

# Guidance Paper 3: Putting in Place Appropriate Safeguards for Research Involving Children



## Introduction

This guidance paper outlines some of the safeguarding considerations for research involving children. It is Guidance Paper 3 in the series *The Ethics of Research Involving Children: Common Questions, Potential Strategies and Useful Guidance*.

Ethical principles aim to ensure that all aspects of research in so far as possible respect and protect participants from potential harm.<sup>1</sup> Whilst it can be argued that everyone is vulnerable and at risk of potential harm at some point (after all, vulnerability is part of the human condition<sup>2</sup>), children are seen to be more vulnerable than adults. This can be attributed to their physicality (they are naturally smaller and weaker), their more limited social development (they have not yet mastered the social tools necessary to protect themselves from harm), and established power dynamics (adults have power over children which can undermine, disadvantage and even exploit children).<sup>3</sup> As such, children require special protection in law, policy, procedures and, indeed, when it comes to designing and conducting research.

Additional safeguards may need to be put in place to safeguard children who are involved in research of a particularly sensitive nature, or with children who are regarded as especially vulnerable due to their circumstances, characteristics and experiences. This includes those who have suffered abuse, those who have been detained, those who have experienced family separation or economic difficulties, and those affected by ill-health, special educational needs or disability.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Harm is defined under Children Act 1989, s31(9) as: 'ill-treatment or the impairment of health or development including, for example, impairment suffered from seeing or hearing the ill-treatment of another.'

<sup>2</sup> J Herring, 'Vulnerability, Children, and the Law' in M Freeman, *Law and Childhood Studies* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 244.

<sup>3</sup> A Myer, 'The Moral Rhetoric of Childhood' (2007) 14 *Childhood* 85.

<sup>4</sup> Children's Commissioner, 'Defining Child Vulnerability: Definitions, Frameworks and Groups' (July 2017) *Cordis Bright* <<http://childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/CCO-TP2-Defining-Vulnerability-Cordis-Bright-2.pdf>> accessed 13th July 2018.

# 1. What is Safeguarding?

Safeguarding denotes protection, prevention and promoting the welfare of children. It is defined as:

- protecting children from maltreatment;
- preventing impairment of children's health or development;
- ensuring that children grow up in circumstances consistent with the provision of safe and effective care;
- acting to enable all children to have the best outcomes.

Ensuring that children are safeguarded through a duty to report any concerns is a legal obligation for anyone working with children. This includes researchers. The Children Act 2004 sets out the legal framework, with the Children Act 1989 setting out the duty for local authorities to promote and safeguard the welfare of children in need in their area. Furthermore, researchers who are registered as education, health or social care professionals must be aware of their regulatory safeguarding obligations.

## 2. The Importance of Researching with (Vulnerable) Children and Young People

In the past, children, particularly those regarded as especially vulnerable, have been excluded from participating in research because of a desire to protect them from any risk of harm, or because researchers feel they do not have the necessary skills to work with children with more complex needs and experiences. However, it is often the very persistence of the child's vulnerabilities and experiences that reinforce the need for research, including that of a participatory nature; children and young people can provide unique and richer insights than adult proxy accounts. They can offer accounts of lived experiences in the here and now rather than relying on adults' (often distorted) retrospective accounts. In addition, such involvement enables children and young people to take ownership of their situations, can offer a sense of empowerment and can benefit the participants and young people more generally by helping to identify improvements to laws, policies, processes, practices and treatments. As such, good ethical research with children will strike a balance between ensuring adequate protection of children and young people and providing them with the opportunity to express their views and experiences.

In the same vein, protecting children requires some consideration of whether the benefits associated with the research clearly outweigh any risks and justify children's involvement at all. For instance, it is

worth asking: how is this research going to add value to the research that has already been carried out? Are the children I am seeking to engage in the research likely to suffer from 'participation fatigue' due to being over-researched? These are common concerns for children from particular communities which have been particularly popular topics for research in response to high profile social, political or economic issues (such as unaccompanied asylum seeking, refugee children or gender diverse children). It would therefore be pertinent to utilise any institutional databases or contact organisations associated with potential research studies to determine if any of the above issues require consideration.

### 3. Responsibilities of the Researcher around Safeguarding

It is commonly recognised that researchers should:

- protect participants from undue harm
- ensure participation is voluntary
- obtain fully informed consent for their participation (see Guidance Paper 2)
- make participants aware of their right to refuse/withdraw participation from a study at any stage (although it is important to be clear and transparent about any limitations on the right of participants to withdraw data – for example, if that data have already been anonymised)
- not exclude any group from consideration without scientific/clinical justification, and
- maintain participants' anonymity and confidentiality (see Guidance Paper 6).
- ensure that children and their families have a robust mechanism to report issues or concerns associated with the research.<sup>5</sup>

Good ethical practice demands that we do not automatically exclude children from the benefits and opportunities associated with research simply on the basis of their actual or perceived vulnerabilities. That said, the benefits of participating in such work should outweigh any potential risks and the child's participation should be fully informed and voluntary. Potential risks may include harm as a result of clinical research treatment or procedures, psychological harm or distress associated with the research area and any impact on the child from time given to participate in the research.

---

<sup>5</sup> Social Research Association, 'Ethical Guidelines' (Dec 2003) < <http://the-sra.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/ethics03.pdf>> accessed 26 September 2018.

Best practice involves providing children and young people with the **choice** as to whether they would like to participate in the research, based on clear, accessible information about what their participation involves and what the potential risks are (see Guidance Paper 2 on Consent).

## 4. Getting DBS Clearance for Research

All researchers who have direct contact with children and young people must have [Disclosure and Barring Service](#) (DBS) clearance. The DBS clearance process allows organisations to check the criminal record of researchers to ensure that they do not have a history that would make them unsuitable for work with children and young people. It also provides reassurance to potential research participants that you have been fully screened for past convictions.

There are different levels of DBS clearance, depending on the nature of the work you are carrying out. To determine which level is most appropriate, complete the following questionnaire (note that this is designed for a range of different sectors and posts so may not be conclusive): <https://www.gov.uk/find-out-dbs-check>.

Most participatory research directly involving children requires an **enhanced DBS clearance**.

Note: DBS checks are processed centrally but should be funded by the researcher's school/department/project funders. The researcher needs to obtain permission from their line school or departmental line-manager and ensure that appropriate funds are available prior to requesting DBS checks.

**Allow at least six weeks prior to the commencement of any direct work with children and young people for DBS clearance. This may take longer if the researchers has lived/worked in different jurisdictions.**

## 5. Skills and Training

Ensuring the well-being of children and young people in research requires that researchers are adequately skilled. While many of the skills used by researchers who undertake research with adults are transferable, further training may be required for conducting research with children. Researchers need skills in communication and forming relationships with children, young people and gate-keepers. Some of these attributes come naturally to researchers but additional training might build the confidence of less experienced researchers. This might include: how to establish a rapport with children, putting them at ease, understanding verbal and non-verbal cues, and responding to needs, risks or harms which

children might reveal during the research process. In some instances, more specialised training may also be required, for example in relation to identifying and managing safety issues, including suspected child abuse or neglect, supporting child-led research, gathering sensitive data (violence; sex, alcohol and drugs; child labour) and collecting medical or biological data. There is no legal standard of training expected for researchers but this is where ethical standards obligate researchers to reflect on their own skills and to consider recruiting additional, expert support (for example, from a trained counsellor), should the research involve particularly vulnerable young people. Without adequate training, the researcher may cause harm to participants and to themselves. Ethics committees, rightly, will expect the researcher to demonstrate that they are competent and qualified to conduct the study, so researchers should bear this in mind when seeking ethical approval.

## 6. Disclosure

One concern when carrying out empirical research is that participants may provide information that raises concerns about their own safety or wellbeing, or that of others. This is more likely in the context of research involving sensitive topics or in sensitive environments such as in health settings, situations of conflict, violence or humanitarian emergencies. Such revelations need to be dealt with calmly and sensitively.

The researcher should acknowledge their own limits and refrain from taking on the role of counsellor or social worker. Instead, they should ensure their obligations around disclosure are clear to the child from the outset, that the options about further action are discussed with the young person, and that supervisors and/or gatekeepers are consulted as appropriate.

Further complications around disclosure may arise in relation to online research as there may be no feasible way of tracing or contacting the participant if they are anonymous or using a pseudonym. Researchers should ensure the contact details of all participants are available to allow for appropriate follow-up and measures if a safeguarding concern arises. The inclusion of details of safety management in online research planning is crucial and might include a private messaging facility or follow-up call (see further Guidance Paper 4 on digital methods and ethics).

Fundamentally there must be clear institutional and/or organisational procedures for managing disclosure, alongside how support services and resources can be accessed. Ethical review will always consider the protocols put in place for disclosure of issues that would require the researcher to breach confidentiality. The limitations to confidentiality must also be outlined to participants as part of the informed consent/assent process.

## 7. Safeguarding researchers

The planning of research often overlooks plans for safeguarding the researcher. Some research involves periods of field work in remote areas, with groups or communities that exist on the social and economic periphery. Other work involves discussion and analysis of intensely sensitive, disturbing or emotive issues and material. For such work, it is essential that clear protocols are in place to ensure the safety of the researcher. We have included an example from a University of Liverpool project at the end of this briefing. Even the most robust of protocols cannot completely eliminate the possibility of researchers experiencing distress, however. As Bashir (2020) argues, the cause is multifaceted and can often be caused by the researcher being on unfamiliar territory, researcher anxiety about the unpredictability of participants, and researcher feelings of powerlessness to help.

Certain things can be put in place to ensure that the researcher is supported, including: regular catch up meetings with other members of the research team/supervisor; a heightened awareness on the part of other colleagues of the nature and potential impact of the research; and a clear checking in and checking out system to ensure that the researcher's whereabouts are known during field work.

Where the research is likely to involve some risks (either because it involves more vulnerable groups or children in vulnerable situations) or because of the potential risks to the researcher, it will be appropriate to put in place a specific **safeguarding protocol**. An example is provided in Annex 1.

### Useful resources

- J. Davidson 'Dilemmas in research: issues of vulnerability and disempowerment for the social worker/researcher' *Journal of Social Work Practice*, November 2004; 18(3): 379-393.
- For further information on disclosure and the potential harms to children participating in research, see [ERIC, 'Ethical Guidance: Harm and Benefits'](#)
- For further information on skills and training, see [ERIC, 'Researcher Support'](#)
- Randall, D., Anderson, A. and Taylor, J., 2016. Protecting children in research: Safer ways to research with children who may be experiencing violence or abuse. *Journal of child health care*, 20(3), pp.344-353.
- NCB 2011 [Guidelines for Research with Children and Young People](#)

- See Alderson, P. and Morrow, G. (2020) *The Ethics of Research with Children and Young People: A Practical Handbook* (2nd Edition) London: Sage, pp.31-32 for a checklist of questions that researchers should ask when assessing the risks associated with their research proposed research
- For consideration of researcher distress see: Bashir, N. (2020). The qualitative researcher: the flip side of the research encounter with vulnerable people. *Qualitative Research*, 20(5), 667–683.
- For further information on the role of the ethics board, see [ERIC, 'Researcher Support'](#)

## Annex 1: Sample Safeguarding Protocol



### **Memorandum of Understanding -**

### **Subcontractor Fieldwork Team and University of Liverpool Project Team**

This document sets out guidance for subcontracted fieldwork researchers about:

- 1. The research processes and expectations regarding respectful engagement with research participants, with specific focus on children and young people.*
- 2. Expectations and protocols to follow with regards to fieldwork researchers reporting and responding if and when concerns around ethics, methodology, safeguarding or criminal activity arise.*
- 3. Details of expectations for correspondence with the University of Liverpool Project Team regarding fieldwork progress and the sharing of research data.*

### **1. Research processes and engagement with research participants**

#### *1.1 Informed consent of participants*

Participants must give expressed and informed consent for involvement in the fieldwork. The purpose of the project should be fully explained to them and that their participation is voluntary. Consent must be recorded verbally (audio recorded) or in writing from participants. Consent, verbal or written, for children below 16 years of age must be gained from their parent/guardian, in addition to consent from the child. Please refer to the relevant project information sheet and consent forms for stakeholders and workers.



## 1.2 *Participant and researcher safety*

Participant and fieldwork researcher safety is paramount. Subcontractors are expected to have the relevant insurances and health and safety policies in place locally. Risk assessments of interview/focus group locations should be undertaken to minimise the risk to researchers and safeguard participants.

Subcontractors should undertake the relevant checks on fieldwork researchers to ensure that only appropriate and suitably qualified people have access to this vulnerable participant group.

A protocol should be in place to deal with researcher safety issues e.g. subcontractors monitoring when and where interviews are taking place, having a 'checking in and out' system to ensure researchers safely arrive and leave locations and ensuring researchers know what procedure to follow when they feel unsafe in the field.

## 1.3 *Participant Reimbursement*

Subcontractors are expected to ensure that participants are not financially adversely impacted by research activity. Reasonable out of pocket expenses incurred by participants should be reimbursed (e.g. travel to interview or focus group location) and refreshments should be provided for focus groups. Reimbursement should be proportionate to the level of involvement.

## 1.4 *Undertaking interviews and focus groups – questions, recording of information & transcription*

Participants must understand how and why their information will be recorded and stored - please refer to the relevant project information sheets, consent forms and questions within the interview schedules developed for different groups. The expectations of subcontractors sharing this information with the Project Team is outlined in 3.3.

## **2. Protocols for reporting and responding to concerns**

### 2.1 *Distress protocol for interviews/discussions*

Fieldwork researchers should be provided with a strategy to manage a situation if a participant becomes distressed during the interview; below is a typical protocol which subcontractors are expected to adopt or modify:

## Distress protocol

If a participant in an interview/discussion indicates to the researcher that they are experiencing a high level of stress or emotional distress or exhibit behaviours that suggest the situation is too stressful (crying, shaking etc.) the researcher will stop the discussion/interview and offer immediate support. The researcher will assess whether it is appropriate to continue with the interview, in consultation with the participant.

If the participant is unable to carry on then that person will be taken to a quiet area and the interview/discussion discontinued. The participant will be encouraged to speak with a healthcare professional and/or family or friends for further advice and support. They will be offered, if consent is given, for a member of the research team to do this on their behalf.

The research team will follow-up with the participant after the interview (if the participant consents) or encourage the participant to get in touch if he/she experiences increased distress in the hours/days following the interview/discussion.

Source: adapted from Haigh and Witham (2015) 'Distress Protocol for qualitative data collection' <https://www2.mmu.ac.uk/media/mmuacuk/content/documents/rke/Advisory-Distress-Protocol.pdf>

## 2.2 Safeguarding & Disclosure protocol

It is expected that the subcontractor will draw up a plan of action with fieldwork researchers in relation to what to do if a participant discusses information which may require the subcontractor to disclose such information to a relevant body, e.g. potentially criminal activities such as sexual or physical abuse of children. This plan will ensure that researchers are aware in advance of how to manage disclosures and can inform participants of the boundaries of confidentiality; that is, what will – and what will not - be held as confidential. Here is advice on a disclosure protocol which subcontractors are expected to adopt or modify:

### Safeguarding and disclosure protocol

While anonymity should be assured at all times and there is a duty of confidentiality towards participants, there can be occasions where the researchers may feel it necessary

to disclose information to the subcontractor and the relevant authorities or support agencies.

Decisions to disclose information to authorities or support agencies should be set in the context of the aims of the research, in this case to reduce the exploitation of workers and children, and actions should not cause further harm or danger to participants.

A distinction needs to be made between general discussion of participants working conditions and recommendations for change (not subject to individual disclosure); and those issues where there is threat/risk to the individual/others due to exceptional circumstances that requires some immediate response and disclosure to protect the individual. For example, in cases where there are criminal activities (for example child abuse), or there is expressed intention by participants to harm themselves or others, researchers should be clear about what safeguarding actions should be taken.

Source: McLeod (2015) 'Psychology Research Ethics'

<https://www.simplypsychology.org/Ethics.html>

### 2.3 *Protocol for raising concerns about ethics or methodology*

The Project Team will provide clear guidance on carrying out ethical fieldwork through discussions with subcontractors and the relevant research documents (consent forms, information sheets etc). The subcontractor is expected to raise any concerns about ethics and methodology at the earliest stage of identification. The subcontractor is expected to ensure that fieldwork researchers are aware and competent in this area and to be available to deal with any concerns they may have.

- 1) Everyone, including fieldworkers, will agree on the proposed methods and ethical protocols as set out in this document and the accompanying research tools (which should be sensitively translated/adapted to specific contexts in which fieldworkers are researching);
- 2) Within 2 weeks of fieldwork commencing, the Post-Doctoral Research Assistant (PDRA) Leona Vaughn will check in with each subcontractor fieldwork team to check that the agreed methods and ethical protocols are operating smoothly and being complied with/to assist in making any necessary tweaks; subcontractors are encouraged to raise issues that arise before or after that date with the PDRA/PI on an ad hoc basis.

- 3) Subcontractors will be required to report on the detail of the methods and ethics as part of their presentation of the country-level research/findings/data

### **3. Corresponding with the Project Team and sharing of data**

#### *3.1 Communication with the UoL Project Team*

Regular (at least monthly) communication will be made between the contracted fieldwork teams and a designated member of the lead project team to discuss progress. Once fieldwork has begun, fortnightly intervals the PDRA will check progress and deal with any concerns. The Project Team will arrange fieldwork visits to each country to undertake quality assurance and/or review fieldwork practice. Subcontractors are encouraged to raise any issues outside of this cycle to their specific country contacts (listed below at 3.2.2).

#### *3.2 Who to contact*

In the first instance all queries should be directed to the project PDRA [X], who will raise issues with the Principal Investigator (PI) and the Project Team as appropriate. The PI for this project is [X] and if any urgent issues arise from the fieldwork this should be communicated to him by email (X) or phone (X).

## **Useful resources**

- For further elaboration on safeguarding children, see HM Government, '[Working Together to Safeguard Children: A guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children](#)' (2018)
- Alderson, P. and Morrow, G. (2020) *The Ethics of Research with Children and Young People: A Practical Handbook* (2nd Edition) London: Sage, Chapter 2
- [The Research Ethics Guidebook](#)