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**Reframing a sense of self: a constructivist grounded  
theory study of children's admission to hospital for  
surgery**

Karen Ford

RN, BN, MN, Cert Paed Nsg

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

University of Tasmania

November 2010

## **Statement of Original Authorship**

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The research associated with this thesis abides by the international and Australian codes on human and animal experimentation, the guidelines by the Australian Government's Office of the Gene Technology Regulator and the rulings of the Safety, Ethics and Institutional Biosafety Committees of the University.

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## **Abstract**

Children are significant users of healthcare and their needs are different to those of adults. Whilst important gains have been made in children's hospital care since the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there is a recent trend to reduce dedicated paediatric services in Australia. In order to provide healthcare services that are child centred and that truly respond to the needs of children, children's perspectives on their healthcare are essential. Yet the inclusion of children's perspectives in health services and research is lacking. It is through listening to, and hearing children, that health care can move closer to meeting their needs. This qualitative study explored the experiences of 10 primary school aged children (six to twelve years of age) admitted to hospital for surgery, from their perspective. A constructivist grounded theory approach was used that incorporated flexible, child centred research techniques including interviews and the 'draw and write technique'.

This thesis presents a substantive theory: children's reframing of their sense of selves to incorporate the experiences of hospitalisation and surgery. The children were active participants embedded within the phenomenon. Admission to hospital for surgery presented a form of adversity for the children in what was an embodied experience of contrasts. Major concepts of the experience were: 'being scared'; 'hurting'; and 'having fun'. There were two major processes the children engaged in for reframing their sense of self to incorporate the experience. The first was around their meaning making activities, expressed as 'coming to know' and the second was their ability to move on from the adversity and reintegrate the experience into their normal lives, expressed as 'bouncing back'. In order for the children to successfully incorporate the experience into their sense of self, a supportive context or holding environment was necessary, expressed as 'being held'.

Children were the primary source of knowledge about their views and experiences for this study. The findings highlight the importance of centring children's healthcare on the needs of children and their families. The findings suggest that ongoing problems with paediatric practices continue to impact negatively on children's experiences of hospitalisation. Although there is a body of evidence about what constitutes best practice, in reality, practices fall short of these recommendations.

## **Acknowledgements**

Many people have contributed to this work and I am grateful to them all. First and foremost I would like to particularly thank all the children who participated in the study and who so generously and enthusiastically helped me with my research.

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Thankyou to my friends and colleagues who expressed interest and provided encouragement. Undertaking a thesis part time was at one point described to me as an exercise in endurance. Sharing the journey with fellow PhD candidates has made the process less lonely, and much more fun! Thanks to you all, especially Dan for our GT talks and CP for your friendship and valued critique. Thanks also CP and family for dedicated writing time at the Orford shack.

Finally, special thanks to my family, Ross, Paddy, Annie and Will: Thankyou for keeping me grounded in family and my apologies for time away from you, for poor housekeeping and thrown together meals! I'm free next weekend – what would you like to do?

Childhood has its own way of seeing, thinking and feeling, and nothing is more foolish than to try and substitute ours for them (Rousseau in *Emile*, 1792).

## Table of Contents

Statement of Original Authorship .....	2
Statement of Authority .....	2
<b>Abstract.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Acknowledgements .....</b>	<b>4</b>
Table of Figures .....	9
Table of Tables .....	9
<b>Chapter 1: Children’s experiences of hospital – why aren’t their needs met?</b>	
.....Error! Bookmark not defined.	
Social and political drivers to improve children’s experiences of hospitalisation .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Children’s healthcare rights .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Current and future trends for care of children in hospital. <b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>	
The importance of children’s perspectives of their healthcare .... <b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>	
Children’s absence in research.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Children’s rights to participation in research.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Children as active participants in research.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Child centred research approaches.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
A study that explores children’s admission to hospital for surgery .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
<b>Bookmark not defined.</b>	
The theoretical location: Constructivist grounded theory. <b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>	
Reflexivity and situating myself .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Thesis structure .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Conclusion .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
<b>Chapter 2: Locating children - in society and in healthcare...Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>	
The role of the literature review in this grounded theory study... <b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>	
The methods used in identifying literature for this review <b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>	
Children’s healthcare and research with children reflect society’s positioning of children .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
A history of childhood and children’s status .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Children’s position prior to the 19th century .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Children and the 19 <sup>th</sup> century .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
The century of the child .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
‘The parlous state of childhood – in the 21st century’ .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
<b>Medical care of children .....</b>	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
19 <sup>th</sup> century health care for children .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
20 <sup>th</sup> century child healthcare .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>

Children in hospital: from bureaucratic interests to the interests of families and of children themselves.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
The harmful effects of children's separation from their parents.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Children require a supportive environment to cope with their hospitalisation .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Nursing care of children.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Family centred care.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Child centred care .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Conclusion .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
<b>Chapter 3: Locating children in research.....</b>	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Children as objects in research and possible harm to them ..	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Child development processes and research with children ....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Children's cognitive development .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Language skills and their relevance in research with children	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Ethical issues in research with children .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Developing a sense of self .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Research methods and their suitability for use with children	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Grounded theory as a research approach with children ....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Conclusion .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
<b>Chapter 4: The research strategy and design.....</b>	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
A qualitative research approach.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
A constructivist-interpretive paradigm .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Constructivist grounded theory as the strategy of inquiry ....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
An overview of constructivist grounded theory..	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Strengths and limitations of grounded theory .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Grounded theory as a research approach with child participants .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Symbolic interactionism: a theoretical frame for the research	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
The research methods .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Ethical considerations for this research .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Study participants .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
The relevance of the research context.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Conclusion .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
<b>Chapter 5: Data collection and analysis.....</b>	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Child-centred research techniques .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
The relationship between the participant children and myself as researcher	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Sources of data.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Constructivist interviewing with children.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
The place of story .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Children's drawings and associated writing .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>



My own observations from the field.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
The literature as a source of data .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
The use of Rich Picture diagramming .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Data management .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Data analysis .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Initial coding .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Focused coding .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Constant comparative analysis.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Memo writing .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Achieving saturation or theoretical sufficiency ..	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Theoretical sampling.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Theoretical sorting .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
The ambiguity of negative cases.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Conceptualisation.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
A single Basic Social Process? .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Theorising .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
<b>Chapter 6: Children's admission for surgery - the phenomenon as experienced by children .....</b>	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
The phenomenon - an embodied experience of contrasts .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Being scared.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Hurting .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Having fun .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Conclusion .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
<b>Chapter 7: The processes of 'coming to know' and 'bouncing back' and the context of 'being held' .....</b>	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Coming to know.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Developing understandings.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Participating in care .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Locating their selves .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Bouncing back .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Optimism .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Coping with pain.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Being held .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Parents as primary care givers .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
The caring role of nurses and doctors .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
A child friendly environment.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Conclusion .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
<b>Chapter 8: A theory of primary school age children's admission to hospital for surgery .....</b>	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
A theory of children's reframing their sense of self to incorporate the experience of admission to hospital for surgery .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
The phenomenon – an embodied experience of contrasts ....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
The embodied experience of anxiety and fear ....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
The embodied experience of pain .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Fun as part of the embodied experience .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
The processes .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Coming to know.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>

Bouncing back .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
The context – a facilitating environment .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Being held .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Socio-cultural implications .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Child development theories and their application in the research	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Conclusion .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
<b>Chapter 9: Conclusions and recommendations .....</b>	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
What this research adds .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Key findings of the research .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Evaluation of the study .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Implications for practice and further research ....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
<b>Appendices.....</b>	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Appendix 1: Sample parent information sheet.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Appendix 2: Sample child information sheet.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Appendix 3: Sample parent consent .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Appendix 4: Sample child assent document .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Appendix 5: Sample of line-by-line coding of interview transcript .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Appendix 6: An example of a code - ‘being scared’	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Appendix 7: Memo from one interview.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Appendix 8: Abstract from published work.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
<b>References.....</b>	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>

## Table of Figures

Figure 1: Drawing of the study hospital ( <i>Boy, 11yrs</i> ).....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Figure 2: Incomplete drawing ( <i>Boy, 8yrs</i> ).....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Figure 3: Drawing of recovery nurse ( <i>Boy, 8 yrs</i> ).....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Figure 4: Rich Picture Diagram no.1 .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Figure 5: Rich Picture Diagram no.2 .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Figure 6: The analytic process based on Charmaz (2006, p11)	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Figure 7: Representation of the phenomenon; the processes and the context .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Figure 8: Drawing of child and nurse ( <i>Girl, 12yrs</i> ).....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Figure 9: Drawing of child in a wheelchair ( <i>Girl, 8 yrs</i> ).....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Figure 10: Drawing of child in 'her' hospital room ( <i>Girl, 8 yrs</i> )	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Figure 11: Drawing of child in a hospital bed ( <i>Boy, 6 yrs</i> )..	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Figure 12: Drawing of hospital ( <i>Girl, 8 yrs</i> ).....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Figure 13: Drawing of stars on the ceiling ( <i>Boy, 8 yrs</i> ).....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Figure 14: The ' <i>coming to know</i> ' model .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Figure 15: The nested model of ' <i>being held</i> ' (adapted from (Pinkerton and Dolan 2007, p221) .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>

## Table of Tables

Table 1: Articles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child that relate directly to children's healthcare (Nicholson and Clarke, 2007) .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Table 2: Key ethical considerations in research with children (based on Alderson, 1995, in Hill 2005, p66).....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Table 3: Readability statistics (from the Microsoft Word© Program)	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Table 4: Details of child participants.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>