ENGAGING IN ETHICAL RESEARCH PARTNERSHIPS WITH CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

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Introduction

Research with children and families presents exciting and significant opportunities. Through working with children and families, researchers can obtain important insight into their ways of being, their perspectives, and their lived experiences. In the space of digital media, this kind of insight is crucial. Examining the ways in which children and families live with and engage with digital media has the potential to further researchers’ understandings around the nature of digital media, its present place and purpose, and possible future directions. Nonetheless, there are conceptual and ethical complexities of which researchers must be aware and which require prioritisation and careful navigation.

This chapter encompasses a range of conceptual and ethical issues related to research with children and families in the space of digital media. Influenced by a strong image of children, the chapter begins by examining researchers’ conceptualisations of children, digital media, and their nexus, which has great relevance to research ethics. Thus, the chapter next raises ethical issues that researchers in this space may face and frameworks they may benefit from utilising. Finally, the chapter focuses on ethical considerations for exploring digital media in the lives of children and families, with a mind towards serving, supporting, and honouring children and families.

Conceptualising Children, Digital Media, and Their Nexus

Beliefs about children shape adults’ interactions with and observations of them. Thus, clarifying what conceptions of children, childhood, and digital media researchers bring to the process is essential if research is to proceed in an ethically literate manner. This influences the lens through which the researcher looks, and how they make sense of what is being explored (Rallis, 2018), and consequently impacts on ethical matters. When researching children, families, and digital media, two key conceptual questions arise: how do researchers conceptualise children? And, how do researchers conceptualise the nexus of children and digital media?
Conceptualising Children

The ways in which researchers conceptualise children has incredible influence over a research project, from its inception and preparation, through the generation and analysis of data, and into the finalisation and dissemination of the project. Unpacking the conceptualisation of children involves critical reflection about who a researcher believes children to be and how children are situated in the adults’ world, and, thus, in research.

Traditionally, children have been viewed and positioned as voiceless (Smith & Taylor, 2000), passive (Mittal, 2005), lacking in knowledge and capacity (Freeman & Mathison, 2009), and existing in binary opposition to adults (Robinson & Jones-Diaz, 2016). The consequence of this conceptualisation of children tends to be that they become objects of research, rather than subjects, and their expertise regarding their own lives is disregarded. Conversely, children can be conceptualised as important, active, and agentic individuals with their own views, voices, and values. This shift towards new and stronger conceptualisations of the child is seen in the work of poststructuralist and feminist theories (Robinson & Jones-Diaz, 2016), in the discourse of socio-culturalism (Dunn, 2015), and through the lens of the educational project of Reggio Emilia (as explored by Britt & McLachlan, 2015). By viewing children through this respectful and appreciative lens, an imperative emerges: for researchers to partner with children and to empower them as collaborators and co-creators in research. Analogously, there is powerful potential in creating similar partnerships with children’s families, and empowering parents/guardians/carers to share in the research journey alongside their children.

Therefore, a central question for researchers working with children is: what image of the child is mobilised in the research? This question stems from the work of Malaguzzi and is embraced by educators and researchers working in the tradition of Reggio Emilia (Irving, 2018). Britt and McLachlan (2015, p. xv) identify this question as a challenging one, and elaborate: “the question’s significance becomes clear when we consider that what we see, expect, and believe about children powerfully shapes our response to them”. Further questions that will help researchers in navigating their image of the child include:

- What capacities are children believed to possess?
- What kind of citizenship do children hold?
- How are children viewed in relation to adults?
- How does the research project position child participants?

Like the central question, these questions are challenging and significant. They encompass themes of power and potential, and merit close and careful attention. By engaging in this critically reflective conceptual work, a researcher can reach a more nuanced understanding of their role and responsibilities. And while there are many ways to conceptualise children, and certainly many images of children that have emerged historically, culturally, and politically, there is immense potential in embracing a strong and nuanced image of the child. By seeing children as capable and competent (Rinaldi, 2013), as thinkers and theorists (Duncan, 2018), as meaning-makers (Clark & Moss, 2017), and as active citizens (Britt & McLachlan, 2015) who are entitled to rights, respect, and recognition (Freeman, 2011), researchers can move in responsive, creative, and promising directions.

Conceptualising the Nexus of Children and Digital Media

The nexus of children and digital media – that is, the relationship that exists between children and digital media and how the researcher conceptualises these intersections – is a key locus for
research contemplation. It is well-acknowledged that digital media have a pivotal presence in children’s lives (Reid Chassiakos, Radesky, Christakis, Moreno, & Cross, 2016; Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010; Selwyn, 2011; Stephen & Edwards, 2017) – but how is this presence conceptualised? Key questions for reflection include:

- How is the power dynamic between children and digital media conceptualised?
- Does the research position children as ‘digital natives’? Why/why not?

These questions encourage researchers to further examine their image of children with specific regard to digital media. Issues of power arise – for example, it is often observed that children are immersed in the world of digital media (Reid Chassiakos et al., 2016; Stephen & Edwards, 2017). The framing of this immersion is key, particularly in terms of the power dynamic between children and digital media. Children who have grown up amidst digital technologies have been referred to as ‘digital natives’ (Prensky, 2001) – a conceptualisation which this chapter explores and critiques. There is sometimes a tendency towards polarised views where the dynamic is framed as positive/negative or beneficial/harmful, which ignores the inherent complexities of children and media (Qvarsell, 2000). In particular, to construct children as wholly vulnerable in this equation is to deny them their full humanity. Conversely, constructing children as active and agentic in this equation reinforces a strong image of the child and has the potential to empower children.

The question of whether or not to embrace a view of children as digital natives is one worthy of consideration for researchers working in this space. While the term ‘digital natives’ is relatively commonplace, this way of conceptualising children’s relationships with digital media is divisive and contested. It is argued that the characterisation of children as digital natives is lacking in evidence (Bennett, Maton, & Kervin, 2008) and presents a homogeneous view of a generation of children and young people (Palfrey & Gasser, 2011). There is potential for presumptions to be made about children’s readiness to engage with digital media and their levels of interest and investment, rather than recognising diversity and difference in children. As part of their conceptual framing, researchers are encouraged to critically consider whether or not they buy into the idea of children as digital natives, and to contemplate the variety of ways in which children live, in terms of their upbringing and education, and the range of perspectives and passions that children may possess.

Ultimately, establishing a clear and informed conceptualisation of how children and digital media intersect informs and supports a researcher’s next steps, especially with regards to the ethical and methodological aspects of their project.

Ethical Research Partnerships with Children and Families

Engaging in Ethically Literate Research

The importance of research ethics cannot be overstated. Research ethics have significant bearing upon the researcher, their practice, the project at hand, and the participants and their context. A researcher’s engagement with ethics should not be singular or cursory – rather, it is imperative that researchers engage in ethically literate practice. This involves considering ethics in a holistic, critical, and comprehensive manner, and placing it at the very heart of the research endeavour. Engagement in ethically literate research ensures that children and families are protected and supported during projects in which they are involved, and, ultimately, honoured. This section deals with the centrality of research ethics and key considerations for researchers working with children and families. Rather than exacting prescriptive standards, the intention is to raise provocations that illuminate the rich potential of a holistic approach to ethics.
Research ethics are sometimes viewed as a ‘tick and flick’ exercise, where priority is placed on satisfying the protocols of the researcher’s institution and the context in which they seek to undertake research. This view fails to recognise the pervasive presence and complexity of ethics and the necessity of considering the ethics of research before, during, and after any given study. The centrality of ethics is well recognised, particularly with regards to working with children (Abebe & Bessell, 2014; Barblett, Hydon, & Kennedy, 2017), which is an inherently ethical endeavour (Clark & Moss, 2017). Ethics also extend beyond matters of access and assent or consent, and encompass respect, rights, and equality (Alderson & Morrow, 2011). Furthermore, engaging in ethical research practice on an ongoing basis is advocated for by Flick (2007, p. 70), who writes:

Reflection of ethics is not only relevant while you are in the field and it is not only something to work on while you prepare a proposal – for the ethics committee or the institutional review board of your institution. Ethics should play a role in your considerations of how to plan a study, of who you want to work with, and how you (or your fieldworkers) should act in the field.

While research ethics hinge on the context and circumstances of each project (Rose, 2012), there are overarching issues related to researching digital media with children and families. The ways in which a researcher relates to children and families, which is inextricably linked to their conceptual understandings, is a definitive component of the research process and a major aspect of research ethics. Strong and respectful conceptualisations of children invite researchers to engage in their work in ways that honour children’s rights and capacities. Namely, a rights-based approach can be of immense value (Beazley, Bessell, Ennew, & Waterson, 2011). Human rights have immense ethical significance and are grounded in recognition of worth and dignity (Monteiro, 2014). A rights-based approach involves aligning research ethics to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which advocates for and articulates children’s citizenship and rights. While the UNCRC is not specifically focussed on research, it provides valuable guidance and groundwork for engaging ethically with children (Abebe & Bessell, 2014). Here, the following articles come into play:

• Article 3.3: Children have the right to expect the highest possible standards of services from professionals who work with them;
• Article 12: Children have the right to express their opinions in matters concerning them;
• Article 13: Children have the right to express themselves in any way they wish – not limited to the verbal expressions used by adults; and
• Article 36: Children have the right to be protected from all forms of exploitation, including being exploited through research processes and through the dissemination of information.

In aligning research ethics to these articles, researchers can afford children agency and voice, and ensure that their needs and rights are met. Potential implications of a rights-based research approach are explored later in this chapter.

As well as considering the UNCRC, researchers engaged in work with children and families can draw on a range of relevant ethical codes such as the European Early Childhood Education Research Association (EECERA) Ethical Code (EECERA, 2014) and the Early Childhood Australia (ECA) Code of Ethics (ECA, 2016). The EECERA Ethical Code is guided by an ethic of respect around the following principles:

1. The child, family, community, and society;
2. Democratic values;
Similarly, the ECA Code of Ethics – though developed with a pedagogical focus – has relevance for researchers. There is distinct advocacy for a strong image of children and an appreciation of children’s rights. Key principles for consideration include:

- Each child has unique interests and strengths and the capacity to contribute to their communities;
- Children are citizens from birth with civil, cultural, linguistic, social, and economic rights;
- Partnerships with families and communities support shared responsibility for children’s learning, development, and wellbeing; and
- Democratic, fair, and inclusive practices promote equity and a strong sense of belonging.

The principles articulated by EECERA and ECA align to the UNCRC and reinforce the notion of children as competent individuals. While these codes are intended to apply to children in the early years (i.e., birth to eight years of age), the principles have applicability for all children and young people, and their families as well. Researchers are invited to consider a multitude of ethical issues with regards to participants and their contexts. Key questions for critical reflection include:

- How can the project support children’s rights and citizenship?
- How can the researcher plan for inclusivity? For example – are multiple modes of expression supported? What strategies can be put in place to honour and accommodate diversity and difference in children and families?
- What is the potential impact of the project in the short, medium, and long term?
- Are the participants thoroughly versed in the foreseeable outcomes of the project?

These questions can guide and support planning for ethics in the initial stages. Critical reflection should continue throughout the entirety of the project, both in terms of the bigger picture and the minutiae. Researchers should engage with the aforementioned questions with careful consideration towards their participants’ identities. One aspect of identity which is key here is the age and stage of the participants, particularly with regards to how they may or may not understand the project’s foreseeable outcomes. For instance, when working with younger children, the process of inviting participation may require adjustments. Such adjustments may include amending the format and/or language of the documentation, involving parents to a greater extent, and ensuring there are comprehensive checks for understanding employed. With regards to children’s assent to engage in research, there are a range of options available to researchers that may enhance the process. For example, it is recommended that researchers individualise assent processes with consideration towards children’s personal factors and family dynamics, as well as the complexity of the project design and any researcher and organisational factors (Oulton et al., 2016). There are also creative options in obtaining informed consent, such as making use of picture books that depict participation in the research process (Pyle & Danniels, 2016) or utilising technology such as video clips explaining the methods and context of the research (Parsons, Sherwood, & Abbott, 2016).
As research unfolds, the ways in which researchers relate to children is of critical consequence. Ethical interactions with children are characterised by active and respectful listening, a commitment to empowering children and eliciting their voices, staying attuned to children’s needs, and working adaptively in recognition of diversity and difference in terms of – for example – language, culture, and socio-economic status. This requires a sensitive and adaptive disposition from the researcher, and can present challenges when working across different cohorts of children and families. Recognising the diversity of children’s abilities and preferences is also key (Merewether & Fleet, 2014), the implications of which are discussed in the next section of this chapter.

While ethical issues will vary from project to project, and while different complexities, questions, and quandaries may emerge, researchers can remain ethically attuned by engaging in ongoing reflection informed by the principles from EECERA and ECA and the relevant articles from the UNCRC, and by remaining focussed on the ways in which they relate to their participants. By embracing an ethical code that encompasses relevant articles and principles from the aforementioned documents, researchers can enter into child-centric practices that aim to give children choice and voice. There are many possibilities in centring children in research, including – but not limited to – surveys (e.g., Nikken & Opree, 2018; Rideout et al., 2010), questionnaires (e.g., Johnson, 2012; Mourgelia & Pacurar, 2018), case studies (e.g., Heydon, McKee, & Daly, 2017; Teichert & Anderson, 2014), and ethnographies (e.g., Dahya, 2017; Dezuanni, 2018). This section details considerations that have relevance across designs and methods, and which support a strong image of children and a holistic and continuous approach to ethics.

Stemming from a strong image of children is the prospect of partnering with children in research. This is a complex endeavour. It requires a commitment to taking the time to build a positive rapport (Clark & Moss, 2017) characterised by active, careful, and ethical listening (Pascal & Bertram, 2009), and then working continually to sustain an authentic, collaborative, and reciprocal working relationship (Freeman & Mathison, 2009). Working in an adaptive and responsive manner is also key (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). McLachlan (2012, p. 27), offering pedagogical insight into centring children and following their interests:

Following the interests of children is not a predictable process, no matter what the context. Children see differently, walk differently, care differently and talk differently from adults and from each other. Walking beside children, rather than leading them, requires constant and committed reflection with every step. It means getting down low, adjusting your pace regularly, and following through to completion. It requires negotiation, questioning and risk, recognising and respecting the differences that exist among a group of thinkers.
The provocations here – to commit to reflection, to adapt to children’s ways of being and seeing, and to work in a cooperative and responsive manner – have great relevance for researchers. This connects to the ethics of the project and, in terms of the generation of data, can contribute depth and richness. While these provocations are of distinct significance to research with children, they can also apply to working with children’s families. There are implications for:

- The allocation of time (e.g., at what pace do the research activities occur? Can the pace be adjusted to accommodate greater opportunity for voice and choice for the participants? Do context- or individual-specific adjustments need to be made?).
- The nature of communication (e.g., is accessible language used and is it aligned to the participants’ needs? Are multiple modes of expression supported for participants? How might language be adjusted when working with multi-age cohorts or with children and families who are linguistically diverse?).
- The researcher/participant dynamic (e.g., when is it time for the researcher to lead? When is it time to follow the participant?).

Adjusting the pace of the research conveys a respect for participants and their contributions. For many children and families, research can seem intimidating – slowing the pace can contribute to building a sense of trust and supports positive working relationships. It also creates space for deeper engagement in research activities and potentially opens up the project beyond the researcher’s lens and framework, to include the participants’ ways of being and seeing. This is particularly important when working with very young children, who often require more time to ease into research activities and who may benefit from a slower and more patient style of interaction. In terms of research activities, there is a broad range of options that have the potential to invite children’s engagement and inspire their contributions. For instance, Teichert and Anderson’s (2014) case study of digital media in the life of a five-year-old involved three interviews which involved elicitation devices and activities. These included relevant picture books, a digital camera and related software, and iPhone apps. The use of these elicitation devices and activities were targeted at engaging the child, gaining insight into their perspectives and interests, and working responsively with their interests. Furthermore, permitting children to have agency over the pacing of the research can be helpful. In research involving interviews and focus groups with children aged between four and thirteen, Leeson’s (2014) participants were able to use age-appropriate strategies to signal when they did not want to answer a question or when they preferred the interview to end. While the older participants were able to vocalise their preferences, the younger participants used strategies including pre-determined code words, tokens, or pictures. These types of considerations are illustrative of an ethical approach which responds to and respects the children in question.

The use of accessible and flexible language is critical. This hinges on the cohort – for example, are there participants with English as an additional language? At what level are the children in terms of their listening, speaking, reading, and writing? Do some of the terms relevant to the project require clarification, elaboration, or re-wording to ensure accessibility? When working with children of many different ages, what strategies are in place for adjusting the language used in documentation (e.g., assent letters, surveys, and/or questionnaires) and face-to-face communication? A variety of strategies were employed in the EU Kids Online project to ensure children’s readiness to engage in the research, including cognitive testing to ensure questions were comprehensible, checking for understanding during face-to-face interviews, carefully defining terminology, and translating to include a wide range of languages (Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig, & Ólafsson, 2011). Researchers can also consider multiple modes of expression, including non-verbal modes of communication that children and families may utilise in the research process.
The integration of visual resources may also support participation, both in terms of including visual aspects in documentation (e.g., colour coding or illustrative imagery in assent letters for children) or including opportunities for participants to express themselves visually (e.g., photography, drawing, painting, mind-mapping) as part of the research method.

The question of who leads, and how, and when, is also imperative. This requires a commitment to ethical and respectful practice. Researchers working with children and families may benefit from maintaining a critical consciousness towards when it is the researcher’s time to speak and act, and when it is time to ‘open the floor’ to the participants and, perhaps, follow their lead. Such an approach requires a commitment to listening to participants in an authentic and meaningful way. Good guidance in this regard is offered by Rinaldi (2012), who characterises listening as a sensitive, curious, patient, and inclusive experience which gives people and their perspectives visibility and legitimacy. By embracing this critical consciousness, researchers can balance the scales, empower participants, and create space for participants to make meaningful contributions to the project. There are many ways that this ethic of listening can be pursued. For example, in the author’s own study focussing on young girls’ relationships with different types of media across their home, school, and community contexts, an emphasis was placed on empowering the girls to share their perspectives and experiences (Dobson & Beltman, 2019). The girls were positioned as storytellers and the researcher sought their perspectives and experiences through curious and compassionate listening and questioning which was personalised to each girl engaged in the research. Through this type of listening, strong researcher–participant relationships emerged, which contributed to the generation of rich experiential data about the girls’ ways of relating to the variety of media in their lives. The approach was also highly regarded by the girls, who reflected that they appreciated the opportunity to have their voices and views heard (Dobson & Beltman, 2019).

While these ethical approaches have merit, however, they can also present challenges and tensions. For instance, slowing the pace of research is difficult given the realities of time constraints for researchers, children, and families – so striking a balance is key. While permitting children to influence the pace and parameters of research activities is important in respecting and supporting their agency, it may present perceived difficulties or obstacles at times. Accounting for linguistic diversity may – depending on the cohort and their context – prove demanding for researchers and their resources. Supporting multiple modes of expression is complex and requires attention to detail and investment of time, effort, and expertise. Distributing power between the researcher and participants can also prove a navigational challenge. With regards to all of these potential issues, persistence and sensitivity are essential. Persistence is important in committing to this type of practice in a meaningful way, while sensitivity on the part of the researcher elicits an awareness of challenges, tensions, and possible resolutions. Here, ethics return to the fore, as the researcher can refer to their ethical framework to determine a respectful and constructive response to any issues.

There is distinct potential and worth in pursuing approaches that encompass a strong image of children and a deep commitment to ethical literacy. These approaches can be adapted to ensure alignment to the purpose, context, and complexities of the project. In the realm of researching digital media with children and families, such approaches open up possibilities for understanding digital media use through multiple lenses with a deserved emphasis on lived experience.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has examined conceptual and ethical issues related to researching digital media with children and their families. It is grounded in a strong and nuanced image of children and
a research ethic that encompasses respect, care, and rights. Provocations are raised for researchers intending to engage in work with children and families around weaving ethics throughout the entirety of the project and engaging in partnerships which are supportive and inclusive. By pursuing research of this nature, researchers can create collaborative, equitable, and productive projects which have the potential to progress people’s understandings of digital media in the lives of children and families.

References


