Eliciting Children’s Voices in Qualitative Research

Clare Curtin

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Objective. The purpose of this literature review was to summarize the issues and techniques involved when incorporating preschool and elementary-school-age children as informants in qualitative research.

Method. Literature on children's studies, qualitative research with children as informants, and methods for obtaining children's perspectives were examined.

Results. Conducting qualitative research with children involves different challenges and research techniques than research with adults. The researcher needs to examine beliefs regarding children's competence, address the inequality of power in the adult–child relationship, and bridge different communication styles. The researcher can employ a variety of techniques and adaptations to help children express themselves.

Conclusion. This review adds to the understanding of occupational therapy researchers about children as informants in research. The practical suggestions presented can also be used in clinical practice to strengthen children's voices in therapy.


Children can be reliable informants and provide accurate accounts of their experiences (Lamb, Sternberg, Orbach, Hershkowitz, & Esplin, 1999; Zwiers & Morrissette, 1999). However, engaging children in qualitative research and eliciting their voices involve different challenges and research methods than research with adults. The purpose of this article is to identify these challenges and provide practical suggestions for talking with and obtaining the perspectives of preschool and elementary-school-age children. Implications for clinical practice also are presented.

Qualitative researchers can reap benefits from involving children as informants, especially when examining childhood occupations (e.g., play) or pediatric occupational therapy practice. This involvement provides an opportunity for the researcher to learn about the children’s worlds and perspectives, including the personal meanings children attribute to events and actions. The researcher can learn from the children’s own knowledge and experience and gain a better understanding of the phenomena being studied. In addition, children can benefit from being active participants in the research process. The experience of having a voice may give children practice in making life decisions and may help develop perceptions of control and the view of being altruistic (Weithorn & Scherer, 1994). Children's participation in decision making may also promote a sense of being responsible for their own lives versus being “powerless victims of the whims of adults” (Weithorn, 1983, p. 241).
Yet, at least three major impediments to incorporating children as research participants can exist. The first is that the researcher may assume that children are less competent participants and maintain a conscious or unconscious belief of his or her superior knowledge. Acting on these beliefs, the researcher may not even think to include children as active contributors in the research, may focus only on what children cannot do, or may not value the children's perspectives. Second, in the typical adult–child relationship, an inequality in the power relations exists because the adult is considered the authority (Alldred, 1998). This difference in power may affect the children's comfort in expressing their thoughts and feelings and the adult's evaluation of the children's ideas. Third, children and adults have different communication styles. For example, children more than adults often rely on nonverbal language and silence as primary methods of communication (Curtin, 1995). Consequently, the researcher may find it more difficult and challenging to communicate with children than with adults to elicit information of depth and richness.

Therefore, to involve children as research participants, the researcher is challenged to (a) examine his or her own beliefs regarding children's competencies, (b) define a different adult–child relationship that minimizes the power differential (Fine, 1987), and (c) learn the children's communication styles in order to elicit the children's perspectives and develop a common language (Curtin, 1995). In addition, the researcher needs to use research techniques that do not rely only on verbal language.

**Methodological Challenges**

**Examining Beliefs Regarding Children's Competence**

In past studies of children, researchers tended to focus more on children as “objects of inquiry” (Graue & Walsh, 1995, p. 136) than as informants. These studies typically examined developmental processes instead of children’s perspectives of their own world (Alldred, 1998). Oakley (1994) argued that in the theoretical frameworks underlying many studies of children, “the emphasis is not on what children are, but on what they are not” (p. 22). She proposed that this stance is prevalent in theories of development.

Graue and Walsh (1995) maintained that a lack of studies with children as informants exists because researchers have assumed that “children are too developmentally immature to be able to think conceptually or to have the language necessary to be able to express their ideas” (p. 146). Similarly, Waksler (1986) argued that there are two prevalent beliefs regarding children’s competencies. The first is that adults tend to think of children as being not grown up, immature, and thus “not something” (p. 74). She maintained that adults tend to view children as knowing less, being less serious, and being less important than themselves. The second belief is that “children are routinely wrong, in error and don’t understand” (p. 76). Thus, Waksler contended that adults tend to assume that they are superior to children because of their maturity and experience. She advocated the viewpoint that children are different from adults, not inferior. Qvortrup (1994) also stressed the importance of viewing children as “human beings, not only ‘human becomings’” (p. 18).

Tammivaara and Enright (1986) argued that “adult-centrism” has led researchers to underestimate children’s abilities (p. 227). This stance is seen when researchers assume that they know all about children because they once were children. When adult-centrism occurs, researchers tend to stay with their own frames of reference versus being open to learning from the different perspectives of children (Fine, 1987).

Another problem in past research is that when children had difficulty responding or completing a task, they were often considered incompetent in that area. Yet, researchers have not always examined their own roles in the research, such as checking whether the children understood what the researcher was really asking. For instance, when researchers presented Piaget’s research questions in a manner that was more relevant to the children’s life experience and clarified what concept was being tested, the children knew more than what Piaget had proposed (Donaldson, 1978). In a study of how occupational therapists collaborated with children in treatment planning (Curtin, 1995), I found one 9-year-old child losing interest in drawing and talking about his experience in therapy. At first, I started to doubt his competence to express himself. However, when I changed my approach and created a guessing game that still involved questions about his experience, he eagerly directed the game and began talking again.

In studies in which children have been informants, researchers have gained a better understanding of children’s competencies and their perspectives. The researchers also had some unexpected findings. For example, in a 9-month ethnography of an oncology unit, Bluebond-Langner (1978) interviewed and observed children 3 to 9 years of age who were dying. She discovered that the children’s understanding of death progressed through stages that depended on individual experiences (e.g., knowing a child who died), not on their ages. Children knew that they had cancer and would die even when adults did not tell them this was the case. They came to this conclusion by talking with peers on the unit, interpreting the serious expressions of everyone around them, and making sense of unusual behaviors in others (e.g., getting numerous gifts). The children perceived what the adults could handle and responded in a way to match this. For example, some parents would maintain a pretense that the children would recover. Even though the children knew they would die, they engaged in this mutual pretense with their parents. Bluebond-Langner found that the children viewed supporting others as their life task. She was also surprised by
the staff members’ unawareness or denial of the depth of the children’s knowledge.

Chalhub de Oliveira (1997) conducted an ethnography of homeless children in Rio de Janeiro. She found that even though the children encountered violence and hunger, some actually preferred living on the street instead of being with their families. A number of the children liked the freedom and independence they had on the street. Maria, a 10-year-old, described how she liked to be “free to go and stay anywhere” (p. 170). She also told the researcher:

I don’t know what I’m going to eat tomorrow. I don’t care. Somehow I will have something. Somebody will feel sorry to see a cute, dirty, and hungry little girl on the sidewalk crying, begging for food....I don’t need to know about tomorrow. I don’t have anything to worry about...at home I had everything but my mother wanted to control everything I did. (p. 170)

Therefore, the first challenge is for the researcher to examine his or her beliefs regarding children’s competencies. This examination requires ongoing reflection and being prepared to learn from children. The researcher needs to recognize children as experts about their own lives and to be open to the idea that children may have competencies of which adults may not know. The researcher also needs to recognize that if children are having difficulty answering a question or participating in the research, it does not automatically mean that the children are incompetent. Instead, the researcher needs to examine the entire situation, including the context, the child’s age, and especially his or her own role (e.g., reflecting on how the questions are worded).

Overcoming Inequality in the Typical Adult–Child Relationship

Adults often tell children what they should or should not do, and children are socialized to conform to adult’s wishes (Koocher & Keith-Spiegel, 1994). For example, children are taught to follow their teacher’s instructions and the school rules. Children also learn that when a teacher asks questions, they need to try to determine what the teacher wants to hear and guess at the right answer (Tammivaara & Enright, 1986). Thus, when an adult asks children questions, the children may think there is a right answer that the adult, as the authority, already knows. As a result, children may try to guess at an answer instead of expressing their own thoughts.

In the typical adult–child relationship, Waksler (1986) also argued that if children challenge what an adult says, the children’s views are “routinely discounted” (p. 77); therefore, “children have learned to keep their thoughts from adults” (Fine & Glassner, 1979, p. 170). Additionally, children are careful about how they act in the presence of adults, and, consequently, a “hidden world” of childhood exists that adults do not see (Fine & Sandstrom, 1988, p. 43). Unless the researcher conveys to the children the desire to hear their perspectives and learn about their worlds, the researcher risks that children may not express their thoughts or act naturally while he or she is present.

The second challenge then is to develop a relationship and clarify a role (e.g., define rules for interaction) that decreases the differences in power between the researcher and children and convey the researcher’s desire to learn. The researcher would need to convey to the children the importance of hearing the children’s perspectives and to employ specific strategies to reduce authoritarian, judgmental, or interfering behavior. In addition, the researcher would assume a responsive versus a dominating stance to the children’s actions and words. This relationship could be considered that of an “out-of-the-ordinary” adult (Tammivaara & Enright, 1986, p. 229) or the assumption of the “least adult role” (Mandell, 1988, p. 435). When this type of relationship is clear to the children, it is reflected in their descriptions of the researcher. For example, the children called Fine (1987) an “honorary kid” (p. 238).

Establishing a different type of relationship can be difficult at times for the researcher because children often react with bewilderment and then test the limits of the relationship. The children may find a nondirective and nonauthoritarian adult–child relationship puzzling if it is a new experience for them. For instance, when one researcher observed children getting into trouble and did nothing, a child yelled, “What’s wrong with you, mister, aren’t you going to report us?” (Fine & Sandstrom, 1988, p. 53). In Mandell’s (1988) study, whenever she acted differently from other adults, the children often asked, “Who are you?” Mandell maintained, “The main reason children have difficulty in accepting an adult as nondirective stems from their lack of experience of adults as participatory, enjoyable, and nonjudgmental” (p. 442). However, she found that when the children were viewed seriously, they responded with joy.

Children may also challenge the researcher to see whether this is truly a different adult–child relationship. For example, children will watch the researcher’s reactions in situations not tolerated by most adults. The children will check to see whether they can trust the researcher. Bluebond-Langner’s (1978) relationship was tested by a child named Benjamin. Benjamin asked her what happened to Maria, a girl on the unit. Bluebond-Langner replied, “She was very sick, much sicker than you are, and she died” (p. 188). Later, she found out that Benjamin asked everyone he saw what happened to Maria. When she asked him why he did that, he said, “The ones who tell me are my friends. I knew Maria died. I saw the cart come for her. They told everyone to go in their rooms. I wanted to see if you were really my friend” (p. 188).

The researcher also can encounter difficulties in assuming a nondirective and nonauthoritarian role because as an adult, he or she is morally and legally responsible for
protecting children from harm (Fine, 1987), especially if the researcher is the only adult present. If any possibility exists that the children may get hurt, the researcher needs to take action. At the same time, the researcher has to be careful not to get into a policing role (Fine, 1987). This dual role requires a delicate balance. The researcher seeks an understanding of the children’s worlds (including deviant behavior), but if he or she intervenes as an authority, the children may limit what they say.

**Bridging Different Styles of Communication**

Children often communicate differently from adults (Baumann, 1997). Preschoolers may use babble or nonstandard English in a way that other children, but not always adults, can understand the meaning (Mandell, 1988). Children also display a greater reliance on nonverbal language and silence for communication. For example, in my study (Curtin, 1995), Lisa (pseudonym) spoke in short sentences but varied the pitch, tone, and loudness of her voice to clarify the meaning. Once the therapist learned Lisa’s facial and voice cues, she said, “She really was very communicative, even though it wasn’t always verbal. Even her facial expression, you can just see when she’s sad or see when she’s angry. I mean her whole mannerism changes” (p. 81).

Children also tend to use fewer words to encapsulate the meaning of their message (Curtin, 1995). When asked, “What is important for therapists to know when they work with children,” Lisa responded, “How to talk to them.” After a few probing questions, she added, “That they understand what you are saying” (p. 69). Her message is poignant because of her hospital experience. Until the occupational therapist began treatment, Lisa did not know why she was there. “How to talk to them”(p. 64).

When asked general or vague questions, children may give minimal information. Pipe, Gee, and Wilson (1993) described an interview of a 6-year-old child:

> Interviewer: A couple of weeks ago you came and saw a magic show. Well, I’d like you to tell me all about it. Let’s start at the beginning...someone came to get you out of your class. What happened then?

> **JR:** We did a magic show. (p. 25)

However, when young children are asked more specific questions about their present experience, more information can be elicited. The statements young children make may appear meaningless or shallow because of the lack of verbal detail, but when examined, they are often rich with meaning (Zwiers & Morrissette, 1999).

Thus, communicating with children can take more time and effort if the researcher wants to learn about the children’s perspectives. Tammivaara and Enright (1986) contended that difficulties in communicating have kept researchers “from examining the world of the child from the vantage point of the child for many years” (p. 226). Often, researchers rely only on the parents or other adults to speak for the children. Yet, parents do not always know what their children are thinking (Biklen & Moseley, 1988).

Therefore, the researcher’s third challenge is to learn and use ways of communicating that bridge the different styles. The researcher needs to look for the meaning conveyed in short phrases. It is important for the researcher to learn “kid’s language,” including the nonstandard use of words, to allow the children enough time to answer and to ask questions in more than one way. The researcher also needs to learn which words children understand and try not to use “big words” or complex language. When I worked in an oncology clinic, one child made this point in his story for the group newspaper:

> When I was in the hospital I felt really bad at the time because I didn’t know what was going on at the time. I didn’t know what kind of medicine that was going in my body and when I was going to radiation they was trying to explain to me. But I didn’t understand because the kind of words that they was using.

Lastly, the researcher needs to be willing to adapt and use a variety of nonverbal techniques (e.g., drawing) to elicit the children’s perspectives.

**Considerations and Adaptations**

A number of adaptations can be made to successfully include children as valuable research participants. Because all children have competencies, the researcher is responsible for using techniques that will elicit the competencies needed to participate in the research. If the researcher considers different ways of getting children’s perspectives, successful participation becomes more feasible.

**Developmental Considerations**

When working with children, it is helpful for the researcher to be aware of development norms and that development varies with experience. However, the researcher also needs to be open to the idea that children may be able to do and understand more than has been stated in previous research and theories of development. Reexamination of Piaget’s work provides a good example (Donaldson, 1978).

The following developmental patterns affect children’s abilities to describe their experiences. By 3 years of age, children tend to be able to recall and tell about events that they have experienced, often in an outline format with few details (Saywitz, 1990). Their memories are more accurate with meaningful and familiar events than hypothetical stories, but children tend to lose detail as time passes (Lamb et al., 1999; Steward, Bussey, Goodman, & Saywitz, 1993). A 3-year-old may find it difficult to remember “peripheral details” (e.g., location) and events they consider unimportant (Saywitz, 1990, p. 333). Though preschool children are more easily misled and affected by suggestion than adults, they are less suggestible when recounting life expe-
Experiences (Zwiers & Morrissette, 1999).

Preschoolers tend to have the vocabulary needed to talk about the present but are still learning concepts regarding time and the use of words involving past tense (Steward et al., 1993). In first grade, children can talk concretely about events in the past and are better able to answer questions starting with “how,” “why,” or “when” (Steward et al., 1993). However, children under 7 years of age tend to have difficulty answering questions involving abstractions with a variety of dimensions (Hatch, 1990).

At 7 years of age, children can discriminate the different feelings and actions that occur in various situations, such as recognizing that they are more competent in one subject (e.g., art) than another (Zwiers & Morrissette, 1999). They also appear to distinguish between external and internal events at the same level as adults (Lamb et al., 1999). By 8 years of age, children describe more details in their accounts of their experience, and by 10 years of age, they are similar to adults in their recall of historical events (Zwiers & Morrissette, 1999).

**Ethical Considerations**

Researchers have found that most elementary-school-age children have the capacity to provide assent as defined by federal regulations (Weithorn & Scherer, 1994). The children need to be given an explanation of the research in words that they can understand and be told with whom the information will be shared. Children also need to be told that they have a right to dissent, that a decision not to participate will be respected, and that they can stop at any time with no consequences.

As in all research, the researcher is ethically responsible for being sensitive to signs of distress or anxiety so as to not harm the children (Crowley, 1996). Throughout the research, children should have opportunities to ask questions and express concerns (Kendall, 1997).

Children may want their real names to be used in the study. When I told a child in my study that I needed to change his name, he replied, “That’s dumb.” I explained that it was necessary and had him pick the name to use. Some of the children in Fine’s (1987) study also wanted their names used, but he used pseudonyms because he had documented the children’s deviant behaviors and was concerned about ramifications in the future.

**The Setting**

When eliciting children’s perspectives, it is best to be in a place that is quiet and private. The location needs to be a neutral place where the children feel comfortable and free to talk. If possible, the researcher should let the children choose the location (Faux, Walsh, & Deatrick, 1988). If this is not possible and a strange setting is used, the researcher needs to allow time for the children to get familiar with the setting (Yarrow, 1960). It also is helpful if child-sized chairs are available and the researcher sits at the same level as the children. Younger children usually are more comfortable with their parents or other children present (Koocher & Keith-Spiegel, 1994).

**Adaptations for Preschoolers**

The use of drawing or play materials is especially useful for eliciting the perspectives of preschoolers (Deatrick & Faux, 1991). Therefore, one way to adapt an interview is to ask a question and have the preschooler respond with pictures (Garbarino & Stott, 1989). Otherwise, preschoolers do best when questions come from the immediate situation or are embedded in an activity that is familiar (Deatrick & Faux, 1991; Tammivaara & Enright, 1986). Also helpful is if the researcher develops questions that use words introduced by the child or that respond to the child’s actions or drawings (Garbarino & Stott, 1989) and keeps in mind that preschoolers are better at describing events, persons, or objects than reflecting or clarifying (Garbarino & Stott, 1989; Yarrow, 1960). Preschoolers also will do better if names are used instead of pronouns (Garbarino & Stott, 1989). Lastly, because preschoolers can be suggestive, opening up the range of possible answers is important (Parker, 1984); otherwise, the researcher’s questions may directly influence the children’s responses.

**Adaptations for Elementary-School-Age Children**

Because an interview highly depends on the relationship established between the interviewer and the person being interviewed, the researcher in an interview with a child can decrease the differences in power by being flexible and informal (Deatrick & Faux, 1991). The opening question “sets the tone of the relationship” and conveys what is expected (Yarrow, 1960, p. 580). To help the interview flow, a few key questions prepared ahead of time can be helpful, especially because children do better with some structure in the interview (Yarrow, 1960). However, if the interview is too highly structured, the children may think it is a classroom lesson with predetermined answers (Tammivaara & Enright, 1986). Asking the children to tell the researcher when they want a break or when they do not understand a question is a helpful strategy (Zwiers & Morrissette, 1999).

One way a researcher can start an interview is to have the children bring a picture or something they made (Yarrow, 1960). By encouraging children to talk about their work, they are put into the role of an expert and given the message that their thoughts are valued (Yarrow, 1960). Another strategy for beginning an interview and decreasing anxiety is to ask the children to either share three wishes or describe who they would like to become (Faux et al., 1988).

**Methods of Eliciting the Children’s Perspectives**

Children’s perspectives can be elicited through a variety of
ways. The child can draw pictures, make a videotaped story, talk to a pretend friend, or act out different roles or scenes. Other ideas include drawing and writing in a diary (Sorensen, 1989), completing sentences (Kendall, 1997), explaining a videotape the researcher shows (Graue & Walsh, 1998), or participating in a focus group (Shaw, 1996). The use of props (e.g., talking through a doll or toy phone) can be especially effective with preschoolers (Yarrow, 1960).

The Art of Questioning

When asking children questions, it is helpful to inform the children (a) that there are no right or wrong answers and (b) that it is all right if they do not have an answer (Faux et al., 1988). It is best to avoid the use of double negatives and vague references to time (e.g., “a few months ago”) (Zwiers & Morrissette, 1999). The researcher also needs to monitor his or her responses, being careful not to use judgmental phrases like, “that’s right” or “that’s good.” Faux et al. (1988) also recommended that questions gradually shift from least to most sensitive, general to detailed, concrete to abstract. Children find it easier to answer questions about the present and events they have just experienced than about the past (Amato & Ochiltree, 1987; Hatch, 1990). The researcher also needs to keep in mind that questions starting with “why” are the most difficult because they require knowledge about causality (Saywitz, 1990). The researcher should word questions with only three to five more words than the children’s average number of words in a sentence (Garbarino & Stott, 1989). To learn about the children’s level of vocabulary, the researcher can read story books that children typically read at that age (Zwiers & Morrissette, 1999).

In the interview, the researcher should try to avoid initiating all conversation, controlling the children’s behavior, interrupting with many questions, and responding with an additional question (Faux et al., 1988; Garbarino & Stott, 1989; Tammivaara & Enright, 1986). Instead, the interview needs to be more similar to a casual conversation and stopped if it becomes more like an interrogation. If the interview is too formal, children may think it is a test (Hatch, 1990).

A researcher can encourage children to talk more by using props (e.g., photographs, videotapes, toys or objects) related to the phenomena being studied (Pipe et al., 1993). Hatch (1990) gave the example of how a researcher studying children’s perspectives in sharing would elicit more information if the children carry an object (e.g., a toy) that they have had to share. The children can then look and touch the object as they talk about their thoughts and feelings about sharing it.

Group interviewing is a format that can elicit more information (Graue & Walsh, 1995). Children tend to be more comfortable talking with other children than with an adult and will be more likely to direct the conversation (Graue & Walsh, 1995). When children guide the conversation, the researcher learns what the children consider important.

To get more information from children, the researcher can ask for examples for clarification. Another strategy is “playing dumb” in which the researcher asks the children to help him or her to understand (Tammivaara & Enright, 1986, p. 231). A third suggestion is for the researcher to repeat the same question in a different way or restate the children’s words or feelings in a questioning manner (Faux et al., 1988; Garbarino & Stott, 1989). Biklen and Moseley (1988) recommended asking about persons, things, and activities separately or dividing requests for information into parts and ask questions about each part. If the researcher asks children about a difficult topic, Yarrow (1960) suggested giving the children a chance to say something positive before asking questions that might entail a negative response. He also suggested mentioning that other children may feel the same way. Faux et al. (1988) recommended asking children about what they would do in a certain situation as a way to elicit their feelings.

Sensitivity to Signs of Fatigue, Disinterest, or Lack of Understanding

Elementary-school-age children often can tolerate 30-minute interviews (Faux et al., 1988). However, the researcher needs to watch for nonverbal signs of fatigue or decreased attention and allow for diversions (Faux et al., 1988; Garbarino & Stott, 1989). If children are using the same phrase repeatedly, it may be an indication that they do not know the answer, may not understand the question, or may think the question is unimportant (Biklen & Moseley, 1988). Additionally, quick or easy answers may mean that they are bored or tired (Faux et al., 1988). The researcher needs to realize that until 10 or 11 years of age, children may not be able to say what they do not know, understand, or remember (Garbarino & Stott, 1989). If a child does not understand a question, the researcher can help by rewording the question instead of repeating it (Garbarino & Stott, 1989). When checking for understanding, the researcher should ask children to repeat what they have heard rather than asking, “Do you understand?” (Garbarino & Stott, 1989, p. 190).

Occupational Therapists as Qualitative Researchers With Children

Pediatric occupational therapists who become researchers bring with them a wealth of knowledge regarding children. They have experience interpreting children’s nonverbal language, talking at the children’s level, and involving children as active participants in the therapy process. These skills are valuable assets for doing research with children. Occupational therapists also have a history of being prob-
lem solvers who discover creative solutions to various difficulties. This skill can be applied to discovering inventive ways of eliciting children’s voices. For example, when the 9-year-old child in my study (Curtin, 1995) stopped talking, I used my skills as a therapist to analyze the situation. I realized that he may have been bored, felt pressured to talk, or did not like talking in front of an audience (i.e., his mother, younger brother, and myself). So I created two games and wrapped them up like presents. In the next session, he was intrigued. He smiled as he opened the packages. I told him that he had a choice of a matching game (matching his experiences in therapy with pictures of children with different feelings) or a guessing game. He chose the guessing game in which each card had a question about his experience in therapy and the four of us had to guess at the answer. The child was pleased to tell us the right answer (which also meant that he told us about his experience). By being creative and playful, I discovered a way to elicit this child’s perspective.

Implications for Clinical Practice
Therapists can use the ideas presented in this article to help them collaborate with children. Though occupational therapists tend to be skilled at giving children a voice in treatment activities, involving children in defining the purpose of therapy is more challenging. Yet, if therapists want children to learn to speak and act for themselves, they can start by eliciting and strengthening the children’s voices in defining the focus of therapy. By engaging the children in dialogue combined with other methods (e.g., drawing, using props), the therapist may increase the likelihood of participation and in the process gain an understanding of the children’s perspectives.

It has been my experience that children are often more comfortable talking while engaged in an activity. Consequently, if children know that the therapist is interested in their thoughts and will listen to them, they often share their concerns in the midst of an activity. Because it is their choice whether or not to focus on the activity or to talk, the children do not feel pressured to talk as in a formal interview. Therefore, occupational therapists can be in a position of listening and helping children.

Children appreciate having an opportunity to talk with a therapist who cares and values what they have to say. When two children in my study were asked about their time in occupational therapy, Tony (pseudonym) said, “We had fun while she was asking me the questions and I was telling her the answers. It was like fun doing that.” Lisa said that she liked “the stitching and the talking.” When asked what she liked about her therapist, she replied, “She’s fun, she’s got a lot of neat things to do, and we talk” (Curtin, 1995, pp. 68–69).

Conclusion
Occupational therapy researchers will gain a better understanding of childhood occupations and pediatric practice by eliciting children’s voices in research. For example, researchers may learn how children’s hidden worlds affect their functioning and about children’s experiences in therapy. This information can assist therapists in providing treatment that is more meaningful to children’s lives. In addition, when children are given the opportunity to be informants, they may also benefit from the research experience. For instance, in my study Tony reviewed the videotape of his interview where he talked about his experiences in therapy. He said that he liked the tape because of the way he was talking and sitting: It was “like I’m a real professional.”

Though it may be more difficult for a researcher to engage children in research than to work with adults, the impediments are not insurmountable. The researcher can make a number of adaptations and adjustments to elicit children’s perspectives and explore children’s worlds. By doing so, the researcher will find that children can be active research participants who will help expand the knowledge base of occupational therapy. In addition, the researcher will be giving children an opportunity to have a voice like “real professionals.”

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References


