

# Qualitative health research involving children: ethical and methodological considerations



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# Session outline

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1. Background: Changing views of researchers towards children and childhood

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2. Ethical considerations and practices in qualitative health research involving children

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3. Methodological considerations and practices in qualitative health research involving children

A top-down view of several children sitting around a large sheet of white paper on the floor. They are actively drawing and coloring various school-related items. Visible drawings include a microscope, a globe, a pair of scissors, a calculator, a computer monitor, a lightbulb, a pencil, a ruler, a pair of glasses, a book, and a small figure. Some children are using colored pencils and markers. The scene is brightly lit, and the children appear to be engaged in a collaborative activity.

1) Background: changing views of researchers towards children and childhood

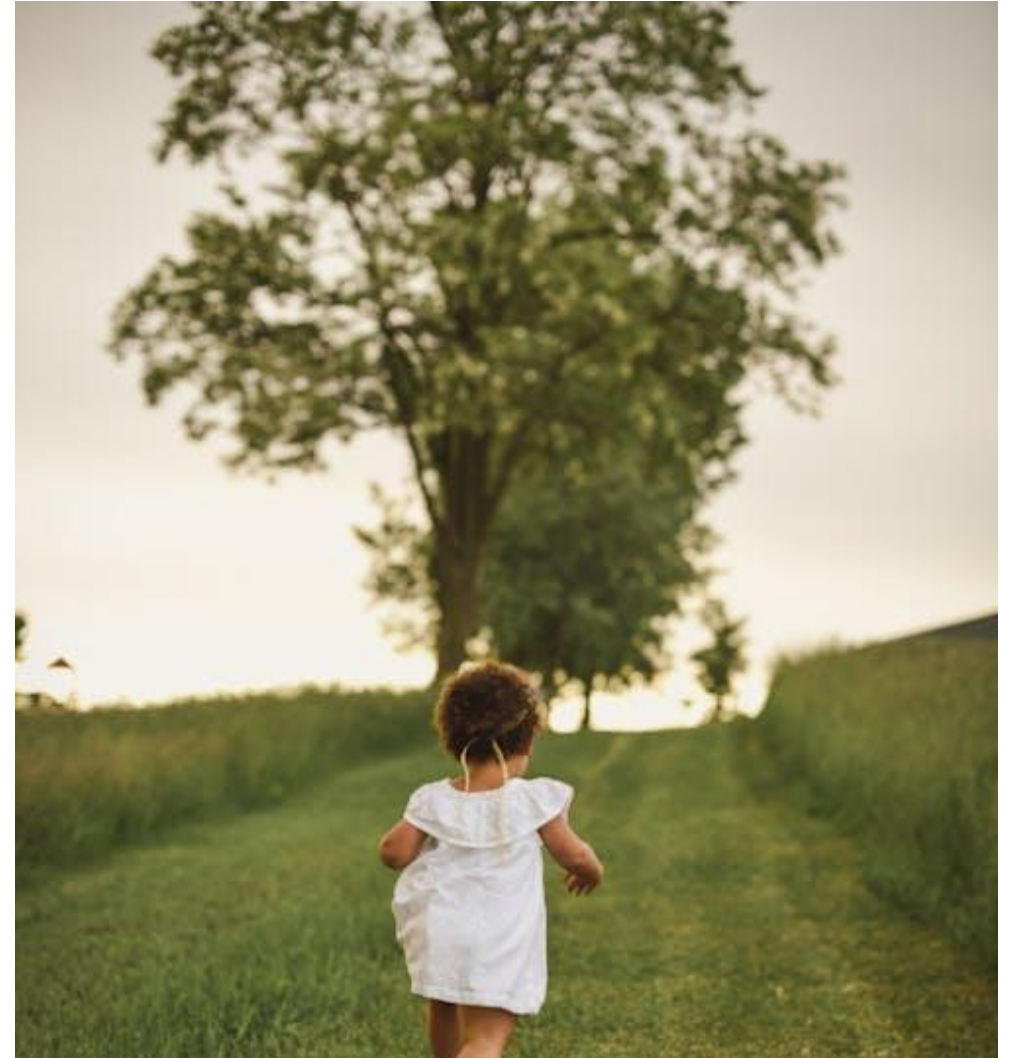
# How researchers' views of children and childhood have changed

Changes can be explored through historical, cultural or policy lenses

Here we take a disciplinary perspective, looking at how children and childhood have been understood across different academic disciplines (Morrow, 2011)

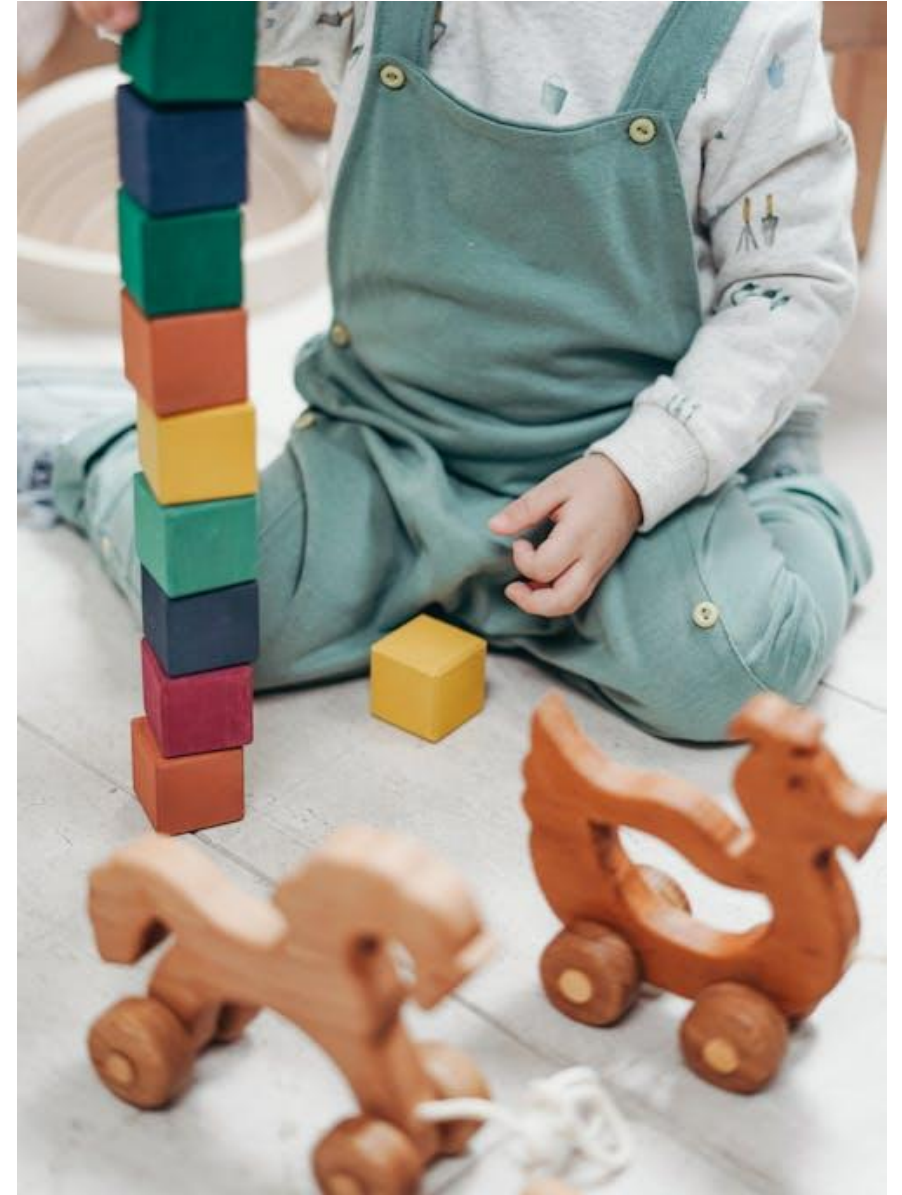
# Traditional conceptualisations of children and childhood

- Focus on two key disciplines: **developmental psychology** and **early sociology**
- Chosen because they were highly influential in shaping traditional views of children and childhood
- Dominated academic and professional thinking throughout much of the twentieth century
- Provided the frameworks through which children were understood and studied



# The developmental paradigm

- In psychology, the developmental paradigm has dominated the study of children throughout much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Woodhead, 1999)
- Childhood seen as a universal, staged progression: irrational → rational, simple → complex
- Adults were framed as rational and independent; while children were seen as dependent, developing and often incompetent (Boyden and Levison, 2000)
- This has been critiqued by academics both within the discipline and beyond it (e.g. Burman, 1994; Woodhead and Faulkner, 2008)



## Early Sociology

- Children seen as “incomplete beings”
- Research focused on what children should become, not their lived experiences
- Children viewed as lacking competence, maturity and social significance; emphasis on preparing them for adulthood (Qvortrup, 1994; James and Prout, 1997)



# Traditional conceptualisations of children and childhood

## Implications for research:

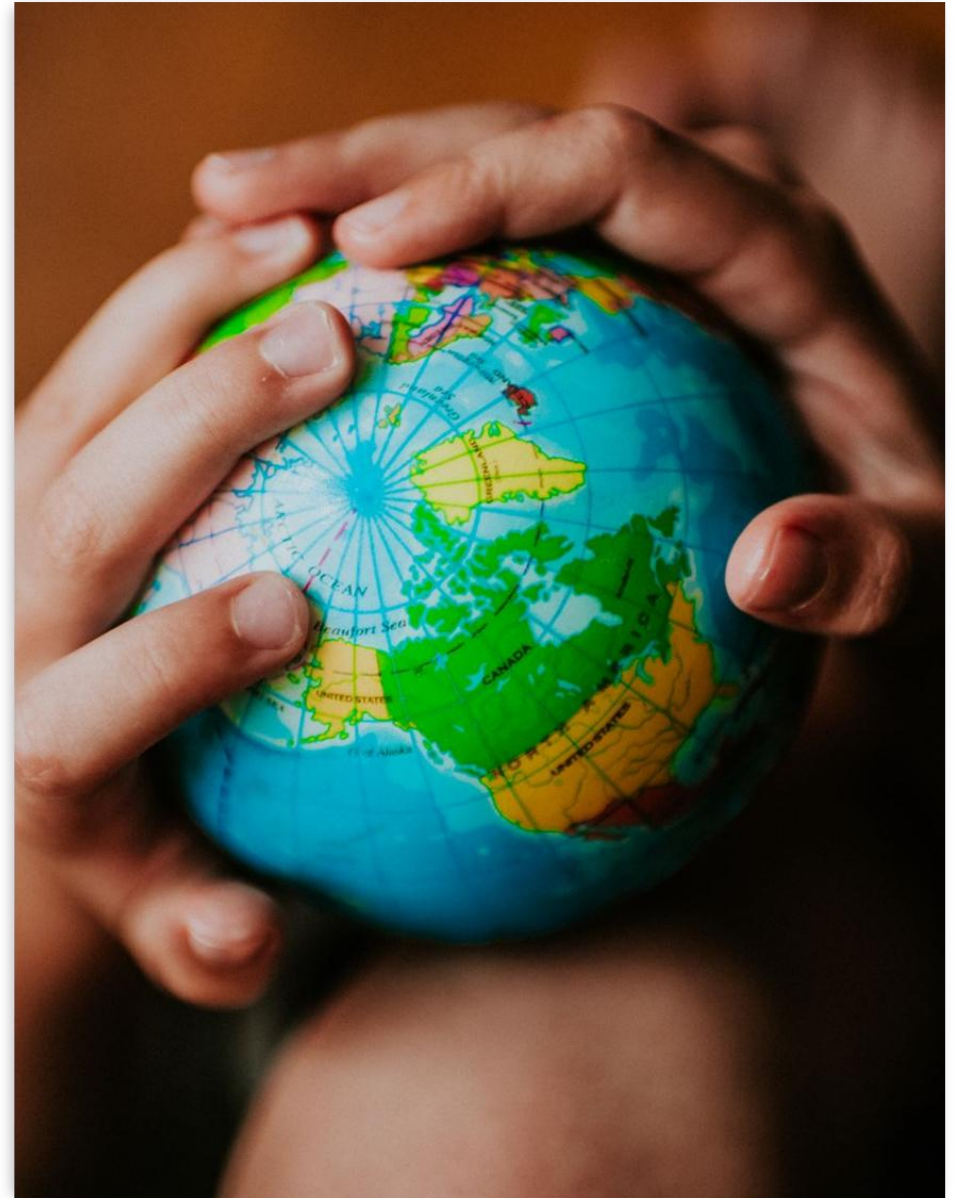
Children were considered immature, incapable of explaining their viewpoints and incompetent to participate in research

Their experiences were often filtered through adult perspectives (e.g., parents, teachers, professionals)

Historically, research was conducted about or on children, rather than with children or by children

# Shift in perspective on children and childhood (late 1980s onwards)

- Social scientists began to challenge traditional views of children and childhood
- Disciplines involved included sociology, anthropology, psychology and geography (e.g. Jenks, 1982; Qvortrup et al., 1994; James and Prout 1997)
- This shift led to the development of the “new social studies of childhood” which has strongly influenced contemporary understandings of children



# The “new social studies of childhood”

- Children seen as social actors with agency; actively shaping their lives (James et al., 1998; Qvortrup et al., 1994)
- Focus on children’s experiences in the present (“here-and-now”) rather than only as future adults
- Childhood seen as socially constructed; varying across culture, history and context
- Emphasis on diversity; age, gender, culture and social environment



## Shift in perspective on children and childhood (late 1980s onwards)

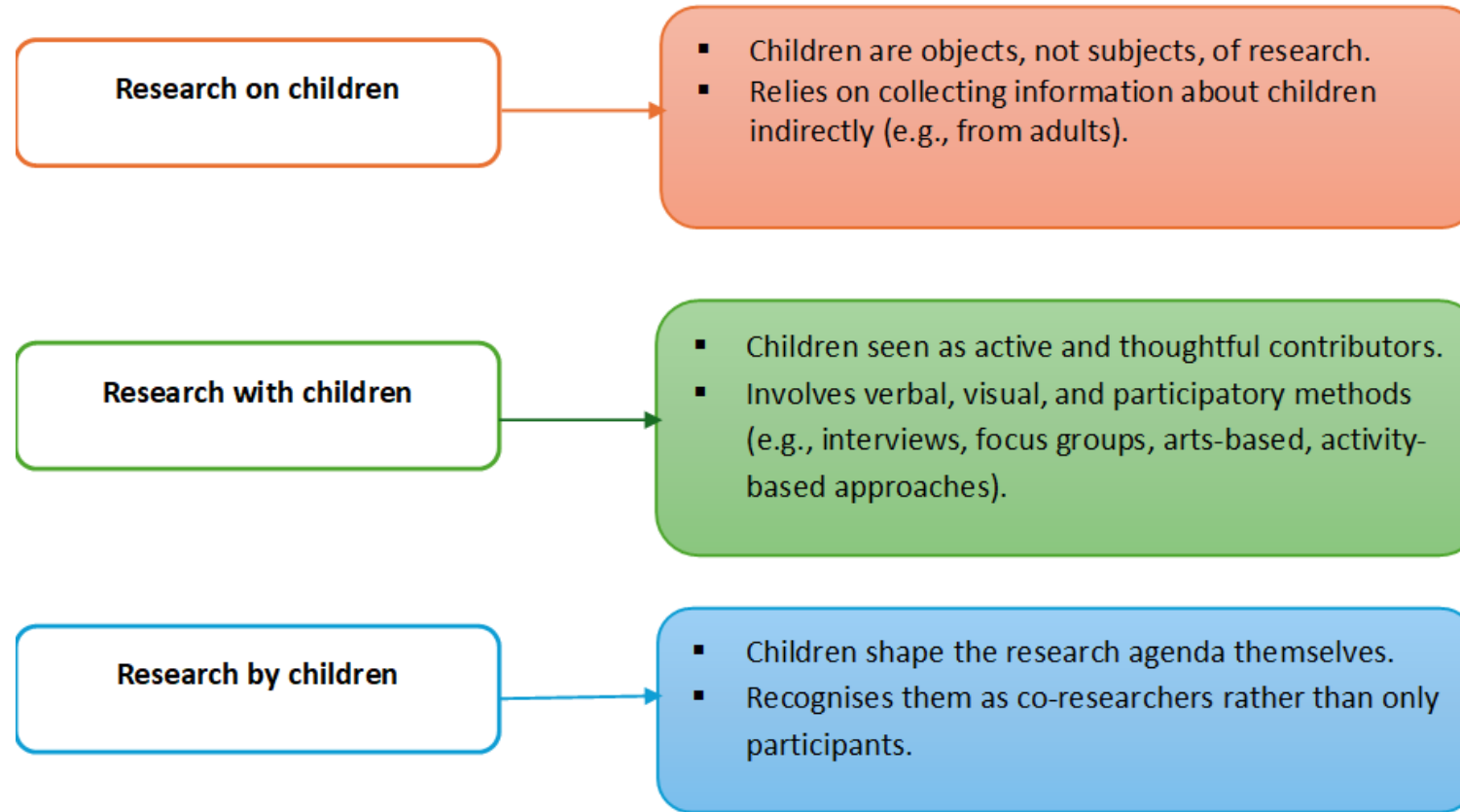
### Implications for research:

Children are now seen as capable informants and active participants

Emphasis on studying children's perspectives and experiences directly, not only through adults

Research methods adapted to be child-centred and participatory

Shifts knowledge production from about/on children to research with/by children




Conceptual categories of participation:  
Christensen and James (2000; 2017)

# Persistence of traditional conceptualisations of children and childhood

- Important to recognize that traditional views of children and childhood still influence some fields
- Deficit-focused approaches remain influential despite newer perspectives
- Adult-centered assumptions continue to shape policy, professional practice and research design

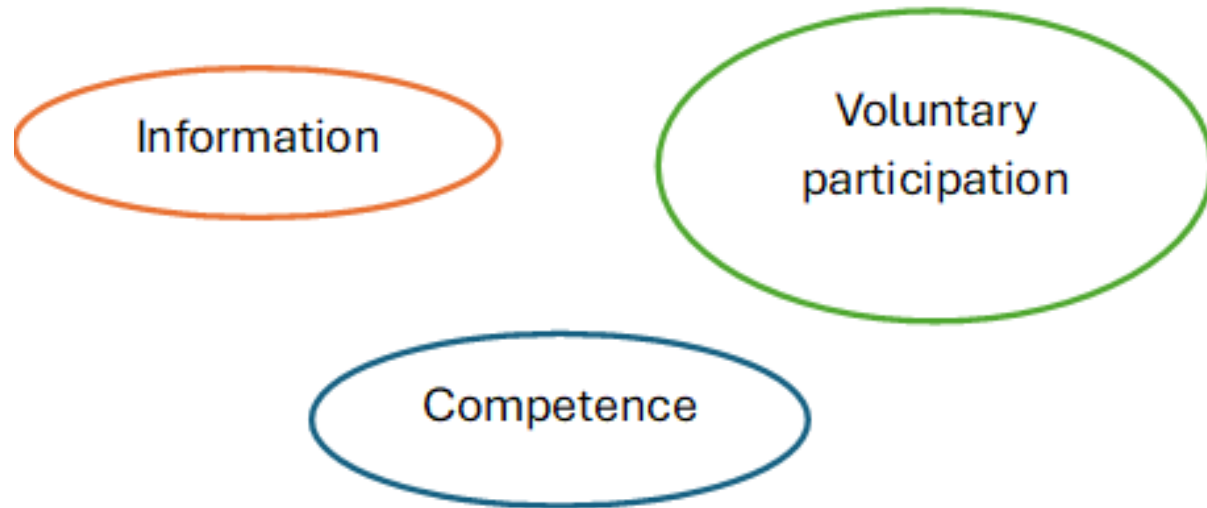


A photograph of a colorful playground with yellow slides and blue structures. The text is overlaid on a semi-transparent white box in the center.

## 2) Ethical considerations and practices in qualitative health research involving children

# Understanding informed consent

Three core aspects of informed consent:



- **Information:** Participants must receive information in a form they can understand
- **Voluntary participation:** Consent must be given freely (without coercion)
- **Competence:** Participants must have the capacity to give consent

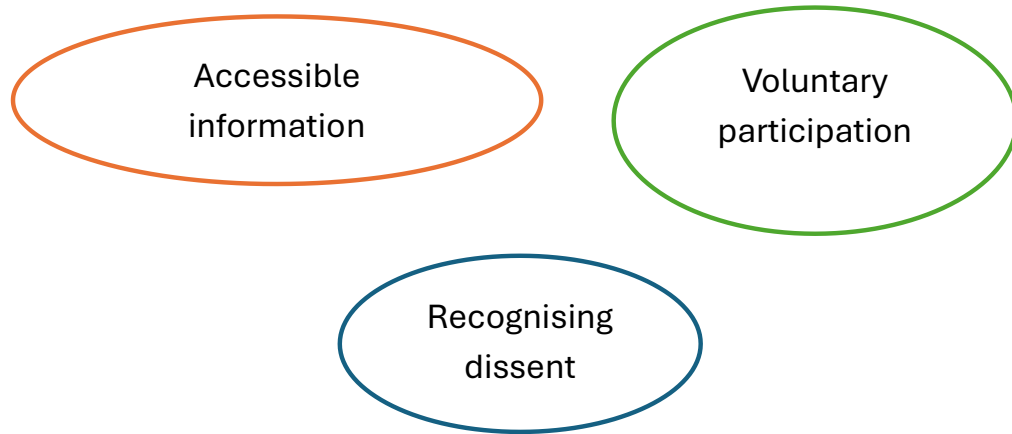
# Parental/carers/legal guardian consent

- Required when children cannot legally provide informed consent
- Parents/carers/legal guardian must receive clear and accessible information about the study and their child's participation
- Consent may be provided in writing, audio-recorded or through other approved methods



# Understanding children's assent

Three key elements of assent:



- **Accessible information:** Children should be given age-appropriate (child-friendly) and clear information
- **Voluntary participation:** Participation must be voluntary
- **Recognising dissent:** non-verbal or verbal cues of discomfort should be treated as withdrawal or dissent (NCRM, 2023)

# Practical considerations in obtaining assent or consent

- Attend to children's non-verbal cues and signs of discomfort (Cocks, 2006)
- Children differ in age, maturity and understanding; tailor information accordingly
- Consult child and youth advisory groups to improve understanding (NCRM, 2023)
- Assent can be verbal, written or creative; multiple formats enhance accessibility (Pyle & Danniels, 2016; Tay-Lim & Gan, 2012)
- Treat consent and assent as ongoing processes (“process consent”) (Spriggs, 2010; Heath et al., 2007)

## Practical considerations in obtaining assent or consent (continued)

- Legal requirements vary; many EU countries require both parental consent and child assent
- Child competence is context-dependent; not solely age-based (NCRM, 2023)
- Adult-child power imbalances can influence whether consent is truly voluntary

# Privacy and confidentiality

Articles

## 'You need to own cats to be a part of the play': Icelandic preschool children challenge adult-initiated rules in play

Sara Margrét Ólafsdóttir  , Susan Danby, Jóhanna Einarsdóttir & Maryanne Theobald

Pages 824-837 | Published online: 05 Oct 2017

 Cite this article  <https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2017.1380880>  Check for updates

- Are key ethical considerations in research with children
- Should be clearly explained during consent/assent and respected throughout the research process
- Child-friendly approaches can support understanding such as the use of pseudonyms (Ólafsdóttir et al., 2017)

## Practical considerations

- Balancing children's right to privacy with parents' right to know
- Confidentiality is not absolute and has clear safeguarding limits
- Cultural contexts shape understandings of privacy, confidentiality and children's autonomy



# Protecting children from harm

- Children must be protected from potential harm in research
- Risks may include physical harm, psychological distress or time-related burdens
- Some children may require additional protections due to heightened vulnerability (abuse, neglect)
- Children should not be automatically excluded due to vulnerability
- Ethical safeguards should not be overly restrictive; children have a right to be properly researched (Van Goidsenhoven & De Schauwer, 2022; Beazley et al., 2009)






3) Methodological considerations  
and practices in qualitative health  
research involving children

# Access and recruitment

- Children are classified as a vulnerable group, requiring heightened ethical scrutiny
- Access commonly occurs via schools, hospitals and community organisations
- Young children and children with disabilities are often excluded
- Inclusion of disabled children is essential to understand lived experiences and improve health and wellbeing outcomes (Van Goidsenhoven & De Schauwer, 2022)



# Remuneration and compensation

 Open access |  | Research article | First published online October 8, 2025 | [Request permissions](#) 

Reframing payment practices for co-research for children and young people

[E. Kay M. Tisdall](#)  , [Carol Robinson](#) , [...], and [Nicole Anne D'souza](#)   [View all authors and affiliations](#)

[OnlineFirst](#) | <https://doi.org/10.1177/17470161251380888>

- Payment and compensation raise ethical concerns in child research
- No consensus on what constitutes ethical payment practices (Tisdall et al., 2025)
- Use of financial incentives, including cash, is debated
- Incentives require clear justification (amount, form and timing)
- Researchers must avoid financial inducement of children or parents

## Building rapport and trust

- Good rapport is essential for all research with children
- Strategies to build trust include:
  - Visiting settings in advance and participating in play to build familiarity (Ólafsdóttir et al., 2017)
  - Providing child-friendly information in simple, engaging ways
  - Emphasising that children's contributions matter and there are no right or wrong answers
  - Allowing children to choose location, timing, method and whether parents are present



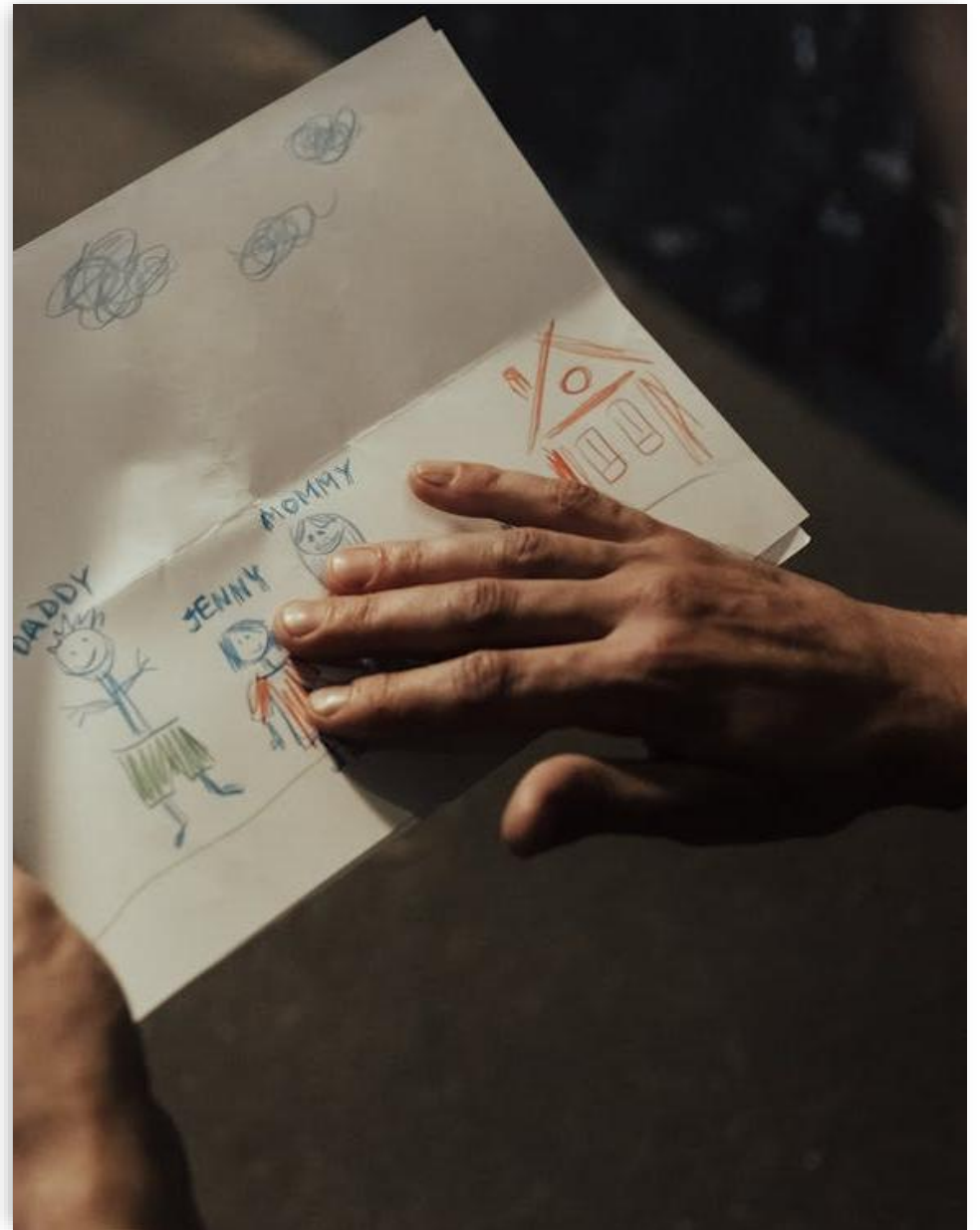
# Methods, techniques & tools

- Multi-method approaches are common
- Often argued: using multiple methods with children leads to richer and more credible data (triangulation)
- Techniques include individual interviews, focus groups, observation, visual/creative methods, ethnography
- In qualitative health research, individual interviews are the most widely used method



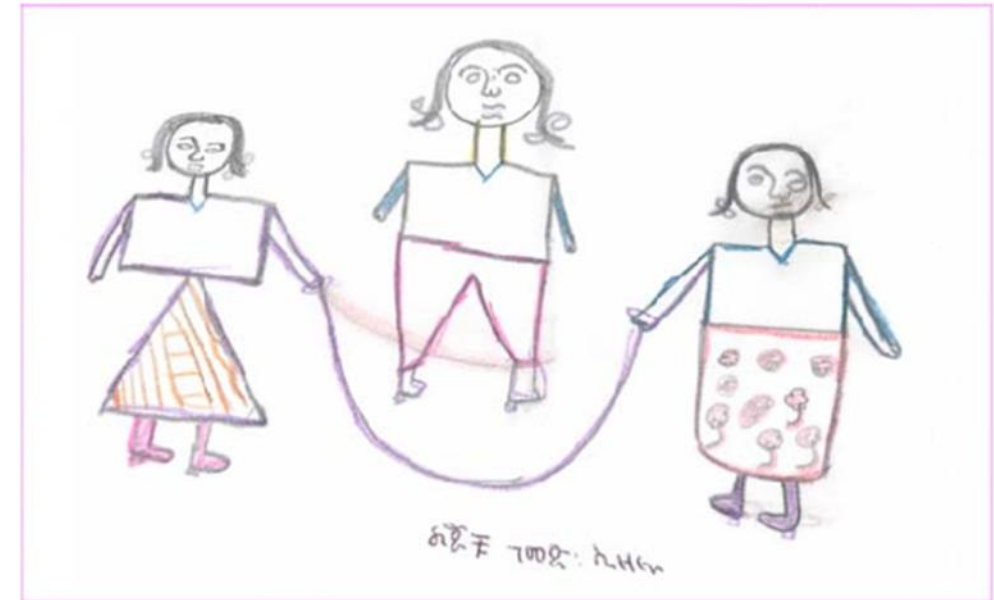
# Interviews

- Most widely used method for exploring children's perspectives
- Flexible: allows open-ended exploration of experiences
- Can be adapted with child-friendly techniques: Draw-and-tell, photo-elicitation, emojis, video prompts
- Formats: individual, group or paired interviews (e.g., Cooke et al., 2020)



# Interviews: practical considerations

- Use age-appropriate, clear and understandable questions
- Pilot test questions with children when possible
- Adapt prompts and techniques to children's abilities (e.g., draw-and-tell, draw-and-write, photo-elicitation, emojis)
- Create a comfortable environment (rapport, familiar setting, parent/carer presence if needed)
- Consider children for whom interviews aren't appropriate



Thematic drawing by a 12-year old girl of "children skipping with a rope"

# Creative and Visual methods

- Creative methods: playful, participatory approaches (drama, storytelling, role-play, arts & crafts, games, music, drawing, photography)
- Visual methods: useful for young children or those with limited verbal skills (Sevón et al., 2025)
- Photography: photovoice, group projects (Darbyshire et al., 2005; Dockett & Perry, 2005)
- Drawings: draw-and-talk, draw-and-write, draw-and-tell (Driessnack, 2005)
- Combined approaches: often paired with interviews/discussions for richer, multi-dimensional data



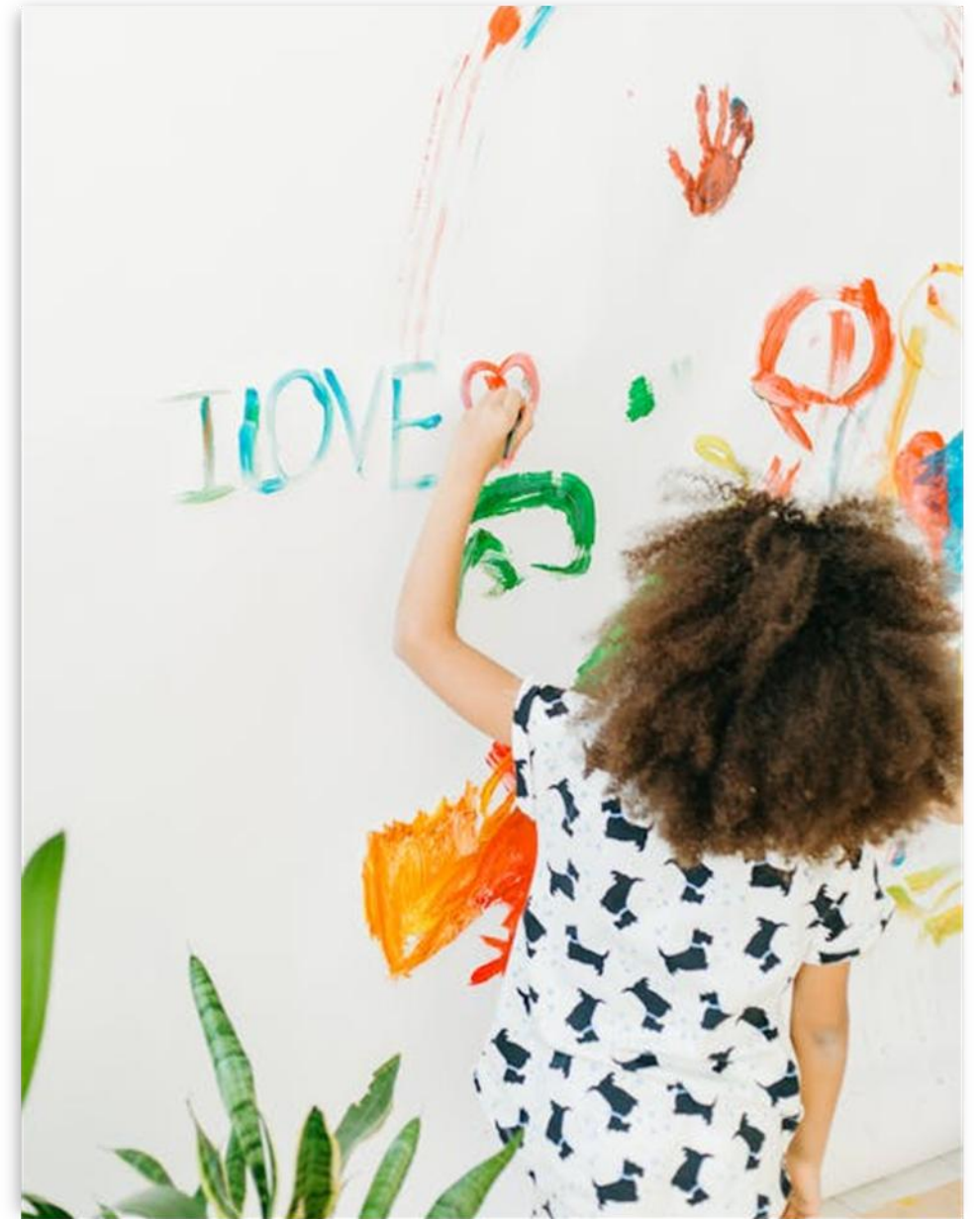
# Creative and visual methods: practical considerations

- Plan activities carefully; guide children in using cameras or materials
- Provide support for children who may struggle or feel uncomfortable
- Engagement varies: some children may lose interest, feel embarrassed or produce little output (Barker & Weller, 2003)
- Data analysis: artistic outputs are rich but context-specific, making systematic analysis more challenging



# Participatory research

- Children as co-researchers, participating in decisions throughout the study
- Help identify/refine research questions
- Help choose study design and data collection methods
- Help interpret data and decide dissemination strategies
- True participatory research ≠ just listening to children; requires engagement in key research decisions
- Terminology: “participatory research” = child involvement in decisions; “participatory methods” = techniques to collect data



# Participatory research: key issues

- Many studies labelled “participatory” do not involve children in decision-making
- Extent of participation varies across research design, data collection, analysis and dissemination (Lundy, 2018; Davis, 2009)
- Overrepresentation of articulate children; underrepresentation of younger children (Kellett, 2011; Lundy et al., 2011)
- Need to balance ideal participation with ethical and practical feasibility



# Ethnographic research

- Long-term immersion in children's lives (months or years)
- Originated in anthropology; widely used in childhood studies (new sociology of childhood)
- Children seen as active participants, not objects of research (Van der Smee & Valerio, 2024)
- Methods: unstructured interviews, casual conversations, observation and full participation
- Child-centric "task-centred" activities: drawing, maps, charts, grouping objects (James et al., 1998)



# Power differentials in ethnographic research

- Power differentials between adult researchers and children are significant (James, 2001)
- Strategies: “friendly adult” or “least adult” roles, sharing activities, informal clothing, using first names
- Limitation: adults can never fully “pass” as children; differences must be acknowledged



# Useful resources

- NSPCC 'Research with children: ethics, safety and avoiding harm. What to consider when conducting research involving children'. (NSPCC, June 2018)
- National Centre for Research Methods (NCRM) (2023) Introduction to The Ethics of Research Involving Children: Common Questions, Potential Strategies and Useful Guidance, Papers 1-6. UK: National Centre for Research Methods/European Children's Rights Unit. Available at: <https://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/id/eprint/4916/>
- Ethical Research Involving Children (ERIC): <https://childethics.com/>
- Webinar: Creative Methods in Research with Children and Young People, NIHR, May 2022. Available at:  
<https://arc-nenc.nihr.ac.uk/virtual-college/creative-methods-in-research-with-children-and-young-people/>

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