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Participatory approaches to engaging in research with young children place a great deal of emphasis on children’s rights to choose whether or not they wish to be involved. A number of recent studies have reported a range of strategies both to inform children of their research rights and to establish options for checking children’s understanding of these rights throughout the research process. This paper seeks to move the debate around children’s informed agreement to participate forward by considering the ways in which children might indicate their dissent – their desire not to participate – at various stages of the research process. Drawing on examples from Iceland and Australia, involving children aged 2-6 years, the paper will explore children’s verbal and non-verbal interactions and the ways in which these have been used, and interpreted, to indicate dissent. Reflection on these examples raises a number of questions and identifies several tensions, as well as offering some suggestions for ways in which researchers can recognise children’s decisions to opt out of research participation.

Key words: Children’s perspectives, ethics, participatory research, dissent

Introduction

Recent decades have seen a substantial shift in the nature of research conducted with children and young people. The ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) has provided impetus for the recognition of children as active participants in their own lives, learning and communities, moving beyond notions of children as passive recipients of the experiences and efforts of others. Strategies to promote children’s participation in research, engage children in consultation, and listen to children’s perspectives about things that are relevant in their lives have been introduced. While these directions emphasise different possibilities for engagement in different contexts, they are all underpinned by commitments to the ethical conduct of interactions with children and young people, recognition of their
rights as participants in research and consultation, and efforts to represent their perspectives in authentic ways.

Central to these commitments is recognition of the role of informed consent – that is, voluntary consent provided on the basis of sufficient and appropriate information, including information about the right to choose not to participate in the research. When research involves children, an added element is an assessment of the capability of children to make informed decisions (Kirk, 2007; Wiles, Heath, Crow, and Charles, 2005). Where children are considered unable – either legally or by virtue of their developmental status – the concept of assent is often invoked. When children are invited to either consent or assent to participation, they retain the right to dissent.

This paper explores the notion of dissent – that is non-agreement to participate in specific experiences – in research with young children. We do not aim to generate a definitive account of dissent. Rather, we aim to explore various interpretations of dissent, the ways in which it may be signified by young children, and the potential implications of respecting dissent. To do this, we draw on our own studies and reflect upon some of our own practices, as well as some examples shared by colleagues, in our efforts to engage in reflexive research practice with young children. To establish the context for examining dissent, we first provide an overview of the concepts of consent and assent.

**Consent, assent and dissent**

Research with children in Australia is guided by the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research*, (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2007). This statement notes that a parent/guardian is required to provide informed consent for the participation of children in research, although it also urges researchers to ‘respect the developing capacity of children and young people to be involved in decisions about
participation in research’ (NHMRC, 2007, p. 55). This statement is usually taken to be applicable to older, rather than younger, children. The result is that informed consent for young children’s participation in research is sought from parents/guardians as a legal requirement because these children are considered to have neither the maturity nor the understanding necessary to provide informed consent.

While the research context is different in Iceland, there is also a requirement to seek parental consent prior to undertaking research with young children. Iceland has a public institution, The Iceland Data Protection Authority (IDPA), which is charged with the implementation of the Act on the Protection and Processing of Personal Data, No. 77/2000, promoting the principles of data protection and privacy in research. All studies are reported to the IDPA and, when the intent is to involve young children, details of procedures for obtaining informed consent from parents are required (The Data Protection Authority, 2012).

Rather than assuming that parental consent is a sufficient basis for engaging children in research, many researchers have invoked the concept of children’s assent. The terminology of assent and consent is not used consistently across the research literature – possibly because different jurisdictions have different requirements and precedents for engaging with children in research. As an example of the different use of terms, we note that assent has been defined as ‘agreement obtained from those who are not able to enter into a legal contract’ (Ford, Sankey, and Crisp. 2007, 20); ‘an explicit, affirmative agreement to participate, not merely the absence of objection’ (Vitello, 2003, 89); ‘a person’s acquiescence’, as opposed to their informed agreement to participate (Coyne, 2009, 2); and an ongoing process, embedded in relationships and requiring the researcher to be ‘vigilant to the responses of the child’ (Cocks, 2006,258). Despite these varied uses, there is some agreement that assent is neither the lack of

Children’s decisions about participation are not made in isolation; rather the interdependence of children and adults means that decisions are embedded within the context of relationships (Gallagher, Haywood, Jones, and Milne, 2010). Assent and dissent occur within the context of ‘the relationships between the researched and the researcher, by the trust within that relationship and acceptance of the researcher’s presence’ (Cocks, 2006, 257). Relationships provide contexts to recognise and support children’s decisions about participation, as well as to recognise and respect their decisions to opt out of participation: ‘Knowing children, their interests and preferences provides opportunities to gauge children’s comfort with participation and to respect their dissent – regardless of their developmental level’ (Dockett and Perry, 2011, 242).

While recognising the importance of relationships, we also support the contention of Gallagher et al. (2010, 479) that children, occupy a ‘messy, compromised position [as] research participants’, subject to a range of influences and expectations as they make decisions about participation. Relationships with peers, family members, teachers and others may influence children’s decisions about participation (Conroy and Harcourt, 2009: Gallagher et al. 2010). Recognising both children’s rights to make informed choices about participation, and the significance of relationships for children making these decisions requires that researchers adopt a reflexive approach and attitude.

Such an approach is encapsulated in Christensen and Prout’s (2002) notion of ethical symmetry, which outlines the starting point for research as the ethical relationship between researcher and the participant. Though guided by a set of ethical principles and practices, ethical symmetry suggests that ‘researchers often have to rely on their own personal judgement in their everyday ethical practice’ (Christensen and
Prout, 2002, 489). These judgements form the basis of a set of ethical values and provide opportunities for researchers to reflect upon assumptions and approaches, with the aim of developing ‘a set of strategic ethical values that can give researchers the flexibility to meet the very varied circumstances of research that they may encounter while also providing an anchor for their practice’ (Christensen and Prout, 2002, 495). These values provide a basis for researchers to reflect upon children’s decisions about participation by considering not only what children say, but how they, and those around them, act and the contexts in which these words and actions are located.

While a great deal of recent research has argued for the importance of children’s informed agreement to participate in research, and there is consensus about children’s rights to express both assent and dissent, much less attention has been paid to considering the nature and implications of dissent for both participants and researchers. As is the case with consent, both assent and dissent are deliberate decisions about participation. In describing the process of seeking consent, Gallagher et al. (2010, 476), outline ‘a three-step process, where responsibility for providing information falls to the researcher, and responsibility for reflecting on that information, asking any questions and then signalling a response falls to the participant’. These same steps apply when researchers are seeking and participants are considering, assent and/or dissent.

The provision of appropriate information is an important element of seeking children’s participation in research. Initial information to be shared should indicate that children are already, or have the potential to be, subjects of research and that they have choices about their engagement in that research (Prout, 2000). In order to provide further information, researchers need to understand what constitutes relevant and appropriate information for those involved, and how best this information can be delivered (Conroy and Harcourt, 2007; Dockett, Perry and Kearney, 2012; Einarsdóttir,
Researchers need to strike a delicate balance between providing too little or too much information, or providing information that may be too simplistic or too complicated. Whatever information is provided and how, researchers have an obligation to engage in open discussion about the research and what involvement entails (Alderson and Morrow, 2004). These discussions provide opportunities for those considering participation to reflect on the information provided and ask questions.

Consent, assent and dissent are signalled by responses. When parental consent is involved, a signed consent form is usually provided to the researchers. Children’s decisions about research participation need to be recorded in some way. Possible approaches include a signature or mark on a form, an audio-recorded conversation, or researcher observations and notes. Advantages of having children record their decisions include affirmation of their right to choose as well as providing clear evidence of their decisions (Ashcroft, Goodenough, Williamson, and Kent, 2003; Wiles et al. 2005). However, these advantages may be lost if children regard the documentation as unchangeable, or if they feel unable to sign a form.

While it would be very neat to have a clear signed form to indicate children’s decisions about research participation, the reality is that children indicate assent or dissent in many different ways. Children may signal their decision verbally (for example, clearly saying ‘yes’ or ‘no’); behaviourally (for example, engaging willingly in an activity or wanting to leave); or emotionally (demonstrating happiness or distress). It is also possible for children to provide mixed signals, for example, where they clearly indicate that they want to be involved, but also look like they want to finish an activity as soon as possible.
The mixed signals, in particular, prompt researchers to question the voluntary basis for children’s decisions. Although children agree to participate in studies, often we do not know the basis for their decisions. Power imbalances between adult researchers and children have been discussed, recognizing that children’s agreement to participate may be based on perceived obligations to authority figures or their sense of how adults will react if they dissent or withdraw (Bruzzese and Fisher, 2003; Einarsdóttir, 2007).

Decisions may also be explained in terms of what else is happening around them. For example, children may choose to participate when they do not like what is happening in their classroom, when participation offers opportunities for novel or exciting activities, or when their friends have already decided to participate (Einarsdóttir, 2011; Gallagher et al. 2010). Reference to already having parental consent may also imply that children do not have a choice (Conroy and Harcourt, 2009). In one of our studies (Einarsdóttir, 2011) the children’s former preschool teachers participated in the data gathering by talking to children after they had been in primary school for several months. The children were very excited about meeting their ‘old’ teachers and discussing ‘old times’ as they participated in the study. In this case, the involvement of their former preschool teachers may have influenced children’s eagerness to become involved and provided a level of comfort about being involved.

Recent research interest in the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty (1946/1962) and his concept of embodiment has heightened awareness of the ways in which children position their bodies in space and time, and the affordances this positioning makes in terms of the perspectives available to them, potential ways of interacting and making sense of the world around them. Recognising the importance of the body alerts researchers to the actions of children as they signal their preferences about participation.
A further aspect to be considered when reflecting on consent, assent and dissent is the principle of process consent – where consent is regarded as provisional and open to renegotiation each time data is contributed (Simons and Usher, 2000). This principle commits researchers to having discussions with children on a regular basis about their involvement in research, enabling them to reassess their participation. It can be particularly important when research occurs over time, involves different forms of participation, or participation changes as consequences of participation become evident (Alderson, 2005; Conroy and Harcourt, 2006; Flewitt, 2005).

**Expressions of dissent**

Children signal dissent in many ways. Dissent can occur at any time within a project, and it is possible that participants may assent to some levels of involvement, and not others. For example, children may agree to be involved in drawing or photography activities, but not interviews. When considering dissent among adult patients with dementia, Black, Rabins, Sugarman, and Karlawish (2010) note that dissent does not require a reason or justification, and can be expressed at any time by participants. They urge respect for dissent, regardless of where it occurs within a project. Further, they argue that where the meaning of an individual’s signal about participation is unclear, researchers are obliged, ethically, to seek clarification from knowledgeable informants – those who know the person well and have experience interpreting their actions and/or communications. While the research context is different, and we in no way wish to imply that children are not competent to express their views, it is instructive to consider the same principles in research generally, including research with children.

In the following section of the paper we share some expressions of dissent from our studies, as well as those from the work of some of our colleagues. We are not seeking a ‘set of prescriptive solutions...using the ‘right’ techniques’ (Loveridge, 2010).
Rather, our aim in introducing these examples is to consider the ways in which we offer children opportunities to opt out of research and to continue to reflect on the ethical values that underpin our research with children.

**Example 1**

Pálmadóttir conducted a study involving two-year-old children attending preschool. On some occasions, she reported that the children gave very clear indications that they did not accept the presence of the researcher.

He (two-year-old child) looked at me and said, ‘No, no, no’ and shook his head. ‘No, no, no’. I understood that he did not want me in the room. He watched me leave the room and continued playing.

When I entered the room, she (a two-year-old girl) looked at me and said, ‘No, no, no’ and looked in the direction of her preschool teacher. I sat down on a sofa at some distance from her and kept my distance. I saw that she kept an eye on me.

The words and actions of the children were taken as clear indications of dissent. Yet, at the same time, it was not clear if the children were indicating dissent for the whole project, or refusing to join in at that given moment. When she returned at different times, Pálmadóttir noted that the children accepted her presence and demonstrated willingness to participate. In her reflection on this example, Pálmadóttir indicates that as they children got to know her more, and to trust her, they were more comfortable with her presence and more likely to engage with her (Pálmadóttir and Bjarnadóttir, 2012).

**Example 2**

In a study involving children with special needs in preschool and primary school settings, preschool children were more likely than primary school children to indicate that they did not want to talk with the researcher. The researcher reflected that this could have been because the primary school children were doing something in their classrooms that they did not like and so were happy to do something else with the researcher. It could also be because, at the time, the preschool children were playing with friends and did not want to stop. Or it could
even be that the younger children were more honest and just said what they meant (Jónsdóttir, 2012).

**Example 3**

Children in the first year of school (aged 5-6 years) were invited to contribute their views to a project seeking information about their experiences and expectations of their local community. In conversations about the project, children discussed a booklet designed by researchers to share information and provide opportunities for questions. The booklet included a page where children could indicate their willingness to participate in the project. Figure 1 includes a clear expression of dissent from one of the children.

Insert figure 1 about here

Several other children also indicated their dissent by circling the ‘thumbs-down’ figure, and some offered explanations for their decisions. Andrew’s explanation was: ‘I’m saying no ‘cause I’m allowed!’

**Example 4**

A mixed methods study involved opportunities for children to complete a range of literacy and numeracy tasks. The length of time taken to complete these tasks depended largely on how successful children were – that is, the more they could do, the more they were asked to do, until a ceiling was reached. Before engaging in the tasks, a researcher, with whom they had already had contact, asked if they wanted to be involved. The same researcher had made contact with their parents and the children knew that parental consent for their involvement had been provided. The tasks were undertaken individually by the children in a location away from their usual kindergarten (first year of school) classroom.

After agreeing to participate and showing some eagerness to leave the classroom, Stella expressed interest in what she was asked to do. She demonstrated a range of competencies as she proceeded through the tasks. However, as the tasks continued, she started to look towards the door and at one point asked ‘I wonder what the other kids are doing now?’ When asked if she wanted a break or to stop, she sighed, but said she would continue. A short while later, her responses to the tasks became peppered with ‘I don’t know’ and a shrugging of the shoulders. When she indicated that she needed to go to the toilet, the researcher interpreted her actions
as expressions of dissent. As they walked back to the classroom, Stella started
discussing the tasks she had been doing. Her conversation indicated that she knew
what had been required, but had chosen to cease her involvement by stating that
she ‘didn’t know’ or shrugging her shoulders.

Example 5

Substantial numbers of children in Australia live in remote areas, with limited
access to preschool services. A number of these children and their parents
participate in distance education preschool, interacting with other children and
adults via a range of technology. On regular, but infrequent occasions, the parents
and children travel to the distance education centre for face-to-face interactions.
During one of these meetings, researchers had opportunities to speak with the
children about their preschool experiences. The meeting was the first for a new
group of children. The children had not met each other (except over voice or video
link) and the equipment they were using (easels, climbing frames) was also novel.
At first, several children greeted the researchers and engaged in general
conversation. However, after a short time, they continued to engage with the
equipment and each other but not the researchers. At various times, they chose not
to respond to comments, walked away from researchers, or avoided them all
together.

Example 6

Accompanied by her guardian, Peter, the researcher met Isobel at the early
intervention service she attended. Isobel had limited speech, but smiled widely
when she saw Peter and ran to meet him. She stood very close to him while he
introduced the researcher and asked her if she would like to talk, or maybe draw,
about going to school. Still smiling, she sat next to Peter and proceeded to draw,
using large circular motions. Peter encouraged Isobel to talk to the researcher, but
she kept her eyes on the drawing, occasionally looking at Peter, but not the
researcher. The researcher and Peter engaged in conversation, sometimes referring
to Isobel and inviting her input. Occasionally, Isobel looked to Peter and vocalised.
He responded and Isobel continued drawing.

Discussion

Across these examples, children have used a range of signals to express dissent. These
include clear verbal responses, apparent acquiescence accompanied by disengagement, and general disinterest. The 2-year-olds in the first example were clear in their use of ‘no’ and their actions – both in watching the researcher leave the room and ‘keeping an eye’ on her. The actions of Stella and Isobel also communicated their dissent, even when Stella has said that she wanted to continue her participation. Children at the distance education preschool used no words at all – yet clearly communicated their dissent. These examples affirm the importance of considering children’s verbal, behavioural, and emotional signals as indicators of assent or dissent, paying attention to what Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962) designates the ‘body subject, the body of personal experience’ (Thomas, 2005, p. 71). In other words, the ways in which children used their bodies provided a great deal of information about their preferences.

Isobel conveyed a number of intentions through positioning herself in particular ways. Throughout the interaction, her attention was directed towards Peter and it was clear that she was very comfortable in his presence. It was evident to the researcher that Isobel had a range of special education needs. However, she also had communicative ability, particularly with her knowledgeable caregiver who was able to interpret her actions and preferences. Without Peter’s presence, it would have been tempting to conclude that her dissent was due to her developmental limitations. However, Peter’s presence indicated that her dissent could not be attributed to her special education needs; she was quite able to communicate when she chose to do so, and it was clear that she chose not to communicate with the researcher.

Jónsdóttir’s reflections on Example 2 serve to remind us that there are many possible reasons for children’s decisions about participation and that, while we may speculate on these, because we cannot live someone else’s experience (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962), our understanding of others’ actions remains limited. In Example 3,
Andrew does provide a reason for his dissent, suggesting that being allowed to make a choice about participation, while at school, is a novel experience for him.

\textit{A set of ethical values to guide our work}

The aim of presenting these examples and exploring the notion of dissent was to continue our reflection on the ethical values that underpin our research with children. Our discussions have raised several issues, provided some insights to our practice and problematised our actions. In many ways, our approaches to researching with children have become messier because of this. This exploration has prompted reflection of the following assertions.

\textit{Dissent does not need to be justified.}

We are confident in the belief that children should not have to justify their decisions. Yet, whenever children decline participation, we would all like to know why and how to change things to make participation more attractive. We think we could learn a lot from children about why they dissent or choose to withdraw. This reflects the emotional dilemma of researchers wanting to respect children’s decisions, but also wanting to continue to engage with the children involved. The ethical principle of voluntary participation, including the right to withdraw at any point, must underpin our commitment to respect children’s decisions. Warin (2011) draws on the work of Guillemin and Gillam (2004) by referring to her desire for an explanation for withdrawal from her study as ‘an ethically important moment’ requiring her to ‘balance the risks and benefits to the study and to its participants’ (Warin, 2011, 808). Respecting children’s dissent means being reconciled to the view that we may never know why the decision was made.
Children’s dissent is binding.

We acknowledge the importance of process consent, where opportunities are provided over time for children to change their mind about research participation. Should the same apply to dissent? If children have indicated that they do not wish to be involved, should we provide opportunities for them to change their mind, or do we regard dissent as binding? In providing opportunities for children to reconsider participation, are we suggesting to them that they have made the ‘wrong’ decision and implicitly exerting pressure for them to change their minds (Fivush and Hudson, 1987)?

Children’s dissent is to be respected, even when it impacts on the research.

If we genuinely respect children’s choices, we must expect that a number will choose to dissent. Respecting children’s dissent will impact on the study, reducing the number of participants, the nature and amount of data generated as well as the transferability of any conclusions. How do we design research that affords multiple opportunities for children to re-think their participation and recognizes that some children will choose to participate in some, but not all, of the data generation experiences? One response is to promote qualitative research that seeks to explore the lived experiences of those involved. However, qualitative research often relies on the in-depth involvement of a small number of participants and, if some of these choose to withdraw during the study, the viability of the research itself could be challenged. We need to consider research designs that manage opting-in and opting-out, affording children genuine opportunities to participate without ongoing obligations. We also need to confront challenges in recording and reporting data, when data sets may be incomplete because children have chosen to participate in some, but not all, experiences. When there are opportunities for children to opt-in and opt-out, researchers need to have comprehensive records of these
decisions, ensuring that children’s choices are acknowledged and enacted. Methods such as the mosaic approach (Clark and Moss, 2001) provide an important model for compiling a range of data into a meaningful whole without insisting on children’s participation in each aspect.

Decisions about research participation need to be considered in context.

Both the physical and the social contexts influence children’s decisions about participation. We are mindful that the novelty of some activities, and the chance to spend time in interesting or different physical spaces, can influence children’s decisions. Relationships both influence decisions and provide a context in which decisions can be interpreted. Relationships between the researcher and the researched are the basis for accepting the presence of the researcher in their worlds (Cocks, 2006). Knowledgeable caregivers have important roles in interpreting children’s signals, particularly when these are ambiguous. This may be the case for children who have special education needs or who have limited verbal communication skills. Two caveats are important here. The first is that children with special education needs retain the right to express dissent, in whatever form is most appropriate for them, and researchers have an obligation to respect this. The second caveat is that we need to consider the potential for caregivers to misrepresent children’s responses.

Children should be offered genuine choices about participation.

A central tenet of ethical research is the right to choose, or not to choose, participation. In research with children, the right to provide consent rests with parents/guardians. If consent has already been provided, it is reasonable to question whether any choice remains for children. It may not be a legal requirement that researchers seek children’s assent or recognise dissent, but the imperative to enact ‘what a community of
researchers believe is important for promoting ethical conduct’ (Loveridge, 2010, 7) remains.

In our own practice we have endeavoured to provide genuine choices for children. In some instances we have invited children to record these in some way (Dockett, et al. 2012; Einarsdóttir, 2011). Initially, we offered the choice to participate or not. More recently, we have offered a choice that sits between these extremes – the choice of being unsure, perhaps needing more time or more information, perhaps just not wanting to make a decision right now. In doing so, we have tried to create spaces for children to find out more about the research, get to know the researchers better, or find out what their friends have decided – much as we would expect adults to do when invited to participate. We also recognise that it can be difficult for children to openly express dissent in setting such as preschools or schools, where adults have entrenched power. Providing some space and time for children to make a decision can sometimes make it easier to say ‘no’. This can be particularly important when not only the educational context, but also the cultural context is one where an outright refusal is considered inappropriate or impolite.

_Dissent may be a gatekeeping strategy._

Just like adults, children have a right to privacy. Expressing dissent may well be an exercise of that right to privacy, as children become ‘gatekeepers of their own accounts’ (Danby and Farrell, 2005, 61). Even when children provide assent, they exert some control over what experiences are shared as well as the ways in which these are shared.

**Conclusion**

Across our varied research with young children, we have defined dissent as children’s disinclination to participate, expressed verbally and/or non-verbally. In keeping with
Cocks (2006), we situate the processes of dissent within relationships, recognising the importance of trust between researchers and children and children’s acceptance of the researcher in any specific context. We have endeavoured to promote children’s dissent (and assent) as an ongoing process, open to review and change throughout the research process. However, we are aware that young children exist within many different contexts and interact in a range of ways with many different adults. Hence, we cannot be certain that what we feel is offered as choice by researchers is understood as choice by all children, or the other adults with whom they interact. For example, as adult researchers in a preschool or school settings, we cannot be certain that our invitations to participate are treated differently from those of teachers, with the possible consequence that they are regarded as directives rather than invitations.

We acknowledge that children can and do express dissent in many ways. Regardless of the expression, we contend that researchers have an ethical obligation to respect dissent. Indeed, we argue that respecting dissent is part of an ethical framework that underpins all of our interactions with children. Our aim in sharing examples of dissent, as well as our reflections on these, has been to illuminate some of the ethical values that guide our everyday interactions. This is a central element of Christensen and Prout’s (2002) ‘ethical symmetry’, and of Guillemin and Gillam’s ‘ethics in practice’. Both notions argue that such values guide researchers in the unanticipated ethical decision making that occurs within research. Such guidance is important in the complex, ideological and political processes of participatory research with children.

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Figure 1. Written expression of dissent.