

## INFORMATION ABOUT CONDUCTING RESEARCH INVOLVING CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN OUT-OF-HOME CARE

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to provide information and resources about good practice when undertaking research activity with children (under 16 years of age) and young people (aged 16 and 17 years) who are in out-of-home care and in particular, children and young persons for whom the Minister has parental responsibility.

The term 'research' used in this paper refers to any systematic investigation of a matter that results in new knowledge that may improve services provided to, and/or circumstances of, children and young people in out-of-home care. The information in this paper will assist designated agencies in developing their own research policies. It may also be of interest to people who are considering undertaking research because it identifies the minimum requirements that they should consider.

#### Consent and the release of information

The release of information held by a designated agency is governed by section 254 of the *Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998*. The Act states it is an offence for any person to disclose information obtained in connection with the administration or execution of the Act, unless certain requirements have been met.

The participation of children for whom the Minister has parental responsibility, is subject to the delegate of the Minister consenting in writing to their participation. This is the Director General of the Department of Community Services. For all other children, the consent of the person who has parental responsibility is required. This is usually the child's parent. In addition to seeking the permission of the person who exercises parental responsibility, it is necessary to also seek the child's approval. Young people are able to give informed consent for themselves. If they are not able to give informed consent, due for example to an intellectual disability, you should refer to the *Guardianship Act 1987* to determine whose consent is required. For questions about the Act or the process of

guardianship, you can contact the Guardianship Tribunal on (02) 9555 8500. Research should always be conducted within the confines of these conditions and should adhere to necessary ethical protocols.

### **Participation of children and young people in research projects**

When conducting research in a field that involves children and young people, researchers have often undertaken their work on the children and young people rather than in partnership with them. It is important to consider the inclusion and participation of children and young people in all aspects of research that involves them, where it can be seen as being in their best interests.

There are a number of reasons why children and young people should be involved.

- Participation is one of the principles of the *Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998*. Although research is not specifically mentioned it can be seen as a decision that may have a significant impact on his or her life. The *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* states that their opinions on matters that affect them should be taken into account according to their maturity.
- Participation can empower children and young people, increase their skills in a range of areas, enhance their self-esteem and increase their sense of connectedness with their community.
- Participation of children and young people can give researchers better knowledge and information and a greater understanding of issues and concerns underlying that information. Where research is likely to lead to action, the involvement of those who will be affected by this action is essential, both for ethical and practical purposes.

Some issues researchers should think about when considering research with children and young people are covered in Save the Children's policy article entitled *Children and Participation: Research, monitoring and evaluation with children and young people* (2001) at [www.savethechildren.org.uk](http://www.savethechildren.org.uk). A summary of this information follows:

- Adults in all societies have power over children which make them vulnerable to exploitation during research. Children and young people in out-of-home care can be particularly vulnerable.
- Understanding and interpreting children's concepts, languages and cultures developed away from the adult world.
- Adults must take care that children's participation is truly voluntary and not coerced.

- Participation is based on equality. Children's opinions do not have more weight or validity than anyone else's, but they should have the same weight, provided they are based on equal access to information and resources.

This policy article also raises the question of when the participation of children and young people is appropriate and when it can be seen as enhancing their safety, welfare and well-being. The policy article encourages prospective researchers to ask themselves these questions:

- Is the research really necessary?
- How important is participation for the children and young people themselves?
- Does the researcher have the skill, ability, time and resources to conduct participatory research effectively?
- Participation can be preached with too much ideological fervour without enough attention to securing actual tangible benefits for people. It is important to ask how both the research and the participation of children and young people will benefit them.

Other useful resources are the *TAKING PARTicipation Seriously* toolkit from the NSW Commission for Children and Young People and the *Stakeholder Feedback Resource* from the NSW Office of the Children's Guardian (OCG). Although not specifically about research they cover areas such as gathering feedback and information, decision making, meetings, conferences and events and provide ideas and practical suggestions for participation. A list of other possible resources is included in section 5 of this paper.

## Approval

Approval for research projects has two elements. The first of these is approval of the actual project and secondly, securing consents from the appropriate people for children, and from young people themselves, to participate.

Prospective researchers are encouraged to submit a proposal for their research project to both the designated agency providing out-of-home care and to the NSW Department of Community Services, to ensure that all areas of consent have been covered. Many large agencies have research guidelines, policies and/or ethics committees. Prospective researchers should be aware of these when planning their research project.

## 2. GENERAL REQUIREMENTS WHEN ASSESSING A RESEARCH ACTIVITY

The following information outlines a minimum standard that designated agencies should apply to all applications received from people wishing to undertake research activity about children and young people in out-of-home care and in particular, children and young persons for whom the Minister has parental responsibility. These can be used by agencies wishing to prepare their own guidelines or policy positions or as a resource to apply to prospective research projects.

- All research should conform to the designated agency's research policy. The research policy should as a minimum standard cover the topics and issues raised in this paper.
- Research activity must contribute significantly to new knowledge about children and young people in out-of-home care and the designated agency's capacity to fulfil its responsibilities.
- The proposed research activity must conform to the principles of ethical research outlined in section 4 of this paper.
- The proposed research activity must not contravene the designated agency's duty of care.
- The methodology must ensure that the product of the research activity will be of the highest standard.
- The *Commission for Children and Young People Act (1998)* and *Child Protection (Prohibited Employment) Act 1998* work together to form the *Working with Children Check*. The *Working with Children Check* looks at a person's suitability to work with children. It is an offence for a prohibited person to apply for, undertake or remain in child-related employment.

Prospective researchers are required to undergo this check when working with children and young people. Designated agencies are responsible for seeking authority to conduct this check for the purpose of ensuring that unsuitable people are not involved in research activity on their behalf with children and young people. Designated agencies should go to the NSW Commission for Children and Young People's website [www.kids.nsw.gov.au/check](http://www.kids.nsw.gov.au/check) for further information about the *Working with Children Check*.

## 3. INFORMATION REQUIRED FROM APPLICANTS OF A RESEARCH PROPOSAL

Prospective researchers who wish to carry out research activity should make a formal application for approval. The following information should be included in

the application. Designated agencies can use this as a checklist for the minimum requirements.

### **Applicant details**

- Applicant's name, title, auspicing institution, address, e-mail, phone and fax numbers.
- The principal researcher's name, title, address, e-mail, phone and fax numbers.
- The principal researcher's academic or professional qualifications and a resume of this person's research experience, including previous grants and publications.

### **Project details**

- A full title for the project.
- A short, plain English title for the project.
- A brief project description.
- A proposed timetable for the project (including all significant phases).
- Any costs associated with the project.
- Evidence of a literature survey, which includes information on the context and background of the research that has given rise to the need to undertake the research.
- A statement of the aims of the project or hypotheses to be tested.
- The perceived benefit and relevance of the project to the children and young people within the designated agency.
- An independent referee's report in support of the research proposal.
- The research method including project design, sampling techniques and any materials.
- Research plan (eg. use of research assistants, recording technology, venues and estimated time commitment by research subjects).
- Method of data analysis (including statistical tests).
- Copies of the research instruments (such as interview schedules, questionnaires or other data collection methods) that will be used.
- Copies of information sheets and consent forms that will be used.
- Locations in NSW to be included in the study.
- Characteristics of and information about research participants.

- Information about research ethics. This includes approval from a human research ethics committee, conformity with the principles of ethical research (see section 4 of this paper), process for obtaining informed consent, assessment of potential risks to research participants and proposals for minimising risks and proposed arrangements for safeguarding the confidentiality of personal information gathered from the designated agency's records or research participants.
- A full statement of proposed agency involvement in the project and what form this would take (eg. funding, access to staff/clients/records). The proposal must demonstrate the feasibility of carrying out the proposed project. This could include preliminary discussions with the relevant operational managers.
- Details of the proposed involvement of other agencies in the project. If these agencies are to provide funds and/or support in kind and whether approval has been obtained?
- Any potential conflict of interest.

#### **4. PRINCIPLES OF ETHICAL RESEARCH**

All research activity should conform to principles of ethical research. This is absolutely paramount when the research may involve potentially vulnerable people, especially children and young people in out-of-home care. Many designated agencies, both government and non-government, have research guidelines and/or a code of ethics which potential researchers should consult. The National Health and Medical Research Council has endorsed the *Human Research Ethics Handbook*, which has a chapter on research involving children and young people. In addition, universities have ethical guidelines and codes which researchers will need to consider.

This paper outlines some of the basic principles of ethical research, however all potential researchers are strongly advised to consult widely and thoroughly to ensure that their project adheres to the highest ethical standards.

##### **Respect for people**

This principle aims to ensure that all people involved in the research project are treated with respect and that their dignity is upheld. They must be fully informed about all aspects of the project and understand their rights, including their right to make a complaint and their right to privacy. The cultural and religious heritage of participants and their communities must be respected and appropriate consultation must occur. The researchers must also understand and adhere to the duty of care requirements involved in working with individual and groups of children and young people.

## Benefit

A research study should seek to contribute to social justice, providing benefits for socially disadvantaged people or communities wherever possible. There should be a benefit to the people who participate in a research project. At an absolute minimum, ethical practice requires a researcher to minimise risk of harm, discomfort and disadvantage to participants. However, a project that involves children and young people in out-of-home care may be unlikely to receive consent if there is no perceived benefit to the participants and the sector.

## Justice

People who have experienced significant disadvantage are often the subjects of research. Some individuals and groups of people have been or may be likely to be subject to over-research. Too often they do not see the results or benefits of the research and their circumstances or disadvantage do not change. Within a population there should be a fair and just distribution of the benefits and burdens that result from research. Children and young people in out-of-home care have often had a high level of scrutiny and participated in a number of assessments and interviews. Consideration must be given to the balance of benefit and burden placed on children and young people contributing to research, even when the research will have long term benefits to the sector.

## 5. RESOURCES LIST

The following list of texts and websites includes some useful resources for prospective researchers. It is by no means an exhaustive list. In providing this list, the NSW Office of the Children's Guardian does not necessarily endorse or support the views, opinions, standards or information contained in these resources. You should also not interpret the absence of a resource from this list as a criticism or comment by the OCG on the author or content of that resource. The OCG can not warrant and does not represent that the material which appears in this list is complete, current, reliable and/or free from error.

You should be aware that website providers often have their own protocols and standards in relation to their sites and the information which appears on them. We urge you to familiarise yourself with any such protocols and standards.

Boyden, J. and Ennew, J. (eds) (1997) *Children in Focus: A manual for participatory research with children*. Radda Barnen.

Calvert, M. et al (2002) *Youth Involvement for Community, Organizational and Youth Development: Directions for Research, Evaluation and Practice*. University of Wisconsin-Madison and Innovation Centre for Community and Youth Development/Tides Center.

Chambers, R. (1997) *Whose Reality Counts? Putting the first last*. IT Publications.

Graue, M. and Walsh, D. (1998) *Studying Children in Context. Theories, Methods and Ethics*. Sage Publications.

Greig, A. and Taylor, J. (1999) *Doing Research with Children*. Sage Publications.

Kirby, P. (1999) *Involving Young Researchers: How to enable young people to design and conduct research*. Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

Milner, P. and Carolin, B. (1999) *Time to listen to children: Personal and professional communication*. Routledge Publications.

The National Health and Medical Research Council. (2001) *Human Research Ethics Handbook*. Commonwealth of Australia.

NSW Commission for Children and Young People. (2003) *TAKING PARTicipation Seriously*.

NSW Office of the Children's Guardian. (2003) *Stakeholder Feedback Resource (draft)*.

Save the Children. (2001) *Children and Participation: Research, monitoring and evaluation with children and young people*. [www.savethechildren.org.uk](http://www.savethechildren.org.uk)

O'Shaughnessy, T. and Doming, K. (2001) *Creating Space for Children's Participation*. World Vision Australia.

Worrall, S. (2000) *Young People as Researchers: A learning resource pack*. Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

Australian Centre for Community Services Research [www.flinders.edu.au/accsr](http://www.flinders.edu.au/accsr)

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [www.aihw.gov.au](http://www.aihw.gov.au)

Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth [www.aracy.org.au](http://www.aracy.org.au)

Child Rights Information Network [www.crin.org](http://www.crin.org)

The National Health and Medical Research Council [www.nhmrc.gov.au](http://www.nhmrc.gov.au)

NSW Office of the Children's Guardian [www.kidsguardian.nsw.gov.au](http://www.kidsguardian.nsw.gov.au)

NSW Commission for Children and Young People [www.kids.nsw.gov.au](http://www.kids.nsw.gov.au)

Save the Children UK [www.savethechildren.org.uk](http://www.savethechildren.org.uk)