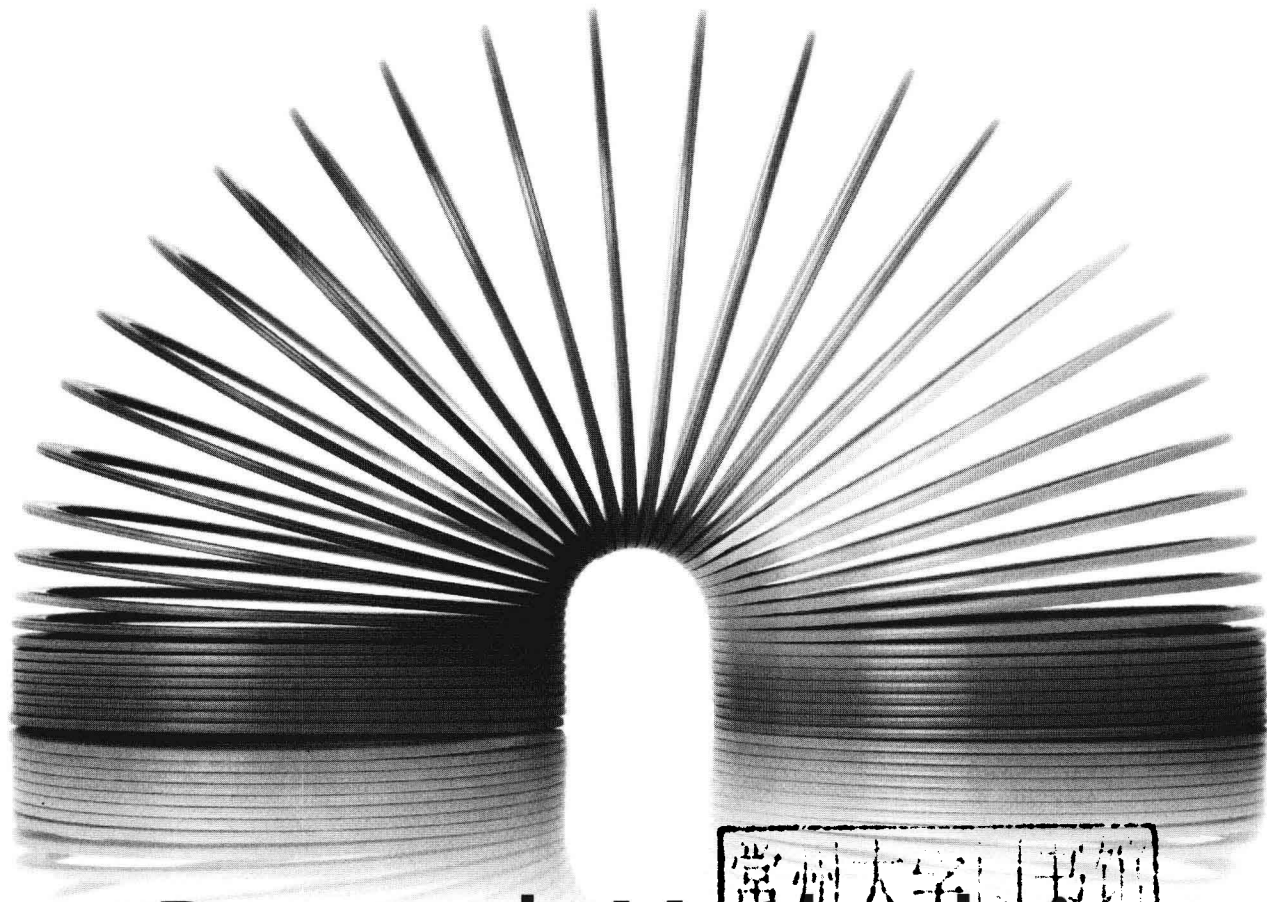


Research Methods in Early Childhood

An Introductory Guide

Penny Mukherji and Deborah Albon





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 **SAGE**

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Penny Mukherji has been involved in educating students in the field of early childhood for over 20 years and during this time has developed a deep understanding into how to support students on their learning journeys. At present Penny is a Senior Lecturer in Early Childhood Studies at London Metropolitan University, where an important part of her teaching involves supporting both undergraduate and postgraduate students as they complete their research projects. With a background in health and psychology, Penny is an established author, with a special interest in the health and well-being of young children.

Deborah Albon worked as a nursery nurse, teacher and manager in a range of early childhood settings for nearly 20 years. Her research interests are primarily around food and drink provisioning and play in early childhood settings. Deborah has published a range of articles in this area and with Penny Mukherji has co-written *Food and Health in Early Childhood*. She now works as a Senior Lecturer in Early Childhood Studies at London Metropolitan University, where she has considerable experience teaching research methods to both undergraduate and postgraduate students.

FOREWORD

Researching early childhood issues is notoriously difficult. Not only is it extremely difficult to conduct robust research in an area that is relatively subjective, but researching anything to do with young children has enormous ethical issues which are often underplayed. How I wish I'd had a book like this when I first started my career as a researcher into early years education and care! Not only do the writers outline very clearly the various methods and methodology feasible in early childhood contexts but they explain and explore critical issues like ethics when researching young children and their experiences.

One vital issue that I've always found so challenging is that of power relationships between children and adults, especially as an adult researcher: how do we make children 'equals' in the research process? How do we ensure that children's own voices are heard? When one embarks on research in early years settings one is immediately and potentially in a 'power' situation in respect of children: they tend to see adults as 'all powerful' – they who must be obeyed! – and, therefore, when asked questions will respond in ways that 'please' the adults. This book explores these issues openly and honestly and provides clear guidance on how to make children, as far as possible, joint and parallel researchers within a carefully conceived project, however young.

Another strength of the book for me is in outlining with clarity and cohesiveness the major challenges and strengths of various types of methods for conducting research and the underpinning methodologies available to researchers. The writers explain unambiguously the difference between methods – the tools of research – and methodologies – the way research is conducted, which will be of considerable help to new researchers, especially those undertaking masters and doctoral studies. These people, in my experience, often misjudge and misrepresent the differences between methods and methodologies: they will be in no doubt after reading this excellent book.

It is worth pointing out that the book is not only extremely readable but is very well referenced, important for those who want to read further into the issues raised. All references are up-to-date and, within the text, are vital to exploring the various challenges and concerns outlined.

Where we often think of 'meaningful' experiences for young children as paramount to their developing understanding of various concepts, as researchers we often forget the meaningfulness issues when it comes to children and our own researches. This book reminds us powerfully of the need for our research, whatever its overall focus, to make sense to children if they – and their parents – are to consent to involvement and remain involved over a period of time. It is clear that the writers both feel that the child as participant is a vital aspect of research and of this book: the writers are both sensitive to children's involvement and clearly feel that listening to children is a crucial part of all early childhood research. They are also clear that 'listening' involves not only researchers' ears but their eyes as well, in that children's body language and actions are

often just as telling – sometimes more – in research terms, as their oral contributions. In other words, what a child does is just as important as what a young child says – or doesn't say!

An essential area covered in the book is the difference between undertaking primary and secondary research and the importance in both contexts of critiquing the research of others. This may be through literature reviews or other forms of textual analysis, for example, or action research into what policies appear to be effective in practice. Various different examples of research projects are interrogated and evaluated in terms of how they help us to understand research into practice and policy in early childhood. The reported empirical research within the book and the various outcomes will be a great support for all who are seeking to conduct their own research and are unsure of the challenges and issues that are likely to confront them. There is practical support, too, for observation which is one of the major ways in which practitioners and researchers are likely to interpret and analyse many aspects of early childhood practice and experiences.

In my experience, most students have great difficulty in developing their own research – where to start, what to focus on, how the analysis should be conducted, what they are likely to find and such like – are all extremely difficult areas for inexperienced researchers. All these aspects are covered with thoroughness and thoughtfulness in this excellent book. There's something for everyone at whatever level they embark on their research. The writing is not only extremely clear and concise, but the examples make it very interesting and informative.

The real underpinning of the book is its major strength: the role of children in supporting researchers to understand more about children's experiences of life in early years environments. The book is highly creative in terms of ensuring that readers must think through various issues and challenges if they are to conduct effective, robust and worthwhile early childhood research. Much of the research with young children will be subjective and interpretive in nature: other studies will involve positivist research where numerical data is collected. Both issues are covered with clarity and integrity in this book and the differences, advantages and disadvantages of both are explored and explained in ways which will support readers at both undergraduate and post-graduate levels. The structure of the book, in itself, is most supportive and considerate to its readers: a bonus for all those researching early childhood.

The book is bold and not afraid to cover difficult issues such as those involved in analysing and interpreting the data collected either through positivist or interpretivist methodologies whilst still putting young children at the heart of the process. In summary, this book is a model of clarity for all those involved, or intending to be involved, in early childhood research. I wholeheartedly commend it to those embarking upon, or wishing to extend their knowledge of, early childhood research.

*Professor Emeritus Janet Moyles
Early Years and Play Consultant*

KEY FOR ICONS

Chapter objectives



Case study



Reflection point



Research in focus



Glossary



Key points from the chapter



Further reading



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INTRODUCTION

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY 'RESEARCH'?

Research can sometimes appear daunting to a new researcher. We can recall a student telling us that the key difference between writing an essay and carrying out a piece of research is the 'venture into the unknown' or onus on the *student* to conduct the inquiry as opposed to having to write about the work of others. This, she suggested, was scary.

Yet we carry out research all the time. In reading this book you will have made the decision to do this based on a range of information; the recommendation of a tutor or student; a whim based on the cover of the book; or by thoroughly examining a range of research methods' texts in person. Similarly, when deciding what school to send their child to, parents might ask for the opinions of other families that use the school, they might visit the school themselves and talk to the staff and observe what happens on a typical day. Alternatively, they might prefer to examine what they view as more 'objective' evidence such as school league tables. These examples could be regarded as 'research' and demonstrate that we are being 'researchers' a lot of the time. Young children and babies are also carrying out 'research', it could be argued, when they explore the possibilities of a particular object using all of their senses. It would seem, then, that to answer the questions that we pose for ourselves it is necessary to collect information, analyse it and interpret it in some way (Kumar, 2005) and this is a process we engage in at different points and for a variety of reasons throughout our lives.

But there is a clear distinction between this kind of 'kitchen sink' research and academic research. To qualify as *academic* research, there needs to be an understanding of the paradigm and methodological approach that underpins the research. The terms 'paradigm' and 'methodology' are ones that you will come across throughout the book, but especially in Chapters 1 and 2, and relate to the philosophy that underpins the research and the rules associated with producing knowledge within that paradigm respectively. The researcher needs to be able to argue the position they take with regard to this as well as the methods chosen in order to undertake their research. This is because *academic* research is open to greater scrutiny. An example would be the need to subject research that is put forward for publication to a rigorous process of peer review (Kumar, 2005). 'Kitchen sink' research is not subject to such scrutiny. Decisions made in relation to academic research need to be justified carefully in the same way as one would draw upon published work to support the points made in an academic essay. This would not be required in less formal writing, such as a text sent to a friend, for instance. But we should remember that knowledge and skills in relation to *research*, like essay writing, are some-

thing that can be developed and improved upon.

The exact purpose of the research will determine the type of research study that is undertaken. Johnson and Christensen (2008) identify five different kinds of research undertaken with or about children: basic research, applied research, evaluation research, action research and orientational research. We will look at these briefly in turn:

1. **Basic research.** This is research that is aimed at finding out the fundamentals about scientific and human processes. In the sphere of early childhood there is much fundamental research being undertaken to discover underlying brain mechanisms. For example, in 2007 it was reported that Gallo et al. had discovered new information about processes involved in the repair of white matter in the brain. Gallo comments that 'By understanding the fundamental mechanisms of brain development, we get closer to finding clear instructions to repairing developmental brain disorders and injuries' (Darte, 2007: 1). Often it is not immediately apparent how the information discovered in basic research will help us in everyday life, but it is upon these fundamental discoveries that applied research is based, which can lead to advances in practical applications of basic knowledge.
2. **Applied research.** This is research that is focused on answering or finding solutions to 'real life' questions. Applied research may draw upon the findings of basic research to point the way to solutions. This is the type of research that early childhood practitioners and students of early childhood studies are most likely to be involved with.

Basic research and applied research can be considered to be two ends of a continuum, as often, research projects have elements of both, in varying proportions.

3. **Evaluation research.** This type of research, a form of applied research, is undertaken when a new intervention or project has been implemented and is designed to evaluate the effectiveness of the initiative. Evaluation research projects are often undertaken to see if the new programme should be rolled out for wider participation. There are many examples of evaluation studies in the field of early childhood, perhaps one of the largest being the ongoing evaluation study into the effectiveness of the Sure Start programme. The programme, started in 1999, aimed at giving children and families from deprived areas, intensive support in the children's earliest years. Although the programme has now evolved into the nationwide provision of children's centres, the evaluation programme continues. In 2008 the team reported positive effects for three-year-olds in the programme, who showed better social development and higher levels of social behaviour and independent self-regulation than children who were not part of a Sure Start scheme (NESS, 2008).
4. **Action research.** This is research based in the workplace, and is another example of applied research. It arises out of the identification of a problem or need within the workplace and the practitioners within the setting design and implement the research study. The objective is to arrive at a solution or intervention that can be implemented and evaluated by the staff team. Action research is looked at in more detail in Chapter 8 of this book.
5. **Oriental research (critical theory research).** This is research that aims to collect information to help strengthen the argument of those who wish to promote a particular ideology or political position, with the intention of improving society (Johnson and Christensen, 2008). Oriental researchers aim to promote the most disadvantaged sections of society and focus on social inequalities, and, therefore make their ideology (orientation) explicit.

AIMS AND SCOPE OF THIS BOOK

Our aims in writing this book are many. We hope that students who are new to early childhood research will learn about some of the main paradigms, methodologies and methods that are used in early childhood research. Of course many of these might relate to research in general, but our aim throughout is to write a research methods' text with *early childhood studies* at its heart.

Therefore, in recognition of the multidisciplinary nature of early childhood studies, we draw upon research from a variety of theoretical and professional fields. We will be looking at research from health studies, psychology, anthropological studies, education and such like. In doing this, we will be reflecting upon small-scale and large-scale studies as well as studies that are longitudinal or provide a snapshot of an issue. Some of the research we will be referring to may already be known to you, some is likely to be new to you. As previously noted, the guiding principle has been to include reference to research in the field of 'early childhood' or that has clear relevance to this area.

By 'early childhood research' we are referring to research that has been carried out with or about children from birth to eight years and related issues, such as those relating to practitioners that work with this age group or parents of children in this age group. As many of you are probably aware, some of the research that falls within the 'early childhood' umbrella might actually be carried out with adults, especially parents and practitioners rather than *directly* involving young children. In addition, as you will see in Part 3 of the book, early childhood research might involve looking at documents that are pertinent to the field, such as diaries and other forms of 'text'.

We hope that reading this book will equip you with some of the knowledge that will enable you to critique the research of others. In doing this, though, we wish to stress that no research lies outside the possibility of criticism. There are always possibilities and limitations with *any* research design and, as new researchers in particular, you should aim at being tentative and considered when critiquing the work of others as opposed to merely declaring them as 'wrong' or 'flawed' in some way. This is another skill to develop in becoming an early childhood researcher. You will notice that in this book, each chapter will outline the possibilities and limitations of the paradigm, methodology, approach or method discussed in the chapter. Sometimes this is in the form of a distinct section towards the end of the chapter, and on other occasions this discussion is threaded throughout the chapter.

Greig et al. (2007) point out that a key difference between training to be a professional, such as a teacher or nursery nurse, and learning how to be a researcher is that the trainee professional usually has an opportunity to observe the skills of other, more experienced practitioners. They also have an opportunity to reflect on their professional training experiences with other student practitioners and their lecturers at college. Such opportunities are often not replicated for the novice researcher. We hope that in this book, by reflecting upon early childhood research in our 'research in focus' sections and reading about the experiences of people who have embarked upon their own research projects in the 'case study' sections, you will be afforded such opportunities. Certainly the development of the 'Research Methods in Early Childhood' module on the degree course that we

are both involved in came about as a result of the need to support students in developing knowledge and skills in relation to research on the course, especially as they prepare for their final dissertations or projects.

HOW THE BOOK IS ORGANISED

The book is divided into four parts. At the beginning of the book we look at paradigms and principles that underpin early childhood research. We think about positivism and then the growth in interpretivist and post-structuralist research. Within these first two chapters we also discuss methodological approaches. We will show how the positivist paradigm has a tendency to employ a quantitative methodological approach, whereas the interpretivist and especially the post-structuralist paradigms tend to embrace a qualitative methodological approach. You will also find that we thread discussion about research paradigms and methodology throughout this book.

The third chapter focuses upon ethics and the fourth, listening to young children in research. These appear in the first part of the book owing to our belief that ethical principles should underpin any piece of research. We draw upon Lahman's (2008: 285) notion of the '*competent yet vulnerable child*' in Chapters 3 and 4 to highlight the way that one's view of the 'child' underpins a research project. By emphasising the child as *competent*, we wish to highlight the potential of seeing the child as a participant in research – as opposed to the object of research. By recognising the child as *vulnerable* we are highlighting the necessity of keeping the needs of young children firmly in mind when carrying out research. This is in recognition that research that directly involves very young children and babies, in particular, is likely to be different to research carried out with children of secondary school age, for instance. However, in saying this, we believe that *everyone* is vulnerable in some sense in research and it is important that researchers keep this in mind.

Part 2 of this book looks at some approaches that are used in early childhood research. We look at surveys, ethnography, case studies and action research. These approaches might draw upon a range of different methods and it is these 'tools' or methods of research that we discuss in Part 3 of the book. Here, we look at observation; interviewing; questionnaires; using documents and other visual 'texts'; journaling and creative methods for involving children in research.

The final part of this book, Part 4, outlines some of the key things someone new to early childhood research needs to know in relation to designing a small-scale research project, analysing data and writing up a piece of research. Chapter 17, which looks at analysing and presenting data is a lengthy chapter in comparison with others, owing to the volume of information we wished to cover. Part 4 also includes a chapter on writing a literature review as all research needs to position itself in relation to the research that has been carried out in a similar area or using a similar methodological approach previously – a key role for this chapter in a piece of written up research.

Inevitably, when writing a text such as this, decisions as to where to place different topics have sometimes been difficult to make. Other writers may have placed the chapter on research design at the beginning of the book, for instance. We decided to organise

the book in the way that we have so that the reader is introduced to some of the key ideas about paradigms, methodology and ethics early on in the book as they underpin research practice. The second part of the book, which looks at approaches such as surveys and action research, is located next because it seems to follow on logically and needs to be discussed before Part 3, which deals with specific research methods. We decided to position the chapters relating to designing, carrying out and writing up a research project in Part 4 of the book because we want the reader to draw upon the knowledge they have gained about early childhood research in order to support their decision-making.

We hope that as you read through the book you will have developed some understanding of paradigms, methodologies, principles, approaches to research as well as methods themselves that will help you in planning your own research project. The boxed research in focus sections, Case studies, Reflection points and Activities aim to encourage you to think further about a point that has been raised or provide an exemplar from a piece of published research or student project. Some of the activities will involve you in accessing particular websites. If these prove difficult to open, try shortening the web address to its main page. For example, if the British Psychological Society's code of conduct is difficult to access on the following website: (http://www.bps.org.uk/the-society/code-of-conduct/code-of-conduct_home.cfm), you could shorten the web address to <http://www.bps.org.uk> and carry out a search within their particular website. Occasionally you will see a word in **bold** and the symbol © in the margin. This tells you that this word is further explained in the glossary.

Finally, in reading this book, we hope that you will develop knowledge and skills in relation to *early childhood* research. We especially hope that you will have the confidence and enthusiasm to undertake your own piece of research, in an area that you feel *passionate* about. In doing this, whether you are carrying out research aiming at instigating a change in practice, developing a greater understanding of an issue or suchlike, you will be contributing to a body of knowledge that enriches our understandings of young children and the many factors that impact upon their lives.