



ETHICAL RESEARCH INVOLVING CHILDREN

Centre for Children
and Young People



Childwatch
INTERNATIONAL
RESEARCH NETWORK

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NEW ZEALAND



PHILOSOPHY

Ethical Research Involving Children (ERIC) assumes that ethics is much more than procedural compliance with a prescribed set of rules or code of conduct that can deliver good or safe research in any given context. While such codes play an important role, the ERIC approach recognises the myriad ways in which researchers' own knowledge, beliefs, assumptions, values, attitudes and experience intersect with ethical decision-making. As such, ERIC requires critical reflection; cross-cultural, inter-sectoral and cross-disciplinary dialogue; context-specific problem-solving; and international collaboration, learning and engagement. In order to safeguard and promote the rights, dignity and well-being of children in and through research, ERIC calls on researchers and the research community to be open, reflexive and collaborative in their ethical decision-making, and to be specifically attuned to the relational dimensions of research ethics. The core ethical principles underpinning the ERIC approach are respect, benefit and justice.

Ethical principles and issues cannot be disconnected from researchers' attitudes, values, beliefs and assumptions about children and childhood.

Respect for the dignity, well-being and rights of all children, irrespective of context, is central to the philosophy that underpins the Ethical Research Involving Children project. Such respect is integral to researchers' decisions and actions concerning the nature and conditions of children's involvement in research, regardless of sector, location or methodological orientation.

ERIC opens up an opportunity for international dialogue around the more difficult issues and questions that shape our work as a very diverse community doing research that either directly involves children or potentially impacts on their lives and well-being. The ERIC approach acknowledges that ethical principles and issues cannot be disconnected from researchers' attitudes, values, beliefs and assumptions about children and childhood, since these invariably shape our decision-making and underpin important matters of power and representation.

Children's rights as expressed in the UNCRC underpin the approach taken in ERIC, whereby researchers are presumed to be informed of and guided by their responsibilities to respect the rights, well-being and human dignity of every child. The UNCRC, therefore, is a central starting point for the ERIC project.^{vii} It is the first and most complete international instrument to assert a full range of rights for children and, in effect, is "a legal articulation of a broader philosophical perspective" (Lundy & McEvoy, 2012a, p. 77). While keeping in mind that the UNCRC is a set of obligations on states (and their actors) and not on individuals, and therefore does not necessarily put direct obligations on researchers, it is a useful and important framework that connects to and may inform ethical research with children (Lundy & McEvoy, 2012b).

The UNCRC is a central starting point for the ERIC project.

The UNCRC gives visibility and legitimacy to the **agency** and participation of children, while also drawing attention to their **protection** and **provision rights**, thus recognising children as both able to and entitled to participate in activities such as research. While it does not refer specifically to research, when read in conjunction with the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child General Comments, the articles are elastic enough to address most aspects of children's lives, including participation in research (Lundy & McEvoy, 2012a). The near-universal ratification of the UNCRC holds considerable potential for inspiring and pursuing a shared commitment to the development and conduct of ethically sound research.

Ennew and Plateau (2005) articulate children's 'right to be properly researched' based on combining four articles of the UNCRC,^{viii} thereby merging children's right to protection with their right to participation.

They contend that children's 'right to be properly researched', along with the basic human rights principles of dignity and respect, support children's partnership in research and make the development of an ethical strategy an integral part of all research design.

Ethical research requires recognition of and reflection on the multiple contexts that shape children's lives and experiences, and inform and influence research involving children, both implicitly and explicitly. These contexts include the wider cultural, social, political and economic milieux and also the multiple relationships that are formed around the research (including, but not limited to, researchers, children and young people, **parents**, guardians, caregivers, significant adults/**gate-keepers**, institutions and funding bodies). Ethical research involving children is critically important across all contexts, both in **collective cultures**, in which children's identity and voice is closely bound within family, tribal and/or community contexts, and **individualistic cultures** in which individualism and independence are emphasised.

ERIC offers a reflexive process to guide research decision-making and is specifically attuned to the **relational** dimensions of research ethics – that is, the relationships between people who interact during the research process and are integral to good conduct.

An international context for research involving children

There has been increased attention internationally to the involvement of children in research of all kinds, although to date the ethics of such research has been largely circumscribed by concerns about conduct and guided by compliance-focused exercises. Several international organizations and researchers have played a critically important role in developing ethical guidance for research involving children. Consequently, there are a number of national and international guidelines focused on research within specific sectors, regions or methodological orientations.^{ix} These guidelines have made a valuable contribution to ethical research practice and provided a sound basis for further development.

Research involving children is vital for understanding children's lives. It ensures their experiences and perspectives closely inform the study, providing accurate and culturally specific information, which consequently enhances the value and validity of the findings. Systematic information obtained from children can contribute to strengthening laws, policies and practices that advance their human dignity, rights and well-being. Children's involvement in research is vital in ensuring their right to participate in matters that affect them, as recognised in the UNCRC, is upheld. Recognising the methodological significance of involving children in research, the potential impact that research findings may have on their lives, and the importance of upholding children's rights to both protection and participation, underpins the need to have internationally-agreed ethical guidelines and principles that can be applied across multiple contexts.

High quality, ethical research requires close attention to the principles and practices that reflect the highest respect and regard for children in any given research context. The development of ethical guidance specifically for children highlights the growing recognition that, while the ethical principles underpinning research are consistent, the issues, considerations and nuances are conceptualised and experienced differently between child and adult populations, with differing implications and outcomes.

Relationships are at the core of ethical research.

Children's involvement in research is vital in ensuring their right to participate in matters that affect them and in enhancing the value and validity of findings.

Protection and participation: A reflexive research approach

Contemporary research involving children has evolved from a rich mix of diverse research ideologies, methodologies and practices, with ethical approaches shaped by researchers' own understandings in conjunction with wider theoretical, socio-political and cultural considerations. Such research has evolved historically from being conducted in an environment that is largely unregulated, to one which is characterised by complex, multi-dimensional and dynamic challenges, reflecting the multiplicity of children's environments and experiences. The extent to which research involving children is regulated varies across international contexts. However, increased consideration of children's involvement is evident in the different perspectives shaping research practice.

Ethical considerations have shifted significantly from a predominant focus on protectionist discourses, which positioned children as vulnerable and requiring **safeguarding** by adults including researchers, to an emphasis on recognising children's agency and competency, and highlighting children's **participation rights**. Both dimensions are critically important to children's well-being, however these can, at times, present as contradictory and/or opposing.

Mindful of the tensions between protectionist and participatory standpoints, the ERIC project is focused on supporting high quality research practice, while navigating the ethical challenges that arise from such tensions. Rather than being seen in oppositional terms, children's protection and participation are viewed such that the competence, dependence and vulnerability of children do not, in themselves, determine their inclusion or exclusion from research so much as inform the way in which their participation takes place. Such an approach is best supported through more reflexive ethical research processes. Emphasis is placed on the multiple relationships occurring throughout the research process, which are where ethical issues play out, including those related to protection and participation. Hence, attention is drawn to the important role of dialogue, collaboration and critically reflective practice in navigating the uncertainty that often arises in ethical decision-making.

Furthermore, the ERIC compendium is the result of extensive research and consultation with the international research community and one of the key recommendations emerging from this work was the need for a clear statement of internationally-agreed ethical principles that could be embedded into the everyday research practices of governments and organizations within and across cultural contexts.

Several core ethical principles, such as **respect, benefit and justice** are broadly agreed and accepted in research involving children, and underpin the increased attention on specific ethical issues, such as **harms and benefits, informed consent, privacy, confidentiality and payment**. However, little focus has previously been given to the kind of reflexive engagement required by researchers in applying these within particular projects, which involve particular children, utilise particular methodologies, take place in particular contexts and are motivated by particular intents.

The competence, dependence and vulnerability of children should not determine their inclusion or exclusion from research. It should inform how their participation takes place.

KEY ETHICAL PRINCIPLES UNDERPINNING ERIC

The ERIC project is underpinned by three core ethical principles that will likely be familiar to researchers undertaking research involving children. These principles require that researchers attend to the relational as well as the procedural dimensions of research:

- Respect
- Benefit
- Justice

Each principle is worthy of critical reflection, debate and discussion. ERIC invites researchers and the research community into a more reflexive engagement with the meaning and application of these principles, from both a researcher and a child's perspective, across different contexts.

In focusing on the above three principles we also acknowledge that existing ethical guidelines generally include these and/or related principles. The overarching ethics framework offered here takes these principles as a point of departure only - while remaining open to the possibility of adding and/or merging others based on the shared dialogue that is so central to their interpretation and application.

Respect

For our purposes with ERIC, respect means more than tolerance. It implies valuing children and the context of their lives, and recognition of their dignity. Obtaining informed consent for research involvement is an important means of demonstrating this respect for children's dignity.

Respect in research tends to be a principle with which everyone agrees, but which is rarely explicitly articulated in relation to undertaking research involving children. With ERIC, it is assumed that to respect a child in research, one must know:

- who the child is;
- what cultural context they are living in;
- how culture shapes their experiences, capabilities and perspectives.

This involves the subjective and relational experiences of children within their communities, including family, peers and social structures. Respectful research is situated in the lives of children and founded on the assumption that children's experiences and perspectives will be, and should be, taken into account. Such consideration envisages that researchers acknowledge the unequal relationships of power between researchers and children, between children and their communities, and between children.

These unequal relationships require negotiation with the children involved, as well as with potential gate-keepers or other adults participating in the research process. This takes place within the cultural context in which the research is situated and requires reflection on the positioning of children in the local ecosystem, particularly when the researcher brings an 'outsider' perspective to the local context. Respectful research involves acknowledgement and careful consideration of societal emphasis on collective and individual rights in the negotiations of the research process.

Respect is linked closely with rights, and implies valuing children and the context of their lives, and recognising their dignity.

Respect extends to all children impacted by the research, not just those directly involved in the process.

Respect also extends to research that impacts on children even if they have not been directly involved as **participants** in the research process. It requires researchers to pay close attention to the broader ethical implications for children of conducting such research, including the balance between the best interests of individual children directly participating in research, as distinct from children as a social group who may be impacted by the research.

The rights articulated in the UNCRC hold considerable potential for focusing our attention on where and how respect is integral to research involving children, particularly in relation to their protection and participation. Protection rights emphasize that researchers must ensure the safety and care of children. Children's participation rights are activated by researchers noticing and valuing children and their potential contribution to research, and ensuring that children have information and a choice about participation, including the right not to participate.

Benefit

There are two components to the ethical principle of benefit: **non-maleficence** and **beneficence**.

The principle of non-maleficence, or doing no harm, requires researchers to avoid harm or injury to children, both through acts of commission or omission.

Non-maleficence The principle of non-maleficence, doing no harm, requires researchers to avoid harm or injury to children, both through acts of commission or omission. It reminds researchers that research that is likely to do harm to children is unethical and should not proceed. While involving children and young people in research holds many possibilities for enhancing research, practice and policy (Greene & Hill, 2005; Hinton, Tisdall, Gallagher & Elsley, 2008) researchers have a clear responsibility to ensure that no harm comes about from their inclusion. To this end, research should be methodologically and ethically sound, rigorous, relevant and likely to have impact.

In addition, harm as a consequence of exclusionary research practices must be avoided. Researchers must consider potential negative impacts of research for children's lives, sense of identity and belonging. This responsibility includes later consequences of the research, after the researcher has left, as well as during recruitment and the course of data collection, information gathering, interpretation and analysis of the data collected. Researchers have an obligation to ensure that protecting children is an integral part of the planning, implementation and dissemination of all research (H. Fossheim, personal communication, December 14, 2011).

Research likely to harm children should not proceed.

The principle of non-maleficence has particular resonance in research involving children as a consequence of the disparities in power between adults and children, and the responsibility of researchers to ensure that children's rights to protection, as expressed in the UNCRC, are upheld. There are further nuances, in ensuring that no harm is done, with the tension that arises between children's protection and participation rights. While the UNCRC does not specify children's right to participate in research, the articles within it are pliable enough to address research, and the participation rights elucidated in the Convention underpin researchers' obligations to consider, respect and protect children's involvement. Engaging in dialogue with children, in recognition of their status as rights-bearing citizens and authorities in their own lives, as well as potential research participants, provides opportunities to bridge the tension and respect

children's capacity for meaningful involvement in research.

Beneficence The principle of beneficence refers to actions that promote the well-being of children. It refers to a researcher's obligation to strive for their research to improve the status, rights and/or well-being of children. Beneficence is understood as more than acts of kindness and charity and envisages that both the research process and outcomes include positive benefits. Put simply, gaining information from children should result in children, their families and/or local community receiving something in return for this information (H. Fossheim, personal communication, December 14, 2011). Benefits also accrue to children as a social group (who have not been research participants) through the implementation of evidence-based policy-practice. Such benefits may take a diverse range of forms, from undertaking research in caring, attentive and responsible ways so that children feel they are heard, and that their experience is validated and respected, through to providing children and communities with tangible benefits, such as payment or provision of resources, appropriate policies or programmes. The principle of beneficence requires researchers to identify clear benefits likely to arise from research involving children and to reconsider proceeding if these cannot be articulated.

Justice

The principle of justice is foundational to a number of dimensions of research involving children. Justice arises in the relationship between researcher and child and in any dialogue and conversation that takes place between them. The principle of justice requires researchers to attend to the power differences inherent in the adult/child research relationship. Respectful listening to children's views, giving due weight to these and responding to what they have to say is part of facilitating just outcomes from research and is consistent with Article 12 of the UNCRC.^x

The principle of justice requires researchers to find a balance between the perceived benefits of the research and perceived burdens placed on the participants (Belmont Report, 1979). Children should always be treated fairly and the benefits of research distributed equitably. The concept of justice must also underpin decisions made by researchers about which children will be included and which children will be excluded from research, always ensuring that selection is consistent with a clearly stated research purpose and methodological choice, and not driven by discriminatory intent.

All these issues are as relevant to the relationship between the research project and the wider political and social world as they are to the relationship between each child and the researcher.

Justice also concerns the (re)distribution of burdens and benefits of research, including consideration of the allocation of material and social resources to support the respectful and ethical involvement of children (Fraser, 2008). Justice requires that children participate in public discussion and processes of decision-making not only as objects and subjects of research but also, wherever possible, as advisors and consultants in research and the policies it informs.

Research should never be unjust. In research involving children this means children should not carry an undue burden of research

Beneficence refers to the obligation to improve the status, rights and/or well-being of children.

If researchers are unable to identify clear benefits likely to arise from research involving children they should reconsider proceeding.

Justice ensures children are treated fairly and equitably. This includes attention to power imbalances, and issues of distribution of benefits and burdens, and inclusion and exclusion.

Treating children fairly includes ensuring unjust institutions, policies and practices are not indirectly supported by research, as well as ensuring children are treated fairly in face-to-face encounters.

nor should they be denied benefits of research. Justice thus requires researchers to consider whether and how research potentially dominates children and places constraints on their self-determination, and how oppression renders particular perspectives of children invisible or stereotypical of childhood (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005).

The question of whether someone is treated fairly or unfairly is relevant not only in face-to-face encounters. A research project may, for instance, indirectly help uphold unjust institutions, as well as unjust policy choices and practices, whether or not there is any direct contact between the child and the researcher.

Finally, justice is as relevant to the relationships that exist between children involved in research as it is to the researcher-child relationship. Power also affects the relationships between children and it is important to ensure that the views and interests of more than merely a powerful and/or articulate few children, whether they are participants or child-researchers, are represented in the process and dissemination of research.

In summary, the ERIC approach:

- Views children and young people as persons in their own right and as worthy and capable of recognition, respect and voice in research.
- Acknowledges the right of children and young people to have a say and to be heard, as afforded to them under the UNCRC, including in the context of well-planned, ethical research.
- Assumes children's involvement in any kind of research takes place in partnership with caring, skilled adults who need to provide appropriate support and guidance, in order to help them formulate their views and participate in a safe and meaningful way.
- Underlines the importance of research focused on understanding and improving children's lives and circumstances, including within the context of family, school and community.
- Engages critically with well-attested ethical principles of respect, benefit and justice in light of the above, promoting the importance of dialogue and a more reflexive approach in attending to the complex ethical issues that can emerge with research involving children.

^{vii} By virtue of their status as human beings, children are the beneficiaries of rights as articulated under a number of international human rights instruments (for example, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). However, for the purposes of this document, the UNCRC is utilised as it is the core international human rights document pertaining specifically to children.

^{viii} The four articles combined by Ennew and Plateau (2004) are: Article 12.1 – the 'democracy principle'; Article 13 – freedom of expression; Article 36 – protection against exploitation; and Article 3.3 – competence of responsible bodies for care and protection of children.

^{ix} See Review of Other Ethical Guidelines in the Resource section.

^x Article 12: State Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.