

The UNICEF Ethics Toolkit

For your applied behavioural science project

“We are committed to a new era at UNICEF – one anchored by our strong, enduring commitment to achieving results for children and young people, and one grounded in **openness, transparency and respect.**”

~ UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta H. Fore

Who is this toolkit for?

The toolkit has been designed for the staff of UNICEF, international organizations and NGOs ('practitioners') and their governmental counterparts, who want to **ethically implement behavioural science to positively impact the lives of children.**

What does the toolkit do?

The toolkit provides a **10-question checklist** to guide you through key ethical decision points during your project and helps to identify when other perspectives are needed.

What's in the toolkit?

There's a **behavioural goals tool** to use at the beginning of the project (Questions 1–4), and a **behavioural intervention tool** to use when designing the intervention (Questions 5–10). The toolkit is supplemented by a discussion paper outlining three core ethical principles for conducting applied behavioural science projects focused on children (see the final page of this toolkit).

How do I use the toolkit?

Step 1. Get your project team together for at least an hour at the beginning of the project and again when designing the intervention. It can be helpful to invite implementation partners to these meetings.

Step 2. Ask your team each question in the relevant tool. Discuss your answers as a group. An answer of **X** or **?** does not necessarily mean your project is unethical. It means you should use the Actions column of the tool to write down what actions to take to get to **✓**, or why you are satisfied answering **X**.

Step 3. After completing the actions, come together again to discuss the learnings and revisit the tool.

Note: This tool is a guide only and is not a substitute for an ethics review board.

This tool is not designed to provide guidance on how to conduct an applied behavioural science project. If you are not familiar with the applied behavioural science approach, please seek advice and review resources such as the OECD's [BASIC toolkit](#).

Behavioural GOALS tool: Four questions to ask when deciding what behaviours to change

Ethical consideration Place a ✓, X, or ? in the boxes	Further information (see also Principles 1 and 2 of the discussion paper)	What to do if you answered X or ?	Actions needed (include who is responsible and a due date); or explanation for X
1. Are you confident that an applied behavioural science approach alone will add value?	For example, if the <i>primary</i> reason that people are not engaging in the desired behaviour is structural or systemic (i.e., they <i>can't</i> do the behaviour because they don't have the financial or material means), then an approach that addresses structural barriers may be needed <i>alongside</i> a behavioural approach.	Combine the project with another approach, for example, the provision of resources or advocacy. Alternatively, choose a different target behaviour for which a behavioural intervention could have a greater impact.	
2. Have you determined that changing the chosen behaviour is in the best interests of children in this population?	For example, evaluate whether existing evidence regarding the behaviour you're promoting applies to your target group and context. Ideally, you'll have meaningfully engaged children locally, using child-friendly materials, and you'll have ensured your behaviour change goals were understood. At a minimum, consult with parents or other stakeholders who can be trusted to represent children's interests. Determine how much children are expected to benefit from the behaviour change, and if others will also benefit. <i>Where a project indirectly affects children (e.g., by targeting parents or teachers), the goals should ideally align with the interests of both the adult recipients and children.</i>	Consultation will be even more important in situations where children have not previously been consulted about the issue. If consultations with children are not possible, other options include consulting with parents, child advocates, or local community representatives to ensure goals are in the children's best interests. Aim for a diversity of voices to ensure different perspectives are represented.	
3. Is there alignment between you, children, parents, and relevant others (e.g., child advocates and representatives, local stakeholders) about what behavioural goals to pursue?	Ideally you will have meaningfully engaged with children to understand what it is in their best interests. At a minimum you should have consulted with those who represent children's interests, such as local child advocates, parents, etc. If everyone agrees that changing the chosen behaviour is a good idea, then you have alignment. If there is disagreement (e.g., it is in the best interests of children but not adults) then you have misalignment, but it may still be ethical to pursue the project.	The project may still be ethical, but seek external viewpoints (outside the project team) to confirm. Options include: advisory group or red team*; existing internal checks, e.g., internal ethics committee, senior sign-off; ethical review board. Be explicit about the choices you made; for example, if you did not gather the perspectives of certain stakeholders, be transparent about why. Carefully reflect on power imbalances, including between you (as the decision-maker) and children.	
4. Are you confident that changing this behaviour won't exacerbate existing inequalities?	For example, if marginalized children can't perform the behaviour you're encouraging because of disadvantage, promoting the behaviour could widen inequality.	Conduct research or consult those with local knowledge to better understand the local context. When consulting with children/parents, ensure diversity of voices. If concerns exist, devise mitigation strategies and plans for monitoring potential consequences. Alternatively, you may need to focus on a different behaviour.	

* A red team is a group of people given the task of taking on an outsider perspective and regularly critically evaluating the project.

Behavioural INTERVENTIONS tool: Six questions to ask when you are designing an intervention

Ethical consideration <i>Place a ✓, X, or ? in the boxes</i>	Further information (see also Principles 2 and 3 of the discussion paper)	What to do if you answered X or ?	Actions needed (include who is responsible and a due date); or explanation for X
5. Are you confident that the intervention you have chosen is likely to be effective in this context and is unlikely to have harmful unintended consequences?	For example, could it backfire (and worsen the problem)? Could it widen inequality? Could children outside the target group be exposed to the intervention unintentionally?	Consult those with local knowledge to help you understand how different interventions may apply to your context. Put mitigation strategies in place to minimize unintended consequences. Consider whether elements of the intervention should be changed/removed to minimize risks.	
6. Have you consulted with relevant stakeholders (e.g., a diverse range of children, parents, local representatives) to help you identify possible harms from the intervention you have chosen?	Stakeholders can include: children, parents, local community representatives, child advocates or others who represent children's best interests. This step can occur when co-designing the intervention with recipients and stakeholders (ideally, a diverse group).	Review information about consequences observed in similar interventions/contexts. Where possible, meaningfully engage with children locally to identify potential harms from their perspective. Use child-friendly materials and ensure your behaviour change goals are understood. At a minimum, consult with those who represent children's interests. Implement risk mitigation measures and seek external review as a check.	
7. Have you made plans to monitor for negative consequences and have you established escalation procedures in case negative consequences arise?	Unforeseen risks can occur. Put mechanisms in place so that, if they do, you find out quickly and can take action.	Determine how you can keep track of problems or complaints that arise from the intervention, and specify what you will do if they occur. If unsure, seek advice from outside the project team (e.g., red team*, ethics review board).	
8. Can a child or adult receiving the chosen intervention see that they are recipients of a behaviour change initiative?	For example, have recipients provided informed consent? (Review UNICEF guidelines regarding when informed consent should be sought). If not, when recipients are exposed to the intervention, are the behavioural goals of the intervention obvious?	Three options: 1) Make project goals transparent with communications separate to the intervention. Ensure these communications are appropriate for children and adults, and make routes for people to complain; or 2) Consider whether you can redesign the intervention to be more transparent; or 3) Seek external checks (e.g., ethics review board) before continuing.	
9. Is it easy in practice for children or adult recipients to opt out of the intervention, or not to participate in the intervention?	Are there clear mechanisms in place for someone to opt out if they want to? Reflect on how power imbalances contribute to the ease with which children can actually avoid an intervention in practice. Consider also how easily people can withdraw their data, even after a project is complete.	Make it easier for people to opt out where possible. If it is not possible for people to opt out, then ensure the project is transparent and people are not forced or coerced into behaving in a particular way. Be sure to monitor consequences and follow through on escalation procedures if necessary.	
10. Have you made plans to release information about the project publicly, and are there routes for people to complain?	When making information public, ensure that communication and complaint channels are appropriate for children as well as adults.	Being open with the public is most important in situations where an intervention is not readily transparent to recipients. If public openness is not possible, seek external ethical review or redesign the intervention to be more transparent.	

You've reached the end of the toolkit. Congratulations!

Remember to follow through on your plans to **monitor and communicate** about the project, and revisit this toolkit when there are pivots in the project.

And if you're planning to **scale up your intervention**, consider whether the original goals are still appropriate in the new context and with the new population.

Summary of core ethical principles for practitioners

Principle 1: Children are involved in the decision-making process	Practitioners should provide space for children to meaningfully contribute to the decision-making about what is 'good' behaviour and what behavioural goals to pursue. Children should be asked (in age-appropriate ways) for their preferences where possible, and practitioners should assess the strength and consistency of these preferences. Understanding the socio-political environment, power dynamics and risk of harm is crucial in determining how best to consult with children. If child consultation is not possible, at a minimum practitioners should consult with adults who can be trusted to represent children's interests.
Principle 2: Behavioural goals and interventions are critically examined	Before embarking on a project, practitioners should consider whether a behavioural science approach is the most appropriate course of action. Practitioners should reflect on how power imbalances could undermine their ability to determine what goals are in the children's best interests. External review can also help to counter potential biases in decision-making within the project team. Intervention-specific risks, harms and impact should be carefully thought through, monitored and mitigated. The top priority is to ensure that projects do not unintentionally contribute to existing inequalities.
Principle 3: Interventions are transparent and promote autonomy	A core idea underlying the applied behavioural science approach is that interventions should not restrict choice and should transparently communicate project goals. When designing an intervention, practitioners should determine how transparent it will be to those affected by it. They should ensure that children and parents can easily opt out, and should design feedback mechanisms so that children and their parents can voice concerns, see the outcomes of their objections, and hold decision-makers to account.

Further reading

- Tindall, Karen, Lydia Hayward, Emma Hunt and Benjamin Hickler, 'Ethical Considerations When Applying Behavioural Science in Projects Focused on Children', UNICEF Office of Research - Innocenti Discussion Paper, 2021.
- United Nations Children's Fund, 'UNICEF Procedure on Ethical Standards in Research, Evaluation, Data Collection and Analysis', UNICEF, New York, 2021.
- Graham et al., 'Ethical Research Involving Children', UNICEF Office of Research - Innocenti, Florence, 2013.
- United Nations Innovation Network, 'United Nations Behavioural Science Report', UN Innovation Network, New York, 2021

Feedback

Contact research@unicef.org with any questions, feedback, or examples of how you have used this tool in practice.