



# ETHICAL RESEARCH INVOLVING CHILDREN

Centre for Children  
and Young People



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# PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY

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## Peer research and young people in and leaving out-of-home care

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### *Background context:*

Care Matters: Time for Change (Department for Education and Skills, 2007) identified the importance of narrowing the gap in attainment between children in and leaving out-of-home care and their peers in the general population. Right2BCared4 was one of the initiatives that was piloted with the aim of improving outcomes for young people making the transition from care to independence. The pilot was based on the following principles:

- Young people should not be expected to leave care until they reach 18 years old; 
- They should have greater say in decision-making preceding their exit from care; and 
- They should be properly prepared for independent living. 

The Centre for Child and Family Research, Loughborough University, in collaboration with the National Care Advisory Service (NCAS), adopted a peer research methodology to promote young people's active participation in the evaluation. This involved training and supporting young people who had experienced care to get involved in all aspects of the research from the development of the research tools to analysis and write up of the findings (see Edwards, 2011; Munro et al., 2010; Munro et al., 2011; National Care Advisory Service and SOS Children's Villages, 2012). Managed well the approach can empower all those involved and provide young people with the opportunity to inform child welfare policy and practice. However, it also raises ethical challenges and critical consideration needs to be given to safeguarding both participants and the peer researchers. 

### *The ethical challenge:*

As part of the Right2BCared4 evaluation children in out-of-home care and care leavers were invited to complete a survey. Young people were given the option of completing this independently (online or hard copy) or over the phone with a peer researcher. During one of the telephone interviews a survey participant made inappropriate sexual comments towards a peer researcher. As a consequence the peer researcher terminated the phone call. In line with agreed protocols they notified a member of staff from the local authority about the incident. The support worker then made contact with a member of the research team and suggested informing the survey participant's local authority to notify them who had made these comments. The limits of confidentiality outlined during the informed

consent process stated that: ☐

In exceptional circumstances anonymity and confidentiality would have to be broken, for example, if say a child or young person is being hurt by someone, or is likely to be hurt by somebody's actions. In these circumstances advice will be sought from a senior manager from another local authority who will advise the research team as to whether we need to make your social worker aware of what you have told us. ☐

The peer researcher was not distressed by the incident and the research team's view was that the incident was not serious enough to warrant breaching confidentiality and disclosing the information. Moreover, the nature of the comments would not have prompted action if the young person concerned was not in out-of-home care. The support worker disagreed on the basis that the comment may reflect a pattern of behaviour. S/he took the view that the local authority should be informed so they could assess the situation and take measures to address the matter with the young person concerned.

*Choices made:*

As the support worker and research team could not reach a unanimous agreement about the best course of action it was agreed that advice would be sought from a senior manager from a local authority that was not directly involved in the evaluation (in accordance with CCFR protocols). The independent senior manager advised against contacting the survey participant's social worker on the basis that the incident was not sufficiently serious to warrant this breach in confidentiality. The support worker was informed of this decision, which was accepted.

*Reflexive questions/considerations:*

- Participant and (peer) researcher safety must be of paramount concern throughout the research cycle;
- Research exploring children's experiences of out-of-home care can raise sensitive issues and systems should be put in place to ensure that young people can access support;
- Preparation, training and on-going support is vital to the successful completion of peer research projects;
- Clear protocols establishing respective roles and responsibilities in the conduct of research involving vulnerable groups need to be established;
- Confidentiality should be "honoured, unless there are clear and overriding reasons to do otherwise" (British Sociological Association, 2002, p.5). Perceptions of when information should be disclosed may differ. It is important to ensure that the limits of confidentiality are clearly outlined to all parties and that mechanisms are put in place to ensure the timely resolution of differences of opinion;
- On-going dialogue with gate-keepers is important in the conduct of effective

research with vulnerable children. □

**References** □

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**Contributed by: Clare Lushey (Research Associate) and Emily R. Munro, (Assistant Director), Centre for Child and Family Research, Loughborough University.**