Children and Youth Ethics Module

This module will guide you through ethical principles and processes in data collection.
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What is it?
Applying ethical principles and processes to ensure ethical treatment of all participants in data collection is critical.

What is it for?
Within conflict resolution we haven’t always been aware of the negative effects that are possible and the dangers that we could bring to participants in our work and research. If the researchers are “outsiders”, they must be aware that their presence may affect the social dynamics within the community by potentially bringing in unfamiliar practices, attitudes and resources. Furthermore, the visibility of their presence can draw attention to those children who engage in research activities, thereby arousing suspicion and potentially creating risk.

Following an ethical procedure will ensure we predict and plan for possible negative outcomes and reduce the danger for participants in our work.

When should it be used?
Each occasion that we undertake data collection (for research, assessment, monitoring or evaluation activities) we should undertake an ethical review.

Who should be involved?
Within Search, the Children and Youth Specialist should be involved, in addition to the DME Specialist and the relevant programme staff. The individuals who will undertake the data collection must be informed about the ethical review process and develop the required tools prior to data collection.
How to use it?

Summary of the key steps to follow in an ethical review for researching with Children and Youth:

1. **Make sure the information-gathering activity is necessary and justified.**
   - Before starting the activity, clearly define its intended purpose and audience, and make sure that there is sufficient staff and money to conduct it in an ethical manner.
   - Only use direct methods with children if the required information is not otherwise available.
   - If the information-gathering activity will not directly benefit the children and adolescents involved or their community, do not proceed.

2. **Design the activity to get valid information.**
   - Develop a protocol to clarify aims and procedures for collecting, analyzing, and using the information to which all partners agree.
   - Apply community definitions to set clear criteria for inclusion. Use existing records when possible, and recognize social and cultural barriers to participation. For surveys, use the minimum number of respondents to achieve demonstrable results.
   - All tools, such as questionnaires, should be developed through discussions with experts. These tools should then be translated locally, back-translated, and field-tested.

3. **Consult with community groups.**
   - Consult locally to determine who must give permission for the activity to proceed.
   - Consider what concerns are likely to exist amongst the immediate community about bringing children together for research activities? How might such concerns relate to the specific composition of groups of children – for example, in relation to mixing males and females, or children from different class/caste or ethnic groupings?
   - In the event that the research creates upset for individual children, division amongst participants or adverse reaction from others what resources – individuals or organisations – exist to provide back-up and support in addressing such problems?
Interviewers must be sensitive that they may be highly visible and a source of local interest. Clarify roles and expectations through community meetings and honor commitments.

**Tips: Dealing with Power Dynamics**

While imbalances of power that commonly exist between adults and children are widely understood, there is less appreciation for the fact that such difference is also inevitable amongst children themselves. Factors of age, gender, educational attainment, caste/class, ethnicity, (dis)ability, as well as individual personality and physical stature, all play a role in shaping power relations in childhood.

**Researchers should be cautious that their work does not contribute to the creation or strengthening of hierarchies amongst children:**
- Consider which children are involved in research activities and on what basis? Who is excluded from such activities and is exclusion systematic (e.g. on basis of geography, gender, or class)?
- What are the benefits of participation and how might the enjoyment of such benefits (whether material or symbolic) contribute to differences of status and intra-group tensions?
- What can be done to ensure that those not participating directly are not marginalised, disempowered or stigmatised?

4. **Anticipate adverse consequences.**
- In partnership with the community, anticipate all possible consequences for the children and adolescents involved. Do not proceed unless appropriate responses to potentially harmful consequences can be provided.
- Are the local political-military actors likely to take an interest in these activities? If so, what relationships may be needed to be built and assurances given?
- Does the schedule of issues to explore through research contain anything that participating children, their families/communities, and political-military actors might consider inappropriate?
- If the safety and security of children and adolescents cannot be assured, do not proceed.
• Interviewers should have experience working with children. They should be trained to respond to children’s needs, and require ongoing supervision and support. If appropriately skilled interviewers are unavailable, do not proceed.
• In partnership with the community, determine what kind of follow-up is appropriate to respond to children’s needs, recognizing age, gender, ethnicity, and so on. If appropriate support cannot be assured to meet the children’s needs, do not proceed.
• Prepare a reaction plan to anticipate serious needs. If support for the child cannot be assured, do not proceed.

5. **Conduct consent and interviewing procedures with sensitivity to children’s specific needs.**
   • Children must give their agreement to participate, but consent is required from appropriate adults.
   • Interviewers should make sure that children know they can stop or withdraw at any time.
   • Investigators must provide children and adolescents and their parent or guardian with information about the activity in a manner appropriate to their culture and education.
   • Consent forms and informational tools should be developed with community members and field-tested.
   • Use an independent advocate to represent the views of children if there is any doubt about the protection provided by their guardian.
   • Avoid efforts to unduly influence participation by the use of incentives. If incentives are used, they should be in line with local living standards.

6. **Ensure confidentiality**
   • Particularly in an unstable social and political environment sensitive information must be handled with extreme caution. As well as the potential distress it may cause to recollect experiences of abuse and violation, sharing such information may not only lead to stigma and suspicion but also put at risk the safety of children, their families and communities. For example, in situations where the recruitment of children is officially denied, revelation by individual children of their own recruitment or that of peers could place themselves and their families in great danger. Confidentiality and anonymity are thus crucial.
   • All documentation (including data collection notes and reports) should not name individuals but give a generic and unidentifiable description (girl age 10 or male age 15 etc).
   • Feedback to communities should present findings that are general and not provide individuals stories or experiences if they can be identifiable.
The key tool for the Ethical Review is the Consent Form.

An example of a consent form developed to support a semi-structured questionnaire to be used with young people aged 10-14 is provided below. The following form was used only after the child’s parent or guardian had agreed to their involvement.

- Each Study should develop a specific consent form that contains all the sections from the one below.

Example of A Consent Form

**BASELINE SURVEY:**
Questions for youth aged 10-14

**INTRODUCTION:**
Hello! My name is .... I’m here for a study on behalf of XXXX, who are providing services here in [insert name of community] like [insert name of local services].

**PURPOSE:**
We’re talking with adults and children here to get information about their lives and how XXXX can provide them with support, especially in difficult times. The information we obtain will be used to assess how the services are going, and how XXXX can improve them.

**IDENTITY AND INVOLVEMENT:**
I have already been talking to your parent/guardian about these things, and now we would like to try to understand what you think. So, I would like to know if you are [insert selected child’s name]? Have you been interviewed in the past two weeks for this study?

*Proceed only if identity is correct and no previous involvement.*

**FUNDING SOURCE:**
*Consider if it’s appropriate to mention:* These services are being provided by XXXX, whose local partners are [insert name of local partners].

**PROCEDURES INVOLVED:**
We would like to ask you some questions, in an interview which will take about 15-30 minutes. I would like to talk to you alone, but if you like, you can ask for a parent or guardian to be present at any time.

**RISKS:**
Some of these questions might talk about things that some people find quite personal, or may be difficult to answer. If any of the questions make you feel uncomfortable or you don’t want to answer them, you do not have to.

**ABILITY TO SAY NO:**
Remember, you do not have to talk about anything you don’t want to. This will not affect your ability to receive services now or in future. However, I would really appreciate it if you would answer the questions honestly and openly, so that we can find out what young people here in [insert name of community] really think. Your answers will be very important to us. We would really appreciate any help you can give us in finding out about children here. Do you have any questions about any of the things I have just said?

**WHAT WILL HAPPEN WITH THE INFORMATION:**
We’ll be asking children from different places all over the country the same questions. When the survey is finished, we will collect all the responses we have received here in [insert name of community] and keep them safe. Someone in the office will add them together. You will be able to find out about the results by contacting our partners here, like [name local partners, and make sure individual knows how to contact them if they want to].

**CONFIDENTIALITY:**
If you agree to take part in this interview, the things you tell me will be confidential. That means they will be private between you and me. I am not going to write down your name. If you agree, you can indicate your agreement by making a mark here. Alternatively, I can sign here to say that I have witnessed your agreement.

**SEEKING COMPREHENSION:**
Do you have any questions about any of the things I have just said?

**SEEKING VOLUNTARY AGREEMENT:**
Are you willing to participate in this interview? Do you want a parent or guardian to stay with us while we are talking?

_____________________ ______________________ __________________
Youth/child agreement / Adult present?
(Specify who)

Witness Date

__________________ ______________
District Name Area Name
Additional Resources

*Ethical Approaches to Gathering Information from Children and Adolescents in International Settings: Guidelines and Resources*: Horizons, Population Council IMPACT, Family Health International

‘Research with Children Living in Situations of Armed Conflict: Concepts, Ethics & Methods’ Jason Hart and Bex Tyrer