Abstract: In recent years there have been significant changes in conceptual and theoretical views of children and childhood and the expectations adults have of children (Christensen and James 2000). Current perspectives view children as competent experts on their own experiences (James and Prout 1997) who actively shape their own lives, cultures and spaces, and have a right to have a say in situations that impact on them (Lansdown 2005; United Nations 1989). This paper reflects these perspectives in reporting a range of strategies used to engage with young children in research and in reflecting on some of the methodological and ethical tensions inherent in such engagement.
Engaging young children in research

Sue Dockett
sdockett@csu.edu.au

Murray School of Education
Charles Sturt University

Introduction
In recent years there have been significant changes in conceptual and theoretical views of children and childhood and the expectations adults have of children (Christensen & James, 2000). Current perspectives view children as competent experts on their own experiences (James & Prout, 1997) who actively shape their own lives, cultures and spaces, and have a right to have a say in situations that impact on them (Lansdown, 2005, United Nations, 1989). This paper reflects these perspectives in reporting a range of strategies used to engage with young children in research and in reflecting on some of the methodological and ethical tensions inherent in such engagement.

Background
Over a number of projects, and with a number of colleagues, my colleagues and I have been interested in investigating young children’s perceptions, expectations and experiences. This has occurred through projects focused on the transition to school (Dockett & Perry, 2005a; 2005b; 2007a) and children’s views of museum spaces (Kelly, Main, Dockett, Perry, & Heinrich, 2006). Each project has emphasised the importance of children’s perspectives and of appropriate adult responses to these – including changing practices to reflect what is important for children and developing ways to ensure that children’s perspectives are not regarded as tokenistic.

Strategies for engaging young children in research
Researchers have used a range of strategies to engage young children in research. For example, various studies have utilised extended periods of observation (Dunlop, 2003); interviews and conversations with children (Broström, 2003, Clarke & Sharpe, 2003; Peters, 2003); and photographs (Einarsdóttir, 2005a; 2005b) as well as combinations of these strategies (Clark, Kjørholt, & Moss, 2005; Clark & Moss, 2001). This paper focuses on the following strategies:
• conversations with children;
• drawings;
• reflections;
• photographs; and
• journals.

Conversations
A conversation
Joanna and Sam were aged about 5 years when they talked about starting school.

Interviewer: How did you feel when you started school?
Sam: I think a little bit happy or sad.
Joanna: I felt a bit embarrassed. Because …too many people standing around looking.
Interviewer: Why do you think they were looking at you?
Joanna: Because I was looking at them.

Our conversations with children tend to be informal in style and location. We generally use some open-ended questions to start conversations, such as “can you tell me what it was like when you started school?” We are also quite happy to talk to children in a location of their choice – be it the sandpit or other area. The reasons for this are that we want children to feel comfortable, able to finish the conversation whenever they want to, and able to resume it if they feel so inclined. They can also choose to have someone else with them, and that too can help children feel comfortable in their conversations with adults. In other words, we want children to have some control over the nature of their engagement in conversations. Where possible, and with the permission of the children, we audio-tape our conversations and transcribe them for analysis. Some of our most involved conversations have occurred when we have revisited children and followed-up the conversation. Sometimes, children are very keen to edit their initial comments, either by adding to them or by deleting some of them.

There are a number of ethical issues to be considered when talking with young children. We seek children’s assent to their involvement, even though we already have parental consent. We also seek children’s assent to having their conversation recorded. In addition, we aim to be clear about what children’s contribution to the research will be and how the information will be used. Mindful of obligations relating to child protection, we let children know this before seeking their agreement to talk with us (Dockett & Perry, 2007b). As we are aiming to build a relationship based on trust, we believe that this would be impossible if we did not disclose our obligations.

**Drawings**

Some children prefer to draw, rather than talk about, what is important for them. Some other children are happy to draw and converse, with their conversations and their drawings influencing each other (Dockett & Perry, 2005a; Einarsdóttir, Dockett & Perry, 2009 in press). Children are often familiar with the process of drawing and eager to use a range of drawing materials and paper. With drawing, children have a high level of control, both over what is drawn and what information they choose to share about the drawing. Tasks such as drawing also provide opportunities for children to talk with researchers without maintaining eye contact or feeling that they are in the spotlight, and possibly under pressure to produce answers to specific questions. Drawing and other concrete tasks, such as construction activities, also provide children with time to respond to specific issues and questions.

Many of the same ethical issues identified in engaging children in conversations apply as well in the context of drawing activities. In any task where children produce an artefact, we ask children if we can take a copy of their drawing (or a photograph), rather than ask them to give their drawing to us. We believe that this respects the effort they have put into generating the drawing, as well as reflecting our appreciation for their involvement.

It is important that children’s narratives about their drawings, including their interpretations and intentions, form the basis for interpreting children’s drawings. These are often co-constructions, as adults and children, or children together, jointly construct text and drawings to share intended meanings. Figure 1 is an example of a co-construction between Caitlin (3.6 years) and her mother after a visit to the museum. Caitlin was fascinated by the crystal
gallery and the fairies she expected to live there. Caitlin drew her picture, talking with her mother as she did so. She then asked her mother to scribe the dictated text.

Figure 1. This is where the fairy lives. She flies out in the morning. She goes to sleep in the night time – why isn’t she coming out of the rock now?

**Reflections**

The reflection task is an extension of the drawing task. We have used it in a number of contexts to encourage children to reflect upon their start to school and to consider how they may have changed over their first year at school (Dockett & Perry, 2004, 2005a; Einarsdóttir et al., 2009 in press).

Figure 2. One child’s reflection on how she had changed over her first year of school.

As with drawings, this task provides children with a concrete task as they think about and reflect on their experiences. This task recognises children’s ability to reflect upon and articulate what is important for them. Very often, we hear adult reports of what is important for children. This task opens up that opportunity to children themselves.
Photographs
Along with a number of our colleagues (Clark & Moss, 2001; Dockett & Perry, 2005b; Einarsdóttir, 2005a), we have encouraged young children to use cameras to record their perspectives and experiences. The photographs that result can provide a focus for sharing information, affect and reflection (Rose, 2007). Using this strategy, children have control over what photos they take, which of these they share with others, and the narratives that accompany the photos. We have found that children (as young as two to three years of age) enjoy taking the photos, particularly with a digital camera where they can review them instantly. One challenge has been the number of photos that children want to take. To help focus their attention, we have emphasised the purpose of the task through questions such as “What do you think new children need to know about your school?” or “What is something special for you at the museum?”

The children with whom we have worked have all been very competent with digital camera technology. Even when they may not have used a digital camera before, they are rapidly able to master its operation. One challenge with using digital cameras is that children expect that the photos are immediately available to access. To facilitate this and to promote their selecting specific photos to share with other children or adults, we have found that downloading a copy of the photos onto a computer has been helpful. This also makes it clear to children that they have control over the data and how they choose to share these with others.

Figure 3. Why are there only bones left? (Ellen, aged 3 years).

As with the drawings and reflections, the narratives children construct around the photo are just as important as the images. The text offers children’s explanations as to why the image is important, and reflects some of the things that are important for the children. For example, Figure 3 was taken by Ellen, aged 3 years. She was interested in the bones in the museum, and curious as to why the museum had only bones. Ellen took the photograph and asked her mother to scribe her question. She then chose to share it with the researchers.

Journals
In some projects, we have sought a strategy to collate the range of information shared by children, both as a means of grouping data and as a way of facilitating children’s review of material they have provided (Kelly et al., 2006). The strategy adopted involved the use of journals – a collection of A4 pages, some with headings, to prompt children’s reflections or comments. As children had the original copies of all of the information (including drawings, photographs) they had gathered, they (and their families) were invited to incorporate these
into the journal, reflect on their experiences and to any follow up discussions or interests that emerged.

Caitlin’s journal (Figure 4) was jointly constructed by Caitlin (aged 3.6) and her mother after a visit to the museum. Caitlin sorted through the photographs she had taken and selected some for inclusion in her journal. She added to these with drawings and asked her mother to scribe some comments and explanations. When Caitlin was ready, she sent the journal to the researchers, who copied it and returned it to her.

![Figure 4. Pages from Caitlin’s journal](image)

Regardless of the strategies used to engage with children in research, it is critical to provide feedback. We believe that research relationships are based on trust, and that one element of this trust involves sharing the data we have generated with children and providing opportunities for them to review, edit and change the information they are prepared to share. For example, after transcribing conversations with children, it is important to have a further discussion with the children about what they have said. Such discussions can seek clarification as well as confirm initial comments. We would introduce such a follow-up discussion with the comment that “last time we spoke you talked about … is that still important? Do you still feel that way?” Similar discussions can be had using artefacts (such as the drawings, photographs or journals) constructed by children.

A further opportunity for feedback and review can be provided by appropriate displays of the material children are prepared to share. For example, with children’s permission, copies of drawings and photographs, and the narrative of their choice can be displayed on walls, in books, or downloaded onto the computer. This can provide opportunities for children to access them, respond to them or change what they wish to share.

**Methodological and ethical tensions**

Engaging with young children in research highlights a number of methodological and ethical tensions, notably those related to consent (Farrell, 2005; Ford, Sankey, & Crisp, 2007), what constitutes data and how it is interpreted (Grover, 2004), the representativeness of children
who participate in research (Hill, 2006) and the potential impact of children’s involvement in research (Hill, 2006).

**Consent**
While there is a clear legal position in terms of what consent is needed to engage with young children in research (that is, informed parental consent, Dockett & Perry, 2007b), this should not negate the importance of seeking children’s informed consent to participate. Sometimes, this is regarded as seeking children’s assent, as opposed to the legal concept of consent (Cocks, 2007). Children can provide assent in a number of ways. These can include responding to a smiley chart noting how they feel about participating in research. Equally important is an adult reading of children’s non-verbal actions and signals. For example, children seeking to avoid researchers, turning away from interactions or generally seeking to be engaged elsewhere are all signs that a particular child may not feel comfortable with participating. Several researchers emphasise the importance of time in developing trusting relationships (Clark & Moss, 2001; Greene & Hill, 2005; Lansdown, 2005), noting that children may have an initial reluctance to engage with researchers, and that this may well reflect the need for time to build a connection, rather than a refusal to participate.

Seeking children’s informed assent is an ongoing process (Flewitt, 2005). It involves using a range of approaches to ensure that children are aware of what is being asked of them, what it involves and what will happen to the data they contribute. For young children, promoting understanding across these areas presents a number of challenges. Underpinning our approach to seeking children’s informed assent has been the concept of process assent (Alderson, 2005; Einarsdóttir, 2007), where children have multiple opportunities to either confirm their willingness to be engaged, or to withdraw from the research.

**Interpreting data**
All researchers adopt an interpretive framework that shapes their interpretation of data (Grover, 2004). When interpreting data constructed or contributed by young children, it is important to reflect on the meanings and interpretations ascribed by the children themselves, rather than those imposed by adults. Such a view regards data as an intercultural event where the researcher and the children involved both shape the generation of outcomes (Baker, 2004) and were the data generated are therefore the result of intercultural collaboration (Danby & Farrell, 2004). In other words, children and researchers shape the data and interpretations that are conveyed.

When children have important roles in the interpretation of data, as well as the construction of data, it is likely that their own perspectives are reflected, rather than those of the researchers. Such an approach requires researchers to build into the research opportunities for children to review and interpret data. These could include revisiting conversations, or reviewing photographs or drawings they have made. One likely outcome of these opportunities is that children will censor what they choose to share.

**Who is represented in research?**
Children have diverse backgrounds, expectations, perspectives, experiences and understandings. Choosing to involve some in research and not others can mean that this diversity is neither recognised nor respected (Vandenbroeck & Bie, 2006; Waller, 2006).

It is evident from children themselves that some are comfortable engaging in research; others are not so. In a similar way, some parents are more comfortable than others with notions of
their children’s engagement in research, and hence more likely to give consent for this to occur. Some older children regard participation in research as intrusive (Kirby & Bryson, 2002) and we have noted this is our own research with young children, where some children have regarded our attempts to converse with them at home as an invasion of their private space (Dockett & Perry, 2007a).

In one situation, a child who had been keen to talk with us in his preschool setting was not as eager to talk with us at his home. At home, he was watching television and, when invited by his mother to talk with us, indicated that he was watching television and did not want to be disturbed. He remained watching television during our visit and did not interact with the researchers at all. His mother seemed a little embarrassed, and did try to coax his involvement. However, it was clear that he did not wish to speak with us in that space, and we accepted his decision. Two issues were highlighted for us in this situation: children’s rights not to participate and the importance of providing more than one opportunity for children to be involved, if they so wish. In this situation, the child was happy to speak with us at preschool, but not at home.

A further constraint on who participates in research relates to the source of the invitation to participate. Such invitations generally come from adults (Hill, 2006) and may well have some conditions. For example, in some of our research in schools, from among children who have parental consent, only children who have completed set tasks or behaved in specific ways have been nominated by teachers to participate in research. One consequence is that some, rather than all children are likely to become research participants.

To promote the involvement of as many children as possible, we have aimed to work with teachers, fitting into their schedules and explaining the nature and intent of the research. For example, in one school teachers were asked to talk with children about starting school and invite them to draw about their experiences. The teachers then collected the drawings and selected the best to share with the researchers. Only when we talked some more about the aims of the research did the teachers realise that we were seeking to involve all children, regardless of their drawing skill, and the importance of taking a copy of the drawing to share with us, rather than keeping the originals. In other situations, working with teachers has involved spending some extra time in the classroom helping the teacher complete their set tasks, so that some time could be devoted to the research tasks. Having researchers and research assistants who are qualified teachers has assisted greatly in this.

**The impact of children’s participation in research**

There are many positive consequences of young children’s participation in research. These include recognition of the competence of young children and the opportunity for children to guide change in aspects of their lives. Across several projects, we have sought children’s views of their transition to school experiences, including information about what could be done to make these experiences better. In one project (Perry & Dockett, 2008), involving children from 4 schools and 11 preschools, the children made a range of suggestions about how they would change transition programs, ranging from the number of visits children should make to school and what should happen on these visits to how buddy programs should operate. These changes have been made and the children have clear evidence that their input was respected and valued.
In our museum project (Kelly, et al., 2006), young children identified a number of things that they would like to see changed in the museum. These included making sure that some of the equipment (such as microscopes) and displays were at their level, so that they could reach them and engage with them. In recent changes to some spaces in the museum, these changes have been incorporated.

However, there is also the potential that children’s perspectives are sought but then ignored, or that children’s participation becomes tokenistic (Tisdall & Davis, 2004). It is also possible for children’s participation in research to become an additional mechanism of surveillance (Arnot & Reay, 2007). For example, in some of our research about schools, children have identified spaces they like to play that are designated ‘out-of-bounds’. Identifying these spaces has resulted in greater supervision of these areas, to ensure that they genuinely are out-of-bounds. Broström (2005) has challenged adult researchers to consider carefully the consequences of engaging children in research, particularly when it has the potential to impinge on their private spaces. If we accept children’s rights to privacy, then we must also accept being excluded from some spaces. This presents some challenges for adults in a social context where there are expectations that children will be supervised at all times.

As researchers we are conscious of trying to promote a balance between wanting to know what is important for children and realising that researchers’ desires to know are not sufficient to expect children to share details of their lives. How can we respect children’s privacy, yet also seek to change situations that are not positive for children? While not having simple answers to this question, we do reflect on a range of questions (Dockett & Perry, 2005b):

- What are the tasks children are asked to do? How relevant or important are they to those children, as opposed to the researchers?
- How can we faithfully represent children’s knowledge and understanding?
- Do we ground the research in what matters to children, in the interpretation of children, or is the focus what matters to the researcher and what counts as data?
- Does the research matter to children?
- What do we do to meet the concerns expressed by children in the research discourse?

**Conclusion**

In seeking to encourage young children’s participation in research we endeavour to call upon a range of strategies as a means of recognising that children have a range of preferred ways of interacting. We also accept that some children choose not to engage with our research, and respect their rights to make this choice. However, we also recognise that to be genuinely promoting children’s engagement in research, we need to constantly reassess the strategies we use and to be reflexive as we ask how some of the strategies might promote the engagement of some children, but not others. Engaging young children in research brings a range of ethical obligations and dimensions. It also brings great potential to treat young children seriously and to begin to understand how we can promote their agendas in positive ways.

**References**


