Children's Rights and Research Ethics

This journal has always featured papers presenting the findings of studies directly involving children, and it goes without saying that such research must always meet the highest ethical standards. Having a robust ethical framework in place to guide all stages of the research process is a necessary precondition for research involving children and sits comfortably with a children's rights-based approach which honours children's right to be 'properly researched' (Ennew and Plateau, 2004) to be heard on matters that affect their lives, and to be protected in the process (Lundy and McEvoy, 2012).

We are fortunate to have an abundance of thoughtful guidance on how to achieve this in practice (Alderson and Morrow, 2020; Graham et al, 2013; Graham et al, 2015). This guidance has been further enriched by an online repository – The Ethics of Research Involving Children (ERIC) – containing information and resources aimed not only at nurturing international exchange and collaboration, but also at inviting critical reflection on some of the more challenging and contested aspects of child research ethics in different cultural, social, religious, political and economic contexts (http://childethics.com).

The International Charter for Ethical Research Involving Children, which has emerged from the ERIC project, reaffirms our shared commitment to the values and principles underpinning the study of children's rights and childhood. It has already been signed by dozens of researchers, practitioners, organisations and projects from around the world who are committed to 'undertaking and supporting high quality ethical research that is respectful of children's human dignity, rights and wellbeing'.

Such statements of principles and practical guidance need to be supported, however, by an institutional commitment and openness to implementing them in practice. We know that many researchers experience deep frustration when
their work is constrained and, indeed, prevented by risk-averse ethics committees and decision-makers, particularly within Higher Education institutions. Applications to conduct participatory and/or peer research with children in distinctly ‘vulnerable’ situations – such as those in the criminal justice or care system – are commonly rejected on the presumption that their vulnerabilities are simply too grave to be accommodated within a research study (Powell et al., 2020). The result is, sadly, that many researchers shy away from even trying to conduct such research and, instead, pursue more conservative, remote or proxy methods that avoid direct engagement with children in certain circumstances. This is especially the case for early career and PhD researchers who may not have the confidence, support or experience to push back on paternalistic orthodoxies. That is not just a shame for the researchers concerned; it inhibits efforts to interrogate and understand the world of the most marginalised from their own perspectives and, in turn, to explore, identify and evaluate appropriate responses to their needs (Beckett et al, 2022; Bovarnick et al, 2018). Indeed, allowing research with children to only take place along narrowly prescribed lines may be, in and of itself, unethical.

But there are examples of researchers harnessing a children’s rights-based approach to tackle such issues. For instance, Templeton et al. confronted the concerns raised by their ethics committee in relation to a project exploring children’s sexual readiness by working through such concerns with their Children’s Research Advisory Group and presenting their responses together to the ethics committee. In doing so, they drew on the distinct insights of the young people to respond to the committees’ questions and empowered them to challenge what might have otherwise been a disproportionate interference with their participation in the work (Templeton et al, 2020). To ensure that children in the most vulnerable of circumstances can take part in research, others have sought to develop a distinctly trauma-informed approach, drawing on the significant body of work on trauma-informed practice in social work, education and legal representation (Shankley et al, 2022; Beckett et al, 2022).

The task now is to encourage openness to these values and approaches on the part of researchers and ethics decision-makers so that the vital work of furthering the rights of children across the world can continue.

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References


