



# ETHICAL RESEARCH INVOLVING CHILDREN

Centre for Children  
and Young People



*Childwatch*  
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RESEARCH NETWORK

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## GETTING STARTED

Getting Started is designed to prompt critical reflection by researchers, members of the research team, organizations and other stakeholders as they plan and undertake research in their local contexts. The intent is to generate shared, useful, practice-based insights throughout each of the phases of the research process. Getting Started is not merely a checklist of do's and don't's and should not be considered in isolation from other important contextual information found elsewhere in the ERIC compendium. The most important overarching question in Getting Started is: How does the proposed research respect the dignity of children?

# QUESTIONS TO GUIDE ETHICAL RESEARCH INVOLVING CHILDREN

Researchers are invited to use these questions in practical ways to support the design and implementation of ethical research practices. The questions reflect a range of ethical decisions to be made as challenges arise in matters concerning harms and benefits, informed consent, privacy and confidentiality, payment and compensation, and other related issues discussed in the Guidance section of the ERIC compendium. These questions also direct attention to the ethical principles of justice, beneficence and non-maleficence, and respect.

## 1. PLANNING AND PREPARATION

### ***Does this research need to be done?***

- Is the purpose of the research clearly defined?
- Will the research contribute new knowledge?
- What new knowledge will children contribute?
- How have you ensured that the information being sought is not available elsewhere?
- Is children's participation in the research necessary or can the information be obtained in other ways?
- What steps have you taken to maximise protection of participating children and their communities from being over and/or under researched?
- Who are the likely users of your research and in what ways have you taken into account the possibility that your research findings could be misused?
- Does the research enhance children's participation and other rights (under the UNCRC)?

## **The Children**

### **1.1 Is this research important for children?**

- How will children benefit from this research?
- What would be the likely benefits for the individual child participating in the research?

- What form will children's involvement in the research take?
- Can children be involved in the planning of the proposed research? If so, what strategies will you use to facilitate this?

### **1.2 How will this research be inclusive of children?**

- Have you established clear inclusion criteria?
- What steps can be taken to include marginalised/hard to reach children in research?
- Are any children to be excluded?
- If any children will not be included, on what basis will they be excluded and why? (For example, on the basis of their age, gender, sexuality, culture, ethnicity, disability, language, and/or family structure, mental health and well-being status? And/or for non-child specific reasons such as scope of the study, methodological choices, or financial, geographical or other constraints?)

### **1.3 How will children's safety be ensured during the research process?**

- Are there any identifiable risks for children?
- What plans can be put in place to reduce risk?
- Are there children whose particular circumstances place them at high risk? If yes, who are they and why?
- What arrangements do you need to make to support children who become distressed or who disclose sensitive information?
- What actions will you need to take to respond appropriately if a child discloses harm or abuse?
- Who will you need to inform about these actions?
- How will you find out what community and/or professional resources and services are available to children if needed?
- Do you need to develop and/or implement safety protocols or policies in your project to protect children? If so, why and what protocols or policies are these?
- What possible stigma may attach to children if they participate in the research?

### **1.4 What information do children need to consent to being involved?**

- What information do children need to enable them to consider giving their consent? (For example, in relation to participation, methods of data collection, dissemination etc.)
- How will you find out the information children need?
- How will you tell children about the study, ensuring that the information is age and context specific?

- Will you provide written information for children? If so, why?
- If you do not provide written information, how will you convey the information? Why have you chosen this method of doing so?
- Is there a designated person that the child (and/or parents) can go to if she/he has any questions or concerns (now and in the future)?
- What further information will children need (in long-term projects) as the study progresses to enable them to consider their continued consent, and at what stages?
- What procedures have been put in place to prevent children being coerced to participate?
- How will you communicate the decision to include or exclude children to them?

## The Researcher(s)

### 1.5 Have you considered your role in the research?

- What are your own values, assumptions and beliefs about: Children? Childhood? Their place in research? The context in which the children live?
- How will these shape the decisions you make about the research process?
- How do your understandings of culture (generally and in relation to the local cultural context) impact on the decisions you make in planning and preparing to do the research?
- What do you imagine might change as a result of involving children in the research?
- What beneficial outcomes will there be for children (both individual child participants and children as a social group) as a result of your research?

### 1.6 How well prepared are you, the researcher, to meet and conduct research involving children?

- What do you know about the children you wish to involve?
- How will you find out what you need to know about children?
- Do you have the necessary skills (technical and interpersonal) to involve the children in research (including, for example, skills in facilitating respectful conversations and knowledge related to children's ages and evolving capacities)?
- Do you have support and supervisory relationships in place (for example, with experienced researchers, relevant local groups, local child protection experts, local experts in the field of research)?
- Are you aware of the local legal definitions and regulations relevant to your research, for example, the definition of adult or

emancipated minor, the legal age for employment, requirements regarding child abuse reporting?

- Have you considered, and sought appropriate advice, as to how you will respond if you become aware that children are breaking the law?
- Have you considered whether (and how) children will be informed of test results related to their health status which may result from their participation in the research?
- How will you ensure that your research team, (both local and international as appropriate) share your ethical concerns and approach?
- What means (or methods) will you use to help address the power difference that exists between you and children, and between you and other family and community members?

### **1.7 Who else do you need to consult to involve children in the study?**

- Which adults, young people and children, if any, do you need to meet in the family or local community in order to understand the needs and rights of the children involved?
- Whose consent do you need for children to be involved?
- Does the age of the participating child impact on the person or agency from whom you will seek consent?

### **1.8 Have you considered the role of parents (or carers) in the study?**

- What are the responsibilities of parents with regard to the research?
- What information do parents need to have to be able to make informed decisions and to support their children in research participation?
- Have the expected benefits of children's participation been clearly explained to the parents?

### **1.9 What community and stakeholder concerns exist about this research?**

- Have you consulted all related community and stakeholder groups regarding the involvement/exclusion of children and the nature of the research?
- Are you able to incorporate any community and stakeholder feedback into your research and/or respond to concerns?
- How have you ensured that the community groups and stakeholders understand the research questions and process?
- How have you ensured that there are not unrealistically-raised expectations of the outcomes of the research?

### **1.10 How will children's involvement be resourced?**

- What resources (funding, time, staff, equipment etc.) are necessary to undertake the research and are these readily available? If not, is there a plan for how these will be obtained/managed?
- How much time needs to be allocated for obtaining necessary resources in order to undertake the research project ethically?
- What costs are incurred with involving children? (For example, transport, accommodation, food, interpreters, space, materials, communication with children, rewards/payments, staff time and preparation etc.)
- Have the payments associated with children's involvement been factored into the research budget? How will you ensure that the source of funding is consistent with the promotion of children's dignity, rights and well-being?

### **1.11 Ethics Approval**

- Does this study require ethics approval? If so, from whom and who determines this?
- How have you engaged with the Ethics Committee / Institutional Research Board?
- After gaining formal ethics approval, how will you ensure that ethical standards are adhered to throughout the research process, by you and your research team?

### **1.12 Are there any risks for you in undertaking this research?**

- What risks, if any, are there for you in undertaking the research?
- What will you do to manage these risks?
- What supports are available to you?

## **2. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS**

### **The Children**

#### **2.1 Will children be involved in the design of the research?**

- What opportunities are there for children to provide input or feedback regarding the research design?
- What strategies will you employ to facilitate this?
- How will you incorporate feedback from children about the study design?

#### **2.2 Is the research methodology including data collection inclusive of all children?**

- How will you ensure your research design does not discriminate against particular children?

- How will you ensure that all children, where relevant to do so, have equal opportunity to participate irrespective of their age, gender, ethnicity, disability, literacy level or any other specific characteristics/circumstances?
- How will research methods help identify and gain appropriate access to children?
- How have you ensured that secondary data sources have been ethically collected and analysed?

### **2.3 Are the research methods appropriate for children?**

- Are the key questions easily understood by the children who will be involved?
- Are the questions (particularly in surveys) appropriate for the child's characteristics, including age, and surrounding context?
- How will the research methods facilitate children's engagement with the research?
- Are the methods responsive to the specific needs of children (i.e., adaptable methods for particular situations/needs/ages of children)?

## **The Researcher(s)**

### **2.4 Do all staff involved have the requisite skills and expertise to undertake the research?**

- Is any additional training or up-skilling required for this particular research study?
- Are all staff mindful of cultural considerations?
- Are all staff respectful of those involved in the research study?
- Are specific policies or protocols required to assist staff (for example, policies relating to different aspects of the research process, child protection, confidentiality, data storage etc.)? If so, what policies or protocols, and who determines they are necessary?
- Are there any design and/or data collection methodology-specific ethical considerations to be aware of? If so, what strategies will you adopt to deal with them?

## **3. DATA COLLECTION**

### **The Children**

#### **3.1 How will children's participation be supported?**

- Will you be able to include children at a time of the day that is suitable for them?

- How much time do you require from children? (Is this reasonable?)
- How will you ensure that children's participation will not conflict with their other responsibilities and commitments (e.g., school work, employment/work, leisure time, religious and cultural festivals etc.?)

### **3.2 How will children's involvement be recognised and supported financially?**

- How will you ensure that children's participation will not conflict with their other responsibilities they have related to their family's economic well-being?
- Will children need financial compensation for their participation (for example, for lost earnings)?
- Will children or parents need any financial reimbursement of costs associated with participation in the research?
- Will there be any appreciation payments for children's participation in the research?
- What form will any payment take (for example, money, food, a gift, educational materials) and who will receive it – the child, parents, community?
- Have you taken the local context into account when deciding about payment?
- How and when will information on payment be disclosed? Will it be disclosed in the consent process, after children have agreed to participate, or at the end of the research?

### **3.3 How will children's privacy and confidentiality be respected?**

- How will you ensure children and their families can and cannot be identified, as needed?
- How will privacy be attended to in the research setting?
- Do you plan to allow parents or persons in authority to be present when research is being conducted with children? Why? What impact may this have on children's involvement in the research or the information they may share?
- How will you respond if parents or others will not allow children to be interviewed on their own?
- How will you respond if the child requests that others be present?
- What will the gender and number of interviewers be in relation to the children being interviewed? Why?
- How will you ensure children (and parents) understand the circumstances under which confidentiality should be breached?
- Are there additional strategies that would enhance research staff's capacity to respect children's privacy and confidentiality?

(For example, would developing and implementing explicit protocols for research staff regarding privacy and confidentiality be helpful? Have research staff received training relevant to privacy and confidentiality in research involving children?)

- How will you protect confidentiality if your research includes situations in which you are required to share certain research results with service or clinical teams (for example, to provide services to those with infectious diseases) or government agencies?

### **3.4 How will concerns about children's safety that arise during the research be attended to?**

- What actions will you take in response to a child's disclosure of harm or abuse?
- Who will you need to inform about these actions?
- What are the legal requirements for reporting child abuse in the area the research is taking place?

### **3.5 Do children require extra support to contribute?**

- How will you identify the special needs of individual children?
- How will you respond to these needs?

## **The Researcher(s)**

### **3.6 How will you assess the competence of children to consent?**

- How will you ensure that children understand what consent is?
- How will you support children to understand and weigh up any risks?
- How will you ensure that children are able to withdraw without negative consequences?
- How will you ensure that children understand that they are able to withdraw consent at any time without penalty?
- How will you make provision for gaining children's informed consent or allowing their dissent at different stages over long-term projects?

### **3.7 How will you respond to children if they become distressed or upset?**

- Do you have the experience and/or skills to respond to children's distress?
- What arrangements do you need to make to support children who become distressed?
- Have you sought local advice regarding existing psychosocial supports?

- Have you considered instigating a post-interview check-in by someone who is a known, trusted support, familiar with the child's usual behaviour, and can read the signs and find additional help if needed?
- What supervision or support do you need to have in place for research team members?

### **3.8 How will you ensure your own emotional and physical safety?**

- Have you considered the need for debriefing at the conclusion of research procedures? If needed, how will these be established?
- Are colleagues aware of your location, travel plans and expected time of return during fieldwork?
- Are you able to contact your colleagues/supervisor or emergency services should an incident arise where you need help?
- Have you considered the possible ways your safety might be compromised and made contingency plans if necessary?

## **4. ANALYSIS, WRITING AND DISSEMINATION**

### **The Children**

#### **4.1 Are children to be involved in the analysis of data?**

- If children will be involved in data analysis, what support will they require?
- How will you ensure the privacy and confidentiality of participants is respected by children involved in the analysis of the research?

#### **4.2 How will the research findings be disseminated to children, other relevant stakeholders and wider audiences?**

- How will children hear about the findings of the study?
- How will you ensure children involved in the study can access, understand and, where appropriate, act on the findings?
- How will you ensure that feedback on the research findings from children and their communities is incorporated in any follow-up actions?
- How will you ensure children's contributions, and their value in the research, receive due recognition?

#### **4.3 How will you ensure that research findings are disseminated safely?**

- How will you ensure that the identities of children, families and communities are not revealed?
- How will you respond if children want to be identified?

- If children have been researchers will their names be included in the published materials, in recognition of their contribution?
- How will the participants be assured of the safe-keeping of confidential information they shared?
- How will you ensure that reporting and dissemination is appropriately managed, particularly in relation to language issues, as well as immediacy and ease of accessibility to children and communities?

## The Researcher(s)

### 4.4 Will the research make a difference to children?

- What outcomes do you hope for?
- What are the considerations to ensure rigorous, transparent analysis of data?
- What are the considerations to prevent the misuse of findings?
- What obligation, if any, do you have to promote the consideration and use of research findings in programming, service delivery, staff practices and policy-making? How will you go about doing this?
- What are the key elements of the plan for giving children, community members and stakeholders access to the findings of the research?

### 4.5 How will you ensure data is returned or safely stored and destroyed?

- Will data be returned to children? If so, how will this be done?
- Have you considered the use of information collected that was additional to that specified in the initial consent process? How will you gain consent to use this?
- How will you ensure that the data is returned with respect for maintaining confidentiality?
- What strategies do you have in place for the safe and secure storage of data?
- When and how will you ensure the secure destruction of all nominal information and data when it no longer needs to be kept?