

## Qualitative Research with Children

Since the groundbreaking television perception studies of the 1970s, researchers with expertise in extracting information from children have been much in demand. One such researcher, Megan Nerz, senior partner of MLN Research (Raleigh, North Carolina), estimates that while there are numerous researchers who claim experience with children, there are only a handful of firms with true expertise. As a graduate assistant during the 1970s at the University of Hartford, Nerz participated in those early studies about the effects of television advertising on kids. She's been putting that early experience to use for more than 25 years for such clients as Kraft Foods, Nabisco, Oscar Mayer, LEGO, and the Walt Disney Company.

"Kids are wonderful to work with," claims Nerz. "They can be amusing, insightful, creative, tender, reluctant, antagonistic, withdrawn—all within the span of a few minutes. But they aren't just little adults, their cognitive skills and level of development are very specific to their age and where they are in school." Where you wouldn't worry about forming a focus group with adults of different ages, Nerz insists that in child research focus groups should always be single-gender and members should never be further apart than one grade level or one year in age.

Qualitative research methodologies are often used with children, and while the names of some of those methods are familiar to those who conduct adult research, the procedures and techniques are different.

"When you work with adults, they have preconceived ideas and expectations of how to behave, what will happen, how they are expected to interact with the researcher and other participants. But children have no such expectations. And while you can often spend a considerable amount of time with an adult, with children your time is limited. Our children's focus groups will never be more than 1 hour and 15 minutes, so the researcher has to be extremely focused on the research objectives and on enticing the child to reveal their thoughts and impressions, their attitudes and concerns, in a very short period of time."

### > Recruiting: Mom as Gatekeeper

The process of screening and setting up a child research group has its own idiosyncrasies. The first rule of child research: You must deal with Mom. When trying to identify participants for a child focus group, the researcher first interviews the child's mother during the phone screening. Recruiters ask the mom about the child's ability to function in a group, ask her to describe the child's personality, to talk about how shy or outgoing the child is and whether the child can express his or her opinions to others. "Often if the mom has more than one child in the target group, the recruiter will ask which of her children best matches the social characteristics we seek," explains Nerz. In the back of the researcher's mind is rule number two: You don't have time to get to know the child, so the child has to be receptive to having information "teased" from him or her, and be able to express how he or she feels. Screening continues with a phone conversation with the child. Rule number three evolves from that experience: If the child won't come to the phone, choose another child.

L&E Research, a focus group facility that MLN Research uses in Raleigh, North Carolina, recruits the participants for many of Nerz's focus groups. Adults involved in research are often recruited using purchased lists of households; in essence, the recruiting is blind. L&E takes a different approach and began building its own database of possible participants in 1990. When it needs a child of a certain gender, age, or year in school, it taps this database, which is organized by parent. Participants are recruited with periodic advertis-

ing, or they can volunteer on the L&E Web site (see our text Web site for the sign-up procedure). As a result, the database is constantly updated and growing. “The turn-down rate is low,” shares Tina Glover, a recruiting manager for L&E. “Parents are interested in giving their children an opportunity to participate, and to capture the \$35 participation fee for their child.” L&E also recruits members for child panels, whose participants are involved in up to three research-oriented activities in a single year and paid \$25 each time.

### > The Pre-Warm-Up

While adults go through a reception procedure when arriving at a focus group facility, it takes little time and is designed to get them settled and ready to begin. “We always invite more children to the facility than we need for any given study,” explains Glover, “expecting more scheduling or illness problems [with children as opposed to adults] which might cause last-minute cancellations.” When the firm first started working with children, L&E had not expected the children’s devastation when told that they wouldn’t be needed that day for the research. “While adults, if dismissed, are happy to take their pay and go home, children take the release as rejection,” describes Glover. When working with children, L&E now uses older, more comforting hostesses, who deliver the message to the dismissed children that they will be considered for the next group requiring children with their characteristics. “Children who are recruited for panels usually can’t wait to participate again,” claims Glover. “They see their involvement as their ‘job.’ But if we have drop-outs, those children who feel uncomfortable and don’t want to participate again, we turn to our database for a match.”

### > The Warm-Up

“With children, you have to alleviate concerns of Mom, so the warm-up is always in the presence of the parent,” shared Nerz. “But we separate kids from moms as soon as possible, physically moving the parents to one end of the room. Kids need to feel comfortable with each other to be responsive. If we separate them from their parents, their natural inquisitiveness has them asking the other kids where they go to school, what they are interested in, and what video games or toys they have.” The researcher has to set up expectations for the focus group with the child participant even to the point of breaking down one of Mom’s rules: Don’t say anything if you can’t say something nice. “One job of the moderator during warm-up is to convince the child that it really is okay to tell us what they think and how they feel. They aren’t going to hurt our feelings and we aren’t going to get mad at them if they don’t like something,” claims Nerz. Some researchers believe all children are “pleasers,” telling the researcher only what they believe the researcher wants to hear. Nerz disagrees. It’s her experience that children can be painfully and brutally honest, creating some very uncomfortable moments for the client who is positioned behind the mirrored window.

Adults have an image of a focus group as people sitting around a conference table talking. “Kids have tables, but they are appropriate for the child—no conference tables and no swivel chairs,” shares Nerz. “If a child is roaming the room during a focus group, then the moderator has lost control.” But as Nerz explains, what children are asked to do during a focus group, sometimes doesn’t look like a focus group for an adult. Focus groups with young children, six- to eight-year-olds, those with limited vocabulary because of their age and grade, often are asked to draw pictures to start the focus group. Then some time is spent with each child explaining his or her picture and what it tells about a trip to the grocery with Mom or about the child’s favorite part of his or her house or bedroom. Older children, 11- to 12-year-olds, have better language skills. They might be provided with a list of two dozen words and be asked to circle five words that describe how they feel about helping fix dinner. Older children also might be provided with images and words and be asked to create a collage. “You have to stimulate the child’s creativity and cognitive skills before you can extract meaning,” explains Nerz.

Children's focus groups are videotaped, as are those involving adults. And more and more, children's researchers employ FocusVision, where members of a client's management team observe the group as it takes place but via videoconferencing, often from their own offices in distant cities. "If parents won't permit videotaping, then the child is dismissed," explains Glover. "And parents can't watch the group from the observation room, either. There is too much strategy being discussed behind that one-way mirror."

## > Other Child-Research Techniques

A **creativity session** involves an initial phone screening, followed by a face-to-face screening with the child and a hands-on creative exercise. Usually ten youngsters are screened to a group of four. These four are brought to an activity room, where they are encouraged to find their own special space. This may be at a table, outside on a picnic bench, on the floor in a hallway, even under a table. Child-appropriate snacks and drinks are provided, and the child is free to snack and move around during the research. The creative exercise usually takes 20 to 30 minutes, followed by a "building" exercise in which the four participants build on each other's ideas. This session can be an hour or more. "Children are wonderfully creative. They are unhampered by expectations. If we've done our job correctly, kids will reveal many things that adults won't," enthuses Nerz.

**Observational playgroups** involve observing children at play, with targeted toys or materials, usually behind one-way mirrors. **Children's panels** involve focus group activities where the same child may participate in up to three groups in a year, with each experience several months apart. "With children, something that happened in January is ancient history by June. So even if they have participated before, they have fuzzy recollections of what happened," explains Nerz. *Paired-interviews* (dyads) involve two children with a moderator, either friendship pairs or straight pairs (children who don't know each other ahead of time). In this 45- to 60-minute interview, researchers track thoughts, experiences, and processes. Individual depth interviews, with a moderator and one child, can last an hour. One technique, **ethnography**, is growing in use. This technique involves the use of observation paired with an individual depth interview. "I've taken pairs of preteen girls shopping for clothing and cosmetics at a mall, been to a video arcade with young boys, and done a grocery store ethnography with older girls. But 'home ethnographies' may be the most fun. You can do it with children as young as three, where shopping ethnographies are usually reserved for those nine or older. In the home you can explore how and why they decorate their rooms, what they carry in their backpacks, what foods they like to eat or cook, how they use personal or kitchen appliances, what they collect, even how they organized their closets," shares Nerz.

## > Strategic Decision Making

Children are involved in helping advertisers create child-involving messages by reacting to storyboards for television commercials. (Storyboards arrange the scenes of a commercial in comic strip-like panels, with dialogue and special effects noted beneath each panel.) "Unlike adults, children do better with storyboards than with the more expensive videomatics or animatics [semiproduced commercials using slides or slides transitioning on video]; this can save the client time and money," shares Nerz. MLN Research has also studied how children use the Internet, their reaction to visual concept boards for products (What would Mom think? Would you want this product? How would you use this product? Would your friends have one?), their reaction to packaging prototypes and changes and to taste changes being considered, and their insight on brand association, imagery, and brand equity.

But working with kids isn't all fun and games. Children's research has to take place after school, during school breaks, or on weekends. Some evening research involves older children, but even those activities are usually over by 8 p.m. And sometimes all your best-

laid plans can go awry. “Sometimes they get sick, or have a fight with their mom on the way to the research facility, or maybe they have a bad day at school. Kids can’t filter out experiences, environmental stimuli, or physical symptoms of unease the way adults can.” This leads Nerz to her last rule of children’s research: Be prepared for anything.

### > Glossary

**children’s panel** group of children where each child participates in focus groups up to three times per year.

**creativity session** a hands-on creative exercise in which children are observed they debriefed in a group as they build on each others’ ideas.

**ethnography** interviewer and participant collaborate in a field setting participant observation and unstructured interview.

**observational playgroup** disguised observation of children at play.

### > Sources

This material was developed from interviews with Megan Nerz, MLN Research; Ed Eggers, L&E Research; and Tina Glover, L&E Research.