

LEARNING  
TOGETHER



# Supporting the safe and ethical involvement of children and young people in research about violence and abuse

A GUIDE FOR RESEARCHERS

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*If you can, it is good to **collaborate** with established young people's participation groups who have experience of working in the context of sexual abuse research.*

## About this guide

As part of the Learning Together project, this guide was co-developed with young people in Albania and the UK. This included eight young people supported by the organization **Different & Equal** in Albania, who are involved in different projects as young advisors, young advocates and young researchers. It also included four members of the **Safer Young Lives Research Centre's** Young Researchers Advisory Panel, who work to ensure research about young people is informed by and undertaken with young people, including those with lived experience of issues being explored.

The draft guide was also reviewed by youth advisors from Australia, Brazil, Colombia, Uganda and elsewhere in the UK. Thank you to all of them!

This guide outlines some key things these young people want researchers to think about and do, to keep children and young people's interests and wellbeing at the heart of their approach. This is not an exhaustive list, so we encourage you to think of other ways in which you can implement their recommendations in your research.

*These young people are a **special resource** that can support you to develop plans for doing your own research with young people. They remind us that a good **starting point** is asking what a child or young person needs or wants.\**

Though drawing on experiences of sexual abuse research, the guide is also relevant for researching other topics, including other forms of harm and abuse. Similarly, though reflecting primarily on experiences of qualitative research, the principles can also be applied to quantitative studies.

The guide focuses on involving children and young people as research participants. It is also important to think about other ways in which they can be involved in, and influence, other stages of the research process. This could be through being part of advisory groups, collaborating on research design or supporting dissemination.

*\* All quotes are from the young people who took part in this project.*

*You may relive the pain but the act of telling can be liberating.*

*Research can help by showing care, rectify the belief that no one cares, 'I am important, all people do deserve humanity and care (including me).'*

*Nothing about us without us.*

## The importance of involving children and young people

Involving children and young people in research about sexual abuse (or other issues that might be viewed as sensitive) can present challenges, but it is really important to find safe and ethical ways to navigate these. When done well, there can be many benefits:

- Research can create a space where children and young people can express their views and be heard – helping them realise their right to have a say about (all) matters that affect them.
- It can offer a sense of empowerment or validation for participants; knowing their perspectives matter and are valued.
- It can help them to know they are contributing to making things better for others.
- It improves researchers' (and others') understanding, giving them valuable real-life insights from those best placed to share this (children and young people themselves).
- It can help make sure that policies, laws and services are informed by children and young people's experiences, needs and priorities.

# Ten key things to remember

- 1 Participants are always more important than data.
- 2 Your integrity and motivation matter – how does your work benefit children and young people, and not just you?
- 3 Children and young people don't have to share their views and experiences with you; they are "giving you a gift" in doing this. Honour that.
- 4 Children and young people are the experts in their lives, not you. Make room to find out what is important to them, and make sure you listen.
- 5 The power imbalance and benefits are skewed in your favour – you need to take steps to offset this. Prioritising participant choice, control and benefit are central to this.
- 6 Every participant is a unique individual; there is no 'one size fits all' approach. Make sure your approach is inclusive of those with different needs, abilities, perspectives and life experiences, and challenge any associated assumptions or biases you bring to the research.
- 7 Promoting safety and wellbeing must be a key priority throughout – before, during and after your engagement with participants. Think about what you can put in place to support this, and who can help you with this.
- 8 You need to understand the impacts of trauma and what this means for your research. You won't always know if someone has experienced trauma, so always be sensitive to this. Think about the language you use, the things you ask participants to talk about, and the ways in which you engage with them.
- 9 You should never make promises that you can't keep, and should always follow through on any commitments.
- 10 You should always show kindness and respect.



The rest of this guide explores how you might design and undertake research in light of these considerations.

# Children and Young People Want to Feel...



WELCOME

Understood  
eeeeee



Valued

Included



able to say  
NO  
and change  
their mind

treated like  
an equal



Like they  
matter

HEARD

APPRECIATED

able  
to be  
themselves




Like they've  
made a difference



## Assessing and managing risks of participating in research

- Recognise that benefits and risks differ for different children and young people, and in different types of research engagements.
- They can also vary at different points in time, and may depend where a child or young person is in their recovery journey if they have experienced abuse.
- Identifying potential risks should not automatically result in exclusion of a child or young person from research. Explore how you can minimise or manage the risk, rather than simply avoid it, but always make sure there is appropriate support in place to address any potential risks to participants' safety or wellbeing – before, during and after their involvement in the research.
- Where possible and appropriate, ensure children and young people's views inform decision-making around what risks (and benefits) exist and how these can best be managed.
- Partnering with organisations who know a child/young person can help with assessing and managing potential risks of involvement, and ensuring that participants' views and wishes are integrated as part of this.



*I think you should ask them how they feel **comfortable** to give consent.*

## Informed consent

- When providing information about the research, cover all key points but keep it clear, simple and to the point.
- Where possible, build in time and space for potential participants to meet you, talk about the project and ask any questions.
- Be flexible and creative in how you share information – can you use infographics, apps, animations or video recordings, for example? Similarly, think through how you can record consent in a non-intimidating and accessible way.
- Translate information/consent materials, or make any other adaptations required to allow potential participants to meaningfully engage with them – and the research process more generally.
- Be honest and transparent about the focus of the research and what involvement means for a child or young person (and those supporting them), both in practical terms and in terms of any potential for upset or distress.
- Don't promise things you can't deliver. This includes promises about the difference the research will make.
- No-one should feel pressured to take part, or to stay involved. Be clear about when and how a child or young person can withdraw, and their right to do so. Build in check-ins throughout the process; not just at the start.
- Be aware of power dynamics that may make it difficult for children and young people to say no or withdraw consent, and pay attention to non-verbal cues.
- Where you need to get parent/carer consent, present the information in a clear and non-threatening way that helps them to support their child's involvement.
- Remember that parent/carer consent is not a replacement for a child/young person's consent.


*I think for me the most important [thing] is adopting a **trauma informed approach** to research. That is the overarching message, that's what this guide is all about.*

*Actively learning how to **support children** through research. Doing research that not only benefits the researcher, but shows young people how they should be treated.*

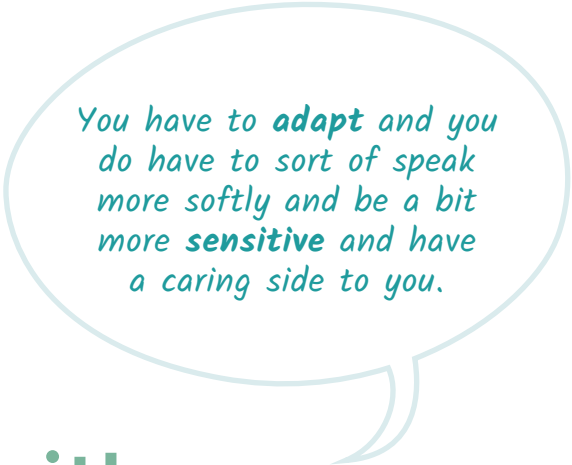
## Supporting engagement

- Give children and young people as much choice and control as you can. This can be in big and little ways. It can include choices like when and where they take part, what snacks they want, how they share their views and how you record these, or how they would like you to address them.
- Explain that this is an opportunity for them to convey their perspectives, and that you want to hear these – their views are important.
- Think about what you can do to support the engagement of children and young people with different needs and abilities. How can you adapt your approach for them, rather than asking them to fit into your approach?
- Where appropriate, explore use of creative approaches to promote accessibility, engagement and safety - things like photo-based methods, games, drawing, or digital whiteboards.
- Avoid long and complicated questions. Word questions in a way that can be understood (and rephrase them if needed, if meeting with a participant).
- It is important to offer options to children or young people about how to share their views in research, whenever possible. Different participants will feel more comfortable with different approaches. Some may prefer talking; others may prefer writing, drawing or the anonymity of a survey.
- Make time to discuss issues of representation and identity, and to explore how participants would like to be described in research outputs. Wherever possible, build in opportunities for participants to check they are comfortable with how you are representing them and their contributions.
- Always confirm what will happen next, with timescales where possible.
- Ensure that you follow through on everything you have said.
- Endings should feel safe and positive. Participants should feel valued, not exploited or regretful.

*No leading questions, also I like it when [researchers], if they don't know 100% what you said, say, 'This is my perception, **have I got it right?**', do you get what I mean?*



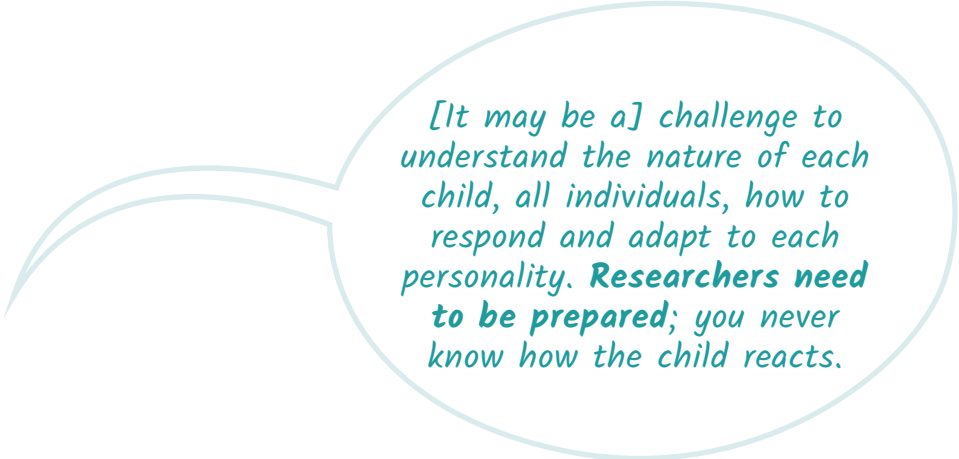
*The beginning should not be formal, **build rapport**, be friendly.*



*You have to **adapt** and you do have to sort of speak more softly and be a bit more **sensitive** and have a caring side to you.*

## If directly engaging with participants, you should...

- Take time to establish rapport before starting the research activity – remember it's a person in front of you, not a source of data.
- Be calm, respectful and authentic.
- Remember that how you speak, and your body language, tells a child or young person a lot. It can make them feel heard and valued – or not!
- Avoid closed body language (closed legs or crossed arms, for example).
- Be sensitive to the fact that different participants will experience your words and actions differently. Be alert and respond to the individual child or young person's cues, including non-verbal signs of discomfort.
- Ask children and young people about their preferences (sitting on the floor or chair, for example) and have some comforting or calming things easily available – like cushions, blankets or fidget toys.
- Be conversational, not formal, in your words, actions, and your clothing.
- Be fully present and engaged. No looking at your phone!
- Practise active and reflective listening.
- Be willing to adapt your plans to meet a child or young person's needs and respond to their lead.
- Check your understanding; don't assume you've got it right.
- If engaging with children and young people in a group setting, pay particular attention to group dynamics, and how participants may experience this.
- Pay attention to endings, don't just take what you need and run! Take time to ease out of the engagement – just like you did to ease in.



*[It may be a] challenge to understand the nature of each child, all individuals, how to respond and adapt to each personality. **Researchers need to be prepared; you never know how the child reacts.***

## Managing potential distress

- Be alert to the possibility that a child or young person may become upset or triggered during the research engagement, and be prepared to respond to this – how you do this will differ, depending on the research setting.
- Speaking with a professional who knows a participant in advance may help you identify any adaptations you could make to minimise the chance of potential distress, but it is important this is done in a way that respects the child/young person's privacy. Equally, offering participants control over which questions/topics they wish to share their views on/not engage around can be very helpful.
- Build in check-in points and breaks (ideally with refreshments!) and make sure you have created easy opportunities for participants to pause or opt-out during these times.
- Do not ignore signs of distress and make sure you have thought through options for responding to these – this may involve stepping out of the research activity, sitting together in silence, offering words of comfort, or bringing in another source of support, for example. The key thing is to be sensitive to the needs of that individual in that setting, and wherever possible to be guided by them as to what feels appropriate and helpful.
- It is critical to build in wrap-around support for participants (before, during and after the research engagement), ideally through partner agencies who have an existing relationship with a child or young person. Think about how this will be resourced.
- When running group sessions, always have an additional person available in case a participant needs to leave the group setting, to check on their support needs.
- Recognise that particular approaches to research may hold negative associations for participants – structured individual interviews replicating a police interview, for example.

# Privacy, confidentiality and anonymity

- This can be a particular area of concern for children and young people who have experience of personal information being shared without their consent – for example, as a result of child protection concerns.
- Respect participants' rights to control what information they share. Do not push them, or those supporting them, to share personal information or information about their experiences of harm. Can you learn what you need through other methods, such as third-person scenarios?
- Be open about any limitations to confidentiality, the reasons for these and what would happen if you had to breach confidentiality. For example, explaining when and how you might have to pass on concerns about a child's safety to a relevant authority.
- Using practical examples can be very helpful. It is important for participants to understand what information you cannot keep confidential to the research, so they can decide whether or not they want to share that information with you.
- If you do need to pass on information to other professionals, wherever possible ensure you let the child/young person know this, explain why this is the case and what the next steps will be.
- If engaging participants through a service, be aware of their safeguarding policies and practices.
- Beyond these exceptions, be clear about how you will protect their personal information and identifiable research contributions.
- Discuss plans for anonymisation in reporting of findings (for example, the use of pseudonyms) with participants.
- If possible, find a creative way, perhaps using an infographic or animation, to communicate complicated information, such as data protection rules.

## Acknowledgement and reciprocity

- Participants should be recompensed in some way for their involvement – in recognition of their time, experience and knowledge - in the same way adult research participants would.
- Different children and young people may experience 'payment' differently, so it is important to explore this with them, and those supporting them.
- Where it is not possible, or appropriate, to pay a child or young person, you could use vouchers or fund something for an organisation that the participant will benefit from. It is good to work this out in the planning stage.
- Credit the important role that children and young people have played in your research in any outputs. Thank them and recognise their contribution (in a way that they are comfortable with).
- Remember to also acknowledge the role of any practice partners who have supported children and young people's involvement in your research.

*Ask did we get this right? Did we interpret the information you gave correctly?*

*Communicating impact matters – no matter how big or small.*

## Feedback, outputs and dissemination

- Ask children, young people and organisations what they feel is a safe and appropriate way to acknowledge them in the research.
- Find out from children and young people how their experience of the research could have been improved. This could be done by asking them to complete a short anonymous survey or giving feedback via someone who supported them.
- Where possible, try to ensure participants are able to see, and feedback on, how you plan to use their contributions before publication. This could be through things like sharing copies of notes of sessions, sharing draft versions of outputs or a follow-up session by you or a support worker to share and sense-check the research findings.
- Make sure that participants can receive a copy of your findings in an accessible form - this could be a visual summary, or a short video.
- Inform participants about your dissemination plans – they have a right to know who will be seeing what they shared.
- Explore ways in which children and young people can be safely involved in disseminating the research, if they wish to do so.
- Knowing their involvement is helping others can be very motivating for children and young people, so it is really important that they are kept informed about any impact. This could even be relaying responses from other researchers on what they have read from young people.

*What's really nice is after we've done research, you'll come back and say this is the product of your research, this is the product of what you've done. Even if we're a small part of it, because I feel that makes it really **meaningful**...*

This guide was produced as part of the **Learning Together** project, funded by Porticus.

Find out more about the project here:

[www.beds.ac.uk/sylrc/current-programmes-and-projects/learning-together](http://www.beds.ac.uk/sylrc/current-programmes-and-projects/learning-together)

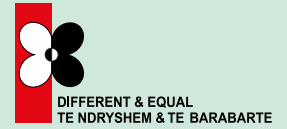
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We'd love to hear your feedback about these guides. You can do that here:

