



ETHICAL RESEARCH INVOLVING CHILDREN

Centre for Children
and Young People



Childwatch
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RESEARCH NETWORK

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Te Whare Wānanga o Ōtago
NEW ZEALAND

HARMS AND BENEFITS

Discussing ethics with children

- **Background context:**

- In the quest for ethical guidelines for research into and with children, children themselves are important partners, especially in research on difficult themes as in a Dutch research project of Stichting Alexander (Netherlands) on children's voices in fighting child abuse. In this project, we consulted youth on the ethical guidelines they felt were important. In another research project, Child Research Groups were engaged in role plays on ethics in research, to define what important ethical directives are according to children. How do they feel that they should be treated within a research setting?

- **The ethical challenge:**

- We faced a number of challenges thinking about ways to discuss ethics with children. For example, what methods would we use, and how could we adapt the methods to the ages of the children? How could we introduce the theme and make sure children know what is meant by ethics? What was the right moment to talk about it?

- **Choices made:**

- We developed two methods. The first method was developed together with the children of the Child Research Groups. By means of a number of small role plays where the children themselves portrayed the role of researcher and respondent, there was a discussion about what is and what is not ethically responsible behaviour. This way, together with the children, ethics rules were drawn up, to which they could then commit themselves. This method has proven to be successful because it appeals to children: they can watch the scenario acted out and are well able to tell which behaviour is good or not and why. They find it fun, it stimulates them to think and matters previously taken for granted are scrutinized. Children can think up rules precisely because they can imagine what a situation could look like if the relevant rule is not observed.

- **Working method:**

- 1. Two children act out a role play in front of the group. They are shown their assignment on a card where they can read a description of a situation. One child takes on the role of researcher, the other child that of the respondent.

- 2. The two children will act out the described situation. They can add and make up whatever they want so that it becomes a fun short 'theatre play' (of 1 minute).

- 3. After the brief performance the two children will sit down again. The mentors first ask the two children how they felt it went (cooling down).

4. Then the audience will explain what they saw. The mentors will ask a few questions about the play:

- Was the researcher right or wrong?
- Why was this good or bad?
- Which rule(s) with respect to the behaviour of a researcher can we think of with reference to this short play?

5. The rules are laid down on a sheet.

6. Then another duo will stand in front of the group to act out a different situation.

The second method was aimed at discussing ethics with young people (aged >14 years), through a group conversation. After acquaintance and the creation of a familiar atmosphere, we went into the theme of ethics more directly. Group conversation was a suitable method, because ethics is a theme that lends itself pre-eminently to dialogue and exchange. You can record the conversation and elaborate afterwards, so that you can try to formulate guidelines on the basis of the statements. You can then give feedback about these directives to the young people and in this way continue to develop the discussion.

That you then simply say: If you find it difficult to answer the questions you don't have to feel obliged at all. Then you can simply say that you don't want to talk about it. (Boy, 13 years old)

Reflexive questions/considerations:

- Can we discuss ethics with children we involve in our own research?
- Is it possible to discuss ethics with regard to the topic with children, before the actual research starts?
- What if children's ethics differ from the standard ethical guidelines?
- How can children's ideas and experiences on difficult themes be known, especially if researchers themselves hesitate to discuss them?

So that you really give the child the feeling that they are now also truly helping other children who have experienced things. (Boy, 13 years old)

References

Jurrius, K., & Uozie, A. (2012) *If I were a researcher. Discussing ethics with children and young people.* Amsterdam: Stichting Alexander.

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