

Your Story Matters

An Introduction to Participatory Research — Written for Families & Communities

BEFORE WE BEGIN, WE WANT TO SAY SOMETHING IMPORTANT

You are not a research subject. You are not a data point. You are not someone to be studied from a distance. You are an expert — on your own life, your family, and your community. And your story has the power to change things.

What Is Research — Really?

When most people hear the word *research*, they think of scientists in labs, or academics writing papers that nobody outside of universities ever reads. They think of something done *to* communities — not *with* them, and definitely not *by* them.

Traditional research has a long history of treating communities — especially Black, Indigenous, and communities of color — as objects of study rather than partners in knowledge. Researchers would come in, collect data, and leave. Communities rarely saw the results. They rarely benefited.

Participatory research is different. It is built on a simple but radical idea:

THE CORE IDEA

The people who live an experience are the best people to help understand it, design solutions for it, and lead change around it. **Research should serve the community — not the other way around.**

What Is Participatory Research?

Participatory research — sometimes called **Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR)** or **Participatory Action Research (PAR)** — is an approach where community members are active partners in the research process from beginning to end.

In Traditional Research...

- Researchers decide the questions
- Community members are "participants"
- Data is collected and taken away
- Results are published in journals
- Communities rarely see the findings
- Power stays with the researcher

In Participatory Research...

- + Community members help shape the questions
- + Everyone is a co-researcher
- + Knowledge stays in the community
- + Results are shared in plain language
- + Communities drive how findings are used
- + Power is shared

Who Is a Co-Researcher?

A co-researcher is anyone from the community who participates in the research process as a partner — not just as someone being studied.

At EVOLVE, we believe that:

- ✓ Mothers know their children's lives better than any outside expert
- ✓ Children understand their school experiences in ways adults cannot fully access
- ✓ Families know what their communities need — and what has not worked
- ✓ Community members bring knowledge that no degree can replace

YOU DON'T NEED A PHD TO BE A CO-RESEARCHER

You need your lived experience, your willingness to share honestly, and your commitment to your community. That is it. Everything else, we learn together.

How Does Participatory Research Work at EVOLVE?

When you participate in research with EVOLVE, here is what that looks like in practice:

1

We Ask Together

We don't come to you with a pre-set agenda. We sit with you — as a family, as a community — and ask: what questions matter most to you? What do you want to understand better about your children's experiences? What would you most want to change?

2

We Learn Together

We share what research says in plain language — no jargon. We create space for you to respond, push back, add to it, and connect it to your own experience. Your knowledge and published research sit side by side as equals.

3

We Gather Stories Together

Through conversations, interviews, community sessions, and other tools you help choose, we collect knowledge — together. You decide how your story is shared and what you are comfortable contributing.

4

We Make Meaning Together

We bring back what we have gathered and make sense of it — with you. What patterns do you see? What surprises you? What confirms what you already knew? Your interpretation matters.

5

We Share and Act Together

Findings go back to the community first — in plain language, in formats that are actually useful. Then we work together to decide how to use them to create real change.

Your Rights as a Co-Researcher

- ✓ You can say no to any question, at any time, for any reason
- ✓ You can withdraw from the research at any time without penalty
- ✓ You will know exactly how your story will be used before you agree to share it
- ✓ Your identity will be protected unless you explicitly choose otherwise
- ✓ You will receive the findings in plain language before they are published anywhere
- ✓ You can ask questions at any point — and you will get honest answers
- ✓ You will be credited for your contributions to the knowledge we create together

"Washing one's hands of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral."

PAULO FREIRE

At EVOLVE, we choose not to wash our hands of it.
We choose to research **with you** — because your story is not just data.
It is the foundation of change.

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