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**Abstract:** Much of the current rhetoric in areas of child and family research and in early childhood education emphasizes the importance of listening to children in research that has a direct impact on them. Despite this, there remain qualms in some research contexts and amongst some researchers about the reliability, validity and generalizability of children's research input. This article argues that engaging with children as research participants requires a commitment to, and the facilitation of, listening to and hearing their accounts in research. Drawing on research conducted in both New South Wales and Queensland, Australia, this article adopts the stance that children are active and effective participants in research. It examines selected protocols that stand to support such engagement. Specifically, it considers issues of ethics and research protocols, mechanisms of engagement, principles of co-construction of the research interaction, the analysis and dissemination of data, and negotiating the research space. This article contributes to methodological understandings of research with children.

## Trusting children's accounts in research

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### **Key words**

Young children, engagement, research, listening, ethics in research

# Trusting children's accounts in research (1)

## Abstract

Much of the current rhetoric in areas of child and family research and in early childhood education emphasizes the importance of listening to children in research that has a direct impact on them. Despite this, there remain qualms in some research contexts and amongst some researchers about the reliability, validity and generalizability of children's research input. This paper argues that engaging with children as research participants requires a commitment to, and the facilitation of, listening to and hearing, their accounts in research.

Drawing on research conducted in both New South Wales and Queensland, Australia, this paper adopts the stance that children are active and effective participants in research. It examines selected protocols that stand to support such engagement. Specifically, it considers issues of ethics and research protocols, mechanisms of engagement, principles of co-construction of the research interaction, the analysis and dissemination of data, and negotiating the research space. This paper contributes to methodological understandings of research with children.

## Introduction

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Within many research arenas, there is growing recognition that children's lives are complex and multi-faceted, and may be quite different from the childhood lives remembered by adults. Moving away from the positivist approach of categorizing all children according to stages and developmental expectations, there is an increasing trend to recognize the 'historical and cultural influences that ensure that every child has an individual and unique experience of his or her childhood' (Greene and Hogan, 2005: xi). Accompanying this trend is the belief that as educators, researchers and adults, we have much to learn about children and children's experiences, from children. This belief assumes that children 'both construct their worlds and are constructed by their worlds' (Kincheloe, 2004: xii), as they engage in daily practices.

Two projects are described in this paper, each of which includes children as active research participants. The two projects are the *Starting School Research Project (SSRP)* (Dockett and Perry, 1997--ongoing) conducted in New South Wales; and *Risky Spaces: Children experiencing governance in home, school and community contexts (Risky Spaces)* (Farrell and Danby, 2004--ongoing), conducted in Queensland. The first of these projects investigates the perceptions and experiences of all involved in the transition to school, with particular attention to those of children (Dockett and Perry, 2001; 2004b). The latter project focuses on children's decision-making in everyday contexts that are seen by adults to be increasingly risky (Danby and Farrell, 2004; 2005).

The projects do not focus on children as 'victims of educational discourse' (Cannella, 1999: 42). Rather, they seek to promote children's involvement in ways that recognize the competence of children and emphasize the importance of the perspectives of those living the experience. To achieve this, the projects seek to generate 'legitimate and valued spaces within which students can speak' (Cook-Sather, 2002: 4), where children's perspectives are recognized as valid evidence and where adults take such perspectives seriously. These processes are set within risk-conscious societies, where the safety and protection of children

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are major concerns to the adults who exercise protective responsibilities within those societies (Farrell, 2004; 2005).

## **Validity, reliability and generalizability**

Traditional concepts of reliability and validity are often problematic when seeking to involve children as participants in qualitative research, because of the associated assumptions about the nature of research and about data.

Wiersma and Jurs (2005: 9) note that validity in research ‘deals with the accurate interpretability of the results (internal validity) and with the generalizability of the results (external validity)’. This assumes that there is one accurate interpretation of results, that this is unchanging and that this interpretation can be applied across populations.

As part of *SSRP* (Dockett and Perry, 2004a; 2005a), we have asked children to draw what is important to them about school. Generally, they are eager to do this and to share their comments and discussions about their drawings, and from this, what matters to them about school. However, there is no guarantee that asking them to undertake the same task over several different occasions will result in similar drawings. Does this mean that the task and/or interpretations are not valid? Does this mean that we should not regard their drawings as valid data?

In *Risky Spaces*, children were invited to consider instances during the day where they make decisions about their everyday lives by marking on a timeline and discussing with the researcher when they get to make decisions and when decisions are made for them. Children are asked questions such as: What sorts of things do you think you should have a say about?

Can you think of a time when you wanted to have a say about something but didn’t get a

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chance? When is it okay with you for adults to make decisions about what you do? The analysis of the children's responses is approached by understanding the interview as an interactional event where both researcher and children shape, or co-construct, the generation of accounts (Baker, 2004). In this way, the data are recognized not as 'neutral' but collaborative productions (Danby and Farrell, 2004).

We contend that the data derived from both projects are valid, and that valid data can tell a different story in different contexts or at different times. In addressing validity, following McMillan and Schumacher, (2006: 324), we ask:

- Do we see what we think we see?
- Do we hear the meanings we think we hear?
- Do the interpretations we generate as researchers have shared meanings between participants and the researcher?

Rather than seeking 'one truthful perspective' from children, we accept that children, as adults, may have many different perspectives on the same issue, and that these are reflective of their context/s. We use the definition of context cited by Graue and Walsh (1998: 9) as 'a culturally and historically situated place and time, a specific here and now'. This definition combines elements of the local context, such as the school classroom or the interview context, and the larger context, in which the local context is embedded. The larger context frames the local context and the inter-relationship between these contexts impacts on the interpretation of research data.

In recognizing the importance of context, both research projects problematize the notion of one accurate interpretation of data and the generalizability of results. The aims for both projects do not include demonstrating that all children in all contexts have the same views, or even that the same children have the same view all the time. Rather, the aims reflect the importance of considering research outcomes in context.

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Within the *SSRP* photo-essay project (Dockett and Perry, 2005b), groups of children from different schools took photographs of what they thought children new to the school should know about their school. They negotiated the text and collated the photos and text into a book to share with children starting school. Each book contained different photographs and text and was relevant in that context. For example, the children attending a Catholic school took photos of the church and included text about how the church was connected with the school. In another rural school, the bus area assumed greater importance than in other schools. While there are some general patterns identifiable across the schools, the contextual differences are particularly important.

In *Risky Spaces*, contextual differences were identified on a number of counts. Children who were home-schooled, for example, were found to indicate few instances of decision-making during their day. Children engaged in regular schooling, on the other hand, indicated more opportunities for decision-making at home in comparison to the opportunities for decision-making afforded while at school (Danby and Farrell, 2004).

Rather than seeking only generalizable results, both projects aim to conduct research that is well-argued, logical and well-documented and hence, accessible to other researchers and open to a range of interpretations. In this way, the focus is the comparability of research (can others understand the results, can they understand the theoretical constructs and research methodology underpinning the research) and the translatability of the research (Wiersma and Jurs, 2005), as well as confirmability (Guba and Lincoln, 1989).

Cobb (2000) argues that generalizability comes from regarding each context, such as a school or classroom or community, as exemplars, with the theoretical analysis of one exemplar considered when interpreting others, so that ‘what is generalized is a way of interpreting and acting that preserves specific characteristics of individual cases’ (Cobb, 2000:

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327). In both *SSRP* and *Risky Spaces*, what are regarded as generalizable are the approaches, methodologies and strategies for analyses, rather than only the results. In each project, there is strong recognition that context matters, and that context changes: 'If stepping into the same river twice is not possible, neither is doing the same research twice' (Graue and Walsh, 1998: xvii).

Reliability refers to the consistency of the research and the degree to which studies can be replicated (Wiersma and Jurs, 2005). For example, if using the same task, over different occasions, would similar results be obtained? Reliability also refers to the quality of the field notes or transcripts based on raw data such as audio-recordings that are available for public viewing (Silverman, 1993). Many research strategies have been developed to promote reliability in qualitative research. These include: the use of prolonged and persistent field work, multimethod strategies, involving multiple researchers, member checking and approaches to recording data so that it can be analysed in multiple ways (McMillan and Schumacher, 2006). In our research with young children, we have aimed to employ a range of methods that are interesting and meaningful for children, while at the same time promoting reliability. There is often tension between developing interesting methods to engage children, while at the same time avoiding a gimmick approach.

When considering reliability, we aim to match data with reality, where researchers focus on 'a fit between what they record as data and what actually occurs in the settings under study, rather than the literal consistency across different observations' (Bogdan and Biklen, 2003: 36). The focus of data analysis has been the identification of patterns among categories of data. This means that data are considered in many different ways as researchers seek to understand the complexities of the research situation. In many instances, the patterns of meaning relevant to the research situation will emerge through the use of multiple coding procedures and continual checking of the data and the context.

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In collecting data, researchers in each of *SSRP* and *Risky Spaces* have used the principle of reflexivity, resulting in ‘rigorous examination of one’s personal and theoretical commitments’ (McMillan and Schumacher, 2006: 327), and the ways in which these influence not only the research topic, but also the types of data generated, the people involved and the interpretations constructed. There is no sense that the researcher is an objective observer. Rather, there is an ongoing examination of how the subjectivities of researchers impact on the research process, and vice versa.

## **Trustworthiness**

One of the concerns expressed about research with children relates to the trustworthiness of data. There is often a sense that children will tell researchers what they want to hear, or that their responses change often (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000). The researchers involved in both *SSRP* and *Risky Spaces* have extensive experience working with children and recognize that young children can and do engage in experiences where they ‘push the boundaries’ and may be seen to offer extraordinary input. They also recognize that this is not a phenomenon restricted to children. Malewski (2004: 220) notes that children have probably never offered ‘unchanging insights’ and regardless of the methodology, probably have always been

experts at illusion, telling investigators what they want to hear but possibly little of what they might be thinking at any moment in time ... young human beings on many occasions stand in opposition to investigators who utilize conventional approaches. Their rebellion can sometimes be evidenced in the provision of the

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most outrageous answers – strategic responses that align with what they think will draw the interest of the investigator or simply a resounding no.

How can we trust what children tell us in research? We suggest that this is a question for all research participants, not just children. The strategies used in both *SSRP* and *Risky Spaces* recognize that there are times when participants offer responses that are expedient, for any number of reasons. In order to make some judgements about the nature of responses, we have found it important to be involved in ongoing interactions within the research context and to build relationships that support this involvement. Knowing children, and their knowing the researcher, as well as the context, are essential parts of constructing meaning and interpreting the data.

Children involved in both projects have also engaged in practices such as member checking, where confirmation of data is sought. For example, in the photo-essay project from *SSRP* (Dockett and Perry, 2005b), children who participated in the research discussed the text that had been contributed, adding and deleting as they felt was necessary to establish the information they wished to convey. In reporting one aspect of this project, Simpson (2003: 101), notes that ‘different children recalled different things about each photo and group discussion seemed to encourage students to generate shared meanings’. One example involves the photo of an elevator in the school. The original rationale offered for taking this photo was: *This is the elevator. You can get downstairs in this when you press the button, but only teachers are allowed to use it.* During discussion, the children offered the following additional comments:

- *People who keep falling over all the time and they can't walk properly [can use it].*
- *Only the big people are allowed to use it.*

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- *Big kids are allowed to use it.*
- *Especially for people with sore legs.*
- *People who can't walk so well.*

The final text to accompany the photo was subject to considerable negotiation, with the result being: *This is the elevator. You can get downstairs in this when you press the button, but only teachers, people who don't walk so well, or people who can't walk, are allowed to use it* (Simpson, 2003: 105).

In *Risky Spaces*, there is evidence to show that children play an active role in the research agenda and themselves act as gatekeepers. In one interview (Danby and Farrell, 2005: 59), Lilly is asked by the researcher about how she felt about signing the consent form. Lilly's first response was to indicate that she 'didn't know'. This initial reply by Lilly shuts down any information giving; in other words, Lilly acts as a gatekeeper to her own experiences and practices. However, the researcher asks further 'were you interested' and, after a short pause, Lilly agrees that she was. As the research conversation continues, Lilly elaborates her response by reporting that she felt '(it means) sort of like I'm important. It's for me. I have to sign'.

A further strategy for seeking patterns in data is triangulation. Triangulation seeks to cross-validate 'data sources, data collection strategies, time periods, and theoretical schemes' (McMillan and Schumacher, 2006: 374). Triangulation emphasizes the importance of looking at a situation in many different ways. Greene and Hill (2005) suggest that the principle of triangulation does not 'open the doors to an "anything goes" approach' and that as a methodological doctrine, rather than a practice, it can be problematic:

Triangulation can imply that there is a reality to which one can come closer by

combining multiple perspectives. Richardson (1994) questions 'the assumption that

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there is a “fixed point” or “object” that can be triangulated’ (p. 522) and suggests that the metaphor of the crystal might be more useful than the metaphor of the triangle. ... Each representation in research can be seen as a facet of a crystal, and crystals ‘reflect externalities and refract within themselves, creating different colours, patterns, arrays casting off in different directions. What we see depends on the angle of our repose’ (Richardson, 1994, p. 523) (Greene and Hill, 2005: 16).

The procedure of examining a research context in different ways, from different perspectives is important in our attempts to describe and understand the social worlds being investigated. Nevertheless, we need to be wary of using triangulation as a means of searching for the one truthful or accurate interpretation.

### **Children as active and effective participants**

This section of the paper poses a range of questions related to children’s active and effective participation in research. Many of the protocols and practices discussed below are remarkably similar to those used in research with adults. This reflects the view that children are competent social actors, and that regardless of the participants in research, methodologies and approaches must be relevant and meaningful. This does not suggest that all research participants be treated exactly the same, nor that researchers abrogate their responsibilities of care for children. Rather, it suggests that any research must take into account the research participants and utilize appropriate methods and strategies.

Article 12 in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) clearly identifies the right of children to express their views on matters that impact on them. It is up to researchers to ensure that children have opportunities to exercise this right in

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research. Similarly, the New South Wales Commission for Children and Young People and Commission for Children and Young People (Queensland) (2004), advocate increasing children's participation in information gathering and decision-making at a policy level.

## **Ethics and research protocols**

All potential research participants have the right to give or deny informed consent (Hill, 2005). What does it mean to seek informed consent from children? Who gives consent? How do children indicate informed consent?

In most countries, there are explicit legal and professional requirements for parent/guardians to give informed consent to the participation of children in any research. In Australia, for example, informed consent is inscribed in the *National Statement for the Ethical Conduct of Research with Children* (Australian Health Ethics Committee/National Health and Medical Research Council, 2003), with which researchers interacting with children are required to comply. Researchers focused on engaging children as research participants typically regard this as a necessary, but not sufficient, part of obtaining children's informed consent. The informed consent of children is also considered essential. It may also be necessary to seek consent from other gatekeepers, such as schools, or school systems, individual teachers or principals, in order to conduct research in particular settings.

Adults are usually required to give consent in writing. It may not always be appropriate to seek children's written consent; however, it should not be assumed that children may not wish to exercise their right to give written consent, perhaps by writing their name or using a specific mark or sign. Hill (2005) notes that it is not sufficient for children not say 'no' when asked if they wish to participate in research: positive consent is required.

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Danby and Farrell (2005) provide an example of seeking written consent from children aged 5-11 years. As part of the opening of the research conversation, researchers explained the consent form and encouraged children to think about the consent process. The researcher asked explicitly about the consent process. Danby and Farrell (2005: 53) report the following exchange:

- Researcher: How did you feel about actually being asked if you wanted to do it, or if you didn't want to do it?
- Jacob: I was in heaven.
- Researcher: Yeah ((laughter)) how come?
- Jacob: Usually I don't get uhmm decisions about those particular things at school.

Children involved in *Risky Spaces* were also invited to sign consent forms, sometimes using their names, other times using other marks. The forms of signature are described in Table 1.

**'Table 1 about here'**

While wary of assuming that children understand either the concept of consent or the consequences of giving consent, it is possible to share sufficient information about the research in appropriate ways for even very young children to make decisions about their involvement. Appropriate strategies may include reading an information statement about the research as well as discussing any questions, and providing time for children to think about the research and to consult with others.

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It is appropriate that obtaining informed consent involves ongoing opportunities for children to assess what is being asked of them as well as opportunities to agree to continue or withdraw at any stage (Hill, 2005). Flewitt (2005: 556) uses the term ‘provisional consent’ to signify that agreement can be ‘understood to be provisional upon the research being conducted within a negotiated, broadly outlined framework and continuing to develop within the participants’ expectations’. This concept also highlights the ongoing nature of consent.

Obtaining consent involves several tensions. One is ensuring that sufficient information is provided so that potential participants can make an informed decision about participation while also recognizing that too much information can be as confusing as too little. Another is ensuring that information is provided about the possible positive and negative outcomes of research participation.

Hill (2005: 69) lists the factors that should be included in information provided to children as:

1. the aims of the research;
2. what time and commitment is required;
3. who will know the results;
4. whether there will be feedback; and
5. whether confidentiality is promised.

This latter provision introduces another tension, in that one of the projects under consideration in this paper has been required to include information for children about what will occur should information be disclosed in the research that represents a risk in terms of child protection. *Risky Spaces* has included the provision for the researcher to initiate a disclosure, as appropriate under law, should they be sufficiently concerned about the safety of

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a child participant. This presents an interesting tension, as children have the right to know that some forms of information, when disclosed, must be reported further. As an element of Australian federal law, mandatory reporting of suspected child protection issues is obligatory, whether or not children are informed about it. In this sense, it is very important that children are aware of the responsibilities of researchers.

Research participants have the right to confidentiality. Within Australia, the *Privacy Act* (Commonwealth of Australia, 1988, amended 2004) specifically details the rights of individuals to privacy and prohibits a range of intrusions into personal lives. Provisions of this Act, and of any approval granted by Research Ethics Committees, highlight the importance of ensuring that data is used for the stated purpose, with due respect for the principle of confidentiality.

Confidentiality can occur at several levels within research (Hill, 2005). At the level of public confidentiality, it involves not publicly identifying research participants. This can be negotiated with participants, so that, for example, children may choose the name they want used to refer to them in research reports or presentations. Confidentiality can be more problematic if, in describing the contextual features of a research site or the roles of people within that site, it becomes possible to identify participants. Just as with adults, it is important that children have opportunities to check the data generated through their involvement as well as the representation of this data in public forums.

Other elements of confidentiality to be considered include network confidentiality---where information gathered from one group of participants (such as children) is not shared with another group of participants (such as teachers)---and third-party breach of confidentiality---which involves the disclosure of private or sensitive information about one or more participants within the actual group (Hill, 2005).



Ensuring anonymity for research participants is usually a given in research. It can be achieved in written data by using pseudonyms and providing general, rather than specific, descriptions of context. However, these strategies are inadequate when data is visual. Flewitt (2005) notes that the public nature of video and photographic data can generate anxiety among participants, particularly related to a sense of losing control over how the data can be used. Flewitt's (2005: 559) suggestions for using such data include:

- all participants viewing and commenting on the data;
- participants having their own copies of the data;
- showing adult and child participants the data researchers wish to use and seeking specific consent for that use;
- reflecting on the degree of visual detail required for research reports and presentations---with the possibility of obscuring, to some extent, faces to avoid recognition, or reducing the pixel count of the image, in effect making it 'fuzzy'.

Involving children in research also involves renegotiating consent to use visual data, particularly as children mature and may well have different reactions to representations of themselves.

## **Mechanisms of engagement**

Recently, there have been a number of descriptions of approaches to engaging children in research in relevant, meaningful and interesting ways (for example, Clark, 2005; Danby and

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Farrell, 2005; Dockett and Perry, 2005a; Einarsdóttir, 2005; Farrell, Tayler and Tennent, 2002; 2004; Schiller, 2005). In seeking to engage children in research, it is important to consider how the research is to be undertaken, and what children are asked to do. Christensen (2004: 166) suggests two key questions: 'are the practices employed in the research process in line with and reflective of children's experiences, interests, values and everyday routines; and what are the ways in which children routinely express and represent these in their everyday life?'

Who decides what the research engagement will be and the forms it will take?

Traditionally, these have been researcher responsibilities. In some recent studies, children have had a much more active role in deciding what they will do, with whom and how this will be documented. For example, in undertaking a photo-essay as part of *SSRP* (Dockett and Perry, 2005b), children made decisions about what was important about their school, and how this could be documented in photographic form. In some instances, they decided on who would accompany them on a tour of the school, and within that same group, decided what photos would be included in a final book and what the accompanying text would be. Clearly, there were still adult imposed constraints in this project (coming from both researchers and teachers), but there was also flexibility exercised by the participants.

## **Principles of co-construction of the research interaction**

Involving children as research participants recognizes both the complexity of children's lives and the reality that someone else's experience is 'always in part inaccessible to an outsider' (Greene and Hill, 2005: 5). Making sense of the research situation and interpreting the experiences of children who participate is a dialectic process that involves the development of

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intersubjectivity or shared understanding, where ‘each participant in the dialogue strives to grasp the subjective perspective of the other’ (Berk, 2001: 42).

Developing shared---or agreed---understanding involves co-construction. This suggests that it is neither the researchers’, nor the participants’ interpretations of experience, but rather the co-constructed interpretations, the shared meanings, that are important. Researchers with a particular agenda in mind may well interpret data to fit with this agenda, failing to recognize data that do not fit a particular pattern. This can be identified when data and interpretation are discussed with the research participants.

For example, in studies of children’s drawings, it can be easy for researchers to interpret drawings according to their particular research agenda. This, however, may not necessarily relate to the intention of the drawer (Dockett and Perry, 2005c), as indicated in the following figures.

**‘Figure 1 about here’**

**‘Figure 2 about here’**

In another example, group discussions involving children can generate co-construction of meanings as children contribute different information and build upon the comments and interpretations of others, as indicated in the transcripts below.

Interviewer: Is there anything you need to know before you can come to school?

Jason: You have to be nice.

Eliza: Say good things.

Jason: Not to run in the classroom.

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Lucas: Not to mess in the sandpit.

Eliza: If the boys don't come in from the playground they get into big trouble.

You have to sit next to the door.

Or go to Mr C.'s office at little lunch and big lunch.

And no play because that's why you have to go down to Mr C.'s office.

I never do it.

(Dockett and Perry, 2004b:179)

Alicia: If you don't wear your uniform, you get kicked out of school, get into big trouble.

Miriam: ... they might kick you out of school, or call your Mum.

Nathalie: There is a lady in the office who knows how to ring Mum.

(Dockett and Perry, 1999: 112--113)

Co-construction is promoted through ongoing interactions and relationships. Where research involves extended periods of field study and interaction, there are opportunities to develop relationships and to build understanding based on shared experiences.

## **Negotiating the research space**

Negotiating the research space has both physical and social aspects. Physical aspects include undertaking research in locations that are comfortable and familiar to children and where there is relative ease of movement into and out of the research space for them. For example, holding conversations with children in an area of their preschool can make it easy for children

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to indicate when they have talked enough and want to rejoin their peers. Social aspects of the research space include the roles and positioning of people within that space as well as the potential for children to direct the research and to engage with the research. Christensen (2004: 168) is critical of approaches such as ‘one-off interviews with children’ because they limit children’s ability to respond in ways that reflect their considered views: ‘children will have been left little scope for engaging in a critical manner with the research questions and the research practice’.

Determining what is researched is a critical part of negotiating the research space. Researchers, by necessity, develop a plan to investigate particular elements of experience. The opportunities for children to engage with these plans, to change and redirect them are important to consider.

There are many issues related to power in researching with children. Christensen (2004) notes that researchers need to view power as inherent to research. As well as the power that is vested in people and social positions, she emphasizes the power of the process of conducting research. This has implications both for research approaches and roles.

Another power issue can occur in relation to artefacts produced by children who are participating in research, such as drawings, photographs, models. We believe that all such artefacts are the property of the children who produced them and it is they who must choose whether or not they will be available to the researcher. Too often, the power differential is used to rob children of their hard work. Such actions do nothing to develop a sense of equity in research.

The impossibility of adults assuming child roles in research has been raised in many contexts. Graue and Walsh (1998: xiv) remind us that ‘in doing research with children, one never becomes a child. One remains a very definite and readily identifiable other’. How the researcher positions her/himself and how the researcher adopts a definition of being ‘an adult’

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has a major impact on the research context and the involvement of children. Christensen (2004: 174) has described the importance of negotiating a position that recognizes researchers as adults, albeit an

unusual type of adult, one who is seriously interested in understanding how the social world looks from children's perspectives but without making a dubious attempt to be a child. Through this the researcher emerges first and foremost as a social person and secondly as a professional with a distinctive and genuine purpose.

## **Conclusion**

In much research about children and childhood, 'children have been the invisible and voiceless objects of concern, and not understood as competent, autonomous persons who have a point of view' (Smith & Taylor, 2000: ix). In this paper, we regard children as competent, capable, and effective reporters of their own experiences. We recognize that children's experiences, perspectives and expectations differ both among groups of children and at the individual level. Nevertheless, we regard children as valuable and trustworthy informants. While each child's individual experiences are unique, we do not regard this as sufficient reason for suggesting that their accounts of that experience are unreliable.

We acknowledge the importance of context in understanding children's lived experience, and recognize that children's capabilities reflect their social and cultural contexts. In addressing some of the concerns expressed in the research literature about the trustworthiness of children's accounts, we argue that the use of particular protocols and practices may create contexts where children's meaningful engagement can be promoted in research that matters to them, and where children's views and perspectives can be heard by researchers who are

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committed to actively listening (Clark, 2005). This builds capacity for research that ‘honours the voices of children and gives rich meaning to the variety of social encounters in their lives while also demonstrating an ethic of care not to draw definite and unmoveable conclusions’ (Malewski, 2004: 220). Practices that support children’s active and effective involvement in research ‘have the ability to connect generalizations and particularities in ways that provide investigators with a far more textured understanding of the voices of children and youth’ (Malewski, 2004: 220).

In seeking to address research issues that are relevant and meaningful for children and in developing strategies to engage children in worthwhile and interesting research conversations, where their perspectives, experiences and expectations are viewed as valid representations of their own lived experiences, *SSRP* and *Risky Spaces* have endeavoured to reach the standards outlined in this paper.

## Notes

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## Tables

Table 1. The children's signatures of consent (Danby and Farrell, 2005: 53-54)

- 
- Symbol (e.g., flower, star, snowman)
  - Initials of first and last name
  - Cursive handwriting (as opposed to printing name)
  - Nick-name
  - Code name (such as an action hero)
  - Embellished writing (swirls, little pictures)
  - First name in full with last name initial
  - Abbreviated name
-

## Figures



Figure 1. Child's drawing about school, without caption.

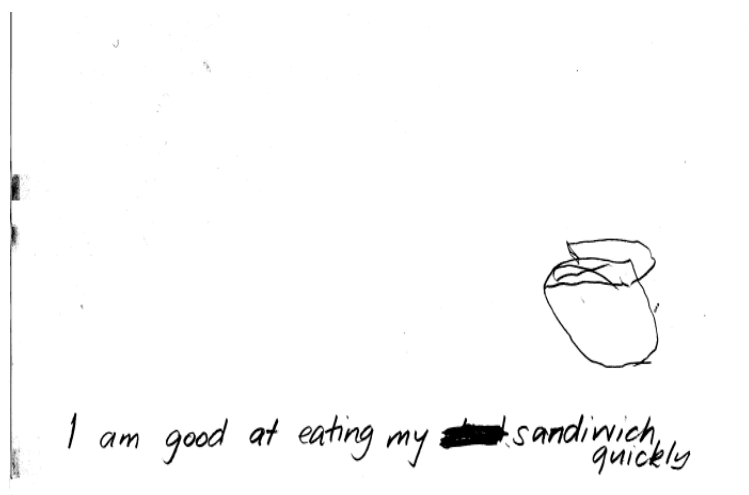


Figure 2. "I am good at eating my sandiwich [sic] quickly."