

Can I Share Your Ideas With the World? Young Children's Consent in the Research Process

Sonya Gaches

Sonya Gaches is currently a lecturer at the University of Otago College of Education in Dunedin, New Zealand, after spending more than 25 years as an early childhood educator in the United States. Sonya's research interests include teaching/learning experiences in the early childhood education community, children's rights, and how these interact with policies and practices. Email: sonya.gaches@otago.ac.nz

Utilizing the four features of informed consent from the guiding document Ethical Research Involving Children, the article illustrates how the informed consent process was carried out with young children from the initial planning stages through the ongoing research's focused conversations. Specifically, the questions of what would be needed to acquire informed consent from the children and what assurances could there be that young children understood the research and how its results would be disseminated are addressed. The article concludes with suggestions for what other researchers might consider and include in their local contexts.

Key words: *children's participation rights; informed consent; research ethics; early childhood*

The participatory articles of the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC; 1989) have called particular attention to the promise of conducting research with young children and the role young children's views and voices can and likely should play in all matters that affect them. This perspective of children as agentic and capable is reflected in the early childhood curriculum of Aotearoa New Zealand, *Te Whāriki* (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2017), which states:

Children are capable and confident learners and communicators, healthy in mind, body and spirit, secure in their sense of belonging and in the knowledge that they make a valued contribution to society. (p. 2, emphasis added)

However, the promise of young children being perceived as capable and confident and having their participation rights fully recognized is a journey that has been fraught with more than a few bumps in the road and plenty of uneven, uncertain footing. The process of consent to participate in research has been an ever-present obstacle for researchers desiring to work with young children.

This article first discusses some of the many issues related to the consent of young children to participate in research and then describes how recent research addressed these issues in a project with children aged 2 to 5 years in early childhood education settings on the South Island of Aotearoa New Zealand. Most specifically, as part of a greater research project, answers to the following questions were sought: What will be needed to acquire informed consent of young children in this research? What assurances could there be that young children understand the research project and what it means to consent to participate? It is hoped that this article's discussion and illustrative example can provide guidance for those wishing to undertake research with children.

Informed consent in research with children

One of the first questions that arises is whether children *assent* or *consent* to participate in research. According to the online Oxford English Dictionary, the two words have very similar meanings. The verb *assent* means "to give

the concurrent of one's will, to agree to (a proposal), to comply with (a desire)" whereas the verb *consent* means "voluntarily to accede to or acquiesce in what another proposes or desires; to agree, comply, yield." Additionally, in the full definition of consent, "to assent" is also used.

The distinction between these two words rests predominantly in the manner in which they have been used in research to denote legal ramifications originating from the biomedical field (Graham et al., 2013; Guillemin & Gillam, 2004; Morrow & Richards, 1996; Oulton et al., 2016). Young children are generally deemed to be a vulnerable population in need of care and oversight by adults (particularly parents, teachers, agencies, and community organizations). Thus, informed consent to participate in research must be first obtained from these adults in most instances. *Informed consent* indicates that the consenting person has been informed of the purpose, potential benefits, and risks of participation and then voluntarily agrees (or consents) to participate. This consent is most often confirmed in writing but can also be documented as a verbal agreement in the transcript of a recorded interview or other similar means (Marshall, 2003). Based upon the legal requirements of consent and due to the fact that children are not deemed to be of legal responsible age, some researchers and human ethics review boards assert that children cannot consent but can only assent or dissent to participating in the research (Te One, 2007).

As noted by Guillemin and Gillam (2004), informed consent marks a special relationship between the researcher and research participant "where the prospective participant comes to an understanding of what the research project is about and what participation would involve and makes his or her own free decision about whether, and on what terms, to participate" (p. 272). Graham et al. (2013) and Graham, Powell, and Taylor (2015) argue that this special relationship and indicative respect between researcher and potential research participant must also be extended to young child research participants. The research discussed in this article takes a similar view of young children as capable and confident, to be respected throughout the research process, and able to make their own free decisions regarding participation. Thus, I shall be referring to young children's informed consent with the acknowledgement that parental consent and institutional consent has already been achieved.

The guiding document *Ethical Research Involving Children* (Graham et al., 2013) states that informed consent has four main features: consent involves an explicit act; consent can only be given if the participants are informed about and have an understanding of the research; consent must be given voluntarily without coercion; consent must be renegotiable so that children may withdraw at any stage of the research process. After a further elaboration on these four main features, they will be used as a means to address the two previously stated research questions.

Consent as an explicit act

The role of parental (or other designated guardian) consent as well as consent from other institutional gatekeepers is reaffirmed in Graham et al.'s (2013) consideration that informed consent must be considered an explicit act. While we continue to acknowledge young children as capable and confident, in most cases it remains a legal requirement for those charged with the care and safety of children to provide the first consents. However, as mentioned previously, the UNCRC Articles 12 and 13 assert that children have the right to have their views given due consideration in a manner that is appropriate to their age and capabilities (United Nations, 1989). Children then are part of a "triad (rather than a participant/researcher dyad) consisting of the researcher, child participant and parent or carer" (Graham et al., 2013, p. 57). Furthermore, in recognition that the child is a member of particular cultures and communities that have similar moral, ethical, or legal responsibilities for the children, consent may also be obtained from those community members.

Understanding the research in order to consent

The challenge to the researcher then becomes how to explain the research in a manner that is understandable

for the young child (Smith, 2011, 2013). The research project itself must be described so that young children understand its purpose, what they will be required to do as part of the research, and how their contributions will be disseminated. For young children, having results published in a journal or presented at a research conference may have very little meaning. Standard written research consent processes are not sufficient for children (Graham et al., 2015) or some other populations (Marshall, 2003). Within these informed consent documents there is generally a great deal of written text and complex academic or legal language. However, it is the responsibility of the researcher to make the informed consent process approachable and understandable.

Where Article 12 of the UNCRC states that children have the right to have their views given due consideration in matters that affect them, it is important to remember that Article 13 further states that children have “the right to freedom of expression” and that these expressions can be made through a variety of means not limited to print but also inclusive of “the form of art, or through any other media of the child’s choice.” Furthermore, *General Comment Number 7: Implementing Child Rights in Early Childhood* (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2005) requires adults to demonstrate “patience and creativity by adapting their expectations to the young child’s interests, levels of understanding and preferred ways of communicating” (14c). This means that adults need to draw upon UNCRC’s Article 5 to recognize children’s “evolving capacities” and draw from these capacities as the child’s strengths in order to continually modify our adult notions of what it means to participate and how young children can express themselves as they participate.

Researchers have documented several strategies for undertaking revised and more child-appropriate consent processes while still fulfilling the mandates of human ethics committees, including semistructured, planned conversations (Gray & Winter, 2011; Harcourt & Conroy, 2011), a consultation process with other children (Gaches & Gallagher, 2019; Harcourt & Conroy, 2011), the use of a poster (Bitou & Waller, 2011), an information booklet (Gaches & Gallagher, 2019; Te One, 2011), and photographs with captions (Graham et al., 2013). Regardless of which medium is used to communicate these requirements, language must be used that is familiar, approachable, and understandable to the desired child participants in that place and time (Graham et al., 2013). Moreover, it is important for children to have some type of reference point or materials to which they can later refer as the research proceeds. Information provided to children should include details usually associated with the consent process (e.g., research topic and purpose, what participation involves, potential benefits and risks, ongoing options to withdraw, where the research will take place). However, it should also contain information about what will become of anything the children create, such as drawings or photographs.

Voluntary consent without coercion

Children must feel that they can freely consent or dissent. Adults are frequently perceived by children as those who have power over them. This can be particularly true in education settings (Gaches, 2020; Gaches & Gallagher, 2019; Gallagher et al., 2010) where children may feel obliged to participate, as they must for schoolwork, or that participation can be bartered to gain the adult’s favour or to get out of undesirable work. Children may also feel pressure to participate through overt goading and coaxing from peers or from feeling they are missing out on somethings special. Graham et al. (2013) also provide several considerations for how various cultural considerations around respect, hospitality, and obedience can factor into unintentional coercion for children to participate. In a related vein, children may feel that withdrawing their consent may damage their relationship with the adult researcher or other adults associated with the research (Gaches, 2020) and so they are coerced into continuing with the research out of fear of hurting this relationship.

Consent as renegotiable throughout the research

Throughout the research process consent must be affirmed and children must have the right to discontinue their participation even if their parents or other gatekeepers have consented and desire the child to participate. While this is generally true for all research participants, special considerations are involved for young children (Graham et al., 2013; Gray & Winter, 2011). First, young children may not have the verbal capacity to state their desire to discontinue. Special attention must be paid to children's nonverbal or behavioural dissent (Gray & Winter, 2011). A child ignoring an adult's prompts or who only plays with research materials should not be seen as adversarial but rather as expressing their dissent to participate. Dockett, Einarsdóttir, and Perry (2011) note that children can express their dissent in many ways, such as verbally, requesting to leave to use the toilet, and engaging with research materials but not the researcher.

Additionally, a child research participant may participate one day and then decide on a following day to no longer be a part of the research. Researchers must then decide, based upon their research design, whether or not that child can rejoin the research again another time (Harcourt & Conroy, 2011). Gray and Winter (2011) utilized "process consent" (p. 31) to break the research into smaller pieces and then recognize children's consent/dissent through discrete changes in their nonverbal cues along each step of the research.

Finally, special considerations also come into play when researching in group contexts (Graham et al, 2013) as children may again feel coerced to continue because they want to be a part of the group, they fear teasing or bullying if they withdraw, or if the group engagement doesn't provide a sufficient opportunity to exit.

The study

In an effort to better understand the lives of young children on the South Island of Aotearoa New Zealand, both as a new resident and because recent related research by the Children's Commissioner (Children's Commissioner Manaakitia Ā Tātou Tamariki & Oranga Tamariki Ministry for Children, 2019) excluded the voice of these children, I undertook a small-scale qualitative research project with young children. Following a consultative process with older children (Gaches, 2020; Gaches & Gallagher, 2019), it was determined that I would engage in focused conversations with young children in their early childhood settings to find out where and how they learned, how they were engaged in their communities, and what their thoughts were for their future. Through my community engagements as part of the Initial Teacher Education (ITE) program at my university, I approached two early childhood education settings about conducting this research with their 2- to 5-year-old children. One setting is a local kindergarten (Beachside Kindergarten¹) and the other is a nonprofit community-based education and care centre (Hillside Centre). Both settings were interested in the research and so sought and obtained consent from their governing bodies.

The research plan developed with school-age child consultants (Gaches & Gallagher, 2019) included having focused conversations with young children while they played with LEGOs or drew with markers/crayons. Other times the young children took photographs with special child-friendly cameras and we used these photographs as discussion starters (Einarsdóttir, 2005). During these conversations I would ask them about their learning, their engagements with the community, and what they thought life would be like when they were adults. Results from these focused conversations, the children's views and voices, will take centre focus in further publications.

However, before these focused conversations began, the informed consent process had to be undertaken. Throughout this research, many ethical issues were considered (Gaches, 2020), but the ethical consent process itself asked these questions:

- What will be needed to acquire informed consent of the young children in this research?
- What assurances could there be that young children understand the research project and what it means to consent to participate?

The four main features of informed consent discussed previously (Graham et al., 2013) were used as both a planning tool and as part of critically reflexive ethics in practice (Gaches, 2020) in addressing these questions and are discussed in the following. Data for this article is drawn from the documents used in the consent process, as well as field notes recorded after each research visit and transcripts from the conversations with children.

Enacting the four features of informed consent

From the outset of this research planning, efforts were made to engage with all of these features of informed consent. The discussion that follows is not a chronological ordering of the process but is rather organized by the four features. Often various actions that were taken in the informed consent process fell into more than one feature. It is hoped that this illustrative example can provide guidance for those wishing to undertake further research with children.

Consent as an explicit act in action. Informed consent was attained from the early childhood settings and their administrative bodies as well as the children's parents as part of the institutional human ethics requirements. However, from the beginning the intention was to provide multiple opportunities to obtain informed consent from the children themselves. This informed consent would be through explicit means as well as implicit ongoing consent. This section will discuss the explicit means. How implicit consent/dissent occurred will be discussed in a later section.

Because I was familiar with the settings and knew that engagement with books was a common occurrence, the explicit act of providing information about the research was through a specially created big book and individual handheld-sized black-and-white copies of the same book (Gaches, 2020; Te One, 2011). The reading and discussion of these books was the explicit act of informing the children about the research, its purpose, what the children would be expected to do, and what would happen to their contributions. On the last page of the book was a set of tick-boxes where children could mark their consent/dissent to participate and a box where they could "sign" their name (or make their mark) in one of the handheld-sized books. I explained to the children that this marking and signing would prove to other adults that each child had made their own decision to participate in the research with me and have their ideas shared with the world.

At Hillside Centre, reading the big book was part of the normally occurring whole group time at mid-morning. The children were especially engaged by particular graphic aspects of the book (to be discussed in the following section) and the opportunity to sign their names in the box. At Beachside Kindergarten, reading the big book was an optional choice activity during the regularly occurring playtime after morning kai (snack). About one-fourth of the children chose to come and sit in the area where books are routinely read with groups of children. The attending children had a variety of levels of engagement, from peripherally engaged while playing with a friend, to sitting quietly and appearing to listen intently.

Furthermore, in both settings as I began each subsequent engagement with children, either individually or in small groups, I pulled out one of the handheld-sized booklets to remind the children about the research project and its key informational points. If this was the first time a child was participating, they had the opportunity to mark their consent/dissent on the final page. The child was then offered another copy—their own copy—of the small book to keep. During each research visit, I kept a handheld-sized copy of the informed consent book next to me where I

was sitting. When a returning child began their engagement with me, I would point out the book and remind them of what I was doing in the early childhood centre that day, once again explicitly seeking their informed consent/dissent.

Understanding the research in order to consent in action. The challenge in creating the big book and accompanying handheld booklets was to create a narrative that would provide the necessary information but also be approachable and understandable to these young children. I had preexisting relationships with these early childhood settings as a visiting lecturer (supervisor) for our student teachers (student kaiako). Many of the children already knew me as someone who was there as their student teacher's university teacher. Now I was there in a different capacity doing something much more directly focused on their play, their interests, and their ideas. Therefore, my new purpose for being in their space had to be addressed. The first part of the informed consent book addressed this point:

Hello! My name is Sonya Gaches. I work at the University of Otago. Sometimes I come to (name of setting) to see how new kaiako are doing and to help them become even better kaiako. You may have seen me here before writing things on my iPad and talking with your kaiako. Maybe you and I have even played together while I was here.

Another part of my job at the University of Otago is to do research. Research is when you are curious and are wondering about some questions you have. You figure out a way to find an answer to that question. I bet you do research, too! What do you do when you have a question about something? Maybe you explore, looking for the answer. Maybe you ask someone else about your question. Maybe you watch or listen really carefully. These are some of the things I do as a researcher when I have questions.

Right now I am curious and wondering about children's lives. I think sometimes grown-ups forget to ask children about things that are important. Sometimes they remember but they only ask older children, like children who are in schools. Sometimes they forget to ask children who are in (kindergartens/early childhood centres)—children like you!

In a similar vein, the book continues to briefly share, in child-friendly language, some of the gatekeeping steps I took, including a brief mention of consulting with older children (Gaches, 2020; Gaches & Gallagher, 2019) and getting permission from their teachers and parents.

Perhaps one of the most challenging parts of the narrative was describing what they would be doing in a manner that kept their attention and was somewhat enticing and interesting but was still realistic and contained the needed information. This was accomplished through a first-person narrative with shorter, direct sentences in a very matter-of-fact manner, such as in the following excerpt:

When we're talking and drawing or building, I'm going to record our voices. That way I can remember what you say. When we're all done with this research, I'll delete all the recordings of us talking. Sometimes you might want to give me your drawings or we might take a picture of your drawings or what you build. You get to decide.

I then made sure to let them know what I would do with the information they shared with me:

Then I'll share some of your ideas with other grown-ups so they can hopefully make some better decisions about things children want or need in their lives and how to make things better for children. Sometimes I'll write about your ideas for people to read about. Other times I'll go to big meetings and talk about your ideas.

This point was reiterated two more times in the book and the final consent tick-box noted that by marking that box they were saying “*I want people around the world to hear my ideas.*” This last point rather became an ongoing mantra of the research project. As noted previously, when children reengaged with me on multiple visits, I would point to the handheld version of the book to remind them of the project and then I would ask, “Can I share your ideas with the world?” However, even the best intentions of this messaging can be problematic. After all, what does “the world” mean for these children? Is it the world in which they are most directly participating, or might this world extend to worlds they see through the media, including but not limited to social media, reality television, and fictional “world/time” settings? To at least partially address these ambiguities, as was conversationally appropriate with the children in our interactions, I would mention how I had travelled to faraway places like America (how the children referred to the United States) and Denmark and how I had shared my work with the primary school children with adults (the children’s preferred word) while I was there. While Denmark was less known to them, some children had family in America or had travelled to America, and children were often curious about my family there or things I did growing up there. These conversations led me to believe that at least some of the children had an understanding of “the world” extending to faraway places outside their usual daily routines. However, this is also an issue that the concept of ethical mirroring can address (Christensen & Prout, 2002; Gaches, 2020). How research findings will be disseminated and what impact they may have are ethical considerations that researchers must address within the consent process for all research participants, regardless of their ages and capabilities.

There were several indicators that the big book / handheld books and accompanying conversations were successful in helping the children understand at least some key elements of the research. First, children were engaged and attentive at each reading of the big book. At Beachside Kindergarten, a couple of children were very excited about the cartoon-like illustrations in the book, most particularly a big rainbow and a cartoon version of me. One of the children exclaimed that she knew the cartoon-type person was me because of the glasses being worn and the purple streak in the character’s hair (just like mine at the time). This was an intentional likeness that the book’s illustrator (my artistically gifted sister²) had incorporated.

A few children were particularly excited to participate after that first reading. At Hillside Centre, one child, AB, was so excited that she interrupted the discussion at the end of the reading, insistent that she wanted to sign her name and for people to hear her ideas. Additionally, at Beachside Kindergarten, both B and C immediately requested their own copies of the handheld booklets. Even after I explained that we wouldn’t actually start the research until my next visit, they both demanded (and received) their own copies right then. C ran off to show his copy of the book to his mother, one of the kindergarten’s kaiako (teachers).

It’s interesting to note that children often chose to draw with the markers rather than build with LEGOs (Dockett et al., 2011) and that several of them also asked for another copy of the handheld book. I was perplexed at first, but children often wanted to colour in the grayscale pictures of the booklet while conversing with me about the research project and my planned focused conversation intentions. This was not something I had anticipated but went along with, as interacting with these consent books appeared to create a physical connection for the children to focus our conversation and its purpose. The children then kept this additional booklet as their created artwork and as a point of reference to which they referred as to why they were chatting with me that day (Graham et al., 2013). It may have just been the novelty of this new process, the receiving the gift of their own small book to keep, or their colouring in of the pictures, but I never saw a booklet just discarded or laying around. It appeared that, for at least some of these children, these books were something special.

The following response from B led me to believe that the consent booklets held a connection to potential power. Upon receiving her copy of the consent booklet, B ran around the kindergarten showing the booklet to the other

children, including children who had not listened to the reading of the big book. She provided a good summary of the key points to these children (whether they seemed interested or not) and made a point about how I was going to share their ideas with the world while pointing to the picture of the world in the booklet. When I left the kindergarten for the day shortly thereafter, I saw B standing in the outdoor play space, clutching the booklet to her chest. Each time I returned when B was in attendance, she was eager to participate in our play and focused conversations. This small book seemed to hold the potential for something exciting, something that would make a difference for her. During a later conversation about how she learned to wink, B strongly stated that “my dad teacheded me to have a giant voice, too.” It was as if this consent booklet was an object that was going to help that giant voice be heard all the more.

B was not the only child who could explain aspects of the project very well to others unprompted. During one research day at Beachside Kindergarten, I was drawing and conversing with W when her younger brother approached. While I was explaining the research to him, W interrupted to clarify and then proceeded to explain the research in a manner her brother better understood. She then guided him through the process of making his marks of consent. I then verbally asked him if I could share his ideas with the world to double-check that he wasn't feeling coerced by his big sister (Graham et al., 2013). Meanwhile, at Hillside Centre, AB's mother shared with me (and I retell here with permission from mother and child) that during a home conflict between siblings, her daughter became quite distressed when the older sibling was tattling on something AB had said. Reportedly, AB declared to her mother that she had not given permission in that instance to have her words shared with the world.

Voluntary consent without coercion in action. Since I had a preexisting relationship with these early childhood settings as someone who would be observing student teachers, I was aware that, based upon this relationship, children may see me as a figure with some power and authority even though I had also often engaged in some play and conversations with the children. I was also careful during this research to not be the designated supervisor for any student teachers in these settings. Instead, I renewed my relationship with the centre at the beginning of the academic year as only an observer and play participant. My play with children began with just sitting in play areas and engaging with them as they approached me. Sometimes I was the recipient of sand-tea times and other times I drew or sculpted playdough alongside children, while still other times I was requested to push children on the swings or to “watch this!” After reading the big book to the children, this relationship shifted as I became the researcher. When children approached me to play, again I would remind them through use of the handheld booklets that I was there for research. The three consent options were

- permission to play and talk and for Sonya to share their ideas with the world
- permission to play and talk but Sonya could NOT share their ideas with the world
- no permission to play or talk with Sonya.

Nearly all children who engaged with the consent booklets chose the option to play and talk with me and for me to share their ideas with the world. One child at Beachside Kindergarten selected no permission to play or talk with me, took her book to her backpack, and never interacted with me again. Another child at Hillside Centre, EN, chose to play and talk with me but not to share her ideas with the world. Each time EN, her friends, and I were engaged in drawing/building focused conversations, EN participated fully in the engagement, yet always declined consent to share her ideas with the world. However, when EN saw the small booklets created by/for the children as part of the member-checking process (see Gaches, 2020 for a full description of this process), she changed her mind and we had a brief exchange to be shared with the world. The concern, of course, is whether seeing her friends deeply and rather excitedly engaged in this final process was, in fact, coercive consent (Graham et al., 2013).

This was a particularly challenging ethical dilemma because EN *had* consented to participate in all our previous engagements unhindered as play partner but not as a research participant. These member-checking booklets could only be produced based upon transcriptions from data I had permission from the children to obtain. Since EN had not been a research participant, I had no data from EN from which to create the current booklet. She either had to consent to providing me research data or not be included in this member-checking booklet peer-inclusion moment (Corsaro, 2003). Thus, the ethical tensions pulled at EN's understanding what she was initially consenting to, understanding what she was consenting to now that she saw what her friends were doing, and how this affected her standing in her peer community and perhaps her voice in the world.

In each setting there were children who chose not to interact with me in any way or chose to not participate in these research interactions. Like EN, some children did choose to participate in play and conversation, but they did not want to have their ideas shared with the world. The variety of levels of engagement with me and the research's focused conversations was indicative that those children who did consent to participate in the research-focused conversations with me were doing so by their own choice. At Beachside Kindergarten, only eight children out of the approximately 25 children present each visit chose to have me share their ideas with the world. At Hillside Centre, only five of the approximately dozen or so children in attendance each day of my research visits chose to share. In each early childhood setting there were a few children who met with me and signed the consent booklet and would then draw or build with me in silence, not responding to my conversational overtures. Other consenting children would engage in conversation, but when I double-checked if I could share that idea with the world, they consistently replied no. Of those who did consent and wanted their ideas shared with the world, for each child there was at least one incident where they either verbally or nonverbally indicated their dissent to have some of their feelings and ideas shared with others. These interactions indicated to me that children felt comfortable engaging with me (or not) and were also comfortable engaging with me but dissented to the research itself.

Consent as renegotiable throughout the research in action. It was clearly stated in the informed consent books and in our conversations that the children could change their minds whether or not to participate at any time. As mentioned in the previous section, even after children provided their written consent in the handheld books, ongoing consent/dissent was obtained. While this was often my very repetitive questioning of "Can I share this with the world?" children had their own ways of dissenting. As has been seen in much research by others (Dockett et al., 2011; Graham et al., 2013; Gray & Winter, 2011) children's dissent can often take a nonverbal or dismissive form. Sometimes I would ask a question and the child would just ignore me and keep colouring or building. Sometimes it was a more overt evading of the question, such as in the following transcript excerpt:

Me: So, what do you think the world is going to be like when you get to be a grown-up?

Child 1: I, um, I ... (lips are moving but nothing is heard)

Me: I can't hear you.

Child 1: (withering looks at me then lips moving but nothing is heard)

Me: (playfully) I can't hear you. There's no sound coming out.

Child 2: Because she's not talking! (Children begin singing loudly)

Me: So, you're not going to tell me what life is going to be like when you're a grown-up? You don't want to talk about that?

Children: (silence)

Child 2: There's another magic pen! Look!

(Both children turn their attention to rummaging in the pen container to find the specialty colouring pen.)

Clearly, we were not going to be talking about what life was going to be like when they were grown-ups at least on that day. Child 1 had found a quite powerful way of not having her voice heard in response to my adult-focused question. Child 2 then diverted attention away from my pitiful attempt at a playful response by calling our attention to the sighting of a much-valued marker. This shift in the power relationship between my adult-researcher questioning and desired children's responses was then turned on me as I was soon being questioned about who lives with me in my home and what we each do with the dogs in our homes. Child in-the-moment-dissent in this instance is an illustration of how children can be empowered within the research process.

On another occasion, a child with whom I had been interacting quite a bit but whose responses had often been fairly brief had a different manner of indicating her consent to participate in my previous moves to focus the conversation. After sharing with me a story about her dad throwing her up to the stars, she declared, "It's just that I want to tell you a couple of things." She then proceeded to tell me in great detail all about how her mum and dad both help her learn how to behave and to ride her bike without training wheels, her favourite place to go to play in the community (a trampoline park), how she's going to have two babies like her mum when she's grown up, and how she learned to write letters from the poster on the wall. Where previously this child had been a bit reticent to share, this conversation rushed from her as though she'd been thinking about my previous questions for some time and was now ready to share with me these important key points. This made me wonder if her responses to our previous focused conversations had been slightly coerced and only now she was actually consenting to sharing these ideas with the world.

Concluding remarks

Throughout this illustrative example we can find answers to the questions of what will be needed to acquire informed consent of the young children in this research and what assurances there could be that young children understand the research project and what it means to consent to participate.

Several aspects of this research project addressed what was needed to acquire informed consent with the children. First, it is necessary to build a relationship of trust and rapport with the children (Smith, 2011, 2013). In this research, I was able to build upon existing relationships I had with early childhood centres. For many of the children I was already a known face and sometimes play partner. These relationships were instrumental in putting the children at ease when sharing the information about the research and during our ongoing engagements. The relationships also made reading and understanding children's nonverbal signals of dissent possible. When one child started talking with no sound and then she and another child began singing loudly, I knew them well enough to read that they weren't just being silly but that they were telling me they didn't want to talk about my proposed topic. When the child specified she had two things to tell me, I could read that this was a serious moment for her and paid special attention to these particular points.

Second, time and place had to be designated to acquire informed consent. Furthermore, that time and place was setting specific because each early childhood setting had its own cultures, routines, and ways of doing/being. At one setting, the big book was shared with the whole group during a designated group time, while in the other setting an optional small-group reading time was needed. Additionally, we created our own routines. One routine was the use of the handheld book as a reference point at the beginning of each research conversation to remind

the children of the purpose of these engagements. Another routine was the constant checking of “Can I share your idea(s) with the world?”

This routine was also highly related to the third requirement, which was a child-friendly and engaging way to explain the research to the children. The big book and accompanying handheld book fulfilled this need. Children enjoyed engaging with the book. Its cartoon-like illustrations helped the children make connections between the informed consent text, me as the researcher, and the children’s known worlds. The ability for the children to colour in and keep the handheld book made it a treasured keepsake for at least a few of the children and provided them with a reference point to which we could all return regularly.

Several of these same points and others provided the assurances that the young children understood the research project and what it meant to consent. First, there was the initial eagerness of children B, C, and AB after the reading of the big book. All three children were eager to begin the research with me that very day. Children were also good communicators about the intended research. Immediately after reading the big book, B approached other children and told them about the research, pointing to the picture of the earth in the handheld book as she explained how I was going to share their ideas with the world. Older sister W was able to provide a better explanation about the research to her younger sibling than I was able to do, and AB was adamant that she had not given permission for her words to be shared by her older sister, especially in the case of tattling. Finally, the explicit and implicit dissensions are indicators of understanding this process. Not all children chose to engage with me, the drawing, or the building. Some children chose to sign their consent in the handheld book but then never engage with me again, while others would sometimes engage and tell me, through a variety of means, that they didn’t want what they were saying shared with the world or they didn’t want to talk about my ideas for a focused conversation at all.

There are of course limitations to this research and its illustrative value. Much of this discussion is built upon my interpretations of the children’s engagements, consents, and dissensions. While I may rely on critically reflexive ethics in practice (Gaches, 2020; Pillow, 2003, 2015) to address potential bias or misinterpretation, there is always the possibility of complete misreading. Additionally, this study was undertaken with a very small sample size and with sufficient time to build relationships so that processes and routines were generally unencumbered by external schedules and timeline demands. Often this amount of time and research freedom is unavailable in larger research projects or those for which there are more rigid schedules.

However, this illustrative example of acquiring children’s consent and assuring that it is *informed* consent has many implications for further research with young children. By taking the stance that children *are already* capable and confident, ways were found to address concerns for children’s understanding of the research and how its results would be disseminated. In fact, this research makes the argument that it is up to the researcher to build relationships with their intended participants. Based upon the knowledge gained through these relationships, the researcher must develop appropriate methods (Dockett et al., 2011) for informed consent relevant to those particular young children in that time and space and to those children’s cultures, languages, and ways of doing/being/knowing. As part of these methods, the researcher must develop routines for ongoing affirmations of consent or periods of dissent so that children have natural and comfortable avenues to opt out of the research in that moment. Finally, it is imperative that the researchers have enough understanding of young children that they can read the nuanced and often mixed messages of consent and dissent. Ultimately, we must respect children as powerful and capable when we ask them to share their ideas with the world.

¹ All names are pseudonyms.

² Special thanks to Amy Wimmer Walkden for her graphic design services.

References

- Bitou, A., & Waller, T. (2011). Informed consent: Processes and procedures seeking research partnerships with young children. In D. Harcourt, B. Perry, & T. Waller (Eds.), *Researching young children's perspectives: Debating the ethics and dilemmas of educational research with children* (pp. 58–71). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203830437>
- Children's Commissioner Manaakitia Ā Tātou Tamariki and Oranga Tamariki Ministry for Children. (2019). *What Makes a Good Life? Children and young people's views on wellbeing*. <https://orangatamariki.govt.nz/about-us/research/our-research/what-makes-a-good-life/>
- Christensen, P. and Prout, A. (2002). Working with ethical symmetry in social research with children. *Childhood* 9(4): 477–497. <https://doi.org/10.11770907568202009004007>
- Corsaro, W. (2003). *We're friends, right?: Inside kids' culture*. Joseph Henry Press.
- Dockett, S., Einarsdóttir, J., & Perry, B. (2011). Balancing methodologies and methods in researching with young children. In S. Dockett, J. Einarsdóttir, & B. Perry (Eds.), *Researching young children's perspectives: Debating the ethics and dilemmas of educational research with children* (pp. 68–82). Routledge.
- Einarsdóttir, J. (2005). Playschool in pictures: Children's photographs as a research method. *Early Child Development and Care*, 175(6), 523–541. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430500131320>
- Gaches, S. (2020). Using critically reflexive ethics in practice to address issues of representation in children's rights-based research. *Global Studies of Childhood*. <https://doi.org/10.11772043610620959679>
- Gaches S., & Gallagher, M. (2019). Children as research consultants: The ethics and rights of no research about them without consulting with them. In J. Murray, B. B. Swadener, & K. Smith (Eds.), *The Routledge international handbook of young children's rights* (pp. 484–503). Routledge.
- Gallagher, M., Haywood, S., Jones, M. W., & Milne, S. (2010). Negotiating informed consent with children in school-based research: A critical review. *Children & Society*, 24, 471–482. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1099-0860.2009.00240.x>
- Graham, A., Powell, M.A., & Taylor, N. (2015). Ethical research involving children: Encouraging reflexive engagement in research with children and young people. *Children and Society*, 29, 331–343. <https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12089>
- Graham, A., Powell, M. A., Taylor, N. J., Anderson, D., & Fitzgerald, R. (2013). *Ethical research involving children*. UNICEF Office of Research-Innocenti. <https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/706-ethical-research-involving-children.html>
- Gray, C., & Winter, E. (2011). The ethics of participatory research involving young children with special needs. In S. Dockett, J. Einarsdóttir and B. Perry (Eds.) *Researching young children's perspectives: Debating the ethics and dilemmas of educational research with children* (pp. 46–57). Routledge.
- Guillemin, M., & Gillam, L. (2004). Ethics, reflexivity, and “ethically important moments” in research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 10(2), 261–280. <https://doi.org/10.11771077800403262360>
- Harcourt, D., & Conroy, H. (2011). Informed consent: Processes and procedures seeking research partnerships with young children. In S. Dockett, J. Einarsdóttir, & B. Perry (Eds.), *Researching young children's perspectives: Debating the ethics and dilemmas of educational research with children* (pp. 38–51). Routledge.
- Marshall, P. A. (2003). Human subjects protections, institutional review boards, and cultural anthropological research. *Anthropological Quarterly*, 76(2), 269–285. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/anq.2003.0028>
- Morrow, V., & Richards, M. (1996). The ethics of social research with children: An overview. *Children & Society*, 10, 90–105. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1099-0860.1996.tb00461.x>
- New Zealand Ministry of Education. (2017). *Te whāriki: He whāriki mātauranga mō ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa early childhood curriculum*. Author.
- Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. (2005). *General Comment No 7: Implementing child rights in early childhood*. <http://>

www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/crc/docs/AdvanceVersions/GeneralComment7Rev1.pdf

- Oulton, K., Gibson, F., Sell, D., Williams, A., Pratt, L., & Wray, J. (2016). Assent for children's participation in research: Why it matters and making it meaningful. *Child: care, health and development*, 42(4), 588–597. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cch.12344>
- Smith, A. (2011). Respecting children's rights and agency: Theoretical insights into ethical research procedures. In S. Dockett, J. Einarsdóttir, & B. Perry (Eds.), *Researching young children's perspectives: Debating the ethics and dilemmas of educational research with children* (pp. 11–25). Routledge.
- Smith, A. (2013). *Understanding children and childhood* (5th ed.). Bridget Williams Books. <https://doi.org/10.7810/9781927131763>
- Te One, S. (2007). Participatory research methods with young children: Experiences from the field. *Early Childhood Folio*, 11, 21–25. <https://doi.org/10.18296/ecf.0199>
- Te One, S. (2011). Supporting children's participation rights: Curriculum and research approaches. In S. Dockett, J. Einarsdóttir, & B. Perry (Eds.), *Researching young children's perspectives: Debating the ethics and dilemmas of educational research with children* (pp. 85–99). Routledge.
- United Nations. (1989). *United Nations convention on the rights of the child*. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>