



# ETHICAL RESEARCH INVOLVING CHILDREN

Centre for Children  
and Young People



*Childwatch*  
INTERNATIONAL  
RESEARCH NETWORK

unicef   
Office of Research

UNIVERSITY  
of  
OTAGO  
  
Te Whare Wānanga o Ōtago  
NEW ZEALAND

## HARMS AND BENEFITS

---

### **The impact of shared information in focus groups on children's relationships**

---

#### ***Background context:***

The Flemish Commission of Children's Rights (Kinderrechtencommissariaat) commissioned Research Centre Childhood & Society (Kind & Samenleving) to construct a questionnaire to determine the incidence and prevalence of child abuse and negligence in Flanders. The questionnaire focused on children between 10 and 18 years old. To do so, international questionnaires were compared, analysed and adapted to the Flemish context. Based on interviews with experts as well as children and young people, the questionnaire was adapted further.

Through extensive conversations with children and young people about care, authority and punishment, a broader framework of care and authority relationships was constructed. We organized eight focus groups with in total 46 boys and girls aged between 10 and 18 years. Each focus group consisted of six to eight children and assembled three times for a discussion. During the first discussion they talked about care and neglect, in the second about authority and punishment, in the third about their attitudes towards abuse and neglect.

#### ***The ethical challenge:***

Focus group discussions are very apt for research with children. The inequality between children and the adult researcher is far less outspoken than in an individual interview with an adult stranger. The overall atmosphere is less formal; less like research and more like a natural conversation.

However, as in every focus group discussion or interview, difficult experiences can unexpectedly be expressed and they can make a deep impression on the participating children. In discussions on care, authority, punishment, abuse and neglect this is even more likely. Although our questions were framed in such a way that we did not focus on personal experiences, but on their general views on children and care/authority, the participants could have been confronted (directly or indirectly) with abuse and neglect. During the focus group discussions, these experiences can come to the surface. What's more, the focus group's discussions can operate as an opener of a Pandora's box, revealing hidden thoughts and emotions.

In addition to the sensitivity of the research theme for the individual participants, these discussions could also influence the interpersonal relationships of the participants. During the discussions, some children spoke about harsh punishments. Other children reacted with astonishment: "That is child abuse!". Did this information alter the relationship of the children? Will the revelations of harsh punishments later be used during disputes? Although we told the participants that the focus group discussions were

confidential, we did not have any influence on what would happen afterwards.

***Choices made:***

To make the focus group discussions as safe as possible for the participating children, we took the following measures:

- Each participating school received an information brochure. This brochure contained information on the global research (developing a questionnaire concerning child abuse and neglect) and on the specific qualitative research concerning the perspectives of children on care, authority and punishment. The research procedure was described and possible measures concerning follow-up care were proposed.
- Each child from the selected classes received, after a short introduction to the research, an information brochure and a written consent form. They were asked to read the brochure, and if they wanted to participate, to fill in the form and hand it over to the teacher. In the information brochure children could find: the purpose of the research, a presentation of the researchers, their rights (confidentiality, anonymity, the right to stop participation), and information on different assistance services. These services were adapted to the local context of the participants and mentioned, if possible, the names of the local social workers.
- During the focus groups we took an open attitude towards the topics children brought up. We emphasized their expertise and that the focus was not on personal experiences but on what children in general thought about care and authority.
- Because the focus groups treated a potentially sensitive subject, we used a cartoon figure printed on small posters to ask the questions. In this way, it was not an adult researcher who asked the questions, and whom children "had to" answer. Instead, it was a funny figure who didn't really understand how children were being raised. He/she asked questions such as "What do people do when they take care of children?" Children could talk about their own experiences, but also about other children's experiences. Considering that children could keep aloof on their personal experiences, meant the focus groups could be experienced as safer.
- We promised the participating children confidentiality of what was said in the focus groups. We asked them to respect this confidentiality too. Only in this way, everyone would feel confident enough to share their opinion or experiences.
- During the focus group discussions, a silent box was placed in the room. Children received an envelope and some paper. If they did not wish to share specific thoughts during the discussions, they could write them down and drop their letters in the silent box. These could be: too difficult or private things, but also funny things; things that they had forgotten to mention; or things that had nothing to do with the subject. In this way, we gave children the opportunity to express themselves individually.
- To make the focus groups less mysterious towards the non-participating children, we returned to the classroom after the focus group and let the participating children tell the others what had happened without going into detail of what was said. In this way the non-participating children would be less curious and wouldn't ask individual

children to tell them what was being told.

***Reflexive questions/considerations:***

- How can you provide or instigate follow-up care?
- Can you ask children to keep the discussion confidential?
- How can you assure confidentiality in a focus group discussion?
- How do you deal with sensitive or difficult accounts in a focus group?

**Contributed by:** Hilde Lauwers, Research Centre Childhood & Society, Brussels (Belgium).