



SIKID

Sicherheit für Kinder
in der digitalen Welt

Ethical Guidelines for doing research with children in sensitive subject areas

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Background

The following guidelines delineate an ethical concept on how to conduct research with children in sensitive subject areas (Stapf et al. 2022). The condensed reflections here can serve as a basis for decision-making when **doing research with children in sensitive subject areas** such as civil security research. They were developed in the project SIKID (“Security for Children in the Digital World”), funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research) which consists of an interdisciplinary group of researchers in the fields of ethics, psychology, media education and communication studies, as well as law. We see the **need for ethical guidelines for research with children** in the context of recent research showing the increasing online security threats children face (e.g., conduct and contact risks like sexual assault on children in online communication, cybergrooming, hate speech, or cyberbullying). These risks bring to light the tension between different children’s rights, particularly, between the right to participation and the right to protection. Following a holistic approach to children’s rights, we believe that all rights of children are equal but special attention should be given to the evolving capacities of the child as well as concrete contexts (e.g., empirical method, special needs of participating children).

SIKID aims for a conceptual shift emphasizing that research involving children should be conceptualized with children, and that research ethics should be more child centered. This conceptual shift can form the basis for a **new, contemporary model of media governance** that is necessary in light of regulatory deficits and evolving approaches to regulation from the perspective of the child [ref. revision of the Youth Protection Act (JuschG) and the realignment of the Federal Center for Child and Youth Media Protection (BzKJ)]. These new models should be based on studies taking research ethics into account. One major aim of child-centered approaches is to protect but also to empower children, and thereby increase their ability to participate in digital environments and flourish in the digital realm.

These claims follow not only legally from international law granting children fundamental human rights [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN CRC) United Nations, 1989], but also ethically, in that children are not merely perceived of as *objects* of regulatory measures (and research). Rather, children should be seen and respected as *acting subjects* in increasingly mediatized environments. Their perspectives, points of view, and proposed solutions should be heard and considered – not only because it is their right but also because it makes research outcomes more meaningful and allows for measures to be more target-oriented.

12 Criteria for ethical reflection

1. Consider the relevance and justification of the research goals

From a research ethics perspective, planning and implementing research projects with children on sensitive, potentially traumatic topics (e.g., emotional or physical violence or abuse) places unique demands on the research process. These topics require critical reflection on the research goals' relevance and justification. This entails that the children's best interests must be considered during the whole project.

2. Reflect on ethical requirements and conduct systematic impact analysis

Ethical guidelines need to be aware of the tension between the necessity of care towards minor research participants and the achievement of the research goals. Throughout the entire research process (i.e., conception, implementation, and distribution of the project results), ethical principles that fully prioritize the interests of children should be sought after. Ethical requirements should be based on core principles, such as the principles of self-determination, harm avoidance, welfare, and justice. For this, a systematic impact analysis should be carried out to ensure good research practice.

3. Obtain informed consent from children in a child- and developmentally appropriate manner

When conducting research with children, it is important to carefully consider the methods used in obtaining informed consent to allow them to actively decide to participate in the research process. From a research ethics standpoint, informed consent – beyond legal requirements – must *always be* obtained. In this context, child- and age-appropriate forms of consent must be established in order to involve children as active subjects in research. Furthermore, forms of consent must enable children to make their own decisions while not overburden them in the process.

4. Address methodology considerations for research with children

Doing research with minors requires prior methodological consideration. Deciding upon a particular research method and the ways in which to implement it carry significant ethical relevance. Considering that children are still in a phase of physical, cognitive, emotional, and social development, their ability to access and understand information about different aspects of research may vary significantly depending on their (individual) developmental stage. Younger children, for instance, may find it more challenging to make sense of given information or instructions and, therefore, are considered particularly vulnerable due to their dependency on extensive care and protection from their legal guardians. It is the researcher's responsibility to assess the possible psychological demands imperiled on children, regardless of the given consent by their legal guardians. The research process must be suspended immediately should the researcher feel that the well-being of the child is put at risk. Such scenarios do not have a universal solution. Instead, a research strategy should be used that best suits the specific research question and the target group while enabling the child's right to participate adequately in the research process.

5. Protect children from stressful situations when doing research with them

When dealing with sensitive topics such as physical and/or emotional abuse, there is a risk that participating children may experience intense stress situations or even re-traumatization. Children must be protected from this and receive psychological support. This risk must be adequately assessed in advance and precautions need to be taken (i.e., by installing an 'emergency plan'). In addition, peer consulting or supervision of the research team by a third party (e.g., a psychologist or counselor) can help anticipate and reflect on difficult situations. Moreover, it can help address questions that arise when working with children surrounding sensitive topics, especially trauma. This should lead to creating a research environment that children experience as safe, trustworthy, and mindful of their needs.

6. Prevent repeated experiences of victim trauma

When investigating subjective perceptions of safety or means of establishing security, research participants may be exposed to unpleasant or (re)traumatizing experiences. Sensitive research topics and vulnerable participants mandate the need to address the frequency and intensity of the questioning necessary for knowledge gain and to guarantee the protection of involved children before commencing. A delicate questioning methodology must therefore be ensured to counteract (re)victimization.

7. Reflect on the scope and limits of professional roles

Challenges can arise from role diffusion, especially in research on sensitive topics or with vulnerable groups. When doing research with (heavily stressed or particularly young) children researchers should not assume the role of therapists. Likewise, researchers should not be perceived by participants as long-term caregivers who support them or represent their interests to others. Researchers should be aware of their responsibilities towards children in all research phases, especially if trusting relationships develop during research (e.g., in longitudinal studies). To sharpen professional and ethical attitudes, training for researchers along with supervision in the research process continue to be relevant. Not only is it important to provide appropriate care for the children involved to help avoid re-traumatization, but it is also necessary for researchers to critically reflect on their own roles and boundaries due to the demanding nature of the research. Ultimately, researchers should be cognizant of their own self-care.

8. Initiate cooperation and supervision

The research process often involves cooperation with different actors surrounding the child respondents. The respective (professional) competencies should be clarified to enable cooperation that provides the complete network possible for the young people involved in the research process. Cooperating actors are the respondents' legal guardians and other people they relate to, such as pedagogical staff at schools and daycare centers, as well as social workers, psychologists, educators, and teachers. It may be advisable to involve these actors in the planning of the interview (e.g., wording of the questions, conceptualization of the interview setting), pre-tests, and follow-up. This can contribute to maintaining the professional boundaries of the researchers while ensuring adequate care for the participants.

9. Ensure confidentiality and address privacy concerns

The data collected during interviews usually contains personal information and should be treated carefully. Participants in empirical research may be at risk of potential privacy violations. In principle, the right of involved children to a self-determined and open future must be ensured by protecting their data. A trustworthy collaboration in the research process requires the assurance of confidentiality, except in cases of criminally relevant behavior.

10. Reflect on the role of legal guardians in research

Research involving minors can legally depend on the child's age and might require the consent of their legal guardians in addition to that of the child. It is necessary that research protocols are in place and that there is a safe-space for children provided during the interviews. From a research ethics perspective, parents or legal custodians must be involved in the research process from the start, as they have both custody rights and legal duties. Likewise, from a children's rights perspective, parents (Art. 5 UN CRC) have a special duty of care, as they (usually) know their children best and can therefore assess what is (not) good for the well-being of their child. At the same time, the needs of the participating children, apart from parental custody rights, must be sufficiently taken into account to ensure the individual well-being of the child.

11. Allow space for moral integrity and transparency during participation

Children have a right to participate in research that concerns them (Article 12 UN CRC). In participatory processes, it is essential to acknowledge the importance as well as the feasibility of participation in the research process. This needs to be made transparent to all participants. The consequences of participation should repeatedly be reflected upon throughout the entire research process. After all, such forms of participation operate in predefined structures but still need to remain flexible and transparent to find the appropriate research methods in individual studies. It is crucial to actively involve children in the planning stages of the research project. Subsequently, children must also be provided with the appropriate information and the chance to play a participating role in evaluating the results of the study. In sum, children should be interviewed as acting subjects, in that they are not purely objects of interviews. At the same time, the interview needs to include their perspectives as affected persons, especially when it comes to their experiences.

12. Develop child-friendly forms of communication and ensure accessibility

Research with young people is different in multiple regards from research with adults. Apart from the more complex ethical requirements that arise due to childhood being a phase of vulnerability, there are asymmetrical social and generational power structures between children and adults. These asymmetries also (often implicitly) flow into research and should be reflected upon. It is important to be aware of these asymmetrical relationships, not least because children may experience research situations as a form of 'test' in which they must respond to the questions and tasks 'correctly'. Particular attention should be paid towards inclusive language and child-friendly environments. This is especially necessary when working with children with disabilities or special needs. To achieve this, the entire communication of the research process should be tailored to the needs of the participants.

References

Stapf, Ingrid, Ingrid, Cora Bieß, Jessica Heesen, Oduma Adelio, Carla Pavel, et al. (2022): *Zwischen Fürsorge und Forschungszielen. Ethische Leitlinien für die Forschung mit Kindern zu sensiblen Themenbereichen*. [Between caring and research goals. Ethical guidelines for research with children on sensitive topics]. Tübingen: IZEW, Materialien zur Ethik in den Wissenschaften, Band 20.

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Project management:

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