



Do payments encourage children into riskier research? Findings from the MESSI study

Issue 23 Research to Practice Series

Issue 23 of the ICPS Research to Practice series reports on the major findings of the MESSI study. The *Managing Ethical Studies on Sensitive Issues (MESSI)* study explored how adults and children make decisions about children's participation in social research. The centrepiece of the study consisted of online surveys using hypothetical scenarios to explore the differences between participants, particularly when risk and payment levels changed. This paper outlines the responses from children and young people.



Background

In Australia and other developed countries, it is common to provide payments to research participants (Gelinas et al, 2018). Whilst contentious, research payments for children are generally acceptable when provided as compensation or reimbursement, and where research involves low or negligible risk, but not when they become an inducement that is likely to encourage participants to take risks they would not be willing to accept with smaller payments (Appelbaum, Lidz, & Klitzman, 2009; Wendler, Rackoff, Emanuel, & Grady, 2002; Spriggs, 2010; Singer & Couper, 2008).

However, a lack of specific guidance has led some ethics committees to refuse research payments for children (Bagley et al., 2007), which may in turn reduce the likelihood of children participating in research about issues that affect them.

Importantly, the specific amount at which a payment is deemed likely to act as an inducement to undertake risks has not been quantified.

The MESSI study aimed to address these issues.



The use of payments with child research participants is particularly contentious amongst many ethics committees and other decision-makers, predominantly because of concerns that they will be more influenced by the offer of a payment, that it will create “undue influence”.

Methods

Children (12-14 years) and young people (15-17 years) were recruited via Facebook, email lists and advertisements to complete online surveys run in Qualtrics Survey Software on the ACU website between April and August 2017.

Animated videos and scripts describing four hypothetical social research studies with children as participants were used. The scenarios ranged from relatively benign or low risk to highly sensitive or risky. For the low-risk scenario, we used an internet safety scenario, which asked about their views and the strategies they use in relation to internet safety. For the high-risk scenario, participants were asked about their experiences of sexting (defined as a sexual or sexually suggestive message, photo or video) and for copies be provided to the researchers.



[Link to sexting scenario:](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hXzWX5Z62w4&feature=youtu.be)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hXzWX5Z62w4&feature=youtu.be>

To test the influence of payment amounts on the children and young people's agreement to the different hypothetical scenarios, each respondent was presented with a range of payments from no payment through to A\$30 (an amount commonly used by the research team), A\$100 (a high payment unlikely to be approved for research with children) and a high (\$200) prize draw entry.

151 young people and 43 children answered the sexting (high risk) and internet (low risk) scenario questions.

Their responses to these scenarios are shown.

Details about the study design and analyses can be found at:

<https://journals.sagepub.com/eprint/9GfT6dktvJWdsQATr85B/full>

Findings and discussion

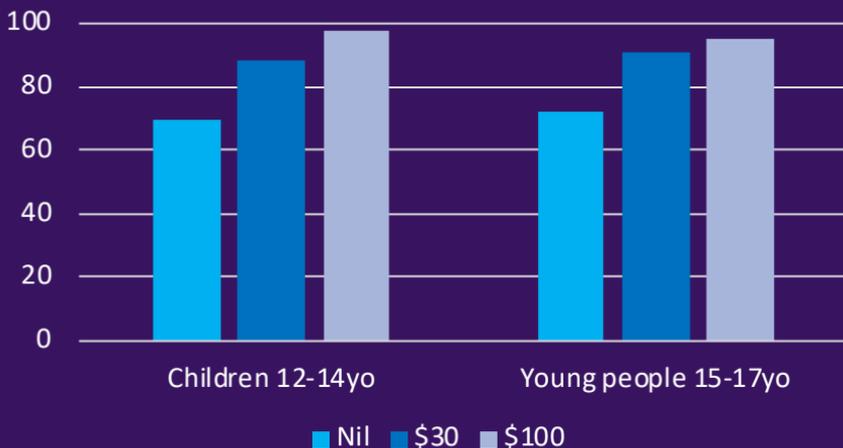
The MESSI study is one of the first large-scale empirical studies to examine the influence of payments (and other factors) on children's agreement to participate in social research studies of different sensitivity levels. Our findings in relation to children and young people's responses to the low-risk (internet) and high-risk (sexting) scenarios are presented below.

1. Higher payments increased participation in both studies

Offering payments to children and young people increased the likelihood that they would agree to participate in either hypothetical research scenario and, in general, the higher the payment the greater the likelihood of their agreeing to participate.

In the internet (lower risk) scenario (Figure 1), most children and young people agreed to participate at all payment levels, and participation increased in both age groups as the payment amount increased. Nearly all children and young people agreed when they were offered \$100.

Figure 1. Percentages of children and young people who said 'yes' to participating in the internet



While participation levels were lower, as the payment amount increased in the higher risk (sexting) scenario, the likelihood that the children and young people would agree to participate also increased.

However, most children and young people did not change their minds about participating in either scenario when the amount of payment they were offered increased from A\$30 to A\$100, because the rate of participation was already relatively high at the A\$30 payment level.

Figure 2. Percentages of children and young people who said ‘yes’ to participating in the sexting scenario (high risk) at different payment amounts (in Australian dollars)

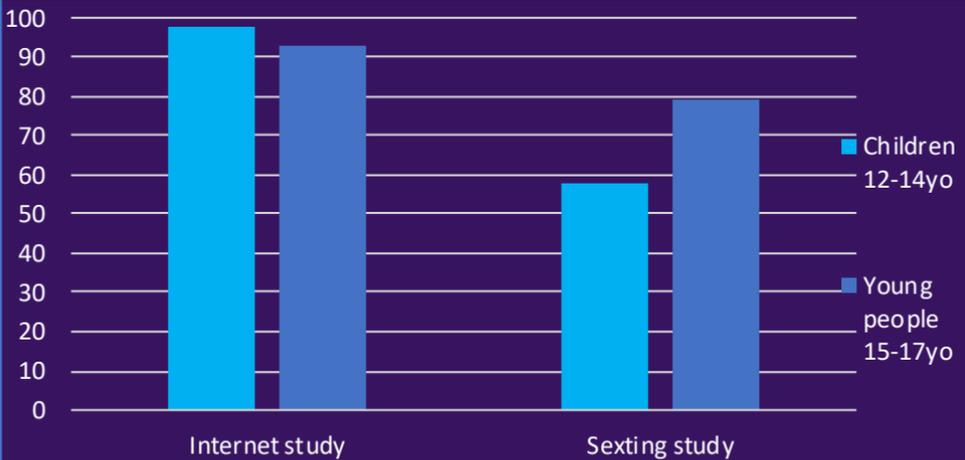


2. There is little difference between a moderate payment and a high prize draw

When we explored whether children and young people’s responses to the hypothetical research scenarios would differ according to the type of payment offered, we found no difference in the rate at which they agreed to participate for the A\$30 payment and A\$200 prize draw (Figure 3).

These findings suggest that the chance of a high payment (A\$200) is not unduly influential on children’s decisions to participate in research, as is at times a concern of human research ethics committees (HRECs) and other approving bodies.

Figure 3. Percentages of children and young people who said 'yes' to participating in the internet and sexting scenarios if offered a A\$200 voucher prize draw



3. No evidence of “undue influence” of payment

Our results show that while any payment increases the likelihood of participation, children and young people are not “unduly influenced” by large offers of monetary payment to participate in “risky” research, as has been the concern of ethics committees and other decision-makers. Irrespective of the topic, but particularly if it is highly sensitive or risky, researchers and ethics committees have responsibilities to eliminate unnecessary risks and to reduce those that remain to a minimum (Singer & Couper, 2008).

4. Children and young people can identify risk

In this study, we have shown that children and young people are able to identify and adjust their responses to requests to participate in research of different sensitivity or risk levels. Younger children are less likely to consent to higher sensitivity or riskier research than are older children.



5. Altruism amongst children and young people

In the lower risk (internet) scenario close to 70% of the children and young people agreed to participate for no payment. Fewer agreed for no money in the higher risk (sexting) study (49% of children and 60% of young people), but this still represents a high proportion willing to participate for no payment. These findings support previous research that has found high levels of altruism among children and young people, particularly when the research is perceived as beneficial (Cooper-Robbins et al., 2011; Weiner et al., 2015).

We also found that children and young people of lower socio-economic status were more likely to participate in research whether they were paid or not paid, and they were no more influenced by higher payments than were those of higher socio-economic status. This suggests that the children and young people of lower socio-economic status tended to be more altruistic about participating in research.

6. An adverse experience did not deter participation

Some ethics committees and other decision-makers request that children who have experience of the sensitive topic (such as child abuse, divorce, family violence) are excluded from the study (Campbell, 2008; Powell & Smith, 2009; Skelton, 2008). However, most of the children and young people in this study who reported they had had a 'bad experience with the particular research topic', still responded that they would participate in the study.

In the few studies that have assessed the impacts of being involved in social research on sensitive issues, only a small number of children have shown to be affected negatively and these impacts are most often short-lived. When negative impacts or distress occurred, these were minimal and often compensated by the positive benefits identified by children (Ellonen & Pösö, 2011; Finkelhor, Hamby, Turner, & Walsh, 2012; Murray, 2005).

In conclusion

Payments can be used to increase the participation of children and young people in research without concerns of undue influence. While the results of this study do not provide evidence to support a level of payment, the higher amounts children or young people were paid the more likely they were to participate in any of the hypothetical scenarios presented in this study, including the higher risk (sexting) study. However, we also found that significant numbers of children and young people who were invited to participate in a study will do so for no payment. Interestingly, there is no evidence from this study that children and young people with fewer economic resources are differentially influenced by payments, although those with fewer economic resources were more likely to participate whether they were paid or not. Those with adverse experiences in the research area still generally wanted to participate and should be given the opportunity to contribute their views and experiences.

It is important that children and young people are afforded the opportunity to make the decision to participate or not in research whenever possible, and that their ability to do so is not removed by other decision-makers. However, the overwhelming requirement is to ensure that research with children and young people that may be considered highly sensitive or risky is conducted ethically.

About the study

The MESSI study was funded by an Australian Research Council Discovery Grant (DP150100864).

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The full article can be found at

Taplin, S., Chalmers, J., Hoban, B., McArthur, M., Moore, T. & Graham, A. (2019, in press) Children in social research: Do higher payments encourage participation in riskier studies? *Journal of Empirical Research on Human Research Ethics*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1556264619826796>

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ICPS research strengths include promoting children's participation, strengthening service systems and informing practice, and supporting child-safe communities.

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