Use of children in psychological research

Lesson 1.5.4 | Concepts and methods

1. Why study children directly?

Child research can investigate development when it occurs, compare ages, improve understanding of learning and eyewitness decisions, and address distress affecting daily life. Adults' memories or animal findings cannot substitute for every question about children's current behaviour.

Core study	Child participants	Main value
Bandura	72; 37-69 months	Imitation after adult modelling.
Pozzulo	59; ages 4-7	Child/adult line-up comparison.
Saavedra and Silverman	One nine-year-old boy	Detailed clinical assessment and follow-up.

2. Comprehension and measurement

Language, attention and developmental understanding affect responses. Instructions, questions and rating scales must suit the child. A wrong answer may reflect misunderstanding rather than poor memory or the intended psychological process.

Pozzulo used familiar cartoons, clear instructions and a demonstrated silhouette. Saavedra used a simple distress scale alongside observations. Multiple measures can reveal differences that visible compliance alone hides.

3. Social pressure

Children may try to please adults, assume a correct answer must be supplied or comply with authority. Task demands can therefore affect validity as well as ethics. Pozzulo's absent-line-up errors were consistent with social influences, but pressure was not separately manipulated.

4. Developmental variation

Children are not one uniform group. A four-year-old and a teenager differ in language, experience and understanding. Age differences do not isolate maturation from learning. A single nursery, private-school sample or clinical case restricts wider generalisation.

A child-friendly task may protect welfare and improve understanding, while reducing similarity to stressful real-world events. Evaluate both effects.

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Lesson 1.5.4 | Evidence and interpretation

1. Human ethical principles applied to children

Guideline	What it requires in practice
Minimise harm; maximise benefit	Consider fear, frustration, shame and possible later learning, not only physical injury. Monitor and adapt/stop.
Valid informed consent	Suitable parent/guardian permission and information the child can understand; check willing assent.
Right to withdraw	Make stopping clear and practical; notice reluctance, not only a formal verbal request.
Avoid deception	Do not assume a child can evaluate misleading purposes or hidden expectations.
Privacy	Avoid unnecessary intrusion into personal experiences or observations.
Confidentiality	Protect identifiable responses, clinical details and recordings.
Debriefing	Explain in suitable language, correct misunderstandings and check welfare.

2. Consent is an ongoing process

A parent's signature does not remove the child's right to disagree or stop. Silence, compliance or accepting a reward does not establish freely given assent. School authority, praise or incentives should not make refusal feel unsafe.

3. Scientific and ethical quality overlap

Distress or pressure can alter behaviour and weaken measurement. Comfortable participation and understandable tasks can improve evidence. However, welfare safeguards are needed even when researchers think the data would be useful.

Hint: Separate a documented safeguard, a potential risk and an unreported detail. Missing reporting does not prove that every safeguard was absent.

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Lesson 1.5.4 | Evaluation and connections

1. Bandura: knowledge and concern

Direct child participation showed novel imitation after modelling. Children also observed aggression and experienced deliberate frustration. Possible learning beyond the session and later welfare require attention; the original report does not establish that lasting effects were absent.

Modern consent, assent, withdrawal and remedial/debriefing arrangements are not fully detailed. Do not invent a reported procedure to remove learned aggression.

2. Pozzulo: documented safeguards

Parents gave written consent. Children were told they could change their minds without trouble. Craft activities built rapport; fatigue, anxiety and stress were monitored. Everyday clips avoided a real traumatic crime; small gifts followed participation.

This supported comfort and task understanding. The same benign clips and short delay limit transfer to stressful eyewitness events, while cartoons/humans differed in more than familiarity.

3. Saavedra and Silverman: benefit and burden

The boy and mother consented to assessment/treatment; the mother later gave written publication permission. Distress declined and gains persisted at six/twelve months. Nevertheless, initial ratings rose despite improved approach, showing why the child's emotional report mattered.

Exposure required careful monitoring, and detailed clinical publication required confidentiality. One case cannot establish the same outcome for every child.

4. Balanced judgement

Study children when their participation is necessary for a worthwhile question with suitable protection. Weigh the specific knowledge gained, method suitability, welfare burden, reported safeguards and remaining uncertainty. Do not conclude simply that children should always or never be studied.

> Hassett tested monkeys, not children. Adult or animal comparisons can inform hypotheses, but cannot directly establish an individual child's preference, cognition or welfare.

Hint: Develop a point using research value or risk → exact study detail → consequence for understanding, validity or child welfare.