

Interviewing Children. A Guide for Journalists and Others, Save the Children UK

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Introduction

This is the revised edition of a booklet that first came out in 1994, with an accompanying tape. It was first designed as a training pack for journalists who need to interview children, or cover issues involving children. But it could be useful to anyone planning to interview children and gather information from them - such as aid workers, community workers, teachers, creative writers. This second edition has more to say about issues around ethics, confidentiality, and working with photographers.

When we talk about children, we also mean young people. But we won't repeat that every time. For the sake of convenience, we use the words 'child' and 'children' to refer to people aged 18 and under. Teenagers usually prefer to be called young people.

Journalists are in a prime position to improve our understanding of children, because we hear and learn so much about children through the media. They also have a responsibility to portray children fairly, and without prejudice. Obviously, how they work and what they produce is governed by who they work for, the demands of the story, deadlines, house style etc. And they're likely to be more interested in getting a good story than thinking about the needs of children. We understand that - but we hope that they'll take the following tips on board, and find them useful.

Journalists are always looking for the new, the surprising, the different angle. In our experience, talking to children can provide that. One of the things we've learnt is that when you spend time really talking and listening to children, it's surprising and amazing what they come up with. They have a fresh perspective on the world and a different way of putting things. Getting children to speak can be difficult, but it's really worthwhile for everyone. This guide is intended to make communication easier all round.

Letting children speak for themselves raises their confidence and sense of worth. Listening to children, and enabling them to get their opinions broadcast in any media, is also about giving up some of our adult power. Adults often tend to gag and censor children's voices. The balance of power needs to be redressed - speaking out is a powerful act in itself; by listening, we show respect for the speaker.

The original pack was researched with children in Barbados, Canada, England, Israel, Namibia, Northern Ireland, Palestine and Romania, who were quoted on the tape and in the booklet. This time, when revising the booklet, we have also involved children from the Newcastle bureau of Children's Express, the children's news agency, which Save the Children supports financially. The children quoted talked about their expectations and experience of the mass media, gave advice on how they like to be interviewed and what would make it easier for them.

Why is this guide needed? Although we see a lot of children in newspapers, magazines and on television, and much is said about them, they are rarely quoted in their own words. Usually, we only hear what adults think about children, not what children think themselves.

From time to time, we've been critical of the way in which the media covers human disasters or crises. It's all too easy to show children in these situations as mere victims of war, poverty and exploitation. It's rare to hear or read children's own views; all we're shown is their mute misery. But we know - because children tell us - that even children living in the most appalling circumstances have thoughts and feelings, a sense of pride and dignity, and a distinct perspective on the world. Children say they don't want to be shown as mere victims - they feel that demeans and misrepresents them. Most of us would feel the same way.

But it's not good enough for us just to criticize what journalists sometimes do. What is important is to find and share practical ways of meeting these challenges.

The easiest way to give children a chance to express their own views is to interview them. (You could also use art, drama, song and other media.) Don't just talk to adults - always remember to include children when you're dealing with any issue that involves or affects them. Children make up nearly half the world's population and they are aware of what is going on around them. Most adults are surprised just how much children know and care about.

Children are seen as difficult to work with, if not downright dangerous. The joke goes: "Never work with children or animals." If you've tried interviewing children and been faced with frozen silence, hostility or embarrassed giggles, you may feel there's a whiff of truth in this. But the point of this guide is to show that it's possible to interview children very successfully, with a little preparation and understanding of where children are at. Working with children can be fascinating, inspiring and rewarding. We aim to help you find a way of working easily and comfortably with them.

A starting point would be to:

- ✓ Try listening to children on radio or TV news bulletins
- ✓ Consider how they are used. How often do you hear them saying what they think and feel?
- ✓ Think about the difference between what happens when adults talk about children and children talk about themselves.

What to avoid

The media tends to use children in particular and predictable ways. We know everybody uses clichés to some extent, but there is a set of clichés about children that adults seem to feel happy with and keep trotting out. It is as though they have found a few 'safe' formulae for describing and dealing with children, and the media rarely deviates from these. They may be acceptable from time to time, but repeated use leads to very inaccurate stereotypes of children. And these are the images that stick in the mind.

Children often complain that they are nothing like the images portrayed in the media. They say their parents sometimes pay more attention to the media than they do to their own children, and are more inclined to believe the media version of things. That is tough on children.

Think about some of those clichés. Do the following sound familiar? Children tend to get put in a narrow set of boxes, ranging from angels, innocents and brave little martyrs at one extreme, through to little terrors, tykes, tear-a-ways, troublemakers, rowdy teenagers and downright delinquents at the other. Have you noticed how the words 'youth' and 'youths' are almost always used in a derogatory way? They've become synonymous with trouble. Young black people in the UK feel that they are often portrayed in the most negative way of all. And children with disabilities say they're fed up with being shown as different, freakish, or pitiable. The story is invariably one of "triumph over tragedy".

We asked children what they thought about how the media depicts them. This is what they said.

Children don't like to see...

- Children's serious comments used as light relief or a joke (funny to adults, not so funny to children)
- A very 'cute' child used to add appeal
- Photos and descriptions of children in miserable situations used as tearjerkers. They do nothing for children's self-respect, or for the audience's respect for them
- Children being patronized and spoken down to
- Adults speaking for children, when the children know more about the subject in question
- Children being made to perform like circus animals
- Adults showing off children's ignorance
- Adults putting words in children's mouths, or interrupting them
- Children being made to look passive when they're not
- Young people lumped together as a problem group called 'youths'.

What do we want to promote?

Children want to be treated with respect and understanding, just as we all do. They are not adults, so they do need special help and protection at times. But they are not a different species, and in many ways they respond much as adults do.

- try putting yourself in their place and ask yourself how you'd prefer to be treated

Children want you to...

- let them speak for themselves without adult interference
- treat them as equals, human beings like everyone else
- ask them what they think about issues covered in the media
- give them the chance to speak freely to adults as well as other children
- see them as individuals, with their own thoughts, enthusiasms and concerns
- value their experience - they may be young, but they've already learnt a lot about life
- let them be themselves, not what other people want them to be
- take their opinions seriously.

Listening to children

Listening is the key to interviewing children - not just hearing their words, but really taking them in and listening to the thoughts and feelings behind them. A child may have a wonderful story to tell, but there is no point in telling it to someone who is not listening. Children know this very well and just won't bother if they think you're not listening. The more sensitively you can listen, the better you can work with children.

It is extraordinary how often children involved in the research said things like:

"This is the first time anyone has asked us what we think." Or as one extremely articulate and thoughtful 10-year-old in Northern Ireland said: "I've never told anyone what I feel about the fighting in Belfast. I think it's all wrong, but I don't think they'll listen to children." Why had no-one given her the chance to speak about it before?

Start with yourself

- are you a good listener? When you interview people, are you interested in what they have to say or do you find yourself more interested in your questions and responses?
- do you enjoy listening to people, or do you often want to interrupt them?
- do you like children and enjoy being with them?
- can you take children seriously, as people with their own opinions and feelings?
- can you let children tell you what to do for a change?
- can you accept that children know more than you do about some things, without feeling threatened?
- can you accept that your preconceived view might be turned upside down after talking to children?

If you feel unsure about any of these, try remembering your own childhood. Did adults take you seriously? How did you feel when they did? How did you feel when they didn't? What was it about the adults who made you feel comfortable and able to talk freely - did they have special qualities?

It is a good idea to be aware of your strengths and weaknesses, because these will greatly affect your relationship with children. And they will be able to spot them a mile off.

Why interview children?

- children want to speak out
- children have fresh and interesting things to say
- children have a different perspective from adults
- some issues - such as education, play, child abuse - affect children more than they affect adults, so you should find out what they think about them
- sharing what children have to say increases mutual understanding between adults and children and helps to narrow the generation gap - very often, old and young demonize each other because they don't talk back
- it boosts children's confidence in their own abilities, and helps them to develop as people
- children are media consumers too, and they like to hear what other children think and feel, so you can increase your readership/audience by including children
- children have the right to be listened to, have their views taken into account, and express themselves in the media - these principles are enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child
- you'll almost certainly learn something.