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# Reflecting on rapport: strategies for online interviews about sensitive or distressing topics with vulnerable children

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## ABSTRACT

Establishing and building rapport is a crucial aspect of research interviews with children and families. With interviews increasingly conducted via online platforms, such as Teams and Zoom, researchers are challenged to reflect on relational aspects, such as building rapport, when using this medium and how approaches may need to be nuanced. This is of particular significance when the topic of the interview is potentially sensitive or may cause distress to a child. This paper builds on the CHE (Connectivity, Humanness, Empathy) principles for building rapport and trust in face-to-face by extending these principles to the phenomenon of online interviews with children on sensitive or distressing topics. It draws on an investigation into the experiences of children with dyslexia to illustrate the value of employing the CHE principles and a range of strategies to reduce potential vulnerability or levels of anxiety of participants. The examples provided illustrate how research via online interviews with children on sensitive or distressing topics in an online environment need not detract from the researcher's ability to build trust create and an empathetic rapport.

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## KEYWORDS

Online interviews; rapport; vulnerability; interviewing children

## Introduction

Building rapport in qualitative interviews is considered an integral aspect of qualitative research, as rapport helps participants to share a rich and detailed account of the phenomenon being researched (Clarke 2006, McGrath *et al.* 2019). As such, it is important to give attention to strategies that will help facilitate the building of rapport in both the preparation of the interviews (McGrath *et al.* 2019) and throughout the duration of the interview (Zhang and Okazawa 2022). While a consistent definition of 'rapport' is somewhat elusive in the research context (Saywitz *et al.* 2015), there is consensus that rapport is an important element of the relationship between researcher and participant. Further, rapport requires intentionality to develop (Gabbert *et al.* 2021) and efforts to create an environment where participants feel comfortable and safe (Tiidenberg 2020). For the purpose of this paper, rapport is defined as a harmonious connection between the researcher and the participant that allows for a working relationship in research (Weller 2017) and minimizes the potential for harm or distress (Tiidenberg 2020). Zhang and Okazawa (2022) state that as rapport-building is a methodological concept that requires actions on the part of the researcher, further exploration of rapport is needed to better understand the practices that help to achieve rapport in research interviews.

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Interviews are considered to be one of the most commonly used tools in qualitative research (Myers and Newman 2007, Gruber *et al.* 2021, Oliffe *et al.* 2021) due to the rich data related to insights into the experiences of others that interviews afford. However, without adequate rapport between the researcher and participants, interviews may not be as effective, potentially even leading to being exploitative or harmful to participants, especially those who may be particularly more susceptible to harm (Clarke 2006). In instances such as these, or where a research topic may be particularly personal or sensitive, a participant may be placed in a position of vulnerability when they are invited to speak on topics that elicit a strong emotional response. Thus, the potential vulnerability of child participants is not considered an inherent character trait of the child, but as a result of the nature of the interview topic (Sin 2018, van den Hoonaard 2018). In these cases, it is vital that researchers carefully conceptualize approaches that not only adhere to ethical considerations but move beyond this to strategies of rapport-building that presume competence (Palaiologou and Brown 2023), respects agency (O'Reilly and Parker 2014), affords children the opportunity to have their voice fully heard (Goodley and Runswick-Cole 2012, Skyrme and Woods 2018), and reduces any potential harm (Davidson 2017).

This paper draws from a research project conducted by Author 1, as part of her Doctoral research, which asked *What interpersonal and systemic barriers to positive interactions are perceived as negative by dyslexic children and their parents in the school context?*. The project focused on seeking insights into the experiences of children with dyslexia and their parents in Australia, using online semi-structured interviews. As a consequence of the sensitive and potentially distressing nature of the research, the research question led the authors to be curious about building rapport in online settings when the interview topic is sensitive. In Author 1's study, methodological consideration was given to conducting online interviews, with particular attention and reflection focused on conducting these interviews in ways that were ethical and empathetic and with the intent of building build positive regard and rapport with the participants. These considerations were informed by and drew upon the three methodological principles of CHE (Connectivity, Humanness, and Empathy), initially proposed by Brown and Danaher (2019) as a guiding framework to support decision-making and action for rapport-building and positive and respectful relationships with participants.

This paper builds on this initial work by offering methodological considerations, particularly in relation to: i) interviewing children within an online environment; and ii) interviewing children where topics being explored may be of a sensitive or potentially distressing nature. We start by reviewing the relational elements of interviewing with nuanced consideration given to online interviews with children and distressing or sensitive interview topics. Details are then shared related to strategies employed by Author 1 for designing and implementing online interviews for this project, where the nature of the topic had the potential to place the participants in a vulnerable position. Next, the discussion addresses the findings from the implementation of this approach to interviewing, framed by the concepts of CHE: Connectivity, Humanness and Empathy (Brown and Danaher 2019). The paper concludes by addressing the implications of this work for future research practice, where the employment of specific strategies had the potential to support others who may be considering interviews with participants within an online space or where consideration needs to be given to ways of building rapport and trust in efforts to reduce potential vulnerability or levels of anxiety in research participants.

### **Relational elements of interviews with children – building trust and rapport**

Trust and rapport are intertwined relational dimensions of qualitative interviews, with rapport enhancing trust (Weller 2017). In their review of the literature on interview practices with young children (5-12 year-olds), Irwin and Johnson (2005) spoke about how children do not build rapport in the same way adults do, in part because of a natural lack of trust and inherent wariness of strange adults. They expounded the virtue of taking time to build rapport with children prior to undertaking the interview as a means of enhancing the relationship and ensuring rich data is collected. Like the review by Saywitz *et al.* (2015), Irwin and Johnson's (2005) review focussed on face-to-face

interviews, leaving room to explore ways of ‘taking time’ to build rapport and trust with children in an online environment.

Pragmatic considerations for rapport-building with children in research interviews include the skill set of the researcher/s and targeted strategies to ensure rapport is built and maintained. An examination of rapport, in contexts such as therapy sessions or investigative interviews, by Gabbert *et al.* (2021) identified specific interviewer behaviours that are used to build rapport. These included verbal behaviours of active listening, showing personal interest, personal disclosures, empathetic responses, tone of voice and using the participant’s name, as well as non-verbal behaviours such as smiling, open body language, head nodding and smiling. While these skills may seemingly appear to be of common sense to most researchers, Gabbert *et al.* (2021) pointed out that simple strategies such as these need to be considered in light of any power differentials between the researcher and the participants, such as when interviewing children. This invites further investigation of rapport-building behaviours in research interviews in specific contexts, such as online interviews, and with specific participant groups, such as children with disabilities like dyslexia.

### ***Nuanced considerations for online interviews with children***

Current research recognizes children’s digital literacy as an established aspect of their daily lived experience (Bennett *et al.* 2016). With the increased use of online platforms for research in a post-Covid world (Thunberg and Arnell 2022), attention is turning to how online interviews are increasingly comparable to face-to-face interviews (Jenner and Myers 2019). There are, however, continued concerns around children’s safe use of the internet (De Kimpe *et al.* 2019) and recognition of the strong ethical and practical considerations for interviewing children and rapport-building in online contexts (O’Reilly and Dogra 2017). One such consideration is the way researchers invite children to engage online with the researcher, who is essentially a stranger in an online setting, which is in contrast to messages of cyber safety and stranger danger espoused by parents and schools (Muir and Joinson 2020). This consideration highlights the seemingly contradictory and abstract and complex nature of conducting research interviews with children online.

While there are many studies utilizing online interviewing with children and young people, in a recent scoping review by Thunberg and Arnell (2022) of 29 studies using online interviews, the authors found that there was very little research into specific strategies to support the use of online interviews as a methodological choice for researching with children. They found that while online interviews can be as effective as face-to-face interviews, it is still a relatively new medium for conducting research and guidelines for interacting in online interviews have not yet been established. This suggests a need for greater illustration of specific strategies regarding the use of online interviewing with children to enhance rapport-building and help children feel empowered through the data collection process (Whale 2017).

### ***Interviewing sensitive or distressing topics***

Online interviewing of children about highly emotive topics is not uncommon in research (Huang *et al.* 2016, Brown *et al.* 2021), and is necessary in order to draw on the child’s subjective experience of events and respect children’s ability to be experts and agents in their own lives (Webber 2020). Online interviewing as a mode of interviewing is often favoured in these situations because of the protection it affords the children, including reducing the anxiety children might feel around being interviewed by a stranger in an unfamiliar place (Webber 2020, Brown *et al.* 2021). In their scoping review on online interviewing with children, Thunberg and Arnell (2022) concurred that online interviews can be a useful methodological choice for researching sensitive or distressing topics and/or working with vulnerable participants. They suggested that rapport can easily be developed in online settings, though it may take more time to do so than in face-to-face settings.

Interviewing on sensitive topics should not preclude those who are potentially made vulnerable by the topic being investigated. The seminal works on interviewing sensitive or distressing topics come from Lee and Renzetti (1990) and Corbin and Morse (2003). These authors made the point that while any topic can evoke an emotional response, sensitive or distressing topics are defined as those that are potentially threatening to those participating in the research or the researcher (Lee and Renzetti 1990, p. 2) and that involve the potential for psychological harm that goes beyond 'everyday life risks' (Corbin and Morse 2003, p. 336 & 51).

At the same time, others (Skyrme and Woods 2018, Moore 2019) are concerned that protecting children from harm in research may lead to them being silenced and excluded from research or that presuming vulnerability perpetuates a deficit model of childhood (van den Hoonaard 2018). In their exploration of ways to enhance research engagement with groups who have potential vulnerability, Stafford (2017) discussed how ableist or adultist/ageist attitudes towards children may hinder opportunities to have their voices heard on distressing topics, essentially silencing them. They highlighted how researchers need to employ participatory methodologies to ensure that children are both protected from harm whilst being given opportunities to include their voices in educational research. Given the importance of giving children a voice in research (Messiou 2006), frameworks and principles for building trust and rapport can be invaluable support to researchers.

### **CHE principles**

The CHE principles were first espoused by Brown and Danaher (2019) as part of their reflection on their own research with families and children. The authors sought to help participants feel at ease with and empowered by the data-gathering process through the creation of a strong rapport between the researcher and participants. Of the three principles, Connectivity 'shortens the distance' (p. 81) between the researcher and the participants by building rapport and trust. The second principle, Humanness, refers to the reciprocity of the relationship and the equity of power between all stakeholders, reflecting a social-constructivist epistemology. The third and final CHE principle of Empathy aligns with a strengths-based axiology that values the participant's contributions and acknowledges the participants' agency and the value in the participants' knowledge. Brown and Danaher (2019) reinforce that consideration needs to be given to the comfort of the participant by creating an emotional connection, or rapport, with them.

The CHE principles (Brown and Danaher 2019) are a useful methodological guide to facilitate data collection, particularly through interviews. Combined, the CHE principles provide a framework through which researchers can seek to incorporate strategies to enhance productive research relationships throughout the interview process. However, while Brown and Danaher (2019) offered a robust framework for educational researchers to guide decision-making regarding the interview process in face-to-face settings, there is yet to be a review of the transference of the CHE principles to the online mode of interviewing. Further, much of the research that cites the Brown and Danaher (2019) article does so to describe their use of semi-structured interviews (Alzaharani and Nor 2021, Asih and Alief 2022, Carter and Buchanan 2022, Hunt *et al.* 2022, Maitland and Glazzard 2022, Fusco *et al.* 2023), or their methodology in general (Smith 2021, Jakavonytė-Staškuvienė and Ignatavičiūtė 2022, Wepener 2022), with some discussing the building of rapport (Shafi 2020, Noreiga 2022, Zubala *et al.* 2022).

The CHE principles have been referred to in research where the adolescent participants were considered vulnerable or marginalized (Shafi 2020), or in researching topics that might place adults in a vulnerable position (Maitland and Glazzard 2022), such as discussion about their mental health. The principles have also been used in research with children, where the children have been conceptualized as vulnerable (Smith 2021, Symington 2022). However, as yet, there is limited evidence of the CHE principles being employed or referred to in investigations where the research topics were of a sensitive nature, placed children in a vulnerable position. Additionally, the CHE principles have been used in face-to-face interviewing (Noreiga 2022, Wepener 2022, Gunawan *et al.* 2023) and

online interviewing (Deeley 2021, Roehl and Harland 2022, Zubala *et al.* 2022), however, their application to sensitive interview topics with children has yet to be reported. The current literature is yet to critically review or build upon the principles in circumstances where children are placed in a vulnerable position, such as in circumstances when the interview topic is potentially sensitive or distressing.

## Designing and implementing the online interviews using the CHE framework

This paper reports on the approach taken by the first author to the interviewing of 10 children with dyslexia and their parents about their experiences within the education context that they perceived as negative. This study was granted ethics approval by The University of Southern Queensland Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval number H22REA102). Recruitment was done via social media support groups for Australians with dyslexia and their families. A total of 10 children, ranging from 8 to 12 years old were interviewed. While participants were offered the choice of in-person or online interviews, all chose to connect online using the Zoom platform. Zoom is an online video conferencing software application that allows researchers to connect with participants who may not be geographically close (Zoom Video Communications Inc 2016). Once voluntary consent from parents and assent from children was provided, a time was negotiated to speak directly to potential participants to verbally explain the project, answer any initial questions and agree on an interview time.

Participants were asked to participate in two sessions as part of the project, and these were conducted from August to November of 2022. The first session was called a rapport-building session and was explained to parents as a *meet and greet*. This first session allowed for the additional time it can take to build rapport in the online setting (Thunberg and Arnell 2022). While the concept of rapport wasn't explicitly discussed, it was described as an opportunity for everyone to become familiar with each other in order to feel more comfortable during the formal interview. No questions about digital literacy were explicitly asked prior to the rapport-building session, as there was an assumption of competency based on the participants' choice to use Zoom rather than undertake face-to-face interviews. It was observed that during conversations in the rapport session and at the beginning of the interview, participants disclosed the type of device they were using and whether it was a personal or work/school-related device. The readiness of all participants to choose to undertake the interview via Zoom suggests a level of competency and familiarity with the platform from the participants.

The second session was the semi-structured interview which lasted between 17 and 51 min. Given the nature of the research question *What interpersonal and systemic barriers to positive interactions are perceived as negative by dyslexic children and their parents in the school context?*, the potential vulnerability of the participants and the possibility of eliciting strong emotional responses were considered. This potential was confirmed when a number of parents who expressed interest in the project withdrew prior to signing consent because they did not want their child to have to relive negative experiences.

Parents and children were asked to reach a consensus between them on who would be present when each was interviewed. They could choose to be interviewed as a pair, or separately, or in a combination of both. For example, a parent may have chosen to be interviewed with or without their child present. Likewise, the child could choose to have their parent present during the interview or to be interviewed without their parent present (they remained close by, usually in an adjacent room). While participants were encouraged to have these discussions prior to the interview, at the beginning of each interview it was discussed again, and the children were observed to assent to the choice made. The methodological choices described below were made to achieve a sense of CHE (Brown and Danaher 2019), develop rapport (Gripton and Vincent 2021) and attune to the children being interviewed. The remainder of this article will explore specific strategies that were employed throughout the recruitment and interview stages of an inquiry conducted by Author 1, where efforts focused on maximizing rapport and connection with participants as part of the interview process for the study.



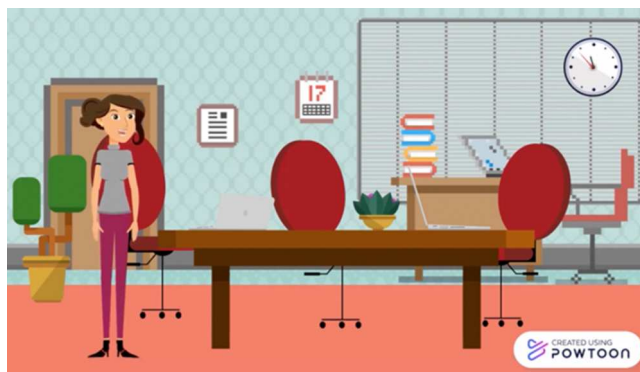
### **Connectivity through the use of zoom**

The CHE principle of Connectivity relates to the initial phase of recruiting, getting to know the participants in a study and maintaining a connection during the interview process itself (Brown and Danaher 2019). Researchers and participants alike can benefit from building a sense of attentiveness to and appreciation of each other. Connection and attentiveness to the children in this study and to their specific needs were apparent in the way informed consent was obtained. As children were seen as active agents in their own decision-making, assent was sought from them in addition to consent from their parents (Bourke and Loveridge 2014, Huang *et al.* 2016). Taking into consideration the literacy difficulties that children with dyslexia would likely face, a simplified children's assent form incorporated graphics and imagery to help convey the *who, what, how and why* of the research project. This was designed to allow the children to feel as though they were equal in status and that their developmental and literacy needs were of importance to the researcher.

Brown and Danaher (2019) provided considered examples for achieving Connectivity in face-to-face settings that are largely transferable to an online context. Strategies such as providing consent forms tailored to support literacy difficulties and creating a developmentally appropriate cartoon to explain the research demonstrate that the CHE principles extend beyond face-to-face interviews and help to reduce potential harm by emphasizing the child's agency and voice in participating in the research. Further to this, the CHE principles also guide the development of strategies that are unique within the online interview. For example, the use of Zoom backgrounds to help create connection is a strategy that is influenced by the CHE principles but is distinctive because of the specific application to the online setting.

The first point of connection with participants was dedicated to rapport-building and getting to know one another, where efforts focused on enhancing the comfort level of participants, sharing information and background on the project, and creating a harmonious research relationship (Irwin and Johnson 2005, Weller 2017). To add a bit of 'humour' to sharing the background of the study during the first session, the author created and shared a cartoon as a mode of 'infotainment' that would be familiar to and developmentally appropriate for the children. Figures 1–4 show stills from the cartoon. The use of the cartoon ensured the children had the opportunity to provide informed assent to participation and helped to prevent parents from acting as gatekeepers or making decisions on behalf of their child (Bourke and Loveridge 2014, Gray *et al.* 2020), further reinforcing the child's agency (Punch 2002). The attentiveness to the specific needs of the children, including respect for their agency and capacity, using a cartoon to explain the project, and employing humour, created the desired Connectivity between the researcher and the children.

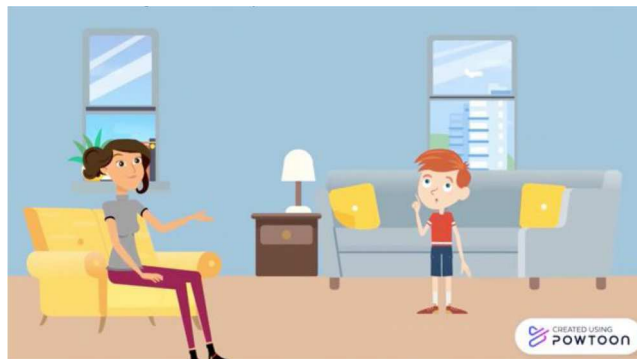
Another strategy for Connectivity that was made possible through the use of Zoom, was to give a significant level of choice and control to the participants over when, where and how the interviews



**Figure 1.** Introduction. Description: A cartoon image of the researcher stands to the left of a table. There are three office chairs around the table.

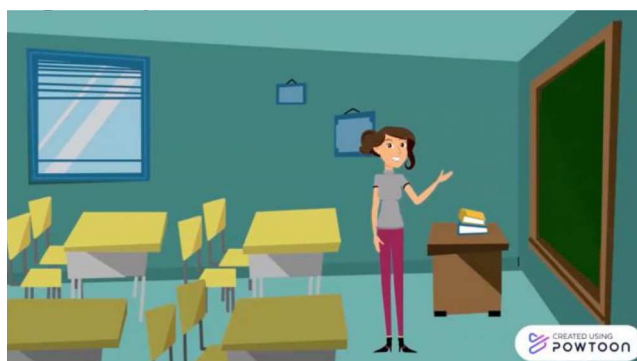


**Figure 2.** Explaining Choice and Control. Description: The researcher is standing in the middle of a grassy field. To her right is a desk with a chair and a laptop indicating interviews could be conducted online. To her left is a house, indicating interviews could be conducted in their home.



**Figure 3.** Discussing Privacy. Description: The researcher sits to the left of the screen in an armchair while the child stands in front of a couch. The child is thinking about something.

would be conducted. Connectivity with the children was initially established by reinforcing to children that their opinions and lived experiences were valued and that their needs during the interviews were respected (Kim 2014). While most participants opted to undertake the online interviews at home, these were conducted in different places within the home (parent’s bedroom, child’s bedroom, kitchen, study, dining room).



**Figure 4.** Explaining Dissent. Description: The researcher stands at the front of the classroom. To her left is a blackboard and to her right are student desks and chairs.



The other aspect of the interviews that the participants were given control over was who would be present while each interview was conducted. This strategy is recognized by Webber (2020) as giving the child–parent dyad choice and control over the privacy of their data and creating a sense of connection with the researcher. The same number of children chose to have their parent present ( $n=5$ ) as those who undertook the interview on their own ( $n=5$ ). Interestingly, both options have benefits and drawbacks. For example, the child may feel they need their parent present to support them, or the parent can sometimes act as a pseudo-interviewer, rephrasing questions and eliciting responses from the child. This can, however, lead to difficulties when parents lead the questioning or provide answers on behalf of their children, resulting in data collection that does not respect the agency of the child (Webber 2020). In this study, there were times that parents did facilitate the conversation in a positive manner such as:

R: What don't you like?

C9: Lots of things

P9: Can you explain it a bit more?

C9: I don't know what to say

P9: Maybe you can think of an example.

And

C10: Yeah. But that's from CRTs and stuff.

R: Oh, what are CRTs?

P10: It stands for classification relief teacher. It's like a what do you call them? Affiliated with the teachers away.

R: In Queensland, we call them DRT.

There were times, however when the parent may have made leading statements or questions. For example:

R: ... what does a bad response look like?

C2: He just says the same thing. He just goes ... .He starts again. And then just goes off and goes to another one.

P2: Or tells you sometimes that you're not listening.

One innovative way of creating connection with the children, was to ask the parents prior to the rapport-building session about the interests and hobbies of their child. An image related to the child's interests was then utilized as the Zoom background to help establish an initial point of discussion and to help the children feel at ease. For example, to accommodate the interests of two children had for soccer, backgrounds that included Australian male and female soccer teams were chosen respectively. In another instance, one child liked the singer P!nk, so backgrounds of her in concert were chosen. At the commencement of the interviews, the researcher explained their choice of background, underscoring the value placed on the child as the participant, as can be seen in the following interview excerpts:

R: C5 you are the most important person in all of this for research. And so, like I said, when we met the first time, you're the boss and the Zoom background is here to help make you feel comfortable.

These strategies of simplified and accessible assent materials, prioritizing choice and control of interview specifics, and utilizing the Zoom backgrounds, were deliberate methodological choices made by the first author. They were employed to enhance the Connectivity with child participants, which in turn helped put them at ease throughout the interview process, privilege their role in the research, and demonstrate the authenticity of the researcher-participant relationship.

This sense of connection and closeness to the participants was a key methodological consideration (Zhang and Okazawa 2022).

### **Humanness when researching with children**

The second CHE principle, that of Humanness, guides researchers to view the relationship between themselves and their participants as a reciprocal and bi-directional relationship, rather than one where the researcher takes and the participants give (Brown and Danaher 2019). A key aspect of Humanness evidenced in Author 1's study was made possible by the lead researcher and interviewer's position and membership within the dyslexic community being researched. According to Ellard-Gray *et al.* (2015), membership within the community allows a researcher to build trust and act on barriers that impact the vulnerability of the participants. This aspect of the researcher's humanness was disclosed during recruitment, the rapport-building session, as well as again during the interview, using the Johari Window to build the humanness of the researcher (Gabbert *et al.* 2021). It was thus both a direct rapport-building mechanism with the children but also an indirect mechanism when rapport was built with the parents. Ultimately, embracing a humanistic approach to rapport-building allowed the children to feel safe and comfortable, thus reducing their potential vulnerability given the research topic that was being discussed and explored.

The Humanness of the participants, namely allowing the children to *be children*, was also of importance to the methodology. One strategy to support the Humanness of the children was to allow, and at times encourage, the use of movement or toys/tools by the children. Encouraging children to draw pictures or hold toys or fidgets while being interviewed provided the children with permission to self-regulate while navigating strong emotions and telling their story (Geldard *et al.* 2017) and was easily achievable in an online context. This strategy also helped the children to maintain their interest, as well as comfort level while engaged in the interview (Cohen *et al.* 2017), and thus reduce the potential for the questioning to evoke heightened emotions or distress. Further to this, the use of tools reduced the formality and provided a child-centred approach for the sharing of experiences, which may have potentially seemed complex and abstract (O'Reilly and Parker 2014, Geldard *et al.* 2017). Examples of this include chewing gum, spinning or rocking on their chair, doodling, or using fidget toys. These types of techniques also evidenced the transferability and nuanced ways in which the CHE principle of Humanness can be applied both in face-to-face, but also online contexts.

R: (Speaking to C2) Okay. Remember that you're the boss here. So if you want to stop at any time or you need to go get a drink if you want to play with some fidgets on the desk, that's absolutely up to you. And you're allowed to do what makes you feel comfortable while we chat.

One parent pre-empted this by providing their child with drawing materials.

P4: I'm going to step around the corner and continue cooking dinner. I'll leave you for good. There's a pen and paper there if you want to do some doodling while you're talking.

Two children even mentioned how drawing or doodling helped to relieve stress or help them to focus:

C4: Yeah, it's like a stress reliever, really. Because sometimes I'm like not allowed to have, like, my art book next to me, or doodle in books, so I just doodle on myself.

And

C8: When I'm drawing, sometimes I am actually focusing on the lesson. And if I'm doing something else, I can hear exactly what they're doing.

The disclosure from two of the children stating how important the strategy of drawing or doodling was to them only serves to reinforce the use of toys/tools and drawing as a strong methodological choice for online interviews with children.

Methodological choices that target both the researcher and the children allow Humanness to be realized. Creating a reciprocal sharing of information outside the direct scope of the interview allowed for both the researcher and child to be viewed as more than just data gatherer and data provider. The use of strong interpersonal skills, such as through the Johari Window, as well as the creation of a safe, non-judgmental space for children to behave as children, was vital for building rapport (Heath *et al.* 2018). The principle of Humanness is not one that is restricted to only face-to-face interviews, and the strategies above demonstrate how this CHE principle is one that easily translates to online settings. Further, embracing Humanness not only built rapport, it also helped to enhance trust and reduce potential harm and vulnerability by creating a reciprocal relationship between researcher and participant.

### ***Empathy when the interview content is highly emotive***

The use of Zoom to interview children about a highly emotive topic did not detract from the researcher's ability to demonstrate empathy, where empathy proved invaluable to strongly and authentically connect with the participant, whilst also helping to minimize their vulnerability (Tiidenberg 2020). As the research questions explored the children's negative experiences at school, some of the stories recalled by the children were of times when they felt invalidated, insulted or ostracized (Sue *et al.* 2007). This led to times when the children appeared visibly distressed, such as using closed body language, turning their heads away, and looking towards their parent during the interview.

Being observant and attentive to the children's behaviours was the predominant strategy for achieving empathy in online interviews that were likely to be highly emotive. At these times, it is important to note that although consent and assent had been provided in written form prior to the interviews and gained again verbally at the beginning of the interview, it was important to continually look for non-verbal signs of dissent. This was necessary as Author 1 appreciated that informed dissent may be harder for children to give verbally and therefore may express their dissent through non-verbal cues (Bourke and Loveridge 2014).

This was the case for two of the children that were interviewed, where both showed signs of discomfort, such as looking to their parent, hesitating before answering or providing short or one-word answers. Non-verbal signs of dissent from Child 9 looked like not making eye contact, looking at their parent frequently, fidgeting and moving as if physically uncomfortable. Recognizing the signs that the children could not engage with questioning required empathy from the researcher (Webber 2020, Brown *et al.* 2021). In these instances, another strategy was employed where the topic of conversation was shifted to a more positive one (Mitchell and Irvine 2008), such as the allyship actions of their parents, and for one child, the level of discomfort was considered significant enough to end the interview early.

R: Or why were you coming home halfway through the day?

C9: I can't remember why.

P9: Do you remember what you were feeling?

C9: I don't want to say.

P9: and that's okay or is it because I'm here or is it you just not liking how it feels to remember it?

C9: Not liking it.

P9: That's okay.

R: C9, you don't have to talk about anything that you don't want to. This is absolutely your interview and you're in charge.

This approach supports earlier findings that rapport and empathy can still be achieved when interviews are conducted via an online platform such as Zoom (Irani 2019, Gray *et al.* 2020, Oliffe *et al.*

2021). In discussing Empathy, Brown and Danaher (2019) discussed the need for researchers to be aware of discomfort that may be, or is being, experienced by the participants. The examples provided here acknowledge the simple strategies of being mindful of verbal and non-verbal cues from the researcher and mirroring the participant and highlight the need to be acutely aware of distress in the participants, especially where participants are potentially vulnerable because of the sensitive nature of the interview/research topic, and who may not have the same capacity or power to verbally dissent during an interview. Here the principle of Empathy translates easily from face-to-face interviews to online interviews. However, there is an increased need for empathetic strategies when the children are placed in a position of vulnerability through the nature of the interview topic (Stafford 2017).

## Implications

The relational aspects and approaches to support semi-structured interviews discussed here have significant methodological implications for researchers wishing to interview in online modes (Zhang and Okazawa 2022), with evidence provided that the CHE principles transfer easily to online interview contexts. The authors build on the CHE Principles, which have not yet been applied to online interviewing of children. This paper offers a conceptual and practical method for qualitative research for others to replicate when transferring rapport-building skills from face-to-face contexts to online platforms, which prompts researchers to consider utilizing the CHE principles to assist in the achievement of rapport. Adopting strategies such as those outlined in this paper can influence the depth and breadth of data collected (Krouwel *et al.* 2019, Mirick and Wladkowski 2019), and enhance the success of the research process (Mirick and Wladkowski 2019).

Further to this, the authors have presented a range of strategies that were utilized to reduce the potential vulnerability created by the sensitive nature of the research topic. The extension of the CHE principles in this manner demonstrates a novel use of Brown and Danaher's (2019) work. As such, the use of the CHE principles to establish and maintain rapport throughout the research process may help researchers wishing to investigate topics that may place participants in positions of vulnerability due to the potentially distressing nature of the research topic can employ CHE to develop context-specific strategies to support participants and reduce the risk of harm.

However, further consideration of how the CHE principles can be used to inform methodological choices is required, and opportunities avail for researchers to innovatively to build upon the CHE principles (Brown and Danaher 2019) with innovative approaches to enhance relational aspects of interviewing, such as considerations for online modes of interviewing, as well as considerations for investigating sensitive or distressing topics. Researchers need creative and developmentally appropriate ways for building rapport for children, and this can be done through strategies that target Connectivity, Humanness and Empathy. Further use of the strategies outlined in this paper could lead to additional reflections on ethical strategies for research involving sensitive or distressing topics.

## Conclusion

Within interviews, the building of rapport is a crucial element in establishing trust and increasing the comfort of participants and in doing so, rapport affords for richer responses and data to inform the phenomenon being investigated (McGrath *et al.* 2019). In addition to this, rapport is considered an important ethical consideration as a prerequisite for building a respectful relationship with participants (Weller 2017, Gripton and Vincent 2021). It is increasingly important to not only afford children a voice in research, including the opportunity to share their insights via online interviews but to consider ways in which to break down the barriers and consider strategies that would support researching the lived experiences of children on topics that are sensitive.

The CHE principles offer researchers a starting place for reflecting on the nuanced ways to utilize building rapport and in doing so provoke innovation within the methodology. The authors believe

the CHE methodology offers the opportunity for researchers to build rapport with participants within a complex and increasingly technological era and we recommend that these considerations be incorporated into future research where children may be vulnerable. This paper reinforces the importance of adopting alternative perspectives and methods for rapport-building, particularly when interviewing children in the online space where sensitive topics are explored.

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