



ETHICAL RESEARCH INVOLVING CHILDREN

Centre for Children
and Young People



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GUIDANCE FOR ETHICAL RESEARCH INVOLVING CHILDREN

A key component of ERIC is the provision of sound guidance that invites researchers and institutions to reflect critically on the complexities of research involving children. The Guidance elaborates on specific considerations, challenges and questions that arise across unique and diverse research contexts. Reference to particular case studies, featured in full at the end of the compendium, is made throughout this Guidance section with the intent of fostering 'like to like' peer learning, dialogue and problem-solving.

INTRODUCTION TO THE ERIC GUIDANCE

This Guidance is designed to support researchers as they engage more critically with the ethical issues that arise in conducting research involving, or impacting on, children.^{xi} It takes into account the unique nature of each research project and context, as well as the common ground of ethical principles and considerations. The ERIC Guidance acknowledges and builds on excellent existing ethics guidelines developed for particular contexts or organizational settings.^{xii} It points to considerable further potential for improving ethical practice when researchers and other key stakeholders engage more reflexively with underlying principles and emerging issues within and across different contexts.

The ERIC Guidance is designed for research with children and young people under the age of 18 years. While it tends to focus more attention on children than youth,^{xiii} the underpinning ethical principles and considerations provide a useful foundation for reflecting on ethical issues in research practice with all children and young people.

The dignity, well-being and rights of all children, irrespective of context, are fundamental to the ERIC Philosophy and Guidance.

A core tenet of the ERIC Guidance is the relational nature of research ethics. Ethical issues and challenges are located in the space between researchers, research organizations, children, parents/caregivers/guardians,^{xiv} communities and others involved in the research process. The practice of research ethics is negotiated within these relationships. This underscores the interpersonal and organic nature of the research endeavour. It also highlights the opportunities for creativity and expansiveness that ultimately promote and strengthen children's well-being, dignity and rights.

The emphasis in the Guidance on the relational nature of research ethics also draws attention to the multiple contexts in which these relationships, and indeed research, are situated. The relationships are founded on the understandings, assumptions, values and experiences of all those participating. While the underpinning ethical principles of respect, beneficence and non-maleficence, and justice are universally relevant across sectors, disciplines and international contexts, the ways in which these are applied and considered are shaped by the context in which the research is situated.^{xv} This includes the broader social and cultural context as well as the more specific locale in which the research is being conducted, for example, in emergency environments, or in educational settings such as schools or via the internet or other ICT technologies.

While some research areas would benefit from the use or development of specific supplementary guidance, the ERIC Guidance frames the discussion around ethical dilemmas on the basis of universal ethical principles, for critically reflecting on and responding to the ethical

issues in their specific context. Self-awareness and reflexive thinking are essential for researchers to negotiate the ethical challenges and dilemmas that emerge from these multiple contexts in relation to considerations such as harms and benefits, informed consent, privacy and confidentiality, and payment, in undertaking research involving children. Reflexive thinking is considered by some to be the hallmark of ethical practice (Davis, 1998; Gallagher, Haywood, Jones & Milne, 2010) while training, support and supervision of researchers play an important role in developing this.

The sections in this ERIC Guidance support researchers as they engage in ethical research practice by reflecting on the key issues, including dilemmas and challenges that may arise in specific contexts. Each section of the ERIC Guidance starts with best practice statements that highlight fundamental, non-negotiable keystones for ethical research involving children, in regard to that particular topic. Key ethical considerations are then outlined, which are grounded in a comprehensive review of the international literature and extensive consultation within the research community.^{xvi}

Reference is made to relevant UNCRC articles and the guidance offered by these when applied to research involving children. While the UNCRC does not directly specify any research rights for children, researchers have obligations to consider, respect and protect children's rights in any given context, including in research.

Examples and case study narratives from a range of international research contexts, involving children and young people of different ages, are referred to in the Guidance to exemplify the ethical challenges that can arise in different contexts. The complete narratives can be found in the Case Studies section of this ERIC compendium. Finally, each section of the Guidance also includes questions to promote critical engagement and reflexivity.

The ERIC Guidance has been developed with an awareness of the range of roles involved in different parts of the research process, such as commissioning research, designing studies, undertaking fieldwork, and reviewing research proposals. These roles are clearly linked to different responsibilities and lines of accountability, however, they are united in the common endeavour of making research involving or potentially impacting on children ethical. The Guidance and Getting Started questions are designed to encourage people engaged across different research roles to reflect on the ethical considerations that may arise, to consider their response to these, and to share (and, at times, to negotiate) these with their colleagues.

Each section of the ERIC Guidance starts with best practice statements critical to ethical research involving children.

^{xi} As noted in the Background section, researchers includes all those who are associated with undertaking research that involves or potentially impacts on children, such as all members of the research team, research organizations and other stakeholders; and children are defined in accordance 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”, although it is important to acknowledge in conjunction with this, that definitions of children and youth vary according to law, culture and custom.

^{xii} This guidance is included in the Resource section, in the Reference List and/or the Review of Other Ethical Guidelines subsections.

^{xiii} As noted in the Background section, young people aged between 15 and 24 years are defined as youth by the United Nations.

^{xiv} For ease of reading, from this point on the word ‘parent’ is used throughout the Guidance sub-sections to refer to parents, carers, caregivers, guardians and those in parent substitute roles.

^{xv} As outlined in the Background section.

^{xvi} See the Background section for details of the literature review and consultation process. A summary of the key points from the review of organizations’ ethics documentation is included in the Resource section.