

Practical Advice for Doing Research with Preschoolers

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The purpose of this chapter is to articulate some practical folk knowledge about doing research with preschoolers (roughly 2 to 5 years old) to help instructors supervise undergraduates who want to work with that age group. Essentially, this chapter will try to make the implicit explicit, even if that means stating the obvious in some cases.

Securing a Sample

Local communities differ greatly in their accessibility to undergraduate research projects, so securing a sample of preschoolers can range from the simplicity of some phone calls to the complexity of months of delicate negotiations. Preschools and daycare centers are obvious places to start inquiring. Other groups that might provide research participants are “mothers’ morning out” programs, public library story-time, and community parks-and-recreation programs. Neighborhood newspapers frequently list such programs, as might packages aimed at newcomers that realtors or civic organizations provide. With any of these established organizations, one needs to consider the following questions:

1. Is the sample representative of the population of interest? Full-time daycare centers cater to families where all adults in the household work or go to school full time; part-time care and preschools may cater to more economically advantaged families where at least one adult is not working full time; families that do not use out-of-home care may have different child-rearing philosophies than those who do use such care.

2. Does the facility have appropriate space for the research to be conducted there? If the sample is recruited from there but has to go elsewhere for the procedure, can the parents make time to do that?

3. Does the facility have policies about not leaving children alone with “strangers”? If so, how can the research protocol be adapted to accommodate that restriction?

4. Most schools and centers have policies against releasing children’s names, addresses, and phone numbers. What will the facility permit so that researchers can contact parents to obtain consent? They might be willing to tuck notices into children’s

backpacks, post notices at the entry, let researchers “camp out” in the lobby to approach parents, or let researchers attend a parent-teacher meeting.

5. Is the facility a popular site for research recruitment, such that researchers need to worry about cross-contamination from other projects or low parental agreement rates because others have recently recruited participants?

Unlike public schools with their extensive bureaucracy and established procedures, most daycare centers and preschools are privately or independently operated and may not have any established policies about cooperating with requests for research. A simple, direct conversation with the director of the facility is usually sufficient for researchers to determine if that site will be a useful source. Once the director agrees, researchers should offer to have further conversations with any Board of Directors or parents’ groups. If children are going to be leaving their classroom to participate, then researchers should also request a short meeting with the teachers to secure their cooperation. Consider carefully whether students have the social graces, if not political skills, to secure the necessary cooperation, or if the instructor should do this task.

A second method of securing a sample is through personal contacts. Instructors might know parents with an appropriately aged child or students might have babysitting contacts. A few cooperating parents can then supply contact information for others they know, who in turn widen the scope of possibilities. Such recruitment is haphazard, however. It can also be more time-consuming, and researchers are unlikely to know in advance what the demographics of the sample will be.

Locating the Research Space

If daycare centers, preschools, or other facilities provide the sample, they may also be willing to permit the research to be conducted in their space. This shifts responsibility for travel from parents to researchers (which is usually a good tradeoff), and children are likely to be immediately comfortable in the location. However, facilities can be unpredictably noisy and interrupted by others entering the space.

The major problem, however, is controlling communication among the participants about the experience. Admonitions to keep the session a secret are not likely to be effective with young children. Teachers may resent the intrusions and interruptions that occur as children shuffle in and out of the classroom, so researchers need to be particularly mindful of the teachers' perspective and have direct conversations with them about ways to minimize the disruptions.

Conducting the research in the child's own home usually avoids the potential for contamination across participants and is the setting mostly likely to make the child feel comfortable, but it shares the probability for noise and physical interruptions. Researchers can feel like they are intruding on family life, and their unfamiliarity with the neighborhood can make locating each home difficult. There might also be concerns about researchers' safety in some locales.

If parents can bring their children to a laboratory room on campus, the researcher has more control over extraneous variables that can otherwise spoil an experimental trial, but counterbalancing that advantage are two potential drawbacks: parents forget to come and the children are likely to be uncomfortable or distressed in the unfamiliar surrounding. Researchers can, of course, call to remind parents of the appointment. In my setting, upwards of 10% of the parents will forget to come even after reminders, and the figure could be much higher in communities that are not college towns. Children should be given time to explore the laboratory setting, to raise their comfort level, but this extends the time that both researchers and parents must devote to the experience. Some children, perhaps 3-5%, will balk at the point of even entering the laboratory. If the research procedure allows it, parents might be able to sit in the experimental room to make their child more relaxed, but researchers then have to worry about parents influencing their child's responses or disciplining their child for perceived misbehavior or disappointing levels of performance. Sometimes children can be reassured that their parent is right outside the laboratory door, but if they are not reassured, I suggest letting the parent sit behind the child and making an explicit request for the parent to be nonreactive.

Framing the Experience

If students have taken their research idea from existing literature, they may already have a sense of what form a suitable procedure might take, but published research is unlikely to make explicit some

details that a novice child development researcher needs to know. For example, when researchers invite children to participate in the session, they usually try to make the activity seem like a game that will be fun, so students should avoid calling the session a *test* or an *experiment* (which vocabulary preschoolers will not understand anyway). I advise my students to tell parents that they are studying "child development" rather than "child psychology" to avoid any implication that something is wrong with their child that requires psychology to fix.

If students are modifying a procedure that worked with older children, they may need to simplify the instructions, reduce the number of stimuli or trials, raise the number of practice trials, change the content of stimuli to ensure that preschoolers are familiar with the items, add visual interest (e.g., add pictures to a verbal story) or make the event more dramatic, break up a long procedure into shorter sessions, and insert memory or comprehension probes.

Establishing a Good First Impression

Traditional-age college students, who are used to their own parents' and teachers' familiarity with and understanding of collegiate behavior, need to be reminded that parents of preschoolers and the children themselves will likely expect students to behave as confident, friendly, and competent adults. That is, students may need to learn to fake it. Students should greet the parent (or teacher) first and perhaps spend a few minutes chatting with the adult before attempting to greet the child. Using a warm, friendly voice, smiling, and getting down to the child's eye level are usually helpful in establishing rapport, as is explicitly telling the child the researcher's own name. A positive remark, such as how happy the student is that the child is present or commenting on something the child is holding or wearing, can break the ice. Simple questions about favorite television characters or games can also serve this function. Warm-up activities can not only put the child at ease but also might help communicate the nature of the experimental task.

Preschoolers are not likely to pay much attention to what student researchers are wearing, but the adults who make the children available certainly do. I recommend that students be told to avoid wearing "grubby" clothes – no holes in their jeans, no bellybutton rings showing, no T-shirts (especially those with offensive slogans) – but they do not need to be as formally attired as they would for a job interview.

Coping with Preschoolers' Behavior

Children vary widely in their understanding of proper behavior in a research setting and in their willingness to cooperate with a stranger's (the experimenter's) requests. I strongly recommend that instructors use class time to demonstrate possible child behaviors and have their students formulate and practice plans for coping with each type of child:

1. The nonreactive, silent participant. Some children will react to the experimental session by freezing or withdrawing into passive silence. Student researchers should know in advance how long they should wait for a response, what level of coaxing to employ, and when to just terminate the session.

2. The physically overactive child. Some children want to touch, pick up, or fiddle with anything that is not bolted down, and some will fiddle with the bolts! Researchers must decide whether they can ignore those behaviors or must ask the child to stop. Can they arrange stimuli to be out of reach but still suitably visible? Can the child be given some task to perform (e.g., turning the pages of a booklet that accompanies a story or pressing a computer key to initiate a trial) that will prevent other actions from disrupting the procedure? A second way that preschoolers are physically active is literally by not sitting still. I have had children repetitively kick the underside of a table, get out of their chair to wander around the room, belly-flop on the table, crawl under the table, tip back in their chairs to the point of nearly falling over, or just prefer standing to sitting. Again, can these movements be tolerated or do they interfere with the child's attention to the task?

3. The verbally active child. It is very common for some preschoolers to want to tell stories or engage in lengthy conversations. For example, after listening to one of the researcher's stories, the child may insist on telling a story in return. If the procedure requires that children provide an explanation or elaboration of their answers, children may use that as a springboard for extensive monologues. It is difficult to know when to cut off such verbalizations without introducing experimenter bias. Children may not ask questions at the start of the procedure (when the researcher invited them to do so), but they may interrupt later as questions occur to them. These may be on-task, such as asking how much longer the procedure will last or whether their parent will be informed of their behavior, or off-task, such as asking why the room walls are painted blue, whether the "bogey-man" is watching from behind the one-way mirror, or whether the experimenter can come home with them to play more.

4. The silly child. There are no end of ways that children can be silly and surprising, but common ones are exaggerating movements (e.g., big arm sweeps prior to pointing to their response choice) or speaking styles (e.g., saying *Noooooo* instead of *No*) or tossing instead of handing objects to the experimenter. If the researcher reacts with too much amusement, the child may prolong or escalate the silliness. The most startling action that one of my students reported occurred as the student was focused on discussing the informed consent form with the parent. The child had come in a Halloween costume, and when the student turned her attention back to the child, she found the little girl had stripped down to her underwear.

Safety and Health Concerns

Students need to be reminded about making the environment physically safe for preschoolers, such as no small toy parts that can be choking hazards and no sharp edges to furniture or toys. One often-overlooked area of safety concerns cleanliness. Preschoolers may be less likely than babies to mouth toys, but they are still quite likely to suck on their own fingers and then touch the stimulus materials and furniture in the research room. They rarely cover their mouths when they cough or sneeze or have tissues available for wiping their noses. One can laminate or use plastic protective covers over stimuli so that they can be wiped clean between participant sessions. (Incidentally, this also protects the material from being damaged.) Researchers should ask children if they want to use the toilet before the session begins and be prepared for children to decline at first but ask to go after the session has begun. Although it may be tempting to ask the child to wait if the session is nearly over, I do not recommend that. Even if the child can physically wait without an accident, the mental distraction of trying to wait may be enough to disrupt task performance.

Many children find it difficult to exercise their right to withdraw from an experiment both because they do not understand (despite direct instruction) that they have that right and because they are taught to be obedient to those in apparent authority. Moreover, researchers have to exercise a delicate balance between implanting the suggestion that a child might find the procedure boring or discomforting when the child would not otherwise think so and overcoming the child's reluctance to stop when the child truly wants to. Instructors should coach students in looking for nonverbal cues that children want to stop and program explicit offers to stop during the procedure (e.g., "I have another game to play, if you want to continue.").

Practice, Practice, Practice

There is no substitute for experience, so the final piece of advice I can offer is to provide students with as much exposure to preschoolers as they can schedule before running participants. If students are not used to talking with preschoolers, they will not necessarily know how to converse or how to elicit responses without making the child feel interrogated. Students might volunteer for a few hours at a preschool or daycare facility, where their interactions will be supervised and where they can observe how the adults interact with children. They can be a play

companion for a child in a cooperating family when one parent is in the home but welcomes having the child kept busy. Instructors might show videotapes of actual or simulated research sessions to give students models of how to engage children of that age. Even the act of reading instructions needs to be practiced so that the pace of reading is slow enough for children to process and so the researcher can maintain more eye contact than they would with older participants. Tell them to prepare for the worst, hope for the best, and when all else fails, call for parental backup.