

ESOMAR Guidelines on Interviewing Children and Young People

Introduction

Requirements

Introduction

A considerable amount of survey research is carried out among children and young people for both economic and sociological purposes. This is a legitimate and valuable form of research but, as Rule 6 of the ICC/ESOMAR International Code points out, it calls for special care and precautions on the part of the researcher. This Guideline specifies in more detail what such "special care" involves. It concentrates on the *ethical* issues involved and does not deal with the technical problems of such research.

- the welfare of the children and young people themselves is the overriding consideration - they must not be disturbed or harmed by the experience of being interviewed
- the parents or anyone acting as the guardian of any child or young person taking part in a research project must be confident that the latter's safety, rights and interests are being fully safeguarded
- the interviewers and other researchers involved in the project must be protected against any misunderstandings or possible allegations of misconduct arising from their dealings with the children or young people taking part in that project
- the authorities, and the public generally, must be confident that all research carried out with children and young people is conducted to the highest ethical standards and that there can be no question of any possible abuse of the children or young people involved.

One difficulty is that at present there is no common international definition of "child", "young person" etc. Even within a single country the definition may vary with the activity under consideration. Because it would be very difficult to agree any general definition based on factors such as the child's cognitive powers, to fulfil the objectives outlined above, this Guideline takes a straightforward, practical approach to the issue. The following procedure should therefore be adopted when carrying out research among children and young people:

1. The researcher must conform to any relevant definitions incorporated in any National Code of Conduct Practice and/or in national legislation
2. Where no such specific national definitions exist, a "child" is to be defined as "under the age of 14", and a "young person" as "aged 14-17".

It does not appear practicable to try to set out in detail different rules for different age groups. Although a child of 7 and a child of 13 often cannot sensibly be asked the same questions or about identical topics, this issue is usually more a matter of common sense and good research practice rather than one of ethics. However, researchers must be alert to situations where the sensitive nature of the research or the circumstances of the interview mean that exceptional care is called for in interviews with children and young people from any age-group. A key criterion must always be that when the parent or other person responsible for the child hears about the content or circumstances of the interview, no reasonable person would expect him or her to be upset or disturbed.

In addition the interviewing of children and young people must in all respects conform to the

general Rules set out in the main ICC/ESOMAR International Code, as well as to the requirements of data protection and other relevant legislation and to any National Code of Research Practice.

Requirements

(a) In the case of children under 14

1. Where a survey is being carried out within a 'protected environment' - i.e. a location such as a school or leisure centre where some person in authority has overall responsibility for the protection of the child - then the permission of the relevant adult overseeing that location (such as a teacher) must be obtained before conducting any interview.
2. In any other environment - e.g. in the home, or in the street or some other public place - the permission of a parent, guardian or other person on whom the parent has conferred responsibility for the child (e.g. a child-minder, au pair or neighbour) must be obtained before the child is approached for an interview. A child must not under any circumstances be approached for an interview unless he or she is accompanied by an adult.
3. When requesting permission to carry out an interview sufficient information must be given to the person responsible for the child for him or her to reach an adequately considered decision about giving such permission. Where it is not practicable for that person to see or hear the actual questions to be asked, the subject and general nature of the interview must be explained, together with an explanation of any potentially sensitive or embarrassing questions etc. The identity of the person giving the permission for the interview should be noted but it is normally unnecessary for the permission to be obtained in writing.
4. When carrying out interviews with children it is normally desirable that some responsible adult (apart from the interviewer) remains close at hand while the interview is carried out. This is especially important in the case of in-home interviews. However it is not necessary that this person is actually present in the same room - this may be undesirable in certain cases for methodological reasons, e.g. where it might introduce some bias in the responses.
5. If the child is to be asked to test any product, the responsible person must be allowed to see this and (if they wish) to try it themselves.

(b) In the case of ALL children and young people

1. In cases involving the testing of any products the researcher must take special care to check:
 - That these are safe to consume (e.g. foods, confectionery) or to handle (e.g. toys). The researcher must confirm this (normally in writing) with the supplier of the product even though the latter may be legally liable for any adverse effects caused by the product.
 - That the child or young person does not suffer from any relevant allergy (e.g. to products containing nuts)
 - That children and young people do not become involved in any illegal action (e.g. the under-age consumption of alcoholic products)
 - Wherever practicable the views of parents or guardians about products they would not wish the child or young person to try are also complied with.

2. The researcher must take into account the degree of maturity of the child or young person involved when considering what subjects may or may not be safely dealt with in an interview. While it may be imperative to avoid certain subjects when interviewing children (e.g. a topic which might frighten the child), the same subject might quite safely be covered with young people if the appropriate precautions are taken. This again is a question of good research practice as much as of ethics. Examples of topics where special care is needed when interviewing children and young people are ones which could disturb or worry them, such as their relationships with others in their peer group, or ones which risk creating tensions between them and their parents.
3. There are sometimes valid and important reasons (e.g. in helping to guide social policies) for covering research topics of the kinds where special care is needed as referred to in point 7. When this is the case it is essential both that a full explanation of this is given to the responsible person (certainly in the case of a child, and if possible even in the case of a young person aged 14-17) and their agreement obtained; and also that steps are taken to ensure that the child or young person is not worried, confused or misled by the questioning.
4. It is not generally necessary to use special types of interviewer for surveys among children and young people. Many experienced interviewers are quite capable of being trained for such work. However, it is very important that anyone who is going to carry out such interviewing is carefully screened for their suitability for this responsibility, given the growing concern of parents and the general public about the protection of young people and especially of children. The manner and behaviour of interviewers vis-à-vis children must clearly be such as to inspire confidence and not suspicion among the public. Whether working full-time or part-time the interviewers should be given special training for such work, including in particular the precautions to be taken, the correct methods of obtaining permission, the special steps needed to establish good rapport with children, etc. Interviewers must be familiar with, and conform to, the requirements of both this Guideline and the main ICC/ESOMAR International Code, and any National Code of Conduct or Guideline on interviewing children and young people.
5. In the case of telephone - and even more, Internet - surveys it may often be more difficult to establish the age of the respondent when making the first contact and also to obtain the necessary permission for an interview from the appropriate responsible person. However, despite these difficulties the researcher should still try to follow the principles set out in this Guideline. This may mean that certain types of survey should not be undertaken; if in doubt - or in the rare cases where some alternative procedure might seem more appropriate - the researcher should consult the ESOMAR Professional Standards Committee or the national research society.

[Back to Top](#)