

REFLECTIVE ARTICLE

GIVING VOICE TO CHILDREN: CONSIDERATIONS ON QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS IN PEDIATRICS

DANDO VOZ ÀS CRIANÇAS: CONSIDERAÇÕES SOBRE A ENTREVISTA QUALITATIVA EM PEDIATRIA

DAR VOZ A LOS NIÑOS: OBSERVACIONES SOBRE LA ENTREVISTA CUALITATIVA EN PEDIATRÍA

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ABSTRACT

When considering the child as a research subject and attempting to understand their perspective on specific experiences, one must take into account the need to follow meticulous steps to ensure children's autonomy, as well as respect their stage of development and their ability to comprehend. In this light, the present study aims to make considerations on methodological issues that arise when conducting qualitative interviews with children, based on theoretical research available in current literature. This study employed a bibliographic search for the most relevant questions used when conducting a qualitative interview with children. Three main aspects are discussed: cognitive development, strategies used to approach the children, and ethical criteria for the inclusion and participation of children, with emphasis on consent and confidentiality.

Keywords: Qualitative Research; Child; Methodology; Child Health.

RESUMO

Ao considerar a criança como um sujeito de pesquisa e almejar compreender a sua perspectiva em relação a determinada experiência, deve-se levar em conta a necessidade de seguir criteriosos passos para garantir sua autonomia, bem como respeitar seu estágio de desenvolvimento e sua capacidade de compreensão. Este ensaio tem como objetivo tecer considerações acerca das questões metodológicas para a realização de entrevistas qualitativas com crianças, a partir de levantamento teórico, disponível na literatura atual. Trata-se de um resgate bibliográfico das questões mais relevantes ao se realizar uma entrevista qualitativa com crianças. Três aspectos principais são discutidos: desenvolvimento cognitivo da criança, estratégias de aproximação e critérios éticos para participação e inclusão de crianças, com ênfase no consentimento e confidencialidade.

Palavras-chave: Pesquisa Qualitativa; Criança; Metodologia; Saúde da Criança.

RESUMEN

Al considerar al niño como sujeto de investigación y tratar de entender su punto de vista sobre una determinada experiencia, hay que tener en cuenta la necesidad de ser prudentes para garantizar su autonomía y respetar su etapa de desarrollo y su capacidad de comprensión. Este ensayo tiene como objetivo hacer consideraciones sobre las cuestiones metodológicas para la realización de entrevistas cualitativas con niños, a partir del relevamiento teórico disponible en la literatura actual. Se trata del rescate bibliográfico de los temas más importantes al realizar una entrevista cualitativa con niños. Se discuten tres aspectos principales: el desarrollo cognitivo, estrategias para enfocar el tema y criterios éticos para la inclusión y participación de niños, con énfasis en el consentimiento y la confidencialidad.

Palabras clave: Investigación Qualitativa; Niño; Metodología; Salud del Niño.

INTRODUCTION

Researchers have begun to recognize the importance of considering the child as a participant in their investigations, be it in a clinical environment or not. In fact, researching a child's universe has been the object of study in a wide range of fields of knowledge, including Education, Psychology, and Health.^{1,2}

Children are the best sources of information about their own experiences and opinions, but the manner in which they communicate and express their feeling is potentially influenced by physical, social, economic, and political contexts.³ Considering the unique character of a child's experience, qualitative research can be employed as an aid in an attempt to ensure all of the richness and complexity of the experience. By applying a qualitative approach, it is possible to investigate the events that occurred through a child's eyes and the meaning that they attribute to such lived experiences.³

Children are good communicators; they will tell their stories to those who are willing to listen. Often, the means through which they express their thoughts and feeling can occur either verbally or non-verbally, together with other modes of expression, such as: gestures, crying, speech, drawings, music, and writing. It is not enough for these thoughts and feelings to be expressed by the child; they must also be noted down and valued by those who take care of them, and, in the investigative environment, by the researcher who approaches this child.^{1,4} Therefore, additional knowledge and skill are required when carrying out research in the form of an interview, especially when the interviewed subject is a child.

The professional must establish an effective relationship aimed at helping the child and, for this, must have knowledge regarding the children's perspectives of their view of their own world. Children may be able to communicate their feelings, ideas, and values, but often have difficulty expressing themselves, requiring the researcher to delve into their world, using, during data collection, resources that are creative and familiar to a child's universe.⁵

There are three main types of research that can involve children or questions intended to protect the child⁶:

- asking the children to tell about their feelings, opinions, and experiences. This can be done either through face-to-face interviews with the children or through questionnaires;
- observing the behavior of the children, using experiences or monitored activities, or observing children in an uncontrolled environment to see how they react in specific situations;
- analyzing the information contained in the children's files (for example, social work cases or even school records);

In a systematic survey of the Brazilian publications in the field of Nursing regarding the use of interviews as a data collection technique in research with children, what was found was that analyzed studies prove that the interview, either as the

sole technique or associated with other data collection techniques, is an appropriate technique to be used when conducting studies with children.⁷

However, to conduct a study with children, some basic measures must not be forgotten. For example, it is important to evaluate the child's level of development in order to employ the proper interview; therefore, appropriate forms of interview techniques must be applied according to the subject's age. In addition, as this is a vulnerable population, research involving children is a field that must comply with methodological and ethical questions.

In this light, the present study aims to make considerations on the fundamental aspects of methodological issues that arise when conducting qualitative interviews that use interviews with children as a data collection strategy. This study also takes into account the cognitive development of the children and the strategies employed to approach these children before and after data collection, as well as presents a bibliographic search of the ethical principles that must govern the study at all stages.

CHILDREN'S COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT

To conduct an interview with children, one must recognize that they are the best sources of information about themselves. For this, it is necessary to understand what cognitive development stage the children are currently in and with this information formulate appropriate questions for each child.

Jean Piaget was the first to consider that the knowledge of a child's world changes with age, and thus proposed three stages of thought: intuitive, concrete operational, and formal operational.⁸

Each stage is built upon the foundations of the previous stage and is derived from it in a continuous and ordered process.⁹ The evolution of intellectual development is divided into four stages:

- a. **sensorimotor** – with children of up to two years of age;
- b. **preoperational** – with children from two to seven years of age;
- c. **concrete operational** – with children from seven to eleven years of age;
- d. **formal operational** – with children from 11 to 18 years of age.

According to the Cognitive Development Theory⁸ in the preoperational stage, thought is more concrete and egocentric, in which the meaning of words are broader and restricted to language. At this age, children answer questions but in a simpler and more direct manner. In the concrete operational stage, they are able to provide more information about their experiences than can those in the previous stage (preoperational). These children find it difficult to define abstract concepts, but it is expected that they will be able to understand and think in a more general manner. By contrast, adolescents who are in the

formal operational stage are able to define abstract concepts, think about logical and philosophical issues, and read a logical conclusion based on their own observations.

The appropriate age for a child to participate in a research interview varies according to the main aim of the research itself. However, there is a general consensus that those at four years of age are already capable of speaking about their own life experiences, since they already possess cognitive, mental, and conceptual skills, and are even able to associate specific events with other memories.

It is important not to confuse one's chronological age with the stages of normal development. A child's development age may not coincide with that which is expected for the child's chronological age. It therefore becomes necessary to integrate the knowledge of the child's development with the knowledge of the child's sense of time, temper, and language skills.

THE CHILD, CHILD'S PLAY, AND ART: STRATEGIES TO ENCOURAGE COMMUNICATION AND CLOSER CONTACT WITH THE INTERVIEWER

Taking greater care when conducting interviews with children is necessary to make the child feel comfortable. Presenting oneself to the child, communicating with the child in an appropriate language, and giving value to the child's contributions can be a means through which to delve into the child's universe.

Beginning with daily, leisure/recreational, and playful interactions, as well as conversations about their daily activities, school, and hospital, if the study unfolds within this environment, can serve to welcome the children, who are the main subjects of the study.

The use of a recorder, for example, can be used for play or as a game, testing the best position for the equipment and asking for the child to say something to test the noise levels. This strategy also facilitates the interaction between the interviewer and the child.¹⁰

Resources, such as the use of drawings, drama therapy toys, puppets, photographs, and creativity and sensitivity role plays, whether associated with the interview or not, can work as facilitators, both directly and indirectly, in the data collection process. These resources serve to broaden interactions with children and allow the children to better express their feelings, in turn facilitating both communication and interaction between the participant and the interviewer. Moreover, these provide a means through which to increase the trust and motivation of the participants.^{11,12}

Drawings are one of the most commonly used strategies, due mostly to fact that all children draw what they know (their "idea" of the object) and not what they see. Children also

have the habit of drawing what is important to them and what they remember, such as figures that represent people, animals, houses, or trees. It is therefore believed that the drawings are the most appropriate resource for younger children, since they are unable to fully articulate their beliefs and emotions using spoken or written speech.¹³

Drawings are a useful tool to relax the children and to win over their interest and trust. The dramatization of the situation can aid in delving deeper into their experience, which may be camouflaged by the child's limited speech, as well as serve to construct the child's verbal narrative, a trigger to the interview, from which, after feeling more comfortable, the child will feel more confident to speak about his/her feelings.³

Children's books treating themes that bring the child closer to their real life situation can also be strategies geared toward bringing the child closer to the study's main theme, in turn facilitating the narrative and breaking the ice. As mentioned above, it is important to find ways through which to come closer to the children's point of view and show respect for their experiences.³

To obtain good results with the interview, it is necessary to go beyond the technical limits, which depends, *a priori*, on the qualities and skills of the interviewer, as well as on the isolated or associated use of child's play activities, especially in the case of children under seven years of age.⁷ There are no magic formulas to be followed, but rather care to be adopted for each age group. This, together with the attentive conduct of the interviewer, will lead to a good interview and to the expected results from a study with children.

There are certain needs that formulate the balance between recognizing the situation and the child's feelings, and recognizing the child needs to defend and protect him/herself. Using child's play allows one to understand and comprehend the child, and allows children to feel comfortable with an activity that is familiar to them.

Clearly, different methods are needed for different age groups. Adolescents are able to verbalize their experiences, views, and perspectives. Children of above seven years of age possess skills for verbal communication, and can understand and express their feelings orally, according to their own development stage, thus facilitating interaction.¹⁴

IMPORTANT ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Children are social actors and, as such, are also producers of data for studies/research. However, children also present characteristics in their development that make them vulnerable in biopsychosocial aspects. Thus, their participation in studies should be observed cautiously by researchers.^{2,4}

When involving children as subjects of an investigation, the aim of the research must include some additional care in such a way as to protect the children and ensure the maintenance of their autonomy, as well as to respect all other principles of bioethics, including: justice, beneficence, and maleficence. This care is related to the relevance of the study, the risk of children's participation, the publication of the results, and the aspect referent to consent and confidentiality.² These last two concepts are of utmost importance when speaking of qualitative interviews with children. When considering the premise that children are subjects with rights and, therefore, have the right to a voice, it is thus essential for the researcher to guarantee conditions for their participation in the decision to collaborate or not in the study.⁴ Considering the need to obtain an Term of Free and Clear Consent in studies involving children and adolescents, what is sought is the respect for the principle of autonomy. To achieve this condition of self-determination and self-management, two assumptions are necessary: a) a sufficient intellectual capacity to comprehend and analyze, in a logical manner, a specific situation and have the skill to reflect on and choose from among the various available options, in order to intentionally select one of the presented options; b) the ability to be able to voluntarily choose, without influence or control on the part of third parties, so that such a decision can be considered an authentic result of the child's own self-determination.¹⁵

In general, it is assumed that children are unable to autonomously decide on their participation in a study, presupposing that they lack the essential components of competence, that is, rationale, comprehension, and consequently, voluntariness. For this reason, one normally requests the parents' or guardians' consent, believing that these people possess the necessary conditions to analyze what is best for the child who is under their responsibility.

Nevertheless, upon considering that children are people and, accordingly, human beings with rights, it is understood that they should be consulted before being included in a study. It is also crucial that children be in agreement and have free will to participate in an interview for scientific purposes. In this sense, the child's consent to participate in scientific research is understood as the expression of his/her will and individuality, in turn configuring a condition of respect that must be guaranteed, in addition to the free and clear consent from their parents or guardians.⁴

On the other hand, there are certain situations in which the family does not play the role of the child's protector, as is the case with children and adolescents in at-risk situations and exposed to social vulnerability, as with street children and victims of abuse. Obtaining consent from both parents implies, generally, the existence of an intact family, with a cohesive and

healthy relationship, who is interested in the benefits of the child's participation in the study.¹⁵ In a situation such as this, the debate and reflection on the benefits of the child's participation in the study is essential in order to weigh the relevance of the theme and the procedures that must be adopted to ensure autonomy and the ethical standards of the study.

Regarding the respect for confidentiality, qualitative researchers commonly come into contact with critical data and information, and at times even demand intervention and denunciation. In the case of research with children, it is well-known that the International Convention on the Rights of the Child, though it does not mention nor sets forth standards for the study itself, does in fact define the integral protection of the child and adolescent as a basic premise of the professional/researcher. It is therefore the duty of all researchers to ensure the child's and adolescent's dignity, in turn protecting them from any inhumane, violent, terrifying, demeaning, or embarrassing treatment.^{2,4,15}

A breach of confidentiality in research is ethically permissible in three circumstances: a) when there is a high probability of serious injury – physical or psychological – to a specific or identifiable person (based on the principle of non-maleficence); b) when a true benefit results from this breach of confidentiality (according to the principle of beneficence); c) when it is the last case scenario, after having used persuasion or other approaches (according to the principle of autonomy). Based on these principles, the researcher must carefully analyze if the situation in question fits one of these three circumstances in which the breach of confidentiality regarding the obtained data would be permissible.^{2,15}

Regardless of the aims or theme of the interview to be conducted with the child, researchers may well find themselves faced with a suspicion or identification of one of the highlighted situations. It is the responsibility of the researcher or professional to pay attention to this possibility and assume an ethical commitment, always prepared to intervene when faced with the possible negative consequences of this revelation.²

During the data collection process, upon identifying an at-risk situation, such as that described above, the researcher must try to remain calm and request only the information that the child or adolescent has the condition to provide and that are absolutely necessary and not the fruit of one's own curiosity. The researcher must also be aware of one's own feelings and limitations, and, when in doubt, refer the case to another professional who is more specialized in the area or even seek supervision. The researcher must also be prepared to take important intervening measures concerning the lives of the children and adolescents, such as to denounce a violation to the Tutelary Council, to call the police, and/or to approach the families to clarify the case.^{2,15}

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This brief essay does not have the pretention to definitively resolve this issue, but does seek to stimulate debate and reflection on the relevant questions for the inclusion of children and adolescents in qualitative research. The interview is a very useful strategy and is recommended when collecting qualitative data, but conducting an interview requires some care when the subjects are children so that they can participate safely and so that the collected data will be reliable and able to reflect their experiences in depth.

Respecting the children as people begins in the planning of the study and the interview to be conducted, and involves the choice of the proper approach strategies for the age in question and the subjects' development characteristics, as well as the procedures to be adopted to ensure the ethical standards of the study.

In this sense, the present study seeks to give a voice to children in a safe manner, ensuring not only satisfactory data for the study, but also the protection and rights of the children both during and after the interview.

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