Developmentally Appropriate Research Methods: A Strategy for Use With Adolescent and Child Participants

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This paper broaches the concept of ‘developmentally appropriate research methods’ and encourages researchers to use these in order to improve participatory experiences whilst raising the validity of information gathered. This two way beneficial effect for researchers and participants follows the conventional wisdom of pooling resources for the greater good. Developmentally appropriate research methods can be used to investigate samples of any age, although here their potential is explored primarily in relation to children and early adolescents.

Developmental appropriateness in research

The lengthy period of development in humans creates vast physical and psychological differences between particular age groups. Although these differences underpin the field of developmental psychology, our research of these uses very similar tools for gathering information from samples of children, adolescents and adults. Our usual modification of methods is to simplify questions and demands when working with younger ages. However, this is often done without proper consideration of the nuanced developmental states and needs of child or adolescent samples.

The extent to which development occurs within and across biological, psychological, and behavioural domains can be readily observed by inspecting the chapters of developmental psychology textbooks (e.g. Lerner and Steinberg 2004, Littlefield Cook and Cook 2005). Specific alterations in personality are often reviewed, such as changes in attachments, self-esteem, self-efficacy and motivation. Notions of biological development have expanded with the increasing amount of neuroscientific information available. Changes in the brain are known to include the sudden increase of grey matter during early adolescence (Giedd et al. 1999) and the shifting roles of the amygdale in relation to emotion, of the cerebellum and its regulation of movement, and of the prefrontal cortex in moderating cognitive responses. These age-specific capabilities of the brain are central to our understanding of how physical development can influence a child or young person’s abilities to conceptualise and behave. By identifying changes within and across the domains of the body and the psyche we can begin to understand how general and age specific social environments interact with individual psychological differences to create developmental states of being.

Several major psychological theories of development conceive that changes in psychological, social and cognitive development occur in set stages across the lifespan (see for example
Piaget 1967 and Erikson 1950). Marcia also initially used a stage-theory approach in his notion of identity statuses (1966). Social constructions such as ‘childhood’, ‘adolescence’ and ‘adulthood’ are further examples of how stages are used to categorise developmental states. Erikson (1950) introduced the idea that each stage of human development constituted specific developmental goals that when met would facilitate positive wellbeing. An example of a developmental goal might be when adolescents obtain enough autonomy to be independent within a community – a tradition that is fostered in homes, schools and in the wider social arena. Erikson used the term ‘developmental needs’ to refer to that which is necessary to reach such goals. Critiques of stage-theories remind us that individuals of any age are deservedly whole beings and should not be considered as ‘unfinished products’ on a continuum of birth to adulthood (James and Prout 1990). However, when observing that certain age...
salience of identity issues, increased peer orientation and increased self-focus and self-consciousness (Eccles and Midgley 1989). As a result of the findings, the method of active participation (Rudduck 2001) was chosen for use in the doctoral study, where a sample of twenty early adolescent participants are engaged as researchers of their own experiences. This choice was made to promote their autonomy and sense of personal agency in the research, to assist relational bonds between participants and the adult researcher, and to allow plenty of opportunities for them to control their disclosure of information in order to alleviate concerns about anonymity, self-appearance and incompetence.

Active participation not only meets many of the developmental needs of early adolescents when conducted sensitively, but also has the potential to raise the quality of information when participants express themselves using intuitive concepts and on their own terms. Researchers from the EPPI-Centre (Harden et al. 2001) found in a study of mental health, that young people did not relate to medical terms such as ‘mental illness’ and ‘depression’ and were more likely to describe their mental states in emotional terms such as ‘happy’, ‘sad’ and ‘frustrated’. They advised for young people to be actively engaged “in the task of eliciting their views” (p.6) so as to avoid these types of misunderstandings. Smyth and Hattam (2001) explain the benefits of this process in stating that "the promise of voiced research is anchored, local knowledge, in the face of objective, normative, hegemonic forms of knowledge" (p.47). A common approach in active participation is to empower young people to do their own interviewing, a technique used by Christensen and James (2001) and Pollard (1985). Peer interviews allow the researcher to gain knowledge otherwise inaccessible to adults (Fielding and Bragg 2003) and to find accounts that more accurately reflect participants’ realities. By consulting young people about research and by actively involving them in the research process, we can “enable young people to express themselves in a manner in which they are most at ease” with “lines of questioning and terms which are relevant to the context of their everyday lives” (Harden et al. 2001 p.6). In this we are creating a research environment that improves the authenticity of information in relation to a samples’ developmental state.

Developmental appropriateness can be addressed in the use of more conventional research methods without altering the entire structure of one’s research. An example of this is in vernacular term interviewing, where participants are asked ‘what did you mean by that?’ (Eyre et al. 1998), in an attempt to better understand a specific age group’s individual and social concepts. Surveys can be brightened up with pictures to engage the visual orientation of younger children, or used to facilitate autonomy and responsibility for adolescent participants by offering personalisation options when presented online and by revealing the purpose of gathering information with respect to its use in local or international contexts. We can foster participants’ developing cognitive and reflective skills by asking them to comment on our analysis of results so as to ensure that our interpretations reflect the ‘real world’ that they inhabit - a technique referred to by Lincoln and Guba (1985) ‘member checking’. A final suggestion is that when working with children and young people as researchers we can draw on their intuitive understandings of how they best impart information, by asking them to come up with research methods of their own. Herein lie ways to improve the chances for methods to be developmentally appropriate, by 'opening up spaces for young people to tell their accounts' (Smyth and Hattam 2001 p.404) in a manner that is not too forced or predefined.
Testing for developmentally appropriate research methods

Considering the methods suggested above, there are plenty of opportunities to be more developmentally appropriate in our research. However there is still some definition to be made between allowing for more developmentally authentic processes and information through our altered use of existing methods, and in designing research methods that are in themselves more developmentally appropriate to a specific age group. Unfortunately there is very little publication on age specific research methods which belies a lack of testing for these. Pilot studies most often examine methods for the appropriateness of their question types and wording, or for the reliability of themes or measures. However, we are then simply testing the contents of a method for degrees of participant ‘fit’, instead of generating new methods or comparing a range of alternative techniques that may be more developmentally appropriate.

A further aspect that is rarely tested is the developmental appropriateness of the administration of methods. For example, how many seven year old children prefer or are assisted by sitting alone when completing paper or online surveys? Does this differ for sixteen year olds? How long can they concentrate on responding for before their attention and commitment reduces and error occurs? Are there benefits in interactivity in research and do these vary by age group? What effects might the location of an interview or familiarity of a researcher have on early adolescent participants who are asked to express sensitive information about growing up? These questions and more are lurking under the surface of any age specific investigation yet are considered far less than the researcher’s choice of questions or themes when conducting pilot studies.

As we hardly ever test alternative methods or a method’s administration in relation to the age specific needs of our samples, and as our eventual alterations to any chosen method are unlikely to be discussed in publications, the current general approach to pilot testing does little to generate developmentally specific research methods. The failure of many researchers to properly test for developmental appropriateness when researching with children and young people undermines the prospective success of our studies both in the quality of information produced and in the positive nature of the experiences that we provide to participants.

Achieving a knowledge bank of developmentally appropriate research methods

So how might we address the dearth of published knowledge and begin to test for developmentally appropriate research methods? Firstly, a review of what is known is badly needed. It is likely that indications of developmental appropriateness exist in many methods chapters and in articles in general, yet these have not been brought together in a coherent synthesis. Through reviewing what attempts have been made, the evidence underpinning researcher’s choice of these, and by gauging the reactions of participants to a particular method, we should uncover themes for different age groups as represented by their respective groups of samples.
Secondly, pilot studies could begin to consider multiple factors of method-participant fit, such as the choice of method, a method’s contents, its administration and the quality of its results – and do so in relation to developmental psychology. Although the multiple relationships, effects and causes in any developmental state may present a serious challenge to researchers when attempting to discover what is developmentally appropriate, this complexity should not prevent us from trying.

Thirdly, we must try to incorporate this information into publications, conference presentations and into our communication with colleagues and junior researchers. This will help us to build our knowledge base and encourage research that does not harm participants. When research methods and developmental needs are in line, we are likely to provide positive experiences for participants and in the case of using some form of active participation we can even help to build young people’s agency, skills and reflective tendencies and by this add to ‘progressive’ development (Eccles 1999). By using developmentally appropriate research methods we not only can improve the quality of information gathered, but will foster a community where young people and their caregivers are enthusiastic about participation in research and thus willingly contribute to our studies.

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