

# Planning research

## a printable step-by-step guide

It's important to plan your research flexibly, but having milestones to tick off can help keep you on track and focussed.

This guide should help you make a draft plan of the whole research project and poses questions to ask yourself at each stage to make sure you're on track.

You can use the [timetable template](#) to help you plan your time and goals for each research stage and the [research ready checklist](#) to check you are ready to start.

## Be prepared!

### Set a research question

Research questions should be open and allow positive and negative information to be collected. Find out more information on the [research skills](#) page of the website.

Your initial research question/s may change if you discover something while gathering data. This is fine - don't resist! - but re-think carefully when changing it. Is it still an open question?

Think about the relationship between your research and the rest of organisation/project? How does your research question fit? Is it relevant and useful?

Write your research question at the top of your [timetable/plan](#) This can help you focus when you are at the reporting stage.

Research question examples:

- What wellbeing do people get from planting trees? Does this last beyond the activity?
- What effect does my Forest School project have on wellbeing? What activities, people and places enable and discourage wellbeing?



### Who will do the research?

Decide how the research will be divided between colleagues and/or how it will fit in with your role as a practitioner/session leader.

Will you be working alone? This can be challenging if you're also running sessions. You need to consider when you will be able to step back from your leadership role to gather data, or set aside a specific time to do research each session/activity.

If you are working with a colleague - how will you divide the work between you? It can help to have clearly defined roles, even if you swap between them. You need to feel confident and supported. Being a 'researcher' can feel like a very different role to your normal one as a practitioner and your relationship to other staff and participants may change.

Who is supporting you? If you work for an organisation, your research needs to be supported by colleagues/managers and other stakeholders. Make sure they are interested and understand the research. Show them your research question and plan. See the [research motivation](#) page for more about why this will help in the long run.



### **How long will the research take?**

This is a difficult question to answer and depends on the number of participants you have, your research methods and the number of activity sessions. Here are some things to think about:

- allow time for planning and preparation, it can be easy to underestimate this.
- allow more time to analyse data than you take to collect it. Some methods, such as video observation, can be quick to do in the woods but take a long time to analyse but it can be worth it! Structured surveys will be much quicker both when gathering information and analysing it.
- labelling and storing data can take a little while - devising a naming convention at the beginning helps save time.
- allow time to make sense of, write up and disseminate your findings. Having spent time doing the research, you want to make the most of it.

Use the [timetable/milestone template](#) to help you get a rough idea of how long your project will take and set yourself deadlines (if you can agree these with a colleague/manager it may help you to stick to them!)



### **Research skills**

You will need to plan in at least half a day to think about research skills. This is important because without them your research may end up being very biased and therefore be less credible.

Go to the [research skills information page](#) for more about the difference between evaluation and research and being aware of bias.



### **Choose your participants/group**

Be clear about who you are researching and who you are not. This may sound straightforward in a self-contained group. However if you work with families you might decide to focus on just the parents/carers or just the children or both. If you work on a project where people come and go, will you include everyone? How will you deal with ethical consent?

Get to know participants if you can before you start the research. This can help you to [choose research methods](#) and helps people feel more comfortable/confident about being involved in your research.

If you can't meet participants in advance you might have to try different research methods over time, or choose a simple method such as an interview or survey with a one-off activity. Use the [research methods index and key](#) to help and allow extra time to trial methods.

Decide if you will be comparing the expectations of your organisation/colleagues and other stakeholders with the real outcomes of the project. If so, stakeholders are also participants and you will need to get ethical consent from them too.



### **Choose your research methods**

Think about which methods would suit your group, your skills and your activities - more about [choosing methods](#) and [examples](#) here.

Are you planning to track change over time? The way you do your research will help with this. For example, you may decide to carry out a survey at the beginning of your project, again in the middle and then at the end of the project to track possible changes.



### **Get ethical**

Make sure that you have ethical consent from all participants, and also from you and your colleagues as you are also part of the research.

You will need to allow time for people to get forms signed (if by a parent/carer), and you may need to build in time to explain the ethics face-to-face with participants. Get more advice about [ethical consent](#) and download the [template consent form template](#).



# Collect your data

## When and where

Decide when you will collect data. If you have the time and resources you might want to observe people throughout a session. If you're short of time you might do the research at one point during a session. Use the [research methods index](#) to help you decide.

Make sure you are clear about when people are part of the research and when not e.g. when participants are in the mini-bus on their way to the woods should you still ask them questions? What about a group discussion away from the woods in school? Make sure that your participants know when what they say or do could be part of the research and when it's not (more about this in: [research ethics](#)).

Making notes and/or writing a research diary can help give your data context (it is easy to forget exactly where you were and what you were doing when you come to analyse it)



## Store your data

Store your data to make sure that your participants and information about them is protected.

More about data protection, including your legal obligations on the:

- Information Commissioner's Office website: [www.ico.org.uk/for\\_organisations/data\\_protection?hidecookiesbanner=true](http://www.ico.org.uk/for_organisations/data_protection?hidecookiesbanner=true)
- The data protection act on GOV.UK: <https://www.gov.uk/data-protection/the-data-protection-act>

Anonymise your data to make sure that no real names are used. You could use a letter number code for each person e.g. for a school group you might have T01, T02 (for teachers) and S01, S02 (for students)

More information in [data organisation and storage](#).



# Where's your evidence?

## Analysing your data

Try to avoid leaving too much time between gathering your data, analysing it and writing it up. If you analyse your data as soon as possible it can help you remember things such as context. It also keeps your motivation and the project progressing.

The analysis stage can be hard for some people, you may feel bogged down by the data and trying to make sense of it. Most researchers go through this phase before things start to become

clearer. It can help to use fresh eyes - ask a colleague to look at it, they may see patterns or themes that you can't.

The analysis stage is when you look at all the data you have gathered and look for trends or themes e.g. there seems to be more social cohesion when the group sits around the fire. Once you have found a theme look for evidence of what or who might cause this to happen e.g. is it because of the fire, the fact that people are sitting down, that they're sitting in a circle, they're warm, they aren't working, the leaders aren't directing them etc.

Be realistic about the depth/amount of information that you can get. This will depend on the research methods you have used. You may want to revisit your participants to check things with them.

Give yourself enough time to analyse your data. This may not feel like the most exciting part of the research but it's the bit that gets you results!

If you work in a particular sector you may choose to analyse your data using existing research frameworks e.g. SDQ, widely used in schools: <http://www.sdqinfo.com/>

The [data spreadsheet](#) may help you to organise your data. Get more help with [analysing data using the indicators](#).



### **Make sense of your findings**

Having the structure of a report or presentation can help to make sense of your analysis and note down findings. It can force you to look at what the most significant themes and outcomes of your research are rather than getting bogged down by the detail.

Advice about how to write up your findings is in the [presenting your findings](#) section.

The [report template](#) or [presentation plan](#) may help provide a structure.



### **Share your findings**

Once you have finished your report you want to make the most of it both within your organisation and outside.

Your findings might be useful when writing funding bids or in staff training or planning your next project.

More about this in [using your research findings](#).