpressurised pace, allowing the participant time to think, is also identified as a key dimension of ethical research in Graham et al., 2007: 6.
**Expression**

The children and young people we spoke to felt that some participants might find it difficult to express their wish to end the interview early. They felt that participants might feel ‘shy’ or ‘embarrassed’, perhaps because the interviewer was unfamiliar. In addition, it was felt that it could be difficult to find a polite way of saying that you wanted to stop, particularly if the reason was boredom rather than, for example, feeling scared or feeling uncomfortable answering the questions:

‘It’s harder to say that you’re bored with something, because you can’t really put it in a polite way, so you just don’t want to say anything.’

(Female participant, Year 10)

**Interviewer reaction**

Children identified that a further barrier was a child’s worry about the way an interviewer might react to a request to end an interview early. They said they might feel ‘worried’ or ‘frightened’ that the interviewer would be ‘angry’ or say that they were ‘wasting his time’. The extent to which a child or young person would worry about an interviewer’s reaction was seen as being related to the interviewer’s personality and characteristics:

‘Well it depends what the - who the person’s like. Like if they’re like really like a warm person to talk to and stuff, it would be easier to like tell them. If it was like someone who you’d think would get like annoyed and stuff, like you’re letting them down, then maybe you’d leave it.’

(Female participant, Year 10)

This echoes the findings presented earlier regarding interviewer characteristics and behaviour possibly causing a participant to decide to end an interview early (Section 3.3.1).

**Guilt**

Feelings of guilt emerged as a key barrier to expressing a wish to end an interview early. Children felt that these could follow from a feeling that you would be ‘letting the interviewer down’ or ‘wasting their time’. Concerns were also expressed that you might ‘hurt their feelings’ or come across as ‘mean’ or ‘rude’. Underlying much of this discussion was the notion that, by taking part in the interview, the participant enters into an agreement to complete it which would be broken by asking to finish early. It was suggested that participants might feel particularly guilty if the survey was especially ‘important’, or if their reason for ending the interview was boredom rather than some more severe form of discomfort, such as feelings that the questions were too personal.

3.3.3 **Would you end an interview early?**

Children and young people were asked whether the barriers that they identified would ultimately prevent them from asking to end an interview early if they wanted to.

Among those children who could envisage themselves asking to end the interview, the strength of this conviction ranged from a clear feeling that they would do so to a sense that it might be difficult but that they would probably say something if they ‘really weren’t enjoying it’. However, the view was also expressed that:

‘most people would just like sit there and carry on even if they don’t want to’

(Female participant, Year 10)

The ‘importance’ of the survey and the participant’s reason(s) for wanting to end the interview were both mentioned in the previous section as factors influencing the extent to which participants might feel guilty about finishing early (note that the purpose and potential impacts of research, and their role in influencing participation, were also discussed in Chapter 2). Both came up again as potentially influencing the ultimate decision of whether or not to request an early finish. In terms of
the participant’s reason for wanting to request an early finish, it was suggested that the decision about whether to actually make the request might depend on an assessment of whether one’s reason was ‘good’ or ‘bad’: as before, an example of a ‘good’ reason was feeling the questions were too personal, while simply feeling ‘fed up’ was identified as a ‘bad’ reason. It was asserted that a participant who was just bored should be prepared to continue, at least for a while. In such circumstances, it was suggested that one might consider providing quick and partial answers in order to get the interview over with as quickly as possible, although it was also acknowledged that this might be ‘rude’.

3.3.4 Strategies for ending an interview early

Children suggested a number of ways they might go about ending a survey interview early. One view was that this would be relatively easy and straightforward:

‘I would just say I’m sorry but I don’t really feel comfortable doing this.’
(Male participant, Year 5)

Another strategy involved going to a parent, perhaps by making an excuse such as needing a drink, and asking them to tell the interviewer that you did not want to do it. Children also identified strategies for hinting to an interviewer that you wanted to end the interview, such as asking if you can just do the important questions or asking how much longer the interview will take. These mentions of indirect strategies re-emphasise that children and young people may need some convincing in regard to the acceptability of a straightforward request to end the interview early.

3.3.5 Refusing specific questions

Children’s views on refusing to answer specific questions were also explored in the focus groups.

Reasons for refusing

Three reasons were given why a child or young person might refuse to answer a specific question:

- Feeling that the question was too personal
- Not knowing the answer
- Not understanding the question.

Examples of ‘personal’ questions mentioned in this context were friends, parents and bullying.

The fact that not knowing the answer was identified as a reason for refusing to answer a question may reflect the fact that a clear distinction was not drawn between refusals and ‘don’t knows’ during the focus group discussions. However, it may also suggest that, in order to obtain fully accurate data, participants need to be encouraged to use ‘refuse’ and ‘don’t know’ appropriately.

Feasibility of refusing

Children’s views varied with regard to how comfortable they might feel about refusing to answer questions. One view was that this would be quite easy and straightforward, simply involving saying you do not want to answer or asking to ‘skip to the next question’. It was remarked that that this might depend on the participant’s ‘confidence’, and that the interviewer was unlikely to insist on them providing an answer if they did not wish to. However, another view was that refusing could be difficult:

‘If he asked you a question you really don’t want to answer then you might not want to sort of say anything.’
(Male participant, Year 5)
3.3.6 Reasons for withdrawing data after an interview

Children identified three reasons why someone might wish to withdraw data after an interview: ‘correction’, ‘confidentiality’ and ‘regret’. These will now be discussed in turn.

Correction

Children felt that a wish to withdraw data might arise if the participant came to believe that their original answer was incorrect or inaccurate. It was suggested that this might happen as a result of remembering something previously forgotten; changing your beliefs; or having been forced into giving an untrue or inaccurate answer during the interview, for example because somebody else was present (we will come on to discuss the potential effect on data quality of third party presence in Chapter 4).

Confidentiality

The second suggested reason for data withdrawal related to concerns about confidentiality. It was felt that a participant might wish to withdraw an answer that revealed something they would not want somebody (or anybody) else to know – examples of such answers included confessing to being a drug dealer or breaking a window. This concern was linked to the extent to which the participant believed what the interviewer had said about how their answers would be used.

Regret

Children felt it was possible that a wish to withdraw data might follow from feelings of regret about having shared something with the interviewer, maybe because it was private or personal or ‘made them look bad’. There was some debate, however, about whether such concerns could explain a wish to withdraw data in the absence of concerns about confidentiality. On one view, there was no reason to withdraw data unless you believed your answers would not be kept confidential. However, there was also a sense that someone might wish to withdraw something just because they felt uneasy about the interviewer knowing. For example they might want to withdraw information about something very private or personal, even if they did believe that it would not be passed on to anyone else. Of course, withdrawing data would not change the fact that the information had been shared with the interviewer in the first place, but there seemed to be a sense that it could bring a participant peace of mind regardless.

3.3.7 Should data withdrawal be allowed?

Where children felt that data withdrawal ought to be allowed, this was either presented as a straightforward rights-based argument or came with qualifications. For example, withdrawal should only be allowed if the participant genuinely believed that their original answer was ‘false’ (how the researcher might verify this was not discussed). It was also suggested that the acceptability of data withdrawal might depend on whether the interviewer had pressured or rushed the participant during the interview, or on whether the interviewer or somebody else had influenced their answers at the time. There was a feeling that, in the absence of such mitigating factors, the responsibility for giving honest answers and for not saying things they might later regret lay with individual participants.

Children and young people raised the issue of whether a participant’s right to withdraw data might be time-limited. One suggestion was that participants should be asked at the end of the interview whether they want to remove any of their answers, but that they should not be permitted to do so after that time. A survey interview was also likened to a school test, whereby pupils are allowed to change their answers up until the point at which the teacher starts to read the correct ones out. This suggests that one approach might be to have some kind of ‘cooling-off period’ after which a participant’s right to withdraw data expires.
3.3.8 Would you ask to withdraw data?

The following factors were identified as potential influences on a decision about whether or not to request data withdrawal.

- Whether you genuinely felt that your original answer was inaccurate. In this case, it was suggested that there might be good grounds for requesting that the data be withdrawn.

- Whether you trusted that your answers would be kept confidential. In one view, there would never be grounds for wanting to withdraw data you trust will be kept confidential.

- Whether doing so would bring you ‘peace of mind’. As mentioned earlier (Section 3.3.6), there was a sense that this could be a motivator even in the absence of concerns about confidentiality.

- The severity of the potential ramifications of somebody outside the research team finding out (this clearly assumes concerns about confidentiality). This view was illustrated with the drawing of a distinction between having told the interviewer you were dealing drugs and having told them that you had broken a window.

- Whether you feel comfortable contacting the researcher. In particular, the need to call a researcher on the telephone was identified as something that might make participants ‘nervous’. This clearly has implications that go beyond data withdrawal, in terms of providing a sufficient range of easy ways to contact researchers to opt out of studies, raise queries, and so on.

3.3.9 The interviewer’s role in ensuring participants’ comfort and empowerment

The children and young people were asked what an interviewer should do to ensure that a child or young person feels as comfortable as possible at all stages of their involvement in the survey research process. They were asked what the interviewer should do to support them feeling able to ask for an interview to end early; to take a break; to refuse a question; and – if applicable – to withdraw data should they wish to do so. Their responses fell into three key categories of ‘before the interview’, ‘during and after the interview’ and ‘re-phrasing and explaining’. Each of these will now be discussed in turn.

Before the interview

It was suggested that the information provided to the participant prior to the interview might play an important role in ensuring their comfort and empowerment. Saying what sorts of questions would be asked and an indication of the length and style of the interview were given as examples of the kinds of information that could be potentially useful:

‘He could have told him at the beginning that “there’s quite a few questions in this, so if you get bored just tell me.”’
(Female participant, Year 5)

The children and young people we spoke to also felt that it was important for the interviewer to communicate the participant’s rights in relation to finishing early, taking breaks, refusing questions and withdrawing data to them before starting the interview.

Finally, it was also suggested that an opportunity to meet the interviewer prior to the interview might provide reassurance, as participants’ comfort was perceived partly as the product of the interviewer’s characteristics and behaviour. As one participant put it, it is about:

‘the attitudes of the interviewer, like how they are and how they come across to you’
(Female participant, Year 10)
**During and after the interview**

Children felt that it could be helpful for interviewers to remind participants of their rights during the interview, particularly as it can be difficult to take in a lot of information at one time. However, it was also suggested that too many reminders might cause the participant to worry or even make them feel bad about asking to finish the interview, take a break or skip a particular question. This indicates that interviewers are required to achieve a delicate balance when judging how frequently to remind participants of their rights.\(^{11}\)

The children and young people we spoke to saw it as the interviewer’s responsibility to check that participants are happy to continue during the interview, by saying things like ‘are you OK?’ and ‘do you want to continue?’. Views on how frequently an interviewer ought to make these kinds of checks ranged from ‘a few times’ or ‘every now and then’ to after every question. Children also thought that it was the interviewer’s responsibility to watch out for any non-verbal signs of the participant being uncomfortable or upset, although it was noted that there might be limits to what an interviewer could intuit without the participant saying something.

It was seen as important that interviewers should provide participants with easy ways of contacting them after the interview in case they have any concerns about it later, including concerns leading to a wish to withdraw or change data.

**Re-phrasing and explaining questions**

Children felt that interviewers had an additional responsibility in terms of being prepared to explain, re-phrase and re-configure questions when participants have difficulty understanding what is being asked:

> ‘If he asked you a complicated question about life [such] as how many times do you do something then he ought to narrow it down to smaller parts and do it separately’
> (Male participant, Year 5)

This reflects the earlier findings that not understanding a question was seen as something that could lead participants to refuse to answer questions or to ask to end the interview early. We will reflect on the implications of these findings for survey practice in the ‘discussion’ section of this chapter.

**3.4 Discussion**

In this section, we reflect on three key respects in which the findings presented in this chapter appear to have particular implications for survey practice, namely:

- The measures that we take to empower children and young people to exercise their rights in relation to ending survey interviews early and refusing to answer specific questions.

- The measures that we take to avoid early finishes resulting from interviewer characteristics and behaviour; long or boring interviews; personal or irrelevant questions; or concerns about giving ‘wrong’ answers.

- The flexibility that survey interviewers ought to be allowed to provide explanation and clarification during interviews.

**3.4.1 Empowering children and young people to exercise their rights**

As stated in the introduction to this chapter, researchers have a responsibility to empower participants to exercise their rights during interviews. This is not just a matter of stating their rights

\(^{11}\) Graham et al., 2006: 20 report that adult participants also vary in regard to the frequency with which they prefer to receive information about a study. While some prefer a single ‘information event’ (sometimes finding repetition ‘irksome’), others prefer multiple reminders (NB this finding related to information in general, not solely about participants’ rights).
at the outset; rather, it requires researchers to enable and encourage participants to negotiate their participation actively throughout an interview. Of course, such principles are already widely acknowledged among researchers. However, our findings show that children and young people associate a number of difficulties with asking to end an interview early or refusing to answer a specific question. Thus it seems that fulfilling our responsibilities in this regard presents a considerable challenge.

It is also worth acknowledging here a potential tension between the ethical imperative to empower participants to exercise their rights and the research-related benefits of maximising the data collected from each participant. All researchers have an interest in individual participants providing as much useful data as possible. However, whereas purposively sampled (qualitative or quantitative) studies allow for substituting or supplementing participants who withdraw – albeit with significant cost and time implications – randomly sampled surveys do not. This by no means excuses those working on randomly sampled surveys from clearly communicating the participant’s rights in relation to information control. It may, however, affect the degree of emphasis one deems it reasonable to apply to such communications. Researchers are required to make delicate judgements in this regard. Moreover, the relationship between the efforts made by researchers to emphasise participants’ rights in terms of information control and the likelihood of their providing full data may not be straightforward. Recent evidence based on interviews with adult participants suggests that communicating the voluntary nature of research participation can have a positive, rather than a negative, effect on participants’ propensity to provide full data:

‘Reassurance that giving information was voluntary also seemed to remove a feeling of the need to exert control over the level of information giving, and to some extent to disinhibit control. Participants seem to base symbolic value on the reassurance that they can withhold information which in turn seems to cause them to relax and feel safe to give any information.’

(Graham et al., 2007)

3.4.2 Avoiding early endings

While it is imperative that children and young people feel able to end a survey interview early if they so wish, it is worth reflecting on what we, as researchers and interviewers, might do to avoid such wishes arising. In this section, we revisit the reasons the children and young people identified why a participant might want to end an interview early, and reflect on their implications for practice.

Interviewer characteristics, recruitment and training

Children felt that an interviewer’s characteristics – such as their gender or accent – might make a child or young person feel uncomfortable during a survey interview. As discussed in Chapter 2, children’s views on interviewer characteristics do not appear to suggest any general rules for interviewer-participant ‘matching’. While there was some indication that girls tend to be more comfortable being interviewed by women, this cannot be assumed, and preferences among boys were rather more variable. Nor do these findings clearly support a case for offering participants information about their interviewer’s characteristics prior to interview or giving them the chance to request someone different. As mentioned in Chapter 2, such measures have the potential to encourage children or young people to reject an interviewer for rather superficial reasons with whom they might in practice have built up a good rapport. In addition, to do so could raise ethical concerns – for example, if we are going to let participants select their interviewer on grounds of gender, will we let them do the same on grounds of race or ethnicity?

Proper conduct, on the other hand, is clearly key in ensuring participants’ comfort. Children said they might feel uncomfortable if an interviewer was unfriendly, and stressed the importance of interviewing style, in particular the need to be free from undue pressure to respond quickly during interviews. These findings emphasise the need to recruit suitable interviewers, train them thoroughly and support their ongoing development to ensure that they are equipped with the
required interpersonal as well as technical skills. Interviewers working with children or young people may require additional or specific kinds of support.

**Long or boring interviews**

The issue of participants wanting to end interviews early because they find them too long or boring highlights the importance of good questionnaire design, but also raises questions about the degree of flexibility required in administering surveys. Given that, above a certain threshold, researchers have an interest in collecting some data rather than none, an argument could be made for enabling interviewers to opt to undertake a specified shorter version of the interview, wherein some lower-priority questions would be bypassed, in order to ensure that as many high-priority questions as possible are answered.

**Having better things to do**

The children and young people we spoke to also said that they might decide to end an interview early because they would rather do something else with their time. This highlights the importance of giving serious consideration to the potential costs and benefits (to participants and others) of carrying out the research before embarking on it, so that you are satisfied that it is an ethically justifiable activity. Once you have embarked on your study, such problems can be minimised by making participation as fun and stimulating as possible for children and young people. Keeping interviews short, as well as using a range of stimulus materials and interactive elements, can achieve much in this regard.

**Personal or irrelevant questions**

The issue of whether some questions might be perceived as ‘too personal’ by participants was raised in Chapter 2. The finding that this could be one reason why a child or young person would decide to end an interview early re-emphasises the importance of conveying to participants that they are free to refuse any question they are asked. The wide range of topics mentioned as potentially ‘too personal’ also highlights the challenges that researchers face in terms of deciding what can and cannot be asked in survey questionnaires, and judging where to make use of design measures that can help interviewers ask sensitive questions in a less intrusive way (e.g. contextual pre-ambles, coded showcards).

The fact that irrelevance was raised as a potential reason for ending an interview early suggests that interviewers should equip participants to question the reasons for asking particular questions if these are not clear. In practice this means conveying to the participant at the outset that it is perfectly acceptable to ask this, and supplying a phrase with which to do it (e.g. “why are you asking me that?”) if necessary. This is particularly important as those questions which may seem most irrelevant to participants, e.g. those collecting demographic information, may in fact be among the most important in a survey questionnaire, and researchers therefore have a strong interest in encouraging participants to answer them. This also implies, of course, that researchers need to equip interviewers to respond to any queries concerning relevance when they arise.

**Concerns about giving ‘wrong’ answers**

Children also said that they might choose to end an interview early if they found questions difficult to answer or became concerned about giving ‘wrong’ answers. This highlights the importance of emphasising that there are no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ answers in research interviews. However, it also

12 Graham et al., 2006: 28 found that interviewer behaviour was central to participants’ experience of research.
13 Contextual pre-ambles can help reassure participants in various regards, including the reason for asking the question and the anticipated responses (e.g. ‘Some people have said that they often argue with their parents, even though they generally get on will with them. How often do you argue with your parents…?’). Showcards displaying a code for each pre-set answer can enable participants to give the code rather than say the full answer verbatim, avoiding embarrassment. If the interviewer can only see the codes on the screen and not the verbatim answers, letting the participant know this can provide additional reassurance.
14 Question relevance is identified as a key element of ethical research in Graham et al., 2006: 6.
reminds us to question the extent to which this commonly made assertion is true in relation to our individual studies.

Where researchers are genuinely not seeking ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ answers from participants (e.g. when asking attitudinal questions), the simple message here is that we must work hard to convince participants of this, prior to the interview and where appropriate thereafter. However, it could be argued that there are sometimes exceptions to this rule, i.e. some areas in which sometimes we do want right answers, for example when asking about the nature and frequency of experiences or behaviours. For example, imagine we ask participants how many bananas they have eaten in the last week. Of course, there is not a ‘right’ answer to this question in terms of a right number of bananas to have eaten. However, there does seem to be a ‘right’ answer insofar as there is an accurate answer, i.e. we would like them to tell us the number of bananas they have actually eaten, rather than any other number. Requiring this latter type of ‘rightness’ would also seem to have the potential to cause discomfort for a participant.

Where this is the case, some clarification of the assurance that ‘there are no rights or wrongs’ would seem to be required. In addition, researchers should consider whether other measures could be taken to prevent such questions causing anxiety for participants. For example, in a question about frequency, it might help to say something like ‘if you don’t know exactly how often you do X, just give me your best guess’, or offer several options and ask which comes closest.

3.4.3 Flexibility for interviewers to explain and clarify

The children and young people identified that not understanding a question might lead them to refuse to answer it, or lead to discomfort which could culminate in a request to end the interview early. This highlights the importance of good questionnaire design and testing to ensure that questions can be easily and accurately comprehended. However, we also discovered that children saw re-phrasing and explaining questions as a part of the interviewer’s role in ensuring the participant’s comfort and empowerment. This finding – along with the fact that some participants will struggle to understand even the most well designed question - raises important questions regarding survey administration.

At present, in order to ensure consistency between interviews, survey interviewers are usually instructed to read out the questions exactly as they are written on the paper or computer screen. While additional explanatory interviewer notes are sometimes provided, they tend to be limited, and this can leave interviewers in a dilemma if a participant requests clarification. On the one hand, the interviewer might attempt to provide explanation or clarification unguided (which may be incorrect) whilst, on the other, they may be unable or refuse to clarify. This dilemma reflects a trade-off between consistency and complete data, which researchers may need to confront. Researchers may need to consider whether interviewers should be given more comprehensive explanatory notes on question content (possibly within the interview program) to enable them to explain and clarify questions to participants. Again, this may have broader implications for interviewer training and recruitment.

3.5 Key points

- The children and young people we spoke to felt that in some circumstances it might be preferable to have an interviewer of a certain gender, or with other specific characteristics, such as an accent they could understand. This raises the question of whether participants should be offered the opportunity to request an alternative interviewer, which appears to have potential advantages and disadvantages.

- Children emphasised the interviewer’s style of questioning as a factor influencing their comfort in the interview situation, e.g. being allowed to think about and respond to questions in their

15 Note that adults have also been found to appreciate interviewers explaining and clarifying questions where necessary, (Graham et al., 2006: 30).
own time, without undue pressure. This highlighted the importance of careful selection and training of interviewers.

- A long or boring interview was also identified as a possible cause of discomfort, raising the question of whether it should be made possible for interviewers to shorten or speed up interviews by focusing on the most important questions only.

- Children felt that questions that were ‘too personal’ or seemed irrelevant to the topic could give rise to a desire to end the interview early. The latter point suggests that participants should be encouraged to query the reasons for asking certain questions, and that interviewers should be equipped to deal with such queries.

- A number of barriers to ending interviews early were identified and grouped under the three headings of ‘expression’, ‘interviewer reaction’ and ‘guilt’. This highlighted the importance of conveying to participants their rights in this regard. However, we also noted that there might be a tension between this ethical imperative and the research-related benefits of encouraging participants to complete interviews, particularly in relation to randomly sampled surveys.

- Concerns about giving ‘wrong’ answers were mentioned in relation to both ending interviews early and refusing specific questions. This highlights the importance of conveying to participants that there are no right or wrong answers to research questions. However, we also pointed out that researchers need to question the truth of this assertion before making it.

- Children felt that they might refuse to answer a specific question if they did not understand it. They also felt that interviewers had a responsibility to explain, re-phrase or re-configure complex questions if requested. Both of these findings suggest that survey interviewers may require more flexibility in terms of question wording and structure than they typically have at present.

- Children identified three key reasons why a participant might wish to withdraw data after a survey interview: to correct it; because of concerns about confidentiality, or due to feelings of regret. There was a sense that withdrawing data that one regretted sharing with the interviewer, e.g. because it was personal or ‘made you look bad’, could bring peace of mind even if the participant did believe that their answers would be kept confidential.

- Children felt that the legitimacy of data withdrawal depended on the reason for requesting it. Believing an answer to be incorrect or inaccurate was generally seen as providing the strongest grounds for requesting data withdrawal.

- It was suggested that the scope of data withdrawal could be limited in various ways, for example by stating that the whole interview will have to be discarded if parts of it were withdrawn, or by specifying a time period outside of which requests for data withdrawal will not be considered.
4 PRIVACY AND PRESENCE OF OTHERS DURING SURVEY INTERVIEWS

4.1 Introduction

Is it acceptable - or even desirable - for somebody else to be present in the same room during a survey interview with a child or young person?

It is of course important to take all reasonable measures to create a comfortable and non-intimidating environment for participants and, for some, being alone with an interviewer may not be conducive to this. As Alderson, 2004 notes:

‘Young children can be more scared about being left with strangers than about research interventions.’ (Alderson, 2004: 63)

However, the presence of others – be they parents, other adults, friends, siblings or anyone – also runs the risk of influencing a participant’s responses. Thus, the presence of others can be a concern from a research point-of-view, as it may affect the quality of the data provided. In addition, it is important to note that some participants may prefer to be interviewed in private.

The existing literature on this topic highlights and reinforces this dilemma. Views vary between researchers, reflecting a range of factors including the nature of the studies they are undertaking and their own backgrounds and organisational contexts, as the following quotations illustrate:

‘Children and adults must be provided with the opportunity to have a support person present during all personal contact with the researcher, if they wish.’ (Glasgow Centre for the Child and Society: 12)

‘In general it is inappropriate to spend excessive time with children away from others.’ (Save The Children: 67)

‘It is not normally necessary for the responsible adult to be present during the interview. Where their presence would be undesirable for technical reasons – e.g. if it could introduce bias – this should be explained and consent sought to interview the child alone.’ (Market Research Society, 2006: 10)

4.1.1 Chapter structure

In this chapter, we begin by presenting children and young people’s views about the presence of others during survey interviews. We explore the range of reasons they offered as to why it might or might not be desirable to have somebody else present, and the extent to which the survey topic was seen as having a bearing on this. In the ‘discussion’ section towards the end of the chapter, we reflect on three key emerging issues, namely: the extent to which the age of the participant might be pertinent to the privacy question; some dilemmas concerning the acceptability and management of observer intervention during interviews; and whether the need for privacy can or should be guided by the sensitivity of the survey topic.

Although we asked children and young people open questions about who, if anyone, they might like to have present during a survey interview, their discussion focused strongly on parental presence. While many of the arguments and principles emerging can be applied to observers more

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16 It is assumed in this discussion that a participant would not be at risk of serious harm as a result of being left alone with an interviewer.
generally, this is worth bearing in mind throughout the chapter. Specific discussion of friends or siblings is highlighted in relevant sections.

4.2 Children and young people’s views

4.2.1 Reasons to have others present

The reasons given by children and young people for having somebody present during a survey interview fell into three broad categories of ‘comfort’, ‘assistance and correction’ and ‘safety’. We elaborate on each of these below.

Comfort

The children and young people felt that it might be desirable to have someone present during a survey interview if one felt ‘scared’, ‘shy’ or ‘nervous’\(^{17}\). It was suggested that a parent’s presence in particular might be ‘calming’ or ‘comforting’.

Children in both the primary and secondary groups raised this argument for parental presence, although those who raised it did not always feel it applied to them personally:

‘I would be a bit nervous [about being alone with the interviewer], but I’d be all right.’
(Female participant, Year 8)

It was also felt that the presence of a friend or sibling might offer comfort in an interview situation.

Assistance and correction

A second category of reasons focused on an observer (usually a parent) being on hand to assist the participant during the interview. Assistance could take different forms. It was felt that a parent might be able to help their child with finding the right answer to a question or the right word to express what he or she meant. It was also suggested that a parent might actually step in and correct a child if he or she gave a ‘wrong’ answer. This kind of intervention was presented positively, as a form of assistance:

‘if you make a wrong decision they can sort of help you think about it’
(Female participant, Year 5)

Children also felt that it might be desirable to have a parent present in the room because they could ‘back you up’ if the interviewer asked you to do something you did not want to, or if you wanted to end the interview but felt unable to communicate this to the interviewer\(^{18}\).

Safety

The third category of reasons for having someone present related to the participant’s personal safety. A contrast was drawn between home and school, as it was noted that while ‘anyone’ can come into your home, police checks are required for ‘strangers’ to come into schools. One view was that there was something ‘odd’ about interviewing children and young people in their homes, and accordingly that interviews in school may be preferable. It was also noted that interviewing children and young people in their homes might be uncomfortable for the interviewer. However, in

\(^{17}\) Reasons why they might experience these feelings were not discussed in the context of having others present, but were explored in detail during a separate discussion about why a survey participant might want to end an interview, as reported in Chapter 3.

\(^{18}\) For children and young people’s views on the extent to which they would feel able to refuse questions or ask to end an interview, see Chapter 3.
spite of this, there was general agreement that it would be acceptable for a child to be left alone in a room with an interviewer if they could prove that they and their organisation were ‘professional’\textsuperscript{19}, and if a responsible adult was present elsewhere in the home.

4.2.2 Reasons for interviews to be private

The arguments that the children and young people made in favour of conducting interviews in private broadly reflected researchers’ concerns with honesty, openness and data quality. They identified that participants might refrain from giving information, or give dishonest answers, as a result of others’ presence. They also recognised that third party presence might affect a participant’s responses in different ways. While in some cases they felt it could lead to false responses or no response, they thought that in others it might lead to answers that stopped short of being false but were nevertheless partial or incomplete. It was felt that children might find it difficult to express themselves openly or fully if somebody they knew was in the room. Accordingly, it was suggested that it might be easier to be open about some topics when alone with an interviewer who is ‘not part of [one’s] everyday life’.

Two key reasons were given for providing false or incomplete answers if someone else was present: confidentiality and embarrassment. In addition, children and young people were concerned that an observer might distract or irritate a participant during an interview. We will now elaborate on each of these reasons.

Confidentiality

Children and young people identified the desire to keep something confidential from the observer as one reason for giving false or incomplete answers in an interview:

‘If you want to say something you don’t want your mum to know, obviously you’re not gonna say it if your mum is sitting there with you.’
(Male participant, Year 8)

It was suggested, however, that participants might find it easier to speak openly in the presence of friends or siblings, particularly those with whom they are close. However, it was also remarked that girls might be more inclined than boys to speak openly in front of their friends:

‘It’s a bit different with boys and girls, ’cause girls tell each other everything, and there’s certain things boys can’t tell.’
(Male participant, Year 8)

In addition, it was hinted that having a friend present during an interview might run high risks in terms of regrettable revelations, with one child suggesting that saying the ‘wrong’ thing could mean the observer might ‘not be your friend no more’.

Embarrassment

A further factor in favour of conducting interviews in private was the potential for embarrassment, particularly if the question concerned something ‘personal’. The personal topics mentioned in this context were drugs and friends. In spite of the feeling that it might be easier to talk openly in the presence of a friend rather than a parent, both were seen as implying potential for embarrassment.

Distraction or irritation

The potential for an observer to distract or irritate a participant was mentioned exclusively in relation to siblings. Children and young people used adjectives such as ‘nosy’ and ‘annoying’ to describe their siblings, and felt they might be particularly liable to interrupt or ‘start talking for me’.

\textsuperscript{19} See Chapter 2 on information needs.
4.2.3 Sensitive or personal topics

The children and young people we spoke to mentioned a wide variety of topics that might be classified as ‘personal’. Examples ranged from the more intuitive (e.g. drugs, bullying) to topics that might normally be considered relatively innocuous, such as school life or friends.

There was also a range of views regarding whether and to what extent the topic of the interview had a bearing on the need for privacy. One view was that all interviews should be conducted in private, regardless of the topic. A second school of thought was that, where a survey topic was ‘personal’, it might be particularly important to have somebody else present during the interview, for comfort or support. A third view opposed this directly, with children suggesting that privacy might be more important when discussing sensitive or personal issues, to ensure that participants can speak honestly, openly and without embarrassment. These contradictory arguments mirror the way in which survey topic was seen to affect the question of who should make the final decision about a child’s participation in an interview (the parent or the child), discussed in Chapter 2.

4.3 Discussion

4.3.1 Age of participants

While we must be cautious in associating findings with particular sub-groups due to the sample size, views on privacy did appear to vary according to the age of the children and young people we spoke to. Overall, it seems that primary-age children were more inclined towards the idea of having somebody else present during a survey interview than secondary-age children. Younger children tended to emphasise the value of having someone familiar present for comfort and support. Notions of assistance also emerged more strongly from our discussions with younger children, and correction was only mentioned in the primary groups. Secondary-age children quickly brought up issues of personal safety, but widely agreed that it would not usually be necessary to have someone else present in the same room to ensure this. And while there was a view among secondary children that it might be desirable to have someone present when discussing a sensitive or personal issue, there was also a strong feeling that considerations of confidentiality and embarrassment may lead to a need for privacy.

These findings might suggest that third party presence should be allowed for - or explicitly offered to - children below a certain age, primarily for reasons of comfort and support. (The decision about whether or not to offer it explicitly would likely be influenced by the survey’s subject matter.) While our study does not lead us to a specific recommendation for where the age threshold might be, it seems likely that it would be somewhere around the primary/secondary threshold (i.e. 10/11/12). However, caution would be required in taking such an age-based approach, as age is clearly only a rough proxy for confidence, independence, emotional development and other influencing factors. More research would also be helpful to further inform the role of age in determining views about privacy before putting this tentative recommendation into practice.

4.3.2 Observer intervention during interviews

Children and young people felt that observers – and particularly parents – might be able to assist them during a survey interview by helping them find the ‘right’ answers to questions, and correcting them if they got questions ‘wrong’.

These responses indicate that interviewers should set down some ‘ground rules’ before commencing an interview with an observer present, regarding the acceptability or otherwise of observer interventions for different reasons. If one wants to avoid opportunities for observers to intervene, it can also be helpful to arrange the interview setting in a way that minimises eye contact between the observer and both the participant and the interviewer.
In order to discourage observer interventions, it will clearly be important to emphasise to participants that there are no right or wrong answers, and that they are free to answer ‘don’t know’ or refuse to answer any question. However, this takes us back to our discussion in Section 3.4.2. There, we suggested that researchers need to question, with respect to their individual studies, the extent to which it is true to say that they are not seeking right answers. If it is acknowledged that, in fact, we sometimes do seek right answers, the question arises of whether parental interventions might be permissible in order to correct or supply answers in such cases. Note also that, if parental intervention is deemed permissible in some such specific set of circumstances, the result may be that it becomes harder to discourage parents from intervening – or children from appealing to them – at less appropriate points in the interview.

4.3.3 Sensitive or personal issues

The children and young people we spoke to mentioned a very wide range of topics as classifiable under the heading ‘personal’ - everything from bullying and drugs to school, friends and family life. This suggests that, in practice, it would be no easy task to mark out certain topics as ‘personal’ or ‘sensitive’ and develop an approach to privacy on that basis. Indeed, such an endeavour could be risky, as it is clearly the case that what is innocuous for one participant may be highly sensitive for another.

Moreover, the sensitivity or personal nature of a question or topic does not appear to point us towards or away from conducting interviews in private. In fact, it appears to lead us in both directions at once. Therefore it seems that, even if we were able to label particular surveys, topics or questions as ‘personal’, this would not resolve our dilemma about which topics require privacy or presence of others respectively.

4.4 Key points

- Like researchers, children and young people acknowledge that there may be advantages and disadvantages to having somebody else present during a survey interview. Overall, primary-age children appeared to be more inclined towards wanting someone present during an interview than secondary-age children, primarily for comfort and support. This suggests that age should perhaps play a part in any policy on privacy developed for general or study-specific use.

- Children and young people felt that it might be useful to have someone on hand during a survey interview to help with answering questions and correcting wrong answers. This implies that researchers need to make sure that children (and observers) understand that it is OK to say ‘don’t know’ and that the interviewer is concerned with their views and perspective rather than with obtaining ‘right’ answers.

- From a personal safety point-of-view, children and young people were generally agreed that it would be acceptable for a child to be left alone in a room with an interviewer, assuming they had proved their credentials and a responsible adult was present elsewhere in the home.

- Children and young people thought that the presence of a third party could influence a participant’s responses, either because there might be something he or she did not want the observer to know, or due to embarrassment. The results of this influence might include non-response, false response and partial response.

- There was a range of views about whether the survey topic affected the need for privacy. While it was suggested that sensitive or ‘personal’ topics might have special implications, examples of topics that might fall under this heading were wide-ranging and sometimes surprising, e.g. ‘school life’ or ‘friends’.

- Where children felt that the sensitivity of the research topic had a bearing on the need for privacy, it was presented both as part of the case for privacy (for reasons of data quality) and
for the case *against* (for reasons of comfort and support). This – plus the wide variation in topics categorised as ‘personal’ - suggests that it would be difficult to develop a policy on privacy on the basis of survey topic.
5 CONFIDENTIALITY AND DISCLOSURE

5.1 Introduction

The notion that absolute confidentiality cannot be guaranteed to research participants aged under 16 is often cited as a key factor that distinguishes research with children and young people from research with adults. For example, Masson (in Fraser et al, ed, 2004) states that ‘there are ethical considerations in research (and other work with children) which may mean that the same degree of confidentiality cannot be guaranteed to a child as would be given to an adult’ (p52). Confidentiality in a research context implies taking care not to pass on information to those connected with a participant and ensuring that data is presented in a format that protects the identity of individual participants. However, it is generally agreed that researchers may need to break confidentiality if a child discloses that he or she is being seriously harmed or ill treated. Failure to do so may sometimes have legal, as well as ethical implications. For example, a wide range of professionals are bound by (a) local authority child protection procedures and/or (b) their respective professional codes of conduct to report suspicions of abuse (Masson, 2004: 52). Although many academic and independent research organisations are not bound by any such legally enforceable requirements, France (2004) argues that it is still ‘seen as immoral and unacceptable practice for professionals not to report incidents of suspected abuse’.

However, while many (if not all – e.g. see Thomas and O’Kane, 1998) researchers agree that there must be limits to guarantees of confidentiality in research with children, it is not always completely clear where these boundaries should be drawn. Guidelines on when it is appropriate to breach confidentiality use phrases like ‘seriously harmed or ill-treated’ (Masson, 2004), ‘threat to life, health or safety’ (Glasgow Centre for the Child and Society) and ‘risk of significant harm’ (National Children’s Bureau). But determining whether or not a given situation falls under one of these definitions may not always be easy. Could bullying by another child sometimes fall under the category of ‘threat to life, health and safety’, for example? How ‘serious’ would a situation have to be before an interviewer should disclose it? Moreover, we know little about how children themselves feel about confidentiality in a research context. Do they think it is reasonable to place limits on guarantees of confidentiality? Where do they think boundaries should be drawn? How would they react if a researcher did decide to disclose information they had provided?

5.1.1 Chapter structure

This chapter considers children and young people's views on these issues. We start by introducing the video clip and scenarios we used to stimulate discussion. Next, we summarise children and young people’s views on who to tell, whether it is ever alright to pass information on and what considerations affect attitudes to breaching confidentiality in different situations. Finally, we discuss some possible implications of our findings for future research practice, before summarising the key points from this chapter.
5.2 Details of stimulus

To stimulate discussion on confidentiality, the children and young people were first of all shown a clip in which the mother of Tom/Emily asks the interviewer what Tom/Emily told him about their friends. The full script for this clip is shown below.

**VIDEO CLIP**

**LOCATION:** The Interviewer and Emily’s/Tom’s mother are standing in the hall by the front door.

**Interviewer:** Well thanks very much indeed. Emily/Tom was great (s)he was a pleasure to interview.

**Mother:** Oh good I wasn’t really sure how s/he would take it at first. Did you get what you wanted?

**Interviewer:** Yes it was a very good interview.

**Mother:** Brilliant because s/he doesn’t really talk to me about her/his school friends. Did s/he say she/he has lots of friends?

The children were asked whether or not the interviewer should pass on this information to the mother. They were then asked whether there are any situations in which it might be right for an interviewer to pass on information that a young person discloses in an interview. To take forward the discussion, we introduced three further scenarios for the children to consider:

- **Scenario 1** - Imagine Tom/Emily is taking part in a survey about how young people spend their money. S/he tells the researcher that sometimes, when s/he runs out of money, s/he steals from shops.

- **Scenario 2** – Tom/Emily is taking part in a survey about friendships at school. S/he tells the researcher that s/he is being bullied by some of the older girls in his/her school.

- **Scenario 3** – Tom/Emily is taking part in a survey about families. S/he tells the researcher that his/her Dad sometimes hits him/her hard enough to leave a bruise.

In each case, the children were asked to discuss whether or not the interviewer should pass this information on to anyone else.

It is worth noting at the outset that children in the secondary school groups in particular seemed very familiar with the concept of ‘confidentiality’. Indeed, when the researcher asked about this at the end of one group, it was commented that they talk about confidentiality a lot at school when doing surveys or tests. It is possible that the increased focus on children’s rights in educational and other settings may be instilling a greater awareness of concepts like confidentiality in the younger generation.
5.3 Who to tell?

Much of the discussion around disclosure of information given during an interview focused on passing this on to parents. This is unsurprising, given that the clip we used to help stimulate discussion showed a mother asking about her son/daughter’s answers. However, the children and young people also discussed other people to whom interviewers might disclose information:

- **The police** – One view was that the interviewer might have to tell the police if a child or young person disclosed that they were being hit, or that they had been stealing from shops. This led to concern about the possible consequences of disclosure, discussed in Section 5.5.4. Others thought the interviewer should not involve the police in these scenarios, because they might arrest the child or parent.

- **A teacher** – Disclosure to a teacher was discussed primarily in relation to the scenario where a child reveals they are being bullied, as this was connected with school. Although it was suggested that teachers might be able to help in this situation, another suggestion was that schools and teachers have less right than parents to know what is said in a survey.

- **Social services** were mentioned only in relation to the scenario where Emily/Tom reveals that their dad sometimes hits them.

- **Friends** – If a child or young person reveals they have been stealing, one view was that it might be better for the interviewer to speak to their friends rather than to their parents. It was suggested that friends have ‘more influence’ over young people, and would be able to ‘have a quiet word’ to address the problem, whereas parents might get angry.

5.4 Is it acceptable to pass on information given during a survey interview?

A wide range of views emerged from the focus groups about whether or not it is acceptable to pass on information given by a young person during a survey interview.

At one end of the spectrum was a fairly wide interpretation of what might be sufficient to justify a ‘breach of confidentiality’ (that is, passing information given during a survey interview on to someone outside the research organisation). A range of issues, by no means confined to those that researchers might agree involve a ‘serious risk of harm’, were given as examples where a breach of confidentiality might be acceptable on welfare grounds. For example, a child admitting they had been stealing, that they were being bullied into doing someone else’s homework, or that they were worried about school work were all issues that children felt it might be appropriate to disclose to a teacher or parents.

‘if it was like something like she was getting bullied or something I think maybe he should let her (mother) know then ‘cos that could help her’
(Female participant, Year 8)

‘I think she (the researcher) should tell her parents what she’s been doing, otherwise if, like, she steals something big, she could get arrested.’
(Male participant, Year 10)

The main justification for breaching interviewer-participant confidentiality in each of these cases was based on concern about the child, and the belief that it might help them for this information to be passed on to someone else. (Although, with respect to stealing, an additional concern was to stop illegal/wrong behaviour.) It was also suggested that there might be situations (e.g. bullying) where a participant discloses something in an interview that they would like a parent or teacher to know about but can’t find the ‘right time’ or ‘the way’ to tell them. Again, in these situations it was suggested interviewers could be helping the child by passing things on.
At the other end of the spectrum was the view that interviewers should not breach confidentiality in any circumstances, no matter how serious the situation (including disclosures of self-harm and parents hitting a child hard enough to leave a bruise). On this view, it is simply up to the child (and not the interviewer) to decide whether and who they want to pass information on to, and reassurances about confidentiality are seen as absolute:

‘It’s your life, you can do it the way you want it, and if you don’t want to tell anyone then he (the interviewer) shouldn’t tell anyone.’
(Male participant, Year 8)

‘I think they should always keep to confidentiality, no matter what’.
(Female participant, Year 8)

In between these two ends of the spectrum were examples where children and young people thought an interviewer should perhaps pass information on where a child reports that they are ‘in danger’ (an example was if they were self-harming) or discloses something ‘life threatening’, but not in other situations. Furthermore, it was not always the case that an individual’s views could be neatly linked to just one point on this spectrum. There were examples of both groups and individuals moving through different positions during the discussion – for example, from saying it is not the interviewer’s role to disclose, to suggesting that they ask the child’s permission, to feeling that in some situations (for example, where a child is stealing) it may be acceptable to pass information on. In the next section of this chapter, we discuss the kinds of considerations that affected children’s views on the whether or not disclosure is appropriate in specific situations.

5.5 Balancing confidentiality with protecting children – key considerations

Five key considerations appeared to affect whether children and young people thought it was acceptable to disclose participants’ answers to survey questions in particular situations:

- What was promised at the start of the interview?
- Has the child given permission for the interviewer to pass information on?
- What are the potential outcomes of disclosing the child’s answers?
- How ‘important’ an issue is it?
- And are there alternatives to disclosure?

Each of these is discussed below.

5.5.1 What was promised?

One of the reasons children thought the interviewer in the clip should not tell the mother what Tom/Emily said about their friends was that they had told Tom/Emily they would keep it between the two of them. The fact that interviewers give reassurances about confidentiality at the start was clearly seen as important:

‘It’s (confidentiality is) a big thing because that’s what they’ve based their survey on and they should stand by what they said they’d do.’
(Female participant, Year 10)

It was suggested that breaching confidentiality after giving such reassurances could feel like a betrayal of trust to the young person:

‘it’s like … if you really trust a friend and you tell them a secret and then they just pass it on’
(Female participant, Year 8)

20 Such reassurances of confidentiality were not actually shown in the video clips - children seemed to have made an inference from the reassurances we offered at the outset of the focus groups.
However, the precise wording of the confidentiality guarantees also seemed to be important. For example, during their discussion about confidentiality one group quizzed the researcher about the qualified reassurance they had given in the introduction to the focus group. (The group was told the researchers ‘usually don’t pass information on’.) The fact that the researcher had qualified their promise of confidentiality was seen as ‘honest’ and meant children could ‘trust’ the researchers. However, it is worth noting that children and young people only asked what ‘usually’ actually meant much later in the discussion when issues around confidentiality were specifically being debated.

5.5.2 Has the child given permission?

It was suggested that, if the interviewer thinks it necessary to breach confidentiality, they should ask the child or young person for their permission to pass on their responses first. However, views were divided on what should happen if the child or young person withholds permission when asked. One view was that interviewers do not have the right to pass this information on, even in situations where they think the young person is in danger.

‘I think it’s still up to the girl, the person who’s interviewed, it’s still their choice or not, to tell anyone or not.’
(Male participant, Year 8)

Another view was that if it ‘makes it better’ (in this case, in the situation where a parent sometimes hits the child), the young person will probably be ‘grateful’ the interviewer told someone else, even if the young person had refused to consent to this. Another suggestion was that the appropriate response would depend on ‘how strongly’ the child or young person did not want the interviewer to pass something on, and that the interviewer should not go against ‘what she really wants’. The seriousness of the issue in question was another possible deciding factor – for ‘really, really important issues’ it might be right for the interviewer to tell even if the child has refused permission.

A related point (which may explain why some thought that information should not be passed on without the child’s permission) was that if a child wants to tell their parents something they will do so themselves, and that if they have not already told them there must be a reason for this.

5.5.3 An ‘important issue’?

Another issue affecting opinions about breaching confidentiality in different scenarios was how serious or ‘important’ an issue the child had revealed in the interview. One suggestion was that:

‘.. for really, really important issues, then the researcher should take note of that and maybe tell. But if it’s just small issues that can be sorted out with just a little bit of advice, then maybe the advice would probably be best.’
(Female participant, Year 8)

However, we have already mentioned (Section 5.4) that views differ on whether particular issues are important enough to pass on. Stealing and bullying were both examples on which opinion was divided. In relation to a young person disclosing that they sometimes stole from shops, one view was that ‘she ain’t done much wrong’ and it should be kept confidential. Conversely, another view was that it ‘could get really serious after a while’ if the stealing continues, so the interviewer ought to inform her parents. Bullying was spontaneously suggested as an ‘important’ issue that an interviewer ought to tell a parent about ‘because it’s bad for her’. But, again, the view was also expressed that it should still be up to the young person to decide whether to tell.

5.5.4 Potential outcomes of disclosure

Views about whether it is appropriate to breach confidentiality were affected by beliefs about the potential outcomes (both positive and negative) of disclosure. Circumstances where a potentially positive outcome might mean disclosure was justified were identified as:

- Where a child reveals they are being bullied, passing this on to parents or teachers could
enable them to help the child, for example by telling the bully to stop or moving the bully.

- If a child has been stealing, the parent could give them more money (so they do not need to steal), or could put the child ‘back on track’ by talking to them about the situation. (Taking drugs and drinking were also sometimes viewed as issues parents should be told about so they can address them with the child.)

- Where a parent has hit a child hard enough to leave a bruise, the parent might feel ‘stupid and stop doing it’ if the interviewer told them the child had disclosed this to them.

However, children and young people also identified negative outcomes that might result from disclosing what a child has told an interviewer in each of these scenarios:

- Parents/teachers getting involved might make the bullying worse.

- If parents find out that their child has been stealing, the child will get into trouble or be punished. The parents might tell the police and the child could be arrested (this concern was raised by both younger and older children). The child might also be embarrassed if their parents find out they have been stealing.

- If an interviewer discloses (to a parent or to someone else) that the child said their dad was hitting them, the parents might get angry and hit the child more, or the dad might get taken away which the child may not want.

- Even disclosing apparently innocuous information, like how many friends a child said they had, could have negative impacts. It was suggested that Tom/Emily might have told his/her parents that they had lots of friends, but told the interviewer that they do not have many. In this situation, the mother might get upset about Tom/Emily lying if the interviewer discloses their answers.

It was also suggested that the child concerned may not ‘confide in any more people’ as a result of an interviewer disclosing their answers.

5.5.5 Alternatives to disclosure

Children and young people suggested various alternatives to disclosure. Although in fact, these are also things interviewers could do in addition to disclosure, they were usually raised as alternatives. They were:

- Giving the participant helpline numbers (e.g. Childline) -

  ‘Instead of like telling her parent though, (…) she should give her information about it and like give her numbers and help about it.’
  (Female participant, Year 10)

- Give the child or young person ‘advice’ on what they could do to deal with the problem.

- Persuading the participant to talk to someone (else) about the issue – for example, suggesting they talk to someone about ways of stopping stealing.

- Feeding back information to other people in an anonymised fashion – e.g. telling teachers that ‘a lot of people I’ve spoken to today are being bullied’, without naming names.

One view was that the interviewer should offer the young participant all these types of help first and only disclose confidential information if all of these were refused.
5.6 Discussion

5.6.1 Recognising differing views

We have seen that children and young people hold a range of views on confidentiality. At one end of the spectrum, we have a fairly broad interpretation of welfare-based arguments for disclosure. This appears to go further than much guidance in terms of the types of scenarios viewed as sufficiently serious to warrant breaching confidentiality. At the other end, we have a strong defence of a ‘rights-based’ argument for keeping to strict confidentiality, which suggests that passing information on breaches children’s rights to decide this for themselves. The fact that such a range of opinion exists among children and young people points to various issues that researchers working with children may need to address.

- First, the fact that some children and young people may favour absolute confidentiality reinforces the need to explain what, if any, limits we place on confidentiality, as well as why these limits exist.

- Second, the finding that some children think it may be appropriate to breach confidentiality when children are struggling with school work, or being bullied in any way, may reflect the fact that young children in particular ‘are not entitled to confidential relationships automatically’ (Masson, in Fraser et al, eds, 2004). These findings may suggest that researchers need to give more thought to how we convey the interviewers’ role (and the ways in which it differs from that of other adults they interact with) to young participants. When explaining how, and why, their answers will usually be kept confidential, we need to be aware of the fact that they may not usually expect the types of information they give us to be kept confidential.

5.6.2 Qualifying confidentiality

Our findings suggest that the way reassurances about confidentiality are worded and conveyed at the outset is important. In practice, researchers are often faced with a difficult balance between making qualifications relating to confidentiality explicit and clear on the one hand, and on the other avoiding over-emphasising these qualifications in situations where it is perhaps unlikely that a breach would be necessary. Our findings do not suggest an easy resolution to this dilemma. However, they do perhaps reinforce the need to make sure that young participants (a) appreciate that reassurances about confidentiality are always qualified and (b) that they understand what any qualifications actually mean. The latter point would seem particularly important given differing understandings of what an appropriate level of interviewer-participant confidentiality might be (as discussed in Section 5.4) – if qualifications are too vague, it seems likely that different children will interpret them quite differently.

5.6.3 Are initial reassurances enough?

A recent NatCen study exploring adults’ perceptions of a range of ethical issues surrounding research found that concerns about confidentiality sometimes arose at the end of the main interview, when people may have felt they said more than they intended to (Graham et al., 2007). Our study appears to reflect this. Children did not question the reassurances given by the researcher at the start of the group, but after reflecting on confidentiality later in the discussion one group spontaneously asked what had been meant when we said we would ‘usually’ keep their answers confidential. This suggests that queries about the meaning of qualified guarantees of confidentiality may sometimes arise later on, after reflection or discussion with others. Graham et al. (2007) suggest there may be a need to reiterate reassurances of confidentiality at the end of a survey interview, for those who have not fully absorbed information given at the start. In relation to surveys with children, such an approach would, in most cases, allow a further opportunity to reassure them that the information they have just given will indeed remain confidential.
5.6.4 Discussing disclosure with participants?

We found that some children and young people may think guarantees of confidentiality should be absolute. For some, breaking confidentiality may be viewed as a breach of their rights to decide who is told what about them. We also found that children may think interviewers should discuss their intention to disclose with them and ask their permission.

It is perhaps worth remembering here that children and young people in our group were being asked to consider a fairly wide range of ethical issues in a relatively short period of time. Although they were able to give considered views on many issues, it is unlikely that they will have been able to think through all the implications of specific suggestions. For example, asking a child for permission to pass information on might, in some cases, entail asking them to consent to their parents being reported to the authorities – obviously a very difficult and stressful position to put a child in. Moreover, in cases where the participant is at risk of serious harm, it would be disingenuous for the interviewer to ask the child or young person’s permission to pass on this information, since they are duty bound to do this whether or not permission is given.

Another option would be for interviewers to inform the young participant in cases where a breach is deemed necessary, to explain why it is necessary, and to allow them to express any concerns they may have about this. However, this may put interviewers in a very difficult position (and one which they are not trained to deal with) if the child becomes very distressed or is insistent they do not want the information to be passed on. Perhaps again the key message we should take from this is the need to ensure that children and young people understand that reassurances of confidentiality are always qualified, so that disclosure in such situations should not come as a complete surprise.

5.6.5 ‘Alternatives’ or ‘additions’ to disclosure

Some of the ‘alternatives to disclosure’ suggested by children and young people suggest an expanded role for interviewers. For example, giving the child advice or persuading them to talk to someone else would require additional skills to those survey interviewers are typically trained in. Further, it is not clear that such an extension of the interviewer’s role would be desirable, even if it were feasible to equip them with such skills. The one-off nature of the contact between interviewer and participant would place severe limits on the nature, and possibly the quality, of any advice or support they could offer. Asking interviewers to give advice could also conflict with some of the qualities required for good interviewing. For example, interviewers are required to record information without passing judgement, while the act of giving advice in itself involves forming a judgement (which the participant might not share) that the participant has a problem which requires help.

The fact that participants suggested the interviewer could play this type of role may reflect the fact that many of the adults children and young people come into contact with on a day-to-day basis (especially parents and teachers) are expected to play an advisory role in relation to children. The fact that interviewers are not expected (and not trained) to play this role may be something that needs to be explicitly conveyed to participants. Whether this is at the start of an interview or at the point at which a child discloses something the interviewer feels they need to pass on may depend on the perceived likelihood of children disclosing they are at risk (based on the subject matter of the survey or the group of children being interviewed, for example).

Of course, simply saying that interviewers are not qualified to advise is arguably an inadequate response to a young person in a difficult situation who may be looking for guidance. It is important that research organisations are able to refer children on to people who will be able to provide this guidance, whether this is social services (in cases where disclosure is necessary) or suitable helplines and websites (where disclosure is not deemed necessary, but the interview covers issues – like bullying, for example – that participants may nonetheless want help or advice about). In fact, given the range of issues children and young people may be worried about (bullying, school work and how many friends they have were all mentioned by participants), it may be worth considering
having a ‘standard’ leaflet with information and helplines for children and young people for all studies involving them. Ideally, this would be given out to all participants, to avoid interviewers having to make judgements about which children ‘need’ help.

5.7 Key points

- Children and young people’s views on whether or not it is acceptable to disclose information given by a child during a survey interview ranged from a fairly wide interpretation of ‘welfare-based’ arguments for disclosure in different situations, to ‘rights-based’ arguments for thinking absolute confidentiality should be guaranteed.

- What was promised in terms of confidentiality at the start of an interview was seen as important. The fact that guarantees of confidentiality are qualified could be seen as ‘honest’ and could facilitate trust, although there may be issues over how such qualifications are understood by different participants.

- It was suggested that interviewers should not make disclosures without asking the participant first. However, different opinions were expressed as to what should happen if a young participant refuses to give permission.

- How ‘important’ the issue was helped shape attitudes to whether it should be disclosed or not. However, different opinions existed about the relative importance of issues like bullying or a child admitting stealing.

- Children and young people gave examples of both positive and negative potential outcomes from an interviewer making a disclosure in different situations. Varying beliefs about the likely outcome of disclosure in part explained differences in attitudes to whether an interviewer ought to disclose in particular situations.

- Various alternatives to disclosure were discussed. Most of these focused on the interviewer taking a more pro-active role in terms of advising the child or young person, or supporting them to seek help and advice. This might suggest a greater need to clarify the role of the interviewer and the ways in which it differs from that of other adults with whom children may be more familiar (e.g. teachers and parents).
6 METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

In this chapter, we share the research team’s reflections on several aspects of the methodology used for the study. While some spontaneous comments of the children and young people we spoke to have informed these reflections, they were not systematically asked for their views on the methodology used. Key issues will be addressed in the following order:

- The hypothetical approach
- Use of video stimulus
- Research about research
- Participant selection and consent procedures
- Preliminary presentations
- School setting
- Number, age and gender of participants
- Use of focus groups

6.1 The hypothetical approach

As explained in Chapter 1, the decision was taken to adopt a hypothetical rather than a follow-up approach for the study. In other words, we decided not to base our discussions around a specific survey in which participants had recently taken part. Some of the reasons for this were practical and pragmatic: no suitable survey was available at the time of the research, and convening groups within an acceptable time period following each participant’s survey interview would have presented considerable logistical challenges. However, it was also felt that there could be advantages to the hypothetical approach insofar as it would allow scope for the research team to present issues in a more ‘generic’ way, rather than allowing the children to be strongly influenced by a single experience. This argument assumed that, at the time of the focus group, few if any of the children we spoke to would be influenced by a recent survey experience initiated outside the realm of this study, or at least – if they were – that it would largely be possible to override the influence of this experience with our own examples, in particular the scenes depicted in our purpose-made stimulus video.

During the ‘warm-up’ stages of the group discussions, we explored the children’s prior experiences of survey research. Experience was fairly limited, particularly among the primary groups. Those who had taken part in surveys had done so mainly at school, on topics such as the environment and crime, or for marketing purposes, for example a customer questionnaire about an Internet service. Most of this experience involved paper self-completion questionnaires, although there were mentions of telephone and face-to-face interviews. In practice, the children and young people rarely reflected on their own experiences outside the warm-up stage. Thus, we did not feel that their prior experiences of survey research exerted a significant influence over what they said in the focus groups.

In Chapter 1, we acknowledged that we did perceive some advantages to the follow-up approach at the design stage, in spite of the fact that we ultimately decided against it. Primarily, we were always aware that we might encounter some problems explaining and ‘bring to life’ some rather tricky concepts, such as informed consent and confidentiality, if we were not able to ‘hook’ these on to the children’s personal experiences. Our hope was that our stimulus video would act as an effective proxy for the personal experience that would be lacking.
In the event, we did experience some challenges of this kind, particularly in the younger groups. The primary-age children sometimes struggled to get to grips with concepts such as information needs and data withdrawal, and to draw relevant distinctions (e.g. between parents having a say in whether their children take part in surveys versus having an influence over the answers they give in interviews). Nevertheless, overall the children were able to respond to the questions we asked them, and could often imagine and articulate not only how they might feel in certain unfamiliar circumstances, but how others with different perspectives might feel as well. This suggests that there is a good deal of scope for consulting children and young people about our research procedures at a general as well as a study-specific level.

There was no doubt, also, that the challenges we faced in asking children and young people to work with some relatively complex concepts would have been far more serious in the absence of the video. In general, we felt that the video worked very well in aiding participants’ understanding, providing a clear focus and supplying structure to discussions that might otherwise have been difficult to keep on track. Playing the clips also provided variation in pace and tone, which seemed especially important during a relatively long discussion that may not have been of particular personal interest or relevance.

It is also important to note that we may still have encountered these challenges if we had gone with a follow-up approach. It is difficult to know whether a specific survey experience would have made all or some of the tricky concepts easier for the children to grasp, and in fact we may have grounds to argue that this would not have been the case. For example, the children did have personal experience of receiving an information leaflet and being asked to consider whether they wished to participate in research (albeit in relation to our qualitative study rather than a survey). However, this did not seem to overcome their difficulties grasping the concept of information needs or informed consent. Equally, if they had taken part in a survey interview, they would have been unlikely to have personally contemplated requesting to withdraw data, so may not have had much effect on their understanding of data withdrawal. On reflection, therefore, we have no particular regrets about adopting the hypothetical approach. Its anticipated advantages did appear to be borne out in practice, and we remain to be convinced that the challenges it posed would have been satisfactorily overcome by the follow-up alternative.

6.2 Use of video stimulus

The use of purpose-made video as a stimulus tool is relatively uncommon in social research. We have already described some of its advantages. Here we consider any lessons we have learned that might be useful for researchers using this technique in the future.

As mentioned in Chapter 1 (and subsequent chapters), we used two versions of the video clips, so that the age of the actor playing the research participant roughly matched that of the children in the focus group. We also commissioned a professional company to film the video, rather than attempting to do this ourselves, as we felt that children and young people would be sensitive to its quality and using a poorly-produced video might diminish its effectiveness as a stimulus tool. On reflection, we were pleased to have made both of these decisions.

Other lessons learned were as follows.

- The actors were a mixture of professionals and amateurs. While our amateur volunteers did a great job, children are likely to be sensitive to poor acting as well as poor production. It may be worth considering whether you can budget for using professional actors to enhance quality.

- A stimulus video is not a feature film. Our experience of the focus groups highlighted a potential tension between creating convincing, naturalistic drama and conveying a specific ‘research message’. Where the clip included dramatic elements extraneous to the research message, this could result in an unfocused discussion. For example, in the clip where two parents discuss an opt-out letter, some children focused on the dynamic between the parents and the fact that one seemed to shout down the other, rather than on the key research
message of the clip, namely the fact that the parents did not discuss the letter with their child. However, clearly, if the clip errs too far away from drama and labours the research message, it may appear stilted and unnatural. Striking the right balance between these concerns constitutes a key challenge in designing stimulus video. Ultimately, in order for a scene to be convincing, researchers are likely to have to rely to some extent on subsequent directed questioning to focus children in on key research issues.

- Though somewhat mundane, it is worth anticipating the technological challenges posed by using video and DVD, particularly if you are not conducting the research on your own premises. Three of the four schools we visited had interactive whiteboards, so we were able to use DVD and project the clips via the computer. In the fourth school, we used a VHS video and TV. When using a DVD, the main technical problems concerned compatibility of software, sound settings and the fiddliness of controls for stopping and starting after each clip. Pausing between clips was also an issue when using the VHS, and this did have a minor disruptive effect on the group (minimised by having two facilitators present). Typically, we did not have a great deal of time to set up in advance of the focus groups, due to demands on classroom space. So while we may have avoided some of these technical problems by taking our own equipment rather than relying on the school's, we may have lost out in terms of group time.

6.3 Research about research

In Chapter 1, we described some measures that we took to create distance in children's minds between the focus groups we were undertaking and the surveys we were discussing. The video was particularly key in this regard, as it gave us the opportunity to depict a survey interview as something bearing little resemblance to the focus group in which the children and young people were presently taking part. In addition, it was important that we made every effort to minimise the extent to which our own practices (e.g. around seeking consent or providing confidentiality reassurances) exerted an influence over children's responses to our questions about good practice.

Perhaps inevitably, however, there were limitations on what we could do to control this process of osmosis, and we did get the sense, on occasion, that our own actions had filtered through into the opinions being expressed. One example was a child who, during a discussion about confidentiality, suggested that researchers ought to reassure participants that their answers 'won't go to anybody else apart from me and the rest of the company', echoing the reassurances given at the start of the focus group. However, this problem should not be overstated. As mentioned earlier, for example, children and young people sometimes struggled to come up with spontaneous suggestions for items of information they would like to be given, in spite of the fact that we had provided them with information leaflets relating to our study. Equally, the suggestions they did come up with went well beyond the information we had provided - and indeed, they expressed views on all relevant issues that extended beyond and diverged from our own practices. It did not, therefore, appear that children were systematically making inferences about best practice from their experience of our study, or that they felt obliged to express approval for our behaviour. We of course aimed to ensure they felt able to express views that reflected negatively on our practices by emphasising that they should feel free to express their own opinions; that there were no right or wrong answers; and that it did not matter if they disagreed with others in the group.

6.4 Participant selection and consent procedures

Both children and their parents were given the chance to let the school know if they did not wish to be selected to take part in the study. We explained to the children and young people that they would not be able to take part if their parents opted them out. We also explained that if they did not wish to take part, we would not ask them to, regardless of what their parents or anybody else said. We felt and still feel that this process represented the best way of responding to the good practice requirement to seek parental consent whilst placing the consent of the potential participant at the centre of our approach. The use of 'opt-out' consent procedures, as opposed to an 'opt-in' approach, reflected NatCen’s guidelines on conducting ethical research with children and young
people. These emphasise the risk that an ‘opt-in’ approach is biased towards the particularly pro-active or research-friendly. They also argue that conducting a parental ‘opt-in’ places too much decision-making power in the hands of the parents rather than the children. Making the children aware of the research before parent letters were sent out, and encouraging parents to discuss the study with their children, also reflected our commitment to placing children at the centre of our consent procedures.

Each school provided us with anonymised lists of the pupils in each selected class, showing only pupil numbers and gender and excluding any opted-out pupils. Once we had obtained these, we proceeded to select participants randomly within gender. We then returned the selected pupil numbers to the school and encouraged teachers to consider whether any of the pupils selected might not work well together in a focus group, for example because some were much more confident or articulate than others, or because there was antipathy between particular children. On one occasion, a teacher did raise a concern of this nature, and a substitute pupil was randomly selected. All the teachers were comfortable with this method of selection. Allowing the research team to make the initial random selection helped us avoid ‘cherry-picking’ or unnecessary exclusions, which we feared might have occurred if we had allowed teachers to select pupils to take part, even with guidance from the research team. At the same time, offering teachers the opportunity to feed into the process helped us to avoid a situation where taking part in the focus group became uncomfortable or unpleasant for anyone due to the presence of other children, as well as ensuring that the quality of the research was not threatened by any substantial problems with group dynamics.

Some concerns were raised by children and young people, during both the preliminary class presentations and the focus groups, about the fact that only a few pupils had been chosen to take part in the study. In response, we explained that it was not possible for us to include everyone because we had limited time and the group had to be small enough for us to hear what each participant had to say. We also highlighted that, given these limitations, we had chosen to randomly select pupils in order to be as fair and inclusive as possible. (We likened this process to ‘picking names out of a hat’.) Nevertheless, these concerns did highlight the potential for research activities to create divisions within groups of children and the importance of taking measures to mitigate such effects. Delivering the preliminary presentation to the whole class, and giving an information leaflet to every pupil present, was probably important in terms of inclusiveness, as it served to de-mystify our activities and perhaps dispel potential envy or resentment towards those taking part. With hindsight, we were glad to have opted not to offer individual participant incentives, which may well have deepened any divisions between participants and non-participants.

### 6.5 Preliminary presentations

A member of the research team visited each school two to three weeks prior to carrying out the focus groups, to make a brief presentation to each of the selected classes. The objectives of the presentation were:

- To introduce NatCen and the study team
- To describe what we, as researchers, do
- To describe what a face-to-face survey interview involves
- To present some survey findings in order to explain why researchers do surveys and the sorts of things they discover
- To explain about our study
- To describe what taking part in the study will involve (including the length, location, timing and nature of the focus group; the kinds of issues to be discussed; the fact that it will be tape-recorded but kept confidential; the fact that no names will be mentioned in the report)
- To explain how pupils will be selected to take part
- To emphasise the voluntary nature of their participation
- To distribute information leaflets to the pupils and let them know about the letters and leaflets being sent out to parents
- To give them an opportunity to ask questions
Thus, the presentations served two overarching purposes: first, to tell potential participants something about survey research, and hence avoid having to come to these issues completely cold in the focus groups; and, second, to describe the study and what taking part will involve as an aid to informed consent, and in particular to emphasise the voluntary nature of their participation.

In terms of saving time in the focus groups by providing a brief lesson in survey research, the preliminary presentations had limited effect. Children appeared to have a limited recall of what had been presented by the time of the group, and the memories they did have tended to be somewhat partial, dwelling in particular on the issue of selection.

The presentations seemed more effective, however, in making children and young people aware of what taking part in the study would involve, and emphasising the voluntary nature of their participation. In this respect we felt that they did achieve substantially more than we might realistically have expected if we had simply asked teachers to distribute the leaflets and go through them with children on our behalf. As noted earlier, many school activities are compulsory, making it particularly important to emphasise participants’ rights to refuse and withdraw from research activities.

The preliminary presentations also served a further, somewhat unanticipated, purpose, insofar as they provided us with an opportunity to explain and emphasise our process of pupil selection. As with voluntary participation, it transpired that this required particularly careful explanation within the school setting, as one example illustrates. In this school, the teacher began to tell the children, prior to the presentation, that they had better sit still and be quiet or the researcher would not choose them to take part in the study. Using these kinds of sanctions is of course commonplace in school – hence the need to stress that pupils would in fact be randomly selected for our study.

6.6 School setting

Carrying out research in schools always presents researchers with challenges in terms of managing the inevitable connotations of the physical setting. As Hill says:

‘Children’s behaviour in schools is very much affected by the expectations and customs of that institution, which shape how they perceive an external researcher or consultant. Many writers have commented on how the nature and content of the communication in school-based studies have been shaped by children transposing expectations about school tasks to research tasks and about teachers to researchers.’ (Hill, 2006: 83)

We took a number of steps to try and minimise the extent to which children and young people transposed their assumptions and expectations about school life to the focus group. This included wearing informal dress, introducing ourselves by first names and informing them that they were free to speak in any order and did not need to raise their hands. Emphasising the voluntary nature of their participation in the study and their freedom to withdraw or refuse to answer any question also helped convey the distinction between the focus group and compulsory school activities.

The fact that we were undertaking research about research in a school setting also meant we ran the risk that children would assume we were referring to surveys carried out in schools. As our focus was on face-to-face survey interviews, the bulk of which take place in the home, it was important that the scenes depicted in our video were clearly located in a home setting to overcome any such assumptions.

6.7 Number, age and gender of participants

There were six participants in each of the primary groups and eight in each of the secondary ones. The process for selecting participants aimed to include equal numbers of boys and girls; while this did not translate into practice in every case, there were no fewer than three participants of either
gender in each group. Separate groups were conducted with seven-to-eight year-olds; nine-to-ten year-olds; 12-to-13 year-olds and 14-to-15 year-olds.

On reflection, the number of participants in each group seemed about right. We would not have wanted to include any more participants in the primary groups, particularly in view of the complexity of some of the issues and concepts discussed (Note we also felt that an hour was the maximum length of time for which we could have engaged these children.)

As mentioned in Section 6.1, some of the younger children – particularly those in Year 3 – struggled to grasp some of the concepts and issues we raised (e.g. information needs and data withdrawal). However, the difficulties we experienced appeared to be associated with the content of our questions, rather than the fact that children were unable to cope with taking part in a focus group discussion. Therefore, the lesson to be learned here may be an ethical rather than a methodological one, for if these children struggle to grasp some of the key ethical concepts associated with taking part in research (qualitative or quantitative), what does this say about the ethics of approaching children to participate at this age? We will revisit this issue in Chapter 7.

Cohesion of opinion among children of one gender, or sometimes both genders, occurred in some of the secondary groups. Conducting mixed-gender groups had the key advantage of bringing out different viewpoints and allowing children to react and respond to one another. However, it would be interesting to carry out further research on the same issues using single gender groups, or one-to-one interviews, and see whether differences emerge.

6.8 Use of focus groups

We decided to use focus groups for this study for two key reasons. First, they can be particularly valuable for researching issues of which participants have little or no direct experience, as they provide the opportunity for participants to respond to and build on ideas generated by others. Secondly, they can work particularly well with children and young people, who tend to be comfortable in group settings, which are familiar from school (although this can also pose challenges, as discussed in Section 6.6).

On reflection, we are happy with our decision to use focus groups for this study. Given the challenging nature of some of the issues and concepts explored, in-depth one-to-one interviews may have been rather demanding for some children, particularly the younger ones. It is worth noting, however, that the focus group approach may have proved more challenging if we had opted for a follow-up design. In that case, participants would have been drawing on different individual experiences, their memories of which may have differed in terms of both quality and focus. By using the hypothetical approach, we controlled the stimuli to which participants were exposed and did not have to deal with varied recall.

6.9 Key points

- Overall, the purpose-made stimulus video worked effectively as a proxy for personal experience of taking part in surveys. In view of this, we do not think that there would have been clear advantages to adopting a follow-up rather than a hypothetical design for the study.

- The video had additional advantages: it provided a focus and structure for the discussions, as well as varying their pace and tone. It was also crucial for drawing a distinction in children’s minds between the (qualitative) research we were undertaking and the (quantitative) research to be discussed.

- However, the use of dramatic filmed scenes as a stimulus tool does present some challenges. In particular, there can be a tension between the need to create convincing, naturalistic drama and the need to focus children’s thoughts on a specific research issue.
There were some indications that children’s responses were influenced by the way we conducted our research study, but these were limited, and overall we felt that children expressed their views freely and openly in the groups.

Children and young people raised concerns about the fact that only a few pupils in each class were selected to take part in the study. This highlighted the potential for research activities to create divisions within groups of peers, and the importance of taking measures to mitigate such effects.

Preliminary class presentations by the research team were important insofar as they gave us the opportunity to emphasise the voluntary nature of the children’s participation and explain that pupils would be randomly selected to take part. These aspects of the study required particular emphasis owing to the contrast with the compulsory nature of many school activities, as well as the commonplace rhetoric of punishment and reward used at school.

Some of the younger children – particularly those in Year 3 – struggled to grasp some of the trickier issues and concepts introduced. This appears to raise an ethical question, regarding if and how children of this age can be included in research studies if they are not capable of understanding some of the key ethical issues related to their own participation.

There was some evidence of opinion dividing along gender lines, particularly among older children and young people. It would be interesting to conduct further research on the same issues using single-gender groups or one-to-one interviews.

Focus groups worked well for this study. In-depth interviews may have been overly demanding for some children, given the complexity of some of the issues and concepts discussed.
7 CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Owing to the small-scale, exploratory nature of our study, it is neither possible nor appropriate to draw hard conclusions from the findings. Rather, we can report on what we see to be areas for consideration in designing survey work with children and young people. In the ‘discussion’ sections of each of the earlier chapters, we have explored the implications of our findings in each substantive topic area. In this final chapter, we draw out and discuss what we see as being four key issues emerging from the research, some of which are pertinent to more than one of the substantive topics covered. At the end of the chapter, we put forward a number of ideas for future research that might usefully build on the knowledge gained so far.

7.1 Four key issues

In this section, we discuss issues that can be organised around four key themes that have emerged from the findings of our study:

- The role of the survey interviewer
- Sensitive or personal topics
- Right or wrong answers
- Children’s capacity to consent

7.1.1 The role of the survey interviewer

Many of the findings presented in this report highlight the key role played by the survey interviewers. This has been found to be true from adults’ perspectives as well as those of children and young people (Graham et al., 2007). The children and young people we spoke to felt that it would be helpful to know something about the interviewer before deciding whether or not to agree to an interview (Chapter 2). The interviewer’s personal characteristics were also seen as relevant to the participant’s comfort during the interview, and considerable emphasis was placed on their behaviour as an interviewer, for example whether they asked the questions too quickly or in a demanding or pressurising way (Chapter 3). Chapters 3 and 5 indicated that participants expect interviewers to perform tasks that might traditionally be considered peripheral to their role or even undesirable, such as providing advice when a child raises a troubling issue during an interview, or re-phrasing a question the child does not understand. The finding in Chapter 3 that children and young people might want to withdraw data following an interview, even if they believed that their answers would be kept confidential, may also hint at the potentially profound and personal nature of the interviewer-participant relationship.

The central role played by individual interviewers, and the somewhat expanded role assigned to them by participants, have clear implications for recruitment and training. The careful selection of interviewers with appropriate technical and interpersonal skills may be especially key when carrying out surveys with children and young people, for example due to the emphasis placed on the connection between interviewing style and comfort during interviews.

We now consider the specific issues raised in relation to the interviewer’s role in turn.

Information about interviewers’ characteristics

The extent to which it is appropriate or desirable for potential participants to be given information about the interviewer during the consent process is a topic for further debate. As highlighted in Chapters 2 and 3, the benefits of providing such information in terms of participant reassurance need to be weighed against some potential disadvantages, both practical and ethical. In qualitative research, it is sometimes possible for an interviewer to visit potential participants and spend some time with them before they decide whether or not they are happy to take part. This can have some clear benefits insofar as it allows the participant to make a judgement on the basis of a more
rounded impression of the interviewer than any written or verbal description could achieve. While it is usually unfeasible for large-scale surveys, due to the time and cost involved, it may be worth considering whether it could ever be an option open to quantitative researchers, for example on a survey of particularly young or vulnerable children, or addressing an especially sensitive subject.

Offering advice

As noted in Chapter 5, children and young people suggested that interviewers might offer advice to a participant who raised a troubling issue during an interview, or attempt to persuade them to speak to somebody else about it. This would imply an additional dimension to the traditional role of the survey interviewer. The question of whether and to what extent such an expanded role for survey interviewers might be desirable is perhaps a subject for further debate. However, we have suggested that there are serious problems with such an extension to the interviewer role. While some interviewers may be well-equipped and willing to fulfil an advisory role given the proper training, some may not. In addition, it will be important to consider whether asking interviewers to fulfil this sort of role could have negative consequences for participants and/or interviewers themselves. It is not clear that (even with training) interviewers would be able to offer appropriate advice and support within the one-off contact they have with participants during an interview. It might also cause a blurring of the boundaries between the roles of interviewer and counsellor, or interviewer and friend, in a way which could be confusing to participants (and young participants in particular), and which could make it hard for interviewers to maintain appropriate boundaries.

Explanation and clarification

Adults, as well as children, see it as part of the interviewer’s role to explain and clarify questions when necessary (Graham et al., 2007: 30). However, given that children and young people may have particular difficulties with comprehension, this issue is perhaps particularly salient in regard to younger participants.

Traditionally, survey interviewers are instructed to read out the questions exactly as they appear on the paper or computer screen, in order to ensure consistency between participants. Interviewers are obliged to refuse politely any requests for further explanation or clarification, on grounds that offering this in their own words could create inconsistency between the data collected from different participants. Even where they may feel able to help the participant, they are asked not to do so.

The fact that children and young people see explanation and clarification as part of a survey interviewer’s role suggests that researchers should reflect carefully on the ‘back-up’ wording provided to interviewers, and potentially provide a lot more in this regard than currently tends to be the case. This – in combination with designing core questions which are as simple and accessible as possible – should minimise the extent to which interviewers find themselves in situations where participants are requesting help that they are not able to provide. Of course, these measures stop short of providing interviewers with any genuine flexibility. To do so would inevitably compromise the structured and consistent nature of survey research. Whether there might be a case for striking such a compromise in the particular case of children and young people is perhaps a subject for future debate.

7.1.2 Sensitive or personal subjects

Questions about sensitive or personal subjects have been raised in various contexts throughout this report – around privacy, around withholding information and around consent procedures. However, an overarching point to make about this issue is that the range of subjects considered sensitive or personal is extremely wide. Examples mentioned included family relationships, friends, bullying, religion, parents’ jobs and a person’s weight. This likely reflects the fact that what one person considers highly sensitive may be considered much less sensitive – or indeed entirely innocuous – by another. This may well be as true of adults as it is of children and young people.
In Chapter 2, we saw that the perceived sensitivity of a subject could influence views about parental consent in opposing directions. On one view, parental consent was particularly important in relation to surveys addressing sensitive or personal topics, because parents might be worried about the kinds of information their child might divulge, or because they have a protective role. On the other hand, it was also argued that it might not be appropriate for researchers to tell parents the exact content of the interview, as the potential participant might not want their parents to know that they were taking part in the survey because, for example, it might worry them.

This pattern was echoed in Chapter 4, where we described how the children and young people we spoke to saw the sensitivity of the research topic as having opposing implications for whether it was acceptable or desirable to have someone else present in the same room during a survey interview. On the one hand, it was felt that it might be important to have someone familiar present during an interview on a sensitive or personal topic, to provide comfort and support. On the other, it was felt that privacy might be especially important in these circumstances, so that participants feel free to speak openly, honestly and without embarrassment.

Sensitive issues came up in Chapter 3, where we reported that the children and young people saw personal or sensitive questions as a reason to refuse to answer, or even to end an interview early.

The wide range of subjects identified as sensitive or personal, as well as the fact that the sensitivity of a subject appears to inspire opposing views in relation to both parental consent and privacy, suggest that it will be difficult for researchers to make decisions about survey practice on the basis of subject sensitivity. So what does this mean, in practical terms, with respect to the issues mentioned?

- **Parental consent.** The sensitivity of a survey topic points towards both increasing and decreasing the weight assigned to parents’ wishes in our consent procedures. Moreover, it is apparent that some topics are sensitive to one person but not another. For both these reasons, it seems difficult to envisage how subject sensitivity might be built in to the design of consent procedures. It may be that on this issue – and the privacy issue below – researchers should err on the side of providing parents with relatively detailed information about the topics to be covered in advance unless they can justify not doing so.

- **Privacy during interviews.** It may be best to give the potential participant some information in advance about the topics to be covered in the interview and let them judge whether or not they would like to have somebody else present. This would give the child the power to judge how sensitive they are personally likely to find the questions to be asked, and how best to respond to this.

- **Refusing questions and ending interviews early.** The wide range of subjects categorised as sensitive or personal by children and young people suggests that researchers may be well-advised to take a ‘lowest common denominator’ approach to anticipating which questions in a survey questionnaire have the potential to cause discomfort. Rather than defaulting to crude classifications of ‘sensitive’ and ‘non-sensitive’ subjects, it seems important that researchers give careful thought to how all questions may come across to participants reading or hearing them (this, of course, is the skill of good questionnaire design). Where potential for sensitivity is perceived, a range of measures is available to help researchers ask questions in non-threatening and non-intrusive ways (self-completion techniques, pre-ambles, careful question ordering etc.). Maintaining an open mind and being prepared to drop a question if it is ultimately too sensitive is of course important too.

### 7.1.3 ‘Wrong’ answers and ‘don’t knows’

Our findings indicate that children and young people may be inclined to think that researchers are seeking ‘right’ answers to survey questions, and therefore that specialist knowledge is required in order to participate competently in a survey interview. This finding emerged from discussions about a number of different issues during our focus groups. In Chapter 2, we described how concerns
about the need for specialist knowledge might influence a child or young person’s decision about whether to agree to participate in a survey interview. Then, in Chapter 3, we reported that children thought that not having the knowledge required to answer a question could lead them to refuse, or to ask to end the interview altogether. Finally, in Chapter 4, we saw that one reason for desiring the presence of a parent in the same room during a survey interview was the perception that they might be able to ‘help’ the child by assisting them in finding the right answer or correcting any wrong answers they gave.

These findings give rise to the question of what can researchers do to convey to children and young people that specialist knowledge is not required for participating in survey interviews. In Chapters 3 and 4, we stressed that it is important to reflect carefully on our survey practices. In some surveys, it is clear that we do seek right answers, in the sense of accurate answers about experiences and behaviours (albeit sometimes in the knowledge that the answers we receive may not be \textit{entirely} accurate, perhaps especially when interviewing children). Therefore, it is important that researchers take the time to step back from their surveys and consider to what extent they can genuinely reassure participants that specialist knowledge is not a pre-requisite of competent participation.

There are also a number of ways in which we can reassure children and young people about knowledge required to take part in a survey. First, it is important that researchers try to give a clear and realistic indication prior to the interview of the level of knowledge required. For example, if you were conducting a survey about young people’s political views, it might be a good idea to say in advance that you are interested in talking to young people who do not know much about politics as well as those who know more. Once a child or young person has agreed to participate in a survey, it is then important to manage carefully any questions where right answers are sought. There are a number of measures that can help researchers avoid these questions appearing too demanding or intimidating to participants. For example, when asking about the frequency of an experience or behaviour, we might supply a number of options and ask the participant to say which comes closest, or say something like “if you don’t know exactly, just give me your best guess”. For questions where a best guess will be insufficient (e.g. when asking for a participant’s date-of-birth), it is important for researchers to consider the extent to which all participants can really be assumed capable of providing the necessary information.

The acceptability of a ‘don’t know’ response must be clearly conveyed to children in advance of the interview and at appropriate points thereafter. Arguably, it might be preferable not to rely on interviewers to initiate spontaneous reminders of this and other key principles, but rather to ensure that reminders are given at certain set junctures, by building them into the interview programme. Given our finding that children and young people might be inclined to refuse a question they are unable to answer rather than say ‘don’t know’, there might also be a case for interviewers gently questioning refusals as a matter of course. For example, “So, shall I put ‘no answer’, or would ‘don’t know’ be better”? Finally, if a survey does contain a question where ‘don’t know’ is an unacceptable response, this exception to the general rule should be clearly conveyed to participants, preferably with an explanation of the reason why ‘don’t know’s’ are not allowed in this case.

7.1.4 \textbf{Children’s capacity to consent}

Few, if any, researchers would argue that a survey interview ought to proceed unless the participant has freely given their consent. However, on the basis of our findings, we might question to what extent we can realistically expect consent given by younger children to be truly \textit{informed}.

We chose to carry out our research with children from age seven up, on grounds that children of this age are widely agreed to have cognitive ability to participate in surveys. In Chapter 6, however, we reported that some of the primary-age children struggled to grasp some of the ethical concepts presented to them. For this reason, we might question whether it can be assumed that children who are cognitively capable of participating in survey interviews will also have the intellectual ability necessary for comprehending the information presented to them regarding the nature and
consequences of their participation, and their rights in relation to each aspect of the research process. Of course, we know that this information cannot be presented to a child in the same way that it is presented to an adult. It has to be carefully worded, simplified and delivered slowly, with plenty of opportunities for asking questions. Reminders need to be built in at appropriate junctures throughout the interview and afterwards, with provision for participants to raise concerns or queries after the interviewer has left. However, the key question here is: even after all possible measures have been taken to ensure that the information given is accessible to young participants, can we assume that they can fully comprehend it?

Clearly, we are not yet in a position to provide a confident answer to this question. Nevertheless, it is worth contemplating the potential implications should we come to the conclusion that children below a certain age cannot be assumed capable of comprehending all the information necessary for the provision of fully informed consent. In this case, two alternative courses of action appear open to us. On the one hand, we could raise the minimum age of our survey participants. However, given the considerable value of collecting data directly from all those able to provide it (see Chapter 1), this approach would seem to imply substantial sacrifice. Therefore, we might well seek to find a compromise. The main way of doing this would seem likely to involve making use of some form of proxy consent.

It is usually considered sufficient to seek passive (or ‘opt-out’) consent from parents for surveys with children and young people. However, if a younger child is not deemed capable of giving fully informed consent, there may be an argument for seeking active rather than passive consent from a parent or guardian. If we do this, we can be sure that someone acting in the best interests of the child has consented to their participation in the research on the basis of a full understanding of what that participation will involve. Seeking active consent from parents is compatible with allowing the child a veto over their participation, and with offering them as much information as we think they can absorb. In addition, seeking active parental consent need not affect the order in which consent is sought from parent and child – identified as an important issue in Chapter 2. The problems may come, however, when we consider the practicalities.

Seeking active parental consent is not likely to cause too many practical problems in relation to home-based surveys with children. Interviewers are already required to seek a parent’s consent to conduct an interview in their home, so seeking active consent for the child’s participation would simply require interviewers to have a more detailed discussion with parents on the doorstep than they are required to do at present. Thus, the potential problems of this approach would seem to concern surveys based outside the home, namely those carried out in school.

Obtaining active consent from parents for school-based surveys could prove practically difficult. There are three methods by which this might be obtained: an opt-in letter (i.e. a letter asking parents to let the research team know if they are happy for their child to be approached), a visit to the parent or a telephone call. All of these are likely to have a detrimental effect on survey response rates. The latter two also have considerable cost implications, and all imply extra time in the survey timetable. These may, of course, be the prices we have to pay for meeting our ethical obligations. However, given the substantial nature of these costs, it is also worth questioning whether the required active proxy consent must come from parents rather than, say, teachers. Can we assume that teachers, like (it is assumed) parents, will act in the best interests of all their pupils? If we can, active consent from teachers plus passive consent from parents (and of course active - albeit not fully informed - consent from each child) may be sufficient to meet ethical requirements.

Finally, it would be worth thinking about settings other than home and school in which surveys are sometimes carried out, and considering whether other responsible adults (e.g. youth workers) could be – at least for the purposes of research – viewed as acting in loco parentis, and therefore well-placed to consider carefully the implications of a child’s participation in a survey and to provide fully-informed consent on their behalf.
7.2 Ideas for further research

In this final section, we offer a few suggestions for further research, which might complement and build on the findings and discussion presented in this report.

- In Chapter 2, we explored in some detail children and young people’s views on the roles of both potential participants and their parents in the consent process. Research into parents’ perspectives on the same issue would provide important balance.

- Similarly, it would be of great value to investigate the perspective of survey interviewers on a range of issues discussed here in relation to their role. These include: whether participants should be provided with information about interviewers in advance; whether interviewers have a role to play in providing advice to participants on personal issues; and whether interviewers need to be better-equipped to respond to participants’ requests for explanation and clarification.

- In Chapter 3, we suggested that it could be in researchers’ interests to consider the possibility of shortening interviews in order to collect high-priority data when time is limited (e.g. because a young participant becomes bored or restless). It would be illuminating to explore researchers’ and interviewers’ reactions to this suggestion, and perhaps to conduct experiments looking at how this might work in real interview situations.

- The issue of information disclosure, explored in Chapter 5, is highly complex and would benefit from further investigation with respect to research with both adults and children.

- In this current chapter, we hinted that there may be a case for arguing that interviewers should be allowed some degree of genuine flexibility to explain and clarify questions when interviewing children, even if this might result in some sacrifice in terms of data consistency. Experiments aimed at assessing the real magnitude of this sacrifice would shed light on this suggestion.

- Most of the issues discussed in this report have already attracted a wealth of debate among researchers and academics. One exception is data withdrawal, an issue that is notably absent from the literature on research ethics. More research into researchers’ and participants’ views about data ownership, and the extent to which participants ought to be allowed to withdraw or change data after an interview, would start to fill this important gap.

- Finally, we have been at pains to emphasise throughout this report the small and exploratory nature of our study. Conducting a larger piece of research on similar issues, perhaps including in-depth interviews or single-sex focus groups, would undoubtedly help build a fuller picture of children and young people’s views on the range of important ethical issues explored here.
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APPENDIX A TECHNICAL REPORT

Focus group composition
We carried out eight focus groups in four state-funded mixed-gender schools in the London area. Two groups were carried out with participants from Years Three, Five, Eight and Ten respectively (this translates as children aged seven-to-eight; nine-to-ten; 12-13 and 14-15). Groups with pupils from Years Three and Five included six participants and lasted about one hour, while those with pupils from Years Eight and Ten included eight participants and lasted about an hour and a half. All groups were carried out on school premises within lesson time.

Sampling and recruitment
The four schools were recruited by word-of-mouth. Before approaching each school, we reviewed their latest test / examination results and OFSTED reports to ensure that we included one school at the higher end and one at the lower end of the performance spectrum in the primary and secondary categories respectively. We offered each school £200 as compensation for their time and administrative costs, plus £100 in book tokens as a thank-you for the children’s participation. The decision to offer a portion of the payment in book tokens was based on a desire to ensure that some of the benefits of taking part in the research would be experienced by children directly. We decided not to offer individual rewards or incentives to participants as we were concerned that this might create resentment among peers who were not selected to take part in the focus groups.

Each school selected a non-streamed class in each of the appropriate year groups to take part in the study. A member of the research team then visited the school and made a short presentation to all pupils in the selected classes two to three weeks prior to carrying out the focus groups. The main aims of these presentations were:

- To introduce and explain the study, and the process for selecting participants, to the pupils
- To emphasise the voluntary nature of their participation and the fact that there would be no negative consequences if they decided not to take part
- To give a brief description of survey research, in order to help prepare them for the topics to be discussed in the focus groups.

Each pupil was given a leaflet describing the study and providing other key information to enable them to make an informed decision about whether they would want to take part if approached. The leaflet also contained an opt-out slip for them to return to their teacher if they did not want to participate. In addition, we provided the school with letters and leaflets for parents, which they mailed on our behalf. The pupils’ leaflet was also sent directly to parents, and the letter encouraged them to talk the decision through with their child. The parent letter included an opt-out slip and a pre-paid envelope to enable them to return the slip to the school if they did not want their child to take part. Both the pupil and parent leaflets included contact details for the research team. Leaflets for primary and secondary pupils and the parent letter are provided in Appendix B.

21 In one case, the pupils who turned up for the focus group came from a class which had not received the preliminary presentation or the leaflets. We explained the study in detail and sought their consent before going ahead with the group. This experience illustrates the importance of clear communications with gatekeepers at all stages.
Each school sent us an anonymised class list for each of the selected classes, showing only pupil numbers (corresponding to the alphabetical register) and gender, and excluding any pupils who had opted out of the study or been opted-out by their parents. We then selected pupils randomly within gender, aiming for equal numbers of boys and girls in each group. This did not translate into practice in every case due to pupil absence, but there were no less than three participants of each gender in each focus group. Finally, we sent the selected pupil numbers back to the school and encouraged them to consider whether any of the pupils selected might not work well together in a focus group, for example because some were much more confident or articulate than others, or because there was antipathy between particular pupils. On one occasion, a teacher did raise a concern of this nature, and a substitute pupil was randomly selected. Once the pupil selection had been agreed with the teacher, the pupils were informed. We encouraged teachers to check again at this stage that those selected were happy to take part.

**Data collection instrument**

Our main data collection instrument was a topic guide, which identified key themes and sub-themes for discussion. As this was an investigative study, we wished to encourage participants to discuss the issues raised in an open way, rather than limiting them to a predetermined list of points or questions. Unlike a structured questionnaire, a topic guide allows questioning to be responsive to what participants say. The topic guides used for the primary and secondary focus groups are included in Appendix B.

**Data analysis**

All focus groups were digitally recorded with participants’ permission. Six of the eight were transcribed verbatim; the remaining two primary school groups were ‘charted’ directly from the recording by one of the researchers who had facilitated them. These groups had experienced some difficulty grasping some of the trickier concepts introduced and some participants had spoken rather quietly. It was therefore felt that a researcher who had been present would be in a better position than an external transcriber to pick up on everything of relevance in the recording.

The data were analysed using ‘Framework’, a qualitative analysis method developed by NatCen that uses a thematic approach to classify and interpret qualitative research data. Key topics and issues emerging from the data were identified through familiarisation with transcripts, and a framework of key issues devised (see Appendix B). A series of charts or matrices were then set up, each one relating to a different key theme. The columns in each chart represented the key sub-themes or topics and the rows individual focus groups. Data from each group were then summarised into the appropriate cell – a process known as ‘charting’. In this way, the data were ordered within an analytical framework grounded in respondents’ own accounts. This approach allows consistent ‘within group’ and ‘between group’ analysis, and ensures validity and reliability in interpreting findings.

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See next paragraph for an explanation of ‘charting’.
APPENDIX B  FIELDWORK MATERIALS

1  Primary topic guide

Introduction
- Introduce researchers and NatCen
- We’ve come to talk to you today about your views on taking part in surveys
- Explain how focus group works:
  - No right/wrong answers, not question-and-answer, say in own words
  - Would like to hear from everybody
  - Explain why using digital recorder and about confidentiality
- Speak one at a time for recording
- Please indicate if want to ask a question / do not understand something / if not happy about answering a question
- If you need to take a break for the toilet, let me or [other researcher] know
- Any questions?

Group introduction
Ask each participant to tell us:
- Name
- Age
- Who live with
[Explain this is the only time we’ll go round the circle – for the rest of the group, anyone can speak in any order]

Nature and purpose of social survey research: explanation
- Explain: surveys can be carried out in different ways, including face-to-face (as in the clip), over the telephone or on paper. This clip shows a face-to-face survey taking place.

⇒ SHOW VIDEO CLIP 1: INTERVIEWER CONDUCTING FACE-TO-FACE INTERVIEW – INCLUDES SHOTS OF INTERVIEW SCREEN.

- Has anyone ever taken part in a survey? If so, what was it about?

Consent from children and young people
- Explain: before we (the researchers) ask a child to take part in a survey, we usually give them some information about it, to help them make a decision about whether or not they would like to take part.

- What would you want to know before deciding whether or not to take part in a survey?
  [DISCUSS AS OPEN QUESTION – ONLY PROBE IF NECESSARY]
  Prompt if necessary
  - What the questions will be about
  - Who the interviewer will be (age, sex etc.)
  - How long it will take
  - Where you will be doing it
  - What will happen if you don’t want to do it

- How important is it to be told these things?
- What did you think of the information we gave you before taking part in this group discussion?
Consent from adults
- Who do you think should have a say about whether or not you take part in a survey?

- Explain: We (the researchers) usually send a letter to your mum or dad, or whoever looks after you. The letter tells them about the survey and asks if they are happy for you to take part in it. If they don’t want you to take part, they can sign a form to let us know (like you could when we asked you to take part in this discussion).

Opting out without discussion
⇒ SHOW VIDEO CLIP 2 [PARENTS DISCUSS LETTER TOGETHER AND DECIDE TO OPT-OUT WITHOUT DISCUSSING WITH CHILD. INCLUDES SHOT OF PARENT SIGNING OPT-OUT FORM]

- What did you think about the way the parents made their decision?
  [PROMPT IF NECESSARY: they didn’t discuss their decision with Tom. What do you think about this?]  
- How would you feel about your parents doing this?
- This survey was about friendships and school, but how would you feel if the survey was about bullying?

Discussing the letter together
⇒ SHOW VIDEO CLIP 3 [PARENTS DISCUSS LETTER WITH CHILD, CLIP ENDS BEFORE DECISION MADE]

- What do you think about what the parents did in this clip?
- How would you feel if your parents talked to you about taking part in a survey?
- Would it make a difference what the survey was about (e.g. bullying)?

Parents and children disagreeing
- Imagine you wanted to take part in the survey but your parents didn’t want you to. What do you think should happen? Who should have the final say?
- And what about if your parents wanted you to take part, but you didn’t want to?

Privacy
- If you were taking part in a survey in your home, like Tom was on the tape, would you want anybody else with you in the room, apart from the researcher?
- Who would you want/not want?
- How would you feel about a parent being present?
- How would you feel if it was a friend?
- How would you feel if the survey was about something that might be difficult or embarrassing to talk about, like bullying?

Discomfort and withdrawal
⇒ SHOW VIDEO CLIP 4 [RESPONDENT EXPERIENCING DISCOMFORT AT ANSWERING QUESTION / CONTEMPLATING WHETHER TO END INTERVIEW]

- What do you think Tom could do now?
- What would you do if you wanted to end the interview?
- Apart from being bored, what other reasons might there be for someone wanting to end an interview? [IF NECESSARY, PROBE: embarrassment, worries about telling the truth]
- What would you do if you didn’t want to answer a particular question?
- How could the researcher make it easy for you to say you do not want to do something?
Confidentiality (1): dealing with adults’ enquiries
⇒ SHOW VIDEO CLIP 6 [PARENT ASKING INTERVIEWER TO REVEAL CHILD’S ANSWERS]

- Should the researcher tell the parent what Tom said?
- What if she had asked to know his answer to questions about bullying?
- What if the survey had taken place in school, and it was a teacher asking to know the answer, rather than a parent?

Data withdrawal
⇒ SHOW VIDEO CLIP 5 [RESPONDENT WANTING TO WITHDRAW (RELATIVELY INNOCUOUS) DATA AFTER INTERVIEW FINISHED]

- Why do you think Tom is worried about something he’s told the researcher? Has he got good reason to be worried?
- What should the researcher do if you ask him not to use the answers you’ve given?
- Tom’s interview was about school and friends. What if it had been about bullying?

Confidentiality (2): disclosure to third parties

- Explain: Usually, a researcher does not tell anybody else the answers a child gives during their interview.
- Can you think of any times/situations where it might be right for the researcher to tell someone else the child’s answer?

- Explain: We are now going to describe some situations in which a researcher might consider telling somebody else what a child has said.

Scenario 1
Imagine Tom is taking part in a survey about how young people spend their money. He tells the researcher that sometimes, when he runs out of money, he steals from shops.

- Should the researcher tell anyone about this? If so, who and why?
- How would you feel if this was you / your friend?

Scenario 2
Tom is taking part in a survey about friendships at school. He tells the researcher that he is being bullied by some of the older boys in his school.

- Should the researcher tell anyone about this? If so, who and why?
- How would you feel if this was you / your friend?
- What if Tom told the researcher that he and some of his friends had been bullying another boy in the class? Would that be different?
- How would you feel if this was you / your friend?

Scenario 3
Tom is taking part in a survey about families. He tells the researcher that his Dad sometimes hits him hard enough to leave a bruise.

- Should the researcher tell anyone about this? If so, who and why?
- How would you feel if this was you / your friend?
Key factors
- If you were asked tomorrow to take part in a survey about school and friendships, what would you say?
- What would you mainly think about when deciding whether or not to take part? Reasons for choices.
- What if the survey was about bullying?

Conclusion
- Explain: before we finish, we’d just like to ask what it’s been like taking part in the discussion today.
- How easy was it to understand and answer the questions? Which ones were difficult to understand or answer?
- What could we do to make it easier / more fun for you?
- Any questions / final thoughts?
- We will write up a report, but it will talk about all the children we’ve spoken to, rather than saying who said what
- Will receive feedback magazine
- School will be given £100 in book tokens as a thank you for your contributions
- Offer spare leaflets with researchers’ contact details
- Thank you
2 Secondary topic guide

Introduction
- Introduce researchers and NatCen
- We’ve come to talk to you today about your views on taking part in surveys
- Explain how focus group works:
  - No right/wrong answers, say things in your own words
  - Would like to hear from everybody
  - Explain why using digital recorder and about confidentiality
  - Speak one at a time for recording
  - Please indicate if want to ask a question / do not understand something / if not happy about answering a question
  - If you need to take a break for the toilet, let me or [other researcher] know
- Any questions?

Group introduction
Ask each participant to tell us:
- Name
- Age
- Who live with
[Explain this is the only time we’ll go round the circle – for the rest of the group, anyone can speak in any order]

Nature and purpose of social survey research: explanation
- Explain: surveys can be carried out in different ways, including face-to-face (as in the clip), over the telephone or on paper. This clip shows a face-to-face survey taking place.

⇒ SHOW VIDEO CLIP 1: INTERVIEWER CONDUCTING FACE-TO-FACE INTERVIEW – INCLUDES SHOTS OF INTERVIEW SCREEN.

- Has anyone ever taken part in a survey? If so, what was it about?

Consent from children and young people
- Explain: before we (the researchers) ask a teenager to take part in a survey, we usually give them some information about it, to help them make a decision about whether or not they would like to take part.

- What would you want to know before deciding whether or not to take part in a survey? [DISCUSS AS OPEN QUESTION – ONLY PROBE IF NECESSARY].
  Prompt if necessary:
  - What you will be asked to do (fill in a form, answer some questions face-to-face etc.)
  - What the questions will be about
  - Who the interviewer will be (age, sex etc.)
  - How long it will take
  - Where you will be doing it
  - Who will be there while you do it
  - What will happen if you don’t want to do it
  - What will happen to your answers

- How important would it be to know these things?
- What did you think of the information we gave you before taking part in this group discussion?
Consent from adults

- Who do you think should have a say about whether or not you take part in a survey?; reasons for choice

- Explain: We (the researchers) usually send a letter to your mum or dad, or whoever looks after you. The letter tells them about the survey and asks if they are happy for you to take part in it. If they don't want you to take part, they can sign a form to let us know (like you could when we asked you to take part in this discussion).

Opting out without discussion

SHOW VIDEO CLIP 2 [PARENTS DISCUSS LETTER TOGETHER AND DECIDE TO OPT-OUT WITHOUT DISCUSSING WITH CHILD. INCLUDES SHOT OF PARENT SIGNING OPT-OUT FORM]

- What did you think about the way the parents made their decision? [PROMPT IF NECESSARY: they didn't discuss their decision with Emily. What do you think about this?]
- How would you feel about your parents doing this?
- This survey was about friendships and school. How would you feel if the survey was about something different (e.g. drugs)?

Discussing the letter together

SHOW VIDEO CLIP 3 [PARENTS DISCUSS LETTER WITH CHILD, CLIP ENDS BEFORE DECISION MADE]

- What do you think about what the parents did in this clip?
- How would you feel if your parents talked to you about taking part in a survey?
- Would it make a difference what the survey was about (e.g. drugs)?

Parents and children disagreeing

- Imagine you wanted to take part in the survey but your parents didn’t want you to. What do you think should happen? Who should have the final say?
- And what about if your parents wanted you to take part, but you didn’t want to?

IF TIME:

- Who should be asked first, the parents or the teenager? Reasons for views
Privacy
- If you were taking part in a survey in your home, would you want anybody else there with you in the room with you and the researcher?
- Who would you want/not want?
- How would you feel about a parent being present?
- How would you feel if it was a friend?
- How would you feel if the survey was about something that might be difficult or embarrassing to talk about, like drugs?

Discomfort and withdrawal
⇒ SHOW VIDEO CLIP 4 [RESPONDENT EXPERIENCING DISCOMFORT AT ANSWERING QUESTION / CONTEMPLATING WHETHER TO END INTERVIEW]
- What do you think Emily could do now?
- What would you do if you wanted to end the interview?
- Apart from being bored, what other reasons might there be for someone wanting to end an interview? [IF NECESSARY, PROBE: embarrassment, worries about telling the truth]
- What would you do if you didn’t want to answer a particular question?
- How could the researcher make it easy for you to say you do not want to do something?

Confidentiality (1): dealing with adults’ enquiries
⇒ SHOW VIDEO CLIP 6 [PARENT ASKING INTERVIEWER TO REVEAL CHILD’S ANSWERS]
- Should the researcher tell the parent what Emily said?
- What if she had asked to know his/her answer about a question to do with drugs?
- What if the survey had taken place in school, and it was a teacher asking to know the answer, rather than a parent?

Data withdrawal
⇒ SHOW VIDEO CLIP 5 [RESPONDENT WANTING TO WITHDRAW (RELATIVELY INNOCUOUS) DATA AFTER INTERVIEW FINISHED]
- Why do you think Emily is worried about what she’s told the researcher? Does she have good reason to be worried?
- What should the researcher do if you ask him not to use the answers you’ve given?
- Emily’s interview was about school and friends. What if it had been about drugs?

Confidentiality (2): disclosure to third parties
- Explain: Usually, a researcher does not tell anybody else the answers a teenager gives during their interview.
- Can you think of any times/situations where it might be right for the researcher to tell someone else the teenager’s answer?
- Explain: We are now going to describe some situations in which a researcher might consider telling somebody else what a teenager has said.
Scenario 1
Imagine Emily is taking part in a survey about how young people spend their money. She tells the researcher that sometimes, when she runs out of money, she steals from shops.

- Should the researcher tell anyone about this? If so, who and why?
- How would you feel if this was you / your friend?

Scenario 2
Emily is taking part in a survey about friendships at school. She tells the researcher that she is being bullied by some of the older girls in her school.

- Should the researcher tell anyone about this? If so, who and why?
- How would you feel if this was you / your friend?
- What if Emily told the researcher that she and some of her friends had been bullying another girl in the class? Would that be different?
- How would you feel if this was you / your friend?

Scenario 3
Emily is taking part in a survey about families. She tells the researcher that her Dad sometimes hits her hard enough to leave a bruise.

- Should the researcher tell anyone about this? If so, who and why?
- How would you feel if this was you / your friend?

Key factors

- If you were asked tomorrow to take part in a survey about school and friendships, what would you say?
- What would you mainly think about when deciding whether or not to take part? Reasons for choices.
- What if the survey was about something different (e.g. drugs)?

Conclusion

- Explain: before we finish, we’d just like to ask what it’s been like taking part in the discussion today.

- How easy was it to understand and answer the questions? Which ones were difficult to understand or answer?
- What could we do to make it easier / more fun for you?

- Any questions / final thoughts?
- We will write up a report, but it will just talk about what all the teenagers we spoke to said, rather than who said what
- Will receive feedback
- School will be given £100 in book tokens as a thank you for your contributions
- Offer spare leaflets with researchers’ contact details
- Thank you
3 Analysis framework

Chart 1: Awareness, understanding, experience & decision-making

1.1 Experience, awareness & understanding of surveys
   Whether taken part in any before, topics, methodology; whether heard the term, what understood by it, surveys vs research in general

1.2 Views & opinions of surveys
   Purpose / value of surveys, whether fun/boring etc. Comment on whether views & opinions appeared to change during course of group discussion.

1.3 Information would want in order to decide & why
   Relative importance, comment on whether views appeared to have changed during course of group discussion.

1.4 Format of information
   Preferences (e.g. written vs verbal), include reactions/comments on our info leaflet

1.5 Factors influencing decision
   Factors which would influence decision re whether or not to take part, relative importance, comment on whether appear to have changed during group discussion.

1.6 Other

Chart 2: Consent

2.1 Who should (or shouldn’t) have a say & why
   Parents plus others

2.2 Order of consultation
   In what order should child and others be asked

2.3 Parents discussing with child
   Should they discuss it or not & why, does it depend on topic of survey & how, how would discussing/not discussing make you feel

2.4 The final say
   If child & other (e.g. parent) disagree, who should have final say & why, does it depend who thinks what, how would deal with disagreement

2.5 Other

Chart 3: Presence of others during interview

3.1 Reasons why interview should(n’t) be private
   Circumstances when privacy (not) required, significance of survey topic, interview location, interviewer characteristics etc.

3.2 Parents – why would/wouldn’t want them there

3.3 Other adults – why would/wouldn’t want them there

3.4 Siblings – why would/wouldn’t want them there

3.5 Friends – why would/wouldn’t want them there

3.6 Other
Chart 4: Discomfort and withdrawal

4.1 Reasons for ending an interview early / taking break
   Include reasons for being uncomfortable in general
   Distinguish between ending and taking a break as necessary

4.2 Barriers to ending an interview early / taking a break
   Distinguish between ending and taking a break as necessary

4.3 Strategies for ending an interview early / taking break
   Including whether would feel able. Distinguish between ending and taking a break as necessary

4.4 Interviewer role in endings / breaks
   What could they say/do to make this easy, what shouldn’t they say/do, distinguish between ending and taking a break as necessary. Include what they can do to prevent you feeling uncomfortable.

4.5 Reasons for refusing to answer a question

4.6 Barriers to refusing to answer a question

4.7 Strategies for refusing to answer a question
   Including whether would feel able

4.8 Interviewer role in refusals
   What could they say/do to make this easy, what shouldn’t they say/do

4.9 Other

Chart 5: Data withdrawal

5.1 Reasons why might (not) want to withdraw data
   Why might you want to take back something you said? What would this achieve and why might it not be necessary?

5.2 Feasibility of withdrawing data
   Do you think a researcher would let you do this? Why/why not?

5.3 Should data withdrawal be allowed?
   Do you think a researcher should let you do this? Why/why not?

5.4 Other

Chart 6: Confidentiality and disclosure

6.1 Confidentiality (of answers)
   Should answers be kept confidential & why (not), does it depend on the topic of the survey; when might it be necessary/important to tell someone else the answers, significance of topic/nature of answer

6.2 Who to disclose to
   Who might it be necessary/important to tell a child’s answers to; is it OK to tell some people and not others & why

6.3 Confidentiality of questions
   Is it OK to tell someone the questions but not the answers; if so, who is it OK to tell and in what sorts of situations

6.4 Other
Chart 7: Methodology

7.1 Focus groups
Were focus groups the right method? What difference would using another method have made? How did the focus group dynamic affect the findings?

7.2 Follow-up vs non-follow-up
What were the implications of introducing new and often abstract concepts to participants? Which concepts were easier/more difficult for them to tackle? Reflect on our decision not to follow up a specific survey interview – advantages/disadvantages of the 2 approaches. How does the fact that some participants had not taken part in a survey impact on the data?

7.3 Video stimulus
How did the video work? Advantages/disadvantages. How would the group have worked differently without it?

7.4 Profile of participants
What impact did the mix of sexes have? Did the random selection lead to a mix of abilities/characteristics as intended, and what were the implications of this?

7.5 School setting
What was the significance of the school setting for the way the group worked and the data collected? What differences (pos or neg) would it have made conducting the group outside school?

7.6 Preparation
How did the leaflet and preliminary presentation affect the way the group worked and the data collected? What might we do differently in terms of preparation next time?

7.7 Other
4 Information for parents, primary and secondary school children

Dear Parent

Children’s views on taking part in surveys

I am writing to ask for your consent to involve your child in some research we are carrying out at [insert name of school].

I work at the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen), Britain’s largest independent social research organisation. We carry out research on a wide range of topics, including work, childcare, health, housing, education and transport.

This autumn, we will be visiting a small number of schools to talk to children about their views on taking part in surveys. An increasing number of surveys are now carried out with children. These are often reported in the newspapers and on TV, with results such as: “half the children in England play regular sport” or “three-quarters of children drink a fizzy drink every day”. However, no-one has asked the children how they feel about taking part. That is why this study is important, and why [insert name of school] has agreed to help us with it.

The research will involve talking to a group of [6/8] children for about [1 hour/1.5 hours] at school, during the school day. Your child may be asked whether he or she would like to take part. I have already been to the school to tell your child’s class about the research. I also gave each pupil a leaflet, which is enclosed with this letter (note that your child may already have said that he or she does not want to take part).

We very much hope that you will be happy for your child to take part in the group discussion if he or she is asked. If you are happy for your child to take part, you do not need to do anything. However, if you DO NOT want your child to take part, you can return the slip below to the school in the pre-paid envelope provided.

I have enclosed a leaflet which tells you more about the research, and may help you discuss it with your child.

If you have any questions about this research, you can contact me on 020 7549 9524, email a.bell@natcen.ac.uk, or write to me at the Head Office address at the top of this letter.

If you would like to speak to the school about it, please call [XXX] on [XXX] or email [XXX]

Yours sincerely,

Alice Bell
Families & Children Group
National Centre for Social Research

___________________________________________________________

Children’s views on taking part in surveys
I DO NOT WANT my child to be asked to take part in this research.

Name of child: _______________________________________________________

Signature __________________________________________________________

Date _______/_______/________
The results of the research... 
...will be written up in a report and published by NatCen in 2007. A copy of the report will be available from the school or on our website www.natcen.ac.uk. The report will not mention any names of individual schools or children.

If you would like more information...
...please contact:

Alice Bell
Tel. 020 7549 9524
Email. a.bell@natcen.ac.uk

or

Clarissa White
Tel. 020 7549 9579
Email. c.white@natcen.ac.uk

You can also write to us at:
NatCen
35 Northampton Square
London
EC1V 0AX

Children’s views on taking part in surveys

Information for parents and guardians
During autumn 2006, the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) will be talking to children about their views on taking part in surveys.

Who we are
NatCen is the short name for the National Centre for Social Research. We are Britain’s largest independent social research organisation. We carry out research on a wide range of topics, including work, childcare, health, housing, education and transport.

Why we are doing the research
Nowadays, more and more surveys are being carried out with children, but no-one has asked them for their views on taking part. This research is important because it will help researchers understand how children feel about taking part in surveys and what kinds of information they need.

How we will choose children to take part in the research
We will choose 6-8 children at random (like picking names out of a hat), and then check that their teachers think the selected children will feel comfortable about taking part. If chosen, your child can then decide whether or not to take part.

What your child will be asked to do
If chosen, your child will be asked to join a group of 6-8 children to discuss together the topics shown below. This will take place at school during the school day, and will last 1-1.5 hours. Discussion groups will be tape-recorded, but only the research team will listen to the tapes.

What we will be talking about
We will be asking children to tell us their views about a number of questions, including:

- What information do they need to decide whether to take part in a survey?
- How important is it for face-to-face interviews to be carried out in private?
- How important are parents' views about whether their child should take part in a survey?
- Is it ever OK for researchers to tell others what a particular child has said during a survey interview?
- What should a child do if he/she wants to end a survey interview early, or feels uncomfortable answering a particular question?

We will use some acted scenes on a video/DVD and poster boards to help explain some of these issues.

What your child will get out of it
Taking part in a discussion group can be a new and interesting experience for children and young people. We will tell them about the results of the research, so that they learn from the experience too.

If your child has never taken part in a survey...
...it doesn’t matter - we will explain everything they need to know.

We will pay the school...
...£200 to cover the administrative costs of helping with the research, as well as giving them book tokens worth £100 as a thank you for the children's time and effort.

If your child is not chosen...
... he or she will also be told about the results of the research.

If your child has never taken part in a survey...
...it doesn’t matter - we will explain everything they need to know.

We will pay the school...
...£200 to cover the administrative costs of helping with the research, as well as giving them book tokens worth £100 as a thank you for the children's time and effort.

If your child is not chosen...
... he or she will also be told about the results of the research.
We will send out a letter to the parent or guardian of every pupil in your class. If they don’t want you to join the group discussion, they can tell the school. If you say you don’t want to take part, we won’t ask you, whatever your parent says.

We hope you will be happy to take part in this research. This leaflet is yours to keep.

If you want to ask any questions... you can phone me on 020 7549 9524. If there is nobody there, you can leave a message.

You can also email me at a.bell@natcen.ac.uk

What do you think about taking part in surveys?
My name is Alice. I work at the National Centre for Social Research, in a team with four other researchers called Clarissa, Rachel, Caroline and Jenny.

We want to find out what children and young people think about taking part in surveys.

Surveys involve using questionnaires to find out what people think and do. You may have seen the results of surveys in the newspaper or on TV – things like “half the children in England play computer games” or “three-quarters of children think smoking is unhealthy”.

This leaflet tells you more about our research.

What we are doing
We are asking children and young people in schools what they think about taking part in surveys. It doesn’t matter whether or not you have ever taken part in a survey (or even if you have no idea what a survey is), as we will explain everything you need to know.

What we are asking you to do
In the next few weeks, 6 pupils from your class will be asked to join a group discussion.

How we will choose the pupils
We will choose the pupils at random (like picking names out of a hat). We will then talk to your teacher about it, in case there is any reason why the group might not work well together.

About the discussion
- The discussion will take about one hour
- It will be in your school, during the school day
- It is not a test and there are no right or wrong answers – we just want to hear what you think
- We will tape-record the discussion so we can remember what you say

After the discussion...
...we will write a report about what people have told us. We will not say who said what in the report.

We will also send you a magazine about what people have told us.

We will also give your school £100 in book tokens, as a thank you for taking part.

You do not have to take part. You can decide whether you would like to take part or not. Even if you say yes to begin with, you can change your mind at any time.

Nothing will happen if you say no. You will still get your magazine, and your school will still get its book tokens.

If you DO want to take part, you don’t need to do anything yet. If you are chosen, your teacher will talk to you about it.

If you DO NOT want to take part, you can fill in the slip at the bottom of this leaflet and return it to your teacher – or you can just tell them.

Research on taking part in surveys
I DO NOT WANT to take part in this research

Name

Now please pass this slip to your teacher.
We will send out a letter to the parent or guardian of every pupil in your class. If they don’t want you to join the group discussion, they can tell the school. If you say you don’t want to take part, we won’t ask you, whatever your parent says.

We hope you will be happy to take part in this research. This leaflet is yours to keep.

If you want to ask any questions... you can phone me on 020 7549 9524. If there is nobody there, you can leave a message.

You can also email me at a.bell@natcen.ac.uk

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London
EC1V 0AX

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Charity No. 1091768

What do you think about taking part in surveys?
My name is Alice. I work at the National Centre for Social Research, in a team with four other researchers called Clarissa, Rachel, Caroline and Jenny.

We want to find out what children and young people think about taking part in surveys.

Surveys involve using questionnaires to find out what people think and do. You may have seen the results of surveys in the newspaper or on TV – things like “half the teenagers in England play regular sport” or “a quarter of teenagers think Tony Blair can be trusted”.

This leaflet tells you more about our research.

**What we are doing**

We are asking children and young people in schools what they think about taking part in surveys. It doesn’t matter whether or not you have ever taken part in a survey (or even if you have no idea what a survey is), as we will explain everything you need to know.

**What we are asking you to do**

In the next few weeks, 8 pupils from your class will be asked to join a group discussion.

**How we will choose the pupils**

We will choose the pupils at random (like picking names out of a hat). We will then talk to your teacher about it, in case there is any reason why the group might not work well together.

**About the discussion**

- The discussion will take about an hour and a half
- It will be in your school, during the school day
- It is not a test and there are no right or wrong answers – we just want to hear what you think
- We will tape-record the discussion so we can remember what you say

**After the discussion...**

...we will write a report about what people have told us. We will not say who said what in the report.

We will also send you a magazine about what people have told us.

We will also give your school £100 in book tokens, as a thank you for taking part.

You do not have to take part. You can decide whether you would like to take part or not. Even if you say yes to begin with, you can change your mind at any time.

Nothing will happen if you say no. You will still get your magazine, and your school will still get its book tokens.

If you DO want to take part, you don’t need to do anything yet. If you are chosen, your teacher will talk to you about it.

If you DO NOT want to take part, you can fill in the slip at the bottom of this leaflet and return it to your teacher – or you can just tell them.

**Research on taking part in surveys**

I DO NOT WANT to take part in this research

Name

Now please pass this slip to your teacher.