

Emerald Studies in
Child Centred Practice

The Ethics of Unlocking Research with Children

Creativity,
Agency
and
Change



edited by Sam Frankel
Susan Kay-Flowers

The Ethics of Unlocking Research With Children

EMERALD STUDIES IN CHILD CENTRED PRACTICE

Series Editor: Sam Frankel, Learning Allowed, UK

Emerald Studies in Child Centred Practice: Voice, Collaboration and Change seeks to reposition the place of childhood studies as a discipline, highlighting its social value. This series explores the application of theories from childhood studies in practice. It highlights the place, purpose and power of these theories to inform practice and seek to shape a child-centred approach across the settings within which children live and experience their everyday lives – schools, families, the law, the care system. Uniquely, books in the series will not only draw on academic insight but also include the perspectives of both practitioners and children. The series makes the case for the need for a shared dialogue as a foundation for re-imagining practice.

This new series offers a new and valuable dimension to childhood studies with relevance for how wider society comes to engage with it. Indeed, it offers a chance for childhood studies to increase its presence in society – to demonstrate how an awareness of children’s agency and the constructed nature of society can positively influence discourse and debate – with the hope that this can increasingly shape policy and practice and add value to children’s everyday experiences. Proposals are welcome for the series that align to this goal and help us to develop and grow childhood studies. The series is particularly keen to explore multifaceted aspects of children’s lives, such as schooling, home lives, children’s rights, child protection, activism and more.

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The Ethics of Unlocking Research With Children: Creativity, Agency and Change

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

'To all my grandchildren. Those I've met and those yet to come' – SKF
To children around the world – who have a voice and want to be heard – SF

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Contents

| | |
|------------------------|-----------|
| About the Editors | <i>ix</i> |
| About the Contributors | <i>xi</i> |
| Acknowledgements | <i>xv</i> |

| | |
|--|----------|
| Chapter 1 An Introduction: Our Journey to Unlock the Ethics of Research With Children | 1 |
| <i>Sam Frankel</i> | |

Part I

| | |
|---|-----------|
| Chapter 2 Promoting Ethical Research: Identifying the Gap in Research Ethics Application Processes | 19 |
| <i>Libby Robinson</i> | |

Part II

| | |
|---|-----------|
| Chapter 3 Who's Afraid of Research With Children? Perspectives and Reflections | 29 |
| <i>Anne-Marie Smith</i> | |

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Chapter 4 Listening to Children's Voices About Family Life: Ethical Dilemmas in Researching Their Experience of Parental Separation and Divorce | 43 |
| <i>Susan Kay-Flowers</i> | |

| | |
|---|-----------|
| Chapter 5 COVID-19 and Young Children's Well-being: Creative Methodologies and Children's Perspectives | 61 |
| <i>Nicky Hirst</i> | |

Part III

- Chapter 6 School-Based Research With Youth: When Protection Leads to Disconnection** 81

Jennifer Silcox, Laura Rosen and Tara Bruno

- Chapter 7 Empowering Children: Ethical Decision-Making in Research Through a Strength-Based Approach** 95

Michelle Dwerryhouse and Lauren Hall

- Chapter 8 ‘This Is a Healthy Relationship’ School Pupils as Researchers and Equals** 109

Janette Porter

Part IV

- Chapter 9 Childcare Ethics: Is Ethics a Childcaring One?** 135

Judith Enriquez

- Chapter 10 ‘Story Creators, Being Human and Minimal Risk’: A Collaborative Inclusion Project for University Students and Pupils in the Liverpool City Region (LCR) With Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)** 151

Nicky Hirst and Ceri Daniels

- Chapter 11 The Ethical Dilemma of Supporting Children Impacted by Parental Imprisonment, an Adverse Childhood Experience, to Have Their Views Heard in Spaces Where Their Voices, Faces and/or Names Might Also Be Seen and Heard** 169

Lorna Brookes

- Chapter 12 A Closing Thought and Next Steps** 185

Susan Kay-Flowers

- Index 189

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Hirst, N., & Culshaw, A. (2024). Chapter 21: Understanding the World in Palaiologou, I. In *The Early Years Foundation Stage: Theory and Practice* (5th ed.). London: Sage.

Garden, A., & Hirst, N. (2022). 'Ikke skade treet': 'Don't harm the tree'. Narratives from a Norwegian kindergarten. *Education*, 3–13, DOI: 10.1080/03004279.2022.2151318.

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Part of the project involved conversations with children from a local primary school in Liverpool and young people from the 'Time-Matters UK' project. The editors would like to thank them for their time and willingness to share their perspectives on children's involvement in research. Their contributions were illuminating and illustrated the vital importance of children being listened to. Their input not only helped shape this book but informed a wider project in which children's views about research are currently being sought through an online survey.

Thank you to all those at Emerald for their support and direction in helping us pull this project together.

Learning Allowed has been delighted to support this project and is grateful to all those in both Canada and the United Kingdom that have been involved. The conversations have been rich and motivating and the journey itself, which we hope is only just beginning, is continually allowing us all to learn more about effective child-centred research practice. A special thank you to Sue, who has expertly facilitated and co-ordinated all the different moving part that made up this project!

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Chapter 1

An Introduction: Our Journey to Unlock the Ethics of Research With Children

Sam Frankel

Learning Allowed, UK

This project is personal. I am a researcher whose primary participant group is children, and I have sat on and chaired a research ethics board (REB). I understand the reason for ethical oversight but have always questioned the reliance on assumptions that the process is riddled with. It creates a foundation for the design and delivery of research that is anachronistic, patriarchal, colonial, one dimensional and adult centred. The result – an ethical framework that is uncomfortably out of step with the participant group it is set up to ‘protect’ – undermining researcher choice and methodological design and stifling both the protection and ultimately the effective participation of child participants.

It has been notable that this is an issue for others too.

This project, of which this book is the first part, has raised serious questions about how the ‘process’ that has been created for conducting research constricts the researcher’s capacity to contribute to advancing knowledge. We have heard repeatedly from researchers about how they:

- chose not to conduct research with a particular group because of the hassle getting approval would involve;
- designed their research to get approval;
- felt constrained and could not evolve the research once it had started;
- had considered the need to subvert the process to boost participant engagement;
- recognised the tensions between a medicalised model for research approval and the passive view of the child connected with it, in contrast to discipline accepted understandings of the child as an active meaning maker.

This book is therefore requiring us to make a choice about the type of research we want. Our intention is to make a case for reforming the research process through a deeper and more informed understanding of the relationship between the participant, the researcher and any approval or oversight body. Our premise is

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that finding ways to unlock greater participation will generate more meaningful research that will offer new insights and understandings about children and their everyday lives. Without this shift we are in danger of research – at best only allowing us to understand a part of the issue, and at worst missing what the issue is altogether!

Our focus on ethics is implied throughout, as we discuss the design of and the process for initiating and conducting a research project. It allows us to reflect on the procedural actions required not only to enable research but also to be more philosophical about what a call to be ‘ethical’ means for the parties involved. It is also important to note that our discussion develops from a standpoint rooted in childhood studies. The active competencies of children as social meaning makers create a particular angle that drives and directs the discussions that emerge.

Here, we set out the unique path we have created to support this collection, which as well as offering a context for the writing that follows also provides some interesting commentary to provoke thinking on this topic.

Our Journey

To reach the content – the chapters in our collection – we must start by talking about the journey.

Little did I expect that a workshop in June 2023, on children’s voice, would evolve into a full-scale project on re-imagining research design and the ethics process. During the event, two defining themes emerged. . .

- (1) Children’s voices needed to be heard.
- (2) The processes that ‘allowed’ children to participate were complex, variable and disconnected.

A characteristic of the way in which people had experienced ethics was isolation. Finding a forum where the challenges of the process could be shared and discussed created a sense of solidarity. As a group, an awareness formed that these challenges were being experienced widely by those researching with children and taking the time to understand and explore this area better would be well spent.

A collaborative project began to emerge – we would write a book.

First, we would run a workshop for any people who were interested – exploring themes and ideas relating to unlocking the part children were able to play in research.

As a response to that workshop contributors could present an abstract – sharing ideas they would like to develop. This would lead into a second workshop and an opportunity to invite comment on how those abstract ideas had developed, alongside an invitation to hear from children and young people.

The workshops were to be followed by two writing days, providing space for reflection, conversation and getting something down on paper!

As these events became so defining to the process as a whole – it seems important to share some of what came out of them – particularly Workshop 1 and 2 and our first writing day.

Workshop 1

A group of interested academics were invited to a 1 day workshop in February 2024, to explore the following three themes:

- (1) What are the ingredients that inform ethical decision-making in research with children?
 - How are decisions made and why?
 - Who makes these decisions?
 - What training informs decision-making?
 - How well equipped are REBs to respond to the specialised approaches in areas such as childhood and youth studies?
- (2) How are creative methodologies relevant/necessary to capture the voices of minority groups?
 - How influential are REBs in shaping methodological choices?
 - As a result. . .what choices are being made and why?
 - How are those choices impacting research?
 - How are we/how could we approach consent?
- (3) How might we bring about change and advance effective practice in ethical decision-making and research design (both within universities and beyond)?
 - How are existing practices impacting knowledge?
 - What role should/do universities play in shaping attitudes towards research with children and young people?
 - Where might reimagining approaches to ethics have an impact?
 - Why is this relevant/needed?

To guide our discussions, we asked:

- Where are we?
- Where do we want to be?
- How are we going to get there?

I will use this format to provide a simple summary.

Where Are We

Perceiving Risk: (Participation vs Protection)

How we make decisions about children in research – design the methods, make decisions about ethics approval – is defined by risk.

Levels of risk, however, are not constant and alter based on a variety of variables.

How one comes to see that risk will also be influenced by a range of factors from experience through to the role you are playing within the research. Whether one is involved in the research as a member of an ethics board, as a researcher, participant or gatekeeper – our understanding of and our perception of risk will include. . .

- the image we hold of the child;
- our experience of the research approach;
- our relationship with others in the research ecosystem;
- the responsibility we believe is attached to our role.

As an example, a contrasting ‘image of the child’ is clearly seen between members of the ethics board on one side and the researcher on the other. The ‘best interest of the child’, for an ethics board, will be driven by an assessment framed by the ‘medicalised’ model universities have inherited for ethics review in which children are commonly seen as objects in an adult framework. This contrasts with the childhood studies researcher, who is more likely to be oriented by a desire for children to be co-participants. Here, ‘best interests’ requires a continued focus on potential risks, but one that is understood with insight from children – with participation being key to meaningful ‘protection’.

Both have a shared desire for the ‘best interests’ of child participants, however the paths to achieve these and the understandings that underpin them are fundamentally different.

Adult Centric vs Child Centred

The ethics format for participative research with children relies on historic protocols that were created to respond to understandings of children fixed by defined stages of development. The result – a process that continues to centre on adult assumptions about the child, rather than any more progressive thinking about children as meaning makers.

This is illustrated by the fact that current formats for the preparation for research with children, do not involve the child at all. Ethical decision-making, although set to protect the child, does this through a focus on adults – some known to the child and others who are not. The researcher – in order to achieve ethics approval ends up with two key audiences: adult gatekeepers and adults on an ethics board. The researcher has to predict and then mitigate the assumed understandings these adults have for the children to be worked with, without at any point, inviting those children to be integrated into the discussion.

This model inherently requires adults to engage with other adults in a way that is commonly accepted and understood by those adults, on issues that relate to children. This sits very uncomfortably alongside the depth of research on enabling the voice of children. It is somewhat ironic that the academy – here reflected in the

form of childhood studies, which seeks to champion children's participation, finds the access point to unlocking this is restricted and limited by a framework that is engineered to doubt children's competence and instead we rely on a system that asks certain adults to make assumptions on the unsound basis that the 'adult knows best'.

Control vs Choice

A practical reality of the tension is a sense that an ethics board wants control, which impinges on the researchers (and participants) desire for a level of choice.

Discussions flagged questions around whether, for example, more creative methods limit control and therefore increase risk? An illustration of this is seen through projects that desire to use co-production. Co-productive methods open up a space for children to be involved in the research design itself. However, this does not sit easily alongside a framework for ethics that requires pre-approval – where the methods and approach must be defined before even meeting with participants, limiting possibilities for adaption based on participant voice (both in terms of hearing their needs and also any ideas they have for the project).

This tension over the need for ethics board to be in control of a process that was forever changing meant that researchers talked openly about the potential for the research process to be subverted – where one might apply for certain methods only for these to evolve to something slightly different during delivery. The outcome of this meant that researchers were realistic about the dangers that might be incurred, where a researcher might choose not to disclose a change on the basis that they wanted to keep the research timetable on track.

Despite there being increased examples of creative methodologies that reflected child centred engagement, researchers felt anxious about embracing these – relying on more traditionally accepted and known approaches, which were understood and deemed 'safe', in order to satisfy not only ethical decision-makers but also gate keepers.

Where We Want to Be

The process at the moment was seen to limit and restrict – therefore, there was a common sense that it was important to explore what change might look like.

The driving fear was that a decision-making process for children that is based on adult assumptions tied to a medical model of understanding children and risk – limited the way in which researchers approached research design and ultimately what research was able to produce – restricting knowledge output(s).

To move beyond those assumptions a common theme was to connect ethical decision-makers to the research itself (the researcher and participants). A format that encouraged conversation not only before but during the research would create a more meaningful level of protection.

Existing models can leave the researcher, participants and ethical decision-makers vulnerable. By embedding a means for greater communication and access to the process itself, the potential to demonstrate a real ethic of care is presented.

How to Get There?

Conversations were wide ranging but ultimately, they reflected a series of five targets to promote effective change – these were:

- (1) tackle assumptions;
- (2) prioritise meaning (not risk);
- (3) ensure a common/accessible language for research;
- (4) promote awareness and understanding through increased training and resources;
- (5) advance the centrality of collaboration/partnership within the research process.

It was agreed that these would become an informal focus as we continued to think and consider the issues.

I will return to each of these in more detail later.

Workshop 2

A second workshop in May 2024 allowed us to invite some children and young people to join the conversation. As was noted above, an ethical approach to research that lacks children's contribution is restrictive, here the aim was to open a space for discussion to get a sense of children's awareness, interest and opinions around the research process.

The session was split into two parts. While the adults who were writing a chapter met in a separate room to discuss their progress, we ran a series of activities, facilitated by a group of undergraduate and post graduate students for children from one class from a local primary school and some secondary aged children linked to the charity Time Matters. The second part of the session invited the adults back in for a 'question and answer' session in which adults rotated around the room and the children shared their reflections on the activities they had taken part in.

The activities (undertaken as a carousel) were as follows. . . .

What Is Research

- How would you define research?
- What are the similarities and differences in your definitions?
- What's missing?

Discussions covered a range of areas. For some research was about being curious – to 'learn more' or to 'feel smart' – for others it was simply about knowing what tools to access to 'look up' what was required. Although the use of the internet and apps invited a sense that 'research' is something done for us, rather than something we do – there were plenty of others who talked about research in the context of relationships – how we discover through talking with one another.

Whose Voice Counts?

- Reflect on whether some voices are more important than others in research. . .

Groups were asked whose voice should be/is included – as they discussed a continuum with children at one end and adults at the other – in relation to the following themes:

- climate change;
- uniform/dress code;
- happy eating;
- building a new playground;
- redesigning a library;
- the school curriculum.

If the topic related to something that children wore, did or ate, then the children’s voices did not need adult input as well. For broader issues with a greater community focus the children seemed aware that coming together with adults was important. Notably it looked like climate change was the topic where that cooperation was of greatest benefit.

How to Research?

This activity explored different types of research methods with an initial focus on. . .

- observation;
- focus group;
- interview;
- survey.

The facilitators asked the children how they felt about these approaches – with additional questions exploring whether they would prefer to engage online/face to face or if they preferred the idea of one to one or group engagement.

The aim here was to get a sense of how children experienced being researched. One example of this came from reflecting on methods that involved ‘observing’ children. The idea of adults watching a child – triggered a series of interesting discussions that highlighted the contrast between doing the watching and being watched!

Much of the conversations in terms of preferences reflected children’s perceived personal learning strengths, which raised some interesting questions about child led methodologies – particularly as children talked enthusiastically about creative data gathering techniques linked to the arts.

What Limits Research

What is it that might stop someone from getting involved, what can be done to mitigate risk or enable engagement.

Given options:

- feeling used;
- no discussion;
- doesn't matter to me;
- not given a choice;
- unfair;
- mean;
- not interested.

Not being given a choice seemed to stand out as a key reason why children might not want to take part. This seemed to correlate with answers around whether the research was of interest or mattered to the participants and the extent to which that might limit engagement.

Throughout – there was a clear sense that the children recognised their vulnerability within the process – they talked about someone being mean to them, feeling left out or that their voice did not really count. There was a sense from some children that once in a process they could be ‘judged’, separated from their friends and not be given the chance to have breaks or even food!

There were many conversations in which children questioned how their individual contribution mattered – would their ideas be used or not? Taking part needed to mean something – not only that it was important that any contribution was not ‘boring’ but ‘fun’.

A Reflection

This was not research, it was just a series of conversations. What is shared above are extracts from those conversations that I heard or picked up on. We are not claiming any research value from this interaction but more stating it as part of a developing sense of awareness that came to underpin the process as a whole. What we, as a group of adults, took from speaking with the children was the value of ensuring there is a space for them to frame the research encounter. To not include children's voices, to accept adult assumptions about research design is not only limiting but one might argue is ethically questionable.

As the adults (the facilitators and chapter authors) reflected on the workshop, it was clear that children's relationship to research was of significance in a world where content is so freely accessible. It highlighted the need for research as part of everyday enquiry. Ultimately the workshops reinforced a commitment to the importance of enabling children to be involved in the skill of researching, creating opportunities to advance curiosity in meaningful ways.