Guidelines for Research with Children and Young People

School of Psychology, Trinity College Dublin

The following guidelines outline a set of procedures to which researchers in the School of Psychology should adhere when conducting research with children and young people. It is a requirement that these guidelines are read in conjunction with the following documents:

- Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2011), Children first: National guidance for the protection and welfare of children
  Available at: http://www.dcy.a.gov.ie/documents/Publications/ChildrenFirst.pdf

In line with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (2008) definition, the term “children and young people” refers to all persons under the age of 18 years.

Introduction

This document deals with issues of ethics and safety in conducting research with children and young people. The guidelines have been drafted by the School of Psychology to inform procedures for ensuring the welfare and protection of children and young people in research encounters.

Both welfare and protection are the overriding considerations in conducting research with this population. The School of Psychology recognises that it has a duty of care to children and young people with whom it is in contact for research purposes. It also recognises that the safety and privacy of its researchers, both students and members of staff, is also a priority.

The document provides guidelines for all those who aim to conduct research with this population. Specific issues for students who are conducting methodology practicals involving children are dealt with on page 6.
Ethics in research with children and young people

All those affiliated with the School of Psychology should abide by the code of ethics set out by the Psychological Society of Ireland (PSI). In addition, all those intending to conduct research with this population should be familiar with the ethics guidelines pertaining specifically to children and young people, which have been developed by relevant organisations. For example, the Department for Children and Youth Affairs (2012). Guidance for developing ethical research projects involving children available on http://www.dcy.gov.ie/documents/Publications/Ethics_Guidance.pdf

It is recognized that elements of these guidelines vary somewhat depending upon the value basis for research adopted by different organisations. The value basis underpinning the guidelines for researchers at the School of Psychology comprises the following:

- Having a commitment to children’s and young people’s well-being (Beneficence);
- Having a commitment to doing no harm (Non-Maleficence)
- Having a commitment to children’s and young people’s rights including the right of individuals to take responsibility for him or herself (Autonomy)
- Being child-centred in its approach to research, listening to children, treating them in a fair and just manner (Fidelity)


These principles have implications for decision-making in a number of key areas, including minimising risk of harm (physical, psychological or social), informed consent and assent, confidentiality and anonymity, welfare and protection, legal obligations relating to children and young people, and the general manner in which children are treated in any research encounter.

Practical Steps to Minimise Risks in Research with Children and Young People

Checks on previous criminal record - Garda Vetting

According to the Children and Vulnerable Persons, Act (2012), which was implemented on Friday 29th April, 2016, Trinity College Dublin is now required to complete mandatory vetting for persons who wish to undertake relevant work or activities with children or vulnerable adults. This
requirement applies to anyone, staff or students, who will have access to or contact with children and/or vulnerable persons in the course of their employment or research. The National Vetting Bureau has been set up as the authority for this vetting procedure.

Trinity College has recently implemented the online eVetting process for all staff members in association with the National Vetting Bureau, in order to comply with this Act. Further information on Vetting is available at https://www.tcd.ie/hr/our-services/resourcing/vetting/

All researchers intending to work with with children or vulnerable adults must now provide a copy of the letter of confirmation from the National Vetting Bureau with their application to the School of Psychology Ethics Committee.

Children and Young People as Research Participants
For all proposed research involving this study population or sample, the investigators and members of the Research Ethics Committee at the School of Psychology reviewing research protocols, will: 1) evaluate the potential risk or discomfort posed for children and young people associated with the proposed study, and 2) ensure measures are in place to mitigate potential harm arising from the research process, including suspension of the research project if a child’s safety or well-being is compromised.

Informed Consent and assent
In accordance with Trinity College Child Protection Policy;
Parental/legal guardian consent must be obtained before any research activity is conducted with children. Any research activity must respect the child’s right to confidentiality and comply with any relevant code of ethics applicable to the type of research being conducted. Researchers must undergo police vetting where s/he may be working alone with children. Information provided to participants or the guardians of participants in research involving children should state that the researcher(s) operate under College’s Child Protection Policy.

Dealing with issues of consent
In cases where children and young people are under the age of 18 years, written consent must be obtained from parents or legal guardians (for the present purposes, a “child” is someone under
the age of 18 years, as per the Children Act 2001 and the Mental health Act 2001; Children and Vulnerable Persons, Act 2012).

- A “vulnerable” person means a person, other than a child, who (a) is suffering from a disorder of the mind, whether as a result of mental illness or dementia, (b) has an intellectual disability, (c) is suffering from a physical impairment, whether as a result of injury, illness or age, or (d) has a physical disability, which is of such a nature or degree as to restrict the capacity of the person to guard himself or herself against harm by another person, or that results in the person requiring assistance with the activities of daily living including dressing, eating, walking, washing and bathing.)

It is the duty of the researchers to ensure that individuals providing consent are fully informed of, and understand the nature, purpose and outcomes of the proposed research. The guidelines recommend that in practice, researchers should gain consent from an appropriate adult (parent / legal guardian) and also gain assent from the child or young person. In addition, if conducting research in a “protected environment” such as a school or community setting, the researcher will need to obtain the consent of the person in charge of that setting (e.g., school principal / service coordinator or other person in authority who has overall responsibility for the protection of the child within that setting).

**Parent /Legal Guardian information and consent**

Written information for parents should include:

a. A description of the nature of the study and details of the methods involved
b. Information on how children and/or families were selected for participation
c. Information on how the data will be stored and who will have access to the data
d. Information on how the data will be used
e. Information on the ethics and safety requirements of the School of Psychology to which students and staff must adhere. This includes information concerning the limits of confidentiality.

**Child information and assent**

Once informed consent has been sought and gained from parents/guardians and/or other relevant gatekeepers the researchers are then required to obtain assent from the child/young person. Assent refers to a child/young person providing an appropriate indication that they are
willing to participate in the research study. Assent from children / young people can be either written or verbal. Consent and Assent should always be informed and voluntary. Records should be kept of all steps taken with regard to obtaining consent.

When gaining assent from a child or young person the following guidelines should be considered:

- At the outset of data collection, children should be informed as fully as possible, given their age and competency, about the nature of the study and the methods to be used;
- The investigator should ensure that the information provided concerning the research study is clear and written in a language that is easily understood and appropriate for the age of participants;
- A verbal presentation by the researcher to the child, of the aims and procedures associated with the research study, should often be given in conjunction with written material - before seeking to obtain assent.
- Children/ young people should also receive copies of records that concern the gaining of assent – including a description of that which is entailed by participation.
- A participant’s right to refuse to take part is absolute and must be respected. This requirement applies even if parents/legal guardians or other responsible adults have given consent. It should be explained to children and young people that they may choose to discontinue their participation at any time for any reason (and regardless of whether a reason is given).

The issue of whether children and young people should be asked to provide written assent remains grey. Parents/guardians may object on the basis that it might not be meaningful for children and may have no legal standing. In some circumstances, however, it may help to make assent more meaningful for children if they are asked to give their written agreement. In all cases, it is necessary to obtain verbal consent, in the presence of a third party (adult) who is known to the child.

Researchers are required to obtain and record evidence of parental/guardian consent and participant assent for research conducted with children and young people, before proceeding with data collection. Parents/guardians should be given a copy of the consent form and any associated explanatory information to retain for their own use.
Dealing with issues of confidentiality and anonymity

Students and members of staff in their role as a researcher should give careful consideration to what they mean when they tell a parent/legal guardian or a child that participation in the research will take place on a confidential basis. They must inform all parties that there are limits to confidentiality, for example, in the event of a disclosure of risk or harm to the child. This is in accordance with PSI Code of Professional Ethics and Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children (2011), and with statutory law in the Republic of Ireland. Information relating to the safety and well-being of children (or of others) may be disclosed during the research process. Harm or the potential for harm to an individual participant or to others must always be reported expeditiously by the research team to the relevant authorities.

When preparing consent forms for parents and children it is important that the researchers:

- Consider the limits of confidentiality in formulating their research design.
- Use in all documentation provided to parents/legal guardian and children/young people, clear and unambiguous language relating to matters of confidentiality. It should be made evident, for example, that if students (in their role as researchers) have concerns that the safety of any child is at risk, while these concerns may be discussed with their supervisor, the research team are required to act in accordance with the relevant directives and with statutory law in the Republic of Ireland (see below for guidelines on reporting suspected abuse).
- Ensure that a formal written record is kept of the steps that have been taken to make parents and children aware of the limits of confidentiality.

Safeguarding the welfare of children and young people during the research process also requires that the researcher is able to recognise matters relating to child protection issues, and knows how to respond to such matters effectively. The Research Ethics Committee requires that all researchers conducting a research study that engages children and/or young people have read, have good knowledge of, and understand the Child Protection Policy of Trinity College Dublin (2012).
The researchers should also explain who will have access to the data collected. The principle of anonymity requires that individuals should not be identifiable in the data records, unless this is agreed to explicitly by the participant.

Data collection

- It is important to make clear and appropriately documented plans for data collection and curation. Records should be kept of arrangements made with ‘gatekeepers’ such as parents, teachers and schools.
- Researchers can engage one-to-one with children and young people provided they are always in sight of others. Arrangements should be made to conduct the research in a setting that satisfies this requirement, and which also ensures the safety and protection of the researcher. For example, in schools, it is important to ask for the use of a room that is close to a central office, such as a staff room or the Principal’s room, from which an adult with responsibility for the children can easily see the researcher and the child.
- A researcher should not spend time alone with a child in premises such as a private home, a school, or an agency, even if an adult in authority asks them to do so. Similarly, a researcher must not leave premises with a child without an accompanying parent or legal guardian.
- Should it be the case that the researcher intends to bring items into the research environment, special care must be taken to ensure that these are safe. Examples (which are by no means exhaustive) include food products taken into an environment in which children/young people with allergies may be present, and toys that may not be suitable for all of the children the researcher may encounter (e.g. younger children present in a private home). It is a general expectation that a person who has responsibility for the environment in which the research is conducted will be consulted in advance in relation to such matters. Their wishes should be respected in all cases.

Management and Storage of Data

The Data Protection Act (1988/2003) applies at present to personal data that are ‘automatically processed’ (i.e., computerised). It gives everyone the right to establish whether personal data are being retained, to have access to any data that relates to them personally, and to have any inaccurate data erased. Data must only be kept for lawful purposes and "the data shall not be
"further processed in any manner incompatible with that purpose or those purposes" - section 2(1)(c)(ii) of the Act. The Act applies to both adults and children. It is emphasised that the same level of care should be applied to data collected from children as adults.

As is the case with data collected from adult participants, data collected from children should be stored in a secure way. Computerised data which contains any identifying information must be encrypted and password-protected. Printed documents should be kept in secure (i.e. locked by a key) filing cabinets, and all data including audio and video tapes should be labeled with ID codes rather than names.

**Freedom of Information**

Requests may be received to release data under the *Freedom of Information Act (2014)*, which gives individuals the following rights:

- The right to access official records held by public bodies prescribed under the Act
- The right to have personal information held on them corrected or updated where such information is incomplete, incorrect or misleading
- The right to be given reasons for decisions taken by public bodies that affect them.

The College FOI website (http://www.tcd.ie/foi/) provides advice on the Act and on its application to College.

In addition to the Act, there are regulations and guidelines relating to its implementation. These cover such issues as access by parents/legal guardian to their children’s records. These regulations and guidelines emphasise that the over-riding concern in decisions about whether to release information to parents is the *best interests* of the child. The steps that would be followed in answering an FOI request are given below.

- The College rule is that an FOI request received in any part of College should be referred to the FOI Officer in the first instance. The FOI Officer will ensure that it is handled appropriately and in accordance with the rules.
- The relevant Dean, in this case the Dean of Arts (Humanities), has been authorised to decide on the release of information in response to an FOI request.
In the case of research conducted by students, requests for the release of data about any individual child should be discussed with the supervisor who should be familiar with the circumstances.

If there are any concerns that the release of the information would have negative consequences (e.g., where children believed they had given the information in confidence and would not wish it be released, or where the data may be used in ways that place the child at risk in any way), the matter should be brought to the attention of the Dean of Arts (Humanities). The TCD FOI Officer will advise the Dean on how to reply to an FOI request and will inform the Dean of the different provisions, exclusions or restrictions in the Act, which may be employed to withhold information in order to prevent any harm that would be occasioned by release.

**Reporting Child Abuse and Neglect**

*Children First: The National Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children* (2011) encourages adults to recognise a shared responsibility for the protection of children. It is a requirement of all those conducting research with children to read this document. It provides guidelines concerning the recognition of abuse and neglect, and on the means of reporting any concerns that may arise. The School of Psychology has established a procedure for dealing with any concerns about children’s safety or well-being that may arise in the course of student research, either through the student’s own observations, or through a disclosure made by a child.

**Procedure:**

- If a student becomes concerned about the safety of a child, they must discuss the matter with their supervisor, with view to resolving whether there is sufficient substance to the concerns and thus an obligation to report. Detailed information should be gathered about the concerns in question. This must be presented in full to the supervisor. [The information should be discussed with the supervisor, taking account including information about the possible implications for the child and family if concerns are reported to the health board]. There is legal protection for individuals making such reports in good faith.

- A meeting should be held between the student, the supervisor and the Director of the Clinical Programme of the School of Psychology (who is at present the designated person in the School for consultation on such matters) to discuss the matter in detail. If the
outcome of this meeting is a decision that child abuse or neglect is suspected or alleged, then the following steps should be taken:

A formal report should be made by the supervisor to the Child and Family Agency in the HSE area in which the child lives, in person, by phone or in writing. Although it is possible to make a report to the duty social worker, it is advisable to make the report directly to the Children Care Manager of the health board in question.

- In the event of an emergency, or the non-availability of health board staff, the report should be made to An Garda Síochána.
- *Children First* contains a suggested template for a Standard Reporting Form, which can be used by the student and supervisor to record details of the report. This should be forwarded to the relevant health board.

Section 3.10.1 of *The Protections for Persons Reporting Child Abuse Act 1998* ‘makes provision for the protection from civil liability of persons who have communicated child abuse ‘reasonably and in good faith’ to designated officers of the HSE or to any member of An Garda Síochána. This protection applies to organisations as well as to individuals. This means that even if a communicated suspicion of child abuse proves unfounded, a plaintiff who took an action would have to prove that the person who communicated the concern had not acted reasonably and in good faith in making the report’.

**Research relating to specific needs of children and young people**

When applicable, researchers will have specialist expertise in relation to a particular disorder or condition that is a characteristics of the study sample. Specific risks or, for example, greater potential to experience discomfort must be considered for subgroups of children and young people who present with specific needs (e.g., neurodevelopmental disorders, learning disabilities). The duration of testing periods and the nature of research materials may need to be adjusted accordingly. In addition to extra time, additional forms of support may be necessary. Any such measures should be an integral aspect of the research design. The National Disability Authority has developed a set of guidelines for conducting research with people with disabilities. The School Research Ethics Committee requires that researchers read this document if they wish to conduct research with individuals for whom these guidelines apply. The guidelines are
References and Resources


Ombudsman for Children’s Office. Available at: www.oco.ie


Department of Health and Children (2004). *European communities (clinical trials on medicinal products for human use) regulations.* Available at: [www.dohc.ie](http://www.dohc.ie)

