

Developing good qualitative research questions



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Session outline

- 1) Importance of research questions in qualitative studies
- 2) Conceptualising qualitative research questions
- 3) Writing good qualitative research questions
- 4) Activity: Draft and refine your own questions
- 5) Examples of qualitative research questions from funded projects

Clearing Up a Common Confusion

In qualitative research, there are **two** types of questions that often get confused:

1) Qualitative research questions

These are the *big-picture questions* researchers ask to guide their overall study.

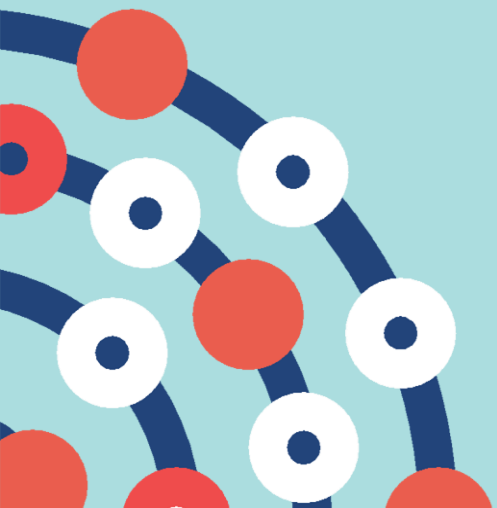
e.g. How do students at x University experience anxiety in their daily lives?

2) Interview (or data collection) questions

These are the *questions researchers ask participants* during interviews or focus groups.

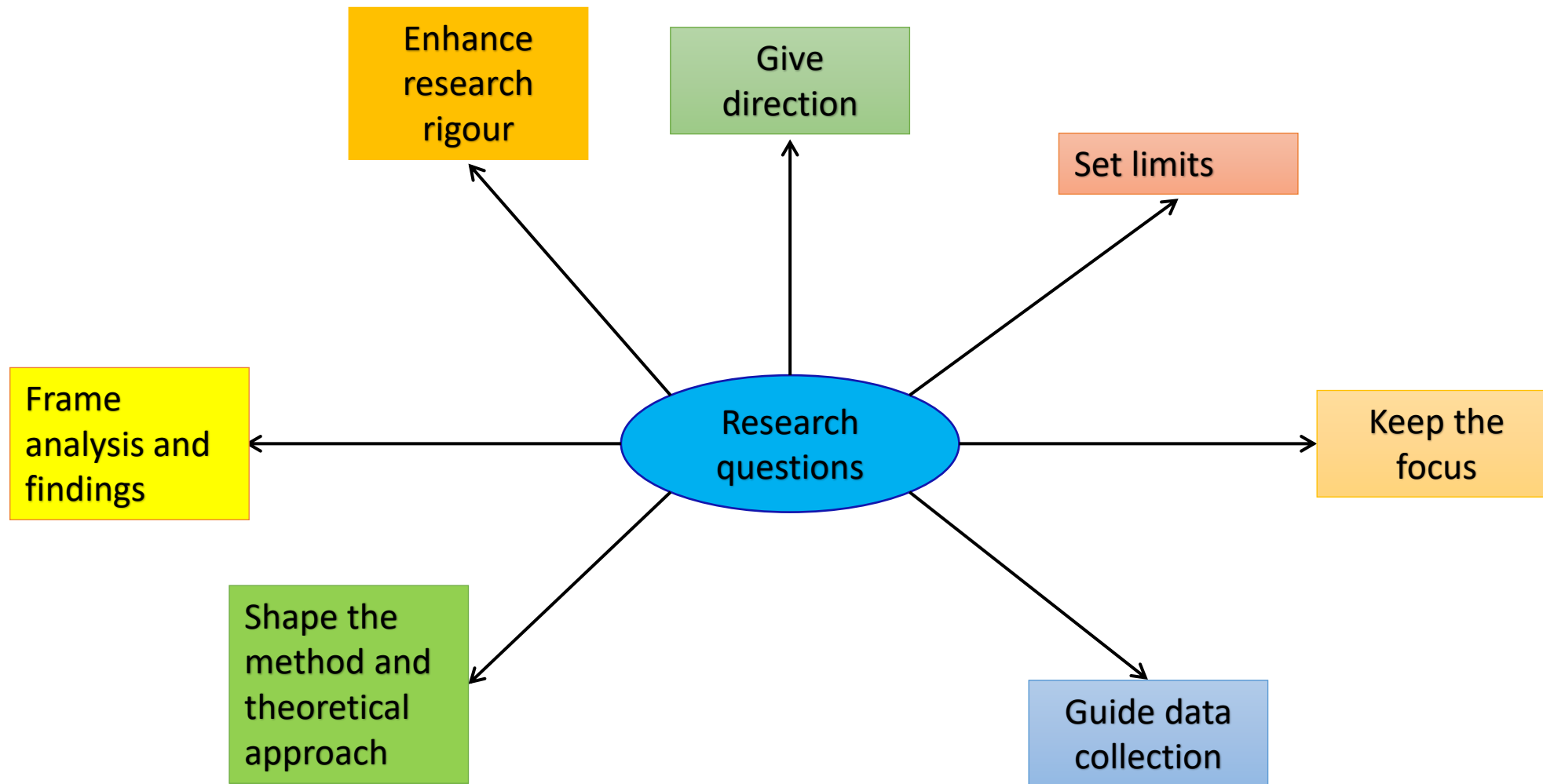
e.g. What strategies do you use to manage your anxiety day to day?

1) Why are research questions important?



"Good research questions do not necessarily produce good research, but poorly conceived or constructed questions will likely create problems that affect all subsequent stages of a study."

(Agee, 2009)



Research questions:

Give direction: they tell us exactly what our study is about.

e.g. How do parents of children with developmental disabilities experience stigma in their everyday lives?

Set limits: they define what our study will and won't focus on.

e.g. Our study will only include parents of children with developmental disabilities (not all adults, not children) and only focus on stigma in everyday life.

Research questions:

Keep the focus: they help us stay on track and not get distracted by unrelated topics.

e.g. If the parents talked about financial struggles, we would only explore those in relation to stigma not as a separate issue.

Guide data collection: they show us what kind of data is needed & from whom.

e.g. We may interview parents about situations where they felt judged or excluded and ask how these experiences affect their lives.

Research questions:

Shape the method and theoretical approach

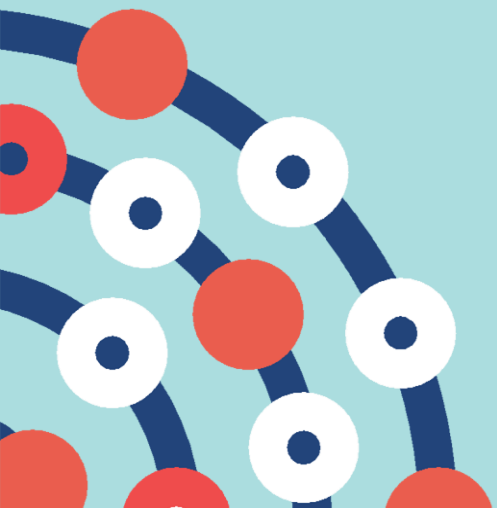
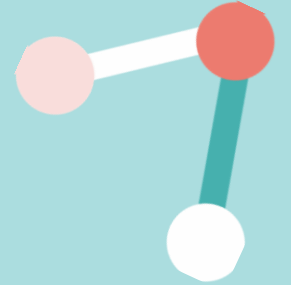
e.g. Since the question asks about personal experiences, the researcher may use:

- In-depth interviews or focus groups
- A theoretical lens like courtesy stigma (stigma experienced by association)

Frame analysis & findings: Help structure how our data is analysed and how findings are presented.

Enhance research rigour: Thoughtfully developed questions contribute to the overall rigour, coherence, and credibility of the study.

2) Conceptualising qualitative research questions



Getting started

Qualitative research does not begin with hypotheses, but it needs a plan, including initial guiding questions (Agee, 2009).

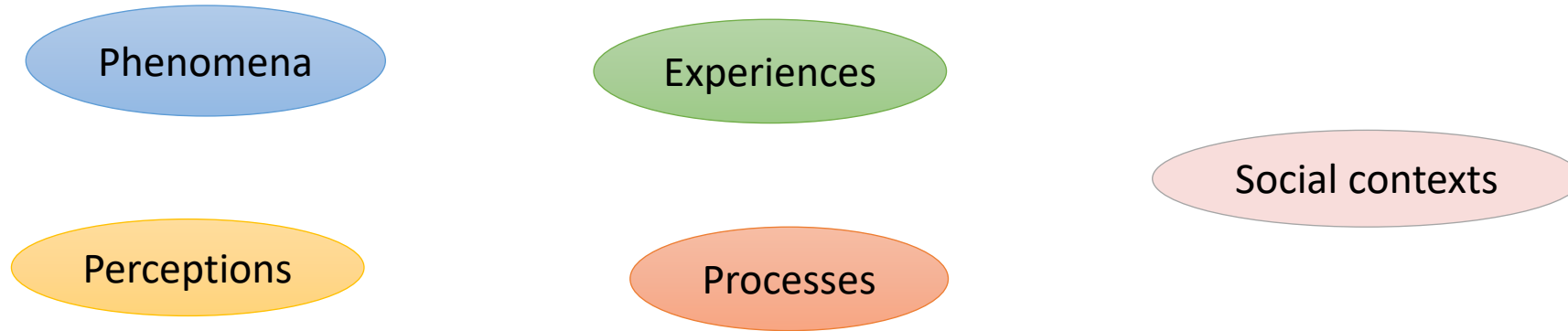
Initial questions are tentative, evolving and exploratory; they serve as a starting point, not a fixed direction.

Research often begins with curiosity or passion about a topic. Ideas can arise from multiple sources (Rapley, 2022).



Formulating your research questions

- Consider what you are interested in:



- Useful starting question: “What do I want to know?”
- Identify what’s worth studying. “So what?” “Why does it matter?”

Topics, aims and objectives, and research questions

A research topic:

- A broad area of interest e.g. depression
- It does not tell us exactly what data we need to collect or what exactly to study.

Aims and objectives:

- Help us narrow down our topic.
- Aims specify what the research intends to **achieve**; they are the **purpose** of the research (Braun and Clarke, 2013).
- The **objectives** are the **specific steps or goals** that help us achieve the aim.

e.g. **Aim:** To explore how people experience and cope with depression in everyday life.

e.g. Objectives:

- To explore how people describe the impact of depression on their daily lives
- To identify common coping strategies used by people living with depression

Research questions

- They are the specific, open-ended questions that guide the qualitative study.

e.g. How do students at X University with depression describe its impact on their daily routines?

You move from topic → aims and objectives → research questions (White, 2017).

Role of Theory

- Theory can help shape our research questions.



e.g. If we use courtesy stigma theory (stigma experienced by association), we might ask:

“How do parents of children with developmental disabilities experience and respond to social stigma in everyday life?”

- Theory is not always needed at the start, sometimes it develops during the study.

Role of Theory



- Theory can help us decide what to focus on and who to include.

e.g. If we are using intersectionality theory, we might explore how race, gender, and socioeconomic status affect how different parents of children with developmental disabilities experience stigma.

- Theory supports our interpretation of findings.

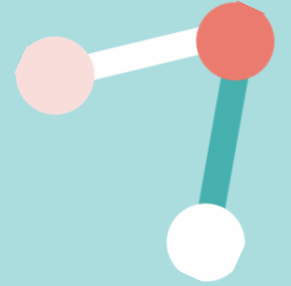
Ethical reflexivity from the start

- What are the potential risks or consequences of studying this topic?
- How will I ensure that participants' voices are respected, represented, and not exploited?
- Who benefits from this research and how?

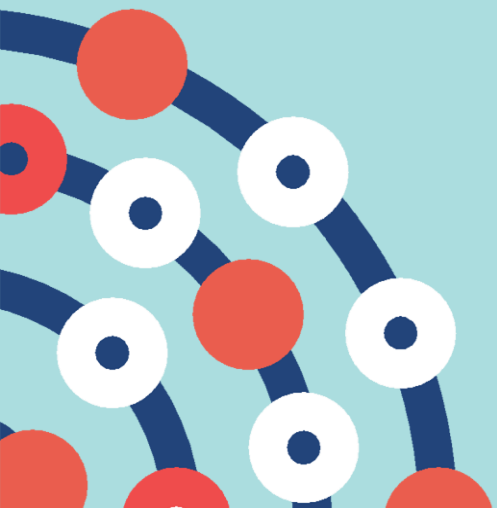


*“In thinking about research topics and research questions, it’s also important to consider **the ethical and political dimensions of research**. We encourage you to ask questions like: **in whose interests is this research? Who might have a stake in the outcomes? In what ways- good or bad- might the research be interpreted and/or used? That is, how ethically delicate or politically sensitive is the research?**”*

Braun and Clarke, 2013 (emphasis added)



3) Writing good qualitative research questions



Contextualised



Good qualitative research questions **clearly specify the context such as the population, location, or situation so our study remains manageable and meaningful.**

Example:

Too broad: How do parents perceive stigma related to developmental disabilities?

Better framed: How do low-income immigrant parents in urban areas perceive stigma related to their children's developmental disabilities?

Open-ended and exploratory



Qualitative research questions should invite rich, detailed descriptions rather than yes/no answers or narrowly defined responses.

Example:

Poorly framed: Do parents of children with developmental disabilities experience mental health problems?

Better framed: What are the mental health experiences of parents caring for children with developmental disabilities?

Answerable and Feasible

Research questions must be realistically answerable given our study's time frame, resources, and access to data.

Example:

Unfeasible question: How do all families of children with developmental disabilities across the country access mental health services?

Feasible question: How do families of children with developmental disabilities living in rural areas of [specific region] access mental health services?



Theoretically informed

Good qualitative research questions often connect to a theory. This connection can be **explicit or implicit**.

Example:

Without theory: How do parents experience stigma related to their children's developmental disabilities?

With theory: How do parents of children with developmental disabilities manage *social stigma* in their communities?

Focused and Clear

Good qualitative research questions **focus on one main idea or topic at a time. This helps us explore that idea deeply and clearly.**



Example:

How do parents of children with developmental disabilities experience stigma and access support services?

- How do parents of children with developmental disabilities experience stigma in their communities?
- How do these parents find and use support services?

Ethically sound

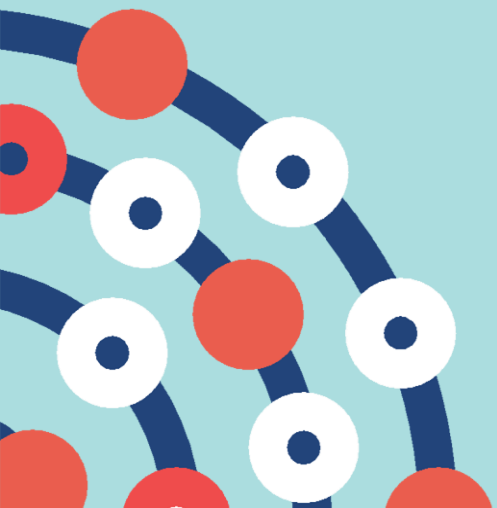
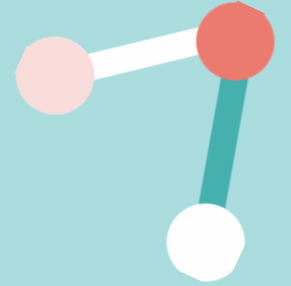


Example:

Poorly crafted: What negative effects do parents of children with developmental disabilities experience regarding their mental health?

Better framed: How do parents of children with developmental disabilities describe their mental health experiences?

4) Activity: Draft and refine your own qualitative research questions



Draft and refine (5 minutes)

Please rewrite the following questions into a **good qualitative research question** suitable for a grant proposal:

1. Are mental health apps helpful for people with depression?
2. What is the recovery process like for people with depression?
3. Do patients feel involved in mental health decisions?

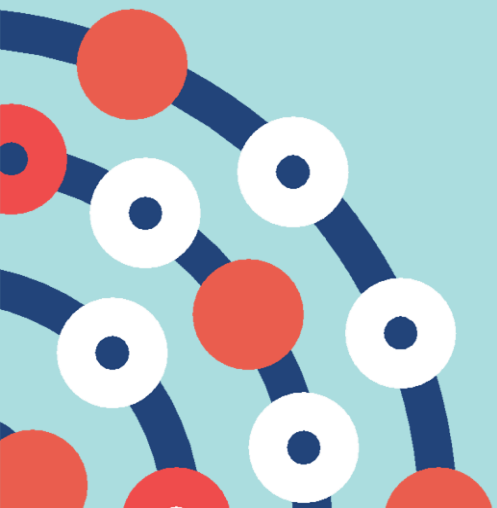
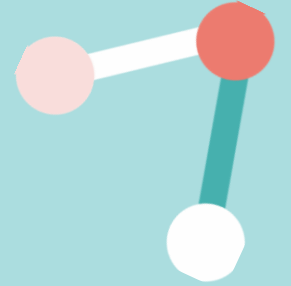
Share and discuss (5 minutes)

- Share: choose one or two of your revised questions and share them with all.
- Discuss:

Reflect together on the following:

- ✓ What makes your revised question good or more appropriate for qualitative research?
- ✓ How did you improve clarity, focus and relevance?

5) Examples of qualitative research questions from funded projects



Research question: **How do core ethnic minority groups in England perceive neurodevelopmental disorders and what are the barriers to these groups accessing NHS neurodevelopmental support within mental health services?**

<https://fundingawards.nihr.ac.uk/award/NIHR206134>

Research Award

Active Award


Award ID: NIHR206134

Shortlist: 

Exploring the EXPeriences of Accessing services and understanding Neurodevelopmental Disorders for ethnic minorities in England (EXPAND)

Plain English Summary:

Aim: Neurodevelopmental disorders, including autism spectrum disorder, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, tic disorder, begin in childhood but continue to affect people throughout life. They have a negative impact on children, affecting schoolwork, friendships, and mental health. It is important children can access appropriate neurodevelopmental support which is offered within child m...

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Abstract:

Question: How do core ethnic minority groups in England perceive neurodevelopmental disorders and what are the barriers to these groups accessing NHS neurodevelopmental support within mental health services? Background: Neurodevelopmental disorders (such as autism spectrum disorder, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, and tic disorders) are lifelong conditions associated ...

Research questions: What is already known about men's mental health and wellbeing during their transition to fatherhood? **How do first-time fathers perceive their mental health and wellbeing needs during this transition?** What is the feasibility and acceptability of the Promotional Guide system on first-time fathers' mental health and wellbeing?

<https://fundingawards.nihr.ac.uk/award/ICA-CDRF-2015-01-031>

Career Development Award

Completed Award


Award ID: ICA-CDRF-2015-01-031

Shortlist: 

Testing the feasibility and acceptability of an intervention to improve first time fathers' transition to fatherhood focusing on the role of mental health and wellbeing.

Plain English Summary:

The transition to fatherhood is a vulnerable time in men's lives. Up to 10% of fathers are reported to be depressed after birth, which impacts negatively on fathers, mothers and their children, and increases the cost to society. Ensuring the best start in life for every child is a priority for the UK government (DH, 2013, 2015) and father's mental wellbeing is crucial to healthy couple relationship...

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Research questions: **How can technology support assessment and monitoring of patients at a distance?** 2. **How can we achieve rapid spread and scale up of remote-by-default models of primary care?** 3. **What insights can we glean from this time of crisis that will help build a more resilient NHS?**

<https://fundingawards.nihr.ac.uk/award/NIHR133168>

Research Award

Completed Award

Award ID: NIHR133168

Shortlist: 

Remote-by-Default Care in the COVID-19 Pandemic: addressing the micro-, meso-, and macro-level challenges of a radical new service model

Plain English Summary:

AIM In the context of COVID-19, to address micro- (technical tools, clinical techniques), meso- (organisational change) and macro (national infrastructure) aspects of a remote-by-default service model in primary care. OBJECTIVES 1. Validate and embed evidence-based tools for remote assessment and monitoring. 2. Support local implementation teams to overcome technica...

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Research questions: **How do structural and system factors help or hinder commissioning of health and social care that is integrated with housing and what are stakeholders' experiences of integrated care?** What is the value for money of length of health and social care contact on service use, costs, and health related outcomes for people experiencing homelessness?

<https://fundingawards.nihr.ac.uk/award/NIHR206006>

Research Award

Active Award

Award ID: NIHR206006

Shortlist: 

Understanding the Missing Links: Integrated Health and Social Care for People Experiencing Homelessness

Plain English Summary:

About a quarter of a million people are homeless in England. The majority of people experiencing homelessness have long-term mental and physical health problems. They often have past experiences of trauma and violence, and contacts with criminal justice systems. People experiencing homelessness struggle to access health and social care that would help with these needs. Research sh...

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Research question: **How can general practices better identify people with complex mental health difficulties, and provide care in a way which integrates primary care and specialist services?**

<https://fundingawards.nihr.ac.uk/award/NIHR203473>

Research Award

Completed Award

Award ID: NIHR203473

Shortlist: 

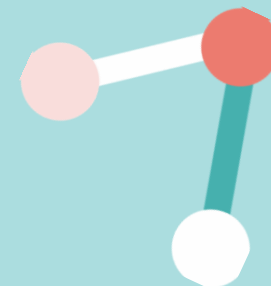
Joining up primary and specialist care for people with complex mental health difficulties: a mixed methods study to produce an implementation toolkit

Plain English Summary:

We want to improve the way GPs work with specialist services to help people with complex mental health difficulties. By complex mental health difficulties, we mean repeated episodes of anxiety and depression, with long-term unpredictable changes in mood and difficulties in relationships. Many people with complex mental health difficulties have had difficult childhoods. Some have h...

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Thank you



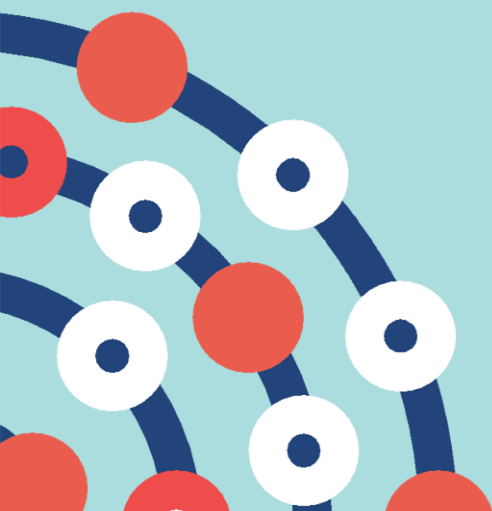
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