



# Click!

## Engaging Children in Research about their Lives: experiences of using photo-elicitation from England, Australia and New Zealand

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### Why engage with children?

Engaging with children in research means that the research can be grounded in their perspectives and oriented to their needs<sup>1</sup>. Understanding children's perspectives on how illness can shape their life-worlds means that health care professionals are better able to deliver more empathic, insightful and better quality care. Ultimately, this has the potential to enhance the outcomes of care for children and their families, including benefits such as promoting children's sense of well being.

### What is photo-elicitation?

Photo-elicitation (PE) is a participatory, qualitative method that does not rely on high levels of verbal or written literacy; this makes it a valuable approach to consider when working with children<sup>2,3</sup>. Photographs are used in conjunction with interviews to elicit participants' perspectives. PE can be based on either:

**Photos taken/supplied by the researcher** that have been selected to invoke comments. However, this means that the research - to a greater or lesser extent - is framed by the researcher's visual focus;

**Photos taken by the participants** as part of the study. This approach cedes a greater level of control to the participants. The images produced create a more 'direct entry' to participants' perspectives<sup>4</sup>.

### What did we do in our study?

In our study we used PE with children (aged 6-12 yrs) living with a chronic illness in the UK, Australia and New Zealand in order to explore their perceptions and understandings of their illness and symptoms.

We gave the children digital cameras and asked them to take photographs of things that they thought were important to them about their illness, their treatment and how it affected their lives. The children had the cameras for an average of 3 weeks prior to the researcher returning to undertake the interview. The children were able to edit and select the photos they wanted to discuss with the researcher during the interview.

### What did we learn about using PE?

#### The range of images

We had anticipated that children might take photographs of their medicines and treatments but these images were less frequent than images of family, friends and activities. Where 'medical' images were present, they were not dwelt on in the interviews.

The children were more concerned with talking about the things they did rather than the things that illness interfered with. Many images reflected the children's positivity and resilience and ways of working around potential restrictions.

#### Challenges and tensions

In each of the countries, PE was seen as 'risky work'; navigating three different ethics review systems was challenging. Gathering visual data is perceived as ethically more challenging than carrying out interviews.

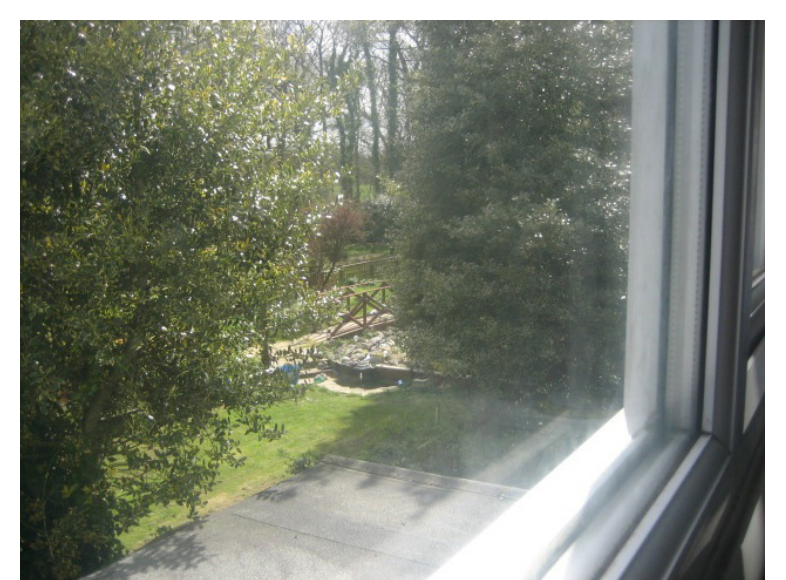
We countered these risks by providing evidence of our trustworthiness and by taking considerable care about issues related to privacy, intrusion, and safety. We created guidance notes for the children/families. Issues relating to ownership, storage and transfer of the images were carefully considered as was the use of images in presentations (e.g. some images needed to be 'fuzzed'). We had to resist the 'lure' of over-interpretation of images and be guided by the meanings the children shared and the things they perceived to be priorities.

### Conclusion

Although PE provides considerable opportunities and benefits, it is challenging research. PE requires skilled, reflexive researchers who can both manage the inherent risks and facilitate the creation of data that provides a robust depth of insight into the children's life-worlds.

### References

<sup>1</sup>Carter B & Ford K (2013) Researching children's health experiences: The place for participatory, child-centered, arts-based approaches. *Research in Nursing & Health* 36, 95-107; <sup>2</sup>Croghan R, Griffin C, Hunter J & Phoenix A (2008) Young people's constructions of self: notes on the use and analysis of the photo-elicitation methods. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 11, 345-356; <sup>3</sup>Drew SE, Duncan RE & Sawyer SM (2010) Visual Storytelling: A beneficial but challenging method for health research with young people. *Qualitative Health Research* 20, 1677-1688; <sup>4</sup>Radley A & Taylor D (2003) Images of recovery: a photo-elicitation study on the hospital ward. *Qualitative Health Research* 13, 77-99.



### Children in control

Some children lost interest part way through, but were confident about withdrawing from the study. Those who stayed in the study enjoyed 'being in charge' of the camera and making decisions about what to take photographs of and which ones to retain or delete.

The children 'set the agenda' for the interviews and were clear which images they wanted to talk about at interview and those they wished to skip. This meant that some images that looked interesting to the researchers were not discussed. Some children had help with taking the photos and/or used pre-existing images.

### Benefits and opportunities

The child-centredness of the project was supported through the use of PE. Using images the children had created meant that dialogue started from a child-oriented position. Taking part in the study triggered some of the children to consider their achievements. The use of digital technology allowed the children to demonstrate their skill and knowledge of using technology.

PE was engaged with enthusiastically by boys and girls of different ages who had different levels of literacy and a range of cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

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