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OUTCOMES PAPER

Researching Sensitive Topics Involving Children

Managing Risk, Distress and Trauma in Research Design and Data Collection

Key topics and outcomes from our expert webinar

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Executive summary

High quality reliable evidence is essential if society is to effectively address many of the critical challenges facing children (including both children and adolescents for the purposes of this paper). Without such evidence, we are less able to understand their concerns and lived experiences, know what interventions work, or influence policy and investments to improve their lives. However, the process of conducting research with children can itself pose risks to children's rights and well-being – especially when investigating sensitive topics such as violence and abuse. While there is a growing body of resources to support researchers in identifying and implementing good practices, an ongoing commitment to reflection and continuous improvement is needed to define ethical practice and confidently address the question of whether we can in fact conduct such research safely.

This document captures the key themes and reflections from a webinar hosted by UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight in June 2024 that was designed to bring together key international experts with UNICEF staff and practitioners and to provide links to additional relevant resources. Panelists Professor Lorraine Sherr, Professor Shanaaz Mathews and Marium Hussein each presented on specific aspects of the topic, drawing on their own experience, before engaging in a broad-ranging panel discussion that unpacked some of the issues presented in more detail.

Some of the key takeaways arising through the webinar included the following:

- Although challenging, research on sensitive topics involving children is essential if we are to effectively influence policy and improve the situation of children. Research should be meaningful and ethical, which requires a clear understanding of both the resources, time and expertise to undertake the work safely and whether direct engagement with children is indeed necessary to meet the research aims. Researchers and donors have a responsibility to ensure that projects which cannot meet appropriate ethical and safety standards do not go ahead.
- While fragile, low-resource or humanitarian settings add additional challenges to ensuring research is ethical and safe, it is essential that researchers and development partners in this sector do not avoid such projects altogether. This would leave children, particularly those who are at higher risk of violence or harm, invisible in the evidence that drives intervention and policy.
- What is considered a sensitive topic may be very contextual and personal for children. While some topics clearly fall into this category (research on violence and abuse, etc.), all research involving children should be considered potentially sensitive, and plans should be in place to deal with unexpected disclosures or findings. This is especially the case in settings where the prevalence of exposure to violence is high.
- Children's reactions may vary significantly from those of adults. We should not assume that they are not upset by questions, but equally we should not assume a lack of competence or ability to engage in difficult conversations. Researchers must be trained to engage with children in an age-appropriate and honest way and to assess each situation based on factors such as topic, context, project design, available resources and potential impacts. Balancing risk and benefit is an ongoing challenge in this work. Getting the balance right starts with an honest assessment of not only what risks and benefits exist, but also who is at risk and who benefits.
- Carefully considered preparation, design and planning are essential for conducting ethical research. This is key in all aspects of the project design, such as participant selection and methodology as well as honest appraisal of whether appropriate resources, time and skills are

available to ensure participant safety. A thorough understanding of the local context – including any mandatory reporting laws that may add complexity to the work or result in limitations to confidentiality – is also essential.

- Participatory and creative methods that allow children to engage with researchers through art, play and storytelling can assist in depersonalizing the information shared and put children more at ease. Particular consideration needs to be given to whether to engage children individually or through group settings (such as when conducting focus groups), as what may be empowering or supportive for some children may be distressing for others.
- Safeguarding, reporting and referral protocols that clearly address screening for participation, response and follow-up are critical risk mitigation strategies. These should always be localized to be appropriate for the context and supported by ongoing monitoring and response across the research implementation, with appropriate corrective actions in the case of unexpected events or outcomes. Such standards should be upheld even in contexts where national safeguarding policies or laws are relatively weak. Supplemental support services may be essential in creating effective safeguarding strategies in low-resource settings.
- Commissioning ethical research requires organizations and project managers to set clear expectations and create supportive conditions that encourage adherence to project protocols and norms. This should include consideration of issues such as enumerator pay, critical assessment of partner capabilities and ongoing monitoring. The responsibility for ethical practice remains with all parties in this situation and cannot be simply 'contracted out'.
- Engaging with children on sensitive topics requires researchers to have a specific skill set, particularly around trauma-informed and child-friendly approaches. It is critical that researchers can communicate clearly, build rapport to put children at ease when engaging on difficult or traumatic topics, and recognize and appropriately respond to distress or unexpected situations that may arise. These skills do not necessarily translate from conducting research with adults. While targeted training is necessary and should be encouraged, building a cadre of confident and capable researchers who can safely engage with children and young people also requires ongoing support, mentorship and reflection from the field as a whole.
- Similarly, the potential impact of researching topics such as violence or abuse on the researchers themselves should not be underestimated. Overlooking this aspect may affect both the researchers and their ability to engage children in a positive and safe manner.
- The obligation to share the findings of research is part of good ethical practice. This includes sharing results with research participants and their communities, development practitioners and policymakers who make decisions that directly affect the lives of respondents.
- Finally, ethics review boards should be supported in critically assessing research proposals to ensure children's rights and dignity are fully protected. This includes providing members with training on child-centred ethical practices, tools to evaluate safety and confidentiality, and guidance on balancing risks and benefits, while ensuring that research is not hindered by unnecessary or arbitrary barriers.

What was apparent across the discussion was the understanding that ethical practice – and whether we can engage children in research on sensitive topics in a safe, dignified and respectful manner – is highly nuanced, driven by our preparation and planning, risk identification and mitigation, local understanding and skill. In many cases, the question is therefore not 'can we do this research safely?', but rather 'what investment, time and expertise are required for us to undertake the work ethically in a way that benefits rather than harms children?' If we are to give sensitive issues facing children the needed attention as a research field, we need to be able to better articulate what good practice looks like and be able to honestly communicate research requirements and limitations.

Contents

I. Introduction

Impactful policy, advocacy and programming for children relies on high-quality, trusted evidence. Driving change relies on compelling and trustworthy data and stories that help connect decision-makers at all levels to the real-world impact their decisions have on children's lives. However, when research involves engaging children and adolescents to share their stories, perspectives and experiences, this raises ethical concerns regarding the potential risk of distress or re-traumatization – particularly if we are asking about sensitive topics, such as experiences of violence, trauma or abuse. Designing and implementing such research safely is complex in all settings, but can be more complicated in certain types of context. These include settings where local expertise on trauma-informed and child-friendly research is limited, where service providers are low on capacity and under-resourced, where national ethics boards are not available or able to meaningfully review study protocols and where national laws may criminalize children. While these contexts make it more challenging to conduct research ethically, these are the very situations where insight is most needed.

There is a growing body of resources to support good practice in research on sensitive topics involving children, but continued reflection, learning and improvement are essential in ensuring that children's rights are upheld and that research on critical issues can be designed and implemented in a safe and ethical manner. This paper has been developed to capture key discussion points and findings from an expert webinar hosted by UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight (UNICEF Innocenti) on 14 June 2024, which can be accessed here. The webinar included presentations and discussion from Lorraine Sherr, Professor of Clinical and Health Psychology and Head of the Health Psychology Unit, University College London; Shanaaz Mathews, Professor at the Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Cape Town; and Marium Hussein, Research Specialist in the Digital Engagement and Protection Team, UNICEF Innocenti. Karen Carter, UNICEF's Senior Advisor for Ethics in Evidence Generation, hosted and moderated the event.

Panelists were tasked with exploring issues related to this topic, including:

- children's experiences during research, particularly when confronted with sensitive or traumatizing questions;
- balancing benefit and risk in sensitive research involving children;
- recognizing and responding to distress during research with children; and
- real-life experiences in designing and implementing ethical research on difficult topics involving children.

The webinar was followed by a panel discussion that aimed to explore some of the topics introduced in the presentations in more detail.

While the webinar and this paper aim to advance the conversation on ethical principles and good practice in researching sensitive topics with children, and share the experiences of our panel, this paper is not intended as comprehensive guidance or training on this topic. Additional resources and materials referenced in the webinar are included at the end of this paper. Interested parties are encouraged to engage further with UNICEF and the Ethics in Evidence Programme to share ideas and resources and help us take this conversation forward.

Box 1: Speaker profiles

Professor Lorraine Sherr

Professor Lorraine Sherr is a Clinical Psychologist and Head of the Health Psychology Unit at University College London. She studied psychology at the University of Warwick and earned a PhD on the importance of communication in health care. She has a wide research portfolio encompassing empirical research, theory, review, evidence, policy and advocacy. Professor Sherr has worked at national and international levels on mental health, treatment adherence, gender, pregnancy, families, children, parenting, palliative care, discrimination and HIV infection. Professor Sherr is editor of the international journals *AIDS Care: Psychological and Socio-Medical Aspects of AIDS/HIV* and *Vulnerable Children and Youth Studies*. She is one of the organizers of the AIDS Impact conferences and has done widespread policy work, such as serving on the World Health Organization (WHO) Strategic Advisory Committee, chairing the WHO Disclosure Guidelines group and providing input for governments, the United States Agency for International Development, Save the Children, UNICEF and others.

Professor Shanaaz Mathews

Shanaaz Mathews is a Professor in the Faculty of Health Sciences and former Director of the Children's Institute at the University of Cape Town. She is the evaluation co-lead for the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office's Global Programme on What Works to Prevent Violence against Women and Children at Scale. She has more than 30 years' experience in the women's and children's sectors and has worked within civil society organizations, as an academic and as technical advisor to government programmes specializing in child rights and violence against women. She currently serves as a Commissioner for the Lancet Commission on Gender Based Violence. She is also Associate Editor for the journal *Child Abuse Review* and Lead Investigator for the DST-NRF (Department of Science and Innovation - National Research Foundation) Centre of Excellence in Human Development at the University of the Witwatersrand.

Marium Hussein

Marium Hussein has served as a research specialist at UNICEF Innocenti since 2019. In her role at UNICEF Innocenti, Marium conducts multi-country survey research on children's rights in the digital age, including through the **Disrupting Harm** study. Marium's research background is in media and communications studies. Her previous work explored internet use patterns in the Middle East and North Africa, primarily through survey research. She holds a master's degree in media and communications from the London School of Economics and Political Science and a bachelor's degree in journalism from Northwestern University.

II. Key topics and outcomes

This section captures some of the key themes arising from the presentations and discussion during the webinar. It is intended to support further discussion and reflection rather than representing a detailed overview of each topic.

Importance of engaging children in research on sensitive topics

While recognizing the challenges of safely conducting research with children and young people, and the importance of not proceeding when the risks cannot be safely managed, the panelists all strongly emphasized the importance of involving children in research on sensitive topics, even when difficult. The discussion concluded that, in many cases, the question we should be asking is not 'when' to engage children but rather 'how' we should involve children, reflecting that robust evidence is essential to influence policy – its absence significantly limits the impact of our work and the opportunity to positively change realities for children.

A child-centred approach has many merits. Some of the key reasons panelists noted for involving children in sensitive research included:

- Enhancing inclusivity and representation: To date, only 1 per cent of research and evidence activities about children consult them directly (Sellars et al., 2021). By engaging children in research, we ensure that their perspectives, experiences and needs are considered and prioritized. This inclusivity is crucial for developing policies and programmes that are truly responsive to children's realities (Larsson et al., 2018).
- Respecting children's right to be heard: Involving children and their perspectives in research is one way to recognize children's right to be heard and to be treated as active participants rather than passive subjects.
- Uncovering hidden issues: Children's direct involvement often uncovers issues and perspectives that may not be immediately evident when consulting adults or proxy respondents. This first-hand insight is invaluable for addressing sensitive or overlooked issues effectively.
- Enriching research quality and impact: By directly involving children, researchers gain deeper insights into their lives, challenges and aspirations. This enriches the quality and relevance of research findings, making them more robust and applicable in shaping policies, interventions and advocacy efforts.

The panel emphasized that this does not mean all proposed research involving children and young people should go ahead. A critical step in planning research on sensitive topics is determining which research questions are best answered through direct engagement with children and young people and which could be sufficiently answered through existing data or other sources. Multiple perspectives may give a broader insight.

Defining sensitive research

Loosely, the term 'sensitive' is used to refer to any research where there is heightened risk of distress to the participant as a result of the topic under discussion, or where participants may face specific risks (including physical or emotional harm and re-traumatization) or repercussions (such as social stigma or violence) for engaging or sharing opinions on a specific issue.

Considering the topic of the research is one way to identify if it is more or less sensitive. For example, issues such as child abuse, sexual and reproductive health, trauma, female genital mutilation and child marriage are generally understood to be sensitive topics. Even so, there is no clear or consistent definition of what makes research sensitive. The panel highlighted that sensitivity – and, consequently, potential for harm – is context-dependent, shaped by circumstances, location, timing, the participant's agency and their lived experience. It is also highly subjective. As such, what is a sensitive topic may vary significantly from person to person and across different cultures and communities. This is especially important when considering the differing perceptions of adults and children, making it essential for researchers to avoid projecting their own assumptions onto research participants. Objective and non-judgmental approaches should be prioritized, ensuring decisions are informed by a body of evidence that highlights potential harms. Standard research procedures and mandatory reporting requirements can also shape our perception of what is considered sensitive, sometimes overshadowing the participant's experience and well-being. It was noted that a significant proportion of research involving children does not always consider the sensitive issues or safeguarding concerns that may arise and, as such, does not necessarily include appropriate safeguards and planning – this represents a critical gap that this research field must address.

The discussion reflected on whether researchers possess the necessary skills to identify safeguarding risks, even with topics that may not seem sensitive. Panelists further addressed the importance of supporting researchers and review panels to reflect on how proposed research topics may affect communities and child participants and plan appropriately, without unnecessarily restricting work to 'non-sensitive' topics. Consulting with experts, communities and participants throughout the research process was highlighted as crucial for ethical practice.

Box 2: Open question – should all research involving child participation be considered sensitive?

Several compelling reasons were identified during the discussions to indicate that all research directly involving children should be considered as 'sensitive' and therefore supported by appropriate safeguarding response plans. For example:

- There is potential for subjects considered benign or 'non-sensitive' by adult researchers to trigger strong reactions in children. In particular, this might apply to topics that affect their lives (such as future thinking and availability of opportunities) where they may feel they have limited agency to affect positive change.
- Researchers who engage with and listen to children may be seen in some cases as a trusted external or independent adult figure whom it is safe to disclose concerns to, even when those concerns are not related to the topic of the research. In some cases, this may be the first time a child has disclosed or sought assistance; thus researcher preparation is vital.
- In settings where there is a high prevalence of exposure to violence, it is likely that at least some of the participants are currently at risk at the time the research is conducted.

Children's experiences and reactions

Children are not simply small adults. Their perceptions of sensitive issues are shaped by individual factors as well as their developmental stage, environment and growing understanding of the world. A topic that may seem low risk to an adult could be deeply unsettling or confusing to a child.

Children's reactions to sensitive topics often differ from those of adults, and the reactions may not always be visible. Distress can be present even when not outwardly expressed, as some children may not have the language or capacity to clearly articulate their feelings or may not seem to 'sustain' a visible distress reaction even when affected, appearing instead to play or interact as normal. It is also important to recognize and respect children's agency and their capacity to understand complex issues. Information should be presented to participants in a developmentally appropriate way that supports a meaningful decision-making process on their part on whether to engage in the research and on what they are comfortable sharing. Researchers need to step back from their own perspectives and genuinely consider the child's viewpoint, benefits to child participants and children more broadly, and if or how their right to be heard and engage on topics that affect their lives can be safely supported.

When planning research or conducting an ethical review, how do we shift our perspective from a benign carer to a champion for child rights?

Based on panelists' experience, key concerns for children that may limit their comfort in engaging with researchers include confidentiality, privacy and the potential inconvenience of participation. Children may worry about how their disclosures will be managed and how researchers will respond.

Fear of negative reactions from the justice system, caregivers or other authorities can significantly influence a child's decision to engage.

Important steps to build trust between researchers and research participants include using child-friendly interviewing techniques (e.g., being aware of power dynamics, sitting at the same level/height as the child, using participatory techniques, offering breaks, and periodically checking how the child feels) and having robust safeguarding protocols in place prior to the research implementation. Good practice requires that we understand the limits of our safeguarding and support processes and that referral pathways are fully prepared in advance.

Balancing the risk of harm against benefit

As noted previously, the discussion highlighted the critical importance of engaging children on sensitive topics. The benefits to children and their community at a broad scale are clear. At an individual level however, the balance between risk and benefit is often much more complex. While some research will benefit the actual participants directly, many more research projects aim to create broader impacts through policy or programme changes informed by the evidence collected. This will not necessarily benefit the individual children participating in the research, but the aim is to benefit children in general in the community or children in the future. As such, the discussion focused on the central challenge of how to balance the need for child-centred evidence generation with the potential risks to individual participants of engaging in sensitive research, especially where the intended outcomes are likely to be of little direct or immediate benefit to those individuals.

This area presents complex challenges with no one-size-fits-all answers. Instead, it requires nuanced, context-specific decisions at each stage of the evidence generation process, often in the absence of predefined solutions. First and foremost, it is critical to evaluate who benefits from the research and whether children's participation is necessary at all. Participation must be meaningful and contribute actionable evidence that has either direct or indirect benefits for children.

A critical reflection on the balance of harm and benefit is thinking about how participants themselves may benefit from the research, if at all.

The discussion recognized that empowerment and a sense of contribution can be very meaningful for child participants. It gives them a platform to voice their opinions, share their experiences and contribute to constructive change. Meaningful participation can foster a sense of agency, pride and responsibility among child participants, as they see their input directly influencing decisions that affect them. Panelists shared experiences of children thanking them for bothering to find out about their lives.

While discussing sensitive topics can be meaningful for some children, this can be difficult for many children as well as adults – and must be handled with extreme care. It is difficult to ensure that a respondent will not be upset or react negatively during any research, but even more so when sensitive topics are involved. Research must be designed to minimize the possibility that the data collection process or related activities will exacerbate existing distress or trauma related to the subject being discussed. Researchers should be able to critically assess whether the work can

proceed in a safe and supported way and be ready to respond when distress occurs, irrespective of the reasons for the distress. Therefore, it is essential to implement safeguards, such as protocols that allow for stopping an interview when a child or adolescent show signs of undue distress.

As always, identifying risks and mitigation strategies is the first step, but this may lead to the realization that certain risks cannot be reliably mitigated, in which case the research should not proceed. The discussion concluded that while the value of child participation and engagement is clear, we should not be prioritizing this need over the best interests of the child – irrespective of the scale or potential impact of the research we are proposing. In some cases, rather than engaging children directly in qualitative research, it may be more appropriate to use volunteered survivor advocate testimonies, offered outside the research setting, to limit the potential for harm.

But where we can safely engage and support children through this process, failing to explore or create evidence to address difficult topics is not an ethical choice. Collection of qualitative data through a well-designed and supported process remains a critical element for research projects where the prevalence of harm and experiences of participants – and therefore the effective responses that we hope to identify and advocate for – are unknown at the outset of the work. Sufficient resourcing and effective planning, monitoring and response plans that prioritize safeguarding and well-being of all children involved were highlighted throughout the discussion as prerequisites for any decision to move forward with research.

Box 3: Open question – should we include children with additional vulnerabilities in research on sensitive topics?

As highlighted throughout the discussion, the importance of research to shine a light on issues affecting the most vulnerable means that there is a clear need to be inclusive of all children, including those who may have additional layers of vulnerability (such as children with a disability, migrant children or children on the move, and children from minority populations).

Engaging in safe research with vulnerable groups will likely require additional cost and time considerations. Balancing the rights of children in vulnerable situations to be included with the feasibility of including them safely within the time, knowledge and resourcing of a research project should be explicitly considered and addressed. Designing and implementing ethical and safe research in these situations will require consultations and specialized expertise to work with the population in question.

The panel noted that there is a high price for getting the balance wrong – both in terms of the potential for direct harm and the cost of exclusion from the evidence and subsequent policy and programme decisions. The importance of the question of how we move the needle for the children most at risk in the absence of evidence was clear in the discussion. While there are no easy solutions, there was agreement on the need to document research limitations, including group exclusions. There is also a need for research to address potential impacts, emphasize inclusivity where safe and fill critical gaps where feasible.

Preparation, design and planning

The webinar discussion underscored the critical importance of ethical review and safeguarding practices throughout the entire project lifecycle, highlighting key considerations at the planning, implementation and debriefing stages.

Principle-based design

The importance of grounding research design and planning in the ethical principles of respect, do no harm (non-maleficence), benefit (beneficence), fairness (or justice) and integrity was reflected throughout the webinar discussion.

All research with children should be grounded in respect – for their rights, their agency, their safety and their dignity. This starts by ensuring that the proposed engagement is meaningful and actionable.

This starts at the outset with the decision about whether the direct engagement of children is warranted in answering the research question – particularly in relation to benefit and harm. There should be careful consideration of context, participants (including who will be included and who may be excluded), proposed methods and whether appropriate resources and time have been allocated to ensure that the engagement of children is meaningful and safe.

The discussion highlighted the importance of ensuring that evidence is actionable and that we invest in its uptake and use so as to realize the full benefit of the work. This is also critical in demonstrating respect as a foundational ethical principle. When individuals, whether children or adults, are asked to contribute their time and share their experiences – particularly those that are difficult or traumatic – it is our responsibility to ensure that the data are used effectively to advocate for meaningful solutions.

Consent

Respectful engagement from the outset of the research was emphasized. This involves clearly articulating to participants the purpose of the study, potential risks and benefits, and limitations to confidentiality, as well as emphasizing children's right to withdraw at any time without repercussions. Consent or assent should be obtained in a manner suited to the child's developmental stage, and wherever possible, researchers should directly seek assent from the child rather than relying solely on parental consent. Information provided, both verbally and on consent forms, must be clear, comprehensible and suited to the developmental stage of children participating in the research. Children should not be put in situations where they might feel pressured to participate, either as a result of an adult or guardian consenting to their participation or because of the setting (such as when conducting focus groups). Furthermore, children should retain full control over their participation, with processes for consent and withdrawal developed in accordance with local consent policies and regulations, and ongoing opportunity to change their mind, without penalty, throughout the process.

Confidentiality and privacy

As noted earlier, a common concern of child participants is around how the information they share will be handled and presented. This is particularly important in studies addressing sensitive issues, such as violence or abuse. Clear communication is essential, including providing detailed and transparent explanations about how information will be used and the measures in place to protect privacy and

manage data, as well as limits to confidentiality. This may include explaining that personally identifiable data will be stored separately from answers or quotes, that findings will never be presented in a way that allows for identification and so on. The importance of clearly understanding local mandatory reporting requirements and designing the work accordingly was discussed, with panelists noting the importance of highlighting any confidentiality limitations that reporting may present and clearly communicating this at the assent/consent stage.

Risk management and safeguarding

Safeguarding is central to the discussion on ethical research, especially when working with vulnerable populations and/or on sensitive topics where the likelihood of distress or disclosures are heightened. The webinar highlighted the importance of a proactive and localized approach to risk identification, management and response, including a reflective research plan that integrates distress and safeguarding protocols and is developed in coordination with local experts. These protocols should be designed to prioritize the safety and well-being of participants, enabling researchers to detect signs of distress, halt interviews if necessary and promptly activate referral pathways when safeguarding concerns arise. As outlined in Box 2, panelists agreed that all research with children should be approached as though disclosures or distress may occur, even when the research itself is not designed to tackle sensitive subjects.

Examples presented during the discussion underscored a range of key elements within a comprehensive approach to safeguarding that minimize the potential of trauma or distress when engaging in sensitive topics. These elements included:

- Screening of participants prior to enrolment in a study: This would involve explaining the research, confirming eligibility to participate and identifying any signs that may suggest the participant requires additional support during the interview or that proceeding with the interview may be re-traumatizing or result in distress. This may be done through administration of a screening questionnaire by the research team or local counsellors.
- Comprehensive and clear protocols for managing mandatory reporting and escalation of safeguarding concerns: For example, the Disrupting Harm project, co-implemented by UNICEF, developed country-specific safeguarding protocols and decision trees – which categorized cases identified during data collection as non-acute, acute and imminent danger – along with appropriate referral and reporting pathways to guide local enumerators and researchers. The development and implementation of study protocols and response plans should always prioritize child rights and dignity over other research demands or considerations.
- Thorough understanding of the local context: This includes understanding policy or legislative requirements regarding consent and assent, mandatory reporting, data sharing requirements and laws that may criminalize children – such as LGBTQI+ youth, children without a recognized legal identity or children engaged in substance use.
- A clear data management plan and strategy: This should acknowledge any limitation to confidentiality due to mandatory reporting or other escalation of a disclosure of imminent harm.
- Clear monitoring responsibilities and processes: These should ensure that project managers and lead researchers have full oversight over concerns arising and can implement necessary protocol adjustments rapidly, and that referral services are in fact working as planned.

- Appropriate training and interview guides: These should ensure researchers are fully trained on the safeguarding protocols in place, are confident in child-friendly research practices and can be attentive to nonverbal signs of distress and respond promptly and appropriately to any disclosures of violence or harm.
- Appropriate screening and management of enumerators: This includes clearly defined processes for supervision and field monitoring, and payment systems that do not induce study protocols to be disregarded.
- Accessible and actionable feedback mechanisms: These are essential in safeguarding plans in order to manage and prevent any risk of harm due to inappropriate behaviour or conduct by the research teams or involved stakeholders – irrespective of the topic being investigated.

Part of setting up safeguarding protocols involves identifying, mapping and collaborating with local service providers. The discussion recognized that in some cases this may require projects to supplement local services or to budget for contingency funding to support the necessary response where this is otherwise not provided. Researchers should inform service providers in their network about research referral plans to ensure proper coordination during and shortly after the data collection period. In addition to linking services to research participants when needed, having a feedback loop between researchers and support services is crucial to ensure that the referral pathway is working as planned and to ensure that research participants receive appropriate support.

Box 4: Open question – how do we support research on sensitive topics in low-resource settings?

In areas with limited resources, local support or referral systems may be inadequate. Researchers might need to establish project-specific structures to ensure appropriate support for participants. While it is imperative to conduct research in low-resource settings, as this is where we often have the greatest need for evidence and insights, there should be critical reflection of the impact of establishing or supplementing services to provide support that will be subsequently dismantled at end of the project.

Panelists noted the importance of engaging with the local community and experts when designing projects in this type of setting, being realistic about the resources required to conduct such projects and reflecting this in the project plan to ensure a clear project close out and handover/decommissioning process.

The importance of localization

As reflected elsewhere in this paper, the importance of localization was a recurring theme across the discussion. Context is critical in sensitive research, and there needs to be understanding of what topics may be particularly sensitive in a given community, the risks that the research might pose to participants (or even those approached to participate), the local language and implications of specific terms used in data collection tools, and the power dynamics that may affect consent and agency during the research.

Localization was particularly referenced in relation to safeguarding protocols and response plans. Referral mechanisms for cases of suspected or detected abuse should adhere to national and local laws – including mandatory reporting laws – and should ensure access to support services throughout and shortly after data collection. Protocols need to reflect genuine capacity and power dynamics on the ground and, therefore, should be developed in collaboration with community partners to ensure they reflect the best interests of the child. These standards should be upheld irrespective of whether they are required under national regulations.

Researchers also need to be aware of the legal implications related to mandatory reporting and sensitive local legal contexts. This includes not just reports of potential abuse, but disclosure of other activities or details that may be subject to local regulation. Research should not place children in conflict with the law, which would expose them to additional trauma or distress. The panelists reflected on some rare cases where the research design could not be safely adjusted to reflect these concerns (within the available budget and time frame), meaning that research could not be undertaken in some locations.

Local ethics review committees can play an important role in ensuring appropriate localization, but they may need to be supplemented by a dedicated advisory committee and/or consultation with local subject matter experts.

Participative and creative methods

During the webinar, presenters covered a range of research methods and data collection approaches that they have used in their work – from self-completion digital surveys conducted in the presence of an enumerator (who cannot access or view the answers being entered) to storytelling-based techniques, such as use of open-ended stories and vignettes. In each example, the aim was to create a scenario that put children at ease and allowed them to select the level of information they were willing to share without pressure. Focusing on children's comfort during the data collection process (e.g., through age- and subject-appropriate methods) and choosing appropriate and safe settings (e.g., whether data collection is conducted through group exercises or by directly engaging individuals) can significantly improve the quality of data collected and, in turn, the research outcomes.

Creative approaches – such as using visual aids and projection techniques, drawing, storytelling and play-based methods – may allow children to express themselves more comfortably by depersonalizing experiences, allowing them to share information in a more abstract framing. This can offer valuable insights while reducing the risk of re-traumatization.

Box 5: Open question – are focus groups an appropriate research method for studies on sensitive topics?

Focus groups were not discussed in detail, but it was noted that while some participants feel comfortable in this setting, others may find it intimidating. This approach poses potential challenges in managing peer interactions or influences that may make participants uncomfortable or create unintended pressure to participate or share information. Additionally, facilitators should be prepared to identify and respond appropriately to distress in the moment, mitigate any risk of repercussions for views expressed and manage confidentiality beyond the activity itself. Although it is possible to ask participants not to disclose what is discussed to anyone outside the group, this cannot be fully controlled. This limitation on confidentiality in a group setting can pose safety risks and ethical challenges. Discussing taboo or culturally sensitive topics can also lead to safety repercussions, especially where the research seeks to capture individual experiences rather than broader perceptions of an issue.

The discussion noted that, in specific contexts, focus groups with peers who share similar experiences may help participants feel at ease when discussing difficult or challenging topics. This approach can also foster a more holistic understanding, as children build on each other's responses. However, **focus groups should be used with a high degree of caution and may not be the most suitable approach in many instances**. It should be reiterated that even in group discussions that do not aim to address sensitive topics, disclosure of violence or abuse might occur, and protocols for responding to such situations should be prepared during the design stage.

Researcher confidence, skills and training

The importance of highly skilled and confident researchers was a recurring theme throughout the discussion, highlighting their role in supporting participant comfort, building rapport with children, minimizing distress during difficult conversations and identifying potential safeguarding concerns or disclosures when they occur. This is critical to ensure that incidents are not overlooked and that they are handled as smoothly and sensitively as possible. Specific skills identified included communication, relationship building and recognition of verbal and nonverbal cues. Depending on the exact topic of the research, it may be preferable to work with trauma-informed researchers or those with a background in clinical research. The qualifications of researchers should be considered in line with the topic of the research as well as its design and implementation plan.

Box 6: Open question – how can training material to support safe research with children be developed given the vast range of children's capacities and reactions to difficult topics?

Training and resources to support capacity building are clearly essential to underpin safe and ethical research on sensitive topics with children, and there is a growing set of resources available in this space, such as the Ethical Research Involving Children website, noted in the appendices.

The question of how to reconcile training materials with the breadth of contexts and, more critically, the variation in normal child responses to trauma and response that may be encountered during data collection was flagged by the panel. While noting that skills and experience do not translate directly from research with adults to research with children, panelists emphasized the potential to learn from the work on research on violence against women as well as from other sectors, such as justice and social services, where children are engaged in giving evidence. Knowledge exchange and reflection – ensuring that we can learn from a broad range of experiences – highlight the importance of documenting and discussing ethical challenges in research publications, alongside presentation of research findings.

Supporting researcher well-being

Panelists reflected on their own experiences and agreed that recognizing and proactively addressing vicarious trauma among researchers and enumerators is crucial. Effective support strategies require preventive planning to build resilience as well as provision of support before, during and after implementation. Examples provided included regular supervision and debriefing sessions, specialized training in child-friendly and trauma-informed interviewing, enough time for data collection so that researchers can take breaks, and access to both professional and peer support. Implementing these measures has been shown to not only support researchers' well-being but also enhance the overall quality and integrity of the research, as they enable researchers to put children at ease and talk about difficult topics and feel confident in reporting and reacting to disclosures or safeguarding concerns (Bhatia et al., 2024).

Responsibilities when commissioning research

While some of the experiences discussed by the panel reflected on the direct implementation of research, the Disrupting Harm project was presented as an example of the role of contractors in research projects and the considerations in commissioning research. Panelists stressed the importance of shared responsibility for ethical practice between contractors and research partners, rather than 'contracting out' the risks or responsibilities of doing the work safely.

This includes having contracting arrangements that create an environment which supports ethical practice. Considerations raised by panelists ranged from having clear contracting provisions and realistic resourcing and expectations to having a detailed safeguarding and response plan with clear roles and responsibilities as well as risk assessment to ensure that potential barriers to proper

implementation are identified and managed. One risk discussed in the webinar was associated with contractors paying enumerators by the interview, as this could encourage them to 'push through' when an interview should be stopped or paused. Enumerators must be paid fairly and assured that their payment does not depend on completed interviews, especially in projects about sensitive topics where refusal or attrition may be particularly high. The importance of oversight, monitoring and ability to pivot or adjust approaches when unexpected issues arise was also highlighted.

The panel also discussed the need to be more critical in the assessment of partners' skills and capacity at the field level – especially regarding their training and knowledge of working with children – and the need for a robust monitoring and oversight strategy. The importance of supporting contracted enumerators and researchers exposed to vicarious trauma, as we would for colleagues and staff members, was also stressed.

Box 7: Open question – how do we push back when a research project poses risks due to inadequate resources – time, expertise or funding?

One of the key takeaways of the discussion was the importance of not underestimating the resources, such as time and skills, required to undertake sensitive research ethically. The panelists also acknowledged that, as researchers, project managers and advisors, they have all felt pressure at times to move ahead with activities that may have resource constraints or challenges.

The reality, as acknowledged in the discussion outcomes, is that researchers, project managers, funders and organizations have shared responsibility to not engage in research that is ethically problematic, to be realistic in project design and implementation, to be flexible enough to adjust and respond appropriately when issues arise (including by reducing the scope of the work if needed) and to consider the need to set aside resources for response on a case-by-case basis. It was agreed that, as an sector, we need to support the development of clear guidelines and communicate expectations around good practice across all sensitive research to help educate donors and review panels to better understand 'what ethical design looks like' and what is realistically required to deliver this.

Ethics review boards and child-centred research

Ethics review boards or institutional review boards play a significant role in ensuring ethical standards are upheld when designing research. There was strong support for both the critical importance of role of ethics approvals and for reporting on this in project documentation. The role of local committees was also discussed as a key source of information for appropriately adapting safeguarding protocols, project design and implementation plans to reflect local context, sensitivities, and laws and regulations.

The discussion recognized that the capacity of these boards can vary widely, meaning that in practice they sometimes lack the necessary expertise to adequately assess whether risks and ethical

concerns have been safely identified and managed. They may also have widely different approaches to acceptable risk. This has resulted in a wide variety of experiences when navigating ethical approvals – from receiving very limited input and oversight to being met with a 'gatekeeper' approach holding that all sensitive research with children should be avoided. Limited feedback may also require the implementation of additional mechanisms to ensure appropriate localization. This might involve forming independent review or advisory boards with relevant experts and community members, as was done in the Disrupting Harm project for some countries.

Box 8: Open question – how do we support ethics review boards to uphold good practice without creating undue barriers to important research?

While the importance of local review boards was acknowledged, it was also noted that the capacity of ethics review boards can vary greatly. There was limited opportunity to discuss this further, and the topic is itself complex with a broad range of factors affecting capacity and effectiveness, including the regulatory framework and procedures, selection and expectations of reviewers, training and ongoing professional development, volume of work and availability of support.

However, the panel did note that there is a clear role for practitioners across the research community to step up and share expertise and experience. Both to ensure that there are clear guidelines and documented examples that set a standard for good practice in identifying and managing risk, and to contribute expertise through training or directly as panel members where appropriate. The discussion concluded that it is our responsibility as researchers to clearly demonstrate to the panel that we have been thorough and can safely undertake the work proposed in a way that benefits children in order to obtain the necessary approvals – and where this cannot be done, the project should not proceed.

III. Moving forward

The panel discussion and feedback from participants (both during the event and subsequently) highlighted that while the 'easy decision', given the challenges and resources required to undertake ethical research, is to perhaps not undertake research on sensitive topics that requires direct interaction with or participation of children at all, we must do better than this. Failing to tackle the critical issues that affect and shape the lives of children really means that we are failing to act as champions for child rights and that issues will remain unaddressed or invisible through a lack of compelling data or opportunities for children to shape what is known about their lives. For the same reasons, simply avoiding work in challenging or fragile settings, or not including children with other potential vulnerabilities (such as not making research disability accessible), increases the potential for disparities and the most vulnerable or 'at risk' children being left behind.

At the same time, this should not be taken as a green light for all proposals to move forward. Ethical research on sensitive topics requires continuous monitoring and a careful balance of risks and benefits while adhering to high standards of ethics and safeguarding, prioritizing the best interests of the child. Research must be meaningful, aware of what is already known or potentially better addressed by other data sources and should lead to actionable evidence for children. Researchers and supporting organizations must be held accountable for grounding proposals in recognized ethical principles for research with children, including respect for their agency and well-being. There must also be a reflexive and responsive approach across the project life span, both to ensure that necessary adjustments can be made during the implementation when unanticipated issues arise and to foster continual learning and improvement. This accountability to grounding research in ethical principles and good practice must become our default expectation for all research, and it must be reported as an integral part of the documentation and publication of all research projects, alongside details about research methods, funding and contributors.

Supporting good practices as a default, however, requires a shift in our approach to research across the sector to recognize adult-centric assumptions about children's lives and which encourages robust conversations about the genuine need for primary data. This should come with a realistic assessment of the time, skills and resources required to undertake the work safely, and the engagement of local communities and experts to help understand and shape risk assessments and safeguarding plans.

Supporting researchers to develop the necessary skills and experience to engage with children or adolescents in ways that put them at ease and minimize the distress caused by the research process, and to confidently recognize and respond to disclosures or potential concerns, is essential. This includes child-specific training, mentoring from experienced researchers in the field and care of researchers themselves. Moreover, in some cases of particularly sensitive research, it may be necessary to engage qualified professionals with specialized skills (such as psychologists or others with who have professional experience in providing trauma-informed care or working with survivors of abuse) to manage and undertake the data collection process.

Fortunately, there is now a wealth of resources available that were not as accessible a few years ago. These resources provide valuable support for researchers and contribute to the advancement of good practices. It is important to rise above existing standards and focus on promoting best practices, making them the default baseline in research. There is also potentially a lot that we could learn from

related fields, such as the justice and social welfare sectors, regarding skills around child-friendly interviews and techniques.

This webinar discussion is part of an ongoing series designed to address these challenges. We hope these events, alongside the resources and tools available in Section IV, will help foster a sense of community and network support as we continue to learn from each other and collectively navigate these issues.

IV. Additional resources

Guidance and publications

Bhatia, A., et al., 'Putting Children's Safety at the Heart of Violence Research', *Nature Medicine*, vol. 30, 2024, pp. 2721–2724. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41591-024-03291-1

Graham, A. P., et al., *Ethical Research Involving Children*, UNICEF Office of Research Innocenti, 2013.

Larsson, I., et al., 'Children and Young People's Participation in Developing Interventions in Health and Well-Being: A Scoping Review', *BMC Health Services Research*, vol. 18, no. 1, June 2018, p. 507.

Sellars, E., et al., 'Young People's Advisory Groups in Health Research: Scoping Review and Mapping of Practices', *Archives of Disease in Childhood*, vol. 106, no. 7, July 2021, pp. 698–704.

Websites and digital resources

ERIC, *Ethical Research Involving Children* <https://childethics.com>, accessed 17 October 2024.

UNICEF, *Disrupting Harm* <https://www.unicef.org/innocenti/projects/disrupting-harm>, accessed 17 October 2024.

UNICEF, *Ethics Resources for Practitioners* <https://www.unicef.org/innocenti/approach/ethical-evidence-generation/resources>, accessed 17 October 2024.

UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight, *Introduction to Ethics in Evidence Generation* <https://agora.unicef.org/course/info.php?id=33813>, accessed 17 October 2024.

UNICEF, *Ethics in Evidence Generation* <https://unicef.sharepoint.com/sites/OoR-EEG>, accessed 17 October 2024 (Internal access only).

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About us

UNICEF works in the world's toughest places to reach the most disadvantaged children and adolescents – and to protect the rights of every child, everywhere. Across 190 countries and territories, we do whatever it takes to help children survive, thrive and fulfil their potential, from early childhood through adolescence. And we never give up.

UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight tackles the questions of greatest importance for children, both current and emerging. It drives change through research and foresight on a wide range of child rights issues, sparking global discourse and actively engaging young people in its work.

UNICEF Innocenti equips thought leaders and decision-makers with the evidence they need to build a better, safer world for children. The office undertakes research on unresolved and emerging issues, using primary and secondary data that represent the voices of children and families themselves. It uses foresight to set the agenda for children, including horizon scanning, trends analysis and scenario development. The office produces a diverse and dynamic library of high-level reports, analyses and policy papers, and provides a platform for debate and advocacy on a wide range of child rights issues.

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