



Research with children and in schools: Some ethical considerations and relevant guidance

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Note

These principles are intended to guide staff and students on how children can be involved in research in ethical ways. In particular they address issues encountered by staff and students on courses in the School of Education but they may be relevant to students and researchers in other disciplines.

We have used as a starting point the ethical guidelines provided by our professional bodies (see list below) and considered current debates within our fields. We have not aimed to re-write these codes of practice, but rather to apply them to solving practical problems.

- British Association of Sport and Exercise Science
- British Educational Research Association
- British Psychological Society
- National Children’s Bureau

1. Preamble

As a general principle we should not discourage or prevent staff or students from researching with children. Ethical protocols do not dictate who can or cannot be researched; rather they guide us how research can be done ethically. Children are under-represented minorities and research offers the opportunity for their voices to be heard; it might be considered *unethical* to ignore those voices.

Childhood is not a state of vulnerability *per se*; i.e. a child is not 'vulnerable' just by virtue of being a 'child'. However, situations in which children are placed may make them vulnerable. When making a risk assessment of a child's "particular vulnerability" we should ask whether *that child, at that time, in that situation*, will be vulnerable.

Traditionally we have tended to underestimate a child's ability to understand and to express agreement or disagreement. It is a matter of fact, not of definition, whether a particular child understands a particular way of participating in research, and is able to give informed consent. We should always consider how a child can be engaged in the giving of consent.

There is a bond of trust between a parent and the person in whose care their child has been placed. The trusting relationship is the ethical basis of the right of the carer to stand *in loco parentis*, and it is difficult to see how child care could take place in any other way. The trusting relationship applies to schools, to early- child care, or even to local youth clubs and sporting associations. Research with children – and in particular that which takes place in the absence of the parent – is dependent on the existence of this trusting relationship. It should be a matter of principle our research does not test, exploit or damage it; indeed the research should be done in a way which overtly acknowledges and supports this relationship.

Communicating with parents is one way of nourishing the trusting relationship. We consider it good practice for parents to be informed of any research or professional development activity taking place in the child care setting. This should be the case whether or not any children are directly involved, or whether consent will be required from parents or children. Researchers should agree with the gatekeeper how best to achieve this.

2. General Principles

Where a research proposal involves contact with children, we consider the following criteria to represent a minimum requirement:

1. There should be a strong rationale for the research, including:
 - a. Consideration of alternative methodologies which do not involve children;
 - b. Relevance to a student's course; and
 - c. Relevance to a student's career outcomes.
2. The researcher should have DBS certification.
3. The researcher should have appropriate experience or training of:
 - a. Working with the intended group; and
 - b. Using the intended research procedure.
4. There should be in place supervision appropriate to the intended relationship with the children.
5. The researcher should obtain consent from:
 - a. An appropriate gatekeeper;
 - b. The children concerned (where considered appropriate);
 - c. The parent(s) or guardian; and
 - d. The person acting *in loco parentis*.

Research which requires children to do something different from 'normal' is more intrusive, and more likely to place them in a situation where they are vulnerable. Students should be encouraged to design research which respects these 'normal' situations.

A 'normal' situation is one which:

- a. Takes place in the 'normal' practice location and context;
- b. Where relationships with participants are determined by 'normal' practice; and
- c. Activities in which children participate are 'normal' practice.

For example, observing children working together on a classroom activity would be within the bounds of their 'normal' expectations. Interviewing a child in a separate room introduces a

new context, a new relationship and a new activity, and is thus far from the child's normal expectations of school.

A greater level of training, experience and supervision would be expected of the researcher where children are taken out of their 'normal' environment.

We have expanded on the idea of 'normal practice' in the section below on practitioner research.

3. Special Provisions: Research with very young children

Research involving very young children aged from just a few months up to school age demands special consideration. In the past researchers have tended to overestimate the ability of very young children to understand what it means to participate in research, and to overlook also the problem of monitoring when a child has had enough. The notion of 'informed child consent' thus has little purchase on real situations.

The trusting relationship between carer and parent is particularly important for children of this age. Parents will have a heightened sensitivity to the child care situation, and the children themselves are more easily made vulnerable by changes. The welfare and safety of the child will always be the first consideration.

Children may start school at aged four. We feel these considerations should apply equally to school reception classes.

The following preconditions should apply to researchers planning to work with very young children:

1. The researcher should be qualified and experienced in working with children of that age;
2. The researcher should already have established a trusting relationship with:
 - a. The child/ children concerned
 - b. The parents of those children
 - c. The staff at the workplace involved

We feel these preconditions are the best way to ensure the trusting relationship is maintained. Familiarity with the children affords the practitioner the best opportunity to judge their ability to consent and to monitor their continued participation. It also implies consent should always be sought from a parent (and the child where appropriate), no matter how indirect or peripheral the child's involvement.

We are aware these preconditions will exclude most undergraduates on childhood related courses from researching with very young children. However, where an undergraduate can meet the criteria we recommend the research should be embedded in their practice, i.e. it should be designed within the parameters of 'normal practice' (as discussed above).

4. Special Provisions: Practitioner research

Evidence-based analysis of educational practice has become a central part of the notion of professionalism in education. The evaluation of such analysis is often suitably incorporated in students' assessment in several professional development courses. We recognise that it is often difficult to distinguish the process of data collection and analysis associated with this method of assessment from traditional research, especially when this leads to outputs that are to be shared or can be publicly available including students' essays and scientific papers. We also recognise that the ethical rules guiding research are not always appropriate to support and guide this process. We note in particular how the demand to gain full consent from child-participants and parents for collection of evidence from classroom situations can be unnecessary and hurdle such practice. The following clarifications aim to address this problem.

Evidence-based analysis of educational practice when working with children is part of a normal professional practice, and should be strictly connected with learning, understanding and developing that practice. During the process of collection and analysis of evidence for such practice neither parental nor child consent will be required, although the researcher and gatekeeper will have agreed how parents are kept informed of the professional development activity.

What counts as 'normal' in these situations is a matter of fact; and is something to which parents have implicitly consented when leaving their children in the care of another. In determining what in fact is 'normal' in the given context, consideration should be paid to whether the researcher's existing relationship with children, parents and institution is not altered as a result of this process.

In case that the analysis of professional practice leads to students' essays and / or academic publications, the **anonymity and confidentiality** of participants should always be protected. Students whose coursework is based on such analysis should take all necessary precautions and measures to ensure the impossibility of identification of participants and of their professional setting and they should seek relevant guidance from their tutors and supervisors.

It should be noted that the evaluation of evidence-based analysis of educational practice may be suitable part of the assessment of certain Level 6 and Level 7 modules, especially those which are often part of the syllabus of professional development courses, including Initial

Teacher Training. Such evaluation is not expected to be the object of study in research degrees (PhD, EdD, MRes), research methods modules or Level-7 research projects (MA or MEd dissertations).

5. A note on children as 'indirect' participants

Much educational research takes place with a focus on teachers and their pedagogy. This may involve non-participant observation of teaching practice or participant-observation of the pedagogic situation. In these cases, the children are 'indirect' participants in the research. Their presence is necessary for the research to take place, but they are not a primary focus for data collection.

In these situations, it is common practice to obtain consent from the teacher who is the focus of the case study, and consent from the head teacher acting *in loco parentis* for the children's presence during the research.

We endorse this practice but note 'indirectness' is an unclear concept. When approving a research design each case should be examined carefully to ensure the focus on pedagogy is genuine and the children's participation is incidental.