PAPER 3: USING A ‘TOOLBOX’ APPROACH TO FACILITATE PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH.

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Research practitioners often find themselves carrying out research in variable conditions and may need to respond flexibly to changing circumstances; this may be particularly the case when conducting research with children and young people or vulnerable groups. Research participants come to research with differing needs, expectations and preferred means of communicating. By working with participants, rather than conducting research upon them, and enabling them to communicate in ways best suited to them, it is more likely that they are treated fairly, and with respect, and that the best possible data is collected.

A toolbox approach utilises a range of visual and creative methods to offer an alternative approach to traditional interviewing techniques, whereby the activity becomes the focus for research, rather than the researcher, and acts as a mediator for communication. These methods can be used flexibly depending on the information that is to be collected, the preferences of participants, the context in which the research is taking place, and any constraints which may be present. These methods can enable participants to connect differently with ideas, and show the researcher how they see the world, as well as, or instead of, vocalising it. Participation can thus be more inclusive (and enjoyable), and by creating a product, participants may get a sense of ownership of their research data, thus challenging the power relationships between ‘researcher’ and ‘researched’.

This paper will explore a host of different ways of engaging participants and collecting data, including fortune lines, spider diagrams, pictures, visual stimulus material, and others, considering the contexts in which these methods can be used, the ethical implications of this approach, and how the resulting data can be used.