

Purpose

It is important to choose a data collection method that fits the cognitive and emotional development of children at different ages

Key Points

- When evaluating with very young children, use concrete and interactive methods
- When evaluating with early to middle elementary aged children, surveys can be administered in small groups
- Written surveys should not be used before the age of 11

Can we survey young children?

Many programs want to survey children who participate in their school-based or after-school programs. While surveying children is possible, it should be done with caution. Sometimes other methods are better when working with youth.

When can we start using written surveys?

The thought process for answering survey questions is actually very complex. (See tip sheet on “Answering Survey Questions”.) Even when we try to make surveys simple, they are often beyond the ability of most young children to answer accurately and in a meaningful way. Therefore, we need to use different methods at different ages. The table on the next page summarizes recommendations for doing evaluations with young children.

Recommended Reading

Borgers, N., Hox, J., & Sikkel, D. (2000). Children as respondents in survey research: Cognitive development and response quality. *Bulletin de Methodologie Sociologique*, 66, 60–75.



Age	Challenges	Recommended Method	Tips for Using Method
Less than 4 years	Language and thought processes limited	No direct evaluation with children	Use caregivers and teachers as informants
4 - 8 years	Developing basic skills Very literal Very suggestible and reluctant to express own thoughts or feelings Short attention span Can't process questions that are not directly about themselves	Interviews Small focus groups Structured surveys where questions and answers are given aloud (children are not given anything written)	Keep questions very simple and direct Incorporate play into the tasks Use child's own words Be vigilant about not influencing answers through words, body language, tone, etc.
8 - 11 years	Very literal Difficulty processing negative statements (e.g., "not", "never", etc.) Difficulty processing questions that are not directly about themselves	Interviews Small focus groups Surveys that are administered in small groups	Use visual stimuli when asking questions Use response cards (e.g., index cards children choose from to show their answers) Avoid negatively phrased questions Keep questions very clear
11-15 years	Answers may be influenced by the context in which the questions are asked Lack of motivation Concerns about confidentiality	Written surveys Computer-assisted surveys	Continue to use graphical and visual questions (e.g., frowning/smiling faces) Watch out for ambiguous questions Continue to watch out for literal interpretations
16 years and older	May have their own group norms Answers may be influenced by the context in which the questions are asked	Written surveys Computer-assisted surveys	May be treated like adults for surveying, but be extra sensitive to social context