



ERIC

# ETHICAL RESEARCH INVOLVING CHILDREN

# BACKGROUND



This compendium is part of an international project entitled Ethical Research Involving Children (ERIC). ERIC has been motivated by a shared international concern that the human dignity of children is honoured, and that their rights and well-being are respected in all research, regardless of context. To help meet this aim, the ERIC compendium acts as a tool to generate critical thinking, reflective dialogue and ethical decision-making, and to contribute to improved research practice with children across different disciplines, theoretical and methodological standpoints, and international contexts. Emphasis is placed on the need for a reflexive approach to research ethics that fosters dynamic, respectful relationships between researchers, children, families, communities, research organizations, and other stakeholders. Hence, the content of this ERIC compendium moves beyond prescriptive approaches to encourage a more critical engagement with ethical issues and contemporary research practices across the multiple sectors and national/international contexts in which these take place.

# BACKGROUND TO THE ETHICAL RESEARCH INVOLVING CHILDREN (ERIC) PROJECT

ERIC has been developed to support all researchers, individuals and organizations who are involved in research that is undertaken with, or potentially impacts on, children. This includes researchers, all members of any research team, research organizations, other stakeholders and research ethics review committees.

## WHAT IS ERIC?

The international Ethical Research Involving Children project, or **ERIC**, is focused on assisting **researchers** and others in understanding what it means to plan and conduct ethical **research** involving children and young people in different geographical, social, cultural and methodological contexts.<sup>iii</sup> By 'research involving children' we mean all research in which children are taking part, either directly or indirectly through a representative, irrespective of their role, and the methodology or methods used to collect, analyze and report data or information. In this way, ERIC seeks to ensure the human dignity of children is honoured, and their rights and well-being are respected in all research, regardless of context.

Significant emphasis is now placed on the value, importance and legitimacy of research that captures the views and perspectives of children and young people. Much has been written about why this is important and how such research can be approached, including with quite young children and others considered vulnerable, on issues identified as sensitive, and using a range of research methods and tools. Yet, many researchers report feeling quite isolated in their research activities, particularly when it comes to making informed decisions about complex issues, such as how to balance the protection of children while progressing their participation in research.

This compendium, together with the associated website (see: <http://childethics.com>), has been specifically designed to provide a rich repository of evidence-based information and resources to guide and improve research involving children. These materials are also intended to encourage critical reflection, dialogue and collegiality across the international research community. To achieve this, it is critically important to keep in mind that it is the attitudes, values, beliefs and assumptions of all involved **stakeholders** that ultimately shape the research experience much more than any documentation or checklist possibly could. By fostering deeper engagement with what it means to do ethical research, the compendium and website also challenge and extend understandings of the children and young people involved in research, including the diverse childhoods they experience.

By 'research involving children' we mean all research in which children are taking part, either directly or indirectly, across the range of research contexts, including but not limited to evaluation, monitoring and implementation activities.

## STRUCTURE OF THE ERIC COMPENDIUM

The ERIC compendium consists of nine parts:

1. This Background, which states the aim and explains the history and background of the ERIC project.
2. The Philosophy, which provides the rationale for the development of the ERIC compendium and accompanying website and elaborates on the ethical principles underpinning these.
3. The Ethics Charter, which is an aspirational statement of seven commitments written for researchers and others who engage in research involving children, and who are committed to fulfilling their responsibility to undertake ethical research, irrespective of context. It has been developed to inspire and unify researchers internationally around these core commitments which aim to elevate the status, rights and well-being of all children.
4. The ERIC Guidance, which identifies key ethical issues arising in research involving children.<sup>iii</sup> It is structured to engage researchers and others in thinking critically about:
  - ethical considerations in regard to their research involving children;
  - the challenges that arise that have no clear cut answers;
  - the questions that have relevance and application throughout the different phases of the research process.

The ERIC Guidance is not intended as a procedural document so much as a broad framework and a tool for generating reflective dialogue, where the starting point is a deep respect for human dignity and a desire to advance the status of children in the way called for by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (**UNCRC**). The ERIC Guidance invites researchers to engage with the complexity of ethical issues as encountered in their specific cultural, social, religious, political and economic contexts. Importantly, it is designed to connect researchers more deeply with their own tacitly held values, attitudes, beliefs and assumptions, and to recognize the ways in which these shape the decisions they make in the research process.

5. Researcher Support, which discusses some of the issues facing researchers, including their own welfare and safety, and offers suggestions for support in the contexts of training, supervision and ethical review mechanisms.

6. Getting Started, which is a series of questions for researchers to consider when planning their research, in light of the ethical principles and challenge-based case studies provided in the compendium (see point 7 below). It is essential that ethical issues are considered at the outset of any research project, so they are accommodated in the resource planning, budget and timeline. It is also critical that ethical consideration is ongoing throughout the research project, from conceptualising the research focus to its post-**dissemination** impact. This will help to ensure that issues are responded to as they emerge and hence position the research to be ethical in its entirety. As well as the key questions raised in the ERIC Guidance (see point 4 above), additional questions related to specific research phases are incorporated in this section.

ERIC invites researchers to engage with the complexity of ethical issues as encountered in their specific cultural, social, religious, political and economic contexts.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989 is a human rights treaty setting out the civil, political, economic, social, health and cultural rights of children.

It is essential to consider ethical issues at the outset and throughout the research process, from conceptualisation to post-dissemination.

7. Case Studies, which provide examples of ethical challenges and aim to assist researchers to engage critically with the kind of questions and uncertainty encountered by other research colleagues, since these may resonate with their own experience and/or offer a way forward with similar dilemmas. Case study challenges from different international contexts and from different thematic areas and research paradigms are used to exemplify the processes that can be utilised in developing ethical thinking and improving ethical practice.

8. Conclusion, which provides a brief outline of the foundational issues in the compendium, contextualised within the broader ERIC project, and invites researchers to continued engagement with these and ongoing collaboration in the development of ethical research practice.

9. Resources, which is the final section of the compendium and includes a glossary of terms, reference list and an annotated summary of other published ethical guidelines.

ERIC is not just for researchers.

### WHO IS THE ERIC COMPENDIUM FOR?

The ERIC compendium has been developed to support all researchers, individuals and organizations who are involved in research that is undertaken with, or potentially impacts on, children. This includes researchers, all members of any research team, research organizations, other stakeholders and research ethics review committees.<sup>iv</sup> It is envisaged that the compendium will be helpful for those starting out on research involving children, such as students and early career researchers, as well as more experienced researchers and other members of the research community who may or may not be experienced in research with children. The scope extends to include researchers who do not specifically work with children, but whose research will potentially impact on children's lives and well-being.

ERIC is intended to be a useful tool for research ethics committees engaged in the process of reviewing and approving projects submitted by researchers. It may also be of assistance to policy-makers and organizations who commission research involving children, as evidence-based policy and practice that upholds the rights and well-being of children, calls for quality research underpinned by ethical reasoning.

ERIC is relevant across wide-ranging areas of research, within the various sectors, which take place in diverse local and international settings.

The approach proposed in ERIC is relevant across wide-ranging areas of research which take place in diverse local and international settings. These may include inquiring into children's health, humanitarian needs, education, protection, social policy and poverty, research concerning nutrition, water and sanitation, as well as evaluative and upstream policy research initiatives. It is relevant across all research contexts, including **evaluation**, monitoring and implementation activities. ERIC is likewise applicable to **qualitative** and **quantitative research**, encompassing any methodology, ranging from large-scale household surveys and longitudinal studies to ethnographic research. In other words, the ERIC approach is foundational to all research directly or indirectly involving children.

ERIC has been developed to support **reflexivity** by researchers and other stakeholders in regard to the decisions they make, and the subsequent actions they take, throughout the research process. At its most basic, 'reflexivity' refers to the capacity of people to be conscious of, and give account of, their actions (Phillips, 1988). This suggests reflexivity may be 'both a skill and a virtue - a process through which tacit knowledge might be rendered explicit' (Moore, 2012, p.67) and subsequently shared. In other words, to be reflexive requires us to be able to detach from what we do and 'reflect on it as a problem' (Flyvbjerg, cited in Emslie, 2009, p. 419).

Such reflexive engagement in the context of enhancing ethical research involving children requires researchers to consider important issues, including:

- whether the research is necessary and should be undertaken;
- their readiness and capacity to conduct the research;
- assumptions about childhood and the children involved;
- the impact of both their own and children's experiences;
- disparities in power and status between themselves and the child research participants.

There are no easy answers or ready solutions to the complex issue of ethical research involving children. Such research is not conducted in a vacuum, but like other enterprises is subject to constraints and limitations related to funding, resources, interpersonal power dynamics and the wider management context. Therefore, the ERIC project explicitly emphasises the importance of deeper reflection and closer collaboration between researchers from different disciplines, working with children in wide-ranging contexts.

The ERIC compendium and accompanying website are freely and openly available in the public domain, making these essential, collectively-owned tools for the research community. The content has been developed in consultation with researchers from a wide range of backgrounds to have relevance across diverse sectors, geographical and cultural contexts, while also recognising some of the challenges and limitations in developing these for such wide use. The content builds on existing national and international guidelines developed for specific sectors, regions or methodological orientations.<sup>v</sup>

ERIC will prove most useful when used in conjunction with additional guidance developed for specific organizations, sectors and/or professional requirements. These requirements may take the form of existing ethical guidelines and codes of conduct which researchers adhere to, in either a research or professional capacity, or it may be that organizations and sectors will seek to develop their own supplementary materials that detail very particular organizational or sector-specific requirements. The ERIC approach encourages both.

## **HISTORY AND PROCESS**

ERIC is a joint project between UNICEF's Office of Research and Childwatch International, the Centre for Children and Young People at Southern Cross University, Australia, and the Children's Issues Centre at the University of Otago, New Zealand.

**Reflexivity refers to the capacity of people to be conscious of, and give account of, their actions.**

**There are no easy answers or ready solutions.**

**The ERIC compendium and accompanying website are essential, collectively-owned tools for the research community.**



ERIC is an ongoing invitation to share, connect and question research experiences.

Ethics refers to well-founded standards of right and wrong that prescribe what humans ought to do, usually in terms of rights, obligations, benefits to society, fairness, or specific virtues. Ethics also involves the study and development of our own ethical standards via continual examination of our moral beliefs and conduct.

The ERIC project has involved over two years of research and consultation with the international research community. ERIC emerged out of a recognised need to connect researchers and other research stakeholders who are largely motivated by a desire to pursue the kind of research that promotes rather than diminishes the dignity, rights and well-being of children.

A core tenet of ERIC is an ongoing invitation for researchers to share their experience, questions, concerns and stories about their engagement with research **ethics**. Sharing experiences and stories is crucial to our humanity: it is an unavoidable task in our ethical lives, because stories open up a space of contestation and of possibility (Kearney, 2002).

To date, researchers and other stakeholders have shared their experiences and stories through a number of key ERIC activities including:

- **An International survey** on ethics-related issues undertaken in 2010 to ascertain the views of researchers doing research involving children in diverse social and cultural contexts and disciplines. Two hundred and fifty seven participants across 46 countries responded (Powell, Graham, Taylor, Newell & Fitzgerald, 2011).
- **A meeting of 17 child and youth research experts** held in London in July 2011, with the survey and a literature review focusing on ethics in research with children providing stimulus for discussion about issues, gaps and concerns that require ongoing attention from the international research community. Participants at the meeting agreed that while the importance of ethical research involving children and young people is now widely accepted, there is an increasingly evident need for the development of an International Charter and Ethical Guidance as well as closer attention to major matters of ethics governance, training and access to available resources.
- **An email consultation with the international research community** undertaken via well-known online/internet-based networks in December 2011, advising of the project and inviting advice and information about ethics issues and initiatives relevant to the development of an International Charter and Ethical Guidance. A total of 66 responses were received from researchers working in a range of different contexts who shared experiences, questions, resources and offers to be further involved in an international dialogue about the best way forward with the Ethics Charter and Ethical Guidance.
- **An expert project advisory group** convened in April 2012 at the UNICEF Office of Research, comprised of leading international researchers to provide feedback and guidance on drafts of the Ethics Charter and Ethical Guidance.
- **An extensive consultation process** undertaken with nearly 400 researchers and other stakeholders, in a wide range of regions and organizations internationally, on the draft Ethics Charter and Ethical Guidance. The consultation resulted in extensive feedback from approximately 100 individuals or organizations, which in turn emphasized the need for a more expansive ERIC compendium, accompanying website as well as the development of tailored training activities.

## In addition, the ERIC project has also involved:

1. Detailed mapping of existing Charters and Guidelines to identify content and approaches, including primary areas of focus as well as gaps – both in terms of ethical principles and practice, and in relation to methodological approaches.
2. Collation, review and analysis of existing ethics systems, guidelines, practices, training programmes and resources from different countries, particularly those relevant to a multidisciplinary perspective, to identify the core principles, strengths, gaps and questions arising from these that are related to the ethics of research involving children and young people.
3. Production of a comprehensive literature review of research publications related to ethical issues with research involving children, published by Powell, Fitzgerald, Taylor and Graham (2012).
4. Commission of a review on relevant philosophical ethics and governance systems and practices in different local and disciplinary contexts (including strengths and limitations) for consideration in the development of the Ethics Charter and Ethical Guidance.

## AGE OF THE CHILD

The ERIC project adopts the definition of a **child**, consistent with Article 1 of the UNCRC, as “every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier”. The term youth is not defined in international law; however, working definitions from the United Nations use the term youth for a young person aged 15 through to 24 years. We are aware that the age-based definition of a child incorporates a wide range of children and **young people/youth**, who have very different life experiences.

It is important to acknowledge in conjunction with this, that definitions of children and young people/youth vary according to law, culture and custom, as well as in accordance with other context-specific socio-cultural, institutional, economic and political factors. While the ERIC compendium may offer the most evident support for ethical research practice with (younger) children, the ethical principles can also be readily applied to research with (older) youth, since these provide a strong foundation from which to consider ethical issues across the age ranges.

Researchers are obligated, in accordance with Article 5 of the UNCRC, to provide guidance and direction consistent with the evolving capacities of the child, in the exercise by the child of his or her rights. This emphasizes the importance of recognizing children's competency, alongside age, as a determining factor in the exercise of human rights. Importantly, underlying Article 5 is the recognition that the diverse life experiences of children in different environments and cultures means that children's acquisition of competencies will vary, at different ages and according to personal circumstances (Lansdown, 2005). Researchers are required to take the contexts of children's lives, their experiences and competencies into account in ensuring that children are afforded opportunities for decision-making and respect in the exercise of their rights, while being protected in accordance with their age and still evolving capacities.

ERIC recognises that definitions of children and youth vary with context.

Researchers are responsible for ensuring that children are afforded opportunities for decision-making and respect in the exercise of their rights, while being protected in accordance with their age and still evolving capacities.



## ETHICS AND THE LAW

Legal responsibilities to uphold children’s rights within the research process, enshrined by the UNCRC, are aligned with researcher obligations to respect the kind of principles signaled in the Philosophy section of this compendium – whether children are **subjects**, respondents or researchers themselves. In developing the ERIC compendium we therefore assume that researchers know and heed their relevant state and national laws.<sup>vi</sup> Critical to this is the importance of gaining formal approval for projects, in line with local legal, institutional and community requirements, for example, relating to the storing of personal data, or reporting concerns about serious present or future harm to the child or to others.

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<sup>i</sup> Throughout the text, bold type is used to indicate terms defined in the ERIC Glossary of Terms.

<sup>ii</sup> ERIC conceptualises research as the collection of data or information within the framework of a methodical study in order to answer specific questions or test hypotheses. This is relevant across the range of research contexts and includes evaluation, monitoring and implementation activities.

<sup>iii</sup> There is an intrinsic tension between the ERIC Guidance, which seeks to encourage more expansive engagement and critical reflection, and the Ethics Charter, which synthesises these issues into seven core commitments. While necessarily succinct, the aspirational Charter still seeks to reflect the underlying philosophy and intent of the overall ERIC project.

<sup>iv</sup> For ease of reading the term ‘researcher/s’ is used from this point on to encompass this wider research community.

<sup>v</sup> Some important and influential ethical guidelines are included in the Resources section, Review of Other Ethical Guidelines and on the ERIC website [www.childethics.com](http://www.childethics.com).

<sup>vi</sup> It is beyond the scope of this document to address national legal frameworks, or the relationship between these and the UNCRC in any depth. Researchers are encouraged to be familiar with these in the locations in which they are conducting research.