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# Guidance for Developing Ethical Research Projects Involving Children and Young Adults

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agus Comhionannais  
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# Guidance for Developing Ethical Research Projects Involving Children and Young Adults

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**STRANMILLIS**  
**UNIVERSITY COLLEGE**  
A College of Queen's University Belfast



Centre for  
Research in  
Educational  
Underachievement

The logo consists of three overlapping squares: a teal square at the top left, a green square at the top right, and a maroon square at the bottom left.

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## Acknowledgements

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## Introduction

In April 2012, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (Now the Department of Children, Disability and Equality) published *Guidance for Developing Ethical Research Projects Involving Children*, which set out good practice principles for research involving children and young people. This document established core ethical principles and concepts relevant to child-related research, including minimising risk of harm, informed consent and assent, confidentiality and anonymity, child protection, legal obligations and policy commitments, and adopting a child-centred, inclusive approach (DCYA, 2012).

Since then, Ireland has witnessed significant developments in the legal and policy landscape. Notably, the enactment of the Children First Act 2015 (Government of Ireland, 2015) introduced statutory child protection reporting obligations for professionals, including researchers. Additionally, the increasing incorporation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) into national policy has strengthened children's right to be heard (Article 12 UNCRC). These changes have prompted a shift towards more participatory, inclusive, and rights-based approaches in research involving children and young people.

In response to these developments, the Department of Children, Disability, and Equality (DCDE) commissioned Stranmillis University College, a College of Queen's University Belfast, to undertake a comprehensive programme of work to update and enhance the guidance. This reflected the need to support more meaningful and ethically sound participation of all children, irrespective of age, ability, identity, beliefs, or socio-economic background.

This programme of work comprised four interlinked work packages:

- **Work Package One** established advisory working groups to inform, guide, and shape the project throughout. These included three Children and Young People's Working Groups (CYPWGs), representing pre-school, primary, and post-primary age groups, alongside an Adult Working Group (AWG). The groups provided crucial insights into policies and evidence, informed the methodology and consultation strategy, and contributed to interpreting findings.
- **Work Package Two** consisted of a comprehensive evidence-based review of relevant international and national literature, legal frameworks, and policy developments since 2012. This review updated understanding of the research context and reaffirmed good practice principles for ethical research with children.

- **Work Package Three** involved qualitative online interviews with twenty international and national experts from disciplines including education, psychology, sociology, and health research. These participants, representing academia, policy, practice, and children’s sector organisations, contributed to a thematic analysis identifying current principles, priorities, and best practices in ethical research with children and young people.
- **Work Package Four** focused on consultations directly with children and young people through playful conversations and focus groups. The diverse sample spanned babies, toddlers, pre-school children, primary and post-primary pupils, as well as an expert panel of care-experienced young people (CEEP). For the youngest participants, Participatory Action Research (PAR) methods facilitated by skilled early childhood educators/co-researchers ensured their expressions and experiences were meaningfully interpreted and represented. Special efforts were made to include seldom-heard voices, such as children with special educational needs, Traveller and Roma communities, refugee and newcomer children, and those impacted by poverty.

The findings from this consultation process and evidence review have been fundamental in shaping the ethical guidance that follows. This guidance is therefore grounded not only in established core principles but also in the lived experiences and voices of children and young people themselves. It goes beyond simply outlining core ethical principles; instead, it proposes a reflective and ethically nuanced framework for consulting with children and young people, including those whose voices are seldom heard. This guidance aims to support researchers in approaching their work with greater ethical sensitivity, reflexivity, and commitment to genuine, inclusive engagement.

This guidance should be read in conjunction with the accompanying evidence review, which provides the detailed research and policy context underpinning these recommendations. Together, these documents offer a robust foundation for advancing ethically sound, inclusive, and rights-based research practice involving children and young people.

## Researcher Responsibilities – Rights of the Child and Core Ethical Principles.

Ethical research in Ireland is grounded in legal, constitutional, and policy frameworks that researchers must be aware of when planning and executing research involving children and young people. Article 42A of the Constitution recognises children as independent rights holders in their own right, with inalienable rights which the State must uphold, which include a right to dignity, privacy, bodily integrity and a right to autonomy or self-determination.

The principles underpinning article 42A are further reflected in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) adopts an integrated and holistic approach to the rights of children. The different rights outlined in the convention are not ranked in order of importance; instead they interact with one another to form dynamic parts of an integrated unit.

In conducting research involving children and young people, the following Articles are of particular concern:

**Article 2**– Non-discrimination

**Article 3**– Best interests of the child

**Article 12**– Right to express views and be heard

**Article 16**– Right to privacy

**Article 17**– Access to appropriate information

These fundamental rights, in conjunction with core principles of ethical research, give rise to the following duties and responsibilities which must be considered by all researchers planning to include children and young people as research participants.

1. Researchers have an obligation to consider the issue of who will receive the benefits of research, and who will bear the risks and burdens, with the *best interests of the child* as a rights-holder at the centre of that consideration.
2. Researchers must be committed to the well-being, protection, and safety of participants

3. Researchers have a responsibility to consider all identities and marginalisations of their participants and ensure non-discrimination in participant selection, communications, and research practice.
4. Researchers have a duty to listen to and respect the wishes of the children and young people participating in their research

## Children First Child Protection Obligations

Children First promotes the protection of children from abuse and neglect. It sets out what individuals and organisations need to do to keep children safe and how to deal with concerns about a child's safety or welfare.

All individuals and organisations working with children and young people should create a culture of safety that promotes the welfare of the children and young people using their services. This includes persons conducting research with children and young people.

For more information, Tusla offer an e-learning programme on Children First:

<https://www.tusla.ie/children-first/children-first-e-learning-programme/>

## Safeguarding Policies and Procedures

Researchers intending to work with children should have child safeguarding policies and procedures in place to protect them from harm and promote their welfare, and must ensure that all researchers are appropriately trained in their obligations under Children First.

All researchers should understand what these policies and procedures mean. They should also expect that parents or guardians may have queries about them, which researchers must be prepared to answer.

## Child Safeguarding Statement

Under the Children First Act 2015, researchers intending to work with children are legally required to complete a risk assessment and have a Child Safeguarding Statement in place.

A Child Safeguarding Statement is a written statement that sets out the services provided and the policies and procedures in place to ensure, as much as possible, that a child or young person using the service is safe from harm.

## **Enabling Ethical Consultations with Children and Young People to inform research practice: A Relational Approach for Researchers**

From the outset of any research project involving children and young people, it is essential to prioritise their rights, needs, and preferences. The preparatory phase should not be seen simply as a procedural step but rather as an enabling phase, one that lays the foundation for meaningful participation by creating conditions that empower children to engage to the fullest extent possible. Researchers should recognise the diversity of children's capacities and experiences, and ensure that different levels of involvement are supported from the very beginning. This early engagement, informed by children and young people themselves, helps shape research designs that are inclusive and respectful of their agency.

### **Cultivating Trust: The Heart of Relational Ethics**

Central to ethical participation is the establishment of trusting relationships. The [consultation report](#) underpinning this guidance revealed that such relationships are especially vital for children and young people from marginalised, vulnerable, or seldom-heard communities, though they are important across all groups. When children feel safe, valued, and cared for within the research relationship, they are more likely to engage authentically and meaningfully. Strong connections between researchers and participants can also protect against exploitative or one-sided interactions, while providing essential support should a child disclose distress or harm. Participation, therefore, should be understood not merely as an activity but as a relational experience rooted in respect, care, and ongoing connection.

### **Sustaining Connection: Building Relationships Over Time**

Building these relationships requires intentional investment of time and effort, extending well beyond a single encounter. For some children, particularly those who are marginalised or vulnerable, this process may take weeks or even months to develop a genuine sense of trust. For others, a shorter time span may be sufficient.

Crucially, researchers must inject flexibility into the timeline of their projects to allow these relationships to form authentically and without pressure. Allowing time and space, and taking an unhurried approach to the research, reflects a commitment to upholding children’s right to participate, enabling them to voice their opinions on their terms, in their own way, through relationships built on trust, respect, and responsiveness. This approach resists the efficiency-driven pace of traditional research timelines and instead centres the child’s emotional and developmental readiness as fundamental to ethical engagement. Researchers should therefore prioritise familiarity and approachability, seeking multiple opportunities to interact with participants before the research begins. This continuity avoids the problematic practice of “parachuting in and out” of children’s lives and fosters a deeper sense of trust and security. The quality of researcher interaction, characterised by empathy, responsiveness, and clear communication, directly influences children’s willingness to participate and their overall wellbeing. For very young or non-verbal children, involving parents or educators as co-researchers is particularly valuable, not only to support communication and interpretation, but also because these adults often already have trusting, established relationships with the child. This existing trust allows them to be attuned to the child’s subtle cues, emotional states, and needs in ways that an unfamiliar researcher might not immediately grasp. By leveraging these relationships, researchers can ensure that the child’s participation is grounded in a sense of safety and understanding, reinforcing the principle that good pedagogy and genuine ethical engagement are deeply interconnected.

## **Navigating Power: Reflexivity and Gatekeeper Relationships**

Within a relational ethical framework, researchers must be deeply aware of the power dynamics that shape interactions between themselves, organisations with responsibility for children who mediate access to children as participants (i.e. “gatekeepers”, such as schools, clubs, or creches), and the children participating in research. These relationships are not neutral; they influence how safe, respected, and empowered children feel throughout the research process. Building genuine partnerships with gatekeepers is vital to creating transparent and respectful pathways that uphold children’s rights to participate meaningfully. Researchers need to reflect on their own positionality—acknowledging how their roles, identities, and authority might impact these relationships—and actively work to minimise power imbalances. By fostering trust, mutual respect, and open dialogue among researchers,

gatekeepers, and participants, a relational approach can help ensure that children's voices are heard authentically and that their participation is both ethical and empowering.

### **Extending Support: Creating a Network of Care**

Support beyond the immediate research team is another important consideration. Children and young people often benefit from the presence of trusted adults, peers, or advocates who can provide emotional and practical support throughout the research process. This is especially true for those from vulnerable or marginalised backgrounds but can enhance the experience for all participants. For older children and teenagers, the option to involve friends of a similar age can also be empowering. Building strong collaborative partnerships with community and advocacy organisations further strengthens ethical engagement, ensuring that methodologies are inclusive, culturally relevant, and sensitive to diverse needs. Whenever possible, research teams should seek to include representatives of the communities involved to deepen trust and understanding. Researchers should take care to inform and prepare adults, peers, and advocates for their inclusion in the research.

### **Relational Ethics in Practice: Sustaining Connection Beyond Data Collection**

Ultimately, adopting a relational approach to ethics means viewing participation as an ongoing process founded on mutual respect, care, and accountability. Ethical research with children and young people is not simply about following protocols but about nurturing genuine human connections that prioritise wellbeing and dignity. Researchers are encouraged to maintain contact with participants beyond data collection, providing debriefings, addressing concerns, and reinforcing trust. Flexibility and responsiveness to the unique rhythms and needs of children and young people—particularly those from marginalised or vulnerable groups—are essential to giving due weight to their voices, as required under the UNCRC.

### **Summary: Building Ethical Research Through Relational Commitment**

By embedding these relational principles, researchers can create ethical consultations to inform research practices that not only respect but actively empower children and young people as collaborators in knowledge creation. This approach fosters

meaningful engagement, minimises harm, and contributes to research that is truly inclusive and respectful of childhood diversity.

## **Ethical Engagement with Children and Young People During the Research Process: The Consultation Phase**

The consultation phase is a critical period in research with children and young people, where their active engagement and meaningful participation are most prominent. Ethical consultation to inform research requires researchers to go beyond procedural requirements and adopt a rights-based, child-centred approach that respects and supports the evolving capacities, autonomy, and diverse needs of all participants.

### **Enabling and Empowering Environments: Creating Spaces That Invite Participation**

Children and young people consistently reported in the [consultation report](#) that informs this guidance that the physical and emotional qualities of the research environment significantly influence their willingness and ability to participate meaningfully. Researchers should create settings that are welcoming, informal, age-appropriate, and familiar, such as schools, community spaces, or outdoor areas, rather than formal or clinical office environments, which may feel intimidating or retraumatising, especially for those from marginalised, vulnerable, or seldom-heard communities.

Flexible, child-friendly environments enable comfort, movement, and freedom of expression. Practical supports such as transportation assistance, provision of refreshments, accessible venues (for example, wheelchair accessible), and appropriate timing of activities (e.g. considering time taken out from school or employment) reduce logistical and emotional barriers. These considerations help children feel safe, respected, and included.

### **Voluntary, Agentic, and Informed Participation: Consent as an Ongoing Conversation**

Children and young people have the right to participate voluntarily, free from coercion or pressure. Assent is a dynamic, ongoing process that goes beyond initial consent, recognising children's agency to change their minds at any point. This

includes both verbal and non-verbal communication tailored to each child's developmental stage and communication style.

For very young or non-verbal children, 'tuning in' by closely observing verbal and non-verbal cues such as body language is essential to assess comfort and willingness. Regular check-ins throughout the research process for all age groups ensure participants remain informed and engaged.

Ethical practice requires clear, age-appropriate information about the aims, procedures, expectations, and potential risks or benefits of participation. For older children and young people, professionally presented information, including logos and signatures, reinforces validity and trustworthiness. Researchers must clearly communicate the right to withdraw and embed mechanisms for ongoing, child-led assent. Creative tools such as visual guides, storytelling, role play, and multimedia can support meaningful understanding. While preparing age-appropriate information, researchers should take care not to patronise or speak down to their participants.

Involving trusted adults such as parents, carers, educators, or familiar practitioners is particularly important for very young or non-verbal children. These adults often act as co-researchers, interpreting the child's communication and supporting their engagement. Children should be offered the option to have a trusted adult present, especially when discussing sensitive issues.

Assent and consent can be particularly complex with young people over 16, especially when research explores sensitive topics such as sexual health, mental health, or experiences of harm. While the *HSE National Policy for Consent in Health and Social Care Research* allows for children aged 16-17 years old to consent to participation in research, they are still considered minors in many research contexts. This means that, depending on the topic and institutional policy, parental consent may still be ethically or legally required. Young people who contributed to the consultation underpinning this guidance expressed that while they sometimes feel constrained by adult authority, having trusted adults involved, particularly when the topic is sensitive, can also offer a sense of safety and reassurance.

Nuanced consent models are therefore needed, i.e., approaches that recognise the evolving autonomy of older adolescents while still ensuring appropriate protections are in place. For instance, a 16- or 17-year-old may be developmentally capable of giving informed consent, but researchers should still consider the potential value of involving a trusted adult (such as a parent, carer, or health professional) to help

explain the research, support the young person during sensitive discussions, or act as an additional safeguard. However, such involvement must be guided by the young person's wishes, with their consent to include the adult, and in a manner that does not compromise their agency or privacy. In this way, consent becomes a flexible, relational process rather than a one-off event, responsive to context and rooted in respect for young people's rights, capacities, and need for support.

## Digital Consent: Navigating the Evolving Landscape

Research using digital tools introduces specific ethical challenges that require careful attention.

Because digital environments can complicate informed consent, due to issues like verifying age, ensuring privacy, and safeguarding vulnerable participants, it is essential to treat consent as an ongoing, negotiated process rather than a one-off event.

Researchers should:

- Provide clear, age-appropriate explanations about what participation involves, including risks and rights, and ensure children understand they can withdraw at any time.
- Implement reliable age verification methods to confirm that participants meet legal consent requirements.
- Establish robust privacy and data protection measures to safeguard sensitive information.
- Acknowledge the role of trusted adults (such as parents, carers, or educators) as vital in helping children understand digital consent and safely navigate online participation.
- Ensure that all digital consent procedures are flexible and responsive, incorporating regular check-ins to confirm participants' ongoing comfort and willingness.

By embedding these principles, researchers can respect children's evolving autonomy while upholding ethical and legal standards in digital research settings.

In addition, researchers should consult *The Fundamentals for a Child-Oriented Approach to Data Processing*, drawn up by the Data Protection Commission (DPC). The "Fundamentals" introduce child-specific data protection interpretative principles and recommended measures to protect children against the data processing risks posed to them by their use of/ access to services in both an online and offline world. The fundamentals apply to all services which process childrens' data, but the core

principles pertinent to research involving the processing children's data outlined in the Fundamentals are:

- **Clear-Cut Consent:** When a child has given consent for their data to be processed, that consent must be freely given, specific, informed and unambiguous, made by way of a clear statement or affirmative action
- **Information in every instance:** Children are entitled to receive information about the processing of their own personal data irrespective of the legal basis relied on and even if consent was given by a parent on their behalf to the processing of their personal data
- **Child-Oriented Transparency:** Privacy information about how personal data is used must be provided in a concise, transparent, intelligible and accessible way, using clear and plain language that is comprehensible and suited to the age of the child
- **Let Children Have Their Say:** Children are data subjects in their own right and have rights in relation to their personal data at any age. The DPC considers that a child may exercise these rights at any time, as long as they have the capacity to do so and it is in their best interests.
- **Consent Doesn't Change Childhood:** Consent obtained from children or from the guardians/ parents should not be used as a justification to treat children of all ages as if they were adults
- **Do a DPIA:** Researchers should undertake data protection impact assessments (DPIA) to minimise the data protection risks of their services, and in particular the specific risks to children which arise from the processing of their personal data.

## Child-Centred and Inclusive Approaches: Tailoring Methods to Diverse Needs

Ethical research recognises children and young people as capable, knowledgeable contributors. Tailoring research methods to the individual needs and contexts of participants is fundamental to maximising benefit and minimising harm. Children of all ages have rich and meaningful contributions to make, yet they form a heterogeneous group whose experiences and abilities vary widely. Effective ethical research respects this diversity by adopting flexible, age-appropriate, and culturally sensitive approaches. Engagement methods must be tailored to developmental stage, interests, and communication preferences, such as storytelling, drawing, play-based techniques, digital media, and observation, to capture diverse voices, especially of very young or non-verbal children.

Researchers must avoid assumptions based solely on age or background and instead approach each child or young person with openness, sensitivity, and awareness. This is particularly critical when working with seldom-heard groups who are often at risk of being essentialised or overlooked. For teenagers, ethical practice involves balancing their growing independence with the reassurance and support they still require, including opportunities for conversations involving parents or guardians to enhance safety and validation.

Inclusive approaches require deliberate attention to accessibility and diversity, adapting resources and formats to meet the needs of children with special educational needs or disabilities, Traveller and Roma children, LGBTQ+ youth, and others. Offering meaningful choices in participation format and content enhances autonomy and ensures research relevance. Children may also choose to invite a trusted adult for support during sensitive discussions.

### **Clear and Transparent Communication: Ensuring Everyone Understands**

Honest, transparent, and developmentally appropriate communication is essential. Children and young people must understand what participation involves, what is expected, and potential outcomes. Communication should be tailored to their age and abilities, reinforced through varied methods including written materials, visual aids, storytelling, and digital tools.

Careful and thoughtful use of language and questioning techniques is essential throughout the research process, especially when addressing sensitive topics or working with children and young people from vulnerable, marginalised, or seldom-heard communities. Each participant's unique experience must be acknowledged as the ethical foundation for engagement and at no time should they feel hurried or under pressure to give a response. Questions should be framed as gentle probes that invite reflection and dialogue rather than feeling intrusive, leading, or coercive in any way.

Researchers must ensure that all communication is clear, accessible, and tailored to the developmental level and cultural context of the participants. Avoiding jargon, complex terminology, or abstract concepts helps foster understanding and encourages genuine participation.

Children communicate through verbal and non-verbal means such as body language, play, drawings, technology, and creative activities. Participation methods should

reflect this variety to capture their voices authentically. For children with communication differences, especially very young or non-verbal children, trusted adults like educators, parents, and carers can support data collection by interpreting and contextualising their communication, effectively acting as co-researchers.

Furthermore, ongoing check-ins during the research process are critical to ensure that children and young people feel safe, comfortable, and fully informed at every stage. These regular moments of reflection allow participants to express any discomfort or desire to pause or withdraw, reinforcing their autonomy and protecting their well-being throughout the research process.

### **Protecting Without Silencing: Safeguarding with Respect**

Protecting children and young people in research is a fundamental ethical responsibility. This requires researchers to carefully assess and minimise the risk of emotional or psychological harm by engaging with each participant sensitively and without assumptions or pressure, and fulfil their obligations under Children First (see p. 6). It is essential to have appropriate support mechanisms in place should any distress arise. Rather than automatically referring children or young people to external support services after interviews, researchers or the research team should be sufficiently trained and confident to provide immediate initial support when needed.

At the same time, safeguarding measures must never silence participants or undermine their agency. Children and young people value being recognised as active contributors to the research, and when it is safe and appropriate, they may wish to be identified by name or image. Such wishes for recognition must be thoughtfully balanced with ethical considerations around privacy, confidentiality, and safeguarding to protect their well-being.

### **Summary**

This evidence-based approach affirms children and young people's right to meaningful participation in research. It requires researchers to adopt flexible, responsive, and inclusive practices that respect evolving capacities and support full engagement throughout the process. Embedding child-centred ethics throughout ensures ethical research conduct upholds both the letter and spirit of children's rights.

## Follow-up Phase: Sustaining Respect and Engagement Beyond Data Collection

Ethical research with children and young people does not end when data collection is complete. The follow-up phase is a vital opportunity to demonstrate respect, ensure continued transparency, and to give appropriate weight to children and young people's contributions in meaningful, age-appropriate ways. This phase should reflect the same values of participation, inclusion, and care that underpin earlier stages of research.

### Acknowledging Contribution: Ethical Recognition and Fair Compensation

The [consultation report](#) that underpins this guidance highlighted important ethical dilemmas around acknowledging, recognising, and compensating children and young people for their growing contributions to research, particularly in contexts of co-production. As the lines between research participant and co-author blur, tensions arise between the need to protect participants' identities through anonymisation and their desire to be recognised for their role.

Researchers should therefore give careful thought to alternative ways of acknowledging and recognising children and young people's contributions. These methods should prioritise safety and privacy while affirming the value of their involvement.

There is a similar tension around compensation. While traditional research ethics often discourage monetary rewards, lack of appropriate compensation can become a barrier to participation, especially for young people from marginalised or disadvantaged backgrounds. For example, unpaid research involvement may compete with part-time paid employment.

Researchers should carefully consider non-monetary and ethically appropriate forms of compensation. These might include:

- Reimbursement of travel costs or provision of food and refreshments during sessions;
- Small tokens of appreciation such as thank-you notes, certificates, or personalised feedback;
- Sharing clear, accessible updates that show how young people's input shaped the research or influenced real-world outcomes.

These forms of recognition can enhance participants' sense of being heard, valued, and respected, without compromising ethical safeguards.

## Verification and Validation: Respecting and Valuing Young Voices through Participant Review

Following up with children and young people to verify data and interpretations is both an ethical obligation and a practical opportunity to enhance research quality. Allowing participants to review their own contributions, such as checking qualitative transcripts or commenting on how their views have been interpreted, can:

- Improve data accuracy;
- Enhance trust and accountability;
- Uphold ongoing, informed consent; and
- Reinforce participant agency.

Verification also requires researchers to communicate clearly and promptly. Children and young people should be supported to understand their right to amend or withdraw their contributions at this stage. Avoiding long delays between data collection and verification is important to maintain relevance and accuracy.

Where possible, researchers are encouraged to involve children and young people in analysing data and shaping findings. This can include:

- Presenting findings in child-friendly formats such as illustrated summaries, short videos, or visual reports;
- Collaboratively validating interpretations to ensure they reflect the intended meaning;
- Co-developing materials for dissemination (e.g., infographics or digital outputs) to affirm their status as co-creators of knowledge.

## Summary

Building in time for a follow-up with children and young people following the research encourages full validation, respect, and meaningful closure. It affirms their contributions and strengthens the ethical integrity of the research. This phase allows participants to reflect on their involvement, verify how their views were represented, and see how their input has influenced findings or decisions. Follow-up also fosters trust and accountability, showing children and young people that their voices have lasting value and are taken seriously beyond the data collection moment.

## In Summary

### Safeguarding and Child Protection

- Comply with statutory obligations under the Children First Act 2015 (Government of Ireland, 2015).
- Implement Child Safeguarding Statements and appoint Designated Liaison Persons (DLPs).
- Establish clear reporting procedures and risk mitigation measures.

### Researcher Competence

- Ensure all personnel have Garda vetting and employment checks.
- Provide training in child protection, ethical engagement, and safeguarding procedures.

### Risk Assessment

- Conduct a thorough risk assessment identifying potential risks to participants.
- Plan supervision, trusted adult involvement, and safety measures for all interactions.

### Consent and Assent

- Obtain parent/guardian consent and child assent, using age-appropriate explanations.
- Treat consent as ongoing and flexible, allowing children to withdraw at any time.
- Clearly communicate any limitations to confidentiality.

### Data Protection

- Collect only the minimum necessary personal data and use it solely for the stated research purpose.
- Ensure secure storage and controlled access, respecting privacy and GDPR requirements.

### Support Structures

- Provide emotional and practical support for participants and researchers.
- Include mechanisms to respond to distress or safeguarding concerns during research.

## Phase 1: Preparatory Phase – Enabling Ethical Consultations

### Prioritise Rights, Needs, and Preferences

- Recognise children’s diverse capacities, experiences, and contexts from the outset.
- Engage children and young people early to inform and shape research design inclusively.
- Ensure different levels of involvement are supported and respected.

### Cultivate Trust and Build Relationships

- Establish trusting, respectful, and caring relationships with participants.
- Allow sufficient time to build genuine connections, particularly with marginalised or vulnerable children.
- Avoid ‘parachuting in and out’ - seek multiple interactions before formal consultations.
- Leverage trusted adults (parents, educators) as co-researchers for very young/non-verbal children.

### Reflect on Power Dynamics

- Identify and minimise power imbalances among researchers, gatekeepers, and participants.
- Develop transparent partnerships with gatekeepers that respect children’s rights and autonomy.
- Reflect on your positionality and how it may influence interactions.

### Create a Network of Care

- Ensure emotional and practical support for participants through trusted adults, peers, and advocacy groups.
- Include community representatives to strengthen trust and cultural relevance.
- Offer older children the option to involve friends during participation.

## Phase 2: Consultation Phase – Ethical Engagement During Research

### Create Enabling and Comfortable Environments

- Use welcoming, informal, and familiar settings (e.g., schools, community spaces).
- Ensure physical accessibility and provide practical supports (transport, refreshments, timing).

- Make the environment flexible, child-friendly, and conducive to free expression.

### **Facilitate Voluntary, Informed, and Ongoing Consent/Assent**

- Provide clear, age-appropriate information about research aims, procedures, risks, and rights.
- Treat consent as an ongoing, flexible conversation, respecting children's right to withdraw at any time.
- For non-verbal/young children, ensure moment-to-moment assent by observing non-verbal cues continuously.
- Adopt nuanced consent models for 16-17-year-olds, balancing autonomy with appropriate adult support, guided by the young person's wishes.
- For digital research, implement robust age verification, privacy protections, and ongoing check-ins with participants and trusted adults.

### **Tailor Child-Centred and Inclusive Methods**

- Use diverse, age-appropriate, and culturally sensitive participatory methods (storytelling, play, drawing, digital tools).
- Avoid assumptions; approach each child with openness and sensitivity.
- Adapt formats and resources for children with disabilities, from Traveller/Roma communities, LGBTQ+ youth, and other marginalised groups.
- Offer choices in participation mode and allow presence of trusted adults during sensitive topics.

### **Ensure Clear, Transparent, and Accessible Communication**

- Use developmentally appropriate language and varied communication tools.
- Frame questions gently, inviting reflection without pressure or intrusion.
- Incorporate verbal and non-verbal communication methods to capture authentic voices.
- Conduct ongoing check-ins to confirm participant comfort and willingness.

### **Safeguard Without Silencing**

- Minimise risk of emotional harm; be prepared to provide immediate support if distress arises.
- Balance safeguarding with respect for children's agency, including choices about recognition (name/image).
- Upskill the research team to handle safeguarding sensitively and confidently.

## Phase 3: Follow-up Phase – Sustaining Respect and Engagement

### Acknowledge and Recognise Contributions

- Consider safe, ethical ways to acknowledge children’s roles, balancing privacy with recognition.
- Offer non-monetary compensation (travel reimbursement, refreshments, thank-you notes, certificates).
- Provide clear updates on how their input shaped research outcomes.

### Verify and Validate Data with Participants

- Share transcripts or summaries to allow participants to check accuracy.
- Support participant agency by enabling amendment or withdrawal of contributions at this stage.
- Maintain timely follow-up to keep feedback relevant and meaningful.

### Involve Participants in Analysis and Dissemination

- Present findings in child-friendly formats (illustrated summaries, videos, visuals).
- Collaboratively validate interpretations to ensure alignment with participants’ views.
- Co-develop dissemination materials affirming children and young people as knowledge co-creators.

### Maintain Ongoing Contact and Support

- Provide debriefings and opportunities to discuss concerns post-data collection.
- Continue to prioritise flexibility, responsiveness, and respect for participants’ evolving needs.

## References

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