

DE MONTFORT UNIVERSITY

Ethical Considerations for Research Involving Children and young People

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1 Introduction

If research involves children and young people (CYP), many of the ethical considerations that apply to adults will still remain, however there are additional concerns that need to be addressed to ensure the protection of the CYP and integrity of the research project.

In England, Northern Ireland and Wales, a person is considered a child up to their 18th birthday, when they legally become an adult. Scotland is slightly different in that for most cases a person is still classed as a child up to 18, but there are some circumstances where this is reduced to 16. Should your research involve CYP in Scotland, please seek guidance from the relevant Scottish authorities.

The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) in ***Research with Children and Young People*** have set out ten points for consideration:

Children's potential vulnerability to exploitation in interaction with adults, and adults' specific responsibilities towards child

social relationships, including those that are formed in the course of research. Where relevant, attention should be paid to the ways in which such inequalities specifically affect children and young people, and their relationships. Sensitivity and attentiveness towards such structural issues are important aspects of researchers' responsibilities to participants at all stages of research, including reporting and publication.' ([BERA 2018, p.6](#))

These guidelines hope to raise awareness of these potential areas for concern, with

Details relating to the level of burden the project is likely to put upon participants and staff

Copies of any relevant DBS checks

2.3 Power Balance

The CYP may automatically view the adult conducting the research as being a figure of authority and this power imbalance between researcher and the child participant may affect the data collected. It is important to be mindful of structural inequalities and issues of identity ([BERA, 2018, p.6, section 2](#)) so a conversation with school teachers/guardians etc., may be important in these circumstances. The researcher can try to minimise this effect by:

- Promoting a relaxed atmosphere
- Making sure that the CYP understands the session is not a test and that there are no right or wrong answers
- Dressing in a more informal manner
- Providing an informal seating/ room layout, rather than positioning behind a desk, as this automatically sets a barrier between researcher and CYP.

2.4 Providing Feedback

When providing feedback or informing the CYP about the outcomes of the research that they have been involved in, ensure an appropriate format is used and if possible produce two versions – one for the CYP and one for the parent/carer/gatekeeper.

Highlight those findings which will be of most interest to the CYP and always include a 'what happens next' section.

2.5 Accessibility, Inclusion and Diversity

There are some groups, as identified by the **UN Committee on the Rights of the Child**, who may not be in control of, or be able to fully access their rights and it is important to ensure that the research sample **does not exclude** these groups. An example would include sampling CYP via a school which means that any CYP not in mainstream education (e.g. home-schooled children) would be excluded. Other groups include:

- Very young children
- Young parents
- 16-18 year olds
- Black and minority ethnic CYP
- CYP with disabilities
- Those in public care

The exclusion of a particular group in the sample would need to be acknowledged along with any possible implications to the research findings.

2.6

3 Informed Consent

Informed consent is required from a parent or carer where it is viewed that a child is incapable of understanding the implications of taking part in a study or where the child is regarded as incompetent to consent. One parent can provide consent, but it is preferable to have consent from both where applicable. A child who is not capable of giving consent alone can still be involved in the decision-making process with others who are able in law, to provide consent. For the purpose of these guidelines, a CYP is anyone under the age of 18 and it is considered best practice to seek parental or carer consent. However, DMU acknowledges that there some circumstances in which it might be appropriate to waive the need for parental consent, or to seek informed consent directly from a CYP. Where such approach is being taken it must be fully justified in the researcher ethics application.

Although the power to consent, in law, is that of their parent(s) or legal guardian, the child's assent is advisable. Assent is difficult to define and is used in diverse ways, e.g. compliance by a child as young as three, through to the active agreement of a young teenager etc. Assent is agreement given by a child / young person, or others who are not legally empowered to give consent. It is important to provide children / young people with information that matches their capacity when seeking assent, and consider how best to record when assent is given. Researchers may also want to consider how they will respond to signs of dissent from the CYP. I

parental consent is required, a parent cannot consent *on behalf of*

It is also noteworthy that the person providing consent must have 'parental responsibility' (as defined in the Children Act, 1989), and it should not be assumed that a person responding to the term 'parent' has such status. Consent forms can be used to confirm the person giving consent has parental responsibility.

The National Children's Bureau (NCB) also set out possible exceptions and special circumstances around parent/carer consent, as follows:

Situation in which parental/carer consent *may* be required for CYP aged 16+

You should take into consideration the ethical guidelines issued by the British Educational Research Association (BERA), specifically [sections 23-](#)

during the information sharing and informed consent process at the start of the research project and reminded throughout any interview sessions. This may present moral dilemmas if the researcher becomes aware of safeguarding issues – researchers have a duty to protect the CYP, but need to be mindful of the legalities of breaking confidentiality in relation to data protection laws. The Data Protection Act is not a barrier to sharing information but provides a framework to ensure that personal information about living persons is shared appropriately.

More information can be found on the [DMU Safeguarding](#) webpages.

4.1 Reporting Concerns

If research is being conducted at an establishment (e.g. school) away from DMU, the organisation involved will have its own procedures pertaining to safeguarding and these should be followed, if there are any safeguarding concerns.

If the research is taking place on DMU campus, or in a context where no safeguarding

7 References and Further Reading

In formulating this document, the University has been informed by:

British Educational Research Association [BERA] (2018) *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research*, fourth edition, London.

<https://www.bera.ac.uk/resources/all-publications/resources-for-researchers>

The Children Act, 1989

<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1989/41/contents>

Department for Education, HM Government, *Working Together to Safeguard Children* (2018)

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/working-together-to-safeguard-children--2>

Economic & Social Research Council, *Research with Children and Young People*,

<https://esrc.ukri.org/funding/guidance-for-applicants/research-ethics/frequently->

NSPCC, *Research with children: ethics, safety and avoiding harm*
<https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/research-resources/briefings/research-with-children-ethics-safety-avoiding-harm/>

Sheffield Hallam University, *Guidance for Obtaining Consent to Undertake Research with Children in Schools* (2016). Sheffield: University Research Ethics Committee.

<https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/ethicsandintegrity/ethicspolicy/further-guidance/special-guidance/papers>

Unicef, *Ethical Research Involving Children* (2013). Florence

<https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/706-ethical-research-involving-children.html>

University Medical Centre Groningen – The Beatrix Children’s Hospital, *Research in newborn infants. Ethical Aspects, recruitment and informed consent.*

https://www.ema.europa.eu/documents/presentation/research-newborn-infants-ethical-aspects-recruitment-informed-consent-pieter-jj-sauer_en.pdf

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