
Article

Little Voices and Big Ideas: Lessons Learned from Children about Research

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Abstract

Over the past three decades social researchers have increasingly engaged children in projects that explore their experiences, views, and understandings. In this paper the authors share the observations of children involved in a project exploring family homelessness, particularly about what they think is important when conducting research with children and ways in which their views were implemented in the design and delivery of the project.

Keywords: children, ethics, methodology, tools

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Introduction

Over the past 20 years there has been an increasing interest in the lives of children, their experiences, and their views. Spurred on by the children's rights movement and the ratification of the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations General Assembly, 1989) a number of governments, service providers, and policymakers have begun to engage children meaningfully in discussions and decision-making processes.

Concurrently, the "new sociology of childhood" has challenged the pervasive protectionist view and has reconceptualized children as valuable and active contributors to societies within which they live, and researchers have argued that they have the capacity to participate meaningfully. This movement has attempted to move "away from the narrow focus of socialisation and child development (the study of what children become) to a sociology which attempts to take children seriously as they experience their lives in the here and now as children" (Morrow & Richards, 1996, p. 92)

These movements have challenged social researchers to reflect on how they, too, conceptualize children and engage them in research about their lives. Although there has been significant support for the more meaningful engagement of children in research, there has also been considerable debate about how we do so in both an ethical and a credible way.

In this paper we draw on our experience in conducting research with children who have experienced homelessness and presents some of the learnings, challenges, and benefits we encountered when ethically engaging children both as research partners and as participants.

Background to the study

In 2005 and 2006 the Institute of Child Protection Studies at the Australian Catholic University in Canberra was funded to explore children's experiences of homelessness by the Australian Capital Territory's Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services.¹ The key research question was, What do service systems need to know about how children perceive and experience homelessness in order to achieve better outcomes for homeless families? The service systems we were thinking about included supported housing services (e.g., refuges), statutory care and protection, schools, and other services that have contact with children and their families. One outcome of involving children and young people in the study was to influence directly and change policy and practice for families who are experiencing or have experienced homelessness. We were of the view that although homelessness has been examined and explored from adult perspectives (including parents reporting on what had happened to their children (e.g., see Kolar, 2004), the experience of a child (being homeless), vividly described, cannot be as easily dismissed or ignored as academic research so often is (Roberts, 1999).

The research, which was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at the Australian Catholic University, aimed to explore and understand the unique perspectives of children who had accompanied their parents during periods of homelessness in as comprehensive and appropriate way as possible. It was carried out between March 2006 and February 2007.

To develop this understanding, we took a qualitative approach to the research project that focused on how individuals and groups view and understand the world and construct meaning out of their experiences. With its emphasis on understanding complex, interrelated, and/or changing

phenomena qualitative research seeks to gain deeper knowledge of lived experiences. We set out to explore the full multidimensional, dynamic picture of the subject of study, in this case homelessness (see Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005).

To maximize children's engagement and to elicit their views, a children's reference group (discussed below) was convened to provide advice and direction to the project; we carried out semistructured interviews (using a wide range of tools), art activities (Figures 1 and 2), and group discussions at an activity day. To help us understand the broader context and to triangulate findings, parents and key stakeholders were also interviewed about how children experienced and were affected by family homelessness.

Children's views and artwork were analyzed and formed the basis of the final report (see Moore, McArthur, & Noble-Carr, 2007). A close examination of the data, particularly the interview transcripts, allowed common themes to emerge. Employing some of the methods of grounded theory allowed concepts, themes, and categories to emerge from the data rather than either being imposed or overlooked in the analysis (Darlington & Scott, 2002; Minichiello, Aron, Timewel, & Alexander, 2000; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). To increase the validity of the conclusions, wherever possible (unless otherwise stated) the children and young people discussed the themes and conclusions. Previous research and other data (interviews with adults) when available and appropriate were also used to support the conclusions reached (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Eighteen children aged between 6 and 14 years and 7 young people aged between 15 and 21 years participated in the study. Of these, 8 identified as being Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander; 14 were male and 11 were female. All participants had accompanied their parent during a period of homelessness in the past.



Figure 1. Artwork by a girl aged 7

Engaging children in research about sensitive issues

There is an increasing acceptance that hearing children's voices directly, including through the research process, is of critical importance. The institute's research activity is explicitly framed with a child-centered approach, which, among other things, seeks to involve children actively so as to better understand and respond appropriately to their unique perspectives and experiences (Moore et al., 2007; Winkworth & McArthur, 2007). Our challenge is to do this in a way that is both effective and ethical.

Fortunately, over the past two decades there has been a growing interest in finding better ways to facilitate the hearing of children's voices in all aspects of the research process. The changing view of children leading to their direct inclusion in research has meant a rethinking in research methods and research topics but also a growing confidence in sharing power and responsibility of all aspects of research design (Alderson, 1999). This has resulted in a wealth of information for potential researchers to draw on when engaging in research with children (Noble-Carr, 2007).

Inherent to this growing commitment of involving children in research has been the willingness of researchers to critically reflect on their chosen methodologies and share their experiences of what has, and has not, worked. Such commitment to critical thinking and reflexive practice enables innovative and flexible research models to evolve and this has been particularly helpful in trying to piece together a best practice framework from which our own study of children's experiences of homelessness was based.

Engaging children using a children's reference group

In 1997 Ward argued that in ethical research children should not only be the "subjects" of research but should also be encouraged to play an active part throughout the life of the project, from the early planning stages through to the sharing of findings.

To maximize their involvement in the project, we invited children to participate in a reference group for the life of the project. This reflected our belief that children should have a central place in processes that affect their lives and the view that research is considerably enhanced when children's views and perspectives are elicited. The aim of the reference group was to provide us with a better idea of how the children wanted to be asked about their experiences of homelessness, to provide feedback on proposed research tools, and to assist us in understanding children's views.

Workers within the homelessness sector were asked to approach families to participate. They gave them a brochure about the purpose and the nature of the group and invited them to contact the research team if they wished to participate.² Both parents and children consented to their children's involvement, and parents were kept informed of the group's progress. Six children aged between 6 and 12 from three families participated in meetings of the Children's Reference Group.

Unfortunately, because the project was a commissioned study, children were not involved in identifying the project or in the initial planning stage (the development of the project plan and internal ethics approval processes). However, as soon as the reference group was established, children were asked to provide feedback on the research plan and its focus.

At two workshops the Children's Reference Group worked with the research team to develop a deeper understanding of how children might prefer to be consulted about sensitive issues and to clarify the research question. At the first workshop children were asked how researchers might make a child feel comfortable, how to make a space child friendly, and how adults might show that they are listening to and respecting the views of children. They also provided strategies on how we might respond if children became upset throughout the research process. From these recommendations and from learning gleaned from the literature (see Noble-Carr, 2007) the research team developed an interview schedule and other tools to engage children in the project.

At the second workshop children were asked for feedback on the use and choice of the proposed research tools. This was achieved primarily by trialing the various games, discussions, and one-on-one activities with the children before seeking feedback. At this workshop it soon became apparent that some of the organized activities took longer and were more engaging than others and that it was important to intersperse fun activities among the more "serious" discussions to maximize children's attention and enjoyment.

After we had modified the interview design, children were interviewed by one of the researchers. Some days later, they were then contacted by another member of the team and were asked about how the interview had been conducted, the effectiveness and "child-friendliness" of the tools, and the personal style of the interviewer. From these conversations changes were made.

When gathering feedback from the younger children, one researcher used a "Cheezel scale" to help children talk about their experience. She placed five Cheezels (ring-shaped cheese snacks) on her fingers and asked the children to score each section of the interview out of 5 in relation to its child-friendliness, the extent to which it was fun, and whether the researcher listened and understood their answers. Although the children could eat the snacks if they removed them from her fingers, they generally ranked the sections highly before explaining their decision. They reported that this was a fun way of giving feedback. From this advice, tools were then modified before being used with other children.



Figure 2. Artwork, My Support People, boy aged 6

We consider that the Children's Reference Group played an integral part in the development of the project and provided invaluable advice and expertise that helped guide and direct the research process. Other children who participated in the project also seemed to be less anxious about their involvement after hearing that it had been developed with assistance from children who had similar experiences to theirs. We will discuss the reference group members' input in the following sections.

Helping children feel safe comfortable

Of the key themes that emerged in our discussions with the Children's Reference Group, the importance of helping children to feel safe and comfortable was of great importance. They shared that children would often feel afraid talking to adults, particularly about sensitive issues, and that researchers needed to help alleviate their fears:

Sometimes, you know, you are too scared to say anything. Well I know I felt like this anyway—especially at the start.

If they're scared they're not going to talk. They need to know that they're OK that they're safe and that you're there for 'em.

This may have been of particular importance to children in this study as it was an aspect of their homeless experience that concerned them greatly (see Moore et al., 2007) but also appears in the observations of other social researchers (Noble-Carr, 2007). Children spent some time advising our team on how we might help children feel safe. They believed that it was important for adults to explain why they were asking them questions, how their input would be used, what would happen if they shared something that was worrying, and what rights they had. They also thought it was important that adults made it clear that they were not looking for "right" answers, that it was OK to make mistakes, and that there was no pressure on them to "say the right thing."

The reference group also suggested that children be encouraged to share their thoughts and feelings, "even if it might hurt someone else." They argued that in the research process children needed to feel able to express themselves without having to worry about how others, particularly adults, felt about their responses. They did not want us to respond in a way whereby the children felt that they needed to justify their position or to minimize their experience so that the researcher would not demonstrate discomfort or sympathy. They believed that this was necessary so that they would not feel compelled to answer questions in a particular way to satisfy what they believed to be the researcher's expectations.

In addition, children felt that a child-friendly environment could help children feel more safe and comfortable while being interviewed. They believed that if children felt at ease within the space, they were more likely to feel as though they could participate. They provided us with a number of suggestions on how we could make children feel more comfortable, including,

Make sure [the space is] kid friendly . . . Have lots of toys, have posters [like] Bratz, Superman, Barbie . . . Have magazines around like Total Girl, K-Zone or Girlfriend—not Cosmo, even though they're funny!

Maybe get some kids to help run the activities so other kids feel like joining in.

[In group activities] let kids know that they can come and talk about stuff that's sensitive one-on-one [if someone] gets upset—someone could go into the fun room

and talk to them about what they are upset about or play games with them or something.

Building rapport and expressing empathy

The ability to establish a relationship in which participants feel able to openly express their inner thoughts and feelings is a critical social research skill that enhances interactions between researchers and participants and leads to improved research outcomes (Alston & Bowles, 1998). Establishing empathy with participants requires researchers to reflect on the way in which they communicate verbally and nonverbally to ensure that the participant feels heard, accepted, and understood. Although researchers often feel able to connect with adult participants in this way, a number of writers have suggested that they often feel ill-equipped to do so with child participants for fear of being patronizing and of not finding common ground on which rapport can be built (Alderson, 1999; Punch, 2002).

The Children's Reference Group felt that this would be a challenge for researchers in this project and suggested that they spend time getting to know the child participant before inviting them to engage in an interview. They felt that it was important for adults to introduce themselves to children, to tell them a little bit about themselves including what they liked doing, and to share a joke so that children felt more comfortable and that they were not talking to a stranger. They thought that having such a discussion would allow the adult and child to identify things they had in common or things they shared. This might be a common hobby but could also be something that they both "think is funny" or interesting. Children also thought it was important for researchers to be relaxed in the way they worked with kids as children would sometimes take their cues from their adult companion.

At the beginning of the interaction the children suggested that researchers "do something fun" with the participant. They believed that children would enjoy starting with a game, particularly if the researcher "let them win," and stressed that it was good because both the adult and child would appear to be on the same level.

On this advice, we began each session having an informal discussion with the children, often about their day, things they enjoyed doing, and, because most interviews were conducted during school holidays, what things they had done during their time off. During this discussion we gave the children snacks and asked them whether they understood why we were conducting our study.

Interviews usually began with a "talking cards" activity where we placed a series of cards with questions like "If I could have any superpower I'd choose . . .," "The person who makes me laugh the most is . . .," or "The best holiday I've ever been on was . . ." face down on the floor. We then asked kids to choose three cards for them and three cards for us, and then we asked each other the chosen questions. This activity allowed us to introduce storytelling, to share ideas, and to establish common ground between us as researchers and the children. This activity usually involved quite a lot of laughter as children appeared to enjoy our sense of humor (or lack of it!).

On a number of occasions this introductory activity also shone light on some of the children's experiences and views. For example, one boy talked about a favorite holiday when he went fishing with his father and how he felt close to him during this time. He then shared how difficult it was for him when his parents separated because he no longer spent positive time with his Dad. The child was keen to talk about his grief, and because the method was flexible, it could lead the discussion down that particular track.

During this activity we also gained insight into some of the children's strengths and some of the things that they valued. Identifying these and then referring back to them throughout the interview often helped children realize that we were listening to and that we valued their ideas. For example, in this "icebreaker" one young child talked about how she was a good helper for her Mum and that this was something she was proud of. Later in the interview the researcher referred back to this: "You are a good helper, aren't you. I can see why you feel proud of being able to help out." Doing so meant that children appeared to be more comfortable about sensitive issues later in the interview.

Talking to children about their rights in research

With the reconceptualization of childhood comes the acknowledgement of children's decision-making ability. Indeed, at the core of ethical research with children is the question of children's capacity to make informed decisions about their lives (Bessell, 2006) and to understand what their rights are when agreeing/consenting/assenting to participate. As in a number of contemporary social researchers (Bessell, 2006), children in the reference group stressed that participants had certain rights in the research process and that they needed to be explained clearly so that they could be understood and enacted: "Kids have gotta know what rights they've got. And you should make sure they get it."

This proved to be a significant task for the research team, who spent considerable time reflecting on how they could do so most appropriately. With limited descriptions of tools and processes found in the literature, the team spent time with the children talking about how they might ensure that discussions about rights might be meaningful and not merely a token gesture. Throughout the project we constantly reflected on our experiences and modified our approaches on a number of occasions.

As part of their recruitment package, each child in the project was given a rights page that named the children's 12 rights in research (including the rights to privacy and confidentiality, to nonmaleficence, and to beneficence; Figure 3). The page had a picture that described each right and a commitment from the team in relation to the research process (i.e., "We will not hurt or tease you, and we will stand up for you if others do" and "If you want to stop working [talking] with us you can at any time. We won't hold it against you"). Workers and parents were encouraged to discuss the rights page with the child before the interview or group workshop and to inform them of the team's commitment to ensuring that they were upheld.

At their interview we then revisited the issue of rights and ensured that the child understood their meanings. For example, the second right states, "You have the right to participate in a way you like." When explaining this right, the researcher read the statement out and asked the child what he or she thought this meant. If the child understood the meaning, the researcher would acknowledge this—"Yes, that's right"—and follow up by linking it with the explanatory statement:

It says here "It's up to you if you get involved in the research or not and how you want to be involved." So if we're talking about your family, for example, I might ask you if you'd like to do a drawing or tell a story or just chat and you can choose one of these or come up with another idea instead.

We then checked to make sure that the child understood the explanation and asked, "Do you think that's a good idea?" or a similar question. We then reminded the children of the choices that they had for each activity and allowed them to feel as though they had some control over their involvement.

Figure 3. Children's Rights in Research page

You have the right to have your say



We believe that children and young people should be involved in any research that focuses on their lives

You have the right to participate in a way you like



It's up to you if you get involved in the research or not and how you want to be involved.

You have the right to be treated well



We will respect you for who you are and treat you well

You have the right to privacy



We will not identify you in our reports unless you give us permission.

You have the right to be informed



We will help you understand what you're being asked to do. We'll use child-friendly words and activities

You have the right to confidentiality



If you tell us that you aren't safe, that you are being hurt or if we are worried about you we will need to tell someone about it. Otherwise people will not know what you have said.

Your Rights

A Charter of Rights for Children and Young People involved in Research.

We are committed to making sure that children and young people who are involved in our research have choices, are protected and get the most out of being a part of our projects.

You have the right to not be hurt



We will not hurt or tease you and we will stand up for you if others do

You have the right to not be discriminated against



We will not treat people badly because of who they are or where they come from

You have the right to benefit from the research



We hope that our project will make things better for children. We will give you a gift for participating

You have the right to stop participating



If you want to stop working with us you can at any time.

You have the right to complain



If you're not happy you can tell us or our supervisors and we'll take it on board.

WANT MORE INFORMATION?



If you would like any more information about your rights you can talk about them to one of our researchers. If you're not happy with how you have been treated or anything about the research you can contact Morag on (02) 6209 1225.



Some of the rights were more difficult to explain than others. For example, the right to confidentiality proved challenging. We needed kids to understand that the information they provided was going to be used to shape a report for government and others to read but that individual children would not be identified. At the same time, we had to ensure that children understood that if we were worried about the child's safety or if the child disclosed information that would require further action, we would be obliged to break their confidence and inform their parents or an appropriate agency for further action. The statement of the right and its explanation were changed on a number of occasions to reflect how children understood the right and the intention of the right. Further workshopping might still be required to better encapsulate the complexity of the issue.

The children were invited to keep the rights page, which also included contact details for staff at the university who could answer any questions they might have or to receive complaints.

Children reported that they appreciated knowing about their rights (although a few thought that "it was a bit boring"). One young boy demonstrated that he had been empowered by the process by taking the rights page home, sticking it to his bed and telling his mother that children had the right to "have a say on stuff that's got to do with them." Incidentally, his mother phoned the research team and asked them to explain to her child that this right did not allow him to choose to not have a bath.

The Children's Reference Group stressed that it was important for children to know their rights in research but felt that going through the rights page before each activity was boring and unhelpful. Instead, they suggested that we develop a game where some of the rights were included among other "fake" or "wrong" statements and where children had to decide which were real and which were not.

In response to this advice, we developed a series of statements which were printed on to laminated cards, each of which was related somehow to the rights that were included on the rights page. Children were given the cards and were asked to place them under the headings of "completely right," "completely wrong," and "kinda right and kinda wrong."

When the children had placed the cards underneath the three headings, they were asked questions about why they chose to put them there, and then for those in the "completely wrong" and "kinda right and kinda wrong" were asked to rewrite them to make them more accurate.

This activity was included in a group exercise and proved to be one of the more engaging tools we used. Children were very keen to explore the issues related to the rights and gave insightful explanations as to why they believed the statements were accurate or not. Each group spent time meticulously wording the new statements to ensure that they could not be misinterpreted and so that they conveyed the sentiments behind the right accurately. For example, the statement "Kids should always be asked about stuff to do with their lives" was changed because some of the children thought that this should not be the case "all of the time" and that they "shouldn't have to talk about the things that you can't remember." As such, they changed it to "Kids should always be asked about stuff to do with their lives, but other kids have the right to say no if they don't want to talk about it."

Consent, assent and the importance of choice

The issues of consent and assent are contentious within the literature on children's research. Some writers have argued that consent can be given by parents on behalf of children (with or without their assent) (see, e.g., Mahon, Glendinning, Clark, & Craig, 1996), whereas others argue that children and young people should be approached directly because, ultimately, it is their right to choose whether they participate.

In this study we recognized that most parents play an important part in the lives of their children and invited those who were living with their children to support their children's participation by giving their consent. However, we also provided children the opportunity to choose whether they participated and how they participated in this research. We informed them that their parents had agreed for them to be interviewed but that because it was their stories and their ideas that we would be exploring, they could decide whether they would talk with us.

We also informed them that they had a number of choices that they could revisit through the interview process: whether the interview be taped, whether they did art or storytelling activities, whether their artwork could be taken and used in the report, and whether there were things that they did not want to discuss or have discussed in the report. Each child completed two copies of a consent form that asked them to tick a box if they understood their rights in the project and were happy to participate. Some children did not tick all boxes (i.e., one chose not to give his art-work to the research team), which highlighted the fact that children did consider their options and took advantage of their choices. This was reiterated in children's feedback regarding interviews:

If people didn't want to do something and you were mean and said that they had to do it, that would be mean, so it was good that you weren't mean.

[The researcher] asked me to draw my house and I didn't want to (because it is hard to draw it because of the shape) so I didn't do that—we just talked about it. That was good. I didn't have to do anything I didn't want [to].

Addressing power imbalances

In research with children, particularly those who are vulnerable, it is important to recognize that there can be a significant power imbalance between adults and children, an imbalance that can be exacerbated through the research process, where the researcher is considered the expert (Jones, 2000; Save the Children, 2001; Thomas & O'Kane, 1998).

Children in our reference group predicted this imbalance and felt that it was important for us to set up interviews in a way that minimized children's feelings of powerlessness. They believed that this was important because otherwise, children would feel uncomfortable and uncertain about their role, and, ultimately, would not participate actively. These views mirror those of other researchers, who warn that if this power differential goes unresolved, children might respond with what they think researchers want to hear, particularly in one-to-one interviews (Davis, 1998; Morrow & Richards, 1996; Noble-Carr, 2007).

As such, we would often meet in spaces where children felt some comfort and ownership. We would sit on the floor with the kids and join in on many of the activities. One child said that this was good because it meant that he did not think of us as though we were teachers, whereas others enjoyed being able to spread out and be relaxed.

Another specific strategy we adopted was to put children in charge of the tape recorders being used to record interview sessions. This technique was found to not only help to diminish power differentials in the interview but also to aid the willingness of children to be taped and the establishment of rapport between researcher and respondent (Mahon et al., 1996, p. 152). Children were told that they “were the boss of the tape recorder” and that they could stop and start the interview however they pleased. Children reported that they felt valued and that they had some control, which was important to them.

Similarly, at group sessions children were given disposable cameras and were asked to take photos of “key moments.” Children enjoyed the role of photographer, with a number of the more reluctant participants engaging with the broader process as a result.

Confidentiality

Children in the study stressed the importance of adults’ respecting children’s ownership over their experiences and the choices that they had in whether they shared these with others. As such, children felt that it was important that we treated the interviews as confidential but said that it was “OK” for them to talk to others if they were worried that they “weren’t safe” or “weren’t being looked after properly” or if something bad had happened, “like an adult has been touching them down there or something like that—that person should be found out.”

A number of the children took the commitment of researchers to confidentiality very seriously. In one of the early interviews, for example, a young girl talked about how a house needed to have enough space for it to be considered “a home” and shared that she liked her new house because it had a stairway that she could slide down on her boogie board (Figure 4).³ When the researcher shared the story with the girl’s mother, saying that he thought that her child’s views were insightful, the child reprimanded him by saying that he had made a promise not to tell anyone, even “if it was in a compliment.” The researcher apologized to the child, thanked her for teaching him an important lesson, and promised to not make the same mistake again. Later the child’s mother fed back to the researcher how much the child appreciated the researcher’s willingness to accept her concern and the fact that he recognized the value she placed on her story.

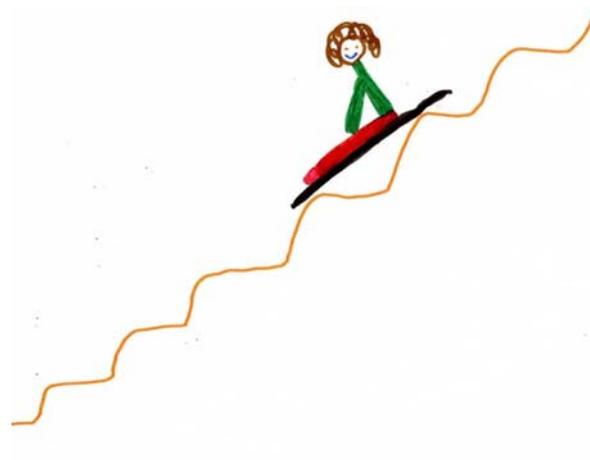


Figure 4. Artwork, Sliding down the Steps on My Boogie Board,” girl aged 7

Our learning

As well as making important findings about the homeless experience, this project enabled us to develop an understanding about how children wanted to participate in research activities, in decision-making, and in service delivery more broadly. These are learnings that we have since shared with community and government agencies and policymakers. Because of the powerful nature of the direct voice of children's experiences and insights, a reorientation of services and the implementation of a significant training agenda around children's participation are under way.

To engage children in ethical and meaningful ways meant that we needed to invest considerable time and energy into the project, to constantly reflect on our experiences, and to "check in" with children to ensure that we had understood their expressed needs and wishes. This is a big investment to do properly, and a method such as this requires the time, resources, and skills that some researchers might not have available to them.

Working with children also required us to transfer and to hone our skills as youth and social workers, particularly with regard to building rapport and promoting a trustworthy relationship with the children and their families (who had the power to gate-keep throughout the life of the project). The need to do so was articulated clearly by the children in the reference group and reiterated by other participants. The question remains in our minds about whether generic or professionally specific research training equips researchers adequately to carry out this type of research without also a background in, for example, social work or youth work or further specialist study.

Children involved in the study reported that they thought that it was important for children to have opportunities to talk about their lives. They also reported that they personally placed great value in their involvement in this study. For example, one young girl, who, when asked to take photos of things were special to her, took a photo of the tape recorder that had just been used to record her interview. When asked why she had done so, she responded that the tape recorder was special because "it has my words on it." She reported that her story was valuable, as was the opportunity to share it.

In 1996 Mahon and colleagues argued that "it is neither theoretically nor methodologically appropriate to rely on proxies to represent the views and experiences of children. On the contrary, children's views can and ought to be taken seriously" (p. 146). In this study it became quite apparent how valuable it is to not only engage children about issues that affect their lives but also about how best to engage children about the issues that affect their lives (Figure 5).

Children in this project stressed the importance of relationship building, arguing that researchers who connected with children and made them feel comfortable, safe, and valued were better than those who did not. Although they did not couch these discussions in terms of methodological validity, they did believe that research would be more credible because children could actually talk about things that were important to them without fear or discomfort.

Children also stressed the importance of having rights and that, in most cases, they appreciated learning about them. They talked about the value of children's having choices and some control over the process, and how small demonstrations (such as being allowed to switch the tape recorder off) help children realize that their rights were real. They also asserted that researchers should "stick to" their commitments and recognize it when they failed to do so.

Children demonstrated both their capacity and their willingness to engage in discussions about important issues and were somewhat alarmed to hear that children were not always engaged in research activities, or policy or program development. As one child in the reference group remarked, “Kids should be asked about stuff that’s got to do with them . . . They can tell you stuff you’d never think of—cos you’re not a kid.”

Although we have much to learn about how best to engage children in research, this project greatly benefited from the opportunity to work with children themselves in constructing and delivering its research activities.

Figure 5. Artwork, Me, girl aged 9



Notes

1. Canberra is Australia’s capital city, surrounded by the Australian Capital Territory. It is a city-state with a local population of 320,000 and a regional population of 500,000. It is the richest Australian city per family income but has significant pockets of disadvantage.
2. This brochure was written in consultation with and with advice from an 11-year-old boy who was known to the research team.
3. A boogie board is a small, surfboard-like piece of foam used in body surfing.

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