



Southern Hemisphere

SUPPORTING MEANINGFUL CHANGE

Conducting Research with Children with Disabilities – a few ideas

A rights based approach is central to conducting research with children. This means that the rights of the child should be protected and upheld by creating a safe space for children to participate openly. As children with disabilities often have communication challenges, more effort needs to be made to create the space where children with disabilities are given the opportunity to share their views and experiences. Southern Hemisphere recently conducted a summative evaluation of a child rights capacity development program for seven special schools in Swaziland and South Africa on behalf of Kindernothilfe. In this newsletter we share some of our key learnings from conducting research with children with physical, intellectual, visual and hearing impairments.

In preparing for data collection, it is important to find out what children's special needs are beforehand and provide them with the **support** (e.g. qualified sign language interpreter, questionnaire in braille, etc.) needed so that all who are involved in the research process can participate with ease.

Having a trusted caregiver (parent, guardian, teacher) present when conducting interviews may also help with **establishing trust**; however if the caregiver is being evaluated, an alternative person should be included in the interview. Conduct interviews in an environment familiar to the children.

The **interviewing methodology** employed (i.e. focus group, semi-structured, survey, etc.) will depend on the type and extent of the disability. For example, children who have severe intellectual disabilities may need one on one engagement, whereas children who have milder forms of disabilities can be engaged through focus group discussions.

Make provision for children who **may not want to participate** verbally. Pair children with mild and severe disabilities together, so that those with mild disabilities can assist those with severe disabilities to participate. For example, those with milder disabilities could signal when their partner wants to speak or could write on their behalf. You could also prepare flash cards with emoticons such as happy and sad faces so that children can express how they feel about a particular issue by simply holding up a card. Splitting children into smaller

groups (of 2-3 people) and/or allowing for one-on-one discussions during or after focus groups may also encourage participation of children who are not comfortable with participating in the bigger group.

Children with visual impairments may not know when it is their turn to speak so giving them a “talking stick” (which could take the form of a stick, teddy bear, etc.) to hold and pass on will help give them an indication of their turn to speak. Maintaining eye contact with **children with hearing impairments** is important as it may be the only indication that you are listening to what they are saying. Having a scribe present is thus important to have in focus group discussions.

All interviews should be conducted over short **time frames** (30-60 minutes). Keep questions simple and allow extra time for interpretation and responses. Children with disabilities need to take regular breaks or they may lose focus.

Energizers are very useful. Be sensitive about the energizers that you use for children with disabilities so as to not exclude any children. For example, for children with intellectual and hearing disabilities use games involving colors and pictures; for children with physical disabilities do not use games that require too much physical movement; for children with visual impairments use games where children have to share something personal or games involving sounds.

Conducting research with children with disabilities may also be emotionally overwhelming, depending on the subject matter. Prior **briefing and debriefing** after fieldwork would be helpful to prepare and support fieldworkers to deal with the sensitive issues raised during fieldwork.

Sources:

[http://www.nda.ie/cntmgmtnew.nsf/0/851DE72FE32677F0802571CB005A165B/\\$File/ResearchwithChildrenwithDisabilities.pdf](http://www.nda.ie/cntmgmtnew.nsf/0/851DE72FE32677F0802571CB005A165B/$File/ResearchwithChildrenwithDisabilities.pdf)

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KNH fieldworker reports, April 2014.