Use of children in psychological research

Lesson 7.1.4 | A Level issues, debates and methods

Core ideas

Children may be studied because some psychological questions are specifically about development, learning, family life, education or early experience.

Child participants need extra ethical protection because they may understand less, feel more pressure to obey adults and be more vulnerable to distress.

Researchers usually need parental or guardian consent as well as the child's own assent where possible.

Tasks, instructions, questions and debriefing must be age-appropriate so children can understand what is happening.

Protection from harm is especially important, so procedures should avoid unnecessary fear, embarrassment, fatigue or lasting upset.

Data from children can be valuable, but validity may be affected by language ability, attention, memory, suggestibility and the testing situation.

Key terms

Child participant: A participant who is not yet legally or developmentally treated as an adult.

Parental consent: Permission from a parent or guardian for a child to take part.

Assent: A child's own agreement to take part, given in a way they can understand.

Use of children in psychological research

Continued

Age-appropriate: Suitable for a child's developmental level, language and understanding.

Protection from harm: The responsibility to avoid physical or psychological harm to participants.

Debriefing: Explaining the study afterwards in a clear and suitable way.

Suggestibility: A tendency to be influenced by leading questions or other people's expectations.

Vulnerability: Increased need for protection because a person may be less able to understand, refuse or cope.

Further detail and evidence

Children may differ in comprehension, memory, language, motivation and power relative to adults. Use developmentally appropriate tasks and response formats. A child scale is not automatically comparable with an adult scale simply because both generate numbers.

Ethical safeguards include suitable guardian permission, the child's willing assent, understandable information, continuing withdrawal, privacy and careful distress monitoring. School permission does not replace individual willingness. Incentives should not create undue pressure.

Useful examples include Lehmkuhl's adapted ERP case, Chaney's child inhaler device, logo recognition in Fischer, and school interventions such as Food Dudes/Shoshani. Each uses children for a specific question; their procedures and ethical demands differ.

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Applying the ideas

Brudvik used age-appropriate self-report to avoid assuming that a quiet child has little pain. Fischer's logo matching reduces reading demands but tests recognition rather than later smoking. The measure should fit developmental ability and the construct, not only convenience.

Worked example: A researcher wants to test memory in seven-year-olds using a long interview with complex wording and several leading questions. What problems would this create? The interview may not be age-appropriate because complex wording could confuse the children, making the data less valid. Leading questions could increase suggestibility, so children may give answers shaped by the researcher rather than their own memory. Ethically, the researcher should shorten the task, use simple language, avoid leading wording, gain parental consent and child assent, and remind children they can stop.

Worked example: During a school study, parents have signed consent forms but one child says they do not want to continue. How should the researcher respond? The researcher should let the child stop because parental consent does not remove the child's right to withdraw. The child's assent matters, especially because children may feel pressure to obey adults in school. The researcher should respond calmly, avoid making the child feel punished, and debrief in a simple way so the child understands what happened.

Evaluation and connections

Research can improve child services and reveal development, but dependency increases risks of compliance and coercion. Adult findings may not generalise to children, while one age group may not represent another. Distinguish longitudinal change from cross-sectional age differences and report documented protections separately from inferred concerns.