
Consulting children during COVID-19: managing research ethics on Zoom

CHAPTER



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Everyday life became digital by default during the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting the importance of digital infrastructures in our daily lives and public participation (Livingstone, 2021). To examine experiences of children's play in a digital world, the UK-based Digital Futures Commission undertook a public consultation during spring 2021 with children and young people, parents and caregivers, and professionals working with children. By deliberating the qualities of free play (Cowan, 2020) and how these are facilitated or undermined by features of the digital environment, the consultation realised children's right to participation by involving them in generating recommendations for 'Playful by Design' (Livingstone et al., 2021).

We devised an online consultation method combining uses of deliberation in research with children and young people (Coleman et al., 2018) with cultural probes, a design-led technique to deepen understanding of users and inspire technological innovation (Wyeth & Diercke, 2006). We relied on the open-ended and reflective qualities of deliberation to support participants to work through their experiences and articulate their value preferences for play in the digital environment. We also rethought recruitment and developed a protocol for interviews on Zoom to ensure ethical and meaningful engagement with participants. With this, we contribute to the methodological resources on child online participation (Cortesi et al., 2021).

Over a three-month period, we recruited 126 participants, half children (aged 3 – 18) and half adults, two thirds of them women and girls. Although we had hoped for an even gender balance, we judged our recruitment during the pandemic successful due to our streamlined recruitment process and consultation

design. We began each consultation with an ice-breaking conversation about participants' recent playful activities. We then showed colourful line drawings illustrating the qualities of free play in non-digital contexts to serve as cultural probes. These linked participants' experiences to our conceptual framework and prompted them to re-evaluate their experiences of playing in digital contexts by reflecting on the qualities of play and generating lively critical reflections on how their experience could be enhanced through design solutions.

COVID-19 restrictions on in-person interaction posed significant challenges throughout the research process, from recruitment to obtaining informed consent, devising the topic guide and managing discussions on Zoom effectively and ethically. Children could not be recruited via schools during the pandemic, so we created a public call, promoted through social media, inviting intermediaries (public and commercial organisations concerned with play, as well as youth groups, parent groups, etc.) to help recruit groups of participants with whom they already had contact.

To obtain informed consent, we developed streamlined email templates for participants under 18 and over 18, after some experimentation to discover what worked and to avoid the onboarding frictions of printing, signing, scanning and attaching consent forms. Each email provided straightforward information about the research and its ethical commitments to confidentiality, anonymity and participants' rights to disengage without consequences. Participants consented by adding their name, date, and typing X next to each condition of their participation before emailing it back to us.

It proved difficult to obtain parental consent for children, so we relied on the intermediary organisations to ensure this or sometimes we interviewed children together with a parent or caregiver. In such cases, and for some adult participants, we collected verbal consent to participate at the start of the audio-recorded Zoom interview. In such circumstances, we reminded participants what the consultation and our ethics process involved before asking participants to state their consent on the recording.

Adapting to precarious participant interest, we allowed some spontaneous and varied group formation: for example, a group of young people and the professionals working with them, family groups comprising one or two parents with their children, or a combination of parents and professionals. Our pilot research suggested potential digital fatigue, so we limited our online consultation to 45 minutes each. We maintained the participant/moderator ratio at a maximum of six participants per moderator to ensure full participation and a lively discussion.

For ethical reasons, turned off the direct messaging function, and only created Zoom breakout rooms if we, having passed the UK Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS), could each moderate a room. Also for safety and security reasons, we provided a fresh Zoom link and password to join our consultation after participants confirmed their attendance. To ensure participants' anonymity, we deleted the video, retaining only the audio recording from Zoom for the purposes of transcription.

Lessons learned

When circumstances change, as during the COVID-19 pandemic, researchers should be ready to rethink their methods and redesign their practices to ensure effective and ethical research.

Streamlining the recruitment and ethics procedures helps reduce joining frictions and overcoming pandemic and Zoom-related stresses;

Our consultation design engaged participants in ways that they found meaningful, enabling them to draw on their experiential knowledge to ground recommendations compatible with the language of policy and design;

We found that children seek similar qualities of play in both digital and non-digital environments, but that the digital environment lacks opportunities for children to explore and push boundaries within safe parameters; hence we recommend 'Playful by Design.'

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▼ References