

NSPCC Research Ethics Committee: Guidance for applicants

The REC exists to help make sure research undertaken for, or in partnership with, the NSPCC is the best it can be. We make sure research planned appropriately, safely and ethically. The aim of the NSPCC ethical review process is to provide a thorough, impartial examination of the ethical issues in a collaborative and proportionate way in order to facilitate safe and ethical research.

Having a central body that all research comes through within NSPCC means that we are learning from research undertaken to inform future research.

NSPCC responsibility for ethical approval rests with the Director of Strategy, Policy and Evidence, as the member of the Executive Board. Although ethical approval that a research project, as planned, meets ethical guidelines, applicants should remember that ultimate responsibility for studies being conducted in an ethical way rests solely with individual researchers and their managers.

In practice, applicants are:

- expected to follow the REC's recommendations and to work with the REC to adapt proposals so that they satisfy the committee that they are in accordance with the agreed principles - outlined in this guidance.
- expected to, where they **cannot** follow the REC's recommendations, actively engage with the REC to seek an agreement on the best way to conduct the research ethically.

In the event that an applicant and the REC cannot agree, a decision about whether the research can proceed and on what basis will be taken by the Director of Strategy, Policy and Evidence.

Who is this guidance aimed at?

This guidance is for any external researcher who is looking to do research for or with the NSPCC and for any NSPCC staff who are engaging in research activities. If after reading the guidance you have further questions, the list below clarifies who you should contact. If you are:

- an external researcher, not commissioned or associated with the NSPCC, wishing to access NSPCC staff, service users or data, please direct all queries to researchadvice@nspcc.org.uk
- external researchers and research organisations commissioned by the NSPCC to

conduct work, please direct your queries to your NSPCC project manager or link person

- A NSPCC staff member or volunteer conducting research as part of your role with the NSPCC, please follow the internal NSPCC research governance process outlined on the Green and direct your queries to your manager and researchadvice@nspcc.org.uk
- NSPCC staff or a volunteer conducting research that is not part of your role with the NSPCC, but wishing to access NSPCC staff, service users or data (e.g. a Masters or PhD research project), please direct your queries to researchadvice@nspcc.org.uk

Research Ethics Committee Governance and the NSPCC

The Research Ethics Committee is an advisory body with an external chair and a majority of external members, which makes recommendations to the NSPCC.

Research within the remit of the NSPCC REC

The NSPCC considers research to be:

- ‘the systematic application of qualitative and quantitative methods to investigate issues affecting children, young people and others, including the problem of child maltreatment and how it can be overcome’.
- The outcome of research is knowledge, contributing to the evidence we need to end child cruelty and to promote the rights of children and young people.
- Most of the research within the NSPCC is empirical work based on information gained from people through surveys, case file analysis, focus groups, interviews or observations and controlled trials, but can also include desk based research activities such as literature/evidence reviews and secondary data analysis.

Interventions that are the subject of research or evaluation will not themselves be ethically reviewed.

Research to be submitted to the NSPCC REC:

1. Research which involves NSPCC staff, service users or data, regardless of who¹ undertakes the research
2. Research commissioned by the NSPCC, except literature reviews
3. Research undertaken by NSPCC staff as part of their official role, except literature

¹ Including NSPCC staff, external researchers and students

reviews

Deciding what to submit to the NSPCC REC

There are three different categories of paperwork that could be submitted to the NSPCC.

- A minimal risk form, if the research meets certain criteria;
- A copy of a Health Research Authority (HRA) or Social Care Research Ethics Committee (SCIE) application and approval form;
- or a full REC application for all other forms of research in scope.

The guidance below covers, in general, what type of paperwork to submit and the review process for that paperwork. If a researcher is unsure what to submit, please contact researchadvice@nspcc.org.uk.

Minimal Risk form and criteria for use

Applicants need to consider a number of questions to determine if their study represents more than minimal risk. These questions are outlined in the table in Appendix 1, and include consideration of the topics to be covered, potential distress to participants, and the vulnerability of participants.

NSPCC staff responsible for ethical review will review this form and determine if the project represents more than minimal risk. In the event NSPCC staff are unavailable for review, the REC chair will review minimal risk forms. The minimal risk forms submitted, and decisions made, will be reviewed at each REC meeting. Research involving sensitive issues will need a full ethics application. *Completed minimal risk forms should be submitted to researchadvice@nspcc.org.uk at any time for review.*

Health Research Authority (HRA)/ Social Care Research Ethics Committee review

If a study is to be submitted to the HRA², the application needs to be reviewed (prior to submission) by a NSPCC safeguarding manager to ensure they comply with the organisation's child protection and safeguarding policies. For NSPCC staff, this should be their directorate's safeguarding lead. For all others, please contact researchadvice@nspcc.org.uk for an appropriate contact to review the application.

When the research has been approved by HRA or SCIE, the NSPCC REC should be provided with a copy of the application and all correspondence, including confirmation from the appropriate NSPCC safeguarding lead that safeguarding issues have been appropriately addressed. *This paperwork can be sent to researchadvice@nspcc.org.uk at any time.*

² <https://www.hra.nhs.uk/planning-and-improving-research/policies-standards-legislation/social-care-research/>

Full applications

All other research requires a full application (see Appendix 2) to the NSPCC REC, even if it is being submitted to a university REC or other external REC. Applicants with research studies of this nature should seek research ethics approval from the external REC first before applying to the NSPCC REC.

Applicants should note that they are required to submit information leaflets and consent forms, as well as interview schedules and questionnaires. For standardised measures, please ensure your application describes the main topics covered by the measure, the age range it has been developed for and standardised on and an overview of how common its use is and in what contexts. Applicants will not necessarily need to submit the standardised measures themselves unless they are unusual, very new or cover sensitive topics, however, it would be useful to provide web-links to the instruments.

All research, whether conducted by NSPCC staff, external researchers or students, should have the following prior to being submitted to the REC.

1. Appropriate approvals from the NSPCC directorate(s) involved, including from the director for the Strategy, Policy and Evidence Directorate.
2. Review by the compliance team (see data privacy and GDPR compliance section below).
3. If young people are involved in the research, the project will also need review by the NSPCC participation team (Participationteam@nspcc.org.uk).

Applications without these approvals will not be reviewed by the Research Ethics Committee. If an applicant is unclear about the approval process for specific directorates, they should contact researchadvice@nspcc.org.uk

Full applications must be submitted to the NSPCC REC at least two weeks prior to a committee meeting. Please contact researchadvice@nspcc.org.uk for committee dates and deadlines for submission.

Full Application Review Process

Applications will be discussed at a REC meeting. The REC will, at the end of the discussion, make one of the following recommendations:

- that the study goes ahead as planned;
- that the study should go ahead, but amendments and/or additional information will need to be submitted and approved via chair's actions before the study commences;
- that the study should not go ahead as it stands, but should be re-submitted to be considered at a full REC once concerns raised have been addressed;

- that the study should not go ahead and would have to be substantially reformulated before it would be reconsidered at a full REC meeting.

In some, very limited cases, applicants may be invited to attend a REC meeting in person or by phone to discuss issues that have been raised during the review of the application. It is anticipated that most applicants will not need to attend a REC meeting. The aim of the discussion with the applicant and NSPCC REC will be to agree a way forward so that the research can progress.

It is anticipated that most applications will not need to return to a full NSPCC REC meeting. A letter confirming the committee's recommendations will be sent to the applicant after the meeting. The applicant should expect the letter approximately one week after the committee meeting. The applicant can discuss with the chair any issues arising from the implementation of the agreed amendments outside the REC, who will decide whether the issues need to be discussed further at a full REC meeting.

Once approved and underway, the chair should also be informed of subsequent changes to the design, and will advise on whether the changes are substantial enough to require any further REC review. Applicants can contact the REC chair through researchadvice@nspcc.org.uk.

Data privacy and GDPR compliance

Applicants should note that although the NSPCC REC will consider how the research will keep data secure and obtain informed ethical consent, approval by the REC does not mean that the research is compliant with data privacy and GDPR requirements for processing personal data. It is the applicant's responsibility to ensure their research is compliant. The applicant should consult with their organisation's compliance/data protection team on these matters, including the lawful basis for the processing of personal data. If the applicant is an NSPCC employee, they should contact the NSPCC compliance team who will review their application for GDPR compliance. All applicants must inform the NSPCC's compliance team of their research and the lawful basis for processing of personal information. The applicant should also note that compliance with data privacy and GDPR requirements does not mean the research meets ethical standards.

The NSPCC compliance team can be contacted at dataprotectionofficer@nspcc.org.uk

Principles and practice

The NSPCC research ethics policy is based on the ESRC³ Framework for Research Ethics (FRE) and the Government Social Research Unit (GSRU)⁴ professional guidance. This guide for applications sets out the key principles contained in those frameworks and provides practical guidance about implementing them in the NSPCC context.

However, this document is not a substitute for the ESRC Framework or the GSRU guidance, and applicants should ensure they are familiar with both documents before applying for research ethics approval.

The aim of the ethical review process is to facilitate high quality, ethical research. The NSPCC REC is committed to working in a collaborative way; it is not trying to 'catch out' applicants but instead is aiming to help researchers think through the ethical issues and find appropriate solutions. The assumption will be that all applicants are intending to conduct their research ethically, even if in some cases the committee and the researchers need to discuss the best way of doing that. Views on how the ethical principles listed below should be implemented will differ from researcher to researcher, and committee member to committee member, and there may be no absolute right or wrong approach. While the committee will want to make sure that the principles are adhered to – for example making sure that informed consent is sought - in the main it will be looking for evidence that the researchers have carefully considered the issues and come to reasonable conclusions that uphold the rights, welfare and dignity of participants. The committee will also want to satisfy itself that the researchers understand the need to keep ethical principles in mind throughout the study and be confident that, should ethical issues arise, the researchers will act in an appropriate way. Therefore, it is important that applicants discuss the reasoning behind their decisions as well as describing the systems and processes they have put into place to ensure well conducted ethical research.

The five principles underlying the NSPCC's ethical policy are:

Principle 1: Voluntary participation based on valid informed consent.

Principle 2: Enabling participation where possible and avoiding the systematic exclusion of particular sections of society

Principle 3: Avoidance of personal and social harm to participants and researchers

Principle 4: Non-disclosure of identity and personal information

Principle 5: Ethical application and conduct of research methods

³ <https://esrc.ukri.org/files/funding/guidance-for-applicants/esrc-framework-for-research-ethics-2015/>

⁴ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/515296/ethics_guidance_tcm6-5782.pdf

These principles are explored below with a focus on the implications for putting them into practice.

Principle 1: Voluntary participation based on valid informed ethical consent.

For the vast majority of projects, a key principle of ethical research is that the participants in the research should agree to participate voluntarily on the basis of adequate information. It is important to remember that this is not a one-off decision, but an ongoing process and researchers need to have appropriate checks to make sure that an individual is still happy to participate. For instance, if some time has passed between a first and second interview, it is appropriate to check that the participant is happy to take part in the second interview, even if formal consent for the whole process had been sought and given at the beginning. Similarly, it should be made clear to participants that even if they have given consent at the beginning of the process, they are entitled to decline to answer any particular question, without giving a reason, and are entitled to decide not to take part at any point, again without giving a reason, and can ask for their data to be removed from the study where practical.

Thought must also be given to the capacity of a participant to consent; this will depend on their level of understanding and the potential risks and benefits of taking part in research. In most instances, consent should be sought from young people and children, and consent also obtained from a parent, guardian, carer or other appropriate adult having a duty of care toward the child. For younger children, it is appropriate to gain consent from their parent, guardian, carer or other appropriate adult with a duty of care toward the child and then obtain assent from the child.

In general, the following guidance may be helpful, but **in all cases the researcher should justify their approach to ethical consent:**

- As a general principle, while third parties (parents or guardians for example) may be asked to consent on behalf of a child or young person, or in partnership with them, a child or young person's refusal of assent or consent should *always* over-rule the parent's or guardian's consent to take part in the research.
- For children under 8, ethical consent should be sought from the parent, guardian, carer or other appropriate adult with a duty of care.; Assent or consent should also be sought from the child. Assent or consent, whichever is the most appropriate given the child's cognitive ability and the nature of the research, should also be sought from the children using age appropriate information and support. In research, the child's wishes should be paramount, therefore if a child does not consent or assent to participate this overrides the consent from the parent, guardian, carer or other appropriate adult with a duty of care.

- For young people aged between 8 and 15, in most cases, ethical consent should be sought from the young person and the parent, guardian, carer or other appropriate adult with a duty of care.
 - o There are situations in which it may be appropriate for only the young person's consent to be sought, for example, the young person has independently accessed a service being evaluated or researched. Researchers will have to justify this and also to establish that the young person is competent and has enough information to make this decision; as part of this process, the researcher will have to satisfy themselves that the young person is "Gillick" competent⁵.
- For young people aged 8 to 15 with a learning disability, but with sufficient capacity to consent, the NSPCC REC would expect consent to be handled as with other 8 to 15 year olds. For young people aged 8 to 15 with a learning disability who do not have sufficient capacity to consent, consent should be obtained from the parent, guardian, carer or other appropriate adult with duty of care, and assent should be sought from the young person.
- For young people aged 16 or 17, the assumption is that they have capacity to consent and it is appropriate to gain their consent and a presumption that in most cases, parental consent is not required. Regardless of this presumption, the researcher should consider whether or not it is appropriate also to obtain consent from the parent, guardian, carer or other appropriate adult with a duty of care. When making this determination, the researcher should consider situations where the vulnerability of the young person or the sensitivity of the issue might make it appropriate to obtain parental consent. The researcher should also consider if they do not seek parental consent, if it is appropriate to require that parents are informed of the research. The researcher should carefully consider and justify their approach.
- If a young person aged 16 or 17 has a learning difficulty, but still has sufficient capacity to consent, the NSPCC REC would expect consent to be handled as with other 16 or 17 year olds, but with a clear process that ensures the young person is supported in the consent process if needed. If a young person aged 16 or 17 does not have capacity to consent, they are covered by the Mental Capacity Act (2007) and third party consent **cannot** be sought. In such a situation, an application for

⁵ Some resources for assessing Gillick Competency are: <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/child-protection-system/legal-definition-child-rights-law/gillick-competency-fraser-guidelines/> <https://www.cqc.org.uk/guidance-providers/gps/nigels-surgery-8-gillick-competency-fraser-guidelines> <https://www.lindsaygeorge.co.uk/blog/is-a-young-person-gillick-competent/>

ethical approval must be made to the Social Care REC

(<http://www.scie.org.uk/research/ethics-committee/index.asp>)

- Ethical consent should be considered separately from the lawful basis for processing personal data under GDPR, which may be consent⁶.

Disclosure

Whilst maintaining confidentiality is a priority, one of the key issues for research conducted within the context of the NSPCC is around the issue of the disclosure of child protection concerns, or other safeguarding issues relating to adults at risk. The concerns could be triggered by what children or adults recruited into the research study say or write, although the concern could also be generated through observation. The NSPCC's policy is that if researchers become aware of such concerns then they have a responsibility to act on the information and pass it on to a relevant organisation, which in most cases will be the NSPCC helpline. NSPCC staff must follow the NSPCC's safeguarding procedures and external researchers will need to be clear which procedures they will follow. To obtain a copy of NSPCC safeguarding guidelines, please contact researchadvice@nspcc.org.uk.

It is vital that the need for disclosure of safeguarding concerns is made clear to participants as part of the consent process, so that participants know what the boundaries of confidentiality are. Researchers should also have clear protocols around when confidentiality may be broken, including;

1. guidance about what constitutes information that should be discussed with a third party;
2. what the researcher should do within a data collection setting if they become aware of information that should be passed on, including how they will communicate with the participant about the process they will be following;
3. who the researcher should report the information to; and
4. what the process is for deciding whether the information should be passed on.

Researchers conducting studies involving practitioners should also consider what should happen in cases where poor practice comes to light. Whatever approach is chosen, this should be included in the information given to participants when they are asked for consent to participate, in order that consent to participate is informed.

Please also see the section below on publication for a further discussion of issues relating to confidentiality.

⁶ <https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/guide-to-data-protection/guide-to-the-general-data-protection-regulation-gdpr/lawful-basis-for-processing/>

Consent process

Another important issue the REC will consider is the process by which ethical consent is obtained, including who asks for it and how and when they ask, as well as any materials given to participants to support the process. It is normal practice to provide information leaflets about the research, and these need to be tailored so that they are appropriate to the participant, in an easily understandable form that uses lay language rather than technical terms and jargon. In some cases, this will mean it is necessary to produce several versions of an information leaflet. For example, research that involves children and young people with a wide variety of ages or cognitive abilities may need a range of information sheets. Similarly, consent forms, where they are used, need to be tailored to the participant group. Researchers may want to use the Flesch-Kincaid⁷ test to aid in the readability of their consent and information sheets.

The appropriateness, or otherwise, of obtaining written versus oral consent is likely to vary between projects⁸. Researchers should assess which method is most appropriate for their project, and clearly justify the proposed approach to obtaining consent in the ethics application form. Please note that, for studies being assessed by the HRA that has specific expectations for consent researchers should comply with the HRA's guidelines for obtaining consent. For studies assessed by other external RECs (other charities or universities), the NSPCC REC consent guidelines should be followed

Written consent provides researchers with some assurance against accusations of failing to secure informed consent (see the Social Research Association [SRA] guidance⁹). For this reason, it has become relatively common practice, perhaps more so in qualitative research rather than in surveys. However, it should be noted that written consent is not always a necessary requirement for ethical research, though typically it is expected. In some cases, it could be seen to undermine the ongoing process of ensuring consent. This happens if people feel that by signing a consent form they are 'obliged' to continue to take part or answer particular questions when they are not comfortable doing so¹⁰. It may have the unintended consequence of placing barriers to participation for those with literacy problems or those finding the process of written consent too 'official'. And, of course, for some interview modes, for example by telephone, written consent raises a series of practical difficulties.

⁷ Guidance on how to use the built-in function in Word <https://support.office.com/en-us/article/test-your-document-s-readability-85b4969e-e80a-4777-8dd3-f7fc3c8b3fd2>

⁸ These guidelines draw on a discussion of informed consent within NatCen Social Research's internal research ethics guidelines.

⁹ See section 4.2 in: <http://the-sra.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/ethics03.pdf>

¹⁰ See Department of Health Archive for guidelines questioning of assumption that written consent equates with fully informed consent:
http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+/www.dh.gov.uk/prod_consum_dh/groups/dh_digitalassets/@dh/@en/documents/digitalasset/dh_4019079.pdf

If researchers opt for verbal consent, they should consider how to put in place mechanisms for recording that verbal consent has been given. Where interviews are being recorded, verbal consent can be recorded; for survey interviews, researchers or interviewers can be prompted to code that consent has been sought, and if appropriate, to code that leaflets have been given, etc. Of course, this is not 'proof' of consent, but rather helps to ensure that the researcher or interviewer is prompted to make all appropriate steps to explain and obtain consent, and record that they have done so. It may be of particular importance where the researcher may not be carrying out all the interviews themselves.

Likewise, where researchers opt for written consent, it is important that they consider how to ensure this method does not compromise the process of ongoing consent or place barriers to participation. It is also important to consider the timing of gaining consent and to make efforts to ensure that participants have the time and space to reflect on whether they want to take part.

Gatekeepers

It is often necessary and appropriate for researchers to make contact with participants through 'gatekeepers' who have immediate access to the research participants. The role and position of gatekeepers can vary enormously, from a personal assistant of a busy professional, to teachers in schools and prison officers. In managing these varying situations, researchers need to consider the particular relationship between the gatekeeper and the individual being recruited. Where a gatekeeper is in a position of power with respect to the potential research participants, a teacher for example, a situation might arise where potential participants feel coerced, or at least pressurised, to take part in research. Another potential problem is that gatekeepers may not explain the research to potential participants very well, so the initial decision to take part in a study is not on a fully informed basis. Researchers will need to consider how best to ensure that the potential participant does understand what taking part involves, and that they have done so freely by going through a thorough process to ensure consent is informed and voluntary before the study commences. The researchers will also need to consider how continuing consent or assent is obtained and how withdrawal from the study is facilitated. A particular issue that will need to be addressed when gatekeepers are service providers is to ensure that potential participants do not think that the service they will receive will be affected by whether or not they agree to take part in the research or evaluation.

Incentives

This is particularly of relevance when participation might be considered onerous, for instance a long interview or questionnaire that would average more than 45-60 minutes or participation in qualitative research involving interviews and focus groups. The NSPCC's position is that the use of incentives, including financial incentives, is legitimate but staff should look on the NSPCC internal website for more guidance. The REC will expect, if incentives are to be used, that the application will set out the appropriateness of incentives for the research participants involved in the study.

Research participants should be made aware that these payments may impact upon their entitlement to benefits and when appropriate they should be advised to check that they can receive the payment without any negative impact. This is particularly the case where you are using participant researchers as this might be seen to constitute remunerative work, given the higher level of incentive that would be offered. This may also potentially count as unavailability for work, which could also affect benefits. Participants must be made aware of these potential issues in the participant information sheet.

- Details of incentives must also appear in the participant information sheet and should be made known to potential participants before they consent to take part. One off incentives must not be dependent upon completing their participation in the research, so that they would still receive the incentive if they were to withdraw early from the study.

REC applications should make clear what form incentives take. If the incentives are cash and not vouchers, this must be justified.

Deception and obtaining consent after data collection has started

For some studies, most often observational studies, it may not be possible to obtain consent prior to participation without compromising the quality of the research. An example of this is an evaluation where an integral part of the study is to observe what happens during the course of the intervention (e.g. a training programme), necessarily without the professional and/or the participants being aware that they are being observed.

For these studies, researchers need to explain clearly in the ethics application form why prior consent is not possible, why the research still needs to go ahead and how the issue will be dealt with after data collection. In these cases, it is vital to ensure that the NSPCC compliance team has reviewed how the research will comply with data protection requirements, including the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR), and agrees that the research is compliant with these regulations.

In some cases, it may be feasible to obtain consent from some parties (e.g. the professionals) and not others (e.g. the participants). If so, consent should be sought from whoever it is feasible to do so. Where it is not possible to obtain informed consent before data collection, it is normally possible to obtain it afterwards and, if so, this should be done as soon as possible. Mechanisms should be put in place to remove someone's data if they retrospectively decline to give their consent.

The British Psychological Society (BPS¹¹) and Social Research Association (SRA¹²;) ethical guidance outlines measures that must be considered within research designs where observation of participants is taking place without their prior consent or knowledge. These include: restricting observations to situations where the people being studied would reasonably expect to be observed by strangers, always considering the local cultural values and privacy of individuals, and placing clear and legible signs in the area where observation is taking place.

If using covert observation, researchers should familiarise themselves with the Human Rights Act 1998. Of particular relevance is Article 8 concerning the right to respect for private and family life.

Principle 2: Enabling participation where possible and avoiding the systematic exclusion of particular sections of society

It is important that applicants consider how they can facilitate participation and do not systematically exclude individuals because of communication, understanding, access or financial expense. Researchers should consider the subtle ways in which people with particular social, religious, educational, gender or sexual identity, or cultural backgrounds can be excluded, and researchers should be alert to this and devise appropriate strategies to overcome these obstacles.

While not every study can include all sections of society, researchers should be aware that a number of tools and strategies are available to facilitate participation, some of which are outlined below. Additional information can be found in SRA¹³ guidance and Office of Disability Issues¹⁴ guidance.

- Researchers should consider translating research tools and supporting documents for non-English speakers.
- Researchers should consider using interpreters to facilitate participation, but recognise that the use of interpreters for interviews can greatly add to the burden for a participant as they may take much longer.
- Researchers should consider how they may need to adapt their research to take into

¹¹ Code: <https://www.bps.org.uk/news-and-policy/bps-code-ethics-and-conduct>

¹² <http://the-sra.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/ethics03.pdf>

¹³ <http://the-sra.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/ethics03.pdf>

¹⁴

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/321254/involving-disabled-people-in-social-research.pdf

account literacy issues and learning difficulties.

- Researchers should consider access to the facilities where the research is taking place, both in the ease at which participants can travel to the facility and any mobility issues that may need to be taken into account.
- Researchers should consider reimbursement of costs incurred by participants, such as travel and subsistence.
- Researchers should consider the timing of interviews and focus groups, considering not only the time of day but also day of the week.
- Researchers should consider if the design of the research may exclude certain groups. For example, Lesbian, Gay, Bi-Sexual, Trans and Questioning (LGBTQ+) participants may need specific recruitment strategies, or studies of parents may need specific recruitment samples to ensure fathers are represented.
- Researchers should consider if particular groups or individuals may have a preference for an interviewer of a specific gender, ethnic background or age.
- Researchers should also consider whether research participants may have caring responsibilities and how that might impact on their participation.

Principle 3: Avoidance of personal and social harm to participants and researchers

Avoiding personal and social harm to participants and researchers is the key aim of the ethical principles and guidelines. However, the REC recognises that the risk of causing harm or upset can never be entirely mitigated. Therefore, the committee will be looking for evidence that researchers have reduced the risk as much as possible and that the remaining risk is justified given the research question and research design¹⁵. In addition, the REC will want to know what measures have been put into place to address the impact of any harm or upset, for example through the provision of support services or advice. Researchers should pay particular attention to issues related to the availability of support, for instance scheduling an interview when the support service suggested is closed.

For social research, the main risk to participants is causing emotional or psychological distress. This can be linked to a number of issues, including:

- vulnerable individuals can find participating in research stressful per se;

¹⁵ The following article provides a framework for assessing. Emanuel EJ, Wendler D, Grady C. What Makes Clinical Research Ethical? *JAMA*. 2000;283(20):2701–2711. doi:10.1001/jama.283.20.2701

- the research may 'reawaken' old feelings or memories;
- the research may uncover hidden or suppressed feelings;
- the research may create additional concerns;
- the participant may be concerned about what they have shared.

While there are a range of ways in which research can cause distress, it does not mean that the distress is necessarily harmful. Indeed, such research can open up the possibility of identifying issues, which can be addressed to the participant's benefit. Challenging situations are also not exclusive to research and may not involve any greater stress than is commonly experienced in day-to-day life or in the interventions which are being evaluated. If the questions being asked are appropriate for the research, the stress or distress that is likely to be experienced as a result of the research is not excessive, and the participant has given their informed consent, then it would normally be considered ethical to ask them.

Participants may also become upset when discussing difficult or sensitive issues, but nevertheless feel that the research is important and even part of the process of coming to terms with the issue on a personal level. It is also important that participants are allowed to contribute to research that may benefit others rather than directly benefiting themselves, if they do so in an informed and voluntary manner through a proper process of consent. Therefore, the possibility of someone becoming upset, or the fact of a participant actually becoming upset, does not necessarily mean the research should not go ahead or should stop as long as the participant is clear that they wish to continue and the situation is handled sensitively and appropriate support is in place. In some cases, shutting down appropriate expressions of emotion can also have a negative impact on participants.

Assessing and managing risk

In order to assess the risk of participants becoming distressed, and the risk that the distress results in harm, researchers will need to consider how vulnerable participants are likely to be, how sensitive the research topic is, the appropriateness and acceptability of the research instruments and how much burden the data collection is likely to place on the participant given the context in which it is occurring. In order to help mitigate the risk, researchers should consider how they can make sure participants are prepared for participation (as part of the informed consent process), how data collection can be minimised to reduce distress (for example through taking appropriate breaks or leaving gaps between episodes of data collection), positioning of sensitive questions in a topic guide or questionnaire, and providing support services or contact information depending on the likelihood and degree of distress caused. If support or helpline numbers are being provided, researchers will need to make sure interviews are scheduled at a time when the services will be available after the interview. Often, this will mean avoiding conducting interviews on Friday afternoons, as many services are closed at the weekends.

Consideration should also be given to where it may be appropriate to provide information or encourage participants to seek help in the case where an unmet need is disclosed, for example a mental health need such as depression. Researchers should also consider

the venue where the research will take place, and the impact this may have on mitigating or exacerbating any distress that participants may feel.

It is good policy to consider debriefing participants at the end of the study, or stressful situations, in order to identify any participant needs and refer them to appropriate help or allay fears. A “Thank you leaflet” containing information and contact details on help and support is particularly useful and should be given to all participants.

Qualitative research

While all of these issues apply to both quantitative and qualitative research, qualitative research brings additional risks because of the nature of the data collection. This is because qualitative research will often go into more depth than an equivalent quantitative approach and there is more scope for discussing issues that have not been anticipated by either the researcher or participant. There are two key ways in which this additional risk can be minimised. The first is by structuring interview schedules or topic guides so that the more sensitive material is in the middle of the interview, and participants are given a chance to return to a more ‘normal’ level of conversation at the end of the interview. The second is by ensuring that the interview remains focussed on the research topic, but recognises that sometimes participants may need to talk about less difficult topics before coming back to a more sensitive topic. Participants who are allowed to discuss sensitive or traumatic issues that are not related to the topic of the research often feel embarrassed and distressed afterwards at having inappropriately disclosed. Researchers conducting qualitative interviews also need to make sure that the boundary between a research interview and counselling is rigorously maintained, even when the researcher is also a trained counsellor. However, a debrief with the participant after the interview can be an appropriate way of helping to manage any feelings prompted by the interview and for the researcher to gauge whether additional information or support would be appropriate.

A final point worth noting about harm to participants is that while gaining informed consent is crucial, this does not absolve researchers from considering the risk of harm. In some cases, particularly for children or very vulnerable individuals, the researcher may have a better understanding of what is likely to cause harm than the participant. In these cases, researchers are required to act upon that knowledge, irrespective of whether the participant has agreed to take part in the research. This action could take many forms, including the researcher discussing with the participant that they not take part in the research.

Risk to researchers

The main risks to researchers in conducting research are that they can become distressed or upset (in the most extreme cases they can suffer from vicarious trauma), that they suffer physical injury or financial loss. These risks are present during a research encounter, but potentially also on the journey to and from the location where the research is to take place. The main ways in which this risk is mitigated is through having a robust risk assessment process that involves on-going risk assessment by the researcher, and

by ensuring that an appropriate and adequate level of internal or external support is available for the researcher before, during and after the data collection.

Researchers should also consider their own physical safety, especially when working outside of the workplace or at unsocial times. Researcher's organisations may have their own policy for lone working. In addition, the Social Research Association has a Code of Practice for the Safety of Researchers (see SRA research ethics guidelines¹⁶) and The Suzy Lamplugh Trust¹⁷ also provide advice on ensuring the safety of lone workers.

Principle 4: Non-disclosure of identity and personal information

Although there are limits to confidentiality, in particular in the case of child protection issues, in general a participant's personal information and their identity should not be disclosed. This confidentiality should operate on at least two levels:

1. Within an organisation. Only those people who need to know a participant's identity and personal information should do so. Normally, this will be only those within the immediate research team.
2. Beyond the organisation conducting the research. Findings that are published or made available to others will need to be written in such a way as to ensure that personal information and identities are not disclosed. This includes attention to the selection of quotes in reports. Where this is not possible, for example in the case where there are a small number of potential participants who could have taken part in the research, the limits to confidentiality should be made clear to participants before they participate and the proposed dissemination approach discussed.

Researchers should also have appropriate processes and procedures in place to ensure data security in line with the General Data Protection Regulations.

Principle 5: Ethical application and conduct of research methods

While the scholarly or scientific standards or merits of the research are not the responsibility of the NSPCC REC, some methodological issues can have an ethical dimension and these should be considered. Designs that are fatally flawed or that contain an inherent bias, to the extent that the research would be misleading or damaging, will not be approved. Researchers should pay particular attention to ensuring that the risk of harm or upset is justified by the research findings. Researchers should demonstrate in their applications how their research will make a contribution to gaps in the evidence base or will be useful in policy and practice. Researchers also need to justify their research design and demonstrate that it is suitable and robust for the issues

¹⁶ <http://the-sra.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/ethics03.pdf>

¹⁷ www.suzylamplugh.org

under research. Finally, researchers should clearly explain how they are appropriately trained and experienced to undertake this particular research.

Complaints procedure

In addition to complying with the above principles, procedures should be in place to facilitate participants making complaints about the research in general or about a particular researcher. Ideally, the arrangements should include the ability to talk to someone not connected with the research or the organisation that is the subject of the research. Consideration should also be given to facilitating children to make complaints, by identifying an appropriate adult (for example carer, teacher, or social worker) with a good relationship to the child and discussing the issue with them so that children can talk to them if they are concerned.

The following form of words should appear on the participant information sheet:

If you would like to complain about any aspect of the study, the NSPCC has established a complaints procedure. You can contact any NSPCC member of staff, volunteer or local office or email researchcomplaints@nspcc.org.uk. You can also call the NSPCC Supporter Care team on 020 7825 2505.

To help us respond to your comment or complaints effectively, please tell us which of our studies it relates to. Also, please include your full name, contact details, and let us know how you would like us to contact you.

Publication

From an ethical stand point the REC would normally expect all research to be placed in the public domain and published, unless there is a very strong argument against. It is important that research is disseminated so that practitioners and policy makers can adapt their policies and work practices in light of the best available evidence, and other researchers can build upon previous work rather than repeating work that has already been done but which they are unaware of.

It is essential that the anonymity and confidentiality of participants is protected during the publication of research where this has been promised as part of the informed consent procedure. Withholding names may not be sufficient and researchers should be aware that no attributes should be reported that might allow someone to work out the identity of a participant, for example in the use of case studies. In some situations, the confidentiality of participants may be impossible to ensure in publication, or it may be desirable to identify individuals, especially senior people in policy making roles for example. In such cases, prior consent for this must be sought and it is appropriate that participants are consulted on publication drafts and the final report, and have the opportunity to comment and challenge what is presented. It is important that any rights

participants may have, with respect to sight of drafts and rights over excluding material, are addressed in the participant information sheet and are clear and explicit.

Researchers should also ensure that they have followed the NSPCC research governance process regarding publication, such that prior to external publication a blind peer review has been arranged and the report has been signed off by the relevant director and the Director of Strategy, Policy and Evidence.

Child protection

The NSPCC believes the principles outlined above are entirely compatible with its child protection and safeguarding policies. However, if situations arise where there is a conflict between these, the child protection and safeguarding policies take precedence. If you have a question about NSPCC child protection and safeguarding policies, please contact researchadvice@nspcc.org.uk.

Further Guidance

Additional information and guidance on the ethics of carrying out research can be obtained from the following organisations:

- The Economic and Social Research Council (<https://esrc.ukri.org/funding/guidance-for-applicants/research-ethics/>)
- The National Children's Bureau (www.ncb.org.uk)
- The British Psychological Society (www.bps.org.uk)
- The Social Research Association (www.the-sra.org.uk)
- The British Sociological Association (www.britisoc.co.uk)
- The Market Research Society (www.mrs.org.uk)
- The Medical Research Council (www.mrc.ac.uk)