

# HARMS AND BENEFITS

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## Tongan children's involvement in research

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### ***Background context:***

In 2015, for the first time, children and young people in Tonga were invited to take part in research about their lives. From the UK, I worked with the project leaders of two Tongan national charities, Ma'a Ffine mo e Famili (For Women and Families; MFF) and Naunau 'o 'Alamaite Tonga Association (NATA), to design, oversee and conduct qualitative research into the experiences and needs of Tongan children. The project leaders wanted to include children, and specifically children with disabilities, not only because they had not been included in research before, but because both anecdotal evidence and evidence from a research project on domestic violence and abuse had suggested Tongan children were at risk of violence and abuse in families.

### ***The ethical challenge:***

The key challenges were to encourage children's participation in research and to ensure the potential harms and risks of taking part were balanced with the potential benefits to them - recognising and understanding Tongan children's needs and using this evidence to inform new national child protection policies and practice (which were largely missing at the time in Tonga). The Tongan government was keen to obtain large scale data about children's needs through a national survey, but myself, the project leaders and research team knew that children would be unlikely to take part in such a survey and that qualitative methods were needed to involve children, and their families, more sensitively and in order to give them a voice.

Overall, the key ethical challenges for the research team in this study were:

1. To encourage children's participation in something new (for children to be willing to take part in the research and for parents to give consent).
2. To not put children at risk of harm as a result of the study.
3. Lack of support services or regulatory authority in Tonga to which to refer children and families in need.



### **Choices made:**

We decided to use semi-structured interviews with children and their parents/carers. This allowed us to better involve children, parents and extended family carers in understanding consent and confidentiality issues, as well as informing them about the benefits and challenges of taking part. We combined this with ethnographic observations carried out by locally recruited researchers in Tonga. Given the sensitive nature of the research – focusing on children’s experiences and needs, including their experiences of violence and abuse – the research team were concerned that children and families might not wish to participate and also that parents/carers may resist or refuse children children’s participation, but it transpired that our concerns were unfounded. This was a result of using rigorous and appropriate research methods, and the sensitive management and conduct of the research by the project leaders and the locally recruited researchers, all of who understood and had in-depth cultural insights into the kind of problems Tongan families faced. Thanks to their input, parents and family carers were accepting of and encouraged their children’s participation, even when their participation involved talking about the violence and abuse they experienced both in the home and in school.

The data were collated from families across urban and rural Tonga (the main island of Tongatapu and the other island groups of Vava’u, Ha’apai, ‘Eua and the two Niuas). The interviews and observations took place in the home (during the home observations the researchers would take part in activities with the children, for example playing games and helping them with domestic chores). The use of mixed methods allowed for a triangulated approach that enhanced the validity and quality of the data. Both the semi-structured interviews with children and the observations particularly showed the extent of violence against children in families, and in schools, as well as the harmful effects of poverty, hunger, poor housing, unemployment and so on, on family life.

Parents considered the use of physical violence a ‘necessary’, as well as culturally acceptable (and traditional) form of corporal punishment in order to control children and teach them right from wrong. But many parents also conceded that this kind of ‘control’ often had limited effect, had serious consequences for their children and made parents feel guilty and ashamed. They said in interview they wanted to learn new and ‘better ways’ of teaching their children right from wrong.

In other contexts, uncovering such extensive use of physical violence and abuse by parents/carers and school teachers and staff against children would have resulted in child protection or safeguarding procedures. That there were no such services or policies in Tonga at the time of the research underscored the

importance of the study and particularly the need to ensure the findings would have real impact for all Tongan children.

Evidence from the study was used to inform government policy and practice on the protection of children in Tonga and resulted in a commitment from the government, including the Prime Minister, Hon. Samuela 'Akilisi Pohiva, to take 'concrete action to improve our respect for and implementation of the rights of our children, including our children with disabilities.' MFF and NATA are continuing their support of children and families (in providing parenting support classes, for example), and in working with the government to ensure essential child protection policies and practices are put in place.

***Reflexive questions/considerations:***

- How do you ensure the methods used in research with vulnerable children and young people are the most suitable?
- Is it possible to use participatory methods (that is, designed by or with participants) with children and young people if they have not taken part in research about their lives before?
- How do you ensure that the methods you use in research reduce the potential risks and harms of children's participation?
- How would you make sure the evidence from your research brings about effective change – in policy, practice and/or in transforming lives?
- How would you manage research findings that reveal extensive violence against children/young people participants? Bear in mind that some states or countries do not have child protection policies in place and parents/carers will have different interpretations and understanding of what constitutes violence against children.

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