Chapter 6

'Play&Talk: The Magic Cards of Foster Care': A Research Tool to Interview Children and Young People in Foster Care

Nuria Fuentes-Peláez, Gemma Crous and Judit Rabassa

Abstract

This chapter reflects on the use of interviews as a method of data collection with children and presents an innovative tool to encourage children and youth to express their views and opinions about different areas of their life, especially their experiences in foster care. The innovative tool presented is a gamified interview called 'Play&Talk: The Magic Cards of Foster Care'. The interview progresses through three levels based on the complexity of the topic to be discussed, and the children or young people decide which topics to discuss and in what order to discuss them. Seventeen children in non-kinship foster care participated for the first time in the Play&Talk interviews in a research context. Based on this experience, this chapter discusses ethical issues relevant to promoting children's expression and fully realising their right to be heard and express their opinions. The age of the children (6–11 and 12–17 years old) was considered in design and data collection. It conditioned how children received the research information, how they completed informed consent, the use of language, the selection of questions and feedback regarding the results. In addition, the chapter discusses how to involve children and youth in research and their relationship with researchers. This research tool is an example of how to offer children a more participatory role in research interviews and illustrates the importance of age-appropriate designs.

Keywords: Research tool; gamified interview; children's participation; foster care; play; data collection

Introduction

The adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child has opened a debate on the participation of children in the protection system, in both practice and research (Kiili & Moilanen, 2019). This debate has affected research with children in out-of-home care since the beginning of the last century and has greatly expanded the number of research studies that directly elicited the views and experiences of children and young people in foster care (Holland, 2009). This increase in research has consequently led to new discussions on how to involve children in research.

Children and young people from the childcare protection system follow a life path affected by traumatic experiences (e.g. abandonment, neglect, maltreatment). Because of these past experiences, it is difficult and delicate to talk about their life in foster care (Falch-Eriksen et al., 2021) due to their inability to trust and confide in adults, alongside the lack of tools and spaces among service providers to explore and evaluate children's experiences in foster care.

Exploring research tools to help children express their voices and opinions about their experiences in the child protection system in a participative, secure and trustful environment is one way of responding to children's and young people's participation rights. However, there is a gap in knowledge and tools that can help children with a foster care background express their feelings.

The game 'Play&Talk: The Magic Cards of Foster Care' (Fuentes-Peláez et al., 2021) that is presented in this chapter attempts to overcome this gap by transforming the classical interview method via play. The aim of the game is to guide an interview and facilitate communication with children and young people in foster care. The tool encourages children and young people to answer questions through play, promoting the creation of a safe space and encouraging communication about their general and specific experiences and emotions in foster care. For example, the tool proposes different topics to talk about such as their foster care environment, friends and classmates, teachers, biological family or even the emotions with which they struggle.

It is essential to address the competencies of researchers to talk to children, promote research with a child participation perspective and create a safe and positive experience. Kiili and Moilanen (2019) pointed to three key ideas: being clearer about the purpose of the research, allowing time to work on trust while preparing for research with children and paying attention to how to involve children in research and maintain safety in the process. Active listening should also be considered in this child participation approach to recognition. The Play&Talk game creates a safe and positive space for children in these varied ways.

The theoretical background of the tool relies on the idea that board games can be for fun and learning at the same time, so they are playful and also educative (Donovan, 2017). Therefore, board games can be a very powerful tool for researchers (Neag, 2019).

Neag (2019) presented a board game designed for research with unaccompanied refugee children. The author presented the game as 'a unique approach to interviewing that proved to be successful in gaining in-depth data. The research tool used (a board game) helped overcome some of the issues highlighted above by addressing the challenges of vulnerability, cultural differences and diverging world views through focusing on the universal language of "play"' (Neag, 2019, p. 255). The aim of Play&Talk is the same as Neag's game: to interview children and get in-depth data through play.

The theoretical background of the tool's content involves some of the application guidelines of the secure base model (Centre for Research on Children and Families, 2022). The secure base model, developed by Schofield and Beek (2014), presents a framework for building positive relationships and promoting security and resilience among children who have been placed out of the home. The secure base has its origins in attachment theory, and the model proposes five dimensions that should be considered to create a safe space: availability, or helping the child trust; sensitivity, or helping the child manage their feelings; acceptance, or building the child's self-esteem; cooperation, or helping the child feel effective; and membership, or helping the child belong (Schofield & Beek, 2014). If we consider these five dimensions from the perspective of research, when we want to promote children's participation, it is very important to build this environment of positive relationships and promote security. The five dimensions helped the creators of Play&Talk draft the first questions of the interview then transform them into a board game. The first draft considered aspects of the daily life of children in foster care, alongside aspects of these five dimensions that foster families might or might not build.

Objectives

This chapter has two objectives: (a) to present the development and outcomes of a tool designed for research with children and young people in foster care and (b) to reflect on the ethical questions that arise when conducting research with children from the child protection system.

The Play&Talk Game

Why?

The game has three objectives: (a) to create a playful and safe environment that makes it possible to delve into emotional issues, respecting participants' decisions about what they want to share; (b) to motivate children and young people to answer questions through play by promoting communication about their general and specific experiences and feelings during foster care and (c) to give children agency by encouraging their participation in choosing the topics that guide the conversation.

How Was the Game Designed?

Once we had the interview guide, we transformed it into a board game in which children take an active role by choosing the topics they want to talk about playfully. A group of adult experts on the topic of child abuse and neglect, with experience in interviewing children from the child protection system, designed the content. A professional graphic designer designed the board game and its cards.

The initial version of Play&Talk was tested and discussed with a 15-year-old girl who was not in foster care but had knowledge of being in foster care.

The pilot test was conducted in four phases. Phase 1 involved an explanation of the pilot experience and interview process. Once the girl agreed to participate, she received a detailed explanation about the board game and the aim of the tool. Phase 2 involved engaging in the Play&Talk game. This process took 1.5 hours. In Phase 3, the researcher sought suggestions and comments related to the content, process and design of the interview tool. Questions referenced: (a) the clarity of the interview questions; (b) the topics addressed, with a focus on adding more topics if needed or changing existing ones; (c) the importance and interest of the content; (d) the design of the tool and (e) the clarity of the instructions. Finally, in Phase 4, the participant suggested other modifications to the vocabulary and language used to make it clearer and more understandable according to the stakeholders' characteristics. For example, she suggested simplifying some vocabulary and making the game less formal, such as the use of the word 'happiness' instead of the word 'satisfaction'.

With the permission of the participant, the pilot experience was audio recorded. Considering the information from the pilot test, the research team discussed all suggestions according to the purpose and theoretical background of the study, then made modifications and additions to the interview tool. Improvements were incorporated in both the questions and the illustrative drawings.

Game Materials

The game consists of a box containing a board, one deck of 17 question cards for players from 6–11 years old, one deck of 19 question cards for players from 12 to 17 years old, three white wild cards and three tokens (see Fig. 6.1). Each card has a topic title and a small drawing on one side and questions on the other side.

The game needs a minimum of two players: a child or young person and an interviewer. No training is needed to use this tool. The instructions and main guidelines are written on the box that contains all the materials.

The two decks of questions are used based on the age of the player: 6–11 or 12–17 years old. Cards differ depending on age. To adapt the game to younger kids who might be less able focus their attention for a long time, the deck for children is shorter, contains two fewer cards than the other deck, every card has fewer questions and questions are simpler regarding vocabulary and content. For example, a card about the player's foster care family has two questions for children aged 6–11: 'Who are your foster family?' And 'Do you like living with your foster family?' In contrast, the same card in the deck for players aged 12–17 has

Fig. 6.1.   The Materials From the 'Play&Talk'.

four questions: 'Do you like being with your foster family?' 'Who do you consider part of your foster family?' 'What makes you feel part of your foster family?' and 'Do you think that you are important for your foster family?'

In each deck, cards are organised with three colours. Each colour represents a level. The first level, 'social and daily life', is yellow. The second level, 'emotions, living together, and communication', is green. The third level, 'foster care relationships', is blue. Each level corresponds in different depths of the player's life. See Table 6.1 for more details on the topics addressed in each deck of cards.

All materials of Play&Talk were designed only in the Catalan language, the official language in Catalonia (the region of Spain where the game was created). The questions noted before have been translated into English for this chapter.

Game Instructions

Play&Talk should be played in a space where the child or young person is likely to feel comfortable, to create a safe, trusting and stimulating space. Thus, Play&Talk can be played in the child's bedroom, living room, a park nearby or even the facilities of an institution that organises foster care and where social workers and other professionals work. Apart from the setting, it is important to adapt the time of the meeting to the children's and their family's convenience. The game should be played only with the child or young person, without their foster care family.

Table 6.1. Topics That Contain Each Deck of the Play&Talk Cards.

	Ages 6–11 and 12–17	Ages 12–17 Only
Level 1: Routine and everyday life	Day-to-day activities Rules School Social and school life Homework Leisure time activities	Teachers from school
Level 2: Emotions	Trust My emotions Expression of my emotions Self-esteem Communication Living together	Dealing with my emotions
Level 3: Foster care life	Foster care family Biological family Other family members Professionals from foster care team Me and foster care life	

This ensures that the participant gives sincere answers and is not biased by the presence of their family.

The game starts with the researcher (who assumes the role of a player while guiding the board game and interview) placing the board game on a table or the floor (depending on where the participant feels more comfortable sitting). The researcher chooses a deck of cards according to the age of the player, sorts the cards so that there are three piles according to the three colours (i.e. levels) and places them on the three rectangles marked on the board. Each rectangle is the same colour as the corresponding level.

The game starts with the stack that corresponds to the first level. The researcher distributes the cards on the table with the drawings and titles of the topics facing up and asks the player to choose one. The researcher turns it over, and then the researcher asks the questions on the back of the card by reading them out loud or the player does this if they prefer to read the questions instead of listening to them. Once the questions from one card have been answered, the researcher places the card back on the board in its corresponding rectangle. When all or most of the cards from the first level have been answered and the rectangle has been filled in, the child or young person can take one of the tokens and put in

the corresponding box on the board. The token has no implications. The only meaning is to signal to the child or young person that they finished this level. Not all the cards have to be played – at the beginning, it is important to make sure that the player understands that if they do not want to play a card, it is OK because no cards are compulsory. When the child puts the token in its place, it indicates that they finished this level, even if not all cards have been used.

The game continues with the second and third levels in the deck of cards, repeating the same process. The player can go through the three levels, using or playing as many cards as they want, or stop at any time.

In addition, three blank cards can be used in each level when the child or young person wants to talk about another topic that does not appear in the cards and is related to the current level. These cards are available on the table or floor, ready to be used if the child wants to talk about something else. For example, if a child wants to talk about their siblings and no questions have been asked about them, they can use a blank card and start talking about their siblings, then add the card to the corresponding level.

When a card has a picture of a paintbrush on the bottom left corner, it means that the player can choose to answer the questions with a drawing and explain it to the researcher or answer the questions verbally. Not all cards have this symbol; only those for which the research team felt a drawing could help the child express their thoughts. For example, the card about their foster family has a paintbrush because some children might find it easier to draw their family, then talk about their family members.

This game can be played many times with the same participant, because the answers may be different each time. A minimum of one week between games is recommended. The researcher can use the Play&Talk game and write down answers or record the conversation. However, the second option is encouraged, allowing the researcher to be more focused on the game and not writing down responses.

Researcher Role: From Interviewer to Gamer

Play&Talk proposes a different role for the researcher in the interview process. The role of the research interviewer shifts from what is expected in a traditional interview, where the interviewer seeks mainly to obtain answers to questions and elicit new questions. In this case, the role of the researcher is more like a gamer or conductor who facilitates the development of a conversation through play, rather than an interviewer who sticks to a predetermined script. There is no order for how the cards should be answered, nor an obligation to answer them all. So the researcher has to follow the lead of the player. This means that the researcher must have an open mind and let the conversation and game flow. When a child is not answering certain questions, that is an informative result. Different hypotheses about why players might not address certain questions or topics can arise: The topic might not be relevant for children, the topic might be difficult or taboo or maybe the topic was not properly understood. As in any participatory research

project, the researchers have to be ready for unexpected results, and when the research is guided by the child, we should respect their decisions.

At the beginning of the game, it is important that the researcher provides an introduction, recalls the information sent with the invitation to participate in the research and offers an opportunity to address doubts (for information and recommendations on how to recruit participants, see the following section). The researcher should explain the rules of the game and its development in a simple but clear way, emphasising how to participate or withdraw. In this context, the researcher is expected to both encourage the child's expression through the choice of cards and use active listening. The researcher must stimulate and encourage the child to choose the topics that motivate them, initiate conversations about these topics and respect their silences during conversation. However, it is not enough to ask the questions that appear on the cards. To promote the authentic 'child voice' (Lewis, 2010), it is important to know how to listen by making the play space safe so that the children do not keep silent about their thoughts or opinions. Nevertheless, offering them the opportunity to express themselves is not enough; as Lundy (2007) said, 'voice is not enough'. Active listening is necessary. In other words, the researcher must let the child know that they are being listened to and that the researcher is interested in what they have to say.

Who Played the Game for the First Time?

Play&Talk was tested for the first time in 2020 through the participation of 17 children placed in nonkinship foster care. Regarding the demographic characteristics of the participants, 64.71% ($n = 11$) were between 6 and 11 years old and 35.29% ($n = 6$) were between 12 and 17 years old; 52.94% ($n = 9$) were girls and 47.06% ($n = 8$) were boys. In addition, 65% of the children had contact with their biological family and 53% were in a long-term foster care placement (see Table 6.2).

The recruitment of participants was done through the institution responsible for foster care in Catalonia, Spain. The institution and its professionals who are in contact with foster care families and follow their progress reached out to potential participants. This process involved sending an infographic and video via email to the foster care families of children and young people. The information relayed the objective of the research, its importance, the methodology involved and why their participation is being sought. This information was adapted to be understandable to children. The video includes drawings and schematic information.

When foster care children and their families agreed to participate, interviews using Play&Talk were scheduled for a day and time that was convenient for them, and participants also selected the setting.

The game took between 30 and 80 minutes. The duration depended on the age of the child: Younger participants couldn't stay focused for a long time, so the game was shorter. All participants collaborated on the interview, answering as many questions as they wanted, and they were not forced to talk more about something or have their explanations cut short by the researcher. At the end of the

Table 6.2. Demographic Characteristics of Children and Youngsters in Nonkinship Foster Care Participating in Research.

Gender	Age	Contact With Biological Family	Type of Foster Care	Children Participants
Boys (*n* = 8)	6–11 (*n* = 6)	Yes (*n* = 3)	Short term (*n* = 2)	1 1
			Long term (*n* = 1)	1
		No (*n* = 3)	Short term (*n* = 1)	1
			Long term (*n* = 2)	1 1
	12–17 (*n* = 2)	Yes (*n* = 1) No (*n* = 1)	Long term (*n* = 2)	1 1
Girls (*n* = 9)	6–11 (*n* = 5)	Yes (*n* = 4)	Short term (*n* = 2)	1 1
			Long term (*n* = 2)	1 1
		No (*n* = 1)	Short term (*n* = 1)	1
	12–17 (*n* = 4)	Yes (*n* = 3)	Short term (*n* = 2)	1 1
			Long term (*n* = 1)	1
		No (*n* = 1)	Long term (*n* = 1)	1

interview, participants received a certificate to reinforce the meaning of their participation.

The results of the interviews conducted through the Play&Talk tool illustrate its research utility. Children and young people, through Play&Talk, explained very personal things and deep feelings. For example, on the card about their foster family, one question asks about feeling that they belong to their family. A 14-year-old boy said that his foster parents made him feel like part of the family. The interviewer asked him, 'What things do they do or say to make you feel that way?' He responded, 'They ask me to do things with them. They ask me how I am doing. My [biological] mother never did this before'. It seems like a simple answer, but without a safe space and trusting environment, he might not have shared these feelings.

At the end of the game, the researcher asked the participant if they liked the game. All participants said that they liked it; for example, a 16-year-old girl commented: 'Yes, I liked it. It has been entertaining'.

All interviews were audio recorded, with the prior permission of the participants, to be transcribed and analysed later. The transcriptions were sent to the participants who so wished (not to their caregivers nor professionals, respecting the principle of privacy). This action was meant to reinforce the meaning of the children's and young people's participation.

A few months after the interviews using Play&Talk, some results were presented in an online session open to the children, with whom their meaning was discussed. Results were presented with a very short and visual PowerPoint presentation. The slides contained mainly illustrations, along with some of the participants' quotes. Not all 17 participants could attend the presentation. They offered some comments about the results regarding the areas of their life addressed through the cards. For example, an 8-year-old girl said, 'We should stop being so much worried about the family that you were born with, because we are good with the family that we have now'. They did not comment on the game because it was not the aim of the presentation. However, the presentation was very useful to understand some comments that they made during Play&Talk that researchers did not understand at the time or later when analysing data.

Ethical Questions

Research with vulnerable groups raises ethical challenges (Von Benzon & van Blerk, 2017) that interconnect methodology and ethics to such an extent that both should be considered together (Kiili & Moilanen, 2019). From this premise, we asked ourselves: What ethical challenges are involved in exploring the experiences of children in foster care through research?

Understanding these challenges goes beyond methodology and requires contextualisation in the research process. We approached these ethical challenges from five premises. The first has to do with the meaning of the research for the participants, especially when dealing with children and young people in vulnerable situations. The fact that the participants found meaning through their participation is a basic axis of the ethical bases for the experience to be satisfactory. In line with this, different actions can be taken to reinforce the meaning of their participation: (a) approach the participants in advance and send them appropriate information in an adequate format before the interview; (b) return the transcripts of the interviews to the participants for review and (c) provide a certificate in recognition of their participation.

Closely related to these issues is the acceptance of the children and young people to participate in the research. The personal relationship that the social worker has with them is a facilitator to participate in child protection services (Van Bijleveld et al., 2015). Based on this premise, their professional or foster caregiver provided the recruitment information to the children and young people. With this information, the children or young people gave their assent to

participate in the research, along with consent from foster caregivers and the public institution responsible for guardianship.

The third principle has to do with the recognition of the child or young person as an active subject in the interview to minimise the researcher's dominance of the interaction (Lewis, 2010). This premise requires, on one hand, the flexibility of the researcher to adapt to the time and place where the game occurs. That is, the meetings were organised considering the time and place preferred by children and young people. On the other hand, the development of the game emphasised the importance of letting the child choose the topics and order, making it clear that there is no obligation to answer the questions and allowing them to decide when to end the interview.

Fourth, it has to do with creating a safe and trusting space that makes the encounter a positive and empowering experience. The age-appropriate design favours the creation of a trusting and safe space to talk with children about their foster care experiences. In this dimension, the preservation of confidentiality and anonymity also contributes to sharing experiences and through active listening, recognising them.

Finally, another sensitive issue in terms of ethics in research with children is the interpretation of their voices and silences (Lewis, 2010). The action of sending the transcripts to the participants and presenting and discussing the results with them after the analysis can help the researchers understand the results and correctly interpret the children's voices.

Implications and Conclusions

Many of the most important experiences in life occur through play. Play is a right of children and an engine of great learning by allowing the exploration of new paths and facilitating interaction in a particular setting. In addition, playing with children helps us better understand their world, logic and perceptions, so it seems suitable to include it as a methodology in research with participatory approaches. Therefore, continuing to explore the possibilities of bringing the concept of play into research holds great promise (Neag, 2019).

This process involves not only collecting voices or opinions but also inter-preting and disseminating these voices (Lewis, 2010). This leads us to the need to consider how to incorporate children and young people in the data analysis. Informative experiences such as that of Liebenberg et al. (2020) illuminate this process. This is the next step of this research project. In a prior study, we included participants in the discussion of the results. The participants contributed with their opinions through a session in which the results were presented. However, it would be interesting to include the participants in the process of data analysis, including choosing what and how data should be analysed.

As previously said, when using a game as a research tool, the researcher needs to take a different role. To develop this role, the researcher must engage skills that favour the creation of a safe, trusting and stimulating space so that the children and young people are encouraged to start the conversation and play. This is not

specific to children in foster care but holds true for all children. The researcher should interact with children with an attitude of being personal and representing an individual and not only a researcher (Eriksson & Näsma, 2012). However, it needs to be clear that the role of researchers is very different than the roles of therapists, advocates or social workers (as pointed out by Schelbe et al., 2015), who also might have contact with these children in foster care. The researcher is there to be empathic and listen actively while making sure that the participant knows the aim of the interview and the boundaries of the conversation. Further research and discussion are needed regarding how to achieve a positive and trusting relationship between children who have been exposed to violence and researchers, and under what conditions.

Acknowledgements

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