

Conducting psychological investigations with children

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- This talk will concentrate on working with children (3+) rather than infants; there are additional specialised (and very effective) techniques for working with younger infants/babies (look at the work of Slater, Spelke or Baillargeon)
- Since most of my work involves experimental methods I will focus on those, rather than observational or clinical interview techniques (although often the same principles apply).
- Hence I won't be covering the use of standardised assessments or psychometric assessment of children. If you want more info on this go to <http://www.kinderstart.com/childdevelopment/behavior/psychologicaltesting.html>
- Or, for an article reviewing these tests look at Halperin, M., & McKay, K. E. (1998). Psychological testing for child and adolescent psychiatrists: a review of the past 10 years." *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, June, 1998

What are we trying to find out when we study children?

1. What they know/think/remember

2. What they can do

and how these processes and abilities develop....

After dealing with each of these issues I'll mention about ethics, since there are clear ethical issues concerning working with minors.

1. Finding out what children know.

Sounds simple - why not just ask them?

- Because you often won't get the whole picture

Children may know more than they can tell.

Beware of over-reliance upon articulated knowledge.

Non-verbal techniques (e.g. sorting/choice tasks) and non-verbal measures (gestures/eye gaze/physiological responses) may yield more accurate answers.

- For example. When studying children's understanding of balance we found their gestures indicate that they know more than they can convey in their verbal responses.
- Children are not always good at accessing what they know - they don't have the meta-cognitive strategies that adults use spontaneously
 - For example: How many windows does your house have? To answer this you visualise your house and mentally count them. Children (5+) can be taught how to do this and come up with an accurate answer but will not use the technique spontaneously (until 8+) - they'll know the answer to a 'How many...' question should be a number and will just say something like "42".
- Lack of meta-cognitive ability means that children won't always admit 'I don't know' or 'I don't understand' and think they just have to come up with an answer. They can be told explicitly that these answers *are* acceptable and this greatly improves their accuracy.
- Children may be over-concerned with giving the 'right' answer. This may inhibit or bias their response or make them sensitive to leading or repeated questioning. Making the child the 'expert' avoids this pitfall (see Pine & Nash, 2003).
- Beware of questionnaires! They are often unreliable with children under 12. Similarly avoid testing children in groups as peer effects are very powerful.

2. Finding out what children can 'do':

- Psychologists have been very innovative in developing tasks for children and the literature abounds with examples...but:
- Remember that 'doing' and 'knowing' can be dissociated

- So the presence of an ability doesn't necessarily mean the child has the underlying concept ('Implicit' knowledge)
- Similarly, task failure doesn't necessarily indicate a lack of knowledge (the child may be working with a different theory).
- Tasks have to be meaningful for children. Try to tap into spontaneous abilities, things that are in the child's natural repertoire of behaviours. Balance tasks, for example, do this.
 - Aim for ecological validity, For example, to find out whether children were influenced by TV ads for toys around Christmas time we examined their letters to Father Christmas, found out about their TV viewing habits and looked for associations between the two (Pine & Nash 2002)
- Children under 10 need concrete not abstract tasks (use props). Often children have been found NOT to be able to do something but when the task is modified we find they can. This means 'age-related' abilities found in developmental studies are often methodological artefacts.

3. Ethics

Like all human subjects children have the right to be informed, protected, not distressed and treated in confidence.

Introductions and debriefs

A parent or head teacher can act *in loco parentis* and give consent for a child under 16 to take part in a psychological investigation. The acting person must receive full written information about the nature of the study and have the opportunity to discuss it with the investigator concerned before agreeing to the child participating.

Even if consent has been granted, if a child does not wish to participate their wishes must be respected and they should be allowed to withdraw without having to give any explanation.

If the study is to be video recorded then written consent from the parent must be obtained beforehand and videos should be securely stored and destroyed after use.

At the moment students can work with children without having CRB clearance provided all the ethical requirements have been met and they are working in the presence of the child's parent or teacher.

For further information go to the BPS website:

<http://www.bps.org.uk/documents/Code.pdf>

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