

Carnegie Faculty Research Ethics Committee
Short-life Working Group on Researching with Children

Draft Report

Group members

Dr David White (Chair); Dr John Connoll; Hannah Greatwood; Claire Griffiths; Jean Laight; Dr Joanne Pearson; Dr Jon Tan; Susan Waltham

Other contributors

Dr Caroline Bligh; Jamie French; Dr Tim Murphy

Contents:

1. Preamble	2
2. General Principles	3
3. Special Provisions: Research with very young children	4
4. Special Provisions: Practitioner research	5
5. A note on children as 'indirect' participants	7

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 our faculty.

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

'Practitioner research' has become a central part of the notion of an education professional. We have found it is neither possible, nor desirable, to maintain a simple binary distinction between 'research' and 'practice', or to disconnect 'research' from actual improvement in outcomes for children. Educational research has a transformative purpose; and practitioner research has an implicit *quid pro quo*. It is in these ways *educational* research has carved-out a new discipline area.

Traditional ethical rules are not always appropriate to these new forms of practice-based research. In particular we note how the demand to gain full consent from child-participants and parents in classroom situations can be a bar to pedagogical improvement. The following principles address this problem. They have been developed out of current debates in educational research and should be seen as operating within the 'trusting relationship' discussed above.

1. A practitioner researcher is a person who works with children as part of a professional practice, and whose research is connected with learning, understanding and developing that practice.
2. The boundaries of the research will be coterminous with their practice in the sense that:
 - a. It takes place in the 'normal' practice location and context;
 - b. Relationships with participants are determined by 'normal' practice;
 - c. Activities in which children participate are 'normal' practice.

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.

3. In determining what in fact is 'normal' in the given context, the following factors will be weighed:
 - The researcher's existing relationship with children, parents and institution;
 - The extent to which the rationale, purpose and methods of the research are transformative;
 - The directness/ indirectness of the children's participation;
 - The sensitivity of the subject for those involved;
 - The educational justification for any differentiation of children's participation;
 - The degree to which non-identification of child participants can be maintained;
 - The degree to which an individual child becomes a case study;

We emphasise these are not 'tests' to be applied, but factors to be weighed in assessing the 'educational value' of the research. The term 'educational value' is intended to encompass the direct and indirect benefits to children of the particular practice.

4. Where a researcher can meet these criteria there is a presumption the research has educational value. The practitioner researcher should gain:
 - a. Informed consent from the appropriate gatekeeper;
 - b. Gatekeeper agreement to act *in loco parentis* for the children.

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.

We recognise 'professional' and 'practice' are contested terms, and may legitimately cover a range of roles involving contact with children. Two exemplars are a qualified teacher on a Master's course and a student teacher on an undergraduate QTS course. They share professional standards and

codes of conduct and when present in a school have clearly defined roles and relationships with others.

However, we do not exclude other professional practices or para-professional roles, where a student may be required, or legitimately ask, to conduct practitioner research. We have considered in particular students on education or PE studies courses, or sports/PE coaches or instructors. We consider students in this position should submit as part of their ethics application an agreement between themselves, their supervisor and the 'gatekeeper' which clarifies workplace roles, conduct and expectations.

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.