

## **Guidance on gaining children's consent/ assent for participation in research**

Gaining assent/ consent for children's participation in research is an essential aspect of Sheffield Hallam University's principles of research integrity and protecting the welfare of participants. Whilst in research with children under the age of 16 it is always the case that informed consent should be sought from the parents or carers first, the European Early Childhood Research Association (EECERA) ethical code calls for 'an ethic of respect' (Bertram et al., 2024, p.2) which invites consideration of how best to respect children's own wishes in relation to participating in or withdrawing from research. Informed by Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), children have a right to be heard in matters that concern them, and according to the British Educational Research Association's (BERA) latest guidance (2024), where children are involved in research, voluntary informed consent and conditional assent are both essential conditions for participating in research.

### **What is the difference between informed consent and conditional assent?**

Researchers should be mindful of the distinction between the legal requirement to gain written informed consent from the child's parent/ carer in research involving children, and the ethical and children's rights-based responsibility to gain assent from children themselves. In its nature, such assent from children is ongoing, provisional (Flewitt, 2006), not always set in writing and not always verbally communicated. In gaining such assent, the researcher works in a reciprocal way to continuously seek and remain vigilant to children's agreement to take part in the research. Building trust is part of this process and often involves the researcher introducing themselves in child friendly terms, reminding children of their role and of the purpose of the research with each visit, as well as being responsive to children's verbal and non-verbal cues indicating their conditional assent to take part in the research.

### **How do we ensure conditional assent is informed?**

In order for children's assent to be 'informed', children should be provided with information about the research, its aims and the researcher's plans for using and sharing the data. Such complex information needs to be communicated to children in a way which is meaningful to them. This might entail adapting consent forms and participant information sheets so that the information provided engages and is accessible to children. **Section 1** of this guidance provides examples of how a consent

form and participant information sheet can be adapted so that they are more meaningful and accessible to children.

## **The need to establish trust**

Gaining informed consent from children involves establishing a relationship of trust. This may include the researcher introducing themselves and being honest about the purpose of their research, what they are recording/collecting and why they are needing this information. **Section 2** is a verbal script which provides an example of how the researcher and research can be introduced verbally. To gain children's trust researchers need to attune to children's multiple modes of communication. This could involve being mindful of children's body language, using illustrations to support written information; it could also involve allowing children to look at and play with recording equipment (if appropriate). The vignette provided in section 2 is an illustrative example of how the researcher can attune to the child's preferred ways of interacting and communicating.

## **The need to hear 'no'**

As part of this ongoing and conditional nature of consent from children, it becomes important for the researcher to prioritise the child participants' wellbeing and adopt a flexible orientation towards access to data – this could mean for example being flexible to rescheduling data collection sessions to times when children feel more receptive to taking part in research (see **Section 3**). It may also mean being prepared to lose some opportunities to collect data.

## **Section 1. Information sheet and consent form for child participants**

This example information sheet and consent form can be used with child participants who have established reading or listening skills. In all cases, with children under the age of 16, parental/carers consent is required, in addition to this written assent.

### **Information sheet<sup>1</sup>**

[Researcher's first name]'s project: [insert project title]

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<sup>1</sup> Images generated with OpenArt.ai

Hello,

My name is [researcher's name]. I am from Sheffield Hallam University. I want to tell you about a research project which I am doing. In this study I want to find out about how children like you [insert information relevant to the project here].



This will help [me/ your parents/ your teachers] to better understand [insert relevant content]. I will be visiting your classroom [insert frequency] times a week. I may be video recording in the classroom. [Alternatively, add what other research activities you will be doing in child-friendly terms, specifically include anything the children will need to do and how long it will take]



I have asked your grownups and they have said it is ok for you to take part. But you do not have to take part if you don't want to. You can also change your mind about taking part and can stop anytime. You can ask me or your teacher any questions about the study. You can also talk to your grownups about this if you are not sure. [If there are any disadvantages/risks involved by taking part, explain them in child-friendly terms and how they will be mitigated.] [Also, if there is a risk of a child making a disclosure, explain in child-friendly terms what will happen.]

I will keep the recording/notes/information I collect safe and will store it on my university computer. I may use the information to write about what I have learnt and share it with other people who do research.



To agree to take part, can you tick yes or no against the questions below.

## Consent form



I am happy to [describe research activity in child-friendly terms]. I am happy to take part in [researcher's name] project. I am happy to talk to [researcher's name] over the internet/ in the classroom/ at home [delete as appropriate].

**YES**      **NO**

☐      ☐

### I know and it is ok with me that:



1. What I say/write/do will be recorded to help [researcher's name] remember what happened;

**YES**      **NO**

☐      ☐

2. Only [researcher's name and the people they work with] will use the recording and he/she/they will keep it safe on his/her/their computer;

☐      ☐



3. [researcher's name] will not use my real name when he/she/they writes about me in her/his/their project so that nobody knows that he/she/they is/are writing about me;

☐      ☐



4. [researcher's name] may talk to someone responsible if he/she/they is/are worried about my safety or anyone else's safety; ☐ ☐
5. I do not have to take part or answer any questions that I do not want to; ☐ ☐
6. I can stop being part of [researcher's name] [interview/ other research activity] if I want to. ☐ ☐

Thank you for filling in the form! You can still change your mind later if you wish. No one will be angry with you if you change your mind.

**Child's name:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Researcher's Name (Printed):** \_\_\_\_\_

**Researcher's Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Researcher's contact details:**

(Name, address, contact number of investigator)

## Section 2: Verbal assent script and non-verbal assent

A verbal assent script can be used with children for whom reading is emerging or with participants for whom reading is not accessible. Verbal assent could also be used if the researcher makes a judgement that this would be the child's preferred mode of communication. The script provided below is an example which can be adapted using language which is suitable to the age, typical level of development and taking into

account the mental health and wellbeing of the child. In all cases, with children under the age of 16, parental/carers consent is required in addition to this verbal assent.

Hello,

My name is [researcher's name]. I am a researcher which means I want to find out about how children like you [insert relevant content, e.g. learn/ play/ think about/ know about...].

You have been asked to take part because you are [insert relevant children's knowledge or characteristics to the project].

If it is ok with you I will [insert relevant research activity e.g. – watch how you play/ take pictures/ take notes/ ask you about/ ask you to draw/ make etc...]




If you don't want to take part or if you start to feel tired, just tell me and we will stop.

You don't have to take part if you don't want to.

You can also change your mind. No one will be angry with you if you change your mind.

I have asked your parent/ grown up and they have said it is ok for you to take part.

[Recommended – include a traffic light card system for participation]

		
Happy to take part	I am not sure	I don't want to take part

Can you let me know now if you are happy for me to [observe/ take notes/ ask you questions]?

If you are happy to take part hold up the green 'yes' sign.

If you are not sure hold up the orange 'not sure' sign.

If you do not want to take part hold up the red 'no' sign.

When you are ready, hold up the sign which shows how you feel.

Do you have any questions for me?

The traffic light system can remain on the children's desks/in children's reach. They should be able to pick up the cards if they change their mind during the data collection. However, picking up the cards requires confidence and determination which many children may not yet have developed. The onus should never remain entirely on the child to communicate their wish to withdraw. At all times during data collection the researcher should remain vigilant and discontinue the process if any of the children appear uncomfortable or indicate with their body language that they no longer wish to participate.

## **Non-verbal assent**

A verbal assent script is useful when the child's preferred form of communication is speech. However, particularly with very young children, communication is notably multimodal, with speech not necessarily being the preferred or dominant mode. In these instances, gaining assent becomes a reciprocal and communicative process where the researcher finds other ways to gain the child's trust and build up interaction. The vignette below illustrates how the researcher can approach gaining assent, without giving dominance to the spoken mode:

*P (2 years) sits at a little table in playgroup, playing playdoh. I am visiting the playgroup as part of a study observing how children make meaning with materials and objects. I sit at the other side of the table, a little way away, pick up a piece of playdoh and begin moulding it too. She keeps glancing in my direction. I make a small ball out of my playdough and place it near her as an offering. She takes it, squeezes it thoughtful, continues to make and play. We build up interaction like this, until we are creating playdoh shapes for each other and copying each others' ideas. I am learning from P about how she uses playdoh. Much later in our interaction, we introduce words, with me commenting 'oh it looks like a wiggly worm, doesn't it' and her agreeing. Note – I don't use direct questions because I find it often puts toddlers under pressure and is not often their preferred mode of communication.*

(Researcher reflective notes; adapted from Hackett, 2024)

### **Section 3: ‘No is a good answer!’ Developing a flexible orientation to data collection**

The ongoing and conditional nature of assent in research with children requires the researcher to adopt a flexible orientation towards doing research and an openness to hearing ‘no’ from children. Hearing ‘no’ from children during data collection means that our processes of really listening to young participants and being guided by their needs are actually working. This could mean being prepared to reschedule data collection sessions to times when children feel more receptive to taking part. It could also mean being prepared to lose some opportunities to collect data. Building in ‘no’ and ‘not right now’ moments into our timescales, our plans, our orientations is part of a more robust ethical approach to involving children in research.

The vignette included below illustrates an instance of how ‘no’ or ‘not right now’ might play out in a research encounter. This vignette take place between the researcher and a child whose parent/ carer has already given informed consent:

*I sit in B’s front room, drinking a cup of tea and chatting to B (3 years) and his mum about his digital literacy practices. B fusses, does not want to interact with me, and keeps pulling on his mum and trying to get her attention. ‘We are having a tough day, sorry’, says B’s mum. ‘No worries at all’ I reply ‘Would it be better to do this another time. The most important thing if you and B are comfortable and happy, and it seems like today is a tricky one?’ B’s mum gratefully accepts, and we plan a visit for the following week. Enough time and capacity has been built into the data collection to ensure this kind of meaningful no— assenting is possible.*

(Hackett, field notes)

### **Further reading:**

Research with children: good practices in seeking consent, by UCL Knowledge Lab:

<https://iread-project.eu/2018/10/01/research-with-children-good-practices-in-seeking-consent/>



Guidance paper which describes the importance of obtaining consent from children when conducting research:

<https://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/id/eprint/4917/1/Obtaining%20Consent%20in%20Research%20involving%20Children%20%E2%80%93%20Understanding%20the%20Legal%20and%20Ethical%20Framework.pdf>

UK Research and Innovation (UKRI): Research ethics: Research with children and young people:

<https://www.ukri.org/councils/esrc/guidance-for-applicants/research-ethics-guidance/research-with-children-and-young-people/>

## References:

British Educational Research Association [BERA]. (2024). Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (5th ed.). [www.bera.ac.uk/publication/ethical-guidelines-for-educational-research-2024](http://www.bera.ac.uk/publication/ethical-guidelines-for-educational-research-2024)

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