Photography

Photography is a non-verbal (visual) method - often combined with verbal elements - that allows children and young people to capture images and discuss them. Various approaches (e.g. photo-elicitation, participatory photography, photo-narratives, and photovoice) can help children and young people represent their experiences, generate conversation and inspire action.[42,66]

Photography approaches

- **Photo-elicitation** – Using photos to prompt discussion or reflection.
- **Participatory photography** – Capturing and sharing experiences or perspectives.
- **Photo-narratives** – Telling stories through images.
- **Photovoice** – Using photos to represent, analyse, and inspire action.

In all approaches, children and young people take photos and then discuss their meaning.

The benefits of using photography

- **Visual expression:** Photography can supplement or replace verbal/written methods, offering a fresh perspective on children's experiences.[66]
- **Engagement:** Photography can be more engaging than interviews or surveys, especially for those reluctant or unable to communicate verbally or in writing.[67]
- **Inclusivity:** Many children and young people are comfortable with cameras and taking photos, making photography an easy-to-use method that also can give them agency over what they want to communicate.[68]

Photovoice

'Photovoice is a participatory photography method that seeks to empower people to share their experiences through digital storytelling.' [69]

'[Photovoice] involves participants taking photos guided by a research question, which are then used to help them reflect upon and explore the reasons, emotions and experiences that have guided their chosen images.' [58,25]

The benefits of using photovoice

Photovoice has been used successfully with young children and young people who find it easier to express themselves through visual images. Importantly, images captured through photography can then be used as a basis for further discussion and sense-making. [25]

The common use of personal smartphones with camera capabilities means barriers to engagement with this method are low. Reliance on participants' personal smartphones for photovoice research can also help reduce the project cost of resourcing cameras.

Keep in mind

- Images alone do not convey meaning. Understanding a photograph requires context, explanation, and joint sense-making with the child or young person who captured it. Providing opportunities for them to explain their images is essential for accurate interpretation. [33,42,68]
- Children and young people's level of interest, confidence and skill in photography will vary and will need to be accommodated. [42]
- Consider what photography can and cannot capture and whether it aligns with your research or project goals. [68]
- Consider image quality, cost, and ease of use when selecting a camera, iPad, or other devices. [68]

Planning considerations

- **Equipment:** What cameras, devices or equipment will you need?
- **Time:** The time required for the project will be affected by its scope, the number of children, the location, the age of participants and preparation and planning needs.
- **Setting:** Where will you engage children/ young people? (in-person; online?)
- **Power balance:** Interpretation and sense-making also ought to consider how other factors like adult-child power imbalances, imposed conditions, context, and broader social/cultural phenomena may influence the process of children and young people taking photos and the resulting images. [68]

When using photography with children and young people, it is important to consider the following ethical requirements.

- **Additional consent requirements:** Do you have consent from other people featured in images or in settings such as private homes or health care services? This may be required if you plan to publish, display or share images publicly. [68]

- **Ownership and copyright:** The rights of photographs taken as part of your project ought to be considered and communicated to participants when obtaining consent.[42,68]
- Balance the child or young person's anonymity and privacy with their preferences for recognition.[42]

See the Consent section for considerations around sharing photographs.

Tips for conducting a photo activity

Before beginning: Talk to the child or young person about any limitations to what can be photographed.

Interpreting the photographs should be undertaken with the children and young people who captured them, to ensure their intended meaning is triangulated and understood accurately.

This can be done by:
- 'captioning', whereby children/young people write a short explanation to accompany the image as they are taken[68]
- engaging them in follow-up verbal discussion via interview so that they can explain their images to the researcher [68]
- Consider how to focus on the meaning of the images and what they represent to the photographer regardless of their aesthetic quality.[2]

By empowering children and young people to capture and interpret their surroundings, photography offers a powerful means of visual storytelling. When done ethically and collaboratively, it can deepen engagement, amplify marginalised voices and stimulate meaningful dialogue and action.

Resources and publications

Photovoice Toolkit | Centre for Society and Mental Health.
A guide to understanding and applying photovoice, including instructional videos.

A Practical Guide to Photovoice | Prairie Women's Health Centre of Excellence.
A step-by-step guide on using photovoice to share stories and drive community change.

A Beginner's Guide to Photovoice Research | indeemo.
An overview of the photovoice methodology in blog format.

See It Our Way | BetterEvaluation Resource Library.
A resource for organisations using participatory photography (photovoice) to advocate for marginalised communities.

A 10-Year Systematic Review of Photovoice Projects With Youth in the United States | Fountain et al. (2021).
A comprehensive review of photovoice projects involving young people across the U.S. over a decade.

A Systematic Methods Review of Photovoice Research with Indigenous Young People | Anderson (2023).
An analysis of methodologies used in photovoice research with Indigenous youth.

How to Involve Young Children in a Photovoice Project. Experiences and Results | Butschi & Hedderich (2021).
Insights and findings from experiences engaging young children in photovoice research.

Whose Voice is It Really? Ethics of Photovoice With Children in Health Promotion | Abma et al (2022).
A discussion on ethical considerations when using photovoice with children in health-related research.

Applying the photovoice method with adolescents in mining areas in rural Mozambique: critical reflections and lessons learned | Cambaco et al. (2024).

Reflections and lessons learned from using photovoice with adolescents in mining communities in Mozambique.

Better Start Report | Centre for Community Child Health & Better Health Network.

A report exploring the experiences of mothers in high-rise public housing using the photovoice methodology.