**Title:** **Collecting data on violence against children and young people: Need for a universal standard**

**Authors:** Karen M Devries1, Dipak Naker2, Adrienne Monteath – van Dok3, Claire Milligan4, Alice Shirley4

1London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine

2Raising Voices

3Plan International

4Save the Children

**Abstract:**

Preventing and responding to violence against children is an aim of the new Sustainable Development Goals. Numerous agencies are now collecting data from children about violence, including academics, non-governmental organisations, government agencies, consultants, and others. Data is necessary to ensure appropriate prevention and response, but there is a real risk of harm to children if ethical standards are not adhered to. There are additional complexities in settings where child protection systems are not well developed. We propose specific suggestions for good practice, based on our past experience and policies, and call for all agencies to adhere to high ethical standards.

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Physical, sexual and emotional violence against children and young people are pervasive child protection, public health and human rights issues[1]. Momentum is building in the international community for action, and one of the aims of the new Sustainable Development Goals (16.2) is specifically to “End abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children”.

However, there is a relative lack of data on levels of different forms of violence against children and young people under 18 years of age, notably in low and middle income countries, on risk and protective factors, and on which interventions work to prevent and respond to violence. To address these gaps, an increasing number of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), government agencies, consultancy firms, academic researchers and for-profit companies are therefore asking children about their experiences of violence.

Asking children about violence can generate much needed data to inform advocacy and programming efforts. Including children in research is important, as children have the right to express their views and to be heard on matters affecting their lives. However, participation must be balanced with due consideration of child protection. If research is done badly, there is a real risk of harm— children may become distressed or re-traumatised, their safety may be compromised, and they can be put at risk of further violence.

There are some recent guidance documents which discuss ethical research with children[2, 3]; and several international NGOs have codes of conduct for their staff[4,5] and child protection policies for programming and research[4-7]. However, we think that further practical guidance on violence research is specifically needed[3], and we propose some good practices that agencies should consider when collecting data on violence in childhood based on our previous work[8, 9] and existing guidance[3, 4, 6].

***Deciding what data to collect***: Data should first and foremost be collected to fill a knowledge gap, and should inform efforts improve service delivery and prevention programming. In many cases, asking children directly about their experience of violence is the most appropriate way to understand their situation. But the necessity of directly asking children these questions must always be weighed against potential discomfort for respondents. The number, type and order of questions need to be carefully considered to avoid over-burdening respondents.

***Interviewer selection and training***: During recruitment, it is important to select interviewers who are respectful of children and who commit to following child protection protocols. Background checks should be carried out (such as Data and Barring Service checks in the UK), or where this is not possible, alternative measures should be put in place to screen out individuals who may be seeking a research position to increase their contact with children for malicious reasons. This could include securing and following up written references. Close supervision of interviewers is also required to maintain standards[8, 9].

During training, it is important that interviewers practice skills in developing rapport, maintaining confidentiality, listening non-judgementally and empathetically, what to do if participants become distressed, and how to implement child protection protocols if necessary. In our work, we have used a code of conduct to clarify the roles, responsibilities, and expectations we have of interviewers, including how they will interact with child participants [4, 5, 8, 9]. One example is the simple rule for conducting interviews in places where child-interviewer pairs can be ‘seen but not overheard’ by others [8, 9] to maintain confidentiality while ensuring children are protected.

***Confidentiality*** must be maintained unless there are overriding child protection concerns. Children should always be informed that they do not have to answer questions they are uncomfortable with. Written procedures should be in place outlining how children’s information will be kept safe, and how children themselves will be kept safe. However, there will be circumstances under which children’s information may need to be shared, for example, if a child reports ongoing abuse. Research projects should have clear, child-friendly wording consent or assent forms to describe these circumstances to children, so they are making informed choices about sharing their information. Consent and assent to participation should be viewed as a process, rather than a single event. Researchers should re-consent participants for separate data collection activities, as well as during data collection activities.

***Duty of care/Child Protection Protocols***: Organisations must have a clear, written position and a plan outlining what kind of support will be offered to children involved in research, and how support will be provided. In practice, organisations might have high-level policies on child protection, but a specific protocol or ‘referral plan’ for each study will need to be developed. During our research, we always have a counsellor available for participants, and a written referral plan outlining how children’s disclosures of specific forms of abuse will be dealt with, by whom and within what time frame [8, 9]. Depending on the skills within an organisation and national legislation, this might involve referral to an outside agency. Interviewers can also experience vicarious trauma, and support mechanisms need to be in place for them[10].

***Mandatory reporting of abuse***: Where child protection systems are less well developed, children referred to authorities may experience inadequate or even harmful responses [8]. In countries where reporting of abuse is required but there is concern about how a case will be handled, or where children do not want their information passed onto the authorities, there is a real tension between respecting the wishes of the child, promoting his or her best interests, and the obligations to report. The dilemmas this creates deserve serious consideration and debate, and the best interests of the child should be paramount[9]. We have encountered such dilemmas in some of our research, and resolve these on a case by case basis via discussion between researchers and other child protection partners.

***Reflection and learning***: Finally, we suggest that reflection and discussion on best practices is necessary to ensure good, contextually tailored practice. All research must be approved by an ethical review board, which can help ensure that research questions are appropriate for local contexts. However, ethics review boards may not have extensive experience with research on violence in childhood; may not be functioning or, in some settings, may not exist. Therefore all organisations working with children, and those involved in research with children, must hold themselves to high standards, engage with the ethical principles underlying research, and review and share examples of practice. This includes ethical review boards, which can help ensure that children are allowed to participate in research on children’s issues, and that such research meets high ethical standards and fills a knowledge gap.

The need for reliable data on children’s experiences of violence is clear, but this work comes with great responsibility—we must ensure we are doing no harm, and be clear about our duty of care to the children who provide information. Research on violence against children is only worthwhile if the methods are rigorous and the highest ethical standards are met. We call for greater debate and discussion to arrive at common standards for collecting data on violence against children. Furthermore, we call for all bodies involved in research with children to be open and transparent about how they subscribe to these standards, as well as for continued reflection and learning about what these standards should be.

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