

Play-Along Interviews: A Child-Centered Method for Research with Children

Wednesday 23 July 2025 09:15 (15 minutes)

Oral presentation

Play-Along Interviews: A Child-Centered Method for Research with Children

Author

Elisavet Pasidi [PhD Candidate], Dr. Kirsten Visser [Assistant Professor], Dr. Gideon Bolt [Associate Professor], Dr. Gijs van Campenhout [Assistant Professor]

Affiliation

Utrecht University, Faculty of Geosciences, Department of Human Geography and Spatial Planning

Abstract

In an attempt to amplify children's under-represented voices in research, we explored the "play-along interview" as an innovative method for collecting context-rich data directly from children while informing methodological innovation based on children's lived experiences. In this presentation, we will share how we applied this method in practice and discuss its opportunities and challenges.

Building upon the "go-along" method traditionally used with adults –wherein researchers accompany participants through their environments to gain real-time insights into their experiences—we embed interviews within play, a domain where children are experts. The play-along interview empowers children's active participation in age-appropriate yet meaningful ways, addressing the limitations of existing methods. For example, traditional question-and-answer interview formats are rather hierarchical and often fail to engage young children effectively, leading to disinterest and missed opportunities to capture their authentic perspectives. Tapping into children's natural enthusiasm, creativity, and mastery of play, the play-along interviews create an engaging context for children to express their thoughts and feelings in ways that are meaningful to them. Other methods of incorporating children's perspectives in research, such as asking parents or teachers to answer on their behalf or relying on observations, are inherently limited by adults' subjective interpretations rather than children's direct accounts. In contrast, play-along interviews enable researchers to gather firsthand insights directly from children and ask follow-up questions in real time, offering a more nuanced understanding of their views. Even when children are directly involved in research through questionnaires, significant limitations exist. Younger children usually lack the literacy skills to complete questionnaires independently, while older children can still struggle with complex questions, requiring adult mediation that may constrain their responses. On the other hand, play-along interviews offer an interactive approach that adapts to children's developmental levels and communication styles, with the researcher entering the children's world, without supervising adults present.

We applied play-along interviews in the context of "risky play", which refers to exciting forms of play where children take age-appropriate risks (e.g., climbing trees). Risky play is vital for children's development, yet much research in this area has focused on adult perspectives, who tend to prioritize safety over excitement. In this study, we accompanied children as they explored their environments without supervising adults, allowing them to lead the way and engage in (risky) play. Our aim was to reveal the complex, situated ways in which residential environments influence children's play behavior. Conducting interviews in the environments where children actually play allowed for a deeper understanding of their behaviors, while enhancing their ability to recall and reflect on their experiences. This contextual understanding provided insights into how neighborhood factors (e.g., green, traffic) influence children's risky play. Additionally, we plan to use children's insights to refine existing factors from the literature to develop targeted questionnaires that are contextually relevant to children's lived experiences.

The play-along interview is a powerful method for studying children's lives, environments, and behaviors across diverse fields. Beyond this specific application, it demonstrates how participatory, child-centered methods can inform methodological innovation, advancing qualitative research and complementing mixed-methods studies.

Keywords

Interviews, children, play, participation, environment

Primary author: PASIDI, Elisavet (Utrecht University)

Co-authors: Dr BOLT, Gideon (Utrecht University); Dr VAN CAMPENHOUT, Gijs (Utrecht University); Dr VISSER, Kirsten (Utrecht University)

Presenter: PASIDI, Elisavet (Utrecht University)

Session Classification: Session 2 : "Innovative methods in Measurement and Evaluation"

Track Classification: Design/Research methods: Design/Research methods