
TIP SHEET: SURVEYING CHILDREN AND YOUTH

Surveys are very useful when you want to collect information from adults, but surveys do not always work as well with children and youth. Still, the voices of young people are important to making your program the best it can be. This tip sheet provides guidelines for gathering information from children and youth. The age ranges given below are approximate, as children differ in their developmental trajectories.

AGES 5-8

In order to answer a survey question, one must be able to understand the question, retrieve relevant information from memory, evaluate options, formulate an answer, and communicate that answer. Children younger than 8 or so will find it difficult to execute these steps and should not be surveyed at all. However, it may be possible to *interview* children in this age group, provided that:

- **Questions are simple and open-ended.** Young children are best able to answer simple questions that relate to recent experiences. Open-ended questions provide richer information and can also provide insight into how children *understand* what is being asked.
- **Play-based approaches are used.** Children respond best to approaches that incorporate play – strategies that use role play, visuals, card sorting, or similar may yield better results than strictly verbal techniques.
- **Findings are interpreted with caution.** Even the most skilled interviewer may not be able to elicit “accurate” or straightforward information from young children. Results should be interpreted cautiously.

AGES 8-11

Children in this age range are not yet fully developed in their language or reading ability but are generally able to complete the logical processes necessary to participate in a simple survey. While it is possible to survey children in this age range, certain modifications are necessary. The following tips can help make a survey of this age group more successful:

- **Read questions out loud.** Reading ability is still developing for many in this group. It is best to read questions out loud, even if children will be answering on a paper questionnaire.
- **Keep it short.** Children will not have stamina for a long survey. Surveys should be kept to one page in order to avoid fatiguing respondents.

- **Be simple and concrete.** Children are very literal; questions that are indirect or abstract can generate unpredictable results. Also, avoid negatively constructed questions, as these can be confusing for children.
- **Use a visual analog scale.** Likert-type response scales (i.e. “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree” or similar) can be confusing for children. Visual scales – thumbs up, thumbs down or happy and sad faces – are a good alternative.
- **Interpret results with care.** As with interviews of younger children, surveys of children in this age range should be interpreted cautiously.

AGES 11-16

Once children reach the age of 11 or so, their language and reading abilities are better developed, and they are better able to engage in the kind of complex, abstract thought that surveys require. Context can influence survey responses, however, so certain steps should be taken to ensure high-quality responses:

- **Attend to the environment in which young people are surveyed.** Provide older children with adequate time and space to complete a survey. If necessary, provide support in understanding survey items, and assurances of privacy if items are sensitive.
- **Be transparent about the nature and purpose of the survey.** Older children and youth are more likely to take a survey seriously if they have been informed of the uses to which survey information will be put.

ALL AGES

Certain principles apply across the age continuum. Even with adults, it is best to avoid confusing or ambiguous wording, and to keep questionnaires short. Also, whenever possible, survey items can be **pretested** with their intended audience to ensure that they make sense. After a survey is administered, the quality of survey items can be checked both by looking for **missing responses** (are respondents skipping questions?) or by testing for **internal inconsistency** (do the responses given by individuals make sense?). Either of these – a lot of missing responses or internal inconsistency – can indicate that a survey needs revision. Also, people of all ages will appreciate follow-up communications explaining the ways that survey results are influencing program practice. Let your respondents know that their voices matter.

FOR MORE INFORMATION...

Borgers, N., De Leeuw, E., & Hox, J. (2000). Children as respondents in survey research: Cognitive development and response quality 1. *Bulletin of Sociological Methodology/Bulletin de Méthodologie Sociologique*, 66(1), 60-75.