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Researching with children using Skype interviews and drawings: methodological and ethical issues explored

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Researching with children using Skype interviews and drawings: methodological and ethical issues explored

Introduction

Researching with children requires methods that encourage multiple ways to reflect on meanings, recognising that children are experts in their own lives thus illuminating their voices (Clark and Moss, 2005). There has been an increasing emphasis on researching with children over the last few years (Christensen and James, 2017), acknowledging that ‘children’s social relationships and cultures are worthy of study in their own right, independent of the perspective and concern of adults’ (Prout and James, 1997:8). How we view children, effects how they are treated in research e.g. child as object, subject, social actor or participant co-researcher. For example, when adults construct children as passive or incompetent, they position them as vulnerable and under estimate their capabilities, thus suppressing or diluting their voices (Christensen and Prout, 2002). A researcher’s construct of the child can in turn influence their choice of methods and ethical practice.

Although Pinter and Zandian argue that young children ‘tend to be less interested in reflecting on their views and opinions’ (2013:73), this is not a view I share. As with O’Kane (2008:124), I perceive children not as ‘passive recipients of adult socialisation’ but ‘social actors in their own right’. Children express their meaning through both verbal and non-verbal means so developing methods that enable children to tell their stories from their perspectives is vital in enabling their voice to shine through (Leeson, 2014).

This paper discusses the strengths and challenges of using Skype interviews and also the strengths and challenges of using a drawing activity with children. It reflects on findings from a project focusing on children’s experiences of having a Mummy who studies and explores these from a methodological and ethical position. There are many research examples of adult defined data concerning juggling studies and family life (Edwards, 1993; Green Lister, 2003; Webber, 2017, a; Webber, 2017b) but there is limited data from a child’s perspective. Often mothers are asked about their children but this paper reports on a unique method of research where children are asked to give insights on their perspectives of their mothers, thus pushing ethical boundaries. In fact, the idea for the original piece of research came from a child when he heard that his mother was being interviewed about how her studies affected family life. He stated, ‘Why is she [researcher] asking you what it is like to study with a family, she should be asking us? We can tell her what it is really like!’ As well as raise awareness of methodological issues I also aim to highlight good ethical practice.

This paper discusses the following three questions:

1. What are the benefits and challenges of using drawing activities with children?
2. What are the benefits and challenges of using Skype interviews with children?
3. What are the ethical issues raised when researching with children?

The answers to these research questions will contribute to debates on the multi layered ethical challenges associated with researching with children about family life.

Drawings as a research method with children

Drawing is a popular method used in research with children as it enables children to communicate their ideas and emotions through symbolic means (Clark and Moss, 2005). Drawing can be seen as a ‘thinking process and a thinking tool’; an activity that encourages children to reflect on their experiences, recall key events, elaborate new information and make sense of their environment (Papandreou, 2014:93). Drawings have a ‘communicative power’ (Einarsdottir, Dockett, and Perry, 2009:218) to act as a ‘window’ to a child’s feelings and experiences. Children’s drawings are full of richness, complexity and hidden meanings positioning children as capable, showing what they can do, rather than a deficit perspective of passivity or helplessness (Mavers, 2011).

Drawing can turn children from, ‘mark makers to meaning makers’, (Papandreou, 2014:97) thus giving them a method of communicating that feels more familiar and comfortable than just talking to a researcher. Giving children opportunities to be listened to, through the use of creative research methods, enables children to express themselves openly (Leeson, 2014). Although drawing is often viewed as a fun method, it must be acknowledged that some children may still have inhibitions and older children may perceive this as babyish (Fargas-Mallet et al., 2010). Further limitations of this method include power relationships between the researcher and participant which may influence what is drawn (Fargas-Mallet et al., 2010). Therefore it is imperative that children are given opportunities to interpret and discuss the meanings of the picture as this is more important than the image itself.

Indeed, drawing alone does not fully enable the child’s voice to be heard but it can act as a springboard for further discussions through other research tools such as interviews (Clark and Moss, 2005). Shared construction of knowledge, through conversations with children about their images and the meanings behind it, can empower children to express their views (Waller and Bitou, 2011).

Skype interviews as a research method with children

Whilst the literature advocates speaking to children about their drawings there can be geographical and temporal boundaries that can make the conversation logistically challenging, not to mention the risky idea of meeting a stranger in potentially unfamiliar place. Technology therefore offers additional

opportunities for research (Davies, 2017). Children encounter many forms of information and communication technology from early childhood (Simeonsdotter Svensson et al., 2014), so are often familiar with technological means of engaging in dialogue (Yamada-Rice, 2017).

Skype is an internet phone service that uses video technology to enable communications and interactions in real time (Kelly, 2013). Its strengths include instant access to communication across long distances (Deakin and Wakefield, 2013) as well as being able to maintain eye contact and use gesture to express and develop shared meanings. Skype is becoming a popular and familiar tool in families to maintain relationships and contact across long distances so is an accessible tool of communication for children (Kelly, 2013). However, for some children this is still a new or an unfamiliar activity.

Skype as a research tool is still in its infancy and further development and reflection is needed (Lo Locano, Symonds and Brown, 2016). Yet there are many benefits of this as a research method. Deakin and Wakefield (2013) highlight the value of widening accessibility for research participants and the advantage of being able to assess non-verbal clues. Skype provides distance between the researcher and child (Adams-Hutcheson and Longhurst, 2016), which can be advantageous for children as it can be less intimidating than being in the same room as a researcher who may be a stranger. It is also accessed from the comfort of the child's home.

My views on children's participation in research reflect my ontological and epistemological views of a child as an active and reflective participant in meaning construction. However, research constraints such as access to children, a limited research budget and availability of time affected the opportunities for children to participate fully in the research design and analysis. Although the research methods and agenda was chosen by me and was not fully participatory it was based on feedback from a child and constructed from this as a starting point. I was able to develop methods that enabled children to express their perspectives in a multitude of ways, giving them choices and encouraging them to take the lead. However, as a newer researcher to these methods this did not always happen in practice due to some mothers adopting an active role in the interview process. The next section highlights the research approach, including how the chosen methods of drawing and Skype interviews were used.

Study Overview

Methods

This paper reports on the methodological and ethical issues resulting from a project entitled, '*My mummy studies*' – *An investigation into the effects of higher education study on family life*. The project aimed to explore children's experiences of having a mother who studies and consider the effects of a mother's Higher Education study on families as a whole. There are multiple reasons why

women enter Higher Education including career progression, wanting to support their children with their education, professional development and to earn higher wages to support the family (Webber, 2017a). I was interested to explore how these choices impacted upon and were viewed by the children in this study. The mothers were all on under graduate or postgraduate programmes (from degree to doctorate level of study).

The data for this project was collected using two phases of research:

Phase 1 - A drawing activity with children aged 5-12. The mothers asked children, prior to a Skype interview, to draw a picture or comic strip of what it looks like to have a mummy who studies. I differentiated in the instruction sheet between pictures and comic strips as I wanted to use a medium that might also encourage older children to participate. Children conducted this drawing in their own homes and at a time convenient to them. However, whether this was convenient to the child or mother and how much they were coerced to complete the drawings by their mother is not known. The idea for drawings came from a previous piece of research where mothers collected data from within their family focused upon how their studies affected family life (Webber, 2017a). One child chose to express herself through a drawing which gathered rich data and valid insights into her experiences. As with research by Christensen and James (2017) I felt it was essential to select methods that were appropriate for the participants in this study and fitted in with the children's cultures of communication and everyday lives.

Phase 2 - A Skype interview with the children. The drawing were used as a tool to initiate discussion about the children's experiences. This gave the children an opportunity to interpret their data for the researcher. A Skype interview was chosen due to geographical and budget restrictions, I also assumed that children would feel more comfortable to chat in the comfort and familiarity of their own homes. One face-to-face interview took place for a child (and sibling) as the mother requested this method due to her child's individual preference (discussed later in the paper). I assumed mothers would be in the background for the Skype interviews but this was not always the case in practice.

Participants

Although my research methodology and beliefs upheld children as active participants, the initial decision to participate rested with the mothers who acted as Gatekeepers. An email was sent to Doctorate student participants from a previous UK research project led by the researcher and students on current Education programmes within the University. Therefore, only children whose mothers wanted to be involved in the study were offered an opportunity to consent to this project. Eight families (thirteen children) took part in this piece of research. For this particular paper, with a focus on ethical and methodological issues, only the perspective of seven participants were drawn upon based on data relevant to these themes.

Child	Age	Mother	Mother's course level
James	12	Marnie	Professional Doctorate
Alexander	10		
Po	7	Clara	Masters
Hetty	6	Linda	Professional Doctorate
Ethan	8		
Violet	5	Sarah	PGCE student
Otto	9		
Ana	5	Jess	Degree
Ginny	9	Lily	Degree
Mimi	10		
Aran	8	Sally-Anne	Degree
Joe	10		
Steve	6	Belinda	Degree

Table 1: Participants

Ethical considerations

Full ethical consent from the University Ethics Committee was gained prior to commencing the research. The families and children were provided with information and consent letters outlining the study and seeking ethical consent. The children's information and consent letters were age appropriate and reader friendly, using images and texts to convey the message (Alderson and Morrow, 2011). All participants were informed that they could withdraw consent at any time. The children were also asked for verbal consent during the Skype interviews and body language was observed by the researcher to ensure continuous consent (Fargas – Malet, 2010; Robson, 2011). Flewitt (2005:556) introduces the terms 'provisional' and 'ongoing consent'. I obtained provisional consent through the letters and through ascertaining verbal consent at the start of the interview. I sought ongoing consent through the observations of body language. This required a sensitive and reflective approach, reactive to the behaviours of the children and parents (see the Ethics section for further analysis of this in practice).

Data analysis

The data was initially analysed using a thematic framework approach exploring children's experiences of having a mother who studies. For the purpose of this paper the initial data analysis was put to one side to enable secondary analysis focusing on methodological and ethical issues when researching with children. The secondary analysis is the focus for this paper. The research findings

and the discussion will be merged together in this paper to create a flowing argument drawing on excerpts from the interviews to illuminate main themes.

Findings and Discussion

The findings and discussion are presented in three main sections, the benefits and challenges of using drawings; the benefits and challenge of using Skype; and ethical issues when working with children. I will draw on literature and relate it to my findings to extend the discussion on the research process and ethics in action.

The benefits and challenges of using drawing as a research method

Drawing – Benefits

It is important that children are valued in research and their perspective is viewed as important (Lund, Helgeland and Bobo Kavac, 2016). With the use of an opening question, ‘Can you tell me about your picture?’ children were provided with an opportunity to discuss different aspects of their drawing. This gave them ownership of the topics they wanted to share enabling them to interact on their own terms. This method ensured that the researcher’s meanings, values and interpretations were not assigned to drawings and the children’s insights were shared (see also Einarsdottir, Dockett, and Perry, 2009). Drawings and discussion encouraged communication about the details and enabled the child to reflect on their experiences with the support of the researcher:

Aran - This is the wall, then we have a clock [mum laughs].

Researcher - Ok, so why is there a clock on the wall in your picture is that significant?

Despite literature maintaining that drawing is a familiar activity that reflects how children communicate with friends and family (Clark and Moss, 2011), four of eight mothers were surprised at how their children could communicate through drawing. James’ mother expressed her surprise and pride that her son was able to convey his feelings and emotions so openly through the medium of drawing. James was able to articulate his views using images, which according to his mother he had not expressed this verbally before, thus turning James from a mark maker, to a meaning maker:

I just think it is really great that he can be brave enough to say that and to show that ... I would agree that that is absolutely true [James’ perspective of how his mother’s studies affected family life], and I am very proud that he was brave enough to do it. (James’ Mother)

The comment from James’ mother stresses the potential for drawings within research on family dynamics, but it is also important that the approach is responsive and flexible to the needs and interest of the child (Clark and Moss, 2011). For example in this research, because not all children like to draw, they were offered alternative ways of expressing themselves thus giving them a choice, which

according to Fargas-Malet et al., (2010) potentially minimises inhibitions, or a reluctance to participate. Three children chose to use a comic strip instead of a single drawing (see Figure 1):

Well it is kind of meant to be kind of comic thing, and the first one is me trying to get mummy's attention, just standing right behind her when she's typing away. (Hetty)

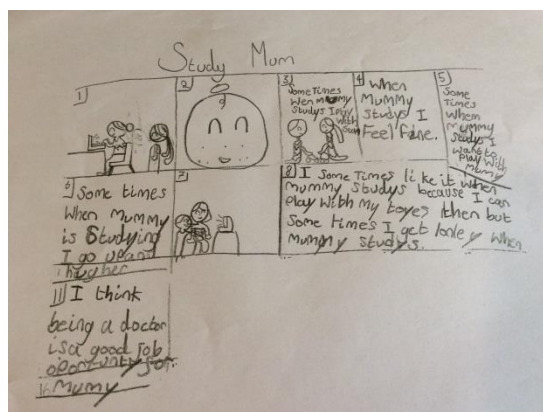


Figure 1 – Hetty's carton strip

Whilst the drawings offered the children freedom of expression and a tool to facilitate the interviews, the interplay of Skype created an additional challenge.

Drawings - Challenges

Viewing the image on a computer screen at times proved difficult during the Skype interviews. The quality of the image was also problematic when it was sent via email using a photograph of the image. To overcome this difficulty, the children were encouraged to talk through the cartoon sequence or meanings of their pictures and a request was made for the original to be sent to the researcher. In one case the picture was unclear as the child had drawn on a piece of paper which already had text on it. What is interesting is that the chosen piece of paper was the mother's essay left on the printer, demonstrating the realities of studying within the home. Although the image was compromised by the text already on the paper, I made the decision that the process and discussion was more important than the picture.

Research with children with additional needs is often avoided by researchers who hold assumptions about a child's ability or willingness to engage. As Leeson (2014:206) argues, 'Assumptions about a child's competence to voice an opinion often inhibits efforts to find effective methods for participation'. One of the children taking part in the research had Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Research by Benton et al. (2012) recognised the potential of children with ASD as partners and participants. During their research process the teachers reflected on the importance of children being

listened to and seeing their ideas come to life. I too maintain that children with ASD can offer a unique voice and perspective as participants in research, when they are listened to, heard and respected. At the mother's request, this was the only family interview conducted face-to-face, as she believed it might enable him to feel more comfortable and aid the discussion. By giving the child freedom, in their drawing and in the discussion, to go off topic (the child drew a space station rather than a picture of their mother studying, see Figure 2), I adopted a strategy of supporting the child to express their perspective in their own time framework at their own pace.

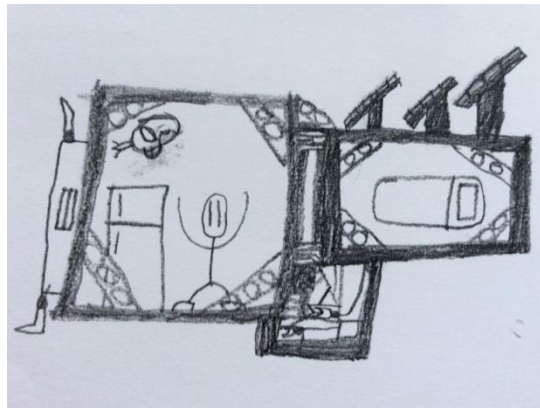


Figure 2 – Joe's picture of a space station

It is important to appreciate the individuality and uniqueness of each child's drawing even when the drawing is not what is expected. By celebrating what the child has drawn a rapport can be developed which can facilitate further conversations. Thus demonstrating that the researcher has '... an obligation to assist children in expressing their perspectives on views that matter and are important to them' (Lund, Helgeland and Kavac, 2016:1531). This is a good reminder that as adults we cannot expect children to follow our research focus; by letting them take control richer insights can be gained. The process of taking part and using drawings to initiate a child led discussion was more important than the drawing itself, reflecting O'Kane's (2008:129) assertion that 'the successful use of participatory techniques lies in the process, rather than simply the techniques used'.

The benefits and challenges of using Skype interviews as a research method

Skype Interviews - Benefits

One of the key benefits of using a Skype interview with young children was that they could participate in the research in their familiar home environment, which helped them feel more comfortable (Simeonsdotter Svensson et al., 2014). For example in four out of five families with siblings, siblings were able to pop in and out of the interview and alternate between playing and being part of the discussion. This created flow and a natural atmosphere rather than a stilted, structured environment. Skype interviews are also convenient and flexible in terms of time (Adams-Hutcheson

and Longhurst, 2016) as they can be fitted around the needs of the family and do not have to interfere with the child's routines. Being able to see into the child's space also enabled context to be established and at times rapport to develop. This also helped the child to explain things more clearly:

Researcher: That sounds fun. When mummy is busy and she cannot look after you, do you have anyone else that looks after you, or do you just play?

Po - I have my dog, she is never busy Well my dog is right there [points to dog].

Researcher – Oh, I can see your dog.

The importance of small talk at the start of the interview cannot be under estimated as this facilitates a rapport and eases the child into the interview (Griffin, Lahman and Opitz, 2016). When a child feels comfortable with a researcher they are more likely to respond (Griffin, Lahman and Opitz, 2016). As Simeonsdotter Svensson et al. (2014) observed, having knowledge and experience of children is important for the researcher to understand the needs, interests and abilities of different aged children. Clark and Moss (2005:68) argue that 'training on child development is a prerequisite for understanding how children communicate'. Being a mother and an experienced practitioner was useful for me in this study, enabling me to easily talk about the child's day, or have conversations on topics that interest the child such as rugby, school friends and farming. This enabled me to gain an insight into the child's social world and initiate rapport. Once the children appeared comfortable with me and were happy sharing their experiences then the research topic could be introduced.

Using a Skype interview alongside the drawing activity gave the child an opportunity to elaborate on their drawings and explain their meaning. The Skype interview facilitated this and gave children control as they had the picture in their hands. At times I had not seen a clear view of this before the interview. The challenge of an unclear picture also proved a positive experience as I was able to ask further questions to enable the child to explain their picture in full. In this way, having the distance of Skype encouraged children to give richer details:

Researcher: And what does the bit on the side of your picture say?

James: That is just an explanation of what I am saying, I will read it out 'can be frustrating when mum is too busy or tired to do stuff, and sometimes she is hardly ever at home'.

The findings show that deeper analysis and questioning, through Skype interviews, enables children's narratives to develop and their meaning to be co-constructed together with the researcher. In this research the initial analysis of the drawings, prior to the interview, appeared to show the child's negative view of the mother's studies. Through the Skype interview discussion, the children revealed pride in their mother's study, enjoyment of their additional free time for play and the development of

their educational aspirations. This demonstrates the importance of giving children varied opportunities to express their perspective using multiple methods to facilitate discussion (Clark and Moss, 2005). It also reveals the importance of researchers not making assumptions on initial analysis and being willing to delve deeper to gain richer insights into the child's meanings.

According to Simeonsdotter Svensson et al. (2014) using Skype within the home enables parents to support the child in the conversation. Four out of eight mothers in this research contributed during the interview to clarify a point or to help the child express their meaning more clearly:

Mother - Do you think I need a hug or you want to hug me?

Hetty - I think mummy needs hugs.

At times the mother also acted as a second researcher, as she was able to read the child's body language and ask extension questions where needed:

Researcher - Ethan, thank you very much for your time, you have been an absolute superstar, do you want to go and play now?

Ethan's Mother - Or do you want to say anything else about Mummy studying?

In summary, Skype interviews enable the researcher to gain access to the child's space without intruding in person in the family home. This often enables the child to feel comfortable (Simeonsdotter Svensson et al., 2014), take more control of the process and enables parents to participate in a familiar environment. This is enabling for the child and encourages rapport to develop. Although Skype was a useful research tool there were also challenges that arose.

Skype Interviews - Challenges

Although Skype interviews within the home can mean that children are not distracted by an unfamiliar setting (Simeonsdotter Svensson et al., 2014), sometimes in this research younger children could be distracted by toys within their environment. Therefore the timing of the interview was important. Iacano, Symonds and Brown (2016) argued that Skype participants were less concerned about time when the research was conducted in their home environment but this was not the case for Steve. Researching straight after school was convenient for the mother but for Steve this appeared inconvenient. Steve was unfocused and very excitable when participating in the interview straight after a busy school day as he wanted to go and play. In this research I sensed the child's fidgety body language and cut the interview short to respond to the child's needs and perceived non-verbal consent to the interview:

Researcher: Steve, you have been absolutely brilliant with my questions, you must have had a really busy day at school and now you must be looking forward to going to play. Thank you, can I talk to Mummy now and you can go and play?

Steve: YESSSS! [Punches the air] .Thank you (as he runs off)!

Researcher: Thank you!

Mother: Sorry!

When researching with children there can be a danger that the parent's wishes for the child to participate can overshadow or influence the interview. In the previous example, Steve's mother felt she needed to apologise for Steve's lack of interest in the interview. Simeonsdotter Svensson et al., (2014) warn of parents getting involved in the interview and trying to 'lead' the child in their answers or jumping in to quickly with an answer. This was evident in my research when one mother did not give the child time and space to think or not answer. This can go against the ethics of a child centred researcher who is trying to respond to the needs and wishes of the child, including the wish not to participate (Waller and Bitou, 2011). The following example illustrates this:

Mother to Steve - But what do you like to do with Mummy? What did we do the other day, what did we get out of the shed? You like doing that don't you?

Focusing on ethical issues

It is important that children are not pressured to take part in research, or coerced with their answers thus reflecting 'their rights to express their point of view or to remain silent', (Clark and Moss, 2005:9). Ensuring that children understand what they are providing consent for is also important. Although Joe consented to participate in the drawing activity and interview it was important to him to retain ownership of the original picture, requesting that I only keep a copy. Listening to children in this way is important and ensures that children have some control over the activity and artefacts produced (Einarsdottir, Dockett and Perry, 2009). It is also important to explain the research process and introduce the researcher using language that the child understands (Fargas-Malet et al. 2010):

He asked me, 'Who is she?' [child enquiring identity of researcher] and I said it in his terms rather than a lecturer or tutor so I said you were my teacher and he said, 'Oh, OK' and was happy to speak to you ... (Steve's Mother)

However, this presents another ethical challenge – power. Robson (2011) emphasises issues of power and hierarchy and reminds us to be aware of the researcher's impact on the participants. One area to be particularly aware of is the position of adults coming into the child's domain (in this case through a video link). The mother introduced me as her 'teacher' which could have positioned me with authority

and power, making the child's ability to opt out difficult. Trying to gauge Steve's ongoing consent was an important part of my role as an ethical researcher.

As well as negotiating consent (see also Palaologou, 2014) with the children throughout the interviews it was also important to obtain ongoing consent from the mothers, particularly when conversations deviated from the agreed topic. The mothers had consented, either consciously or subconsciously, to be the objects of research enabling their lives to be under the microscope through the eyes of their child (see also Davies, 2017). Although Davies' research shows that some parents were concerned what their child may reveal about aspects of their lives, I did not perceive these anxieties from the mothers in my research. As I was aware that the topic area was sensitive (discussing the impact of studies on family life) it was important to check with the mother and gain her permission before pursuing tricky questions:

Researcher to Ethan's Mother - Can I ask Ethan about his Dad studying?

Gaining consent from both parent and child was not always easy as ultimately the parents had the final say as Gatekeeper. I was very aware that this topic was of a sensitive nature and wanted to be courteous, respectful and sensitive to both the parents and the child. This meant that at times I had to make an ethical decision about whose consent to prioritise. In the former example it was the parent, but when noticing Steve's eagerness to stop the interview and go and play I prioritised the child's voice. Another example was when the mother of the child with ASD requested that the interview was face to face and not Skype. This was based on her knowledge of which situations and environments supported him in feeling comfortable. This also demonstrated the importance of changing the research method to suit the needs of the child (Clark and Moss, 2011) and family, thus illuminating the voices of all children who wished to participate. According to Bolton (2014:6) making ethical decisions requires a reflexive approach using 'reflection in action' in order to make decisions that promotes ethical actions.

The ethics of the impact of this research on mothers

Asking the children to comment on family life from their perspective created an unexpected ethical challenge (see also Davies, 2017). It is quite unusual to ask children to remark on how the effect of choices and activities mothers engage in (i.e. in this research Higher Education study) impacts on them as children. There was a risk that children's explanations of their drawing caused taken for granted views to be unsettled as it may not conform to the expectations of others (namely in this study the mothers) (see also Mavers, 2011). I had underestimated the visual power of the children's drawings and found that five out of eight mothers were initially quite upset by the image alone but subsequently reassured by the verbal discussion and explanation that followed (see Figure 3):

It made me sad! Just the fact that that was the first thing he thought of, when you said draw a picture of what it is like for Mummy to be studying and I felt the first thing he wanted was my attention to come and play. (Steve's Mother)

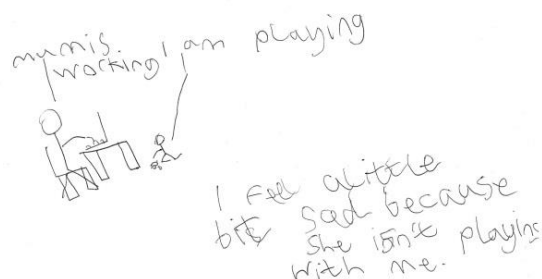


Figure 3 – Steve's picture

Although consent had been obtained from the parents and children I had misjudged the emotive impact that the pictures would have on the mothers in this research. It was important for me to debrief the mothers after the children had shared their pictures and give them time to talk through their interpretations of what the children had shared. Although the ethical protocol signposted mothers to other services such as 'Relate', on reflection this felt tokenistic and the mothers were not adequately prepared for the results that followed. Seeing the world 'through the children's eyes' (Clark and Moss, 2011:296), listening to their experiences of their lives proved a challenge for the mothers but not one that should be avoided. Although it was hard to hear it seemed important for them to reflect on what the children had said:

... the emotional impact of reading that [child's cartoon showing the busyness of the mother's study resulting in limited 'play time' with her son], made me go oh, but actually it is a very good drawing, it is very accurate ... And now that they've spoken to you we'll have some conversations about it. (Marnie, Mum to James and Alexander)

As an ethical challenge this reiterates the importance of ongoing consent, as provisional consent alone is not adequate in these types of research situations (Flewitt, 2005). Planning an ethical protocol cannot fully prepare you for these types of ethical challenges in action. Through following ethical procedures, which adopt a reflexive and flexible approach (Lahman, 2008) children's voices can be encouraged.

Conclusion

There are many benefits and challenges of using Skype interviews and drawing activities with children. Researchers can empower children in research and illuminate their voice through the consideration of different strategies discussed within this paper. I have suggested that using a mix of methods such as Skype interviews and drawings can have positive outcomes and facilitate children's voices to be heard. Drawings give children a creative medium to express their perspectives and subsequent Skype interviews enables children to express their intentions and regain some control over the research process (Einarsdottir, Dockett and Perry, 2009). Although there are challenges when using these methods such as developing rapport, finding a suitable time for children to research or ensuring clear images, the benefits of gaining fresh insights from their perspectives can outweigh these.

There are numerous implications for early childhood research and practice when considering the findings of this research, I would like to focus on two points. Firstly, the importance of giving children opportunities to express their views about their family, even though this may be hard for parents to hear. Using drawings as a research tool enabled the children's voices to be heard and their meanings to be expressed in a way that surprised many of the parents. The parents were amazed by some of the views of the children and underestimated their ability to express themselves coherently on complex family related topics. For the mothers in this study they were able to make changes within the home to accommodate the views of the children. They were also able to see the impact of their studies from their child's perspective showing the juxtaposed views of a lack of playtime in contrast to the pride children had towards their mother's studies and aspirations. For some mothers this incentivised them to keep going with their studies and not to focus on the negative aspects of time away from their children. Therefore it is important that researchers do not avoid potentially distressing or controversial topics as children need 'opportunities to tell their stories and explore for themselves what their experiences have meant to them', (Leeson 2014:218). What is evident from this research is that children wanted opportunities to talk about their family lives to express their perspectives.

Secondly, this research has highlighted the importance of not underestimating a child's age or making assumptions based on a child's perceived ability. In fact good ethical practice, '... cannot be based in presupposed ideas and stereotypes about children or childhood', (Christensen and Prout, 2002:84). For example, the drawing activity enabled the child with ASD to relax, get to know me as researcher, share a picture of personal interest before engaging in the research discussion. Despite some aspects of the discussion not relating to the research topic, invaluable insights into the child's social world and experiences were revealed. To show that we are listening to children and interested in their lived experiences it is important to give them time and space to go off topic and interpret their pictures at their own pace highlighting what is important to them (Clark and Moss, 2005). Listening to children in this way can give valuable interpretations of their social world.

Limitations

Although the aim of this paper was to focus on child centred participatory methods it became clear in the findings and analysis that the mothers played a critical role in supporting or influencing these methods. This is a limitation of this research as some mothers took more of an active role than initially planned. On reflection this could have been due to the nature of the topic and the mother's concerns about what may have been said by the children (Davies, 2017). In research such as this, mothers can make the decision as initial gatekeeper on whether they will ask their children to participate; mothers can decide whether to be in the room during the interview and whether to contribute or remain silent. For this research, this was not dependent on the child's age, as you would assume mothers would be more involved with younger children but this was not the case. Although Simeonsdotter Svensson et al. (2014) acknowledge the benefits of parents being close by to enable children to feel more comfortable during Skype interviews, this can be a limitation if parents overshadow the interview. One way to overcome this is to discuss the role of the mother and agree a way of working before the interview; this is something to be addressed in future studies.

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