



Seeing young people clearly

Top tips for research with children, young people and families

The information in this document explains that what people **see** during workshops and research activities with children and young people might not **mean** what adults think it means. Taking part in research can be uncomfortable, so it is important young people have the time, flexibility and support to find ways to feel more comfortable to help them take part.

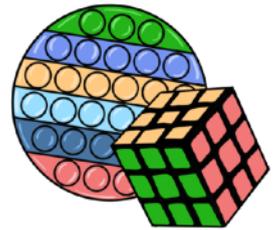
Fidgeting ≠ Not listening

You may see:

- Tapping, bouncing legs
- Playing with a fidget toy
- Stroking a teddy
- Twisting hair
- Shifting in their seat
- Moving around the room.

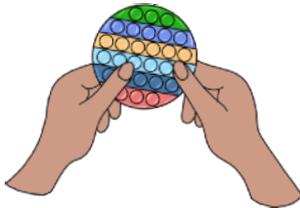
This often means:

- Self-regulation
- Managing anxiety
- Focusing their thoughts
- Sensory comfort.



Young people told us “Fidget toys are not childish”.

Avoiding eye contact ≠ disengagement



You may see:

- Looking at the floor
- Glancing at a trusted adult
- Focusing on hands or an object.

This often means:

- Shyness
- Anxiety
- Sensory overload
- Needing reassurance
- Thinking carefully.

Researcher insight: He kept staring at the floor but was still very much listening.

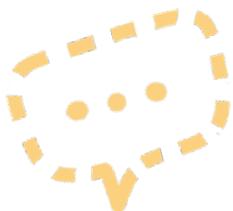
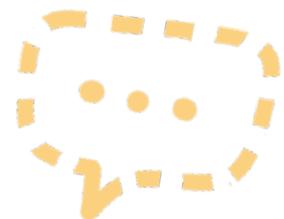
Quiet voices or minimal speech ≠ Lack of interest

You may see:

- Soft-spoken answers
- One-word replies
- Long pauses
- Nodding instead of speaking.

This often means:

- Nerves
- Processing time
- Feeling exposed in the group
- Cultural norms around speaking
- Uncertainty about the question.



Researcher insight: Some people are hesitant to ask questions — they don't trust yet.

Laughter or jokes ≠ Disrespect

You may see:

- Loud joking
- Humour during discussions
- Laughing at unexpected moments.

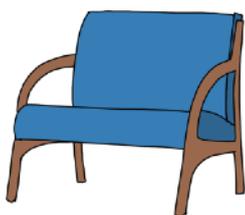
This often means:

- Masking embarrassment
- Covering discomfort
- Avoiding vulnerability
- Trying to bond socially
- Easing tension.



Researcher insight: Humour was often a protective mechanism, not rudeness.

Sitting at the back or outside the circle ≠ Unwillingness



You may see:

- Sitting behind the group
- Staying close to a teacher
- Choosing a corner seat.

This often means:

- Wanting privacy
- Sensory sensitivity
- Social anxiety
- Needing a slower way into the group.

Researcher insight: The seating made some people feel exposed, so they stayed on the edges.

Coming late or leaving the room ≠ Rejection of the research

You may see:

- Late arrivals
- Young people stepping out
- Someone leaving early.

This often means:

- Transport or family responsibilities
- Needing a break
- Managing overwhelm
- Other appointments
- Building up to re-joining.



Researcher insight: People “dipped in and out” as part of feeling safe, not because they didn’t care.

Looking at a phone ≠ Boredom



You may see:

- Checking a phone
- Glancing at notifications
- Briefly tuning out.

This often means:

- Managing anxiety
- Grounding themselves
- Needing a breather
- Avoiding eye contact.

Researcher insight: Phone use was a coping strategy for some, not “rudeness.”

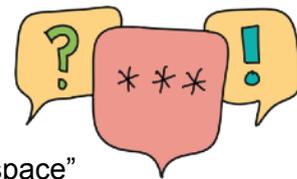
Strong opinions or speaking first ≠ Dominating

You may see:

- Confident contributions
- Leading discussions
- Speaking quickly.

This often means:

- High comfort level
- Using confidence to “hold the space”
- Helping quieter peers join in.



Researcher insight: Talkative young people sometimes acted as anchors for others.

Silence ≠ Nothing happening



You may see:

- Stillness
- Long gaps without speaking
- Closed posture.

This often means:

- Thinking
- Processing
- Waiting for safety
- Managing anxiety.

Researcher insight: Silences often signalled mental effort and caution, not disinterest.

Creating space for every voice

What you might see depends on:

- Neurodivergence (autism, ADHD, dyslexia)
- Culture and family expectations
- Sexuality and gender identity
- Previous experiences with mental health services, carers, and research
- Mental health
- Trust and safety



Until we get to know people, we may misread or misunderstand how they communicate, so we all need to keep an open mind.

Young people said: *“Don’t assume stereotypes — treat each person like a blank slate.”*

Key message: *Every behaviour has a story — and it’s rarely the one you expect.*

**See what’s happening — but don’t assume why it’s happening.
Approach every young person with curiosity, respect and care.**