**Storytelling and role play to increase younger children’s autonomy within research. What younger children really think and understand about online safety.**

# Introduction

As a mother, an Early Years Practitioner and lecturer and an early career researcher, I have developed a keen interest in how children and parents are adapting to an increasingly digital environment, especially considering the best ways to keep younger children safe online. This paper focuses on the early planning stages of a PhD focusing on what younger children, four to six years old, really thinks about online safety and examines the value of storytelling and roleplay as research methods. As an early career researcher, the purpose of this paper is also to question the aims and methods of the proposed research, examining the balance between creative methodologies and younger children’s autonomy within the research environment.

The paper provides an overview of the context of the proposed research, helping to contextualise the proposed methodological approaches. The paper examines the aims of the research, looking at how these can be potentially supported and answered through the proposed methodological approaches. Finally, the paper discusses the proposed methodological approaches and how this impact on younger children’s autonomy within the research environment, aiming to give younger children increased autonomy within the research environment, giving a voice to an often-under-represented group.

# Research Context

So, what are the current issues around younger children’s use of digital technologies and what does the literature say? Sharkins, Newton, Albaiz and Ernest (2015), state that children are accessing the internet at younger ages and for longer periods of time. This increased digital access by younger children suggests this is an area of contemporary early childhood education that warrants further attention from researchers and policy makers, meeting the demands of an increasingly digital society, whilst also safeguarding vulnerable groups. However, much of the research already carried out around children’s online safety, focuses on the engagement of older children over the age of nine (Chaudron, 2015). Chaudron’s (2015) study highlights the need for more research focusing on younger children and suggests creative methodological approaches to gain an understanding of younger children’s perceptions would be beneficial. As Lomax (2012) proposes, are there more creative ways to genuinely attempt to include children in the production of knowledge? This lack of research, suggests a widening gap, between younger children’s increased digital engagement and the paucity of research examining how this increased activity is potentially affecting younger children’s lives, demonstrating a lack of understanding in how best to support younger children’s digital engagement (Holloway, Green & Livingstone, 2013; Ólafsson, Livingstone and Haddon, 2013).

Younger children show limited understanding of what the internet is, or the associated benefits and risks (Chaudron, 2015).This potential lack of understanding may be affected by younger children’s cognitive development and abilities to understand abstract concepts, such as the internet, which are important aspects that require consideration. In relation to children’s abilities to understand online safety, Chaudron’s (2015) study, demonstrates that younger children show little awareness of what the internet is, due to the lack of developmental ability in understanding abstract thinking and abstract systems such as the internet. Chaudron (2015) found difficulties with young children’s ability to reason at an advanced or abstract level when discussing their digital activities. For example, children found it difficult to go beyond what they liked or disliked. This potential lack of ability in abstract thinking makes it difficult for younger children to understand the associated risks or benefits they may encounter online, suggesting more research in this area would potentially help to shape the guidelines for child online safety for this age group. Children’s socio and emotional abilities also need to be considered. Asking younger children to consider online risk and harm requires a level of maturity around emotional intelligence not often found in younger children (Eshet-Alkalai, & Amichai-Hamburger, 2004). The use of storytelling, related to online safety focused age appropriate books and role play, will provide children with different opportunities to display their cognitive and socio-emotional understanding regarding online safety, potentially providing a range of data to further examine children’s ability to think critically about online safety. This suggests that more research is needed to help shape online safety for this age group.

There are many potential reasons why research is lacking, such as research surrounding younger children’s online engagement may reflect difficulties in research involving the perceptions of younger children (Olfasson, Livingstone, & Haddon, 2013). The current lack of research surrounding child online safety and the child’s voice may reflect perceived difficulties in research involving younger children (Olfasson, Livingstone, & Haddon, 2013). However, the Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights (2005) recognises younger children as able to demonstrate the age and maturity needed to articulate themselves on matters that affect them, which is supported by Murray (2016) who suggests this as a rationale for younger children as researchers. This study aims to address this and will gather children’s perceptions of online safety, whilst questioning the inclusion of the voice of the child and how this potentially encourages children to become active participants, using in-depth analysis of their contributions to help answer the research questions. This research uses qualitative methods to gather in-depth data to explore the experiences and perceptions of teachers and parents of younger children, regarding child online safety, through semi-structured interviews, whilst the creative methods, storytelling and role play, will be used to engage younger children.

# Different perspectives: home and school environments

This research aims to examine different and important perspectives, including children’s, parent’s and teacher’s perceptions of the potential risks and benefits of online engagement (Kanthawongs & Kanthawongs, 2013). The UK Government recognises the influential position of parents and encourages them to take responsibility for child online safety through ideals surrounding effective parenting and government influences (Byron, 2008; Lewis, 2014). Research shows that parents of younger children recognise the importance of taking responsibility for child online safety and are willing to share this with teachers (Chaudron, 2015). However, Sharkins et al. (2015) suggest that there is a lack of research that includes the perspectives of caregivers, such as parents and teachers regarding younger children’s use of digital technologies.With different stakeholder’s perspectives involved in taking responsibility for child online safety a deeper understanding of each of these perspectives potentially helps to underpin effective practice in relation to younger children’s online safety. However, Holloway et al. (2013) suggest that sharing responsibility for online safety with teachers may lead to some parents of younger children having less support through a lack of communication between home and school. Shipton (2011) suggests teachers and parents’ views of online safety often differ, potentially causing barriers to effective child online safety advice, which has the potential to confuse teachers, parents and younger children.

# Proposed Research Aims

* This research aims to include the perspectives of younger children, parents and teachers to critically interrogate how the home and school environments work together to tackle the issues of child online safety
* Through applying a phenomenological approach this research examines the possible differences between younger children’s and adult’s perspectives, gaining insights into how best to support younger children with online safety
* Finally, critically analysis of the effectiveness of storytelling and role play will discuss how effective these methods have been in eliciting the views of younger children in the research environment regarding online safety.

# Proposed methodological approach: Storytelling

Storytelling is a pedagogical method that younger children are already exposed to and are familiar with, which would not necessarily be the case with other more formal traditional methods, such as interviews. Pedagogically, reading stories to younger children is often linked to their development of early literacy skills and capitalises on children’s desire to interact and talk to others, relying on the relationship between the listener and the teller, introducing a social element to the activity (Jug & Vilar, 2015; Mason, 1990; Miller & Pennycuff, 2008).Miller and Pennycuff (2008), propose storytelling as an effective method of engaging young children to engage within an activity**.** Jug and Vilar (2015) used storytelling as a research method to enable them to gain further understanding of younger children’s attitudes towards books and reading. Jug and Vilar (2015) suggest that storytelling is a satisfactory research method to use with younger children, enabling freedom of expression, whilst facilitating data collection of opinions and perceptions.Story is a vital concept that supports children’s learning and development, aiding children’s understandings of the world around them and has the potential ability to motivate children and to connect with the content. (Miller & Pennycuff, 2008; Quintero, 2010).

# How will storytelling be used?

As proposed by Jug and Vilar (2015), audio recordings of group storytelling will be collected using a data recorder, whilst the researcher will encourage children’s participation through prompts to engage with the story. This will be achieved using age appropriate books focused on child online safety and will be used to motivate and gather children’s perceptions. There are a number of books aimed at younger children and online safety, with a wide range of data collection possibilities. These books provide a number of opportunities to prompt children within storytelling sessions that link with the research aims. Five children in reception and year one will engage with the storytelling data collection. Parents and teachers will also be able to add their perspectives through semi-structured interviews. Hackett (2016), argues that research involving parents, or other adults, such as teachers, is not an attempt to privilege parents over the child’s voice in research. This research aims to use parent’s understanding of their child gained from daily interactions, alongside teacher’s perceptions of younger children’s engagement and understanding with digital technologies, including additional perspectives to support understanding of under-represented groups, such as young children.

# Proposed methodological approach: Role play and video recording

Children will be asked to help design and play within a role play area. The role-play phase of the research poses questions around ethical data collection, including videoing and audio recording young children. Video recording as a research method is increasingly providing opportunities to observe people, helping to understand people’s interactions in more depth (Heath, Hindmarsh, & Luff 2010). Using similar methods as those suggested within this proposed study, Pálmadóttir and Einarsdóttir (2016), suggests video recordings have significant potential in providing insights into younger children’s lived experiences, in addition to facilitating an important reflective lens. This increased use of video recording has contributed to a paradigm shift within early childhood educational research, where the child is viewed as a competent research participant (Rayna & Laevers, 2011). The use of video recordings in this study will allow younger children and the researcher to revisit the data. Papadopoulou (2012) states, role play enables children to communally explore and assign meaning to their worlds and themselves in it. This aims to provide a pretend world that is reality grounded, where children can recreate aspects of their everyday world, facilitating a medium of expression to allow children to demonstrate their current levels of understanding, anxieties and fears. The role play will potentially allow children the space to explore phenomena, such as online safety, providing links between adopting an interpretative approach and data collection methods.

# Children’s voices within research

Research with children needs to consider issues of marginalisation and social injustice, examine how their perspectives can help add to the body of knowledge about various issues in their lives (Einarsdottir & Harcourt 2011; Lansdown 2005; Murray, 2017).This means that although welcoming the voices of young children into privileged research spaces is complicated and ethically challenging, it is important to consider how children’s voices are represented and interpreted within the chosen methodology and methods (Murray, 2017; White, 2011). Using similar methods as those suggested within this proposed study, Pálmadóttir and Einarsdóttir (2016) suggest video recordings have significant potential in providing insights into younger children’s lived experiences, in addition to facilitating an important reflective lens during the research process.

The use of video recordings within this research has benefits. These being the richness of data collected and what this offers analytically when revisiting the data with participants, analysing language and bodily expressions in-depth, making links with the proposed phenomenological approach, whilst increasing coding opportunities and reliability (Gardener, 2000; Heath et al., 2010). The use of video recordings in this study will allow younger children and the researcher to revisit the data. As argued by Bancroft (2017), encouraging child participants to revisit the video footage is a way of enhancing interpretive analysis, potentially adding validity by facilitating further discussion around younger children’s perceptions of online safety. These revisiting sessions will be audio recorded and make links with the proposed phenomenological approach through increasing coding opportunities and reliability, whilst also encouraging children as active research participants (Gardener, 2000; Heath et al., 2010).

# Ethical considerations

Video recording could increase risks around compromising children’s anonymity. However, as this plan has demonstrated, issues of responsibility and trust are central to the ways the research data will be ethically gathered and presented and also safely stored (Robert-Holmes, 2014). More particularly with regards to maintaining children’s anonymity, the researcher will not use any extracts from the video recordings or stills in which the children, staff or the setting can be identified, within the PhD thesis, research presentations or publications. Children will be aware that they are being filmed and the camera will be in plain sight to avoid any unethical covert research (Gray, 2014). Falloon (2013) and Lahlou (2011) raise concerns around the observer effect when using video recording as a data collection method. In line with Falloon’s (2013) recommendations, the observer effect will be managed through habituation of the researcher within the setting prior to data collection and through children’s familiarity with being observed in school settings. In providing a rationale for the use of video recordings, the researcher has considered the implications for participants, by recognising young children as competent participants who have given their assent to the research (Schiller and Einarsdottir, 2009); demonstrating the benefits of collecting and being able to interpret the data in collaboration with the children; and putting in place stringent ethical data storage to secure participants’ anonymity and confidentiality.

# Final thoughts

This paper recognises potential gaps in the literature pertaining to supporting younger children’s online safety, whilst also acknowledging the widely articulated difficulties in research involving children’s voices. However, the increased digitalisation of younger children’s lives, yet apparent lack of awareness, identifies that more research in this area could potentially help to shape understandings of younger children’s online safety. Finally, if we want to understand younger children’s understanding of online safety, then surely we need to ask them, viewing younger children as active research participants involved in discussions about contemporary issues that affect them in their lives.

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