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Focus Groups With Children: Practicalities and Methodological Insights

Susanne Vogl, Eva-Maria Schmidt & Olaf Kapella

Key words: focus groups; children; moderator; ethics; pre-school; primary school children; prompts; digital technology

Abstract: The assessments of adults are important in the study of the interests and needs of children, but children themselves should also be viewed as competent informants. Social research methodologies have typically been developed for use with adults, and children might challenge underlying assumptions. Particular demands are placed on research design and researchers when researching children, owing to their different needs and abilities. Although children are involved in a growing number of research projects, methodological considerations around their inclusion have been rarely explicated.

In a European study on digital devices in the lives of children, we planned and conducted focus groups with preschool (5-6 years of age) and primary school children (8-10 years of age). In this contribution, we share our initial rationales and methodologically reflect on our experiences in order to derive recommendations for conducting focus groups with young children. We concentrate on the setting, formal structure of the schedule, moderator behavior, group dynamic and age differences, skills, and ethical implications. We conclude by outlining strengths and weaknesses of employing focus groups with young children.

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1. Introduction

When the interests and needs of children are under study, we should not only rely on the assessments of adults but also view children themselves as competent informants. Children and young people are co-constructors of social reality and active participants in societies. They are experts and social actors in their own right (JAMES & PROUT, 1990; MAGUIRE, 2004) and should have a voice in research. Not only do children's life worlds differ from those of adults, but the way in which children make sense of them can also differ greatly. Thus, researching children can be considered similar to researching a different culture (MEY, 2001; MEY & SCHWENTESIUS, 2019; RAFFETY, 2015). Yet, it is a legitimate question whether we truly understand children from their own perspective or if our results are only adult perspectives on children (MEY & SCHWENTESIUS, 2019). Openness, flexibility, and reflection are required in the methodological approaches in order to avoid replicating adult views. [1]

Scholars typically develop social research methods with adults in mind. Owing to their different needs and abilities, children pose specific challenges to research design and researchers when they are the main subjects of research. Generally, *qualitative methods* are considered more appropriate for researching children owing to the methods' greater orientation towards participants' needs. With the use of qualitative methods, researchers can facilitate children's participation as a key children's right (BUTSCHI & HEDDERICH, 2021). With the openness inherent in a qualitative method, a researcher can get close to children's views and the (generational) power imbalance can be reduced through establishing communication and trust (PUNCH & GRAHAM, 2017; RICHTER, 1997). [2]

As participants in social research, children need careful treatment in methodological as well as ethical respects (MORROW & RICHARDS, 1996). When planning social research, researchers need to consider the specific psychological, interactive, cognitive, and verbal abilities of children, as well as the inability of adult researchers to put themselves into the children's position (LUND, HELGELAND & KOVAC, 2016; VOGL, 2012; WILK, 1996). [3]

Focus groups are perceived as being especially well suited for researching the perceptions of children. Compared with individual interviews, a focus group setting enables participants to express ideas more spontaneously. In addition, subjects are more likely to perceive the atmosphere as relaxed and fun, and it may offer a safe peer environment in which participants' contributions jog each other's memories (ADLER, SALANTERÄ & ZUMSTEIN-SHAHA, 2019; PUNCH & GRAHAM, 2017). However, participants in focus groups must have certain verbal and interactive skills (VOGL, 2019). Although there has been some focus group research with children as participants (MORGAN, GIBBS, MAXWELL & BRITTEN, 2002), methodological considerations have been rare so far (VIERTEL, 2015). Therefore, a number of questions arise, including the following: What are the specificities of focus groups with children as participants? At what age can children "fulfill" the methodological expectations of focus group research, or how do methodological assumptions need to be modified for children as

participants? What difference does age make regarding the applicability of focus groups? What are the practical challenges and the methodological implications of focus groups with child participants? [4]

In this contribution, we provide a practical and methodological reflection of experiences in a European project on digital devices in the lives of children. We conducted focus groups with preschool children (5-6 years of age) and primary school children (8-10 years of age) in four countries. In a comparison of these two age groups, we reflect on age-related skills and specificities of the behavior and thinking of children. On this basis, we reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of employing focus groups with young children. In addition, we assess our research design and examine the methodological and practical implications of our findings. First, we summarize the methodological background of focus groups in general (Section 1.1) and focus groups with children as participants in particular (Section 1.2). Then, we elaborate on our rationale in planning the focus groups (Section 2) and describe our practical experiences (Section 3). Finally, we conclude by reflecting on the methodological implications and recommendations for future research (Section 4). [5]

1.1 Focus group methodology

In focus groups, a small number of participants discuss topics, facilitated by a moderator (VOGL, 2022). The central characteristics of focus groups are a comparatively *natural setting*, *communicativeness*, and *openness*. Naturalness arises from the fact that participants know different kinds of "round tables" from everyday life (LAMNEK, 2005). "The researcher creates a permissive environment in the focus group that encourages participants to share perceptions and points of view without pressuring participants to vote or reach consensus" (KRUEGER & CASEY, 2009, p.2). The goal in fostering openness and communicativeness is to let participants say whatever they have to say, with their own relevancies and in their own words. [6]

Multiple participants are interviewed simultaneously in focus groups, and researchers not only pay attention to what is said, but also methodologically take advantage of the *dynamic amongst participants* as a key to understanding what their words mean. Unlike interviews in which only the view of one person is surveyed, focus groups include a group dynamic that potentially generates and validates views. With focus groups, researchers facilitate a specific type of interaction and results are more than the sum of individual interviews—the group dynamic shapes the progress and outcome of a focus group. In a setting with real-life groups, we can thus research collective phenomena and orientations that would not become apparent or be accessible in individual settings without the group interaction (MORGAN, 1988). Only in the process of a discussion does a person have to take a certain position and then articulate and defend it. Interactions may give rise to more spontaneous expressive and emotional views than individual interviews (e.g., KVALE, 2009; BARBOUR, 2018). Consequently, the breadth and depth of information can be increased. [7]

Interaction among participants is thus the *strength* of focus group research because it can generate a wider spectrum of opinions, foster exploration of topics, and lead to the generation of hypotheses; further, it warrants external validity. Focus groups can be used to capture a range of ideas, to understand differences in perspectives between groups, and to uncover factors influencing opinions, behavior, or motivation (DALEY, 2013; KRUEGER & CASEY, 2009). The research interest could be attitudes and perceptions; group dynamics, the process of attitude formation, and negotiations (BARBOUR, 2018; HENNESSY & HEARY, 2005; MORGAN, 2012); and knowledge about collective orientations and relevancies (GRUNERT, 2020). Particularly for investigating consensus and diversity among participants, they "engage in sharing and comparing among themselves with the moderator in a facilitating role" (MORGAN & HOFFMAN, 2018, p.251). [8]

From a methodological point of view, the interaction among participants can also become a *weakness* given that the specific communication process and group dynamic can inhibit communication (HENNESSY & HEARY, 2005). Owing to the group setting, participants might withhold expressions of opinions (e.g., from fear of negative sanctions). In the more or less public setting of a focus group and the related social desirability, participants might withhold their "private" opinion or express opinions that might be influenced by a desire to fit in with other participants (HENNESSY & HEARY, 2005; VOGL, 2009). In addition, contributions are highly contingent on context and the group dynamics, which makes attempts to extrapolate individuals' attitudes or in-depth information about each participant futile (BARBOUR, 2018; MORGAN & HOFFMAN, 2018). Furthermore, silent participants are more likely because shy participants can hide behind the group and are easily dominated by other people. In some cases, the group dynamics can overshadow the content. Despite focus groups seeming to be more realistic and relevant to day-to-day experience than interviews, they still occur under artificial settings because the environment is produced by the researcher (LAMNEK, 2005; MORGAN & HOFFMAN, 2018). Therefore, the biggest advantage of focus groups—the group dynamic—can also be a hindrance. In the following table, we summarize the advantages and disadvantages of focus groups compared to individual interviews. Based on these methodological considerations regarding focus groups in general, we now present insights on the specific case of focus groups with children as participants.

Advantages	Disadvantages
Wider spectrum of opinions	Higher demands on cooperation and skills
More and more diverse views	Silent members
Friendly and relaxed atmosphere	Quasi-public atmosphere inhibits private opinions
Comparable to everyday conversation	Group dynamic can inhibit open conversation (i.e., peer pressure, social desirability)
More spontaneous reactions	Artificial setting
More detailed and thought-through statements	
Controversial attitudes	
Opinion formation and group dynamic	
Collective orientation	

Table 1: Advantages and disadvantages of focus groups compared to individual interviews (adapted from VOGL, 2005, 2009) [9]

1.2 Focus groups with children

Focus groups are seen as a "participatory method for collecting information from children" (HUNLETH, 2011, p.89). With this mode of data collection, researchers attempt to replicate a real-life setting of children's social groups and to gain insights into meaning-making in situ amongst peers (HENNESSY & HEARY, 2005). With focus groups, researchers create a safe peer environment similar to the kindergarten and school settings that children are familiar with (DARBYSHIRE, MacDOUGALL & SCHILLER, 2005; HEINZEL, 2012a; LANGE & MIERENDORFF, 2011). The peer support as well as the superior number of children compared to adults can be helpful to redress the power imbalance between an adult and a child that exists in one-to-one interviews (ADLER et al., 2019; HEINZEL, 2012b). The emphasis is instead on discourses among the children themselves, rather than on the interactions with the adult researcher (DALEY, 2013). Furthermore, children typically strive to make peers understand their thoughts and feelings, and they also attempt to understand other children's perspectives. Based on this attempt for mutual understanding, "adults who are 'listening in' have a unique opportunity to discover the meaning of events from the children's perspective and to study their behavior in action" (ADLER et al., 2019, p.5). In this setting, we can analyze the "common sense" and joint construction of meaning in peer groups rather than on the individual-level perspective and biography. [10]

Due to potential power imbalances and generational hierarchies between the moderator and participating children, the moderator needs to be well trained in

terms of empathy, flexibility, and sensitivity. The demands on focus group moderators are amplified when the groups are composed of children, and experience in working with young children is helpful—but not strictly necessary (VOGL, 2005). [11]

In focus groups, people become involved in specific types of interaction, and they have opportunities for self-promotion, narration, and argumentation (NEUMANN-BRAUN & DEPPERMANN, 1998). At the same time, corresponding skills and cooperativeness are required. Children do not necessarily have these abilities (LUND et al., 2016; VOGL, 2015a), at least not to the same extent as adults. To assess children's abilities correctly, we need far more methodological research. In this article, we attempt to help fill this research gap. The overarching questions center on the age-specific factors that need to be considered in focus group research. From a methodological point of view, we investigated the specifics of group composition and group dynamics, threats to data quality, specificities of moderator involvement, and interaction with children, as well as the ethical considerations and several different "tasks" aimed at structuring the focus group discussion. [12]

2. Methods and Data

Our investigation is based on the project "DigiGen: The impact of technological transformations on the Digital Generation" (funded from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program under grant agreement No. 870548). For analyzing the family system (Work Package 3), we conducted separate family interviews with at least one child and one adult from a family as well as focus groups with children at ages 5-6 years and 8-10 years in four European countries (Austria, Estonia, Norway, and Romania) in 2021. This publication is based on insights from six focus groups with kindergarten children and five focus groups with primary school children conducted in Austria. The focus groups consisted of three to six children each, for a total of 24 preschool children (12 girls and 12 boys) and 18 primary school children (7 girls and 11 boys). Most groups were gender-mixed, except for two groups, one with four boys in the younger age group and one with four boys in the older age group. We did not recruit siblings and tried to have friendship groups instead. Nevertheless, in two focus groups a younger sibling of a participant was present. In both groups, these younger siblings seemed to have an established role in the real-life group. [13]

We audio recorded all focus groups with an additional microphone. In addition to the moderator, an assistant was present in all focus groups, which enabled having someone else experiencing the focus group and allowing for a joint reflection (ADLER et al., 2019). Furthermore, the assistant helped with technical aspects such as audio-recordings, as well as when a child needed something. The assistant was free to ask questions. As soon as possible after the focus group, moderator and assistant filled out detailed memos with observations and interpretations on methods used and content discussed. For our purposes, transcription of significant verbal utterances or intense discussions was sufficient. [14]

With the focus groups we aimed to elicit children's perspectives on digital technologies (DT) in their family and everyday life in a peer group setting. We analyzed the data in our team of three researchers with different roles during data collection and different disciplinary backgrounds (sociology, pedagogy, social work). We sought to better understand children's interactions with and through digital devices, the types of activities they were using them for, their assessment of DT and relevance of DT in everyday and family life, and the diversity and social inequality regarding access to DT (KAPELLA & SISASK, 2021; KAPELLA, SCHMIDT & VOGL, 2022; SCHMIDT, KAPELLA & VOGL, 2021). We focused on children's use and assessment of DT individually and in the family context (e.g., communication, leisure time, organization of daily life); interactions with and through DT; negotiations, rules, and conflicts around DT use (e.g., privacy, time, self-presentation); and advantages and disadvantages from the perspective of children and the family. [15]

3. Results on the Practice of Focus Group Research With Children

In this section, we describe different aspects of the focus groups' design and our rationales behind decisions for certain methods, and we discuss our experiences and the lessons learnt. We start with aspects concerning the focus group setting, continue with the formal structure of the focus groups, reflect on children's skills, group dynamics, and the researcher's or moderator's behavior. Finally, we discuss ethical issues regarding focus groups with child participants. [16]

3.1 Setting

Duration, *group size*, and *composition*: As recommended in the literature (PRZYBORSKI & WOHLRAB-SAHR, 2019; VIERTEL, 2015), we aimed for real-life groups—all children knew each other beforehand. In our experience, real-life groups worked very well. Sometimes, strong friends dominated focus group discussions, particularly when focus groups were conducted in a child's home. At the same time, friends discussed their use of DT in (more) detail. Groups of three to five children turned out to be ideal for a productive focus group, as also suggested in the literature (BUTSCHI & HEDDERICH, 2021; VOGL, 2005). With bigger groups, participants can be distracted more easily. Side interactions or conversations that might evolve in subgroups when a group has too many participants were rare. The focus groups lasted between 45 and 70 minutes. For the younger age group, we detected a drop in attention at around 30 minutes. [17]

Location: Our original plan was to conduct our focus groups in schools and kindergartens, but we had to find alternative locations due to COVID-19 restrictions. Thus, we conducted the focus groups in family homes, a seminar hotel, and meeting rooms in parishes—the decision depended on options available. If possible, the children could also suggest preferred locations (OETTING-ROß, ULLRICH, SCHNEPP & BÜSCHER, 2016). Using the family home or a child's bedroom as a location for focus groups had several methodological implications. On the one hand, these locations allowed for insights into living conditions and digital equipment in the home of one family; the

family homes of the other participants of course remain unknown. On the other hand, even though being comforting, focus groups in the family home or even a child's bedroom sometimes entailed imbalances between the child living in the location and the visiting children and researchers who had to respect the hosting child's and the house rules. Furthermore, children's bedrooms often had space restrictions or were associated with a play area because of toys in them. Consequently, concentrating on the focus group became difficult or unappealing. In contrast, nobody was familiar with the facilities in rented locations. In this case, more time for a warm-up was necessary: children needed time to explore the room and sometimes found other things (e.g., a piano) more interesting than the discussion. [18]

Parents: In some focus groups, parents were either present or nearby, which had mixed implications as well. On the one hand, having parents nearby was sometimes reassuring for younger children, and some children preferred having their parents stay, particularly at the beginning of the focus group—a wish we did not want to deny. In two cases parents stayed in the rented room. In one case, the parent had organized transport for the participants and had nowhere else to wait. In the second instance, the father wanted to support the moderator if the child got too wild. We sometimes had the chance to informally talk to the parents or to observe parent-child interactions and family dynamics before and after the focus group, which was very informative. On the other hand, when researchers talk to the parents too much, it might undermine the expert status we want to assign to the children. Furthermore, parents being present made confidentiality impossible. We could not preclude the possibility that their presence had an impact on what was said and how. Although we were not asking sensitive questions, nevertheless answers could be sensitive. However, comparing focus groups with and without parents present, we could not detect any signs that children edited their responses or limited their participation because of the parents' presence. Having said that, the understanding of sensitivity might differ between adults and children, i.e., what adults consider sensitive or desirable does not necessarily coincide with the children's perception (VOGL, 2015a). However, this consideration is outside the scope of the present study. [19]

For both the participants and the researcher, it was tempting to ask parents questions or refer to them when they were present during the focus group. However, it was necessary for researchers to resist doing this because it could have suggested that parents were perceived as more credible or children as deficient. In terms of research interest, it would also have been misguided; we aimed for children's perspective, their "truth" and not parents'. In sum, the presence of parents had positive and negative effects during the course of the focus groups. They lent confidence to the children and encouraged them, but they also might have influenced what children said and how they behaved—in positive and potentially negative terms. We avoided referring to parents to confirm children's statements in order to take children seriously in their agency and status as active participants. [20]

Recordings: We considered video recordings very helpful for the analysis, but they were not possible in small rooms. With video recordings we were able to determine speakers (especially in larger groups) more easily during transcription and in the analysis. Recordings also enabled us to capture nonverbal behavior (common in younger children) and facilitated analysis and interpretation on a visual level. Participants readily accepted recording devices. To acquaint children with the technical equipment, we let them press the record button, try the device before the actual focus group, and listen/watch a short recording they made (VIERTEL, 2015; VOGL, 2005). We can recommend this type of warming up. Recording devices did not pose any (detectable) threat to the data quality. [21]

3.2 Formal structure of the focus group schedule

In this section, we present our focus group schedule and explicate our intentions with the specific tasks and elements. Then, we reflect on our lessons learnt. The focus group guideline thematically addressed digital activities of children and methodologically included different tasks and questioning techniques to explore children's skills and peculiarities in the application of these tasks. For comparability reasons, we used the same tasks for both age groups. [22]

3.2.1 Introduction

To make children comfortable with the focus group setting, we started with a short introduction of the project, the moderator, and the assistant, as well as all participants of the focus group with their name. To acknowledge their agency, we emphasized their expert status, underlining that answers were neither right nor wrong and everybody could have a turn. In our experience it was not necessary (and probably would have been counterproductive) to announce conversational rules (see also ADLER et al., 2019; BUTSCHI & HEDDERICH, 2021). A better strategy might be to mention rules as needed during the discussion. Primary school children were reminded that during the focus group, unlike a school setting, it was not necessary to indicate (e.g., raise a hand) if they wanted to say something. [23]

To avoid overextending children's patience in focus groups, the introduction (especially the instructions) was kept as short as possible. Otherwise, children's attention span could have already been exhausted before the focus group discussion started. Furthermore, to keep children's attention, the whole focus group was built around a box, introduced with the words: "I brought a box of surprises for you, let's see what we have there!" [24]

3.2.2 Warm up: Visual prompts

Generally, with the warm-up we set the frame for further tasks and cooperation among the participants. To introduce the general topic of our research, we presented a selection of visual prompts of different digital devices (e.g., smartphone, smart-watch, notebook) and different software (e.g., devices with the symbol of YouTube, Facebook, Spotify). The moderator pulled out the first set of pictures for discussion—the pictures made children very curious and served as a great way to keep the attention of the group and to bring the children back to the topic as needed. We asked the children which devices they had at home or knew about from other contexts, what they did with them, and what they liked about them. In total, we prepared 12 show cards with different devices and software (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Visual prompts for warm-up [25]

The warm-up turned out to be much more than just getting familiar with the setting and the topic under research; it became a central part of the focus groups. Children started to discuss the topic and share their experiences. Show cards were useful not only for eliciting children's knowledge about DT, but also for engaging them in talking about their experiences using the technology. Children also took the opportunity to share experiences with digital devices not depicted. They related observations or experiences involving, for example, a father's height-adjustable work desk, or the "magic" connection of two screens parents used when working from home. Sometimes children did not recognize a device on the drawing and interpreted its function in a creative way. In particular, the smart watch was difficult to recognize, maybe due to the fact that its picture was not at the same scale as the other devices.

> "Interviewer: [showed picture of the Smart-Watch]
>
> Child 1: A backpack.
>
> Child 2: No, headphones.
>
> Child 1: Yes, headphones.
>
> Child 3: No, no, no, that's for listening to music, a backpack and for making phone calls. This is a backpack and when you need something, the backpack slides open from there and then it listens to music and makes a phone call" (AT_FG1_Kindergarten, October 10, 2020).[1] [26]

Sometimes, younger participants got overexcited with this task and the discussion became chaotic as many participants spoke simultaneously with what

1 All focus groups quotes have been translated from German by us. The focus group transcripts are abbreviated with the country code (e.g., AT), the number of the focus group (e.g., FG1) and the age group (e.g., kindergarten).

seems to be fantasy answers. As a consequence, the moderator had to structure the discussion more actively than intended, which led to a question-answer routine.

> "I have three mobile phones, for a thousand video games to play" (AT_FG6_Kindergarten, July 7, 2021).
>
> "Interviewer: Next picture.
>
> Child 1: A toy watch.
>
> Child 2: Basti has it. You can see how many steps you've taken.
>
> Child 1: I have one like that too.
>
> Child3: Me too.
>
> Child1: I have an orange one.
>
> Interviewer: And you know how many steps you have taken?
>
> Child3: I've got something like 32,000.
>
> Child1: Me 20,000, almost.
>
> Interviewer: On the wrist?
>
> Child3: Yes. You can also record, there's a time, how long you need. But you can also take a break.
>
> Child4: I have a game camera with headphones" (AT_FG4_Kindergarten, February 12, 2021).
>
> "It's played by about a third of humanity, it's a very famous game" (AT_FG3_Primary School, June 6, 2021). [27]

Generally, all groups were quite interactive from the beginning and a warm-up was not strictly necessary. Nevertheless, the pictures served well as an ice breaker and stimulated a lot of information sharing regarding the use of and knowledge about DT. The children got very engaged with the cards, which occasionally led to this task taking too long. As a result, participants' ability to concentrate on subsequent tasks was negatively affected. Thus, although we had planned to present one show card at the time and discuss individually, we adapted the procedure and presented clusters of cards at a time or all at once. This helped reduce the time requirement, and the children discussed devices in relation to each other. [28]

3.2.3 "What if there were no smartphones/tablets/TV/internet ...?"

In this task, we directly asked participants to imagine what it would mean to them and their lives, if DT did not exist. We intended to elicit spontaneous and abstract ideas and concepts about DT. We were aware that this question could be challenging for younger participants as it required abstract thinking. Therefore, we prepared some more concrete follow-up questions such as the following: What would you do without DT like a smartphone or laptop? Would you like that or not? [29]

We had mainly positive experiences with this task. Even 5- to 6-year-old children could handle that "abstract" question and had ideas about a world without DT and what they could do instead of using DT (e.g., "then I could look more at books"). In addition, children also expressed how they would feel about it. Some children had very insightful, even philosophical and analytical thoughts about this, for example, "I would not be sad because I would not know what I am missing" (AT_FG4_Primary School); "[w]e would have only cables and no devices" (AT_FG5_Kindergarten); and "[b]ut when someone has died, you also have to talk to someone on the phone or send something by mail. That will take a little time" (AT_FG1_Primary School). Especially among younger participants, this thought evoked strong feelings, for example:

> "Child1: I would smash the whole world. Without a television.
>
> Interviewer: If there was nothing left?
>
> Child1: Without a screen I would die.
>
> Interviewer: Can you imagine that.
>
> Child3: Then I would have broken everything and given it away.
>
> Child2: Then I would scream" (AT_FG4_Kindergarten, February 12, 2021). [30]

We could not elicit many ideas with this questioning technique in only some groups—concentration was already exhausted, or for some younger children, the question was too abstract. Nevertheless, this open and more abstract question stimulated discussion and interaction among children in all age groups. [31]

3.2.4 Interpretation of scenarios with sticker assessment

We presented scenario cards to the participants and asked them to individually assess the scenario in each picture by using stickers (see Figure 2, Figure 3, and Figure 4). The sticker exercise was meant to give each participant a chance to form an opinion independently and thus to foster a discussion amongst participants afterwards. Initially, we asked the children to use the stickers with happy, medium, or sad smileys to assess the scenario. This exercise worked well with the school-age children; they were familiar with this way of assessing topics. For kindergarten children, using stickers of different colors for "like" and "dislike" and sticking these directly on the scenario card worked better. However, group pressure among the kindergarten children became particularly apparent with this task. Most children put their sticker on the picture/smiley where the first one had put his or hers. Overall, we would not unequivocally recommend this type of sticker exercise with preschool children. [32]

For the subsequent discussion, we asked follow-up questions about what they thought the scenario portrayed and why. Our intention was to offer a discussion stimulus that was not directly linked to personal experiences and therefore allowed all participants to contribute equally. At the same time, the pictures were meant to be vague in terms of gender and emotions of the people on the card to allow for multiple readings and discussion. Therefore, faces of characters did not

have a mouth. Not having hair also left interpretations of the characters' gender open and thus open for diversity.

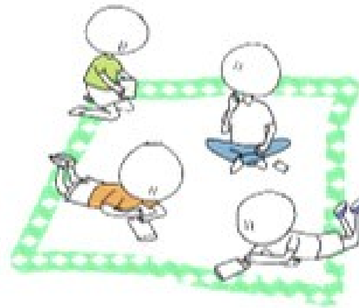

Figure 2: Scenario Card 1

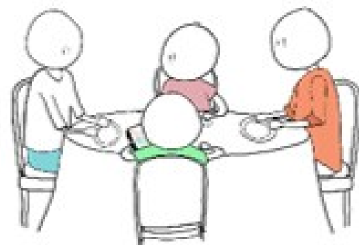

Figure 3: Scenario Card 2

Figure 4: Smileys for sticker-exercise [33]

In our experience, the scenarios worked well as a stimulus for initiating a conversation about the scene on the card in all age groups. They evoked controversies about the interpretation of the situation—especially among the older children (8-10 years). One important lesson we learnt with this approach was that the moderator had to be very careful in formulating the questions regarding the situation the children see. Instead of asking "How do you like the picture? ," it was more appropriate for our purpose to ask children questions such as "What can you see on the picture? " or "Do you like what you see on the picture and why or why not? " This was important to establish a common ground and to validate our interpretations. When children were asked whether they liked the picture, they sometimes understood the question as "Do you like/dislike the way it has been drawn?" or "What do you see and think about the image itself?" [34]

In general, children described the pictures and discussed a lot of ideas and interpretations (who the depicted people were, what they were doing, whether they were friends, how they feel). They had a lot of explanations for a situation, interpreted a certain feeling, or started to imitate the adults/parents, thus referred to rules and parents' regulatory behavior. For example, in Scenario 2, kindergarten children interpreted the individuals playing with the tablet as a child waiting for his/her hot soup to cool before eating it, because children do not eat

the soup as hot as adults (AT_FG3_Kindergarten). In another kindergarten group, the following interpretations were discussed:

> "Child 1: Yes, they, wait a minute, at least he has the things to eat, hey, maybe he's just not hungry.
>
> Child 2: He's not hungry.
>
> Interviewer: And he gets to play and the others eat?
>
> Child 1: Yes, maybe they want to eat.
>
> Child 2: Or maybe he's not allowed to eat because he's dirty?" (AT_FG1_Kindergarten, October 10, 2020) [35]

Even if they did not have a clear idea of what was depicted on the scenario card, participants jointly tried to make sense of it. Some kindergarten children, for example, interpreted scenario 1 as a yoga class or saw disappointment in a child, because his smart phone was smaller. In contrast, the older participants showed empathy and emotions, like the following examples show.

> "Interviewer: And what do they have in their hands? [Comments on Scenario 1.]
>
> Child 1: Yes, a paper and a pen.
>
> Interviewer: And this child?
>
> Child 1: That's an adult, he has nothing in his hand. But he had something in his hand, an eraser.
>
> Interviewer: And him?
>
> Child 1: He has a paper in his hand. Or a book. I think it's a book. Yes, a book.
>
> Child 3: I know something.
>
> Child 2: They have a book.
>
> Child 3: Maybe a mobile phone.
>
> Child 1: A book" (AT_FG1_Kindergarten, October 10, 2020).
>
> "Child 1: That's very sad [children comment on Scenario 2]
>
> Child 2: It was supposed to be a family evening, but instead of a family evening, one of them just took the tablet and gambled on it. I don't like that at all. And then they think there are three of us, not four. And he doesn't even notice and just keeps on playing" (AT_FG3_Primary School, June 6, 2021). [36]

3.2.5 Role play

For the role-play task, the moderator was assigned the role of a child, while the children were supposed to play parents. In the scene, the child was going to bed, secretly taking a smartphone with him or her and using it under the blanket. Then parents came in. From this point onward, the children (as parents) were supposed to improvise and enact the scene from there. [37]

Our intention with this stimulus was to offer an interactive technique that is close to children's experiences. Playing imitates a natural behavior of children in the

age group we researched and puts less emphasis on verbal exchange. Furthermore, with this technique, we avoided direct questions about their personal life at home, in order to protect their privacy in a group setting. If children did not engage in this type of task, we had prepared a scenario card to initiate a verbal discussion on the same situation instead of a role play (see Figure 5). In one case, the moderator felt uncomfortable playing a child or felt it was inappropriate, and we used play figures to evoke a discussion about the scene instead.

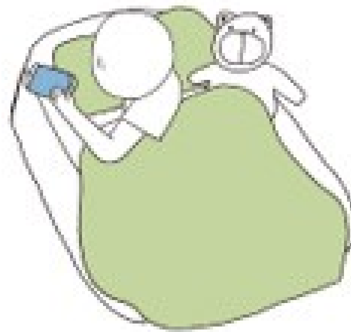

Figure 5: Scenario card: In bed with smartphone [38]

Generally, the role play was highly appropriate for both age groups under study. We could gain similar insights from both age groups, but participants' underlying skills were different. Particularly for kindergarten participants, role play was a good way of including a playful element. They started commenting and interpreting the situation actively during the task. The role play seemed more effective than the scenario cards in getting spontaneous reaction from children. Sometimes children engaged in a fictive game that might not have had much to do with the reality they experienced. Noticeably, the older children used more indirect speech and subjunctive expressions, while younger participants really engaged in playing and used direct speech.

> "Child 1: You have to go to sleep! Without a mobile phone!
>
> Interviewer: I still want to play
>
> Child 1: But you can't, you have to sleep and not look at your mobile phone.
>
> Child 2: You can play for 10 hours.
>
> Child 1: No!
>
> Interviewer: How much longer?
>
> Child 1: Just a second, one and now put it away.
>
> Interviewer: Only?
>
> Child 2: You just get a mobile phone ban because you were bad, because you're not allowed to watch TV in bed. You can play for another 10 minutes. And tomorrow morning, if you're good, you can play again.
>
> Interviewer: Do you allow me to do that?
>
> Child 2: Yes.

> Child 1: No, you're not allowed to, no way, you're banned from using your mobile phone. One year" (AT_FG4_Kindergarten, January 12, 2021). [39]

Even when using the situation cards as an alternative to the role play, children often imitated parents' voices. In one instance, we changed the role play with the moderator playing the child to using playmobile figures (see Figure 6). Even though children did not play a parent, they still articulated what they thought a parent would say, potential consequences, general rules, and sanctions. However, if children engaged in the human role play, we found more interaction than in the role play with figures. In our experience, it was good to have alternatives to give the moderator flexibility to decide what was best suited for the individual group and for the moderator in that situation.

Figure 6: Using playmobile instead of role play [40]

3.2.6 Closing question: "I would like to have ..." (personal future)

In the closing question, we asked participants what they would wish for their personal future and left it open whether they referred to DT or other aspects. Nevertheless, the idea was to gain insights on children's wishes regarding DT. In practice, the children interpreted the question on a more general level. Younger participants tended to list their birthday wishes.

> "Child 1: I would have liked a driver's license and a Lamborghini.
>
> Interviewer: Also a Lamborghini.
>
> Child 1: I wish I had such a fast car that I could be at home and in space in no time.
>
> Child 2: A tablet.
>
> Interviewer: A tablet?
>
> Child 3: A Nintendo Switch" (AT_FG4_Kindergarten, January 12, 2021). [41]

Older participants mentioned political or societal topics such as peace and the climate crisis. It was insightful for us that despite the contents of the previous focus group discussion, the answers were very broad and often not directly related to DT. In retrospect, the question would have needed to be directly related to DT. As a hypothetical question, the "what if" question worked better with regards to our substantive research interest. [42]

3.3 Children's skills and group dynamic

For determining what and how we should and can ask children in focus groups, their behavior and underlying skills are highly relevant. Calendric age can only be a proxy for this, and skills vary considerably within one age group (LUND et al., 2016; VOGL, 2012, 2015b). Nevertheless, we found some age differences between children aged 5-6 and 8-10 which are relevant for expectations and implementations of focus groups with children. [43]

Generally, individual opinions were stated more frequently and justified in greater detail among older children. Younger participants in particular gave information or stated facts, and their opinions seemed primarily based on parents' opinions and attitudes, e.g., the assessment that too much screen time leads to "square eyes." Nevertheless, this was valuable information. In addition, it was to be expected that parents' views shaped children's thinking at this age. What the children had heard and experienced from their parents influenced their life as well as their views. Thus, we did not consider this a sign of social desirability, but rather a matter of socialization and children's cognitive development. [44]

For both age groups, only limited direct discussion occurred among participants. Statements were often complementary, without an argumentative exchange about the exact meaning of the word, i.e., the children did not bring in new and different arguments to support their view or interpretation. However, this did not mean that participants did not refer to each other. For statements to be complementary, the other person's position had to be heard first. Adult standards about debating a topic might fail with young children, but the group setting and the other participants' contributions elicited further thoughts and statements, which was the added value of the group setting. Moreover, adult standards of a "discussion" as a debate with an exchange of arguments might be difficult to be met with young children. However, this does not make a focus group less valuable for research. We found that discursive skills were limited and statements were usually complementary rather than argumentative in both age groups under study. This might be related to the group composition: real-life groups/friendship groups implied joint knowledge and facilitated complementary statements while decreasing conflict. [45]

Nevertheless, the presence of peers enhanced a greater variety of reactions than would have been possible in individual interviews. Furthermore, we could see more interaction and direct reference to other participants in the older age group (8-10 years) and also more statements of opinions. For the younger age group (5-6 years), the other children gave important impulses and thus the insights methodologically differed from individual interviews. The strength of validated opinions or formation of opinions was therefore only partly usable. For the validation of group opinions in the course of the discussion, a collective orientation was necessary. This was not always the case, but more likely with older children. [46]

Younger children had a stronger need to tell their story, even if it was off topic. When something was on their mind they wanted to share, they just said it whether it fitted the question/topic or not. Someone, for example, suddenly said: "I am bored, I want to go," or all children needed a toilet simultaneously. In addition, children often had their own agenda, played on a piano in the room, and got distracted easily—particularly at preschool age. Furthermore, children were often more outspoken than would be expected from adults. In one focus group, the children challenged and partly ignored the moderator. Furthermore, participants did not hesitate to contradict suggestive phrases of the moderator. This also indicated a different understanding of social desirability or behavior towards adults. [47]

In all groups at least one participant was more outspoken and dominated (or attempted to dominate) the conversation. It occasionally happened, that other children disciplined the dominant child (i.e., "be quiet"). Silent members were rare, and the small group size might have been helpful in that respect. Nevertheless, some participants were more active than others. However, this probably mirrors a real-life situation and group structure. In friendship groups (or with siblings), role patterns had been established before the focus group. This was advantageous as group structures did not have to be established first and children felt more comfortable. Gender did not seem to make a difference in the manner and level of participation; loud and sometimes unruly behavior occurred among girls and boys (e.g., being distracted easily, walking around the room, telling other children off, playing with technical devices, destroying show cards). Furthermore, we could not detect problems or tensions in the interactions between boys and girls, probably because the groups consisted of friends. [48]

3.4 Moderator behavior and researcher's role

The moderator has a central role in focus groups, and personal characteristics as well as moderating strategies frame the communication with and among participants (PUNCH & GRAHAM, 2017). The primary concern in focus group research is to encourage a variety of viewpoints on the topic discussed and interaction amongst participants with little moderator intervention (LOOS & SCHÄFFER, 2001; NENTWIG-GESEMANN, 2002; PRZYBORSKI & WOHLRAB-SAHR, 2019). Thus, focus groups are often characterized by a nondirective style of interviewing encouraging interaction among participants, and the moderator should facilitate rather than formally lead the discussion (LUND et al., 2016). [49]

In our study, we considered it vital to avoid simple question-answer routines and a school-like setting. Our aim during the focus group and in constructing its schedule was to let children themselves organize turn-taking as much as possible. However, in our experience, a more directive moderating behavior, relative to focus groups with adults or adolescents, was necessary with the age groups 5–10 to keep the discussion going and to maintain the children's focus on the topic. Children were encouraged to talk without indicating. With a more active moderator, status differences and power imbalances between child participants and the adult moderator were potentially perpetuated. However, underlining the

expert status of children and sitting at eye level with them (e.g., on cushions) was helpful in empowering them to participate. Nevertheless, the power imbalance can never be fully compensated for (ibid.)—many research settings have a mostly unresolvable power imbalance between researcher and participants, but in research with children, this imbalance is pronounced by a generational hierarchy. Researchers should be aware of, and critically reflect on this (CHRISTENSEN & JAMES, 2008; CHRISTENSEN & PROUT, 2002; GREIG, TAYLOR & MacKAY, 2013; MAYALL, 2000; STEWART, BUSSEY, GOODMAN & SAYWITZ, 1993). [50]

Generally, children were very moderator-centered, competing for her attention and recognition (LUND et al., 2016). Thus, the moderator was (unintentionally) very central and sometimes directive—even more so with the younger children. We found that the focus group process was easier for children when roles between moderator and assistant were clearly assigned and only one person was the leader. For some children, it was important to impress the moderator, and they boasted, for example, about the number of devices they have at home or how long they can use them. The older participants were more eager to impress the moderator than younger ones. We assumed that in friendship groups, the need to impress peers or show off was lower than in artificial groups; however, we witnessed some surprised "What? You do not have that?" comments, but it did not lead to marginalization. Nevertheless, the moderator paid special attention to avoid situations in which children with more devices (and financial resources) showed off and discriminated against others. However, children with little experience with DTs generally seemed quieter and less involved. It was possible that they felt they did not have much to contribute. In sum, the centrality of the moderator made insights into peer orientation processes in situ questionable. [51]

The moderator needed to monitor the level of participation and ensure that shy children were encouraged and vocal participants did not dominate the group (HENNESSY & HEARY, 2005). However, for a natural setting, it is not important that every participant contribute equally. It is only natural that some children are more talkative and outspoken than others. If the moderator invited individual participants to contribute, it has to be done in a sensitive way without pressure. For example, shy children are encouraged by nonverbal signals such as nodding or by positive comments (LUND et al., 2016). Prompts such as "What does everyone else think?," "Do others have different thoughts?" or "Tell me more" encouraged other participants (ibid.) without directly putting them in the spotlight. Expressions such as "Great!," "Terrific!," or "Cool!" should be avoided because they may discourage the child from telling the parts of the story that are less impressive (FARGAS-MALET, McSHERRY, LARKIN & ROBINSON, 2010; LUND et al., 2016). [52]

A fine line exists between putting pressure on members to contribute and giving everyone an equal opportunity to contribute. Treading this line required sensitivity and empathy, a good understanding of children, and pedagogical sensitivity, as well as flexibility to give room for children's agendas and to find a way back to the topic. Generally, the moderator needed to be prepared to monitor the progress of

the focus group discussion and take an active role without lecturing or judging children, but rather keeping an open mind and taking them seriously. [53]

The moderator sometimes had to take a more directive role, particularly when children, especially the younger ones, continuously disturbed the discussion, e.g., shouting, trying to snatch show cards off the box, jumping/climbing in the room, taking off socks and throwing them around. Initial strategies were successful in most cases, like ignoring this behavior as much as possible, staying patient, and actively trying to bring the child back into the discussion by asking his or her opinion about what someone else had said and so forth. Sometimes, however, more direct interventions were necessary, e.g., asking children if they preferred to leave the room with the assistant, in order to facilitate the focus group and to allow the other participants to continue their conversations without disturbance. On the one hand, this behavior can replicate a (generational) hierarchy. On the other hand, it can be necessary to warrant children's safety and allow all children to participate and share their contributions. [54]

We also found that more interpretive work was already necessary during the focus group itself (see also MORGAN et al., 2002). The semantic and pragmatic meaning of words was not necessarily equivalent between the adult moderator and the child participants (MAYALL, 2000; VOGL, 2012). A moderator constantly needs to question his or her understanding and be very attentive to potential contradictions. This is crucial for asking and reassuring comprehension because equivalence of meaning cannot be taken for granted; for example, a child in our study referred to a hearing aid but meant headphones. Adults cannot assume that their concepts have the "same connotations in children of preschool age" (LUND et al., 2016, p.1536). [55]

Furthermore, having a moderator as a facilitator and an assistant for organizational tasks (e.g., monitoring technology, taking children to the bathroom) is highly recommended. Having a clear role differentiation between the two made it easier for the children to orient. During the analysis and interpretation, it was also helpful to have another person, i.e., the assistant, with first-hand experiences on the content, context, and form of the focus groups. [56]

3.5 Ethics

Social relations between peers continue after the focus groups and what is said in the focus groups might have an impact on social relations outside it. Therefore, we tried to avoid children finding themselves in a competitive situation of who had more DT at home or who had more knowledge. Intense discussions may cause stress for individual participants or lead to distress. In focus groups, the research team must be highly aware of asymmetries, power dynamics, or discomfort (MORGAN & HOFFMAN, 2018). However, because we had recruited friendship groups almost exclusively and did not ask sensitive questions, we did not detect any participant distress in our study. Having said that, sensitivity of questions or responses have to be judged from the children's point of view which is difficult to accomplish and not within the scope of the present study. [57]

The moderator was responsible for monitoring group dynamics closely and intervening if individual participants were somehow marginalized. Everybody should have the opportunity to participate—without pressure to do so and without negative consequences. Additionally, confidentiality was also sometimes difficult to maintain as a consequence of parents' curiosity and concern for their child (FARGAS-MALET et al., 2010; PUNCH & GRAHAM, 2017). [58]

When conducting research with children as participants, obtaining consent from parents or a legal guardian is an essential part of research ethics. Although common practice with adults as participants, written consent from children is not legally required or possible. Beyond legal requirements, we obtained the assent from children participating in the research and ensured their assent throughout the data collection by being sensitive to any verbal or nonverbal clues that might have indicated a lack of assent. We made clear to the participants that they had the right to "withdraw" or "opt-out" of the study at any time without negative consequences. It has also been suggested to agree on nonverbal signaling, if a child wanted to leave the focus group discussion (OETTING-ROß et al., 2016). [59]

Information on the project and participation was provided to them and their parents/legal guardians using language that was suitable for each group. We introduced the project, procedures, and data protection issues, and we asked for verbal assent for video and voice recording at the beginning of the focus group. We considered it a sign of appreciation to also let children sign "a form" but we decided against acquiring written assent at the beginning of the focus group. However, at the end of the focus group, children were asked to assent with the data collection and anonymized use for analysis and reporting. For this purpose, we had developed a child-friendly form for them to sign. The assent form contained very little text but pictograms (KAPELLA & SISASK, 2021) and was equipped with additional verbal information by the moderator so even young children could grasp the idea of informed assent. They were very keen to (symbolically) signing the form and some presented it proudly to their parents. [60]

We believe that assent after the actual focus group experience is better informed and more appropriate for these age groups. For children, the concept might still be very vague before the focus group, but afterwards, their experience better enables informed consent. We wanted to give the participants the opportunity to withdraw their consent after they found out what had really happened during the focus group. At the same time, we were very sensitive to verbal and nonverbal behavior that could have indicated reluctance to participate during the entire focus group. [61]

Although researchers were in contact with the parents of the children, for example, when they brought them to the focus group or picked them up, nothing the children said was reported to the parents. Parents were sometimes interested in what their child said about the handling of DT in the family. From an ethical point of view, it was important that the focus group remained a confidential conversation. We instructed all participants—and parents if present during the focus groups—to keep everything confidential that is said inside this room and do

not tell anybody else. However, we offered to provide parents with the final report of our study to get more information on the results. [62]

4. Conclusion and Practical Recommendations

Compared with individual interviews, focus groups have the benefit of children inspiring each other to talk about certain topics and remember specific experiences. They refer to and discuss more aspects with enthusiasm. The peer environment offers a more egalitarian, less hierarchical approach, although in many cases, the moderator plays an active role. The fact that adults are in a minority eases the interaction and reduces potential stress and pressure on individual participants. Furthermore, children are well acquainted with working in peer groups, while a one-to-one interview situation with a stranger might be an unfamiliar and more stressful experience. In addition, if real-life groups participate, focus groups offer insights into the functioning of peer groups and peer culture. However, researchers should not expect that focus groups with children generate one coherent peer opinion or offer discussions in terms of exchanging arguments. Moreover, the group dynamic can hamper the communication process, for example, by issues of certain individuals dominating others, unruly behavior, or silent participants. Group dynamics can inhibit equal contribution and become more important than the actual content. In other words, fights over who is right or wrong might overshadow progressing with the content. [63]

Based on our findings, we make the following recommendations to guide researchers planning focus groups. In sum, regarding focus groups with children from 5 to 6 and from 8 to 10 years, our experience shows that the composition of the group of participants is crucial. For a more comfortable, less threatening set-up, we recommend real-life groups. In terms of age, the group should be homogeneous to give everybody the same chance of participating. Otherwise, older participants might easily dismiss and dominate younger participants. In addition, siblings and very close friendship pairs might be problematic because their experiences and views are more similar and can imbalance the discussion and dominate other participants. However, in these age groups, separating boys and girls does not seem necessary. The group size should be smaller with younger children (3-5 participants) and can increase slightly with age. What makes focus groups with children special compared to those with adults is the children's enthusiasm, their shorter attention span, and their off-topic contributions. Particularly with younger participants, focus groups require moderators to take a more active role. [64]

The moderator generally has a key role in the focus group: maintain focus while allowing for openness; establish an open, equal, and appreciative communication; give structure; facilitate an exchange among participants. The moderator might have to structure the focus group to a higher degree than is typically necessary with adults. Children are less well versed with rules of cooperation and negotiation—depending on their skills of perspective taking. Organizing an exchange independently might therefore be challenging, and the moderator has to take a more active role the younger the children are. The

moderator is motivator with a regulating and balancing function. Depending on the group's size, an assistant is advisable not only to help with technical and organizational issues but also for first-hand observations important for data interpretation. [65]

The moderator's task is to create a permissive atmosphere for the expression of personal and conflicting viewpoints on the focal topics and to be "supportive and empathetic, active listening; acknowledge the value of each child's contributions" (HENNESSY & HEARY, 2005, p.242). It is crucial not to lecture or judge children but to keep an open mind. For the natural setting, it is not important that every participant contributes equally. It is only natural that some children are more talkative and speak up more than others (VIERTEL, 2015; VOGL, 2009). If the moderator invites individual participants to contribute, it has to be in a sensitive way without pressure. The moderator has to make sure that no participant is excluded, while taking account of natural group structures in which group members have different roles. Everybody should have the opportunity to participate—without pressure to do so and without negative consequences. [66]

As researchers, we have to give child participants room to express themselves at their own pace and in their own way. Children should feel free to talk (without indicating first, as could be mentioned in the beginning as a communication rule for the focus group). Also, researchers need to be prepared for children being frank (e.g., "I am bored," "I want to go home"), or disruptive or unruly. [67]

The setting should be familiar and comfortable and have few distractions. However, the normal function of the location has to be considered because space implies specific rules: a church requires people to be quiet, a classroom is related to work and a strict hierarchy, and a gym does not necessarily invite people to sit down (VOGL, 2015a). Seating arrangements should be chosen in a way that creates a communicative and balanced setting. It is always a good idea for the moderator to be at the same height as the children and to avoid formalized settings that remind children of a test or school setting. Ideally, the focus group should occur in a room or location that has some relevance or relation to the topic under research (BUTSCHI & HEDDERICH, 2021; VIERTEL, 2015; VOGL, 2015a). [68]

Visual aids, i.e., photos, picture stories, drawings, and stickers are very popular and worked well for us. On the one hand, they motivate and stimulate discussion. On the other hand, when children get excited with the pictures, the related task can take a long time and thus require a lot of concentration. We advise researchers to use visual prompts that are concrete enough that children can grasp the intended theme, but at the same time be vague enough to allow for different interpretations (e.g., no gender typical identifiers or mimicry). Also, we advise researchers to have back-up-plans for techniques, particularly for role play or drawings, which might not seem appropriate in specific but unforeseeable circumstances. [69]

Focus groups are rather complex and demanding interactions and thus require participants to have good social and verbal *skills*. With our findings, we documented that there cannot be a uniform approach for children: age is the critical factor. With a small age discrepancy, differences in abilities and behavior arise. Thus, depending on the age, different requirements are posed to the methodical design. A flexible framework and setting for focus groups is crucial, particularly with young children. Due to generally limited perspective-taking skills, tasks that involve finding a consensus might be challenging for young children—but they may be easier in friendship groups. Stating their own views and experiences works very well. Methods that demand abstract thinking can be used with younger children as well and produce interesting results. We encourage researchers to be more courageous in their choice of methods: with flexibility and sensitivity, even approaches that seem too advanced for children can often lead to surprising and very valuable insights. [70]

Regarding *research ethics*, we recommend assent forms in simple language or with pictograms for the children and beyond the legally required guardian consent forms. We also made positive experiences with offering information on the project, data protection etc., beforehand and offering the assent form to the children afterwards in order to make truly informed decisions whether the material can be used for research. Researchers should also be mindful of potentially sensitive questions or sensitivity of answers, as well as group dynamics that could exclude or marginalize participants. [71]

Based on our experiences, we are strong advocates for focus groups with (young) children. The process and outcome of focus groups with children are certainly different from focus groups with adults, but this does not make them less worthy. Quite to the contrary, we found it insightful, rewarding, and fun. In short, be prepared and expect the unexpected, accept the uncertainty connected to qualitative research (KUHN, 2003), and you will be able to gain valuable insights into the life worlds of children. [72]

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