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Researching with young children: Seeking assent

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Abstract
Changing views of children and childhood have resulted in an increased focus on the nature of children’s participation in research. Rather than conducting research on children, many researchers now seek to engage with children in research. Such a change recognises children’s agency as well as their rights to have a say in matters that affect them. Research that reflects a participatory rights perspective and respects children’s agency must be based on children making informed decisions about their participation. However, prevailing views of children’s competence to make these decisions often preclude their involvement. While recognising the importance of informed consent from parents/guardians, we argue the importance of assent as a means of recognising the wishes of young children in relation to research participation. In this context, assent is defined as a relational process whereby children’s actions and adult responses taken together, reflect children’s participation decisions.

Keywords: assent, consent, children’s participation, children’s rights

Introduction
Over recent years there has been a major shift in research involving children. While a range of research is still conducted on children, much of the recent research involving children is focused on research with children (Woodhead and Faulkner 2008). This change reflects a paradigm shift in the ways in which researchers view children and childhood. In many instances, images of children as needy, incompetent and vulnerable (Moss and Petrie 2002) have been replaced with regard for children as competent social agents within social and cultural settings (Clark and Moss 2001), actively shaping their own experiences as well as the experiences of those around them. This perspective, embodied in ‘the new sociology of childhood’ focuses on children as ‘persons in their own right’ (Prout 2000, p. 308), experts on their own lives (Clark and Moss 2001; Lansdown 2005a) and competent to share their views and opinions (James and Prout 1997).

Underpinning this perspective is recognition that children have agency, defined as ‘the power to make decisions that impact on self and others and act on them’ (Sancar and Severcan 2010, p. 277). Children’s exercise of agency needs to be understood in relation to the social, cultural and political contexts in which it occurs, and in connection with adult agency. That is, exercising agency will be different for different children in different contexts. Recognising children’s agency in research is based on a view that children are individuals who experience their worlds in unique ways, and that these unique experiences are a valued focus of study (Greene and Hill 2005). Children are regarded as distinct, but not separate from, adults and capable of sharing their experiences.

Research with young children also has been influenced by discourses of children’s rights and citizenship. Children’s rights are fore-grounded by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (United Nations 1989) and General Comment 7 (Office of the
United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2005), which emphasise the rights of all children to be consulted in matters that affect them. Citizenship discourse (Jans 2004) recognises children as citizens in their own right, rather than framing them as citizens of the future.

Children’s participation in research is one area where the discourses of children’s rights and sociology of childhood overlap (Hoffman-Ekstein et al. 2008). The result is referred to as a participatory, rights-based approach. The opportunities for, and the nature of, participation afforded children within research reflect both the rights of children to have their views taken seriously (rights discourse) and respect for children’s agency (sociology of childhood discourse). In this approach, participation is concerned with children ‘not only speaking and being heard, but also ... active and routine inclusion into vital social processes’ (Liebel and Saadi 2010, p. 152). It is important to draw on both children’s rights and their exercise of agency, and to recognise the interplay between these, as it is quite possible to recognise children’s rights without affording opportunities for them to be involved in social processes, just as it is possible for children to have a great deal of social responsibility, without being recognised as holders of rights (Percy-Smith & Thomas 2010).

Any research involving children draws on particular understandings of children and childhood (Thomas and O’Kane 2000). Legal frameworks define childhood, most often in terms of age. For example, in Australia, anyone aged less than 18 years is a child; those over age 18 are adults. The terms adult and child are mutually exclusive, yet the multiple cultures and contexts of childhood can generate shifting boundaries as the nature of childhood itself becomes more ambiguous and diverse (Prout 2005). Some of the ambiguities of childhood have been recognised in the ethical frameworks underpinning research with children. One of the issues addressed in these frameworks relates to consent – that is, who decides whether or not children will participate in research?

Researching in ways that seek to promote children’s agency and rights brings with it a range of legal and ethical implications (Morrow and Richards 1996). Research that reflects a participatory rights perspective must be based on children making informed decisions about their participation: ‘participation is authentic when children understand clearly what they are doing and voluntarily choose to contribute’ (Chawla 2002, p. 16). However, legally, children are not in a position to provide informed consent: that must be provided by a parent or guardian.

This article explores notions of consent and assent in research with young children. While recognising the legal requirement for adult consent as a precursor to children’s engagement in research, we argue the importance of the concept of assent, as an additional process whereby children can exercise choice about their own research participation. We contend that young children are capable of providing assent, or dissent, in ways that clearly reflect exercise of agency in their own choices about participation. Decisions about assent are made in specific contexts and on the basis of specific information. We argue that the same elements underpinning informed consent are applicable in contexts where children are asked to make decisions about assent. These elements are the provision of appropriate and accessible information; promoting voluntary involvement; and recognising children’s competence to make an informed decision. The human element of contexts must also be considered and the roles of adults in creating enabling environments and in recognising and responding to children’s actions are critical.
In the following discussion, we explore the bases of informed consent and informed assent, as well as the role of gatekeepers in facilitating children’s assent, before providing some examples of research projects using participatory, rights-based approaches, which include ongoing opportunities for children to indicate assent as they determine the nature and extent of their own research participation.

**Informed consent /assent**

The recent Australian National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) 2007, Chapter 4.2) provides advice about who can provide consent for research involving children. Young children are considered to have neither sufficient age nor maturity to provide informed consent to research participation. Such consent must be provided by a parent or guardian. While the consent of children themselves may not be required, research that adopts a participatory rights agenda must also seek children’s agreement to participate in research. This will take the form of assent, rather than consent.

The concept of assent, ‘agreement obtained from those who are not able to enter into a legal contract’ (Ford, Sankey, and Crisp 2007, p. 20), involves more than passive acceptance or non-refusal on the part of children (Alderson and Morrow 2004). In this discussion, we adopt Cocks (2007, p. 258) approach to assent as an ongoing process, requiring the researcher to be ‘vigilant to the responses of the child’ and Vitiello’s (2003, p. 89) regard for assent as ‘an explicit, affirmative agreement to participate, not merely the absence of objection’. In adopting this approach with young children, we acknowledge the importance of non-verbal, as well as verbal actions as children use a range of means to signal the choices they wish to make. Recognising children’s ability to provide assent also requires acknowledging their right to dissent and hence to opt out of the research.

As with informed consent, the basis of providing informed assent rests on access to sufficient and appropriate information to support an informed decision; voluntary involvement; and competence to make an informed decision (Kirk 2007; Wiles, Heath, Crow, and Charles 2005). While these elements are drawn from Australian ethical guidelines, they are similar to the principles that underpin ethical research in many other countries around the world (Alderson and Morrow 2004). The relevance of each of these elements in research with children is the focus of the following discussion.

**Providing information**

Deciding what information is provided for children, and how, can be a complex task. Sufficient information is required to support an informed decision. Yet, it needs to be provided in ways that are accessible and appropriate for specific children. Researchers often seek to balance written and visual information, backing this up with verbal information (Alderson 2004; Conroy and Harcourt 2009; Ford et al. 2007). Regardless of whether the research involves children or adults, Wiles et al. (2005) note that researchers must have sufficient awareness of potential participants to provide information in ways that facilitate their understanding of what the research is about and what participation involves.

Explaining the research to children is important. However, the research may involve sensitive issues – does this mean that researchers should provide detailed explanations of such sensitive issues? Assuming that children are neither aware nor capable of making decisions about sensitive issues reiterates some of the wider ethical debates around children’s participation in research, some of which hold that children are vulnerable as well as
incompetent (Morrow and Richards 1996). While conscious of the ethical value of beneficence (NHMRC 2007) which seeks to balance potential risk or discomfort of the research for participants against likely benefits, researchers adopting a participatory rights-based agenda seek to afford children opportunities to assess the potential risks and benefits of research participation themselves. A critical aspect of providing appropriate information involves knowing the participants well enough to be able to make judgements about what information is necessary to facilitate children’s understanding of the research. In addition, Noble-Carr (2006) notes the importance of providing a safe and secure environment, characterised by commitments to privacy and confidentiality, and opportunities for debriefing at the conclusion of the research.

Providing information for children about research and their role within it is not a one-off activity. Conroy and Harcourt (2009) describe the process of providing information as ongoing, occurring over the period of the research such that additional information is provided at different phases of the research, accompanied by opportunities for participants to reassess their participation, based on this ongoing information. This is the basis of process assent (Alderson 2005; Flewitt 2005), where assent is regarded as provisional, to be renegotiated each time data is to be collected (Simons and Usher 2000). This process offers a way for participants to reassess their involvement and demonstrates that agreement to participate can be changed. It can be particularly important when research is ongoing and where different forms of participation may be sought over time.

Voluntary involvement
The second element of informed assent relates to voluntary involvement: are children free to choose whether or not they participate in research? It is important to note here that voluntary participation involves an active decision to take part – rather than failure to give dissent, or passive resignation. It also involves children knowing that they have the right to withdraw from the research at any time.

Children’s understanding of the voluntary nature of participation can be undermined by a number of things, including their perceived obligations to parents or guardians and their sense of how adults will react if they withdraw (David, Edwards, and Allred 2001). Children are often sensitive to the cues of adults around them. For example, in the work of Ondrusek, Abramovitch, Pencharz, and Koren (1998), children believed that the researcher would be unhappy if they withdrew. In other research, children reported not being aware of the procedure for withdrawing their participation (Abramovitch, Freedman, Thoden, and Nikolich 1991), or expecting negative consequences if they did withdraw (Bruzzone and Fisher 2003). These examples reflect the power imbalance often inherent in research with children (Mishna, Antle, and Regehr 2004).

Recognising the power imbalances that occur in research with children does not make them disappear. However, it can lead to consideration of ways to redress some of these imbalances. For example, observation of children’s body language and levels of engagement can provide indications of their willingness to participate (Flewitt 2005). It should also not be assumed that children are powerless victims of research. Even when children feel pressured to participate they have some control over the level and intensity of that participation (Morrow 2008). For example, it is possible for children to be particularly un-talkative in interviews, write little or nothing on questionnaires, or to scrawl over a drawing. In this sense, children themselves are capable of acting as gatekeepers by regulating their levels of participation in research (Danby and Farrell 2005).
Competence to make an informed decision

Much of the recent research relating to children’s assent comes from discussions of medical ethics. While medical and social research fields clearly have considerable differences, similar ethical principles underpin arguments about children’s engagement in research. The principle of respect, for example, incorporates not only respect for the child as an autonomous individual, but also respect for their developing competencies (NHMRC 2007). Critical questions in these discussions relate to whether or not children understand the concept of assent and to what they are asked to assent.

In the United Kingdom, judgements of competence are based on children’s understanding of the information provided about the research and potential outcomes (Heath, Charles, Crow and Wiles, 2007). Similar conditions apply in Australia, with the NHMRC (2007, p. 55) avoiding age as the criterion of competence, referring instead to respecting ‘the developing capacity of children and young people to be involved in decisions about participation in research’. While young children are not regarded as competent to provide consent, it is noted that ‘even young children with very limited cognitive capacity should be engaged at their level in discussion about the research and its likely outcomes’ (NHMRC 2007, p. 55).

Considering competence as a developmental process recognises that children will have different understandings at different times and that the content and process of assent may have be to explained in different ways at different times (Miller and Nelson, 2006). According to Kon (2006, p. 1808), a child-focused approach to assent consists of processes that are ‘rigid enough to provide protection and respect for children yet flexible enough to allow for varied cognitive and emotional levels’.

Despite changing understandings of young children and the recognition that their abilities in a number of areas have been underestimated in many contexts (David et al. 2001; Heath et al. 2007; Lansdown 2005b), there is generally no argument that young children should be expected to understand the elements required to provide informed consent: that they should appreciate the nature of research projects, what participation involves and the potential consequences of research participation (Mishna et al. 2004). However, there is strong agreement that, even when the informed consent of a parent or guardian has been provided, children have the right to choose to participate, or not, through the process of providing assent (Cocks 2007; Ford et al. 2007). We argue further that this is a right that also should be accorded to young children.

Gatekeepers

According to this argument, consent from parents/guardians does not abrogate the need for assent from children. Adult consent has been described as providing permission for researchers to approach children and to then negotiate with them their participation in the research (Thomas and O’Kane 2000). According to this perspective, adults, through their providing or withholding of consent, act as gatekeepers (Balen et al. 2006).

Often, several levels of gatekeeping will need to be negotiated by researchers before any information about the research and participation is shared with children. When researchers seek to access potential participants through organisations such as schools, early childhood settings or agencies, negotiations with managers of these organisations – often at a range of levels – will be needed before access to the organisation itself is granted. Gatekeepers, such as teachers or case workers, are usually not in a position themselves to provide consent for
children, but they do have control over the sharing of information, the nature of the information provided and access to potential participants within that setting (David et al. 2001).

Gatekeepers can facilitate or hinder researchers’ access to participants and children’s access to research participation. Indeed, they may do both such as, for example, by promoting access to some participants, but not others. In some contexts, gatekeepers provide a familiar and trusted mediator between participants and researchers; in others, gatekeepers’ knowledge of social and cultural contexts, language or cultural protocols means that they are critical partners in research.

When research involves children, gatekeepers may limit researchers’ access to participants for a range of reasons, such as the sensitivity of the research topic, children’s perceived competency or interest and the potential disruption to their lives. A possible outcome is that children may wish to participate in research but that wish can be overridden by a parent or guardian or other gatekeeper (Heath et al. 2007). This, in turn, has implications for the representation of children within research, determining which voices are heard or silenced (Malins 2008; Wise 2009). Where gatekeepers limit access, not only is there potential to marginalise children and promote discourses of children as unable to make such decisions (Campbell 2008), but also for children to be excluded from the perceived benefits of research, such as engagement in processes that ‘build capacity to analyse and transform their own lives and communities’ (Cahill 2007, p. 297).

Promoting research contexts where young children are positioned as competent to make decisions about participation involves working closely with parents/guardians and encouraging them to share the responsibility for decisions about consent and assent with their children.

**Young children and assent**

Our argument for considering assent a right that should be accorded to young children involved in research rests on three notions: the CRC (United Nations 1989) which affirms the rights of all children to be consulted about matters that affect them; respect for children and their agency; and changing notions of competence which recognise children’s developing capabilities.

Article 12 of the CRC (United Nations 1989) affords all children, regardless of age, the right to have a say about matters that affect them, and for what they say to be listened to and considered. Recently, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights issued General Comment 7 (2005, pp. 6-7), which reaffirms the applicability of Article 12 to young children, noting that

> As holders of rights, even the youngest children are entitled to express their views … Young children are acutely sensitive to their surroundings and very rapidly acquire understanding of the people, places and routines in their lives, along with awareness of their own unique identity. They make choices and communicate their feelings, ideas and wishes in numerous ways, long before they are able to communicate through the conventions of spoken or written language …

Competency and agency are recognised in changing perspectives of children, which represent children as competent social actors, who actively influence their worlds and the worlds of those around them. Children are active members of social and cultural contexts, both
contributing to, and learning from, those contexts (James and Prout 1997). While children’s agency is important in this view of competence, it is also recognised that children and adults co-exist, and are indeed, interdependent (Prout, 2005). Acknowledging such interdependence can lead to considering children’s competence within their relationships with others, rather than only on an individual level. This, in turn suggests that children, in the context of relationships with familiar and trusted others, can demonstrate competence beyond that demonstrated in unfamiliar contexts on their own (Cocks 2007).

We promote the definition of assent as something that exists within the relationship between the researcher and child, where the researcher’s presence is accepted positively by the child and where the researcher is attuned to the child’s actions in such a way as to be able to discern any sense of discomfort or disinterest, as well as interest and engagement (Cocks 2007). Using this definition, assent is not a one-off decision made by a child. Nor it is tied to definitions of competence or maturity, or reliant on verbal ability. Rather, it is based on a sense of familiarity and trust between researcher and child. This definition locates the responsibility for assent with both the child and the researcher. It respects children’s abilities to indicate signs of interest and engagement as well as their right to dissent, and expects adults to know the children and their context well enough to be able to react appropriately to these signs. It argues for assent as a process of ongoing discussion and negotiation (Flewitt 2005).

**Indicating assent and dissent**

The following discussion draws on three different research projects involving children aged 2 to 6 years. Each project adopted a participatory rights based approach, by:

- recognising children’s rights to participate in discussions of issues that mattered to them;
- providing opportunities for children to exercise agency, for example in deciding whether or not they wished to participate and in choosing the form of participation; and
- assuming children’s competence to indicate assent or dissent.

A brief overview of each project is included to provide context for the examples. We do not claim that these examples are representative of every child involved in the different projects. Rather they are included to indicate that children, when afforded opportunities in familiar contexts often are willing and able to make informed decisions about their own research participation.

The first project involved seeking children’s perspectives of starting school. To facilitate the engagement of children about to start school, researchers visited a number of preschools. These visits occurred over time and provided opportunities for researchers to talk with educators, parents and children. The research adopted qualitative methods, inviting all participants to engage in informal conversations about starting school. Children who indicated assent chose the timing and nature of their participation. For example, some children chose to talk about starting school; others preferred to draw or dress up and describe what they were doing. Some children indicated a preference not to participate.

**Assent: That’s my school**

At the beginning of a project seeking preschool children’s perspectives of starting school, researchers met with parents to outline the project and what was involved
for children and families. Parents had opportunities to ask about the project and were encouraged to talk about it with their children, prior to making a decision about consent for their children’s participation. Following this, the researcher visited a group of 4 year-olds at their preschool. She explained what the study was about – finding out what the children thought school would be like and sharing anything they would like to know about school; the purpose of the study – to help plan visits to schools as part of a transition program; and what children might like to do if they wanted to participate. The choices included talking about what they knew about school, or thought it would be like, drawing or painting about school, or playing about school. Within these activities, if the children agreed, their interactions would be recorded or documented. The researcher emphasised that it was the children’s choice whether or not to be involved – they could still do the same activities and not have them documented, or do the same activities but not talk about school. Children were told that they did not need to put their names on any drawings or paintings, and invited each of them to choose a different name to use if they were willing to participate.

This discussion was followed by several days of the researcher being in the preschool, as a participant observer. After this, the children were reminded of the study and told that the researcher would be asking them if they wanted to participate. Soon after the morning conversation, Eric, aged 4, approached the table where the researcher was sitting. He brought some pencils and several large sheets of paper and commenced drawing. After a few minutes, he handed his drawing to the researcher, pointed at a figure and said “That’s my school …and me … and the other kids playing”. “Great drawing,” said the researcher, “do you want to talk with me about what you think school will be like?”

Eric’s initiation of interaction with the researcher and his subsequent agreement to talk about his expectations were taken as assent. We believe that his comfort in sharing his views partly derived from the familiar environment, the opportunity to participate in familiar tasks and the timing that allowed Eric, and other children, to build connections with the researcher and to decide whether or not they wanted to participate. Eric’s drawing and subsequent discussion indicated his interest in the research topic; it was something that mattered to him.

**Dissent: Active avoidance**

In the same project, Anthy, aged 4, seemed to avoid the researcher whenever she visited the preschool. When the researcher talked to the children at group time, Anthy sat near the back of the group and did not make eye contact. If she was nearby when the researcher sat at a table or in the sandpit, Anthy either turned away, or moved.

While Anthy did not voice her dissent, her actions were taken as signs of active avoidance of the researcher and the activities associated with the project. In recognising this as dissent, Anthy was still invited to join in any discussions or activities, but there was no attempt to convince her to participate in the study.

A second project involved children in consultations about what they liked to do in a museum. Families who visited the museum were invited to join a mailing list of future projects and, through this, invited to participate in the research. Initial information about the project was sent out to families and they were encouraged to discuss this with their children and, if
interested in participation, to join in some activities at the museum. Parents were asked to indicate their informed consent for their children’s participation on a standard form. In addition, researchers developed an assent form for children. The aim of the form was to ensure that each child was provided with sufficient information about the research to make an informed decision and to provide an opportunity for children to record their decision about participation.

**Assent form: Recording children’s decisions**

Initially, researchers were pleased with children’s tendency to circle the smiley face on the far left. However, on reflection we were concerned that children were circling the most familiar figure, the one that was regarded as the ‘best’ figure, or the ‘reward’, possibly connecting narratives and discourses from educational settings to the research setting. A focus on intertextuality served as a reminder that the meaning of any text – including visual texts – is shaped by its relationship with other texts and the socio-cultural context in which it is embedded (Stephens 1992), providing glimpses of the connections children make between experiences. It is quite likely that children interpreted these faces in the same way that they would interpret the symbols within their preschool routine, or knowledge of school – the smiley face regarded as positive or ‘good’, and the others as negative or ‘bad’. We also noted that the choices offered did not provide any way for children to indicate that they might want to be involved now, but not all the time.

Discussing the assent form with each child did ensure that information was provided about the project. The one-to-one interaction between researcher and child did offer opportunities for the researcher to describe the project, answer questions and ensure that the information provided to each child was appropriate. However, the form also constrained children’s decision making, suggesting that the ‘good’ response was to agree to participate. While use of the form was retained in this project, researchers reflected on additional ways to promote children’s informed decision making about participation, as indicated in the following example.

**Dissent: Little Dog**

As part of the museum study children were asked about their favourite places and invited (with their parent/carer) to take researchers on a tour of these locations within the museum. After discussions with children and their parents, children were asked if they wanted to participate. Annabel (aged 2 years 9 months) looked at her mother and picked up the favourite toy, Little Dog, who accompanied her everywhere. She held Little Dog’s head, making it nod. A few minutes into the tour, Annabel stopped, held up Little Dog and moved its head in a shaking motion. The researcher also stopped, asking Annabel if she wanted to go back to the play space. Annabel moved Little Dog’s head again in a nodding motion.

Annabel’s use of Little Dog was taken to indicate both assent and dissent. There was a sense that Annabel had been initially interested in the activity, but as she became more involved,
and perhaps had a greater understanding of what it entailed, she changed her mind about participation.

The final project sought the perspectives of Australian Aboriginal children on what happened in their early childhood education settings. The project was conducted in preschools located in Australian Aboriginal communities. The research focus was around the curriculum of the setting, and this was interpreted broadly as what happened for the children throughout the day. This qualitative study invited children to discuss what happened in their setting, what they enjoyed and why, as they engaged in familiar activities. Discussions were informal, taking place in locations chosen by the children involved. Researchers were familiar to the children, having visited the setting previously. Consent to invite children to participate was sought from parents prior to interacting with the children.

**Assent: Do you know my Mum’s name?**

Within the context of a broader project, researchers talked with a group of Aboriginal children about their experiences at preschool. After some time in the preschool playground, two girls approached the researcher and Tahlia initiated the following conversation:

Tahlia: What’s your name?
Researcher: Sue. What’s your name?
Tahlia: Tahlia. Do you know my Mum’s name?
Researcher: No. What is her name?
Tahlia: Molly. My Mum’s name is Molly. An’ my Dad, he’s name’s Trevor.
Researcher: [points to child standing next to Tahlia] And who’s this?
Tahlia: She’s Taneysha. She’s my sister. An’ there’s Percy and Jaspa and Jayden. All my brothers. An’ Nanna Hilda’s there too. An’ who’s your Mum?
Researcher: My Mum’s called Betty. She lives a long way from here.
Tahlia: An’ who’s your man?

... Tahlia: Do you know I can get across this? [walks to flying fox equipment in playground]

This conversation lasted some time as Tahlia established her family connections and explored those of the researcher. When she seemed satisfied with the information shared, she led the researcher over to some playground equipment and started talking about what she could do and what she liked about preschool. Tahlia’s subsequent involvement in the research conversation indicated an interest in the topic; yet her decision to be involved was not made automatically. First, she was interested in establishing the background of the researcher and her role and place within the preschool context. Tahlia’s actions in initiating the conversation and then leading the researcher to the equipment were interpreted as providing assent, contributing to a relationship between herself and the researcher, where the researcher’s presence was accepted positively. After about ten minutes, Tahlia walked away from the play equipment and the researcher. This was taken as an indication that she had finished talking and no longer wished to participate.

**Discussion: Processes of assent**
Why is it important for young children to be involved in the process of assent? The answer relates to the nature of the research. Where researchers profess a commitment to participatory rights-based research, this must be underpinned by acknowledgement of even the youngest children’s rights to have a say in matters that affect them and understanding of contexts that provide the potential for children’s competence to be recognised and their agency to be exercised.

Participatory methods facilitate knowledge production, rather than knowledge gathering (Veale, 2005). Participatory approaches to research with children recognise that there are many cultures and dimensions of childhood and that each child’s experiences are unique and valuable. These approaches position children as active participants, who can exert some control within the research, particularly related to their own participation. Such approaches also have implications for the nature of data that are generated through the research: information that is constructed and shared by children in interactions with others (including researchers) will be quite different from data that is generated in more formal, controlled contexts.

The examples provided suggest that young children are capable of exercising agency as they make decisions about research participation. The children involved used a range of strategies – verbal and non-verbal – to indicate assent or dissent and to change their decisions as the research progressed. These capabilities are often expected of older, but not younger children. Central to the children’s exercise of agency was the nature of the context in which decisions were made. Supportive and enabling environments in which adults expect and provide for children’s active decision making and regard assent as an ongoing process are important contributors to children’s exercise of agency. Key elements of such environments are relationships, time, conversations, context, and reflexivity.

**Relationships**

The time required to build relationships is not always easy to find within the schedules of research. However, when seeking to involve young children, time to build relationships and to develop a sense of trust with children is critical. Building relationships supports the engagement of children who may not be verbally articulate, or who may choose not to engage in verbal interactions. Knowing children, their interests and preferences provides opportunities to gauge children’s comfort with participation and to respect their dissent – regardless of their age or developmental level. As well, relationships provide a context for children to know researchers. Children’s existing relationships can also support their participation in research. For example, children and parents/carers participated together in the museum study, and children were comfortable interacting with researchers with familiar adults nearby.

Relationships with other adults can also be critical in research with young children. For example, building positive connections with parents/guardians and other adult gatekeepers is the first step in gaining their informed consent to approach the children themselves and to then start the process of seeking their assent. In many situations, children note the nature of interactions between researchers and gatekeepers, and may use these as a reference point for their own interactions.

**Time**

The processes of informed consent take time: time to build relationships, time for children to understand the nature of the research, time to ask questions, time to think about participating
in the research, time to confer with others, time to make an informed decision and sometimes, time for children to change their minds.

Seeking informed assent from young children is not something that occurs within a short period of time, nor is it confined to one place in time. Similar to process consent, the notion of assent as provisional or ‘process assent’ indicates that it is something to be re-negotiated each time data are to be collected (Alderson 2005; Flewitt 2005). In this way, over time, young children’s assent may well change. For example, Annabel initially indicated assent for her involvement in the museum project, but then changed this to dissent. As noted in the first example, Eric was eager to participate in the research and to share his drawings with the researcher. However, on a subsequent visit, when invited to talk some more, he indicated that he was playing with his friend and did not want to talk with the researcher. Tahlia was happy to talk with researchers, but only after some time spent exploring family connections.

**Conversation**

Ongoing conversations with children about the research contribute to the building of relationships. Such conversations need to strike a balance between providing critical information (such as the voluntary nature of participation and issues of confidentiality), and too much detail that can lead to confusion. They also need to acknowledge that conversations involve a two-way exchange of information. As noted by Danby and Farrell (2005), researchers need to be alert to the ways in which they open research conversations and set the tone for children’s participation in research. Further, the structure and pace of the conversations need to be considered. For example, Tahlia was quite responsive to questions about her preschool experiences, but only after the conversation about topics that she initiated.

**Context**

The contexts in which research is conducted influence children’s choices about research participation. Familiar contexts, with familiar people and experiences can promote participation. However, these can also appear to children as situations that are ‘more of the same’ and leave children wondering why they have been asked to participate in something they would usually do. Explanations of the research process and the ways in which data will be used can help children make these distinctions, as can the reporting back to children of research outcomes. Familiar contexts, with familiar adults, can also exert pressure on children to participate. This can be the case when someone known and respected by the child invites their participation – it can sometimes be much easier to indicate dissent to someone who is not well known or familiar.

We also need to consider the contexts in which children are engaged in conversations about research. Some contexts provide a great deal of support as children seek to understand the research and make an informed decision about participation (David et al. 2001). Often these are familiar contexts, such as the family or early childhood education setting, where children have been involved in decision making over time and where their decisions are respected and acted upon.

Supportive contexts facilitate children’s developing competence, recognising that their interests and understandings change as a consequence of time and experience. Those within these contexts acknowledge that even when young children may not completely understand the research or its possible outcomes, they often have sufficient understanding to decide whether or not they would like to participate in a particular activity (Flewitt, 2005). For
example, Annabel indicated an initial willingness to participate in the research. However, as the activity progressed and she understood more about what was involved, she changed her mind. Many adults make daily choices on the basis of having sufficient, rather than full information or understanding (Botkin 2003).

**Reflexivity**

Through reflexivity, researchers analyse the personal, intersubjective and social processes which shape research and acknowledge their role within the research (Finlay and Gough 2003). Reflexivity includes critical reflection on the assumptions underpinning the research – in the case of research with young children these include assumptions about the ethical processes. Christensen and Prout (2002) discuss the notion of ethical symmetry, whereby the same ethical principles are held to apply to children as they do to adults. One implication of this is that ‘each right and ethical consideration in relation to adults in the research process has its counterpart for children’ (Christensen and Prout 2002, p. 482). This does not assume that research with children is exactly the same as research with adults, but it does assume that researchers have the ethical responsibility to seek informed agreement to participate, protect participants’ privacy, prevent exploitation or harm in the research and consider the consequences of research participation for all research participants – adults and children. Seeking children’s assent and respecting their dissent is but one element of reflexive research practice.

The development and use of a form on which children could indicate assent is one area that has prompted critical reflection. The notion of an assent form that seeks children’s signature or mark needs to be considered by researchers. On the one hand, it is a concrete symbol that children are being taken seriously and demonstrating their right to choose whether or not they participate. On the other hand, signing a form makes the assent process concrete, clearly marking the power relationships between researcher and researched (Fine, Weis, Weseen, and Wong 2000). Clearly, assent is about more than obtaining a signature: ‘assent, like consent, requires an ongoing discussion that does not end after signing one’s name’ (Kon 2006, p. 1808). Providing information for children is important, and this may include verbal, pictorial and written information. However, given the diversity among children, it is quite likely that more than one type of assent form will be required (Ungar, Joffe, and Kodish 2006).

**Conclusion**

Changing views of children have challenged approaches to research and opened up new ways of conducting research with children. The changing scenarios of, and approaches to, research are often complex, generating new ground for the application of ethical principles as well as new ethical tensions. One such tension involves the issues of consent and assent in research with young children. While recognising the legal imperative of consent from a parent or guardian before children’s assent can be sought, we argue for the significance of children making informed decisions about research participation.

The bases from which children make such decisions are the same as those for informed consent: the provision of sufficient and appropriate information to support an informed decision; voluntary involvement; and competence to make an informed decision. In keeping with changing views of children as competent, social agents, we argue that it is indeed possible to provide appropriate information and construct contexts where children can make voluntary decisions about participation and demonstrate the requisite competence to make such decisions. Recognising their rights to provide informed assent is a major plank in participatory, rights-based research with children.
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