

Surveys

Surveys are ideal if you need information from large numbers of children. You can pose questions in a variety of ways:

- *yes/no responses*
- *scaling questions using number scales or image scales (e.g. happy to sad emoticons)*
- *open-ended questions.*

Written surveys can be done independently by children as young as 8 years-old, and as young as 3 years-old for face to face surveys.

Surveys can be formally structured so that the information is reliable and valid to reflect the views of a larger population, but your sampling (selection and sample size) will be critical.

You can also do informal surveys that are not statistically representative of a population but represent the views of the survey participants. This affords flexibility in sampling, and can provide informative quotes and perspectives. Take care in how you interpret and report informal surveys.

Online surveys

Online survey software is easy to use, can be free or inexpensive and collates data automatically for immediate analysis. They can be electronically distributed. They are convenient for participants providing they have access to the internet. They can be made attractive and fun for children to complete.

Paper surveys

Paper surveys are accessible to those without internet access, can be attractive, and simple to complete in any time or place. However, there are printing and distribution costs involved, and they are more time consuming to complete, manually collate and analyse.

Face to face surveys

Face to face surveys require experienced interviewers to question children and record answers. They can be used with young children because the interviewer can explain questions age-appropriately. The costs include interviewers, accessing children and collating results manually.

Strengths

- Surveys are a good way to gather information from many children.
- Surveys can be anonymous so children are more able to express how they feel without worrying that they might hurt someone's feelings if they say something negative.
- Surveys can be a cost-effective way to gather information.

Things to think about

- Children with learning difficulties may require support from a carer to participate in the survey. However, this can prevent them from sharing information, especially if the information concerns the person who is helping them with the survey. Make sure children have someone they trust if they need support to complete a survey.
- It is difficult to obtain in-depth information from a survey unless it is part of a more specific conversation that explores the child's thoughts.

Tips and tricks

Developing surveys for children

- **Keep questions as short as possible and ask only one question at a time** – Don't ask questions you don't need to ask, or that you can answer from other sources.
- **Use a variety of question styles** – yes/no, scaling questions, ordering by preference, and open ended questions can all provide valuable information. Using a variety of question styles will help keep the children interested.
- **Limit the number of response options** – children find it difficult to process a range of choices. Give only 2 or 3 response options for younger children, and more for older children. Use images or words to describe points on the scale (e.g. never, sometimes, always).
- **Avoid ambiguity! Questions should be very literal** – children have a low threshold for ambiguity. They interpret language very literally. Avoid de-personalised, indirect or abstract questions. Make the survey about them.
- **Use vocabulary the children will understand** – this means both age-appropriate (where you are surveying a range of ages this means designing different versions of your questionnaire for different age groups) and avoiding technical terms (instead use terms that are relevant to children's everyday life).
- **When using check-lists, provide space for alternative responses** – always end with an "other" option, and if possible, ask the child to specify what the "other" is.
- **Avoid the past** – children have a different sense of time and asking about past events and behaviors may not be best handled in a survey. Stick to their current situation and what they would like in the immediate future.
- **Avoid asking questions with double-negatives** – disagreeing with a negatively phrased statement can be confusing.
- **Test your survey** – there's only one way to know if you've got your survey right and that's to test it with children. This will mean the questions are understood and that you have the range of response options where necessary.
- **If in doubt seek ethical advice** – if there is any possibility that your questions may upset a child, lead to them sharing information about themselves or others being at risk, or is on a sensitive topic, seek advice from others with ethics experience.

Start with easy questions like age, year at school, ethnicity as 'warm-up' questions.

It can put children at ease if you preface a statement with an introduction like "Some children agree with this, and others do not. What do you think?"

For attitudinal questions, think carefully if you wish children to answer on behalf of children in general or themselves in particular.

Make it interesting - use images, video and audio to make the survey engaging for kids. Electronic-based surveys (using computers, tablets and other devices) can make the survey more interactive

Examples

At the Office of the Children's Commissioner, we use online surveys to get the views of school-aged children on a variety of topics. Using a school network means teachers can introduce the topics, and children can complete surveys during class-time on class computers.

Topics range from the kinds of out-of-school activities they do, how they learn best, to a mock-up of the national flag referendum.