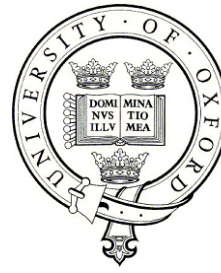


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**Research with Children Living in Situations of Armed Conflict:
Concepts, Ethics & Methods**

Jason Hart and Bex Tyrer

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Jason Hart and Bex Tyrer
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INTRODUCTION

The impact of modern armed conflict on the world's children has been devastating. According to the United Nations, during the last decade 2 million children have been killed, more than 1 million have been orphaned, and over 6 million have been seriously injured or permanently disabled. Approximately 800 children are killed or seriously injured by landmines and unexploded ordinance (UXOs) every month. The United Nations High Commissioner for the Refugees (UNHCR) currently offers support to 7.7 million refugee children, whilst over 1.5 million Palestinian refugee children are registered with United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). In addition, around 25 million people are believed to be internally displaced, of whom 40–50 per cent are likely to be under the age of 18 years.

In many cases the true figure is likely to be much higher. For example, scholars have argued that as many as half of all displaced persons in Africa are self-settled and thus never show up in official registers.¹

Given the considerable obstacles to the collection of data in conflict settings, such figures should be taken as rough guides. Nevertheless, they do point to the massive impact of conflict on children and adolescents. Long after the end of the Cold War, the scale of casualty, displacement, and other consequences of conflict seems to be growing, principally due to changes in the nature of war itself. These changes have resulted in a dramatic increase in the percentages of civilians killed in warfare. In the 1890s, civilian fatalities constituted 5 per cent of total deaths. A century later they had reached an estimated 90 per cent. Over this period all-out warfare between nations has gradually given way to long-term, low-intensity conflict involving rival groups within national boundaries. The site of battle has accordingly moved from relatively uninhabited border areas to the very heart of civilian life in villages, towns, and cities. In addition, the young are vulnerable to death and injury as the result of so-called “collateral damage” caused by “smart” bombs and missiles intended to hit specific sites, often within heavily populated areas.

Children are affected not only as community members, alongside adults, but may also be the deliberate targets of military forces. This has been notably the case in, for example, Sierra Leone and Rwanda. Furthermore, the diversion of national resources from the provision of basic services to the purchase of arms, and the destruction of health facilities by warring parties, leaves children especially vulnerable. According to estimates from UNICEF and Save the Children,² under-18-year-olds are 24 times more likely to die during periods of conflict from illnesses and injuries that in peacetime would be treated routinely.

To date, the majority of research on children and war has come from the fields of medicine, psychiatry and psychology. This has included a heavy emphasis on “trauma” and pathology, with a more general body of literature exploring the individual's physical, emotional and psychological nature of suffering.³ Although these issues are obviously very significant, the wider societal dimensions of conflict – namely how war pervades institutions,

¹ Sommers (2001:x)

² See <http://www.unicef.org/graca/women.htm> and

http://www.savethechildren.org/news/releases/statement_oct14.asp both retrieved 18.12.05

³ See for example, Ayalon (1983); Djeddah and Shah (1996); Elbedour *et al.* (1993); Gupta (2000); Hamilton and Man (1998); Hjern *et al.* (1991); Macksoud (1992); Magwaza *et al.* (1993); McHan (1985); Miller (1996); Sack *et al.* (1986); Ziv and Israeli (1973)

political structures, culture, economy and communication systems – have been overlooked. As Jo Boyden and Jo de Berry point out, by focusing on individual reactions to highly stressful incidents we have often failed to take meaningful account of the vital communal dimensions of conflict:

[War] does not just cause psychosocial and emotional harm, but also attacks the most fundamental conditions of sociality, endangering social allegiances and confidence, and drastically reducing social interaction and trust.⁴

Furthermore, relatively little research has sought to explore the lives of children from their own perspective. Emphasis on the role of researcher as expert observer, coupled with assumptions that in conflict children are helpless victims, have discouraged more concerted engagement with the young as commentators and informants.

Alternatively, from countries such as Cambodia, Sierra Leone and Uganda have emerged images of child fighters engaged in acts of extreme brutality, apparently unfettered by any social constraints or morality. The fear that such images generate may also account for the reluctance of some to undertake direct research with young people in war zones.

Research about children's lives conducted in the volatile setting of armed conflict places particular demands upon researchers. The suggestion that researchers should, whenever possible and appropriate, involve children as meaningful participants in that research may seem unreasonable or inappropriate. However, the production of this paper has been motivated by the conviction that participatory research is especially valuable *because of* the emergency context. Firstly, such an approach is likely to yield richer and more detailed data than a conventional, adult-led approach. These data can be invaluable to the design of interventions. Secondly, engagement in well-planned research activities can offer direct benefits for young participants by enhancing their skills and awareness. In settings of conflict where the young may be required to play an expanded role in their own protection and in the care of others, their personal development is especially important. Our aim here is to equip researchers to most safely and profitably pursue participatory research with children and, to that end, we explore the specific conceptual, ethical and methodological issues concerned.

⁴ Boyden, J. and J. de Berry (2004: xiv)

1. THINKING ABOUT CHILDREN IN ARMED CONFLICT

1.1. “Children” and “Childhood” Across Cultures

Every society has concepts and practices which identify “children” as a section of the population distinct from “adults”. However, the ways in which different societies and cultures imagine such distinction varies greatly. In any case, the line between “childhood” and “adulthood” is usually vague, with responsibilities and entitlements acquired at various stages and in accordance with factors that extend beyond simple chronological age, such as gender, economic status, birth order, etc..

Variation in notions of “childhood” has immense bearing upon actual children’s lives. There may be activities, such as domestic caregiving, agricultural labour or management of household budget, that are considered a normal element of children’s lives in some settings, while in others these same activities are deemed totally inappropriate. Similarly, while some individuals and cultures may consider children’s engagement in research activities as appropriate and beneficial, for the most part, the young are not considered to have yet acquired the competencies necessary to serve as useful sources and producers of knowledge.

According to the conventional “Western” view, the first 17 years of human life are assumed to be a stage during which the young, universally, are socialised towards their later engagement in society as mature adults. Some have argued that such a view positions children as “human becomings”⁵ who are important and interesting because of what they *will become* rather than what they *already are*. According to this view, children are partial adults whose ideas – for the purposes of research – are likely to be of less worth than those that could be obtained from adults who have “the full picture”. Therefore, even when the focus of research is children’s lives, the young are often not meaningfully involved as commentators.

1.1.1. “Childhood” as a Social Construction

The understanding of childhood conventionally promoted by child rights and humanitarian organisations grew from a European and North American tradition of thought and was closely related to particular ideas about family, home, privacy and the primacy of the individual.⁶ Over the last 20 years or so, concerns have grown that such a conception may be of little relevance to the lives of children in many parts of the world, particularly those from less privileged or less Westernised backgrounds. Instead, critics argue that there is a vital need to consider the ways in which childhood is conceptualised and experienced within different societies and cultures. As James and Prout have explained:

Childhood is understood as a social construction. As such it provides an interpretive frame for contextualising the early years of human life. Childhood, as distinct from biological immaturity, is neither a natural nor universal feature of human groups but appears as a specific structural and cultural component of many societies.⁷

This “constructionist” view has had particular implications for research – encouraging researchers to relate their study of children’s lives to local ideas about the roles, capacities, entitlements and obligations of the young. Furthermore, enquiry into local ideas increasingly proceeds on the assumption that, even within a single location, “childhood” itself will not be

⁵ Qvortrup (1991)

⁶ Stephens (1995)

⁷ James and Prout (1997:8)

understood in only one way. Gender, race/ethnicity, class/caste, (dis)ability, amongst other factors, are likely to influence the ways in which members of any society, including the young themselves, imagine and experience “childhood”. So, for example, the ideas held about the “childhood” of a girl from an elite family are likely to differ from the “childhood” imagined for and lived by a boy from an urban slum. Ignoring such difference and assuming that the ideas and experience of “childhood” relevant to certain children constitutes the norm runs the risk of pathologising other children whose lives are at variance.

1.1.2. The Rationale for Contextualised, Children-Centred Research

The constructionist approach – described by James and Prout in the quote above – suggests that each child’s experience should be explored for itself and in relation to local values, rather than in terms of universal notions of ideal childhood as expressed in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Such an approach may be subject to criticism for seeming to suggest that even situations of extreme adversity in which certain children live may be permissible. It is important here to bear two points in mind. Firstly, from the perspective of research (rather than advocacy) it is essential to consider children’s lives as they are rather than how the researcher might wish them to be. This is often far from easy, as noted by Heather Montgomery in the introduction to her study of child sex workers in Thailand:

Child prostitutes are among the most powerless and least articulate in any society and there is an enormous temptation to speak for them and to interpret what they say, so that it fits in with outsiders’ preconceptions. Alternatively, there is a strong tendency not to listen to them at all...However, even these children have their own views and their own interpretations of their lives and these should not be ignored. An anthropologist or an activist cannot speak for them or be their interpreter; they have their own voices and their own analyses which are equally valid...The children in the community within which I worked...painted an infinitely more complicated picture of their world which challenged any simplistic dichotomies of good and evil, abused and abusers. It proved disturbing and disconcerting that their analyses of their lives were far more nuanced and far more sophisticated than mine.⁸

Secondly, if research is to serve the purpose of designing more effective interventions, that research must not only describe the situation in terms of the researcher’s views, but must also take significant account of the experiences, views and aspirations of children and their communities. This is the difference between an *evidence-based* or *evidence-informed, participatory* approach and a *normative* approach to the design of interventions.⁹

1.2. Children and Agency

The conventional view of childhood socialisation suggests that adults are responsible for preparing and leading the child towards adult competence and maturity. According to this view children play little or no role in their own development and that of their peers. Furthermore, there has been a tendency to overlook or downplay the contribution that children commonly make to family and society. Such a view of the socialisation process has been largely discredited by social scientists in recent years. As Prout and James note:

⁸ Montgomery (2001:4)

⁹ See Crewe and Young (2002)

Children are and must be seen as active in the construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live. Children are not just the passive subjects of social structures and processes.¹⁰

In recent years, the assumption that the exercise of agency – the ability to shape one’s own life and to influence the lives of others – is determined by your position within society has been challenged from numerous directions. There is a growing appreciation that even from a position of relative disempowerment or marginality, it is still possible to exercise influence and even some measure of control over one’s life and environment. This view has been greatly strengthened by the ideas associated with Post-Modernism and Feminism and the work of researchers who have demonstrated the ways in which women and other relatively disempowered groups exercise agency.

1.2.1. Challenges and Opportunities of Conflict

While children, on the whole, occupy a status within society that renders them less powerful than adults, they are still able to contribute to their own development and influence others. Clearly, the extent to which they can do this will depend not only on their personal character and competencies but on the opportunities and constraints that exist in their environment. Situations of armed conflict may create additional constraints upon children’s exercise of agency – they may, for example, be forced into various activities, including military combat. Or, out of fear for their wellbeing, parents may severely limit children’s engagement with society beyond the home. However, the upheaval that commonly accompanies conflict often creates additional possibilities – even obligations – for children to contribute their ideas, energies and skills in ways that enhance personal development and contribute significantly to the wider society.¹¹

Secondly, there has been a growing appreciation of the fact that the development of mental, physical and social capacities does not follow a universal sequence in accordance with biological factors. Rather, the development of such capacities emerges due to interplay of the biological and the social/cultural. Physiological and neurological maturation provide a structure to individual child development that is then informed by everyday practices within specific contexts. In conflict-affected settings, children are commonly obliged to take on additional responsibilities as caregivers, breadwinners and as providers of emotional support, even to adults. They may engage, for example, in healthcare provision leading to detailed knowledge of anatomy, illness, and medical procedures that in most settings would be considered as specialised “adult” knowledge. This is evidenced in the following quotation from “Ali” who grew up in war-torn Afghanistan:

Our school time was 8-12 in the morning, and in the afternoon we were free, so I went to the medical clinic of the French doctors. There I began to learn first aid such as injection, dressing of a wound, and so on, and I became a first aid helper with the Mojahedin...That time I did support and worked as medical helper behind the strongholds. I gradually learned some advanced medical skills. When I was 12 and 13, I attended in surgical operation room and I did work as a surgical assistant. When my knowledge developed and after a few months MSF held some medical courses to teach medicine helping, surgery, and general medicine, and I took part. So now I am familiar with many medical and surgical skills. For instance, I know orthopedics and I can bone-set whenever needed.¹²

¹⁰ Prout and James (1997:8)

¹¹ See for example Hart (2002b)

¹² Taken from Brett and Specht (2004)

1.3. Children as Victims

The view of children as having the capacity to play an important role in their own development and in affecting their environment (that we refer to here as “agency”) has become increasingly popular within certain social sciences. However, it is not often reflected in the ideas about children living in situations of armed conflict. Here, discussion has tended to focus on the child as “victim” – the passive recipient of the violence of adults. Notions of “trauma” and “damage” dominate accounts of children in conflict-affected settings and have tended to inform the interventions offered in response.

There are several possible reasons for this. First of all, it is clearly the case that, due to factors such as their smaller stature and relative lack of understanding of events, younger children in particular are liable to suffer the effects of violent conflict to an extent greater than adolescents and adult civilians. Thus their protection needs are likely to be especially great.

In addition, the perception of children as victims accords with dominant notions about childhood within European and North American (and potentially other) cultures. According to such ideas, children’s lives should be conducted solely within a safe, carefree world set apart from the harsh realities of adult existence. All situations that hinder such separation are seen as adverse, even oppressive, by definition. Clearly, armed conflict is amongst the most extreme of situations and, as such, children caught up in conflict are inevitably viewed as victims: prevented from enjoying the kind of childhood imagined for them.

Thirdly, popular ideas about children and armed conflict have been reinforced by the images employed by humanitarian agencies. To attract attention and gain support, organisations have commonly played upon, and thereby reinforced, assumptions about children’s victimhood and passivity in the face of violence.

1.4. Finding a Path Between “Agency” and “Victimhood”

Assumptions of this kind have led to the perception that children’s involvement in political-military action are solely the result of compulsion, coercion, and brainwashing. Few authors have shown willingness to consider the possibility that, in some situations, young people may engage with military groups as a reasoned strategy – as the most desirable option within the range of choices available. They may also enrol out of social and political concern. This is suggested in the following quote from an adolescent male in Nicaragua:

I got organised in school...what was most important was the idea that our ancestors had not achieved for us the right to develop and have fun as young people, that the time we were living in was for struggling and for winning a new homeland for the new generation. And this is what we would do, on the basis of sacrifice and constant struggle and, if necessary, at the cost of blood.¹³

It might be argued that, in some cases, engagement in such action demonstrates the competence and resourcefulness of the young. Faced by threats to their survival and development – from which adults are simply unable to protect them – children may resort to a range of strategies, including engagement in political-military action. Without denying the existence of trauma and without refuting the idea that the young may be victimised, we

¹³ Telechea (1982)

should learn more about the strategies children employ to deal with their adverse circumstances and maintain material, psychological, emotional and physical wellbeing. Such knowledge could contribute greatly to the enhancement of interventions, by ensuring that they are built upon and augment children's competencies and contributions, *as well as* address the damage that adults perceive has been done to them.

While it is important to recognise the agency of children and their role in society, their ability to achieve change should, however, not be exaggerated. Even if children have the strength to cope with extremely adverse circumstances they may still be constrained by what is usually a weaker physical stature than that of a biologically mature adult, and may be more vulnerable to disease as well as the effects of physical violence. Further factors that may obstruct a child's capacity to act and exert influence include social hierarchies, political structures, discrimination, local values, and the exercise of brute physical power. A report on recent research conducted with children in Kabul cautioned that raising children's belief in their potential to change their situation beyond what was viable could lead to feelings of frustration and helplessness.¹⁴

Furthermore, it is important to avoid the suggestion that because *some* children show resilience and resourcefulness in the face of extreme adversity, then *all* children can or should do so. This runs the risk of *both* stigmatising children who are simply overwhelmed by adverse circumstances *and* relieving adults of some measure of their responsibility for children's safety and wellbeing.

1.5. Child Protection

1.5.1. Vulnerability

In considering protection it is important to avoid the view of children as inherently vulnerable. There are three main reasons for this. Firstly, such thinking serves to distract us from the ways in which children may manifest strength and the capacities for coping with adversity. Secondly, the assumption of *inherent* vulnerability can blind us to the ways in which vulnerability may actually be *created*, not least through the practices of organisations that see children as victims and, as a result, fail to engage with them as participants in their own protection. Girls, in particular, are commonly seen as especially vulnerable to abuse in situations of conflict and displacement. Such a view runs the risk of obscuring the fact that they are made vulnerable not by inherent qualities but through the attitudes and behavior of others. The focus for intervention should thus be both the direct protection of girls and efforts to change the attitudes and behavior that give rise to abuse. Thirdly, the association of "children" – as an entire section of the population – with vulnerability may cause us to overlook the fact that no group of children are homogenous in terms of the risks that they face. Age, gender, class, education, language, particular setting, all position children differently with respect to the risks (and opportunities) created by conflict. Discrimination and marginalisation are, in themselves, sources of risk that will obviously affect certain children more than others.

1.5.2. Protection Issues in Conflict

The threats to children's wellbeing in the context of armed conflict are many and diverse. In addition to the risk of injury and death, and the gross violations associated with fighting forces, there are numerous, less obvious ways in which conflict and its associated phenomena

¹⁴ de Berry *et al.* (2003:59)

impact upon the lives of the young. Part of this results from the impact of conflict on social structures, as well as on infrastructure and services. In unstable settings, there are a wide range of adverse influences on health and health services which occur. These have been well described¹⁵ but they provide little insight into how children, in particular are affected. Our understanding of the complex ways in which conflict impacts upon children is still partial and sketchy. While the emergence of diverse risks in conflict settings has been noted, the actual processes by which these are manifested in children's everyday lives are generally not well understood; nor do we have an in-depth or sufficient understanding of how children respond.

The connection between armed conflict and the spread of infectious disease has been increasingly well elaborated; but there is clearly much scope for more detailed analyses. Writers such as Smallman-Raynor have fleshed out the interface between infectious diseases and conflict.¹⁶ Clifford and Zwi (in preparation) have sought to identify key issues relevant to those working on infectious diseases, but there remains a dearth of data and analysis on how children in particular are affected. It is apparent, however, that conflict may have an impact on the agent, host and environment. The agent is the bacterium or parasite that causes diseases, the host – an animal or person that carries the disease, and the environment which may be different when people are displaced, thus forcing exposure to new ideas and approaches.

Increased poverty, higher incidence of disease and exposure to abuse through practices such as trafficking and forced recruitment are obvious potential consequences of conflict, and yet these are not inevitable. This suggests the need for field-based study to explore not only the risks themselves but the means by which such risks are understood and averted or modified. Research could play an invaluable role in helping us to understand and therefore strengthen the mechanisms of protection.

Armed conflict typically disrupts national and local governance, community practices and family life, all of which are implicated in the protection of children. On the national and local levels conflict commonly affects the provision of services such as health care, schooling, law enforcement and the processes of decision making about resource allocation.¹⁷ On a community level conflict often disrupts existing power relations. For example, community leaders and family heads may lose their status, and hierarchies of authority may be strongly disputed. This has been noted in a number of settings. For example, Turner describes the decline in standing experienced by older males living in a refugee camp in Tanzania where humanitarian officials supplanted their role as providers.¹⁸ Goodhand describes the undermining of traditional institutions of authority within Afghan village – such as the *shura* council of elders – by young, armed men made wealthy through engagement in the drugs trade.¹⁹ Engagement in conflict may itself provide a means by which gendered social practice is directly contested. This is suggested in the following quote from a young female cadre with the Maoists in Nepal:

¹⁵ See for example Zwi *et al.* (1999 & 2002)

¹⁶ Smallman-Raynor and Cliff (1991 & 2004)

¹⁷ For example, processes of local level decision-making and resource allocation in Nepal were effectively suspended by central government in 2002 within the context of the ongoing conflict with the Maoist People's Army.

¹⁸ Turner (2001)

¹⁹ Goodhand (1999)

Before the initiation of the People's War I did not know anything about politics or parties. But after the initiation [of the armed struggle] one of my relatives suggested I take part in the local cultural group and asked me to go to their rehearsal. I didn't tell my mother or father about this – only told my older brother who said, 'Go ahead, if you want to die... Can you carry a gun on your shoulder?' I replied, 'You didn't give me a chance to study and now I am eager to solve the problems of the people and the nation. I want to fight for liberation. If you won't allow me to go I will rebel.'²⁰

The contestation of practices and hierarchies that marginalise and disempower certain sections of the population, notably the young and female, may be one positive consequence of conflict. However, it may also leave children more exposed to risk for two main reasons. While existing hierarchies and practices may be oppressive they may be part of a status quo within which the young are, by convention, afforded protection. Challenging the status quo can also undermine the protective role of adults. Furthermore, such challenge may, in itself, give rise to resentment and lead directly to abuse.

In any event, we cannot assume that, in a situation of conflict and upheaval, the family, the school and the local community will be able to play their expected role in mitigating the threats to children's wellbeing. The family home may well be the scene of abuse and neglect by parents and other older relatives themselves sunk in the depths of despair due to the direct effects of conflict and its indirect consequences for their regular economic and social roles. For example, agency workers have commonly noted the high incidence of alcoholism in conflict-affected communities in northern and eastern Sri Lanka which will inevitably impact upon the ability of adults to offer appropriate care.²¹ Teachers, whose lives are subject to the same stresses as the rest of the community and who must maintain school provision in often extremely adverse circumstances, are also known to inflict various forms of violence on the young. This may include, for example, sexual violence directed by male teachers towards female students.²²

1.5.3. Children's Self-Protection

Keeping in mind the understanding that children are not simply passive recipients of adult action but can positively contribute to their own wellbeing and their environment, research into protection requires attention to the ways in which the young protect themselves, their peers and families. Indeed, the evidence already accumulated suggests that children may develop significant strategies – individually and in concert with others – for protection from the various risks associated with conflict. For example, Save the Children Norway-Nepal were initially concerned that the leadership skills and rights training they were sharing with children through their Child Clubs would make them more vulnerable to Maoist recruitment.²³ However, on the contrary, the young people began to “bargain” with the Maoists, arguing for the right to attain their final School Leaving Certificate (SLC) before joining their ranks. A similar example of enhanced “self-protection” can also be found in the actions of the *Vivehananda Children Development Club* in Sri Lanka. Through the club, the children were mobilised in order to get the bus route re-opened to their village, thereby ensuring a safer means for themselves to get to school and other villagers to reach the nearby town. This service had been stopped by order of the local army commander but through the

²⁰ Taken from Onesto (2001)

²¹ For accounts by individual children of their troubled home life in eastern Sri Lanka, see Chase (2000)

²² Leach, Machakanja and Mandonga (2000)

²³ Personal Communication, Kathmandu, 8 November 2005

children's production and delivery of a petition to the relevant authorities the ban was lifted.²⁴

1.6. Why Participation?

Since its emergence in the late 1970s, the notion of "participation" has gradually become widely acknowledged as a basic operational principle of development programming. To some it is a means to an end, a process whereby local people co-operate or collaborate in an externally introduced project. To others, it constitutes an end in itself, with the goal being to help people acquire the skills, knowledge and experience to take more responsibility over their own development and, ultimately, be enabled or empowered to transform their lives and their environment. Until the early 1990s, the concept of participation was predominantly related to activities that were (a) adult-focused, and (b) conducted in a developmental (rather than an emergency) context. However, more recently there has been a growing concern to ensure community participation in humanitarian initiatives as well.²⁵ Meanwhile, enthusiasm for *children's* participation in development programming has also begun to extend to humanitarian initiatives, as documented in a recent study for the Canadian Government.²⁶

1.6.1. *Children's Right to Participate*

The acknowledgement of the children's right to participate contained in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) has provided an important basis for the development of participatory approaches to humanitarian and development programming and to research that informs such work. The UNCRC, which was formulated in 1989, represents the third version of a global statement about the entitlements of the world's children. Earlier versions were formulated in 1924 and 1959 respectively. One important way in which the 1989 Convention differs from its predecessors lies in its assertion of the right of children to participate alongside their rights to survival, development and protection. As Marta Santos Pais has commented:

...the Convention has provided a new vision of children. While acknowledging that the child is a vulnerable human being that requires the protection and assistance from the family, the society and the State, the child is envisaged as a subject of rights, who is able to form and express opinions, to participate in decision-making processes and influence solutions, to intervene as a partner in the process of social change and in the building up of democracy.²⁷

The realisation of children's right to participate is seen both as an end in itself *and* as the means to realise other rights expressed within the UNCRC.

²⁴ Hart (2002b: 23)

²⁵ See for example Groupe URD (2003)

²⁶ Hart (2004a)

²⁷ Santos Pais (1999)

1.6.2. Other Motivations for Children's Participation

Over the years since the appearance of the UNCRC, the enthusiasm for children's participation has been further fuelled by a number of other considerations. Firstly, there is a view commonly expressed that children's participation helps to ensure the greater relevance and efficacy of projects and policies.²⁸ Since the outlook, concerns and aspirations of children are likely to differ from those of adults, even of primary caregivers, it is important to engage directly with them, and not rely solely on the comments of others.

Related to this view is the belief that a participatory approach enables children's energies and creativity to be harnessed for the good of themselves and their communities. Particularly in politically unstable settings, the failure to provide such opportunities for meaningful engagement in social action may lead children to engage with armed groups in order to alleviate the frustration that arises from living in oppressive and unjust conditions. This is just one way that involving children in participatory activities may serve to enhance their protection.²⁹

Arguments have also been made that meaningful participation enhances children's growth and development. Participatory approaches offer children the encouragement to actively engage with their environment – whether practically through actual projects or intellectually through research which stimulates reflection. It is believed that skills of communication and expression, self-confidence and a sense of personal efficacy are commonly enhanced. Furthermore, a participatory approach often enables children to acquire new insight into their situation and knowledge of practical relevance that may be helpful to themselves and their families. This can include knowledge that has been directly introduced – such as that relating to health issues – as well as the greater understanding that develops from collective processes of problem-solving. Children's participation can also change community and adult views of children's capacities and in this way can inspire hope and greater trust.

Finally, hope is commonly expressed that, by involving children in projects and processes that are run according to principles of free speech, equality and mutual respect, they will absorb the values and understanding required to ensure the establishment of democracy. In situations of armed conflict where children have been exposed to the use of force in the organisation of everyday life, this potential value of participatory approaches is often considered as especially important.

1.7. Difficulties and Hazards of Participation

There is always a possibility that "participation" is used as an excuse to offload on to children responsibility that should be borne by adult caregivers and service providers.³⁰ Safe and effective participation generally requires a good deal of support, albeit in ways which are more "hands-off". Particularly in unstable political environments, adults must work hard to identify and minimise potential risks arising from children's involvement as participants in organised activities, including those associated with research. At the same time, they must be prepared to renegotiate the relations of power between themselves as adults and the children whose participation they wish to promote. This is not always a comfortable process and many "participatory projects" fail to fulfill their promise due to the reluctance or inability of

²⁸ Phillips (2000)

²⁹ Hart (2004a)

³⁰ Hart *et al.* (2004b)

adults and adult-led organisations to curtail the exercise of their own authority or forego the benefits of familiar hierarchies based not only upon age but also gender, social class, and so on.

A fully participatory approach to research in which children are meaningfully engaged as partners or collaborators requires flexibility on the part of adult researchers with regard to timing, process and outcomes. While, as individuals, they could be willing to show such flexibility, the funders that support them and/or the institutions that employ them may insist on the maintenance of a pre-determined timetable and list of deliverables.

Participatory approaches are generally group-focused. Simply bringing children together may, however, entail risk in a violent or unstable setting. Encouraging open discussion might lead to the revelation of information that can put individual children, their families or the entire community at risk. Furthermore, in situations of war and accompanying impoverishment, the ability to exert control over one's children may remain as a principal or sole area in which adults still sense their own efficacy. Activities that are perceived to encourage disrespect amongst children by inviting them to voice their concerns and aspirations may lead to backlash from parents. Particularly in unstable, conflict-affected societies adults may often feel unable to voice their ideas and concerns freely and without fear. Therefore, it is likely that they will fail to appreciate or will even actively oppose the creation of opportunities for children to speak up.

Concern has also been expressed that the proponents of children's participation may fail to take account of power relations *between* children. As a consequence, supposedly participatory activities can end up being dominated by a few relatively privileged or forceful individuals whose views carry excessive weight. These might be children with particular skills, a higher level of education or those whose families are more powerful or economically better off. The result for other children could be alienation, sense of inadequacy or the reinforcement of low self-esteem.

Finally, there is a need to be wary of engaging children's enthusiasm in activities that are unlikely to lead to the kinds of results that they hope for or assume will occur. Whether because the aims are unrealistic, or due to the fact that the adults involved do not fully embrace the spirit of participation, children can end up disappointed and demoralised. It has even been argued that the self-confidence of children can be adversely affected by a so-called 'participatory' project that turns out not to be such.³¹

1.8. Participation in Research

The involvement of children directly in research activities represents an important move away from traditional approaches, according to which children are solely the objects of enquiry. The pursuit of participatory research has been partly motivated by concern to fulfill the children's right to participate in accordance with the UNCRC. However, the enthusiastic support for such an approach is due to a number of other reasons as well.

A growing number of advocates now argue that children's active participation in research is both a means to improve the quality and relevance of the data *and* make children themselves more visible within a particular community or within the broader society. Such participation can also improve a child's ability to communicate her/his views and acquire

³¹ Kirby with Bryson (2002)

new knowledge. In this way participatory research can contribute to children's empowerment. This is closely connected to Paulo Freire's concept of "conscientisation" – a process whereby participants learn to perceive social, political and economic contradictions and identify ways to counteract them.³² Likewise, through working in groups and through appropriate facilitation, it has been suggested that children may be able to negotiate "new kinds of relationships and partnerships" with adults that are based on respect and the acknowledgement of interdependence.³³

It has also been suggested that, in some circumstances, working with children may be the most effective way of bringing out issues of concern within the community as a whole, since the young are often less inhibited in their discussion of matters otherwise considered 'sensitive'. This is a contentious view, however, since research pursued with this agenda could lead to the revelation by children of information that runs against the interests of certain adults, thereby putting those children at risk.

Overall, participatory research is motivated by the perception of children as "individuals with rights and responsibilities of their own; playing an active role in the lives of their families, communities and societies; and having interests, views and priorities which may differ from those of the adults with whom they interact".³⁴ The role of the researcher is to help children articulate their particular "interests, views and priorities" in a manner that does not create risk.

Even now much of the research about children takes little or no interest in their views. For several reasons this is particularly the case for research conducted in conflict situations. Firstly, the proper concern for children's safety has often constrained efforts to engage them in the production of data about their lives which, even with the most careful attention, may entail some measure of risk. Secondly, the suggestion that the young are perfectly capable of commenting knowledgeably on their situation has had to contend with the popular view of conflict-affected children as helpless victims. Thirdly, the field of research with war-affected children has been traditionally dominated by mental health professionals for whom psycho-emotional wellbeing has tended to form the sole focus. The methodology employed has often relied upon the researcher's expertise in the examination and analysis of individuals. There has been relatively little interest in children as social beings and in the value of their reflection and commentary on their circumstances.

In summary, there are two broad trends amongst researchers conducting field-based studies of children in situations of armed conflict. At risk of over-generalisation we can see that, on one hand, there has been research conducted principally by psychologists and those involved in public health working in line with a "scientific" paradigm that places emphasis on the "researcher as expert observer" and that downplays the value of participation, particularly by children. On the other hand, we find children-centred studies based upon a "humanistic" outlook undertaken by anthropologists, sociologists and human geographers, for whom the employment of participatory methods may be motivated not only by methodological considerations but also by concern for principles of human (including child) rights. Here the "researcher as skilled facilitator" seeks to enable the articulation of children's views, experiences and aspirations.

³² Freire (2002)

³³ O'Kane (2002:2)

³⁴ Edwards (1996:830)

Table 1: Some Risks & Benefits of Participatory Research with Children

Risks	Benefits
Encourages revelation of sensitive information that puts participants at risk	Enables children's specific experiences, needs and insights to be articulated more fully
Creates unrealistic expectations amongst participating children	Provides fun and stimulation
Makes particular demands in terms of time, material and human resources	Enhances development of social skills and confidence
Requires development of particular knowledge, skills and attitudes from researcher/facilitator	Offers a learning opportunity and the chance to identify both problems <i>and</i> solutions
Subjects research plans/topics/methods to (re)negotiation	Promotes respect, co-operation and trust between participants and between adults and children

2. ETHICAL ISSUES IN RESEARCH WITH CHILDREN LIVING AMIDST ARMED CONFLICT

Since the 1960s there has been increasing attention to the ethical dimensions of research with human subjects. This is witnessed in the development of numerous guidelines and codes of conduct, commonly organised by academic discipline.³⁵ Such codes are usually broad in nature, setting out general principles according to which research should be organised. As such, they do not capture the specific issues related to research in settings of extreme violence and instability. Furthermore, they do not embrace the additional concerns that inevitably arise when researching with young people in such settings, particularly when the researcher seeks to develop a participatory approach to the conduct of enquiry.

In this section we seek to draw attention to the specific challenges of conducting research with children in conflict-affected communities. Our aim is not to present a comprehensive set of procedures applicable in all such situations. That would be misleading and unhelpful. Every research setting poses its own ethical challenges requiring sensitivity, reflexivity and a strong sense of responsibility on the part of the researchers. Our intention is, therefore, to encourage the further development of these crucial qualities.

2.1. Taking Proper Account of Conflict

The environment of armed conflict poses particular challenges for safe, ethically responsible research involving children. The facilitator must take steps to anticipate these challenges in order to minimise any potential risks. Restrictions of movement, the breakdown of communications, the lack of security and a general atmosphere of mistrust and suspicion can make the practicalities of meeting and working with children especially difficult or challenging.

To a certain extent the gender of researchers and participants will lead to different risks. Male researchers, in particular, have been suspected of working as agents of the state, or local armed forces,³⁶ while female researchers face harassment and the threat of rape.³⁷ Ultimately the researcher bears responsibility to both her/himself and the participants to avoid situations of physical or mental harm.

If they are “outsiders”, researchers must be aware that their presence may affect the social dynamics within the community by potentially bringing in unfamiliar practices, attitudes and resources. Furthermore, the visibility of their presence can draw attention to those children who engage in research activities, thereby arousing suspicion and potentially creating risk.³⁸ Even for those who are less visible – as locals or people who share the physical characteristics, language, etc. of the community – there may be risks involved simply in bringing young people together. Preparation is vital in order to assess both the

³⁵ Recent anthropological codes include: American Anthropological Association (1998), Code of Ethics of the American Anthropological Association, available from: <http://www.aaanet.org/committees/ethics/ethcode.htm>
Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and The Commonwealth (1999), Ethical Guidelines for Good Research Practice, available from: <http://les.man.ac.uk/sa/ASA/Ethics/ethics.htm>

³⁶ See Boyden (2004:240)

³⁷ Edmonds (2003)

³⁸ See Veale (2005)

nature of potential risks and develop a strategy to minimise these.³⁹ Some of the key questions that need to be asked include:

What concerns are likely to exist amongst the immediate community about bringing children together for research activities?

How might such concerns relate to the specific composition of groups of children – for example, in relation to mixing males and females, or children from different class/caste or ethnic groupings?

Are the local political-military actors likely to take an interest in these activities? If so, what relationships may be needed to be built and assurances given?

Does the schedule of issues to explore through research contain anything that participating children, their families/communities, and political-military actors might consider inappropriate?

In the event that the research creates upset for individual children, division amongst participants or adverse reaction from others what resources – individuals or organisations – exist to provide back-up and support in addressing such problems?

What spaces, if any, exist within the immediate locale where it is possible to conduct research in a manner that ensures security and privacy without raising suspicion?

2.2. Preparation

As a starting-point the researcher should have a sound grasp of ethical issues as expressed in relevant codes of ethics. However, it is important to recognise that such codes can only provide a broad framework. The principles expressed must be related to the particular setting in which the researcher intends to work. Therefore, preparation for fieldwork must also involve close consideration of the potential ethical issues that may be encountered in the intended project. Obtaining up-to-date and accurate information about the research location, including the current political situation, is obviously vital. Local community leaders, NGO staff members, academics, rights monitors and journalists may all be good sources. In addition, the researcher should obtain advice from knowledgeable locals or experts in the culture of the community in which research is to be conducted as to the suitability of particular methods and the most appropriate way to raise specific issues.

With regards to the fieldwork location itself, it may be necessary to discuss plans with relevant civil or military authorities, including non-state actors.⁴⁰ It is unrealistic to expect that research can be conducted without the knowledge of such authorities. In order to avoid raising suspicion it is therefore better to have consulted beforehand and demonstrated a commitment to transparency. These authorities may also raise relevant issues that are worth exploring. At the same time, however, priority must always be given to confidentiality and anonymity and efforts are needed to ensure that there is no expectation from authorities regarding access to data that can be traced back to individuals and groups.

³⁹ See Newman (2005)

⁴⁰ Boyden (2004: 228)

2.3. Adult-Child Power Relations

Article 12 of the UNCRC states that children have a right to be involved in decisions that affect them. As noted in Section 1, this has been taken as encouragement for engaging the young as active partners in research. However, the reality is that in most societies young people enjoy less social power than adults. Thus, their potential agency will always be constrained by conditions over which they may have little control or say. Where the young do enjoy greater social power, possibly as a result of their military or economic role in warfare, local adults may feel powerless and resentful. Inevitably, the imbalance in power between adults and children will extend to the relationship between the outside researcher and young people in any given community.

Commitment to participatory ways of working requires the researcher to reflect carefully on this inherent imbalance. Such reflection should begin by acknowledging one's own feelings about the potential sharing of power with children. To what extent will the conduct of research, including the actual questions themselves, be opened up for negotiation? How can the researcher ensure that she/he does not impose a fixed agenda, timetable and way of working? How can researchers move beyond a traditional role as expert investigator to take on a role more akin to that of facilitator? What are the implications for one's own professional standing of foregoing the expert role? What may be lost, and how might aspects of it be preserved? What is gained and how might further value be added?

Simple actions, such as sitting at the same level as children (including on the floor if necessary), can be helpful in achieving a less hierarchical relationship. The creation together of a shared set of rules to govern all research activities can provide the basis for a greater sense of equality. However, the fundamental factor is always the attitude of the researcher, including constant vigilance over her or his own actions and reactions.

The researcher must also consider the consequences of young people's participation in relation to their position within the family and community. By pursuing an approach that encourages children to express their views, reflect upon their situation and articulate their aspirations the researcher may well be challenging the status quo. In many places the prospect of young people speaking up and voicing their issues may represent a threat. In simple terms, participatory research may be viewed as encouraging children to become disrespectful or unruly. The result could be a backlash against them. In order to avoid this situation, the researcher must work carefully to assuage local concerns and fears as these arise. To avoid undue suspicion, transparency about methods and aims is essential. Likewise, it is vital that children are fully consulted on how best to undertake research in a way that will minimise risks to themselves.

Finally, an awareness of adult-child power dynamics is also important in the conduct of dissemination activities. The views of children may run counter to the interests of adults within the same community, including parents. Furthermore, open acknowledgement of situations that are formally denied – such as the recruitment of children or incidences of abuse – could place informants in great danger. It may be relatively easy to disguise the identity of informants (or even of whole communities) in a written account. However, face-to-face verbal dissemination within the immediate location of research is more likely to run the risk of revealing identities. Therefore, attention is required to the ways in which dissemination is undertaken and actual findings are phrased. When it is not appropriate for children to be involved directly in dissemination, those involved should seek creative alternatives that enable children's ideas and concerns still to be heard in some form.

2.4. Power Relations amongst Children

While the imbalances of power that commonly exist between adults and children are widely understood, there is less appreciation for the fact that such difference is also inevitable amongst children themselves. Factors of age, gender, birth order, educational attainment, caste/class, ethnicity, (dis)ability, as well as individual personality and physical stature, all play a role in shaping power relations in childhood.

This raises particular issues in relation to the conduct of research. Firstly, there is a need to consider the matter of access. Which children are involved in research activities and on what basis? Who is excluded from such activities and is exclusion systematic (e.g. on basis of geography, gender, or class)? Such questions are vital from an ethical point of view. They also have methodological relevance since they relate to the representativeness and relevance of the research findings.

Researchers should be cautious that their work does not contribute to the creation or strengthening of hierarchies amongst children. This point concerns not only divisions amongst the children directly involved in research but also between participants and those from the same community who do not take part. What are the benefits of participation and how might the enjoyment of such benefits (whether material or symbolic) contribute to differences of status and intra-group tensions? What can be done to ensure that those not participating directly are not marginalised, disempowered or stigmatised?

2.5. Rewards

In situations where children and their families are faced with a severe struggle simply to survive, the issue of payment for research becomes particularly acute. Where there is expectation or a clear responsibility to reward certain individuals this should be done in a manner that avoids fuelling tension amongst the community. Attempts to offer rewards secretly may backfire, badly confirming suspicions and fuelling resentment. It may be safer to make transparent the criteria for participation and the reasons for payment/reimbursement of particular individuals.

Even if there is no expectation of material reward, attention must be paid to the possible loss of income and the costs involved for participating children. At the very least transportation and other incidental costs should be reimbursed and refreshments or meals provided to participants. Rewards do not have to be clearly economic. In some settings the provision of symbolic rewards – such as a certificate to acknowledge participation – may be appreciated and may avoid tension, especially when the criteria for selection of participants has been made clear in advance.

In any event, the initiation of research activities may in itself raise hopes of direct reward or of some form of immediate institutional response. A study by Kumar *et al* noted that children working on the streets of Kathmandu expressed skepticism and anger when asked repeatedly to provide information without experiencing any positive changes in their lives as a result. This prompted them to ask, “Why don’t you give us your research dollars?”⁴¹ While misunderstandings inevitably arise, researchers must always be transparent about the rewards and potential benefits that children may expect to gain to avoid fuelling false impressions.

⁴¹ Kumar, *et al.* (2001)

2.6. Informed Consent

The obtaining of “informed consent” from those involved in research activities is a central element of all codes of research ethics. In practice, however, it is not always straightforward. As Jo Boyden notes, the granting of consent “is bound up in a highly complex web of expectation, norms and meanings and as such can be hard to achieve in practice”.⁴² While the researcher can make every effort to explain the nature and purpose of intended research, it cannot be assumed that this has been properly understood. Even adults in many communities may struggle to grasp the full implications of their involvement in a proposed project of enquiry.

Furthermore, the particular relations of power between the researcher (as an adult and probably an outsider) and local children may lead some to feel that they have no choice but to participate. If the researcher is successful in developing a good relationship with children they may also feel encouraged to participate as an act of friendship even when they have doubts and concerns. To help ensure that this is not the case, researchers need to pay great attention to children’s body language, their silences, and ways of communicating unease or dissent.

Contrary to the impression given in many ethical codes, the pursuit of informed consent is not a one-off act. Once familiar with the researcher, the ultimate uses of the data produced may be forgotten and so it is important to remind participants about the reason for particular activities and the purposes to which findings may be put. Unless explicitly noted as such by the researcher, an informal interview may be understood as a friendly chat, with the result that children disclose information that they may otherwise have kept private. In the view of David Mills, instead of “... the objectifying aspect of a single moment of gaining consent”, researchers should take responsibility for “continually negotiated and reaffirmed consent”.⁴³ In practical terms, this means that the researcher provides children with real, non-stigmatising options to pull out at each distinct stage of research or if they display sentiments of apprehension.⁴⁴

The extent to which informed consent is achieved depends in large part on the quality of information and effectiveness in conveying to participants the aims and possible consequences of the intended study. Based upon the researcher’s careful prior assessment, the potential risks of participation should be explained in a concise manner which ensures that would-be participants and their families gain maximum understanding.⁴⁵ They should also be encouraged to identify further risks that the researcher may not have considered. Time should always be allowed for children to reflect on the consequences of their participation and to consult guardians, other adults or friends should they wish.

One final issue that should be anticipated concerns the expectations of those who may have collaborated or assisted in setting up the research. For example, a local NGO might be involved in facilitating the entry of researchers to a particular community in which it works. This organisation may be happy to do this out of a spirit of co-operation and not seek information as a direct product of the research. However, there may well be an expectation that, at the very least, its work and staff will not be subject to criticism in dissemination activities. If this cannot be assured in advance, the researcher should make this clear

⁴² Boyden (2004:243)

⁴³ Mills (2002:17)

⁴⁴ Edmonds (2003:22)

⁴⁵ Save the Children (2003: 22)

according to the principle of “informed consent”. Where the organisation concerned is a partner to the research, prior agreement about the uses and dissemination of findings should be agreed upon. Who will have the ultimate say over what can be shared publicly and how findings are to be expressed?

2.7. Gender Dimensions of Research

The gender dimensions of the intended research should be considered in advance. If the researcher is male and intends to work with female children, he should consider recruiting a female research assistant, especially when planning to work in a conservative culture where social interaction between the sexes may be highly constrained. In any event, adolescent girls and boys especially may feel more comfortable talking about personal issues with someone of the same sex.

In some societies access to girls and young women may be particularly difficult to gain. It is possible that many will be prevented from joining in group activities. Particular care is needed to ensure that girls are enabled to contribute their experiences, views and aspirations in a manner that best suits their particular circumstances. A similar point can be made for disabled children and for those whose lives do not fit with local ideals. This may include children who have dropped out of school, those living on the street and those who are of especially low socio-economic standing.

Beyond the issue of access, there may also be particular sensitivities that should be anticipated in research with girls. The consequences of conflict rarely impact upon males and females in the same manner. For example, in many settings girls are especially likely to be subject to sexual abuse. They are also more likely than boys to be denied access to education either due to parental fears for their safety or because of the demands on their labour within the home. In societies that place a particular value on the virginity of brides, girls may be forced into early marriage to avoid the social consequences of rape – often more common in the context of armed conflict. In short, researchers need to consider carefully in advance the possible situation of girls and the ways in which research may best be conducted to ensure they are able to speak comfortably about their experiences.

2.8. Confidentiality and Anonymity

Particularly in an unstable social and political environment sensitive information must be handled with extreme caution. As well as the potential distress it may cause to recollect experiences of abuse and violation, sharing such information may not only lead to stigma and suspicion but also put at risk the safety of children, their families and communities. For example, in situations where the recruitment of children is officially denied, revelation by individual children of their own recruitment or that of peers could place themselves and their families in great danger.

Confidentiality and anonymity are thus crucial. Photographs and video material raise obvious challenges since they make identification much easier. Consent in the use of cameras for research purposes and in the employment of materials produced must, therefore, be negotiated with particular care, ensuring that participants have fully considered the possible implications. In general, if sensitive material is to be shared the researcher must make sure that its source cannot be traced. Thus it will be vital to ensure that:

All notes and records are stored securely where they cannot be accessed by unauthorised individuals;

Notes are encrypted to conceal identities where such security is not possible; and

Careful consideration is given to the implications of sharing more widely any information that may have been offered privately or in specific circumstances (for example, amongst a small group where strong bonds of trust already exist).

2.9. Immediate Consequences of the Research Encounter

In-depth research can create the opportunity for children to speak about painful experiences or present difficulties and may, therefore, be particularly welcomed by children whose lives have been affected by the horrors of war. If children are to be asked direct questions about painful experiences, it is essential that research tools are designed in order to minimise potential distress. Ennew and Plateau offer the following observations:

It is not ethical to ask children direct questions about painful experiences, using poorly-designed research tools (particularly questionnaire and interviews) and without their informed consent.

Indirect data-collection methods allow children the option of withholding information, or provide them with the possibility of responding in ways that do not dredge up painful experiences and cause further harm. Such methods include drawings, role plays and the use of puppets – all ways in which children can externalise experiences without reliving them. The pain “happens” to the puppet or character in the drama, it is not happening to the child.

In addition, some methods of promoting positive thoughts in children at the end of a data collection session can be a routine part of the research process.⁴⁶

The recollection of difficult memories may trigger considerable anguish which the researcher can struggle to deal with. Where there is the likelihood of such a situation arising, it is vital that the researcher establishes in advance a system for support and back-up. Appropriately trained staff in a local NGO or community-based organisation may be able to fulfil this role. However, in making such arrangements the researcher must bear in mind the concern for confidentiality mentioned above. He or she must be certain that children will not be placed in a situation where they are compelled to reveal information or express private concerns to people with whom they do not feel comfortable or who will not hold as paramount the best interests of that child.⁴⁷ Thus, when experiences of ongoing abuse are revealed, there is still a need to carefully assess the situation before attempting to involve outsiders.

Even if there are suitable people at hand to follow-up, researchers still have a responsibility to interact with children in a sensitive and supportive manner. It is important to allow them the chance to pause or to change the subject, to express grief in the manner that best suits them, or to withdraw from the research activity altogether.

The expression of interest in the lives, experiences and wellbeing of children is often very welcome. This is especially likely in situations where children have been deprived of the warm concern and affection of adults – for example, those living in institutions such as

⁴⁶ Ennew and Plateau (2004:17-18).

⁴⁷ Boyden (2004:249)

orphanages or in child-headed households. As a result, some children can rapidly develop attachments to the researcher and, not having grasped that the interaction is likely to be short-lived, may feel let-down or even abandoned once the research is complete. There is no simple means to avoid such a situation. However, clarity about the extent and nature of the researcher's role is vital. This clarity is necessary not only for children but also for the researcher herself or himself. Efforts to "rescue" children or to act as a surrogate parent – albeit well-intentioned – are liable to create false hopes and increase the likelihood of sorrow upon parting.

2.10. Dissemination

The presentation and dissemination of findings can have direct consequences for the participants and for their families and wider community. It is even possible that whole societies can be stigmatised by research that paints a particularly dark picture. Unless evidently unnecessary, it should be assumed that all identities – individual and communal – should be concealed through the use of pseudonyms. Certainly, no individuals should be named unless they have given clear permission. In the case of children, such permission should also be secured from their adult caregivers. Of course, many children may wish to have their contributions acknowledged or to see their photographs and artwork in print. As with the issue of "informed consent" discussed above, it is important for the researcher to think through possible implications of revealing identities and enable children and their families to reach an informed decision.

Prior to any wider dissemination, the researcher should make every effort to review key findings with research participants and the community. Care should be taken when sharing findings of a potentially sensitive nature that can be easily attributed to individuals or certain sections of the community. If the research itself has been properly participatory then children should also be involved in planning and, if they so wish, implementation of dissemination activities at the local level.

The ways in which research findings are framed may have particular implications.⁴⁸ For example, the presentation of young people as "damaged" or "traumatised" as a result of exposure to conflict may play into stereotypes that are profoundly disempowering and that undermine the ways in which they cope with extreme adversity.⁴⁹

As stated in a recent International Labour Organization (ILO) manual on research, it is "seldom acknowledged that respondents may make use of research process for their own ends".⁵⁰ Adequate thought must be given to the ways in which research findings can be returned to children and their communities. Here, presentation is a central issue. The style of writing, use of images and drawings will have a bearing upon the accessibility and usability of the findings.

If the research is to be used directly for the development of policies, programmes or advocacy, then there is both an ethical responsibility and a practical imperative to encourage the continuation of children's participation.

⁴⁸ Boyden (2004:245)

⁴⁹ Boyden (2004:1)

⁵⁰ Edmonds (2003:21)

3. METHODS FOR RESEARCH WITH CHILDREN LIVING AMIDST ARMED CONFLICT

3.1. Inclusivity, Non-Discrimination and Representativeness

To the greatest extent possible research processes should embrace children regardless of age, (dis)ability, ethnicity, and socio-economic status. In practice, genuine inclusivity may be difficult to achieve for practical and attitudinal reasons. For example, it may take considerable time and effort to ensure that the most marginalised children are able to participate.

Furthermore, it is important to respect diversity amongst children. This entails an understanding at all levels and among all actors that it is not the aim of participatory research to achieve a forced consensus or conformity, but to explore and respect the diverse conceptual, ideological, cultural, ethical, political and social frameworks that inform children's worlds.⁵¹

The processes of children's participatory research should reflect democratic principles of equality, respect for minority positions, freedom of expression and protection from recrimination.⁵² Gender sensitivity is particularly important and all activities should be designed with awareness of the potential obstacles to the participation of girls and young women in societies where strong patriarchal structures and practices exist.

Where there are too many eager children than could realistically be involved in research activities, it is important to establish a transparent process for selection of participants. Clear criteria for involvement need to be established and explained. In some situations it may be possible and beneficial to involve children themselves in developing the criteria, bearing in mind the principles of inclusivity, non-discrimination and representativeness.

3.2. Selection of Tools

The social, economic and cultural realities of each location in which participatory research is conducted may impose their own constraints and demands in terms of tools and methods.⁵³ However, choosing *which* tools to use is only one step – deciding *how* to use them appropriately to elicit the relevant data is another matter. The research tools must be used in such a way as to complement the approach and philosophy of the project and as a means of helping participants address their questions and issues as they emerge, rather than simply for the collection of information about them for and by outsiders. In the spirit of participatory research the tools selected should reinforce solidarity, co-operation and involvement among participants and focus on the information needed and appropriate.⁵⁴

3.2.1. Age Appropriateness

According to recent research, “an age barrier below which child beneficiaries possess no important information does not seem to exist”.⁵⁵ Within many societies, children often assume major economic and social responsibilities at a very young age. For example,

⁵¹ Cussianovich and Marquez (2002); O’Kane (2002)

⁵² UNICEF (2000)

⁵³ O’Kane (2002)

⁵⁴ Rugh (1992:17) and Naryan-Parker (1993:16-18)

⁵⁵ Phillips (2000:15)

communities which have been severely affected by HIV/AIDS now have many households which are headed by adolescents. Even younger children often take on important roles as wage earners or carers for their siblings.⁵⁶ Global research has shown that these responsibilities can actually result in pro-social behaviour.⁵⁷ In other words, actual daily life activities can have an important bearing on children's capacities. As a consequence, it is possible that even young children may develop particular skills very early and may be able to express detailed views on subjects commonly considered "adult". On the other hand, as the quote below suggests, the deprivation, isolation and paucity of service provision that are often found in conflict-affected areas may impede children's cognitive and social development. In facilitating and supporting children's participation in research activities, researchers need, therefore, to consider the appropriateness of different methods not only in relation to chronological age but also in relation to the lived experience and consequent competencies of individual children. In general, methods that rely more on visual representation are more suited to younger children. Methods that involve a great deal of analysis, especially in relation to ideas of causation ("why?" questions) require particular skills that are more likely to be found amongst older children.

The following quote comes from a recent study in a war-affected area of eastern Sri Lanka and describes the challenges of developing methods suitable for younger children:

The original aim was to work with children aged between approximately 5 and 16. However, it soon became apparent that younger children (those under age 10 or so) were not responding well to the exercises. There were several different problems. Sometimes the younger children were unable to understand what the task entailed. Sometimes they were able to provide very little information that could be used or were simply too shy to engage in an activity. Often, they preferred to play. We established that the problem was not primarily one of limited literacy skills, since even with other children or ourselves acting as recorders this did not make a significant difference to their engagement with the activities. In the end, given the limited time available to us, rather than developing methods more suited to younger children we were forced to abandon working with this age group.

That said, we would not wish to imply that these methods are not suitable for young children, rather that the younger children in this particular area were unable to respond to them. This was evidenced by the fact that when we conducted a session with children in another more urbanised and more secure part of Batticaloa, the younger ones did not have any difficulties with the methods. We concluded that the low level of response in the Badulla Road children is most likely due to years of impaired health and nutritional intake, limited opportunity to express their views and extremely restricted access to and very poor quality of education. Furthermore, curtailed mobility due to curfews and checkpoints has long limited these children's exposure to urban settlements and other learning environments and processes outside their immediate communities. In summary, it appears that cognitive capacity and prior experiences of participation and articulation of personal viewpoints may function as key factors in determining the efficacy of these methods in work with young children. (*Taken from Armstrong, M. et al (2004)*)

⁵⁶ UNICEF (2004)

⁵⁷ Woodhead (1998)

3.2.2. Cultural Appropriateness

At every stage of the research process it is important to take serious account of local cultural conditions and the values of the communities in which activities are to take place. This relates, for example, to the issues that can be explored, the ways in which questions are phrased, the composition of groups, and the timing and location of activities. Such concern for culture should also be extended to the selection of specific research tools.

Each specific tool or method implies a particular mode of communication – visual, verbal, performative, etc.. Our understanding of the appropriateness and nature of different modes of communication is strongly shaped by cultural factors. So, for example, in many Western societies visual art is seen as a medium for the free expression of children’s ideas and feelings. By contrast, in other cultures, strict conventions exist that govern the ways that visual representation should occur. Children are encouraged not to express themselves freely but rather to replicate, as accurately as possible, valued ways of depicting particular objects or scenes.

Certain forms of communication may be unfamiliar in particular settings and therefore challenging to employ for the purposes of research. For example, the use of drama and role play often works well in a country like Sri Lanka where a strong tradition of performance exists and where children commonly perform songs, sketches and dances. However, in other settings such activities may be considered immodest or provocative. At the very least children may have to overcome considerable shyness in order to engage comfortably in drama-type methods in places where performance is not commonplace.

In selecting tools for use in a specific location it is therefore important, once again, to prepare well by discussing plans with experts on the local situation and through reading available accounts of research previously undertaken. Attention should be paid to the ways in which children in any given context most commonly express themselves. In some places, for example, there may be a particular tradition of performance – acting, dancing, singing, etc. – that would make role play a tool that children take to readily. In others, this may be unfamiliar and cause awkwardness.

3.3. Sequencing and Combination of Tools

Each tool is liable to produce knowledge about a particular domain of experience. Some tools are suitable for exploring children’s social worlds. Others may focus on their physical environment, on ideas of health and wellbeing, or on experiences of particular institutions such as school, and so on. Descriptions of some specific tools are provided in the appendices as illustration.

In preparing for a research session the researcher needs to take into account the particular value of a single tool (what knowledge is it likely to produce?) and the fit *between* tools (how does one tool complement and build upon the knowledge produced by others?). Furthermore, it is necessary to consider the sequencing of tools. Some exercises are better suited for use in the early stages. Generally tools that are very concrete – such as the drawing of maps that depict children’s immediate environment – are best. A further guiding principle is that initial exercises should be simple enough to ensure that participants can easily grasp the instructions and engage in the activity to their own satisfaction, thereby helping to put them at ease. Tools that explore more abstract issues – such as notions of health, social identities, aspirations –

are best left until children have acquired greater confidence in expressing their ideas and/or have become familiar with questioning and enquiry.

Generally speaking it is wise to limit engagement with research exercises to a maximum of two hours, in order to ensure concentration and to avoid tiring participants. Concentrated activity should be interspersed by games and refreshment breaks to maintain energy levels and motivation.

3.4. Degrees of Participation

Participation in research may be achieved to different degrees from occasional consultation to full engagement as co-researchers. By involving the participants in every stage of the research process, even to the extent of becoming collaborators, a sense of ownership may develop.⁵⁸ In addition, research conducted directly by children with their peers may produce data that are especially rich and detailed. Furthermore, the knowledge and skills developed by those engaged in this way may be extensive. However, for children to play such a central role, a good deal of capacity building may be necessary. Not only must they become familiar with the tools themselves but they must also become competent in the management of research activities and the analysis of data.

Children's participation to this extent can be very time-consuming and tiring for them. It may encroach on their other responsibilities and activities. An appropriate balance will need to be determined on a project-by-project basis as well as a child-by-child basis.⁵⁹ However, the most important factor in making such a decision will be the possible effects upon children's safety and wellbeing. A greater degree of participation is not necessarily better, particularly if this means putting children at risk. The important point is to identify a degree of participation that is appropriate to the situation and to the wishes of children and their families.

3.5. Intra-Group Dynamics

As noted in Section 2.4, it is important to be mindful of the composition of groups and the power relations between individual children. This is not only an ethical issue but also has implications for methodological rigour and representativeness. For example younger children may be effectively silenced by adolescents, girls may feel uncomfortable sharing their feelings in front of boys, or different ethnic groups may feel it inappropriate to be working on a joint project. All of these factors may lead to unrepresentative data or even to the collapse of research activities. It is vital, therefore, to ensure that all children feel comfortable participating together. To ensure this is the case, it may be necessary to organise groups along lines of age, gender, ethnicity, and so on. However, this should not be assumed. In some situations such an approach may reinforce divisions that children themselves wish to overcome. The important point is that decisions about group composition should involve children themselves. For example, Gillian Mann reported that in her research in Dar es Salaam she revised plans for a girls-only group when the advisory team of 13-16 year olds expressed concern that this would only serve to make children 'strangers' to each other.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Cooper (2005)

⁵⁹ Kirby with Bryson (2002:57)

⁶⁰ Personal Communication, March 2006

3.6. The Role of the Adult Researcher

Boyden and Ennew stress that the term “facilitator” best describes the role of the adult researcher in many participatory research projects.⁶¹ The role of “facilitator” may place new demands on the researcher. Aside from the willingness to renegotiate conventional relations of power between “children” and “adults”, it is also important to develop the ability to manage difficult situations without panicking or losing your temper.⁶² Researchers must ensure the clarity of their language and, as Sam Punch comments, must not assume that they understand the language used by the participants:

Younger children may have a more limited vocabulary, but equally they may use different language which adults do not understand. Thus the language dilemma is mutual.⁶³

It is important that the child has fully understood the researcher’s questions or instructions. The researcher must acknowledge the fact that most technical terms, abbreviations, and abstractions employed by researchers and development agencies alike are not part of the vocabulary used by children.⁶⁴ If unsure of appropriate terminology or if the researcher is unfamiliar with cultural sensitivities, then it will be important to consult in advance with knowledgeable locals.⁶⁵

It should be remembered, however, that the aim of research is not to establish what children don’t know, nor to ask children to comment on and engage with research around issues about which they have no experience or knowledge. Rather the aim is to explore together with children what they do know and those topics that interest or concern them.

When working with children it is also important that the researcher makes sure that research resources are available to all children equally and that no one feels inhibited by unfamiliar equipment or, for example, unable to express oneself satisfactorily due to a lack of communication or artistic skill.⁶⁶ The responsibility of the researcher to choose appropriate tools should not be taken lightly, and it is for this reason that the facilitator must obtain sufficient knowledge of a wide range of tools as well as a sound understanding of the skills and aptitudes of the participants and the sensitivities of the communities within which they live.

Prior to the selection of the tools for participatory research within a specific session it may be advisable for the researcher to use some simple games as “icebreakers”, not only to give the participants an idea of the nature of the research but to familiarise the researcher with the attitudes, skills and willingness of the participants. Ultimately, reflexivity should be a central part of the research process with children. The researcher should “critically reflect not only on their role and their assumptions, but also on the choice of methods and their application”.⁶⁷

⁶¹ Boyden and Ennew (1997)

⁶² Boyden and Ennew (1997:13)

⁶³ Punch (2002: 328)

⁶⁴ Edmonds (2003:6)

⁶⁵ Edmonds (2003:14)

⁶⁶ Edmonds (2003:14)

⁶⁷ Edmonds (2003:14)

3.7. Types of Tools

The different tools that may be used in research with children are extensive, and this is partly due to the need for flexibility and adaptability as well as the nature of participatory research which contains the potential for participants to shape the tools according to their individual and group needs and circumstances. However, for the sake of clarity these different tools can be placed into four broad categories.

PRA and PRA-related tools

PRA (“participatory rural appraisal” or sometimes “participatory rapid assessment”) comprises a range of visualisation, interviewing and group work methods. PRA helps to ensure that the research priorities are defined by the participants as well as providing an indication of the wider community dynamics. Visualisation techniques in particular provide opportunities for creative reflection because they enable people to “represent their own ideas in a form they can discuss, modify and extend”.⁶⁸ Common tools include social maps, timelines, seasonal calendars, daily activity profiles and Venn diagrams. Such tools can usually be implemented using materials which are familiar to the participants. The generation of visual evidence of one group of children can also usefully be compared to the collective knowledge of different groups within the community.⁶⁹ The use of PRA to identify key concerns can ensure that the research continues in the appropriate direction, using other tools which remain sensitive to the context.

Audio-visual tools

These include the use of videos, story-telling, drama, songs and photographs. Children often find these especially stimulating to use, and make a refreshing alternative or accompaniment to interviews.⁷⁰ They can also generate new information by allowing people to look at themselves and their situations through a variety of mediums they may otherwise have little or no access to. For example, in a participatory impact evaluation of the Nepal Resource Management Project, drama and songs were used to help identify villagers’ perceptions of changes in their communities as a result of the project. These tools also helped villagers to define what should be evaluated and what they would prioritise as project objectives.⁷¹

Specific examples of story games include collective story telling, an “open story” in which each child is invited to give a line of a story from child to child until it reaches its natural completion. Drama is another powerful medium. Participants could be asked to “re-enact” a scene to explore alternative solutions to a situation through drama. A post-drama discussion could be initiated to explore the thoughts and motivations and actions of characters. Drama can also be used as a tool for getting at shared symbolic systems and understandings.⁷²

Drawings can be a useful method to offer insight into children’s individual experience and as a gateway to more in depth discussion about an issue by inviting a child to talk about a drawing. Angela Veale comments that drawing is one “method of creating a methodological frame that children could fill with their own meaning”.⁷³ Sam Punch

⁶⁸ Cornwall *et al.* (1993:23)

⁶⁹ Veale (2005)

⁷⁰ Cornwall *et al.*, (1993)

⁷¹ Wigboldus *et al.*, (1995)

⁷² Veale (2005)

⁷³ Veale (2005)

suggests that rather than ask children “what have you drawn” it would be more revealing to ask them to explain “what their drawing meant to them and why they decided to draw those images”.⁷⁴ Diaries can also be a way for children to communicate their concerns although these methods depend on a child’s literacy levels.

Quantitative tools

While these are more traditionally associated with conventional, non-participatory approaches to research, more recent attempts have tried to make these more participatory and accessible.⁷⁵ For example, children can become involved in deciding what questions to ask, how and when to administer the questionnaire and in the analysis of findings. This also ensures that quantitative surveys are developed and carried out to reflect local needs and context.⁷⁶

Tools derived from the “anthropological” tradition

These include the technique of “participant observation” and the use of oral testimonies in particular. The former involves purposive observation while undertaking participatory research in day-to-day activities. From an ethical perspective this should always take place with the knowledge of the people concerned. In the context of participatory evaluation it may be undertaken as a group activity, with locals themselves functioning as participant observers.⁷⁷

3.8. Validation and Ensuring Reliability

Due to the nature of qualitative research, and of participatory methods in particular, proving validity can be challenging. However, the stronger the “validity” of the research claims, the more credibility and potential action for change it will have. The basic problem in assessing the validity of qualitative research is how to specify the link between the relations that are studied and the version of them as provided by the researcher.⁷⁸ More specifically, judgments of validity are judgments about whether you are “measuring”, or explaining, what you claim to be measuring or explaining.⁷⁹ For example, to what extent do your data actually prove that the phenomenon you have identified is an effect of a specific set of contextual concerns or policies, rather than a wider set of social influences and social change? Would a different set of participatory methods have yielded different results, and if so does this add to or subtract from the strength of the findings? In the process of data analysis it is important to reflect upon the quality of the chosen methods in relation to the research questions, as well as how well they produce relevant data to support the results. One way to prove validity is through the method of “triangulation”, whereby a mix of different methods is used to prove the same conclusion:

By combining multiple observers, theories, methods, and data sources, [researchers] can hope to overcome the intrinsic bias that comes from single-methods, single-observer, and single-theory studies.⁸⁰

⁷⁴ Punch (2002: 332)

⁷⁵ Rugh (1992); Abbot and Guijt (1997)

⁷⁶ Estrella and Gaventa (1997)

⁷⁷ Feuerstein (1986)

⁷⁸ Flick (2002: 222)

⁷⁹ Mason (2002:188)

⁸⁰ Denzin (1989: 307)

Each research method can potentially yield different aspects of the same reality. Multiple methods of data collection and analysis are less vulnerable to errors linked to one particular method such as loaded questions or untrue responses.⁸¹ Hence, triangulation is more appropriate when one singular method has been used, as it can give credibility by showing a consistency of results. Four kinds of triangulation can contribute to verification and validation of qualitative analysis⁸²:

Methods triangulation: Checking out the consistency of findings generated by different data collection methods, and if possible comparing and integrating data collected from both qualitative and quantitative methods.

Triangulation of sources: Checking out the consistency of different data sources within the same method.

Analyst triangulation: Using multiple analysts to review findings.

Theory/perspective triangulation: Using multiple perspectives or theories to interpret the data.

However, as the above examination of participatory research methods has suggested, the reasons why PRA is so effective is because it is sensitive to multiple concerns and individual interpretations. As a result, one particular research method may be more suitable whereas alternative methods may be unable to show consistency precisely because they are less appropriate or sensitive to the context. This indicates that while triangulation can add a much-needed element of reassurance to those sceptical about the validity of participatory methods, it also risks searching for a misleading one-dimensional truth.

A more general way to ensure validity is through a commitment to rigorous methods, the credibility and training of the researcher, as well as a philosophical belief in the value of qualitative inquiry, which includes a fundamental appreciation of naturalistic inquiry and holistic thinking.⁸³ It may also be useful to identify a “support group” of peer advisors who could meet at regular intervals throughout the duration of the research, who are not directly involved, but who would be willing to provide critical advice, and to discuss working hypotheses and results. Ideally such a support group would include a combination of people who have had experience working with the participants (and ideally experience of working with children) as well as knowledge of participatory research. The group should identify any major inconsistencies in the results. They should also be able to advise against inappropriate methods. Finally, it is important that the researcher exercises caution when mapping case studies to theory. As Lincoln and Guba stress, “the only generalisation is: there is no generalisation”. For example, it is important to question to what extent the concerns of a particular group are context (time, place, and person) specific or if it could be confidently suggested that their concerns are also reflective of a wider cross-section of the community. High quality data may lose its validity when transferred to a different setting. If comparisons are to be drawn they should be done so by first testing the degree of comparability from one context to another.⁸⁴

⁸¹ Quinn Patton (2002: 555-6)

⁸² Quinn Patton (2002: 555-6)

⁸³ Quinn Patton (2002: 555-6)

⁸⁴ Lincoln and Guba (1985)

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APPENDIX 1:

Risk & Resource Maps

Aim:

To provide information on the risks children face, their problems and anxieties and the resources they have access to. Also to provide information regarding the material environment in which children live.

Participants:

This activity can be used effectively with children aged 10 years or over. With a diverse population, it may be advisable to group similar individuals together (dividing the group according to sex, age, socio-cultural background and so on) and run the activity in parallel for each group. Each group should ideally not be larger than 8 persons. Literacy is not essential.

Facilitators:

1 facilitator can work with up to 2 small groups, although ideally there should be one facilitator per group, with an observer/recorder for each group who takes notes on the children's discussions and other aspects of the process.

Materials:

1 large sheet of paper for each group
Three colours of marker pens for each group (Red, Green, Black)

Instructions:

1. Form the children into groups of around 5-6 each. Try to keep children of the same age together and to form groups of boys and girls separately. Ask the children if they would like to do an activity about their own village. If they say "yes" then continue with the activity. Introduce the activity to the participants. Explain that to help the organisation/animators plan their work, you need to understand the community/village within which they are working. Explain that it is very important to understand what resources and things of use are available in the community/village - as well as what dangers or difficulties exist in the community/village - and that this activity will attempt to encourage a discussion of these issues through the drawing of a map. It is important to confirm that children know what a map is.
2. Give each group a large sheet of paper and three marker pens. Explain that the green pens are for things, places, or people who are resources; that red pens are for the things, places or people who are dangers or risks; and that the black pen is for anything else that is neither a resource nor a risk. Instruct the participants to draw a map of the community/village as they see it - incorporating the views of all the group members.
3. If the participants have not grasped the exercise or are unsure of how to begin, the facilitators may stimulate a little brainstorming within the small groups about ideas for "useful things/places" and "risky things/places" that are found in their village. Questions that can help the children start include "There are some things that are useful to you in your village, can you tell me one of those things?" and "There are some things that are dangerous or scary in your village, can you tell me one of those things?" Facilitators should not make suggestions, but can mingle with the participants, monitoring the conversation and processes of each group. Once maps are relatively well elaborated, facilitators may ask probing questions about the items that have been marked in green and red.
4. Encourage all the children to share the responsibility of drawing. Don't interfere too much in the process, but do ask: "What have you drawn there?" "How is it useful?" Or "How does it create difficulties for you?" "What else is there in your village that is useful or causes problems or danger? And other similar questions.

5. Once all the maps have been completed, invite each group to present their map to the entire gathering and explain what they have drawn. The facilitators should ask questions about each map to find out “why”, “when” and “how” particular items are “useful” or “dangerous”. Asking questions relating to whether “girls and boys” or “men and women” experience these items differently or not will help develop an understanding of the differential experiences of different social categories. Also ask questions about specific instances that demonstrate the nature of the items - or whether participants have personally experienced this, or how they came to know about this. During the presentations of the maps, notes should be taken on the discussion, the layout of the maps, conversation and group dynamics. This is the most important part of the activity, so allow adequate time for it.
6. Ideally the facilitators should keep a visual record of the maps that have been generated. This may be done through photographs onsite or off-site with the consent of the participants. There should be a discussion with the participants about what they would like to do with the maps, and some elaboration of a clear outcome (i.e. who would take care of each map, and what they might do with it).

Timelines

Aim:

To generate information about the experiences of participants in their village / community / project.

Participants:

This activity can be used effectively with persons over 8 years of age. With a diverse group of participants, it may be advisable to group similar individuals together (gender, age) and run the activity in parallel for each group. Each group should ideally not be larger than 8 persons.

Facilitators:

At least 1 facilitator and translator for 2-3 groups.

Materials:

1 large sheet of paper per group

Three colours of marker pens for each group (Red, Green and Black)

Instructions:

1. Group the participants into small working groups. Introduce the activity to the children. Explain that we would like to know more about the history of their village and important events in the recent past.
2. Give one piece of flipchart paper to each group. Ask them to draw a line across the middle of the paper to represent time. One end represents the beginning of the period you are interested in and the other represents now. Smaller lines can be drawn across the main timeline to show the different years. You can choose to set the beginning of the timeline 2 years, 5 years or 10 years ago, depending on the information required.
3. Ask the children to draw all the important events and changes that have occurred in their village in this time period.
4. Encourage the children by explaining that we just want to find out what they think is important, and that there are no right or wrong answers in this activity. Go round to the different groups and ask what they have drawn and when it happened.
5. You can ask the children to draw the positive things in green and the negative things in red. This comes out in the discussions anyway and the most important thing is just to encourage the children to draw.
6. When all the drawings are complete, ask the groups to come together and present their timelines to all the children. Ask questions about the different events and when they happened.
7. Keep a visual record of these timelines but make sure the children can keep their original drawings.

Spider Diagrams

Aim:

To generate data about children's social networks and the people that they may turn to for help with different situations / problems.

Participants:

This activity is suitable for children aged 10-14. The work is carried out individually at first and can work with a group of up to 10. It is helpful to split the groups up, so as to have boys and girls working separately.

Facilitators:

1 facilitator is needed for each group of 10 children. It is not possible to run 2 groups in parallel with only one facilitator.

Materials:

A4 paper and pens

Instructions:

Ask the children to sit on the floor and give everybody a piece of paper and a pen. Introduce the activity by saying something like: "This is a nice activity because we are going to draw people who are helpful to us in different ways". Explain that we will do this by drawing a spider

Ask the children to draw a circle in the middle of the paper and write their name or draw a picture to represent themselves. This is the body of the spider. The legs of the spider are the problems that they face and the feet are the people they go to for help. People who help a lot can be shown by drawing bigger feet.

Encourage the children by drawing a spider yourself, but do not write down anything on the legs or feet. If the children are still finding this activity difficult, it may help to go around to the children individually and ask them about a problem they face and then who they may go to for help. Remind them that there are no right or wrong answers.

When everyone has finished drawing, and you have had time to talk to each child individually, call everyone back together for a Focus Group Discussion. This is intended to aid reflection on problems and people who can provide assistance. Explain that they only have to share the problems that they noted if they want to. Then ask those that are willing to speak to share their problems, and to explain who they go to for help, with the rest of the group.

Problem Trees

Aim: To learn about the situations and issues that children perceive as being a problem or source of anxiety to them and their views of causes and solutions.

Participants:

Children aged 10 and over.

Facilitators:

At least 1 facilitator and recorder for each group.

Materials:

Cards of three different colours, several large sheets of paper and pens

Instructions:

Explain to the children that you are trying to find out about the things that are problems for, or worry, them and that you would like them to note these down on cards. Lay the sheets of paper out on the ground and distribute pens and cards of one colour to everyone. Ask the children to list the things that are a problem for them on the cards, allowing one card per problem. The children should be encouraged to discuss and agree on each problem before it is indicated on a card.

Once this is done, ask the children to start trying to work out whether there is a link between the different problems they have identified. The links between problems can be made apparent by clustering the cards with related problems together on the paper. Having identified and grouped the problems, ask the children what the causes of these problems might be and instruct them to note each cause on a separate card (using cards of a different colour). If the children lay the 'cause' cards (forming the ends of the roots of the tree) out below the 'problem' cards (the trunk), they can then draw lines between the two sets of cards, indicating their precise connections. Once this is done, the children should be encouraged to discuss consequences of the different problems they have identified. These should be marked down on the third set of coloured cards and placed above the problems, as if they were the leaves of the tree. Again, links between problems and consequences/solutions can be made explicit by drawing lines between them, in this case representing the branches. If this exercise is being used for planning rather than monitoring programmes' progress or impact, once the drawing and discussion about causes, problems and consequences is completed, a discussion of possible solutions can take place as a basis for helping the children work out how they can act on a situation to change it.

“What if?” and “Who matters?”

Aim:

To generate information about children’s social networks and systems of support and to learn who provides assistance in specific situations of need.

Participants:

This activity can be used with children aged 10 and over. Ideally, the groups should be made up of 8-10 children and separated by sex.

Facilitator:

1 facilitator and 1 recorder are needed for each working group of 8-10 children.

Materials:

Large sheets of paper, pens and cut out people in two colours (one for male and one for female characters)

Instructions:

Make a list of key problems facing children in the area. These can be gathered from the Risk/Resource Maps as well as Focus Group Discussions

Cut out paper figures in two different colours. One colour represents females (adults or children) and the other, males (adults or children). Make at least 30 of each colour.

Start the exercise with all the children. Go through the list of problems and discuss each one with the children.

Select which problems the children in this village/group perceive to be relevant to them.

Split the children up into smaller groups, by sex and/or age, and go through each of the key problems in turn with the groups. The paper figures can be used to represent the people who they turn to for help with each problem, and the children can draw or write on these figures to explain who they are in each instance.

Record the different people the children identify for each situation. Further information can be obtained by asking the children to elaborate on specific issues and provide examples.

Social Map Exercise ("Who Do I Visit?")

Aim:

To obtain information about children's social networks and engage children in discussion of how they use these networks

Participants:

This activity can be used effectively with children aged 8/9 and above.

Facilitators:

At least 1 facilitator and translator for each group.

Materials:

1 large sheet of paper for each individual (these may be combined for group work)
1 marker pen for each participant

Instructions:

1. Introduce the activity to the participants. Explain that the activity involves thinking about people whom they visit.
2. First ask participants to draw their house and the people who live there.
3. Then ask the participants if they sometimes visit other houses. Ask for examples. When examples are given, ask the participants to draw the house and also all the people who live there.
4. When each house and its occupants have been drawn, elicit information about the people who have been drawn. Ask participants questions related to who these people are, how often they visit them and why, what they do when they visit them, how accessible these people are to them, etc - exploring the nature of the relationship with these people in their social network. Notes should be taken during these discussions.
5. Repeat the two steps above until the participants cannot think of any more houses/people that they visit. It may be helpful to ask participants specifically about whom they might visit to play, for festivals or occasions, for assistance with a problem, etc., and it may be useful to find out who visits the participants' homes.
6. Conclude the activity with a recapitulation of the exercise and a positive discussion of the social resources available to the participating children.

Social Network Sorting Activity

Aim:

To provide information about children's social networks: the people in their everyday lives and the nature of their relationship with them, particularly the types of situations in which these people may be helpful.

Participants:

With some variations this activity could probably be used with children from 8 years upwards. To undertake all components of the activity would likely require at least 2 hours and a good degree of concentration, particularly in the later stages. Some degree of literacy is required.

Facilitators:

This works well with a fairly large group, up to 16-20. At several stages the group can be subdivided into smaller groups of 3-4, ensuring that more children have the chance to express their ideas. An observer / recorder is ideally required.

Materials:

Small pieces of paper with some means to stick them onto a larger sheet - "Post-It Notes" are ideal
2-3 flip-chart sized pieces of paper
Sufficient pens for one to be given to each group of 3-4 children

Instructions:

1. Start by explaining that we are going to do some different activities to learn about the different people whom we meet and the ways in which they help us.
2. Group participants into 3s or 4s and give each group a small pile of notelets/ "Post-Its" (about 10-12) and a pen. Ask each group to think about the people that they meet normally and to write one down on each notelet. Try to avoid giving examples and do not, at this stage, suggest categories of people ("mother", "teacher" etc) as opposed to named people ("Rajan", "Viji", etc). This will be sorted later. In the meantime stick two sheets of flipchart paper together to form a larger sheet and attach this to the wall or lay it on the ground.
3. When the groups seem more or less done ask each group in turn to read out what is on their notes and then to stick them on to one or the other end of the large sheet of paper. One end is for people that they meet in the home and the other for people outside the home. You might also indicate an area in the middle for people who fall under both categories. In many cases the children will probably have clear ideas about home/outside the home for different categories of people but a few may generate discussion amongst all participants which should be encouraged. If any group has proper names written down, ask them to explain who these people are and place them according to category (e.g. friends, cousins, etc). As each successive group takes its turn they should stick their notes on top of the categories of people already laid out on the sheets where these repeat. By the end you should have a range of different *types* of people, many of them occurring several times (such as mother, teacher). Take note of the frequency with which different categories appear.
4. When all the notes are stuck on the sheet of paper ask the participants to look at them and think about people who may be missing. You may prompt with a few ideas of your own if anyone you consider likely is not there - e.g. religious figures, local government figures, people associated with the project itself. Note feedback to such prompts.

5. When the participants are happy with the range of people represented (having added any that seemed missing) invite them to talk about why these people are important, the kind of things that they do to help or the kind of things that are nice to do with this person, etc. Take categories one-by-one, using this as an opportunity to learn in more depth about at least some of them. When particular information is offered about one category of persons you can ask who else is represented that this is also true for. So, for example, if mothers brush their daughters' hair, who else does this? When do they do it instead of the mother and what, if any, are the differences? It may be impractical to have such a discussion about every person represented so the facilitator will need to decide on the most important persons/issues to explore.
6. Ask participants to rejoin their groups of 3 or 4. Give them more notelets. Ask them to think about the biggest difficulties / challenges that children in their community face. Then decide what are the 4 or 5 biggest of these. They should write each one on a separate notelet. While they are doing this, line up the different categories of people along the longest side of the flipchart paper already in use.
7. Invite each group to share the difficulties/challenges they have identified, laying each one on the sheet of paper. Elicit further thoughts about at least some of these from the group and from other participants. Is this a common problem? Who is it worse for - boys or girls? Older or younger children? etc. Each group should take turns to share their ideas, laying similar problems on top of those already on the sheet.
8. Review the list of problems identified with the participants as a whole. Ask them to think for a moment about the 3 biggest/most common ones. Then call out each one in turn, asking the participants to put up their hand if this is one of their 3. (NOTE: you might want to ask them to close their eyes when voting in order to avoid copying.) Record the number of votes for each and feed back the results to the participants.
9. Depending on the time available and enthusiasm of the participants take the 3-7 difficulties that received the most votes and place them along the short edge of the paper so that you now have the basis of a graph or matrix, as follows:

		Categories of People												
Difficulties/ Challenges														

Explain to the participants that they should now think about which of the people represented do or could help them with which difficulty. Each participant should then put a mark on the matrix to indicate this, taking turns. Inevitably some degree of copying may occur and it will be important to observe the process of completing the matrix in order to discern the extent to which this seems to be true.

10. Invite all the participants to review the completed matrix and talk through issues that emerge from this. Who have they indicated as helping with which problem and who has not been indicated. It would also be a good idea to explore strategies for problem solving involving the people represented and to think of others who might also have a useful role to play but are not represented.

Body Maps

Aim:

To generate data on children's ideas about physical, psychological and emotional wellbeing and illbeing.

Participants:

This activity can be used with children aged 8 years and over. The younger children enjoy participating but it is the older children (12-14) that contribute the most. The groups can be large, 10-15 children, although around 8-10 is a more effective number. The groups can be mixed by age and sex.

Facilitator:

1 facilitator and 1 recorder are needed for a maximum of 2 working groups.

Materials:

Large sheets of paper and pens

Instructions:

1. Gather the children into suitable sized groups. Ask them to lay 3 large sheets of paper on the floor. If mats or newspapers are available, these should be laid under the paper to protect it from damage. Ask for one, preferably small-medium sized, child from the group to volunteer and ask this child to lie down on the paper. Make sure that the person is lying down on his/her back with arms and legs spread. Ask for two more volunteers to draw around the body of the child.
2. Ask the children to think about what makes them feel bad or sick. Then ask them to think about the place in or on the body or the body part that feels bad. Then ask them to draw within the outline of the body the affected area or organ and its location.
3. When all the diseases and conditions have been identified and the affected parts drawn on the body, ask the children to list the causes of these conditions.
4. Finally, ask the children what can be done to cure these conditions and, if there is time, who in their community is available to treat them.

Well-being Exercise
(adapted from Jon Hubbard's Functioning Exercise)

Aim:

To elicit the characteristics (and conceptual categories) that children or adults associate with wellbeing for children of different ages and genders.

Participants:

This activity was used effectively with children (and adults) over 8-9 years of age. With a diverse group of participants, it may be advisable to group similar individuals together (gender, age, socio-cultural background) and run the activity in parallel for each group. Each group should ideally not be more than 8 persons.

Facilitators:

At least 1 facilitator and translator for each working group.

Materials:

4-6 Cardboard File Covers for each group
Two colours of marker pens for each group
A4 sheet for each participant
Pen or pencil for each participant

Instructions:

1. Introduce the activity to the participating children. Explain that you want the participants to think of a female or male child/young person/middle-aged person/elderly person that they know about whom they could say, "Yes, s/he is basically doing well" if asked the question "Are they doing well?" Specify the age range you want the participants to choose their person from (i.e. between 5 and 10, between 11 and 15, etc). It may help to draw stick figures on a sheet of paper to denote the particular age group and gender (remember that you will have to use stereotypical representations for gender, although you can jokingly question these).
2. Ask participants if they have got the person in their mind. When you have confirmed that they have, ask them to draw a stick figure of that person quickly on their personal sheet of A4 paper. Ask them to mark the person's actual age (in years) or a good guess under the stick figure.
3. Ask the participants to keep their person in mind, and to write down 4 things about the person that lets them know that they are doing well or that allows them to say, "Yes, s/he is basically doing well". Do not give examples. Avoid asking for "reasons" that they are doing well. Ask the participants if they have such a person in mind, and whether they can think of different things about the person that tell them that they're doing well (maximum of 4 and minimum of 1). Ask the participants to write this down on their piece of paper next to the stick figure that they have drawn.
4. Once everyone has completed this task, ask them to think of a new person of the same age group but different gender. Repeat steps 2 and 3 for this person, and also for the other ages/genders that you are interested in.
5. Mark each cardboard file cover with a stick figure and age range that corresponds to each category that the participants have thought of. Give each group one set of file covers. Ask the participants to briefly explain their "four things" in spoken language, using their notes to aid memory. A designated note taker (perhaps the translator/facilitator) must write down each participant's "four things" in turn, trying hard to capture the spoken language and phrases. Complete this activity for the entire set of file covers.

6. During the exercise, the facilitators can identify commonly occurring or interesting characteristics or markers emerging from the activities. Upon completion of the entire set of file covers, encourage participants to review the file covers and reflect on the characteristics or markers identified by the facilitators. It may be useful to ask questions about “what” these mean in different situations or “how” a person with a particular characteristic would behave in a significant situation (i.e. at home, with neighbours, whilst working, etc). It may be interesting also to explore “what” and “how” questions about a person who does NOT have a particular characteristic / marker. This may be the most important part of the entire exercise so spend some time on this!
7. Thank the participants for their time and explain that you will use the file covers and their ideas to plan future activities. Take any feedback on the activity, and provide some feedback on what you may have learned from the activity.

Image Theatre Exercise

(Adapted from Augusto Boal's *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*, 1992)

Aim:

To generate information on problems faced by children in the community and on the repertoire of responses they may make to these.

Participants:

This activity was used effectively with children over 8-9 years of age. During the activity, if the participants are diverse, it is advisable to group similar individuals (i.e. gender and age) together within the small group activities. The total group should be ideally composed of 12 to 24 persons; each small group should not exceed 6 persons in size.

Facilitators:

At least 1 facilitator and translator for the activity, as well as an additional note-taker.

Materials:

None required.

Instructions:

1. Preliminary activity to explain ground-rules and method. Arrange participants in a circle, standing facing inwards. Ask for two volunteers. Without speaking, arrange the two volunteers in the center of the circle to be motionless figures standing facing one another and shaking hands. Step back into the circle and ask the participants what story they see in the image before them. When participants volunteer a story, elicit more details from them and others in the group (i.e. "If these are siblings saying goodbye, why are they separating? How do they each feel about each other? What challenges might lie before each of them? What do they say to one another?"). Once a single story has been elaborated, then ask for a different story that may be read within the same image. Elaborate this story in a similar fashion. Then remove one of the volunteers from the still image and substitute a new volunteer in a different (non-shaking hands) pose. Ask the participants to read the new image. Continue to change volunteers, poses and images three or four more times, until the ingredients required for the main exercise have been adequately demonstrated. These are as follows: a) the method of "reading" (projecting onto) an image; b) the principle that multiple perspectives may be valid; c) the method of using bodies (respectfully and carefully) to construct still images that convey a situation; d) the idea that the stories and characters elaborated by the viewers are independent and not connected to the volunteers who are embodying characters in the images.
2. Divide participants into groups of 4 to 6 persons. Ask each group to create a still-image that shows a child who is facing some kind of problem, as well as people around her/him. Give each group about 15 minutes to develop and rehearse a story and an image.
3. Bring the participants together in a semi-circle. Have each group, in turn, present their silent image for their peer audience to read. Inform the group that the unknown child in the image lives in their village and facilitate the reading of each image, asking the audience to map out the characters in the story, the circumstances of the child, the background to the child's problems, and her/his thoughts and feelings. Explore alternative readings of each image, whilst the note-taker records the themes and ideas associated with each problem. The facilitator can also ask about the relevance of issues in the story to past experiences of the children in the village. The story elaborated by the group presenting each image is not privileged here, and will only be presented at the end of the readings IF the group requests an opportunity to do so.
4. At the end of the multiple readings of each image, the facilitator can ask the participants which suggested story they thought was the most realistic and that they would like to see more of. Then a discussion should be facilitated on how each problem might be resolved, with an emphasis on the most realistic solutions and the potential (social) resources that might be utilised in each case. Again, the note-taker should record themes and ideas produced during the discussion.

5. To conclude the exercise, each group should be instructed to create two further images, depicting a) one effective action to resolve the problem, and b) an improved situation that results from this action. The groups should each be given 10 minutes to produce and rehearse the two new images.
6. Bring the participants together in a semi-circle to see the presentation of the series of all three images (problem, action, improved situation) and applaud each of the groups.

APPENDIX 2:

Some Thoughts about Interviews

(Taken from Boyden, J & J. Ennew, J, (eds.) Children in Focus–A Manual for Participatory Research with Children. (1997) Stockholm: Radda Barnen, pp 121-123)

Interviewing is one of the most fundamental methods of social research. A development of the 'natural' process of conversation, it relies primarily, but not solely, on verbal communication. It is important to record not only words but also such aspects as body language and tone of voice.

Research interviews are conversations with a structure and purpose that are controlled to a varying degree by the researcher. Just like everyday conversations, research interviews can take on a variety of forms, including:

Life story interviews

Can provide a wealth of information on the life and personal circumstances of an individual child, group of children or family. It may be most practical to conduct an interview in several sessions to ensure that it does not intrude into the child's routine. Issues raised in one session can be discussed again in a later one.

Testimony

This is a more focused form of interview in which a specific aspect of a child's life is explored, such as experience of work, education or family life. These focused interviews take less time than life stories but, since they go into greater detail, require greater prior confidence and trust between subject and researcher and a greater knowledge by the researcher of the issue in question. Because they are specific and can be quite short, it is possible to conduct single-issue interviews with quite a large number of children.

“Key informant” interviews on specific topics

- In the early stages of research, most researchers spend some time with people who seem to be knowledgeable about the topic or group to be studied. These can be either adults or children, and may be “key” in the sense that they are opinion leaders or acknowledged authorities on the subject. Or they may be “key” in that they can open the door to access to a group. In either case, key informants may mislead researchers, and can be more interesting for the stereotyped ideas they present than for the actual knowledge they have. Many will be accustomed to talking to researchers and have well-practised tales to tell. In the case of child research, conventional approaches have tended to use adults, such as teachers or parents, as key informants. Ultimately, the best information comes from children, rather than from “brokers” who stand between researchers and respondents.
- As research progresses, certain respondents become involved in the process and may form a close friendship with a researcher, who will often spend time talking to them both formally and informally. These people are key informants in the sense that their opinion and reflections will be sought regularly during the course of fieldwork and they may sometimes spontaneously offer to be interviewed or give testimony on a specific subject, or even make tape recordings or written records that add to the researcher's data.

Never ask questions unless you are sure you know:

- The correct ways of beginning, carrying out and ending a conversation between the person you are intending to interview and yourself (taking into account such factors as gender, relative age and other aspects of status) in the social or cultural group concerned;
- Cultural ways of framing questions and answers;
- If the topic is one that can be discussed in conversation, if it can be discussed within that culture, or if it is of interest; and
- The words and phrases normally used to discuss the topic, and what they mean.

This entails that the interview should not normally be the first method used in research, or take place with children that you do not already know fairly well and who are interested to talk to you about the topic in which you are interested. The best interviews are those where children initiate themselves, or in which children interview other children.

In conventional research, interviews are nearly always focused on the researcher's interests and research objectives. If this method is used at the outset of a research process, it is unlikely to be participatory. Nevertheless, if children themselves choose the research topic, or themes within the topic, and become involved in collecting the interview material, it is possible for interviews to be participatory.

APPENDIX 3:

Some Thoughts About Focus Group Discussions

(Taken from Boyden, J & J. Ennew, J, (eds.) Children in Focus–A Manual for Participatory Research with Children. (1997) Stockholm: Radda Barnen, pp 129-133)

A focus group discussion is a purposeful, facilitated discussion between a group of respondents with similar characteristics, within a fixed timeframe, focusing on a limited number of topics that may be chosen by either researchers or respondents. The number of respondents should not be too small or too large. The discussion should take place between the respondents, facilitated by a researcher, whose role is to ensure that the topics are adequately covered and that all members of the group have an equal chance to talk. The facilitator is supported by a recorder, using a notebook, a flip chart, audio- or videotape, or a mixture of methods.

The discussion may be completely unstructured or may be prompted by a small number of open questions posed by the facilitator in ways that do not interrupt the flow of the discussion.

Focus group discussions can be organised with several groups consecutively, or with the same group meeting regularly over a relatively long period of time.

Organising Focus Group Discussions:

- Participants should have similar characteristics, determined by the research question, culture and other relevant elements.
- Researchers should negotiate participants' informed consent to:
 - place
 - topic
 - research
 - person acting as facilitator
 - person acting as recorder
 - recording method
 - review of the record of the discussion
- Ensure that the participants understand the topics.
- Ensure that the seating is comfortable and does not create distance or an unequal relationship between moderator / facilitator and participants. A circle of chairs is often stipulated in manuals, but participants may be happier on cushions, or on the ground. Eye contact between all members of the group should be the main aim of the seating arrangement.
- A quiet, well lit space, with no interruptions is the ideal, but many focus group discussions take place successfully in un-ideal conditions indoors or outdoors.

The Role of the Moderator / Facilitator is to:

- Build rapport
- Introduce the session
- Encourage discussion
- Encourage involvement
- Monitor the rhythm of the discussion
- Minimise domination of the discussion by powerful, articulate or emotionally involved individuals
- Summarise discussion for review at the end
- Listen for additional comments after the session
- Not act as an expert or teacher, correcting facts and providing opinions.

NOTE: It is vital to find out how people normally discuss important issues before asking them to take part in a focus group discussion and to adjust your expectations and way of running the session to be appropriate to the cultural context.

The Role of the Recorder is to:

- Record date, time, and place (and possibly also names of participants);
- Make a detailed record of content and actions, recording exact words where possible;
- Make a general description of group dynamics:
 - Level of participation
 - Level of interest
 - Dominant and passive participants
 - Record opinions – especially key statements
 - Record emotions – reluctance, strong feelings and so on
 - Make a note of the words and phrases used by participants to discuss the topic

Special Issues to Consider When Running Focus Group Discussions with Children:

- Who has chosen the topic or research problem? Children will not be good discussants for a topic in which they are not interested.
- Should the boys and girls be grouped together or grouped separately? This depends on the children's age and cultural factors.
- Warm up activities and stimuli for focus group discussions work very well with children:
 - It helps to have some suitable warm-up activities (such as games and songs) to use before you begin a session (and to cool down at the end) – these should be planned beforehand and related to the topic if possible. Children can also be good at initiating warm ups.
 - Stimuli for discussion can be role plays on the chosen topic, drawing activities, a story, a video, music or a review of a previous discussion.

- Children's comfort and safety:
 - Adults often interrupt a focus group discussion with children, talking to the facilitator as if the children did not matter – make it clear to the adult that this is unacceptable;
 - Children can be easily distracted, and children who are not involved in the focus group discussion can be particularly disruptive because they are curious about what is going on – try to minimise this;
 - Chairs or other seating arrangements should be comfortable for the children, not too big for smaller children and not smaller than the chair used by the facilitator and recorder – sit on the floor with the children if this is how they are most comfortable – never sit them behind desks or sit behind a desk or table yourself.
 - Avoid “question and answer” sessions;
 - Don't use a special patronising voice for children or act and speak in an authoritarian manner;
 - Make sure the children understand (and have agreed to) the method of recording used and the review at the end of the session;
 - Take special care over informed consent; many focus group discussions with children take place in schools with teachers telling them to take part;
 - Be sensitive to the children's level of literacy and use of language – but don't talk down to them.