

**Perry Starlight, Kim Cosmos and Ali Orbit's Alien Encounter: creating a picturebook as information for children and parents participating in research.**

**Abstract**

**Design/methodology/approach** Drawing on the researcher's previous professional experience working in children's publishing and taking an innovative and collaborative approach to giving information to child and parent/carer co-researchers, the researcher and an illustrator created a picturebook, both as an eBook and a paperback book, to recruit and explain research and co-researchers' roles to young children and their parents/carers.

**Purpose** This study explored whether the creation of an illustrated picturebook could explain the terms and practicalities of participatory, multi-method qualitative research to children aged four to eight and their parents/carers, creating conditions to seek agreement to their participation, by using an age-appropriate design whilst adhering to ethical guidelines.

**Findings** The picturebook successfully recruited thirty children and their parents/carers. Other children expressed their wish not to participate. These findings suggest that greater consideration should be given to the ways information is given to potential research participants, particularly the visual, material and paratextual elements of the information sheets and consent forms routinely used in research.

**Originality** This paper offers insight into the publishing practicalities of creating innovative ways of giving information about research participation to children and parents/carers and how these ways might foster rich data collection.

*'As adults we've seen so much before we tend to turn the pages of a picturebook without really looking. Young children tend to look more carefully so make sure you give them something to look at...' - Anthony Browne*

## **Introduction**

This article explores one aspect of a PhD study into shared digital reading at home, specifically how information for that study was given to potential co-researchers aged four to eight and their parents/carers in the form of a picturebook created by the researcher and an illustrator. The methodology detailed here draws on the researcher's knowledge from their previous career in children's publishing, working at Walker Books and Macmillan Children's Books for over a decade at Director level in Custom Publishing and Communications, where creating bespoke books and disseminating information about books to young children and their parents/carers were the primary remits of these roles. The picturebook was created, as part of the PhD ethics application, as both an eBook and a physical paperback book. Its purpose was to give information about the research, to recruit and inform thirty children and their parents/carers as co-researchers and gain their provisional consent.

Children and their parents/carers were considered co-researchers in this PhD study, in which they chose a digital shared reading practice to highlight for the research, created parent-made videos and child-led sensory tours (Green, 2016) using video as well as children reviewing the video data with the researcher at interview, similar to methods used by Supski and Maher (2021). Children and parents/carers were considered integral to the research in which the reading practice was the unit of analysis, therefore involving both children and parents/carers.

The research question which guided the information giving aspects of this research was: how can information about the terms and practicalities of participatory multi-method

qualitative research be presented to young children and their parents/carers to foster their understanding, creating conditions to seek agreement to their participation without duress?

## **1. Problem Statement**

In order to widen the pool of research into the information worlds of young children from their own perspectives and to enrich these experiences, consideration must be given to how appropriate information is delivered to children about taking part in research. Giving information requires the researcher to meet a plethora of criteria, not just for children, but also parents/carers, university research ethics committees and funding bodies.

Ethical requirements in the UK, where this research took place, suggest that information given provides an overview of the research, the methods and purpose, explanations of terminology, the duration of the research and what is expected of participants or co-researchers. It needs to explain concepts like anonymity or pseudonymity and confidentiality, explain how data will be used, kept and stored and give researcher and research institution details. Lastly it needs to ask for consent to participate whilst making it clear that potential participants can decline there and then, or at any point in the research (Alderson & Morrow, 2012; British Educational Research Association (BERA), 2018).

In addition, Alderson and Morrow (2012), BERA (2018) and other institutional guidelines ask that attention is given to the specific information needs of individual potential subjects (children and their parents/carers in this case) and that the information should be delivered in a suitable format (World Health Organisation, 1964, 2000; National Health Service (NHS) Health Research Authority, 2021; United Kingdom Research and Innovation (UKRI), 2022). Participants should be enabled to give their consent with regard to their needs and capacities (UKRI, 2021). In addition to presenting this information to children, best practice and many university research ethics committees (REC) suggest that researchers must

take account of the gatekeepers' interests (in this instance parents/carers) and gain their informed consent on behalf of their children (and in this case for themselves as well) and strive to ensure that the relationship between the person (the child) and the proxy (the parent/carer) is not disturbed (British Sociological Association, 2017) and allow for respectful exchanges between all parties, including the researcher (American Anthropological Association, 2012).

Fulfilling this range of criteria for multiple parties can lead to tensions around how to prioritise the agency and competency of children and work within these parameters (Zulfiqar, 2004; Wiles *et al.*, 2007), a struggle to keep a human connection with participants (Anderson *et al.*, 2017) and at worst, information sheets run the risk of prompting rather than alleviating concerns on the part of the prospective participants (Bryman, 2012).

In response to the above criteria, this study sought to create an accessible and familiar form of information by creating a picturebook which would provoke dialogue, give sound information and act as a starting point to seek provisional consent from children aged four- to- eight years old and informed consent from their parents/carers to take part in research.

## **2. Literature Review**

Research with young children is an established area of both Library and Information Studies (LIS) and Publishing studies (Cooper, 2007; Large, Nettet and Beheshti, 2008; Lundh and Alexandersson, 2012; Baverstock, 2013; Rutter, Clough and Toms, 2019; Barriage, 2022). Despite this foundation there is scope for further work in this area (Barriage, 2021), particularly research which explores young people's information practices and behaviours from their perspective (Agosto, 2019). In order to achieve this the use of participatory multi-method approaches have been explored and used by Barriage (2016, 2021).

Using multi-method approaches allowing children to give their own views stems from a change in thinking about how children are researched, regarding them as social actors with agency and, as such, that they should be allowed to voice their opinions freely (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), 1989; Qvortrup, 1991; James and Prout, 2015), (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), 1989; Qvortrup, 1991; James and Prout, 2015). Thus the remit of doing research on or about children transforms into research *with* children (Kellett, 2005). The natural progression from this line of thinking is that if children are social actors with agency, researchers need to go beyond institutional review processes to ensure ethical working relationships (Wood, 2015) including considering how information is presented and communicated to children during the informed consent phase (Mayne and Howitt, 2021). As Dockett and Perry (2011) put it:

Research that reflects a participatory rights perspective and respects children's agency must be based on children making informed decisions about their participation (p. 231).

Thus the onus falls on researchers to find ways to give sound information to children using an age and context-appropriate means of communication. This becomes more pressing when the idea that provisional consent from children can only be obtained if adequate information is provided (Valentine, 1999; Bradbury-Jones and Taylor, 2015). This is relevant not only in children's research but also in research methods in the LIS field which considers how researchers might reflexively consider and change power dynamics when conducting research (Mehra, Albright and Sheffield, 2006; Doiron and Asselin, 2015). This matters because as Gorman and Clayton put it 'the manner in which participants are informed about the research, will influence what can be done' (2005 p. 93).

In research with children this need has been enthusiastically taken up by researchers across a range of fields, using innovative methods to inform participants, including electronic informed consent (Sutter *et al.*, 2020), animated videos (McInroy, 2017) and illustrated leaflets (Lambert and Glacken, 2011).

Researchers have also used stories to give children information. Mayne, Howitt and Rennie (2017) created a storybook to present the context of their research to young children, reporting that this ethical groundwork played a significant role in how children experienced research participation (Mayne et al 2018). Yamada-Rice used a published picturebook and a bespoke picturebook using photographs (2017) giving information in both home and school settings and Martinez-Lejarreta created a picturebook (Arnott *et al.*, 2020). In all these instances the books were used by the researcher with the children.

This work reflects the current calls for a situated, dialogic and reflective ethics approaches between child and researcher, demonstrating a respectful attitude towards participants considering them experts (Flewitt, 2019) and providing spaces for children to engage in dialogue (Arnott et al, 2020). Using stories connects children with activities which are likely to be part of their everyday lives (Yamada-Rice, 2017), emphasises the importance of the home literacy environment and visual images when working with children (Yamada-Rice, 2010; 2017). These forms of information reflect researchers' efforts to step into the children's worlds rather than asking the children to journey into an inaccessible world of adulthood, academia and its informed consent traditions, which have been found to be ineffective when researching with children (Yamada-Rice, 2017).

However, in research where the practice is the unit of analysis, the points of view of others, not just the children come into play. Research like this puts parents/carers in a dual role both as co-researchers (with the associated ethical requirements) and as guides and

gatekeepers who give consent for their children to take part (UNCRC, 1989). As a result child-parent roles and their relationships need to be taken into consideration from the very point of information giving. This dynamic goes beyond practice based research: the power imbalance between children and adults in research settings is well documented (Valentine, 1999; Rasmussen, 2014; Bradbury-Jones and Taylor, 2015; Moody *et al.*, 2021; Supski and Maher, 2021) particularly with parents/carers at home (Aarsand, 2012; Noppari, Uusitalo and Kupiainen, 2017). Whilst this power imbalance can't be removed, efforts might be made to disrupt it (Mannay, 2015) without being invasive (Poveda, 2019) by creating a respectful space for dialogue between children and parents/carers. A picturebook catering to a dual audience of parent (as supposed to researcher) and child readers provides a non-invasive medium to establish ground rules around how the research will be conducted, an education piece and guide for children but also for their parents/carers regarding their children's rights and roles, before seeking both parties provisional and informed consent.

There is an extensive body of academic scholarship about how picturebooks work which is beyond the scope of this paper (e.g. Nikolajeva and Scott, 2006; Kummerling-Meibauer, 2018). In short, picturebooks are defined as books, usually of thirty-two pages (Jalongo, 2004) in which the illustrations and the words interact with one another (as supposed to an illustrated book, in which illustrations are only used to highlight the written text). This interaction creates atmosphere illuminating the narrative (Lewis, 2011), establishes the intricacy of the plot or theme of the book (Nikolajeva and Scott, 2006) reifying a complex and meaningful story to young readers (O'Neil, 2011) where the visuals provide a vital and empowering source of information for the young who often decode pictures before reading text (Moerk, 1985).

Reading picturebooks enhances children's literacy, including their language development (Bus, Van IJzendoorn and Pellegrini, 1995; Hargrave and Sénéchal, 2000;

Strasser and Seplocha, 2007) as does an adult reading to them (Payne, Whitehurst and Angell, 1994) particularly when it involves active participation by children (Hargrave and Sénéchal, 2000). The quality of interactions are heightened when parents and children read together: children enjoy the opportunity to connect with their parents/carers and parents/carers have an opportunity to guide their children through the texts (Merga and Ledger, 2018), promoting internal and emotional state talk between children and adults (Brownell *et al.*, 2013; Garner and Parker, 2018) and contributing to children's understanding of the world (Bus, Van IJzendoorn and Pellegrini, 1995; Lysaker and Tonge, 2013). Lastly, asking parents/carers and children to read an information-giving picturebook as a springboard to participating in research (Arnott *et al.*, 2020) taps into influential home based literacy practices (Yamada-Rice, 2010) and the associated cultural, social and historical contexts in which meaning is made (Street, 1995, Lankshear and Knobel, 2003).

Yamada-Rice (2017) suggests professionals who have worked within creative industries with children, could move visual methods on. Arnott *et al.* (2020) too emphasises the importance of the information being well designed and appropriate to the user. Adding a publisher's perspective to these calls, working with a trained illustrator and creating a material (including digitally material) picturebook opens up new insights into how researchers might enable the sociocultural features which build people's capacity to negotiate information (Lloyd, 2010).

The publishing perspective firstly emphasises the importance and quality of the illustrations as a tool for communicating ideas, not just as an embellishment of the text but as a key element of the narrative, based on the belief that illustration is a language of its own (Bang, 2016) which flat graphics, emojis or colourful and shapely fonts cannot replicate. Understanding that interplay between illustrations and text sometimes provides harmonious reinforcement but can also create a deviation where the text and illustrations oppose each



other to create meaning (Schwartz, 1982; Nikolajeva and Scott, 2006). All of this contributes to a 'gap' into which the reader can step into the role of co-creator (Iser, 1978).

The perspective of a publisher also considers that paratexts influence how a text is read. A paratext is the 'undefined zone' or 'threshold' of text and illustrations which fall outside of the main narrative, for example a title, subtitle or cover (Genette, 1997 p. 2). It is the 'fringe of the printed text which in reality controls one's whole reading of the text' (Lejeune, 1975 p. 45). Considering the paratextual ways in which an information-giving text influences potential co-researchers' engagement with that text matters because 'a text without a paratext does not exist and never has existed' (Genette, 1997 p. 3). Two A4 sides of typed text with a university logo at the top contain paratexts, however covertly, and wield influence on the reader just as much as a brightly coloured cover of a book with a hand lettered title and an accessible visual image.

Materiality (including the digital materiality) is a major focus of any publisher, taking the stance that the format in which information is presented influences the reading of it (Latour, 2010; Drucker, 2013). How the format (including digital formats) can engage children in the idea of research participation whilst maintaining the flow of human interaction is a fruitful area for exploration (Flewitt, 2019).

The multimodal way in which meaning is made, where written-linguistic modes of meaning interface with oral, visual, audio, gestural, tactile and spatial patterns of meaning (Cope and Kalantzis, 1999) matters when it comes to presenting information to potential co-researchers. Information given prior to research is a piece of research apparatus and 'apparatuses produce differences that matter—they are boundary-making practices that are formative of matter and meaning, productive of, and part of, the phenomena produced' (Barad, 2007 p. 146).

### 3. Methodology

To address the necessary ethical criteria and drawing on the researcher's thirteen years working in the UK children's publishing industry, the researcher created, with an illustrator, a picturebook, as both an eBook and a physical book, available [here](#), (and see Fig. 1) to explain the research. It featured the researcher as a character along with three fictional aliens who ask questions of the researcher and child characters in the book.

The finer points of printing and bookmaking were understood as a result of the researcher working at director level across divisions of publishing companies observing the creation of picturebooks from different vantage points, including Julia Donaldson and Rebecca Cobb's *The Paper Dolls*, Oliver Jeffers and Sam Winston's *A Child of Books*, Jon Klassen's *We Found a Hat* and Chris Haughton's *Shh! We Have a Plan*. The researcher had also taught children's publishing at MA level.



Fig. 1 Cover of the *Space Explorers* picturebook

The researcher's university REC had stipulated that for the PhD research no potential participants should be approached in person. This research took place in early summer 2021 when social distancing regulations were still in place in the UK. As such the book, following approval by the researcher's departmental research ethics lead and the university REC, was sent out first in its ebook format as a recruitment tool to WhatsApp parent groups of five South East London state schools and nurseries (in this way speaking to parents/carers in their role as gatekeepers (Fargas-Malet *et al.*, 2010)).

If parents/carers expressed an initial interest they were sent a pack containing one printed copy of the picturebook which they were asked to read with their children (see Fig. 10). The pack contained a parents/carers information sheet and consent form for themselves as co-researchers and following Alderson and Morrow's advice to seek informed consent from parents/carers for their children's participation in social science research (2012). Parents/carers were encouraged by the researcher to discuss the contents of the book with their children after reading it together, to read it more than once and to allow children to look at it alone if they wished to. Parents/carers and children were then given the opportunity to discuss the contents of the book and the research in general with the researcher before committing to joining the study.

The book was used to gain the initial and provisional consent of the children to take part (Flewitt, 2005). Each child was provided with a consent form on which they could draw an alien signifying their provisional consent to continue with the research process (see Fig. 2.). This research did not consider children's provisional consent to participate as a final and fixed agreement nor did it consider the picturebook as the only source of information but rather a springboard in an ongoing relationship between the researcher, children and their parents/carers (Arnott *et al.*, 2020). The researcher was mindful of children's non-verbal cues throughout the data collection process and stopped if any marker of discomfort was

perceived, from the obvious, for example putting a hand up in front of the camera, to more subtle body language and facial signals such as turning away from the camera (Cocks, 2006; Dockett and Perry, 2011). When the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with children, the book was reviewed and its contents discussed, including children's right to stop at any time, which is heavily emphasized in the book itself.



*Fig. 2 Children signified their provisional consent to continue by circling or drawing an alien*

### ***3.a Getting support from others***

The initial work of the picturebook creation was in securing the support and help of others, firstly, an illustrator. The researcher's position as Associate Lecturer on an Illustration MA meant that an illustrator (and former student on the MA) could be found. It also meant that issues of power had to be addressed where the illustrator could not feel coerced by a former tutor. As such, it was essential to pay the illustrator and funding was sought from the department head (as well as funding to printing 35 physical copies of the book). Getting this

kind of support is challenging when using language to describe a visually driven text and when the illustrator's early roughs (see Fig. 3 and 4) rarely convey the richness and characterisation which shines through their final artwork. It required a leap of faith on the part of the university department to provide funding. Other stakeholder support was sought including the university REC, a proof reader and a printer.



*Fig. 3 Early images of the alien characters*



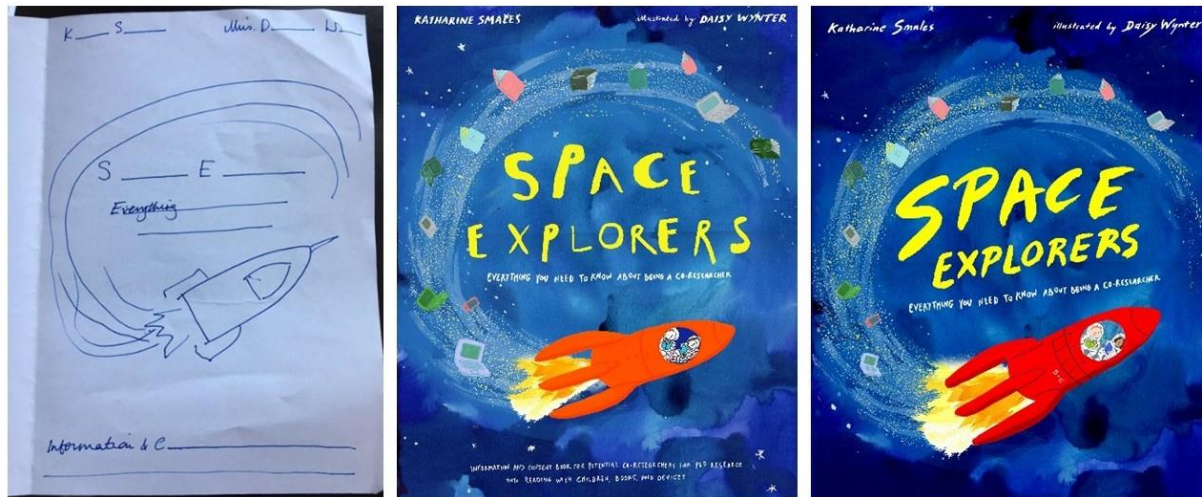
*Fig. 4 Black and white rough of the researcher*

### *3.b Setting the tone*

The tone of the book was considered throughout its creation, but particularly in the early stages. Using knowledge from roles in the publishing industry, the researcher contacted the illustrator because her primary colour palette was accessible to children, her style was approachable yet it belied her skill at conveying humour and emotions in the characters. The collaborative nature of the project between researcher and illustrator became the creative heart of the project and without the considerable skills of the illustrator it would not have been possible.

The illustrations formed the backbone of conveying important information in an accessible and friendly way to a dual audience of parents/carers and children, challenging the dominance of written text (Wynn and Israel, 2018). The written text itself was combed over, edited and cut down many times to ensure it complied with all ethical requirements but was also short and concise enough to be read in picturebook form.

White dummies of the book were made by the researcher to consider the pacing and rhythm of the text and illustrations, for example to accomplish the dramatic turn of the page (Bader, 1976) in which the book reveals new information after a page turn to engage the reader (see Fig. 8 and 9). Various different covers were considered, stemming from an early doodle by the researcher (see Fig. 5). Illustrations also reinforced points which would have been challenging to make to the young audience if text alone was used (Schwartz, 1982). For example, a happy child holding a bunch of flowers and saying ‘no thank you’ is seen leaving the Space Explorer mission, indicating that she doesn’t want to join and making it clear that she is suffering no negative consequences as a result of her non-participation (see Fig 6).



*Fig. 5 Three iterations of the cover from the researcher's earliest doodle to the final version by the illustrator*

The material nature of the book, in both eBook and physical versions, was conceived to reflect the details of a standard picturebook used by young children who were read to by others. The attention to detail, time and care spent on the information given to potential co-researchers materially signalled the importance of the ethics process between the researcher and the participants. The material nature also signalled that the project must have been funded by some institution, giving credibility to the researcher's work and, it was hoped, helped to gain peoples trust in the project. The researcher's presence via a book had to allow participants to return to the information again and again to facilitate understanding but where the researcher could, effectively, be discarded without awkwardness if children or parents/carers did not want to take part.

Most challenging of all was setting a tone which walked the line between conveying the seriousness and meaning of the ethical issues at hand, but also in casting the characteristics of the research as open to the co-researchers points of view and to what was meaningful to them. While the book needed to have a 'fun' element to engage co-researchers, it also needed to convey a message that research was being conducted and was central to

participation. The aim was to ensure that co-researchers did not feel that if they decided not to participate that they would be missing out on 'fun' and as a result feel coerced into participating (Wood, 2015).

The book had to set out information about participating in the research, guiding not only children, but also their parents/carers, particularly about how the research regarded the opinions and wishes of the children. It was essential that children and also their parents/carers understood that the children did not have to participate if they did not want to. Linked to this was the need for children to understand that their parents/carers knew this too and parents/carers should not try to persuade children if they were not keen on participating. Emphasis was also put on the idea that there were no right or wrong ways of presenting research, aiming to ensure that parents/carers understood that their children should have freedom to create their video data as they pleased.

It was also important to convey the nature of the PhD research which they were being asked to join. Co-researchers might want to convey aspects of their reading practices which were important to them and these aspects might extend to the imaginary and conceptual, not only relationships with and feelings about real people but also imaginary characters or people who were not present: authors; illustrators; narrators and content creators. It was vital to show the co-researchers, through the fantastical elements included in the book, that the data they collected could reach into these realms: it was not out of bounds. Recognising children's imaginations was part of a stance which considers that children not as 'static unthinking objects' but rather as 'dynamic reasoning agents' with complex inner worlds (Alderson, 2004 p. 110). This stance regarding children also recognised that they would present their experiences in ways of their own choosing. The creative nature of this information, in the form of a picturebook, acknowledged the boundaries where the research and the practice began and viewed them as fluid and not fixed (Penn, 2019).



The PhD research required a lot of engagement from co-researchers as well as their trust in giving video data over. Creating the book, at significant effort, signalled respect for co-researchers, a move towards them and a way of showing that the researcher was committed to building relationships, in the hope that they would consider reciprocating. Creating the book fulfilled the balancing act of ethical requirements and power dynamics with the need to genuinely engage children in a non-threatening, non-coercive and safe research space (Moody *et al.*, 2021).

### ***3.c Creating the book***

#### *3.c.i Representations of people.*

Recruitment for this research project took place in South-East London, which has a diverse population. Illustrations of children needed to be from a range of backgrounds to reflect the community. Children with cochlear implants, insulin pumps and a wheelchair were included. Older people were also added to the illustrations. Men were shown participating in domestic life and reading with children. This was intended to appeal to and welcome a wide base of potential co-researchers.

#### *4.c.ii Representations of the researcher*

In order to introduce the researcher by more than just a photo or illustration, the researcher became a character in the book. However, she had to remain a relatively bland character rather than a fantastical one for two reasons. Firstly so that when the researcher appeared in person to meet the children, she was a version of herself that they would recognise. Creating the character with fabulous hair or an outlandish outfit was (sadly) not appropriate. Secondly the researcher character needed to be realistic because she had to remain trustworthy throughout – the version of herself presented could not be perceived as a ‘lie’ by the children.

To encourage familiarity, the researcher's voice needed to be heard in the text, so her character narrates the text. The text of the book does not differ from most information and consent forms. The illustrations were where fantastical elements entered the story. Inspired by Rodriguez Leon's (2020) participant information, the researcher's character asks reflexive questions throughout e.g. 'would that be all right?' These reflexive questions showed the researcher's respect for the children and their parents/carers but also provided natural stopping places throughout the text where children and their parent/carer could stop to discuss the subject, a key benefit of using picturebooks (Strasser and Seplocha, 2007). The hope was to convey a sense of consideration, understanding and of deep interest in their lives and experiences. Inserting the researcher as a character into the book, ironically, humanised her.

The researcher was represented in another way to the co-researchers, as the co-creator of the book along with the illustrator. This, combined with the researcher's character in the book, hoped to solidify the researcher in children's minds, not as a distant objective force, but as a person: a person who loves books; who makes up stories about skateboarding aliens and who thought of a funny way of creating a pseudonym. Following Christensen (2004), the intention was not for the researcher to assume the status of a child but rather to become a 'different kind of adult', 'avoiding the preconceived ideas, practices and connotations associated with 'adulthood' (p. 174). The intention was to show commitment to the project and a genuine interest in children's social worlds (Randall, 2012) as a real person not a mindless receptacle for children's data. In asking children to share their lives and feelings the researcher needed to give them something of herself first, transmitted through a picturebook.

The culmination of these two representations of the researcher was in 'Katharine's promise' in which the researcher commits to the page how she will conduct herself in the research. This page resonated personally throughout the research as a reminder of the

commitments and responsibilities to the co-researchers, in a way that perhaps it may not have, had it been rendered in mere text alone.

### *3.c.iii Aliens researchers*

Influenced by Scholes (Fenwick *et al.*, 2015), three alien characters were introduced into the narrative, each with their own characteristics. They were deliberately briefed by the researcher to the illustrator not to be ‘pink and girly’ or ‘blue and boyish’. They were the lynchpin of the visual text and drove the narrative along, providing humour and nuance to the plain text. These aliens fulfilled several other functions. They could ask the children to explain to them in detail what the everyday material objects were in the practices, which might have seemed an odd enquiry coming from the researcher, but was a key research question. They counteracted the kindly but rather-too-realistic-to-be-interesting ‘Katharine’ character by being more fantastical and adventurous. They asked key questions about the ethics of the research, often about complicated words – another benefit of reading picturebooks (Hargrave and Sénéchal, 2000) (see Fig. 7 and 8). They promoted a dialogue with the researcher character creating a conversation within the narrative text which co-researchers could engage with (Berk and Winsler, 1995). These key questions and narratives were designed to provide a prompt for discussion with the researcher, but before that between parents/carers and children.

Lastly and mostly for the researcher, there needed to be an acknowledgment that the research methods were alien apparatus entering into these families’ everyday practices. That in doing research, the researcher is part of the nature which they seek to understand (Barad, 2007). The aliens frequently get things wrong in the text, discernable only in the illustrations, allowing the child reader to see that they know best about their reading practices, creating a balance of power, through which the children could visually recognise that they are the

experts in their own lives and therefore, the research. Placing these aliens on the researcher side of the object/subject split was a way of acknowledging the researcher and their methods as the alien being in these children's everyday worlds (Barad, 2007). It was not a case of the researcher entering into an exotic land called 'childhood' (Chambers, 2003): the aliens worked as a mnemonic to keep the power dynamic between researcher and co-researcher in mind throughout the research (Christensen, 2004; Lindgren, 2012).

### *3.c.iv Creating pseudonyms*

Inspired by a 'name finder' from one of Dav Pilkey's bestselling Captain Underpants titles (2001), a similar version was included in the book, allowing children to find their pseudonym for the research and explaining how a pseudonym would be used (see Fig. 7) encouraging children to actively participate in the practice enriching the experience (Hargrave and Sénéchal, 2000). The first names of these space-inspired pseudonyms were chosen to be gender neutral and not too British. Surnames were in keeping with the space theme of the book. These names needed to work when referring to the children in research, which was done by using their first name and surname initial. So, a child whose 'Space Explorer' name was Ari Solstice for example would become AriS when written up. The children were also given the option of choosing their own names, to honour their own opinions and preferences. Two particular children took up this option with relish, naming themselves Star Earth and Flash Meteorite, thwarting the researcher's attempts to keep her co-researchers' names neutral when writing up her research. This in itself points to the lure of tidy uniform data creation for adult academic audiences which by its nature may quash children's opinions and preferences.



Fig. 6 Non-participating child walking away and introducing idea of pseudonyms

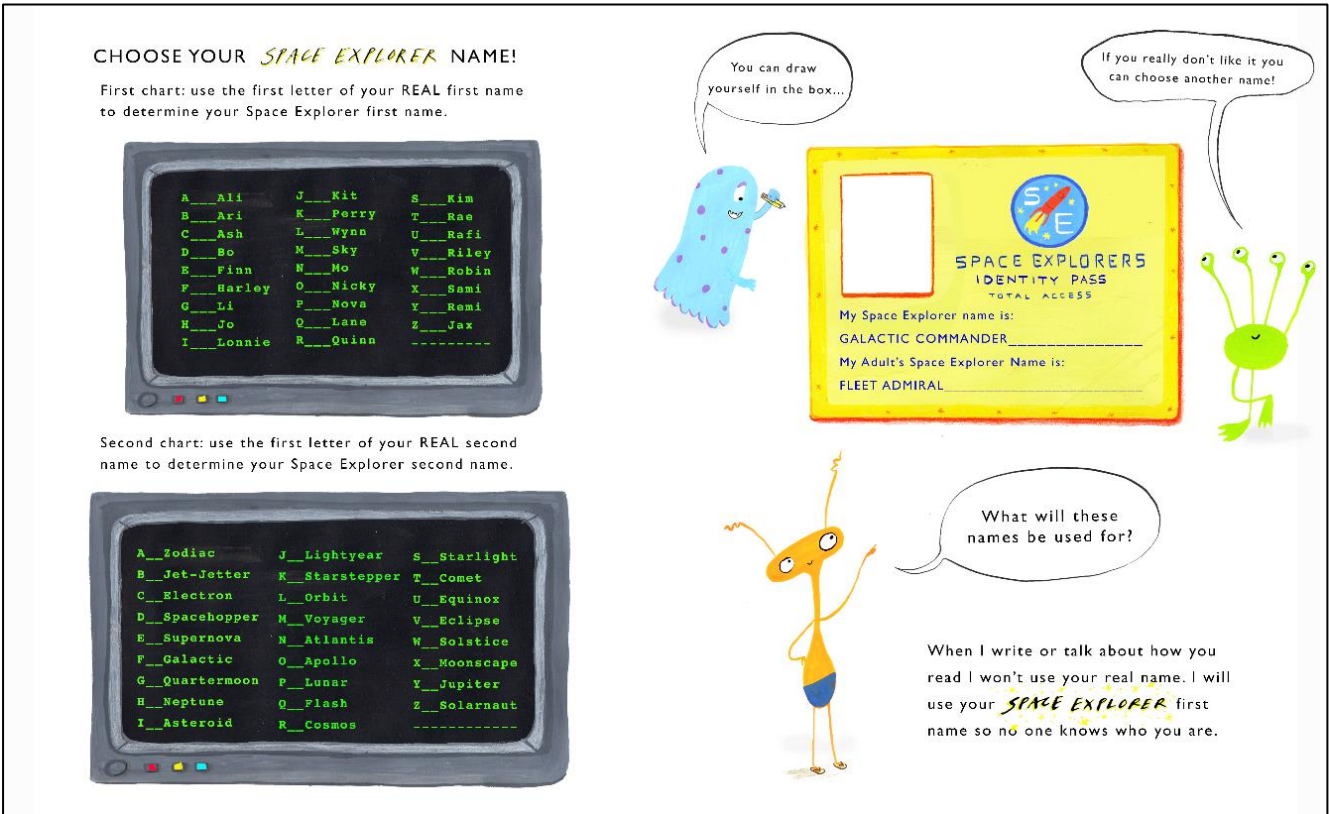


Fig. 7 Choosing pseudonyms and explanation of what they will be used for

### *3.c.vi Emerging through intra-actions*

As the book developed, the illustrations and text began to develop a synergistic relationship towards each other, in which the total effect of the picturebook depended on the interactions between the two (Sipe, 1998). Illustrations began to support the message of the text visually, for example the researcher briefed the illustrator to put the ‘Katharine’s promise’ text onto an illustration of buff-coloured paper to make it as official looking as possible; elsewhere the researcher briefed the illustrated to hand-letter key words like ‘rights’ to visually show their importance (see Fig. 8). The illustrator added in tiny details to delight the readers, like birds wearing headphones and aliens eating pizza at three a.m. Space puns began to creep into the text with the researcher adding them to the text and briefing the illustrator to illustrate extra details, for example adding the space explorers identity pass job titles including ‘Galactic Commander’ and ‘Fleet Admiral’(see Fig. 7). Almost in answer the illustrator in turn began embellishing her illustrations with increasingly playful space-related details, for example, a dog wearing a space helmet (see Fig. 6).

The to-ing and fro-ing of these intra-actions, not just between researcher and illustrator, but also with websites, core texts on ethical guidelines and printed proofs began to shape and influence the content of the book as a whole. The illustrator, whose talent, enthusiasm and hard work work made this entire project possible, brought nuanced meaning through her illustrations. The process of going over and over the book, not to rake over the central ideas and messages, which were now fixed, but to consider the information as a reading experience and literacy practice in its own right, was a fundamental way to connect to potential co-researchers.

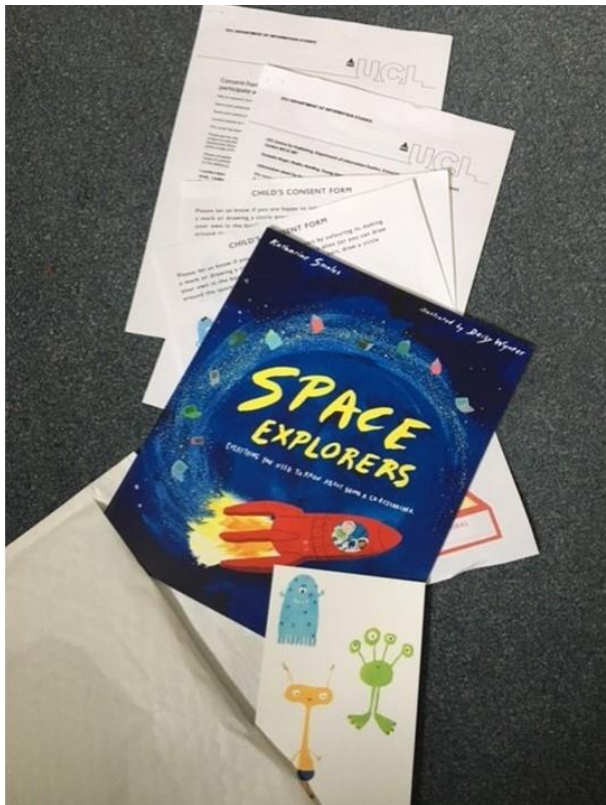


Fig. 8 Explaining what will happen to the children's data, following on to...



Fig 9. ... a dramatic turn of the page to explain the concept of children's rights

#### 4.d Materiality and extending the research assets.



*Fig. 10 Pack sent out after potential co-researchers expressed interest*

*Fig. 11 Stack of thank you cards waiting to be sent out*

Creating a physical picturebook might well have been considered unnecessary when the eBook was freely available. However, the physical presence of the book was an important factor in creating access for children. The researcher did not know how much access children had to devices or what rules and regulations the parents/carers had created around this (Flewitt, 2019). A physical picturebook meant that it would be present in the home, available for children to look at independently, freely and without having to ask parents/carers (as the initial recipients of the eBook and often the gatekeepers of digital devices generally).

Both editions made use of paratexts found in most children's picturebooks including a title page, an imprint page and back cover copy, not because these were essential pieces of text but rather to give the book the most authentic, everyday and familiar feel. Epitexts



(defined as ‘paratexts which are not materially appended to the text’ (Genette, p. 344)) were created including [videos](#) to share with the co-researchers about the making of the book.

Videos were sent to co-researchers when they submitted their own video data and thank you cards which used the illustrators artwork (see Fig. 11). These created a sense of cohesion and shared participation in the research.

The physical book used a matt paper, allowing the children to draw on the pages of the book if they wanted to (to fill in their Space Explorer names on the relevant page, for example (see Fig. 7)) signalling ownership of the project. An initial single proof copy was rejected by the researcher because the stapled spine gave an unwanted educational flavour to the book. The spine was changed to the ‘square-back’ spine found on most mainstream picturebooks available in the UK market, a format widely known by the researcher from her experience working in the publishing industry. A square-backed spine was just one of the many elements which created an everyday object, fulfilling the criteria outlined in the statement of the problem to deliver information to children in an accessible format, requiring the researcher to step into a world where the co-researchers were the focus rather than the other way around.

#### **4. Affordances and challenges**

##### ***4.a Affordances***

Of the thirty copies which were sent out to families, thirty children returned forms signalling their consent to continue (some of whom were siblings in the same family) and nineteen parents/carers. Fifteen of these forms came with spontaneous enthusiastic replies from parents/carers which mentioned the book and referred to their children’s reactions to it including ‘the book is brilliant, and really informative. My daughter is keen to take part, as am I’ from one parent, from two others: ‘my daughter is carrying it around with her’ and

‘(AliN) is so excited that you wrote a book for him’ and filled with reassuring information like ‘she understands that she can stop if she doesn’t want to do it’. One mother sent a photograph of her two sons who had chosen to look at the book independently of her, days after she had read it to them (see Fig 12).



*Figure 12. Two potential child co-researchers use the book*

When data collection began the eBook was used for to information for a second group of people, explaining the research to and asking for the consent from family members who appeared in video footage collected by children and their parents/carers. For example, an older cousin who read to the child co-researcher by facetime, a baby who had been caught on camera whose father gave permission for the video of her to be used and others, including grandparents and teachers.

Most important of all, however, in any measure of the effectiveness of information, were the responses of the children and particularly those where they declined to take part, sometimes through their parents/carers and sometimes directly to the researcher. This

demonstrated not only children's ability to decline but also parents/carers (in their role as gatekeepers) accepting and reporting their child's point of view. One response shows that the book had been looked at jointly, discussion had taken place between children and parent, and a reasoned decision reached. The email is reproduced here, with the permission of the parent and two children:

Many thanks for your email, my children and I looked through your book over the weekend, and it was very interesting and I thought the book was very well written and illustrated. I've discussed it with my children and they are not keen to take part. As feedback, my 7 Yr old felt uncomfortable about someone having a video of her and the younger was shy ;).

*- Anonymous mother's email on being sent the Space Explorer's book.*

Linked to this were the moments when five children dropped out at the video making stage and two children decided they did not wish to take part in the interview. The latter two verbally agreed that their already submitted video data (which they were proud of) would remain in the data set. In these instances the researcher referred to the picturebook text to assure children that their decision not to participate was legitimate and sanctioned. The children exercising their right to decline to take part felt not like a failing but rather a successful execution of the method. It is not possible to know how much the picturebook influenced this, but it is hoped that a piece of information which openly acknowledges children's point of view allowed children to resist the 'structures of compliance' (Valentine, 1999, p. 141) which colour the power dynamic between children and adults.

Beginning the research with a positive reaction meant that the research continued in this vein. The researcher was greeted enthusiastically by children when interviews took place, the Space Explorer names were a particular hit, with children often referring to their names (and

their family's names) at interview. Before an interview, one boy interrupted the researcher who was going over the specifics of the research to ensure his ongoing consent to participate, announcing 'I know that because it says so in 'Katharine's promise'.' In the video data children and parents/carers or carers referred to the text of the book: 'Hello Aliens!' and 'What do you want to tell the Aliens?'

Being able to use a book (both in digital and physical forms) in research which centred on children's reading to build relationships and rapport with co-researchers in circumstances where in-person interactions were difficult felt like a natural way form of connection.

#### ***4.b Challenges***

There were however limitations to the exercise, firstly the uncertainty of how co-researchers would respond to the picturebook. Thirty picturebooks had been printed with the expectation that five families would join a pilot study. In fact, the full quota of co-researchers was recruited in around a week. Although this was a good problem, it meant that the researcher was suddenly moving at a pace which wasn't to the planned research design. It is possible that the book might have had the opposite effect with recruitment becoming glacially slow after a huge amount of time and effort had been expended on it. Sinking so many resources into a project, which was after all not the main focus of the PhD research, was a risky endeavour which could have fallen flat. The time it took to make this book could have been used in collecting data earlier in the project or remaining in the field for longer. However, the questions of access and relationships which have been detailed above meant that, for this researcher, creating a picturebook was a valuable initial way to gain connection between all parties.

There can also be no certainty about what conversations took place between parents/carers and their children about taking part, although this is likely the case for most research in which parental consent is needed. Nor can the picturebook's influence on the

children and parents/carers' decisions be certain. It is not possible to say whether coercion took place either encouraging or discouraging children. Although ideally there would be absolute certainty that coercion never took place, this must be balanced with parents/carers' right to do what is best for their child (UNCRC, 1989) and the respect for families' privacy. This is an ongoing question in research with children (Heath *et al.*, 2007) and in research generally about how participants comprehension of information given to obtain consent can be assessed (Newman, Guta and Black, 2021). The physical presence of the book as a document for all those involved may have helped to legitimise the child's decision to participate or not in the eyes of the adult gatekeeper, acting as a material mediator which laid out the ground rules. To mitigate the issue of parental coercion, the research design had to be built around the idea that children were not giving their informed consent once, rather that this book formed the starting point: giving sound information in order to gain their provisional consent to participate. It is important to emphasise again that the picturebook was only an initial entry point to the research and it's associated ethical work.

### **Conclusion**

This epitext demonstrates how current theoretical approaches to children and researching with families in the home can be practically extended by how we give information to both children and their parents/carers. Creating an illustrated picturebook to explain the research and key ethical elements to both parties, provided in a familiar format created opportunities to access and understand information in multiple meaningful ways. Opportunities for dialogue, connection, active participation and questions were opened up by the picturebook including the name finder and rhetorical questioning device; spaces for language development and understanding were presented through visuals and text including emphasising particular words and ideas; the interaction of words and pictures established a power dynamic facilitating children's right to decline; the textual, visual, paratextual and

material elements created access to an everyday object and intra-action between researcher, child and parents/carers.

Exploring the affordances of a text through the creation of a picturebook opens up new ways of considering how we give information to research participants. LIS and Publishing scholars and practitioners have a wealth of expertise which could further influence this debate within the academy and beyond, as requests to use people's data (including children's) abound and where creating age-appropriate design has become a priority (Information Commissioners Office, 2018).

Returning to the paratext, as a key element in how a reader understands a text, Genette's description seems prescient in the context of information giving to potential co-researchers. He describes the paratext thus: 'a "vestibule" that offers the world at large the possibility of either stepping inside or turning back' (Genette, 1997 p. 2). Participant information created as a suitable vestibule can foster opportunities for co-researchers to choose to step inside or turn back. Coupled with Barad's (1996) statement that 'knowledge is always a view from somewhere' (p. 180), carefully crafted participant information also allows co-researchers to enter research through a vestibule which allows them to express their expert knowledge from an empowering vantage point of understanding, imagination, connection and playfulness, in turn creating rich data for research.

**Acknowledgments:** with profound thanks to Daisy Wynter, Jamie Joseph, Andrew Flynn, Elizabeth Shepherd, Catherine Ngwong and Mark Williams.

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