

Specialist Research Ethics Guidance Paper

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN RESEARCH WITH CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Ethical considerations in research with children and young people occur at all stages of the research process. They should be considered as an ongoing and reflexive part of the research process throughout the life of a research project and not just as the first hurdle to be overcome. The following paragraphs provide details about the kinds of ethical issues that can arise in both qualitative and quantitative research with children and young people. These are not set out as prescriptive rules, however. Rather, the issues are raised to encourage the kind of researcher reflexivity that is one cornerstone of the University of Sheffield's approach to research ethics. While the 'right' answer in one situation may not be appropriate in another, the same questions generally are.

Access

On commencing research, the first question to ask is: who are the gatekeepers for the research project? The school or childcare facility in question? Parents? Health and social care authorities? In many countries, access to children and young people is controlled by a range of individual and institutional gate-keepers. For example, researchers may need to obtain official government clearance, such as criminal records checks in response to child protection concerns, before research can commence. These legal/official requirements vary between countries. In addition, however, schools, social care and health authorities may place requirements on researchers in relation to the nature and conduct of their research that raise other ethical issues. For example, schools may insist that research is not carried out during lesson times and limit researchers' access to children to playtimes. Researchers need to consider the extent to which using children's free time at school, when they may want to play or be with their friends, raises ethical issues.

In some societies it is not just parents and local authorities who must be approached for clearance, but also community elders such as chiefs and other traditional authorities. In some cases parents and children will hesitate to participate in the research if such elders in their communities or families refuse their consent. Therefore, in these contexts it may be necessary to talk more broadly than 'parental' consent' and researchers will need to think about how to work with such authorities.

Access to children and young people has also often to be negotiated with parents and families. Researchers need to consider the ethical issues that arise in relation to access both being granted and denied. If parents give their approval for research to be carried out with their children, researchers need to ascertain whether the children themselves have been consulted about their involvement. Similarly, if a few parents do not give permission for their children to participate in research being carried out in a classroom context, when the majority of children are participating, researchers need to consider how they will manage this sensitive situation: such children may have wished to participate and may, consequently, feel excluded.

While researchers will need to be guided by the requirements placed upon them by the local context with regard to accessing children (e.g. any conditions set out by the head teacher of a school), it is of primary importance that, where possible, children themselves have the right to decide about their participation in research. It may be therefore that the best strategy for accessing children is to send an opt-out letter home to parents/guardians (i.e. parents/guardians only reply if they wish their child *not* to participate) rather than an opt-in letter,

with care taken to ensure that such letters are translated, where appropriate. This approach means that the decision about whether to participate is more likely to be made by children themselves.

Negotiating consent with children and young people

Carrying out any research with children and young people necessitates obtaining children's and young people's informed consent. However the nature and meaning of informed consent in respect of children, and the ways in which this can be achieved, needs to be considered carefully. For example, if children are asked whether they wish to participate in research taking place at school, researchers need to consider the extent to which children may feel obliged to give consent, in a context structured by relations of authority between the children and adults in which they may often feel disenfranchised. In addition, in any context, researchers need to consider how the traditional authority relations between adults and children might be mitigated, so that children's consent can be given freely. This point is particularly pertinent when working with research assistants/translators who may not be as familiar with the principles of childhood research as the researcher and thus may reinforce traditional adult-child relations. Providing such assistants with training over a period of time before the research begins may help to address the problem somewhat.

Given such difficulties, consent should be seen as an ongoing process and as something that is renegotiated verbally at each stage of the research. This enables children to withdraw from the research at any time should they wish to do so. Since children are often less familiar with what research entails they may initially wish to participate but later feel less keen as they get to know what is involved. Consideration needs to be given, therefore, to ways in which children can be made to feel comfortable with ending their involvement in the research should they choose to do so. In research with toddlers and babies this becomes especially important since obtaining their informed consent may not be possible. Researchers need to consider what non-verbal signs and cues from very young children might indicate their enthusiasm or reluctance to be involved.

While obtaining verbal consent is often sufficient, and perhaps preferable in qualitative research, researchers need to consider when it might be appropriate or necessary to also obtain children's written consent. Sometimes this may be a formal requirement set out by gate-keepers. At other times – when photographs of children are to be taken as part of the research process for example – obtaining written consent from both children and their parents may be advisable in the light of concerns about child protection and privacy issues. If the research is to use and publish children's artwork, researchers should consider whether verbal and/or written consent for this is also desirable. Many children may wish to see their published artwork attributed to them, raising further issues in relation to questions of anonymity (see below).

However, there is also a need to acknowledge that in some communities obtaining written consent could be difficult for a number of reasons. Firstly, research with a group of people where the culture is more oral than written, obtaining written consent may be quite impossible. Second, some young people may be very articulate with the spoken word but struggle when it comes to reading and writing. Furthermore, depending on the issue being researched, participants may be reluctant to provide written consent; for example when researching street children's everyday lives children may hesitate about providing written consent as some of the activities that form part of their everyday lives may be illegal.

In some social and cultural contexts ethical concerns may arise when parents or other adults may have given their consent and children may feel unable, therefore to refuse to

participate in the project. Continuing to negotiate consent with children throughout the project can help overcome this issue and if the researcher feels that the children's refusal to participate in the project may get them into trouble with their parents/guardians then one strategy may be just talk to them generally for a while before leaving.

Of course, decisions about informed consent and the process for obtaining it will vary according to the age of the children or young people involved in the research, and the nature of the research.

What constitutes informed consent?

Informed consent depends on how adequately the research - its funding, aims, methods, dissemination, etc. - has been explained to potential participants. How, then, can researchers ensure that young children understand what the research involves and what, therefore, they are consenting to? Researchers need to consider how best to tell children and young people about the research and whether, for example, information leaflets about the research, need to be produced in different formats for different age-groups of children, or whether a group discussion is a better means of explaining a research project. Consideration needs to be given to the use of age appropriate language and visual images so that children and young people can easily access the information about the research, ask questions and understand their involvement. Researchers need also to consider whether they have left sufficient time for children and young people to think about their involvement before agreeing.

Anonymity, confidentiality and safeguarding

The reasons for the anonymising of research participants in publications will need to be explained to children who may often wish to have their own names used. Researchers may wish to encourage children and young people to choose their own pseudonyms to overcome this problem. Anonymity is not *always* necessary and the decisions about this will need to be negotiated with everyone involved, including some loss of confidentiality in research reporting.

Confidentiality needs also to be explained to children and young people in terms that they understand and researchers need to consider the extent to which confidentiality can be fully assured in the event of issues around safeguarding and child protection arising during the research process.. Consideration needs to be given to a form of words that can be used to explain to children that, if they choose to reveal something to the researchers that raises concern, then their confidentiality will need to be breached. Researchers need also to plan, prior to the commencement of the research, how any safeguarding issues will be dealt with.

However, there is a need to explore this further as in some cultural contexts safeguarding is discussed at a very different level, if at all. Therefore, although children may disclose issues that raise concern, there may be few or no avenues for researchers to report this. There may be no effective child protection system and the authorities may have different views on child protection. For example, in a country where the physical punishment of children is not prohibited by law, but instead, is encouraged by legislation and also by authorities, researchers will have few avenues to report abuse if they come across it. Researchers will need to think of how best to handle this scenario before they embark on the research. Seeking the advice of international agencies such as UNICEF, Save the Children and PLAN International as well as local organisations before embarking on data collection on sensitive issues would be useful for the researcher.

Participatory research practices

In the context of an increased awareness about children's rights and in the light of increasing ethical concerns about power imbalances in the research process, especially in research with children and young people, participatory research practices are becoming increasingly common. While these may alleviate some ethical concerns, new ones may arise. Researchers need, for example, to consider the disadvantages, as well as advantages of participatory research methods for children and young people themselves. Are such methods necessarily and always child-friendly? Are they appropriate for use with all children? Might children be inadvertently excluded from a participatory activity because of a physical disability or learning difficulty? How might their participation in the research impact on children and young people's everyday lives in terms of revealing new knowledge or raising questions for them?

Visual data

The use of film and still photographs in research with children is gaining in popularity. Children are often asked to take photos and are also the 'subject' of photos taken by researchers and others involved in a project. Sensitive thought and careful negotiation needs to be put into the use of all images that feature children and young people: might the image be misused if it falls into the wrong hands; what are the dangers of images posted on the web being maliciously manipulated for exploitative purposes; might the young person be later embarrassed by the picture? These and other questions have sometimes been resolved by pixilating images of children's faces, even if full consent of everyone involved has been given. Researchers need to consider their reason for using photographs and film of children and, if they feel the need to pixilate, they may need to reconsider the usefulness of such methods and choose an alternative. Use of images in dissemination needs careful thought and negotiation.

Payment for participation?

Researchers need to consider whether children and young people should be paid for giving up their time to participate in research. Some researchers might consider giving monetary payments while others choose might to give small gifts as a way of thanking children for their participation.

Dissemination

Although the main audience for our research may well be fellow academics, interested professionals and other adults, it is always important that research subjects should be able to see, and understand, the results of their investment of time in participation. How will the research results be disseminated to the children and young people involved, and to other children and young people more generally? What is the best format? Verbal presentations? Written material? How should one decide which is the best format? These are important questions, which should, if possible, be considered at the beginning of the research (not least because they form part of the information on which informed consent depends).

Further reading

Alderson, P. (1995) *Listening to Children. Children, Ethics and Social Research*, London: Barnardos.

Morrow, V. and Richards, M. (1996) 'The ethics of social research with children: an overview', *Children and Society* 10:90–105.

Nutbrown, C. (2011) 'Naked by the pool? Blurring the image? Ethical issues in the Portrayal of Young Children in Arts-Based Educational Research', *Qualitative Inquiry*, 17, 3, 3–14.