



St Mary's  
University  
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London

## **Ethical Guidelines for Conducting Research with Children or Young People**

### **Introduction**

This information sheet has been designed to assist those who intend to collect data from children or young people. Please note that this document should not be considered as a complete interpretation of all the potential ethical issues which could arise when working with children/young people.

These guidelines are based on the National Children's Bureau Guidelines for Research with Children and Young People (and full recognition should be given here). It should be read in conjunction with St Mary's University Ethics Guidelines and the Policy for Fieldwork, Outdoor and Off-Campus.

### **Research with Children and Young People**

The main requirement for research in this area is to gain consent from gatekeepers, guardians and the children/young people themselves. Alongside this, the researcher should ensure that they hold a current Disclosure and Barring Service certificate issued by St Mary's University.

Guardian consent is required for those under the age of 18, and this is held in addition to child consent. It is not recommended that research takes place without the individual child or young person's consent.

The age of the participant group will have a significant impact on the research methodology. Researchers should take into account how the research methodology might vary (in comparison to research with adults) when working with children and young people e.g. the total number tasks and the length of breaks should vary depending on the child's age.

### **Environmental Factors**

Researchers should be aware that children and young people may act differently in certain environmental situations, therefore the researcher should acknowledge any ethical issues such as risk of harm. It is recommended that a pilot study take place prior to commencement of the main project to identify any risks.

## **Safeguarding**

For both the individual researcher and child's protection, the researcher should ensure that they are not left alone with the child, nor should interviews be conducted in an isolated place.

The researcher should ensure that they comply with the guidance set out by the School or University in which the research is being conducted.

The researcher must explain to the child that despite confidentiality any safeguarding measures will mean that confidentiality may be breached. If any potential safeguarding issues arise with the child or young person, this should be discussed with the research supervisor and signposted to the relevant organisations.

Please ensure that you are aware of your responsibilities in regard to safeguarding prior to conducting any research with children or young people.

## **Consent**

Children and young people should be viewed as autonomous individuals when taking part in research. However, those under 18 years of age are not legally able to provide sole consent; and so consent should be sought from the appropriate parent or guardian under an 'opt-in' approach.

The researcher should obtain written permission from the hosting institution first (i.e. the Head Teacher at a school) by doing so the hosting institution should be aware of the purpose and involvement of the child/young person. St Mary's University recommends that a member of staff from the hosting institution is present when the research takes place, and that this is acknowledged in written form.

Once permission is obtained from the hosting institution researchers must obtain active written consent from the relevant guardian/parent who has legal responsibility for the child or young person. Once this has been given researchers will be able to approach the child/young person for consent.

Researchers should be aware that a child or young person's competence to provide consent is usually based on their age.

It is suggested that researchers should:

- Ensure that written communication is provided at a suitable level.
- The written material should also be verbally communicated with the group or individual in an appropriate way.
- Researchers should consider hosting a pilot study to ensure that the information used to gain consent is suitable.

## **Feedback**

Researchers should be reminded that participants are entitled to ask for feedback. It is recommended that the method or details of the feedback should be agreed upon before the

research takes place. If you are providing feedback to the child/young person as well as the guardian then please ensure that feedback is written in a manner which is comprehensible (lay language based on the mental age of the child or young person).

### **Ethical Issues for Consideration: Children and Young People**

Alderson (1995) suggests an 'impact on children' statement for each research proposal which should examine the likely effect of the research questions, methods and conclusions on children/young people.

Researchers are recommended to consider the following points from Alderson and Morrow (2008, 2011)<sup>1</sup> when submitting an ethics application form. Please note researchers may consider further potential issues which could be relevant for their particular research, and that this list is not exhaustive.

1. How will those pupils who are not 'allowed' by their parents to take part in the research be managed? This is significant if the research involves the whole class.
2. Will a reward be given for helping with the research?
3. Have children/young people or the guardians had an opportunity to assist or comment in the planning of the research?
4. Will the children be given a written sheet or leaflet to keep, in their first language? If so, how will you ensure that it is clearly written?
5. Will the children be given time to ask questions or talk to other people in advance of them giving consent?
6. How will the children be made aware that if they refuse or withdraw from the research they will not suffer any consequences?
7. How will you ensure that the child is not under pressure to give consent?
8. How will the person conducting the research respond to children who become distressed?
9. Will the research take place in an appropriate environment? If so, how has this been concluded?
10. If the child prefers, will parents be allowed to be present or absent? In certain situations this may be necessary.
11. If the researcher thinks that there is a potential safeguarding issue based on information obtained from the child, will the researcher discuss this first with the child/parent/school etc?
12. Do you know your responsibility for the child? i.e. safeguarding requirements.

The University Ethics Sub-Committee Secretary holds an example consent form which can be used as a helpful tool when conducting research with children and young people.

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<sup>1</sup> Alderson, P and Morrow, V. (2011) *The Ethics of Research with Children and Young People: A Practical Handbook*. London: Sage Publications.

Morrow, V (2008) *The Ethics of Social Research with Children and Young People – An Overview*. London: Institute of Education.