

Found in translation

Many marketers who are new to kids marketing think of kids as mini adults and aren't aware of their various developmental stages. Clients and agencies that understand kids developmentally in terms of how they process information have far fewer issues with creative and fewer reworks. In the next few pages I'll suggest ways that qualitative research can address how kids from 4 to 14 process information, giving examples from case studies, and suggest methodologies that work well for different developmental stages.

Shaping qualitative research to kids' thought processes doesn't mean dumbing down in detail or depth. Essentially we can ask kids all the questions we need to be able to achieve our research objectives, but we need to do it in concrete terms within a stimulus-driven format. Kids tend to think specifically, concretely and literally. Ask kids how they decide what they want, or if they have ever asked someone to buy something in a given category for them, and the abstract, general nature of the questions can leave them perplexed. Even asking why they think or feel a certain way can be risky; it's an abstract question, and they may not know the reason or even if there is a rational explanation. But translate these questions into concrete terms within a stimulus-driven format, and you can get full and detailed responses.

In focus groups with kids, you often need to shape your methods to fit their needs

In a recent toy study, for example, the clients needed to understand the motivations of 5-11-year-olds for wanting a certain kind of toy. Specifically they wanted to know:

- Category motivations: Thinking of a toy in this category, why do they want that? How did they decide they wanted that?
- What brand/type do they like best? Why?

The task was to recast these adult-style questions to register

with 5-11-year-olds. So for example:

To understand category toy motivations, we had the kids bring in their current category toys. The kids told us and showed us what they liked doing with the toys, likes/dislikes/suggestions about the toys and recalled the purchase dynamics around these toys from product awareness to purchase decision. By discussing the specific



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toys they owned and played with, they revealed sources of influence, nature of appeal, motivational triggers and purchase dynamics, as they could not have done with more general or hypothetical questions.

To understand meaningful attributes and brand equity, we then showed them a variety of brands and types of the product category (18 variations in all) and had them do a product sort as a group, based on their own agreed-upon criteria of importance; kids 10 and up also ranked the 18 variations from best to worst as a group, using their own criteria. This was followed by debrief and probing. By comparing and evaluating these specific stimuli, the kids revealed the most meaningful attributes and relative pull of brand. By using their own criteria, they positioned the products from their own perspective. Had we taken the more linear mode of questioning used with adults - e.g., what do you think of this packaging, what do you think of this color, etc. - we'd have gotten an abundance of data but probably missed the point. Leaving it up to them to sort the 18 varieties on their own terms, we could identify the cues that indicate fun and value to them, and which the client agency will now use in product positioning.

To understand the competitive value of the client's product, we gave the kids 15-20 minutes to play with the product in pairs. In this way we could determine where and how the product succeeded and failed to match with the meaningful motivations and attributes they had identified, as well as gain new insights. When we also compared play patterns across the different age groups, we could understand how we needed to position the product by age-appropriateness and identify product development opportunities reflecting the patterns of the different age groups.

Same focus

Concept testing is not recommend-

ed for kids younger than 7, and kids 7 and older need the same focus on specific stimulus in concept testing as in product testing. For example, it's helpful to give them a pre-assignment around the topic to get them thinking about its specific roles in their lives. In a project I worked on with WonderGroup, a Cincinnati-based kids marketing agency, the task was to help a retailer gain positioning as a fashion Mecca for tweens.

WonderGroup asked the tweens it recruited to wear their favorite outfits to the focus groups. Each of them explained what they liked about their outfit - from tops to pants to shoes to accessories - and these explanations, followed by probing, gave rich insight into the influences and motivations for being glad or proud to wear something. That was invaluable for positioning as well as merchandising. Allowing them to select what was important to them based on their own criteria got us directly to the point and informed the rest of the discussion.

Taken at face value

Kids tend to take value concepts literally - e.g., the proportion you depict graphically is the proportion they'll expect, and the hyperbolic adjective in copy is frequently taken at face value - but they can springboard from the literal stimuli to imagine any number of improvements and product variations. Working with Kellogg's, for example, the WonderGroup team gave the kids a competitor product and let them show us the ways they usually enjoy eating it. For 15 minutes, each kid played with the product, applied the toppings, took different size bites sometimes with and sometimes without sipping their beverage, and so on. The choices they lavished attention on, accompanied by answers to probes, revealed insight platforms that were valuable for positioning and product development, and also served as the basis for ideation.

As the above examples indicate, watching kids - what they wear, how they play, how they sort products, how they eat - is as informative as listening to what they say. Body language is also critical to understanding their responses. We need to watch their energy level to get the full measure of their response. Watching where the kids lavished attention on the product stimulus gave Kellogg's the direction it needed for competitive product development. Nestlé, which is also very shrewd in kids market research, focuses as much on how energetically kids respond to concepts as on their comments. The proposition that excites kids - or upsets them - can be more indicative of success or failure than discussion around likes and dislikes.

Along these lines, in a recent toy study for a client, the kids discussed their love of the product. Then we gave them the stimulus - a new version to try out - and watched what happened. One boy burst into tears because he couldn't figure it out, and two boys got into a fight over sharing the parts. Clearly the reaction to the stimulus was the better indicator of product acceptance than their verbal endorsement.

Concrete language

Because they typically think literally and concretely, kids can better respond to questions and probing if the language itself is very concrete (the same is true in quantitative research with kids). As mentioned earlier, asking for a rational motivation - e.g., why do you like that? - can be perplexing; but ask the question in descriptive terms - what do you like about that? - and the kids more easily grasp the question and answer accordingly. Ask a question without boundary - what could you do with this? - and they're confused because taking that question literally can lead to endless answers. But rephrase it in terms of everyday application - what would be good to do with this? - and they'll give their array of probable

Conceptual Language	Literal Language
Why? (e.g., why do you like that?)	What do you like about that? (descriptive)
Why is that better?	What makes that better? (descriptive)
What could you do with this?	What would be good to do with this? (probable applications)
Do these racing cars need something to indicate the winner or not?	If you're racing the rocket cars, how can you tell which car wins? (problem-solving an experience)
What do you think of this combination of ingredients?	Close your eyes and imagine that you have one of these. Chew it up. What does it feel like in your mouth? Taste like? (descriptive)

uses.

Here is a conceptual question that will engender a conceptual – hence potentially misleading – answer: “Do these racing cars need something to indicate the winner or not?” Answer: sure they do, and the indicator could be any number of things. Here’s a problem-solving, experiential question that will get a lot of energy around determining the best solution: “If you’re racing the rocket cars, how can you tell which car wins?”

Manage different stages

Marketing consultant Jeff Goldstein offers an example of needing to manage different stages of kids’ development: His client wanted to determine the product interest of 2–12-year-olds! The following methodology is an example of a cost-efficient solution to the goal.

- Under 4. Kids under 4 are typically reliable only for observational research. So we focused on age 4 and up – recruiting 4–12-year-olds and moms of 4–12-year-olds who also had 2–3-year-olds. The moms answered a pre-questionnaire that focused exclusively on their 2–3-year-olds, and in the moms focus groups, they spoke for all their kids.
- 4–6-year-olds. This age group works well in dyads with moms. An hour-long dyad is recommended, because the kids tend to lose focus after an hour. Their comfort level with mom encourages them to

open up, and mom can help interpret when the kids have trouble expressing themselves. By having the child speak in the first half of the dyad, it’s possible to largely eliminate mom’s biasing effect.

A variation of this is a one-hour minigroup of four participants – two mom-kid pairs – when the object is to understand how kids will play with the product. Let the kids talk with mom’s assistance as necessary, then let the kids play together, then everybody talks about the experience; kids first, then moms.

When moms are present for observational research, it’s helpful to give them observation cards to record their kids’ behavior while the children are using the stimulus. The moms can provide such useful data as the answers to the following, used recently regarding a toy set:

- What things specifically appeal to him in playing with this set?
- What things specifically don’t appeal to him?
 - Most engaging aspects
 - Ease of use for him: overall and specifically
 - Sources of confusion, difficulty for him
 - How play compares with his usual toy set play pattern
 - His overall interest level in this set
 - Other observations about his use of this set
- 7–11-year-olds. Kids as young as

7 are capable of focus groups. Kids 7–11 can be articulate and focused, provided they are segmented by gender and the groups are limited to a maximum of six kids; otherwise the distraction is too great. Likewise, the focus groups should not exceed 90 minutes – once you get past that amount of time, kids grow restless. Since kids tend to respect age hierarchies, it is important to separate the younger and older kids so that the little kids don’t feel inhibited by the older ones and the older ones don’t feel they’re being treated like little kids. Good groupings are 7–8-year-olds, 8–10-year-olds, 10–11-year-olds, and/or 11–12-year-olds. Poor groupings are 7–9-year-olds because of age differences and 10–12-year-olds because of the perceived social differences between a “mere child” and a pre-teen.

- 12–14-year-olds can be the bane of marketers because they love to pretend disinterest. But the truth is that they are very competitive and, if divided into teams, will work to outdo their opponents in articulateness, creativity, detail, etc., especially if a token prize is involved. It’s a win-win when young teens get to validate their capabilities through competition, and the research team gets a wealth of data in the process. Follow up the competitive sections with concrete, descriptive probing – even young teens are not yet ready for probes asking them to rationalize what they have revealed.

Big difference

Kids make purchase decisions about kid products and services, and it’s been estimated that kids also influence purchase decisions about family products and services in hundreds of categories. We know that understanding the consumer is the key to marketing strategy. Tapping into kids’ thought processes to understand their motivations and insights can make a big difference in creating effective marketing strategy for this important market. | Q