Re-positioning roles in research with children (and adults): how does positionality influence research design and completion?

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Context

- Involving children and young people in research enables them to communicate their needs, informing service provision (Lancaster and Broadbent, 2003; Sinclair and Franklin, 2004).
- Children's level of competence is often questioned in research contexts (Skelton, 2008).
- Involvement of adults in research with children necessary for access and consent (for under 16 year olds; Alderson and Morrow, 2004).

- Involvement may occur at request of child, adult carer or researcher.
- Involvement may be openly requested, or subtly initiated.
- Researchers often have a limited time to build rapport with young participants; the support of parents or carers can be key to identifying effective ways to communicate, particularly with those who are very young or who have additional needs (Pyer and Campbell, 2013; Thomas and O'Kane, 1998).

The projects

Completion of the following , in particular, have underpinned the reflections below:

- Research with 69 young wheelchair users to explore access to leisure spaces
- Research with young mothers, young offenders and looked after children exploring attitudes and behaviours towards teenage pregnancy
- Research with young inpatients of Child and Adolescent Mental Health services identifying information needs.

(Some of) the effect of adults in research with children

Positive effects

"We were trained to perform the interviewing in the focus groups and reassured that we could "opt-out" if we felt uncomfortable or out of our depth". **Young people supported as researchers and participants by youth workers already known to them.**

Challenges

James' mother looked at the photographs he had taken and began to highlight other subjects which could have been in them – the garden, front of the house, for example. This highlighted how the capture of images may have been very different if his mother had had more of a part to play in the process. Her contribution here was to show the positive areas both internally and externally to their home, whereas James' selection was largely based on his computer and Xbox. **Research diary extract (Pyer, 2009).**

- Can lead to spontaneous interactions between adult and child
- Support rapport between researcher and young participant
- Support nervous children/ young people
- Adults may offer opinions on behalf of the child as a form of proxy.
- Proxy responses – whilst often well-meaning – are often unreliable as views underpinned by adult experiences (Stalker et al., 2004).
- Concerns of parents/ carers for the children in their care impact on confidential nature of data collection if they request to be present.
- Adult regulation in data collection settings (e.g. dress codes) may impact on opportunities for building of rapport.

Reflections and recommendations

Aim: empower participants without dis-empowering (or alienating!) those around them
Define boundaries for parent/ carer involvement: communicate before, re-iterate during, review afterwards
Be clear about the difference between **advocate and proxy**

- Pre-define responses to 'un-planned' involvement: direct questions to participant using their name to signal importance of their view
- Give parents/ carers opportunities to share views in own right
- Ask young person to select someone to support discussions
- Consider using needs questionnaire or pre-data collection visits: support effective communication

- Information sheets are key to defining boundaries and setting expectations of all involved
- Choose the site of data collection carefully: balance confidentiality and safety with practicality and accessibility
- Use of 'child-friendly' methods puts onus on young person's contribution