

Guidance Paper 4: Digital Methods of Working with Children: Ethics, Rights and Responsibilities



This guidance paper outlines some of the ethical considerations relating to the use of digital methods for researching with children. It is Guidance Paper 4 in the series *The Ethics of Research Involving Children: Common Questions, Potential Strategies and Useful Guidance*.

Given the fast-paced development of technology and digital media, in this paper we encourage researchers to consider ethical issues as they apply to their chosen digital method and study design.

The Internet is now an integral part of children's everyday lives, and its importance, as both the subject of and tool for research, will only increase. In the UK alone, an [Ofcom report](#) reveals that more than half of children are online by the age of three, and [from 12 years old onwards 99 per cent of children have used the internet](#). Children use the Internet for a [variety of purposes](#): education, communication, information-sharing, entertainment, gaming, creative outlets, shopping, and more. Hence, many children find it [easier to 'be themselves' online](#), and have been shown to [love the use of digital technology](#). They also tend to be quicker in adapting to and learning to use new technology than other age groups.¹ It is absolutely essential, therefore, that researchers develop their capacities to deploy digital resources, to enable them to engage with children in the online spaces they so readily occupy.

The use of digital media has implications beyond providing practical, effective tools for researchers' interactions with children though; it can shift the power dynamics of the researcher/child relationship by "positively exploiting children's natural capabilities to engage with and respond to digital media in a way that may far exceed normal adult researchers' capabilities".²

Despite this, protocols for the use of digital research methods are still developing, and researchers still struggle to develop ethically robust and creative approaches to digital-based research. Ethics committees have well-founded concerns that the use of online media presents additional risks to the safety of the child and the integrity of the research. This guidance paper seeks to respond to some of these concerns and identifies some potential strategies to overcome them.

¹ Merchant G, *Teenagers in cyberspace: An investigation of language use and language change in internet chatrooms*, [2001] 24(3) *Journal of Research in Reading* 293

² Stalford H, Cairns L & Marshall J, *Achieving Child Friendly Justice through Child Friendly Methods: Let's Start with the Right to Information* [2017] 5(3) *Social Inclusion* 207, p. 210

1. Selecting Appropriate Digital Methods

When designing studies that may utilise digital methods, researchers should first consider practical issues such as digital accessibility, digital fluency and the need for parental or gatekeeper support. If a digital method is deemed appropriate there are currently many different digital methods that can be employed in research with children. These are broadly categorised into **offline** and **online** methods. Offline methods employ digital technology, but without reliance on the Internet. This can be done for example through the use of offline software or applications. ³

Online digital methods can be further categorised into:

- **Synchronous (or ‘real-time’) methods**, where the researcher and all participants are present in the research environment at the same time and interact with one another instantaneously.
 - Examples: voice calls and video conferences (e.g. Zoom), webinars and live chat platforms.
- **Asynchronous (or ‘self-paced’) methods**, where contributions to the research are made in participants’ own time and responses are not instantaneous.
 - Examples: e-mails, message/discussion boards, online forums, social media (e.g. leaving comments on Instagram, Facebook or Twitter)

The following is a (non-exhaustive) list of questions to consider in relation to your choice of digital research methods:

- **What benefit does a digital method offer over ‘traditional’ research methods?** Whilst this ultimately depends on the context of your specific research question, some issues to consider include:
 - Whether digital methods offer you a way of accessing a sample that would otherwise be more difficult to access (because of size/location/cost etc)
 - Whether they enable you to gather data in a more efficient way (e.g. survey with significant sample)

³ See for example, the use of gaming software to investigate children’s perceptions of the law in everyday life: Barwick J, Watkins D, Kirk E, & Law E, *Adventures with Lex: The gamification of research?* [2018] 24(3) *Convergence* 229; or the use of a computer package to conduct structured interviews with children and vulnerable adults: Grasso F, Atkinson K, & Jimmieson P, *In My Shoes--A Computer Assisted Interview for Communicating with Children about Emotions (2013) In Affective Computing and Intelligent Interaction (ACII)*, 2013 Humaine Association Conference on (pp. 318-323). IEEE.

- What might you lose from not pursuing more traditional approaches?
- **What digital tools are required?**
 - Hardware – will you require a computer/laptop or can the research be carried out using a tablet or mobile device. Is a webcam or a microphone required? Are your participants likely to own or have access to the necessary hardware or will you be supplying it? Can you cover any costs involved? It is important for researchers to consider ethical issues in the use of webcams and microphones, including who else might be present and what the researcher would do if there were any concerns in respect of the participants welfare that may arise.
 - Software – are you using common software (e.g. Zoom) or niche software? Are your participants likely to know how to use this software? Is it user-friendly and interactive? Are there costs involved in accessing/using the software (e.g. for licensing, permissions, etc), and, if so, who will bear these costs?
 - How will your participants access your method? Bear in mind that some platforms, including popular social media platforms, have age restrictions. For example, Facebook is only available to those aged 13 and above, and WhatsApp has recently raised its minimum age limit to 16. Moreover, not every young person has access to the internet or to technology raising questions around the potential of digital access/knowledge/cost to skew your sample and limit participation (see further below, section 2).
- **If online, will the research take place synchronously or asynchronously?**
 - If synchronously, will you be able to bring participants together at a time convenient to all of them? How will you arrange this? Might there be competing interests for access to computers or tablets from other family members? How might the environment that the child is in influence participation?
 - If asynchronously, how will you encourage continuity of responses?
- **Will the research method be interesting and engaging for participants?**
 - How will the choice of method be interesting to participants? Will there be images/audio/video that is visually appealing to them? Is the software/hardware something that participants will feel comfortable and confident with using?
 - How will you attempt to engage participants through the use of the chosen method? Is your method interactive? Are you using a method that is commonly used by children or

young people? To what extent can you involve children in selecting an appropriate method?

- **How familiar are you with the method?**

- Do you have the technical competence to apply the method and explain it to others in a clear way?
- What happens if there is a technical problem? Is there sufficient support in place to enable you to resolve it?
- What risks does that pose to the security of your data?

- **Consent**

- How will consent be obtained?
- How will participant information be communicated?
- Will parents be aware of their child's participation?

- **Data storage and access**

- How much control will you have over data collected digitally?
- Will collected data be available online after the research is completed?
- How/where will data be stored – and how long for?
- Can participants withdraw their data if they want to?
- Have institutional/organisational and legal data storage and access obligations been complied with?

Useful resource

For a more in-depth coverage of online research methods, including some discussions on ethics a good starting point is Fielding, N., Lee, R. and Blank, G. (2016) *Sage Handbook of Online Research Methods*, 2nd ed (an electronic version is available through the University of Liverpool library)

There are also a range of materials and guidance available on the [Global Kids Online Toolkit](#), developed by key experts in the field led by Sonia Livingstone.

2. Access and Sampling for Online Methods

- Online methods are said to enable researchers to access ‘hard-to-reach’ populations, including children, who generally face more difficulty travelling to venues for research. However, access to the internet itself might be an issue for some children, so it is important to note that digital research methods, while possibly including larger groups of children, may still exclude certain other groups of children.
- Digital literacy may also be an issue. While most children find it comfortable and easy to use digital methods, there should **not** be an assumption that all young participants will be skilled in and happy to work with digital methods. You should therefore consider who your intended participants will be.
- You should also consider how you will be recruiting your participants. Will recruitment be carried out online? If so, where/how will you advertise?
- Will you be using a gatekeeper to access participants? If so, what is the role of the gatekeeper and to what extent will they be involved? How receptive will they be to your methods? Do they have their own protocols around the use of digital media in their work with children? (See Guidance Paper 5).
- Understanding how to reach children via digital platforms and approaches can be well informed by children and young peoples’ advisory groups who can, for example, identify the most widely used platform.

3. Authenticity and Quality of Data

- Because the online environment allows for higher levels of anonymity, there is a suggestion that the use of digital methods might encourage participants to over-disclose information, particularly in the case of qualitative research. If you think participants are likely to over-disclose, it might be necessary to ensure that they understand where their data is going and how (if at all) they can take steps to withdraw their data should they wish to later on. It would also be helpful to remind participants that they need only share information that is relevant to the research questions.
- On the other hand, if the selected research method involves typing rather than speaking, this gives participants time to think about what they say. In this manner, participants are more likely to self-censor and less likely to over-disclose.

- Due to the higher level of anonymity, it may also be difficult to verify the identity of your participants with an online research method. You should therefore consider ways of verifying participants' identities. Some things that you can do include: meeting participants before the research takes place; seeking support for verification from gatekeepers (such as schools, youth workers or charitable organisation representatives), verifying their e-mail address before commencing; or using video to talk to them. Again, this would depend on the nature of your research and participant's preferences.
- Because participants are likely to attend the research from locations of their choice, they may have an adult present in the room while they are participating. This may affect the quality and independence of their responses. You could encourage participants to speak to their parents/guardians about their participation in the research and to explain to their parents/guardians why they will need privacy during the research (see further Guidance Paper 3 on safeguarding and Guidance Paper 2 on consent).

4. Confidentiality and Privacy

- Where information is collected online, the question of confidentiality and privacy of research participants becomes more prominent. This is because data collected over the internet is sometimes publicly accessible. Even if collected via a private online medium, there is a risk of the data being 'hacked' or accessed by others, if the medium selected is not secure enough.
- You will, therefore, need to consider the nature of the data being collected and what level of privacy and confidentiality is required. You should also look into options for securing the data collected, whether at data collection or storage stage. Fundamentally you must comply with legal and organisational data management requirements. Furthermore, the ethical issues associated with confidentiality.
- If data is collected over a public online medium (for example, a social networking site), there are questions of how data is stored and whether it can then easily be withdrawn.
- See Guidance Paper 6 for further broader guidance on confidentiality and privacy.

5. Safeguarding

Online research also tends to mean that participants are not in physical proximity to the researcher while the empirical phase of the research is taking place. A lack of direct and immediate access to participants may make it more difficult to deal with any safeguarding issues that arise. You should therefore put in place a robust and practical plan for addressing any safeguarding issue that arises. Such plans reflect

some of the steps that apply to more traditional face-to-face research and should include, for example a protocol of steps to be taken and people to be contacted if there is a safeguarding concern. You must also build into your digital methods a mechanism for checking in on the participants' safety and well-being at specific points during the research. Collaborating with other professionals who work with children may be one way to support safeguarding practice, for example allowing children to use computers at school to participate in the research and ensuring that teachers are both aware and in proximity to provide any support. Disclosure using online methods may also be more difficult to manage and researchers must consider how this would be managed in respect of their study and chosen digital method. For broader guidance on disclosure, see Guidance Paper 3.

6. Analysis and Dissemination

In conducting participatory research with children, it is not sufficient to merely involve children in the early stages of research. As far as possible, children's views should be heard when the data is analysed, and the results of the analysis should be disseminated back to children in a manner and form that is accessible. If children's participation is secured through a digital or an online method, it is worth considering if the same method can be used to feed the findings of the study back to them or engage them in the analysis and dissemination stages.

Useful resources

- For a summary of the key methodological and sampling issues involved in studying children and online technologies, see the 2014 [EU Kids Online \(Final Report\)](#): findings, methods, recommendations, LSE
- Make sure that your ethics framework for digital research is compliant with your own university's Data Protection and Information Security Policies. Please see also Guidance Paper 6 on the implications of the General Data Protection Regulation for research involving children.