



Children and the Internet:

Working with children methods and challenges

Nicola Brace

What other challenges do psychologists face when they're researching in this area? I'm thinking here of ethical issues that they might come across.

Sonia Livingstone

In relation to risks and possible harms in children's lives, the ethical issues are really considerable. So the overriding priority has to be the wellbeing of the child that you are doing your research with. It's important not to be put ideas into their head that they haven't had before. So not to suggest, for example, that pornographic content can be violent if that had never occurred to them before.

It's important to provide some kind of follow up. You know, you can't walk into a child's life, ask them about a whole set of possibly upsetting things and just walk out. You know, you need to give them something that will follow up or say if you feel upset by this, these are places you might go. There are some things you just can't ask.

Any research with children has to go through either a teacher or a parent, usually a parent, and parents will often want to look at the questions you're gonna ask and just say no to certain questions. Ethically, one should also ask the child for their consent, and that's quite interesting because informed consent means you have to give them a good sense of what you are going to research.

One of the really hard questions about researching children's use of media or the impact of media on children, is the question of long-term effects. What we're really interested in is, does exposure to violence have a long-term effect? Does, let's say, exposing yourself in images on a social networking site damage you later or come back to haunt you later? And research mainly is in the here and now. We do our study, we write it up, we go away. Any kind of long-term follow up is very hard, but those are the questions the policymakers ask. If you're exposed to this, does it matter 10 years later when you're an adult?

Nicola Brace

You mentioned conducting your research using interviews. There's been a tradition in social psychology to use experiments, and I was just wondering if you'd like to say a little bit about the advantages and disadvantages of experimentation, in particularly in relation to the point of long-term effects.

Sonia Livingstone

Well, that's a good question. Any researcher starting a project is faced with a choice of methods. I have often preferred interviews because I feel this is a new field. I don't know what the questions are going to be yet that we should have answers to, and that's why I want to hear how children perceive the issues that face them.

I've chosen not to do experiments because I haven't found them able to take into account the range of different factors that I think are probably relevant to how people use the

internet and what benefits or risks it might face them with. But some of my colleagues do do experiments and that's when they've got quite a precise hypothesis and they want to make a comparison that they can really frame carefully.

Nicola Brace

In terms of conducting an experiment today to look at the long-term effects, would it be possible to get ethical clearance to conduct such a study?

Sonia Livingstone

I suspect it would be hard to get ethical clearance now because your hypothesis would be 'I expect there to be long-term harms and I want to come back in 10 years and see if that's right'. You can't set out to harm people. There is always a question of balancing the addition to knowledge against the harm to those researched, but I think that particular case would be quite difficult, yes.

Nicola Brace

You mentioned that one of your aims was to listen to children and I was wondering if you'd like to expand on that, and in particular in relation to the questions that you think psychologists should be researching, particularly when, when looking at the tricky issue of the risks of violence in the media.

Sonia Livingstone

It's very common when people do research with children and make policy about children to rely on adult decisions about what are the concerns. And of course those are part of the process, but it's also very important to listen to children's voices and children can be often surprising, challenging, and they can contradict adults' sense, you know, adults' concerns.

So I try very hard in my research to find ways in which I can hear what children would like to tell me about the internet, not to say those are the only things we are going to pay any attention to, but hear that as part of the concern.

So, violence is a nice example because often children are not especially concerned about images of violence and adults are. On the other hand, it's also part of child development that children encounter various things that they have to learn to deal with. And they don't want to be, you know, put in a sort of, they don't want to be cushioned off from the world, they want to have a chance to see what adults are engaging with, they want to know always what those a little older than them are doing. And they want to test themselves against that. Can I handle that yet?

We see that, I've seen that for a long time in relation to films. The whole culture of, you know, can you watch a PG, can you watch a 13, can you watch a 18, did you watch the screen in the scary bit. Well now the internet is also providing those kinds of tests. And we don't want to stop children doing it, but we also want to provide some kind of boundaries.

Nicola Brace

In listening to children's voices, do you find that actually it's quite a complex picture?

Sonia Livingstone

This has been one of the challenges of researching in this field, that the internet, or indeed television, is part of children's lives, a really important part of their lives, but still only one part of their lives. So when we're asking what is the effect on children's well-being or what is the effect on their attitudes towards sex or violence or whatever, we're talking about something that is multiply caused.

And focusing on the media is to focus on one part of it, which interacts with everything else, and that's why it is vital to try to keep research in the context of the other factors in children's lives; to try to be modest about the conclusions – you know, internet is one part of the story, and to try to do work that is contextualised. So wherever possible you kind of put the media in relation to the other factors and look at the whole thing, look at the bigger picture.

And I can just give you one example of that in relation to television. I did some work a little while ago on whether advertising for junk food contributed to the account of obesity. And there was a lot of calls for restricting adverts for hamburgers and sugared cereals and so forth. But what one could see from the research is that other factors were also very important – what parents eat, what fresh vegetables cost, what the school dinners were composed of and so on.

So in the end, of all the variation in children's weight, watching junk food advertising was there, it counted, but it was really a small part of the story.