

Guidelines for Conducting Research with Children

Conducting research with children is both challenging and intellectually rewarding. There are also additional ethical and logistical considerations for conducting research with children. This document will help prepare you for these considerations before you begin conducting research with children.

Introduction

Children are individuals under the age of 18 years. Specifically, according to the [British Psychological Society Position Paper 'Safeguarding and Promoting the Welfare of Children'](#), a child is any person who has not yet attained their **18th birthday**, regardless of housing, employment or any other status. Children who have not yet attained their **16th birthday** will require someone else (parent/carer, Headteacher in *loco parentis*) to consent to their participation in research (see 4. *Informed Consent* below). All research conducted with children must follow the ethical guidelines of the British Psychological Society (for more information visit www.bps.org.uk.)

All researchers should follow the University's **Code of Practice for Research, and Research Governance Standard Operating Procedures** – available on the [Research Governance](#) web-pages.

No research may be conducted with children without ethical approval from the University's Sciences & Technology Cross-Schools Research Ethics Committee (SCITEC C-REC).

1. Professional Behaviour

When you are conducting research with children you are doing so in your role as a professional researcher. Clearly, your behaviour needs to be professional at all times. After all, teachers and parents¹ will see you as both a representative of the University of Sussex and of psychologists, more generally.

¹ For the purpose of this document 'parents' means parents/carers

Conducting research with children is a privilege. Whether you are conducting research in a school or in a lab on campus others are volunteering their time and goodwill to assist you with your research. For example, schools are very busy, and their agenda is education, not providing research material. Therefore, it is very important to make clear agreements with schools and be willing to alter your plans if the school requires it. Similarly, parents and children who come to the lab are volunteering to do so and it is important to make clear agreements with them and be willing to accommodate their schedules.

Research with children could not be conducted without schools and parents volunteering to help us. Therefore, it is important to thank teachers and parents for their time and to show respect for the favour they are doing for you.

2. Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) Checks

Depending on where and how you are conducting your research you may need a DBS check before you may collect data. DBS checks are to prevent unsuitable people from working with vulnerable groups, including children, and are managed by the government's Disclosure and Barring Service. The checks look at whether a person has a criminal record and if they are on the barred list for certain activities.

Some projects are integrated with current research and involve working under the direct supervision of a person who has clearance and hence would normally not require a DBS check. If you are conducting research in a school where you will be alone with a child or children you will need a DBS check before you may begin data collection. If you are conducting research in a laboratory you will not need a DBS check if the parent is with the child during the entire experiment. However, if you will be alone with the child in a room separate from the parent then you will need a DBS check.

Ensure that you discuss whether you require DBS clearance with your supervisor. When in doubt, get a DBS check.

2.1 How do I get a DBS check?

If you are a psychology student* DBS forms are available from the School Office. The School employs the services of an organisation called Safety-Net to assist with the DBS checking process (you do not incur any fees for this service.) Information on the [DBS application process](#) is available on the School of Psychology web-site.

*Non-Psychology students/researchers should check with their own School how DBS checks are carried out for them.

3. Ethical Considerations

Before you conduct research with children, you should be aware of the ethical considerations. This section will cover ethical approval, consent and assent. Additional considerations are listed separately under *7. Testing Child Participants* and *10. Data Management*. It is VERY

IMPORTANT that you understand all of these considerations before you begin conducting research with children.

3.1 Ethics Approval

As with all psychological research involving human participants you must obtain ethics approval before conducting research with children. Your study will need approval from the Sciences & Technology Cross-Schools Research Ethics Committee (SCITEC C-REC).

The application process is via the [On-line Ethical Review System](#) on Sussex Direct, and involves completing an on-line form which you submit first to your supervisor and then to the C-REC. A *User Guide for Online Ethical Review Application System* is available on the University's [How to apply for research ethics review](#) web-page and 'Help text' is provided within the on-line application system as you work through the application form.

It is **essential** that you allow enough time for the ethical review process. C-REC handles the ethical approval for several departments; consequently it may take several weeks before the Committee reviews your application. You also need to bear in mind that the Committee might ask you to revise your application, in which case your application will be returned to you with details of amendments or further documents required. This can add time to the application process so it is important to submit applications to C-REC as soon as possible as you CANNOT start your project without ethics approval. In some cases, you may be able to request an expedited review, e.g., if the methods you are using are well-established. However, C-REC will consider such requests on a case-by-case basis.

Your supervisor may already have ethical approval for your project; so check with your supervisor whether your project already has approval.

3.1.2 3rd Year Projects and MSc Projects

In the case of 3rd Year and MSc projects, if your supervisor has approval you will still need to complete an ethics application, signed off by your supervisor and submitted to the School Research Ethics Officer (SREO).

3.1.3 DPhil Students

All DPhil students must complete their own applications for ethical approval for their research. All DPhil student applications must go through the Sciences & Technology Cross-Schools Research Ethics Committee (SCITEC C-REC).

4. Informed Consent

The University has specific guidance for obtaining consent for research with children in schools, which you should consult:

Guidance for obtaining consent for research with child participants in schools available on the School [Standard Operating Procedures](#) web-page.

Informed consent must be obtained before any psychological research involving human participants. The consent procedures for conducting research with children at Sussex operate under the following guidelines, based on current practice as well as British Psychological Society (BPS) and American Psychological Association (APA) guidelines.

Children who are 16-years-old and older may be able to provide (sign for) their own informed consent. If you are testing over-16s contact the C-REC crecscitec@sussex.ac.uk to discuss your individual case.

At Sussex, there are two primary modes of obtaining consent for research with child participants under 16 years: 'opt-in' (parent signs) and Headteacher in *loco parentis* (Headteacher signs on behalf of parents). THE DEFAULT MODE OF INFORMED CONSENT IS 'OPT-IN': Unless you are told otherwise, you should plan that you will need to obtain consent from a parent for each of your participants. In either case the Headteacher must be contacted and must confirm that they have been fully informed about the research and give their permission for it to take place.

The University's *Guidance for obtaining consent for research with child participants in schools* (available on the School [Standard Operating Procedures](#) web-page) contains template letters to send to the Headteacher to request the involvement of their school, as well as template forms for Headteachers to send to parents for 'opt in' and 'opt out' consent.

4.1 'Opt-in'

Opt-in consent should be used in all cases where the data collection involves video-recording of individual children; where work is conducted only with specially-selected individual pupils (as opposed to, for example, a whole class of pupils); or where the activity carries elevated risks for participants and falls outside of what might reasonably be expected to take place at school.

If you are collecting data in a school, you will need to provide the teachers and parents with adequate time to mail, read and send back the consent forms. You should provide the school with consent forms to give to parents at least a week before you will begin testing. Then, once you begin testing it is your responsibility to ensure that you and the teachers have accurate records of any children whose parents have not consented to their children participating in the study. You must also check the identity of the children you are testing to ensure those who do not wish to take part do not do so.

4.2 'Opt-Out'

It may be possible to argue for opt-out consent for low risk activities that might reasonably be expected to take place at school, and where the work is not singling out only certain specially selected individual pupils for participation (such as whole class testing/data collection on topics included on the standard school curriculum for example). 'Opt-out' consent via Headteacher in *loco parentis* will be considered on a case by case basis by the C-REC. In such cases it is still good practice to send parents an additional letter providing information about the study and

giving parents the opportunity to let you know if they do not wish their child to participate (by using an 'opt-out' slip that they can return to the school).

5. Creating Consent Forms

Consent forms contain two parts: an explanatory statement and the consent form (which is signed).

5.1 Explanatory Statement

The explanatory statement should include information about:

- The goal of the project and the general procedure (e.g., your child will be read a story and asked questions after the story)
- Any risks involved
- Any benefits involved
- Any costs involved
- How the research is funded, if applicable
- Information about the use of video/audiotaping, if applicable
- How data will be stored (e.g. confidentiality)
- An explanation about the participants' (children/parents/teachers) right to withdraw (voluntary participation)
- Information about who to contact if the participants (e.g. parents/teachers) have questions after the study

Because the explanatory statement includes information about how to ask questions, it is good practice to give the parents/teachers a copy to keep for their records. It is also good practice to include the name of the researchers and lab on your consents and other materials. You should include the project name as it appears on your application for ethical approval.

5.2 Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form

The School uses a standardised [Information Sheet Consent Form Template](#) which you should follow.

6. Assent

As a matter of course, children who can understand and follow verbal instructions (including any school-aged child) should be asked to provide assent before they participate. For example, the researcher should give the children a brief introduction to the tasks and ascertain explicitly that they are happy to take part. Children should be told that they do not have to complete the tasks, and that they can choose to stop doing them at any time. For more on children withdrawing participation, see *8.Right to Withdraw* below.

7. Testing Child Participants

Conducting research with children can be rewarding and fun. When else do psychologists get to run experiments designed to feel like games or studies where they play with toys? However, child participants are different from adult participants in several ways. Not only do they have shorter attention spans (they cannot complete as many trials in one experiment), different goals (they may not be interested in the same things as the experimenter) and different motivations for participating (they are less concerned with earning course credits), but children do not have the same level of linguistic competence that adults do. This means the studies with children need to be designed so that the instructions are very clear and easy-to-follow. Further, and perhaps more importantly, additional consideration needs to be taken by the researcher to understand what child participants may be trying to communicate.

8. Right to Withdraw

Participation in research is voluntary. This means that participants have the right to withdraw at any time. Child participants also have this right; however, they may not be able to communicate it as clearly as an adult participant. For example, when was last time you heard a 4-year-old child say “I feel uncomfortable. I would like to withdraw from this study at this time”?

Children are not going to communicate their desire to withdraw so clearly. Therefore, it is your responsibility as a researcher to listen to them and be prepared that you may have to stop a session prematurely.

Importantly, then, young children should be taken seriously when they begin to show signs of discomfort or say “no”. If you are testing children in the lab, the parent should be in the same room. In this case, you can ask the parent “do you want to stop now?” or “do you think we should stop now?” Note, either the parent or the child may decide to end the experiment.

In addition, children may fail to clearly communicate their desire to stop participating for other reasons. Consider, for a moment, how an experiment in a school must feel to a child. A stranger, who the child has never met, is asking the child to do something that may feel like an exam. Simply because the stranger is an adult the stranger exudes an air of authority. Perhaps then, the experimenter telling the child, “come on, keep going” is not so different from Stanley Milgram’s experiment telling a participant, “it is vital that the experiment continue.” Thus, it is important to establish a rapport with child participants. You may need to include a warm-up task or a bit of small talk at the beginning of your session.

Importantly, you should ensure that the child understands he or she may withdraw without any penalty. For example, you may say things like “we can stop now if you want,” or “if you don’t want to keep playing this, that’s okay.”

If you have further questions about children withdrawing from research, please talk to your supervisor or a faculty member in the developmental area.

9. Debriefing

It is always a good idea to debrief your participants. Especially when conducting child research because teachers and parents may wonder “what’s so scientific about playing with toys?” or “my child didn’t pick the right answer. Is he below average?” Use this time opportunity to let parents/teachers and older children ask questions. Importantly, IF YOUR STUDY USES ANY FORM OF DECEPTION YOU MUST DEBRIEF participants (e.g. parents/teachers.)

Debriefing can also be an opportunity for good public relations. For example, you can use the opportunity to tell parents/teachers about the goals of the study and how the research might influence them (e.g. “providing children with board games with numbers, as opposed to colours, facilitates number learning and has benefits for several maths abilities”). You may tell them about other research at Sussex. Importantly, depending on the type of research you are doing, you can assure parents that their children did very well (for example, if you are testing children from two age groups, parents of the younger children might be concerned if their children are making a lot of mistakes across trials).

10. Data Management

All research should be conducted in accordance with the University’s [Research Data Management Policy](#) and data must be handled in accordance with the Data Protection Act 2018 and the General Data Protection Regulation 2016 (GDPR).

10.1 Record Keeping

It is very important to keep accurate records when conducting any type of research. In psychology it is also important because participants may withdraw after they have participated. Your supervisor will need access to hardcopies and other forms of data after you submit your dissertation/thesis. Discuss where to store your hardcopy data with your supervisor. In most cases records are kept for **10 years**.

10.2 Confidentiality

All data should be kept confidential. Confidentiality is not the same thing as anonymity. In many cases researchers need to be able to match data from the experiment to other information (e.g., school, class, vocabulary scores, etc). This is especially important for longitudinal research.

To ensure confidentiality each participant should be assigned a unique identification number or ‘code’ that has nothing to do with the participant’s name. Your supervisor may have a system for creating identification numbers. Discuss how to create identification numbers for your specific study with your supervisor before you begin data collection.

In some cases, schools may request and be given access to information collected that would be part of their normal working responsibilities as teachers (e.g. reading scores). In cases such as these, individual scores may be made available to the school if it could help them in targeting curriculum support. There are some cases where studies require confidentiality be kept even if information is shared. For example, research on bullying may involve children admitting to their victim or bully status. In cases such as these, schools may be given information about their

classes and school as a whole, but individual children's answers would not be revealed. Before you share data with a school check that you have ethical approval to do so and discuss which data to share with your supervisor.

You may have ethical approval to share video and/or audio footage of your child participants. YOU MAY NOT SHARE VIDEO/AUDIO FOOTAGE WITHOUT CONSENT. For example, your consent form might have a sentence that the research group might use video footage in classes or at conferences. If you do share video and/or audio footage the identities of the child and any other participants (e.g. parents) should be kept anonymous. For example, you would not introduce the clip as "here is John completing the number-line estimate task" but rather "here is a child completing the number-line estimate task."

10.3 Security

Recorders need to be store securely. Data should be kept in locked rooms and ideally in locked file cabinets and on password protected computers. Importantly, CONSENT FORMS SHOULD NEVER BE STORED WITH THE DATA. For example, you should never staple or clip the consent form to a questionnaire, write the participant's identification number on the consent form or the participant's name on a video/DVD or questionnaire, etc.

One way to think about this is that if someone broke into the lab, they should have a very difficult time matching up the data and consent forms. For example, the consent forms could be in a locked filing cabinet. The data could be in a second location in binders. And the file for the researchers to match the identification numbers and names could be in a password protected excel file on a password protected computer.

11. Conducting Research in Schools

There are particular considerations for conducting research in schools (see also 4. *Informed Consent*.)

11.1 Recruiting schools

You will need a school to agree to allow you to conduct your research before you may begin testing children in schools. If you are conducting research that is part of your supervisor's programme of research, your supervisor may have a specific local school in mind for your project. However, your supervisor may recommend that you seek to conduct your research in a school outside the local area because local schools are under heavy pressure from local researchers. You may be advised to discuss research with a school with which you have personal contact (e.g. a school at which a relative is teacher, you have volunteered or that you previously attended).

Supervisors of those conducting research in local schools must email details of the schools they are testing in to psy-schools@sussex.ac.uk, which is used to ensure no school has approaches from different researchers at the same time.

Discuss which school(s) to contact with your supervisor well before you plan to begin testing as the first school(s) you contact may decline and it may take longer than you expect to find a willing school.

12. Conducting Research on Campus (in the Lab)

There are particular considerations for conducting research in a laboratory. (Please see the School's [Standard Operating Procedures](#) for each Lab.)

12.1 Safety

Before beginning an experiment, it is your supervisor's responsibility to ensure that the laboratory setting is safe for children and does not pose any risk beyond that which would normally occur at home. This may require that you disinfect stimuli after each visit, that you ensure stimuli and furniture are age-appropriate and that all electrical power points are off and/or covered with child safety covers. Your supervisor should be able to help you setup and maintain a safe testing environment.

12.2 Out of Business Hours

"Out of [business] hours" are before 9am and after 5:30pm on weekdays, anytime on weekends and anytime during University Closure Days.

DPhil students, post-docs, faculty, non-student research assistants and technicians are allowed to run experiments out of hours. Ideally, however, you should not work alone. It is your faculty supervisor's responsibility to ensure that you are sufficiently trained to run experiments out of hours and that you are familiar with emergency procedures.

Undergraduate students and taught postgraduate students (i.e., masters students) are not allowed to run experiments out of hours without written authorization from the Head of School (and even then someone who is allowed - see the paragraph above - must be with you).

If you are running an experiment out of hours, your faculty supervisor will need to run a risk assessment. More information is available in the *Guidelines for Running Experiments Out of Hours* available on the School's [Doctoral Research Students](#) web-page, and the University's *Lone and Out of Hours Working Guidance* which can be accessed via the [Health, Safety and Wellbeing - Guidance A-Z](#).

All out of hours experiments must be logged with the **security office**. First, phone the security office at the start of the experiment (01273 678234) and let them know where the experiment is taking place, who will be involved, and what time the experiment will end. Second, after you are done testing, phone the security office to tell them that you are done.

All participants should be informed that the experiment is occurring out of hours and that the university's rapid response team will therefore not be available (i.e., use normal emergency services). This is part of **informed consent**. Ensure your participants are aware of this when

you obtain informed consent. You must also remain with your participants at all times. You must escort them from the building, and you must actually witness them leaving the building.

Note: you should keep as little cash as possible in the lab in case of theft, particularly if you are testing out of hours.

13. Safeguarding

“Safeguarding is [thus] the responsibility of all psychologists whatever their role” (BPS Practice Guidelines, 3rd Edition p.39.).

Researchers working with children need to consider whether they need a safeguarding protocol for their application. This is unlikely to be necessary for whole class-based testing but must be considered for any research entailing one-to-one testing or focus groups discussing issues that could lead to disclosures that might raise concerns. A safeguarding protocol is essential if researchers are visiting children in their own homes or anywhere else where there is not an institutional (such as a school, charity) policy in place.

13.1 Safeguarding Protocol

In the highly unlikely event that the researchers have any safeguarding concerns after the home visit then a procedure for dealing with this needs to be put in place. As importantly, if reporting those safeguarding concerns is a possibility (however remote) then the limits of confidentiality need to be explained to parents as part of the consent procedure (see *13.6 Confidentiality and safeguarding* below).

The protocol needs to include a plan of who to consult regarding any concerns the researcher might have. Any guarantees of confidentiality in information and consent materials need to indicate the possibility that confidentiality might be breached in certain circumstances. Some example wording is below.

13.2 Information Sheet (example safeguarding wording)

“The researchers will treat all statements that are made in the focus group discussions as private and confidential and will not share these with anyone outside the research team, unless we think that the participant and/or someone else might not be safe, in which case, we will follow your child’s school procedures, and will inform the relevant members of staff.

If any safeguarding issues arise these will be passed on to the school’s designated child protection leads and/or XXX staff where appropriate.”

13.3 Consent Forms (example safeguarding wording)

“I understand that in exceptional circumstances, e.g. where the health, welfare and safety of myself and others is compromised by information I/my child might disclose, the researcher has a responsibility to pass this information onto an appropriate person or agency.”

“I know that the researchers will treat all statements that are made in the focus group discussions as private and confidential and will not share these with anyone outside the research team, unless they think that the participant and/or someone else might not be safe.”

“Everything you say will be confidential – that means that it stays between us - unless you tell me something that affects your safety. If this happens I may need to inform your school adults or XXX staff.”

13.4 Safeguarding Policy in Schools

For any research taking place in Schools, there will be a School Policy that can be followed; usually the first step would be to report any concerns to the School Safeguarding Officer. It would be good practice to find out who this is before you start your research and to indicate that you have done this in your application.

13.5 Reporting Concerns

At present, the University does not have a safeguarding policy or designated safeguarding officer. For undergraduate or postgraduate research, safeguarding concerns should first be discussed with the supervisor. Advice is available from colleagues in the School of Education and Social Work and the Chair of C-REC can refer you if you require an expert opinion.

BPS Practice Guidelines advise that:

Where there are concerns that a child is at risk of harm, such concerns should normally be communicated following the psychologist's work-place safeguarding protocol. Where this is not applicable, concerns about a child's welfare can be made directly to the local authority children's social care team.

(BPS Practice Guidelines, 3rd Edition p.39, Section 4.1 “Safeguarding Children”).

Local contact points for reporting concerns are:

- Brighton & Hove Safeguarding Children Partnership
<https://www.bhscp.org.uk/preventing-abuse-and-neglect/reporting-concerns/>
- Adult Safeguarding Concerns:
<https://www.bhsab.org.uk>

13.6 Confidentiality and safeguarding

Section 1.2 “Standard of Privacy and Confidentiality” of the Code of Ethics and Conduct (2009, p.10) advises that psychologists should:

vi) Restrict breaches of confidentiality to those exceptional circumstances under which there appears sufficient evidence to raise serious concern about:

- (a) the safety of clients;*
- (b) the safety of other persons who may be endangered by the client's behaviour; or*
- (c) the health, welfare or safety of children or vulnerable adults.*

(vii) Consult a professional colleague when contemplating a breach of confidentiality, unless the delay occasioned by seeking such consultation is rendered impractical by the immediacy of the need for disclosure.

(viii) Document any breach of confidentiality and the reasons compelling disclosure without consent in a contemporaneous note.