

Researching Own Children - Guidelines

In most research studies the relationship between the researcher and the participant has clear boundaries and steps are taken to ensure that these boundaries are maintained. One of the aims of ethical research is to ensure that the relationships and roles between researcher and participant are as predictable and objective as possible and clearly distinguished from other roles and relationships. This is obviously not the case with parents researching their children. There are preceding relationships and emotional ties that will continue into the future. These relationships jeopardise objectivity and the predictability of the research relationships. The parent researcher needs to carefully consider these issues.

Paramount should be the interests and welfare of the child. **Is it in the child's best interest to participate in the research? This is the core question that needs to be addressed.**

If the parent researcher in this situation is making the decision for the child to participate, then the relationship is affected for the child. The child now has two roles in relation to their parent.

Informed consent is a major issue. It is definitely not appropriate for the PI (parent) to sign the consent form – although it is less problematic if a) someone else is able to give consent on behalf of the child, b) there are clear processes in place to either gain consent or check for assent from the child, and c) the consent giver supervises the data collection. However, there are still issues about how voluntary the consent will be. In studies, reviewers want to be convinced that there will be no coercion and that the child is free to decline or withdraw without anyone being disappointed or angry. Due to the existing parent/child relationship this can be very difficult to ensure and can be a particular issue for older children who fully understand the process. **How will voluntary consent be assured?**

Given the power imbalance between parent and child, it is of the utmost importance that the research is communicated clearly and comprehension is checked. This should be supervised by the consent giver as detailed earlier.

There are concerns around access to the child's data. What if the research study reveals findings with very negative connotations? Also, research around developmental delay suggests that a child, when he/she is older, may then wish they had not been involved in the study. These issues need to be considered and solutions put in place.

There are also issues re the integrity of the research as the relationship may impact on the quality of the data collected. This needs to be considered and solutions found.

Having the study undertaken by a student being supervised by the parent (who is a member of staff) does not remove these issues. The parent is still the PI so to speak, controlling the research process.

The wider literature suggests that it is the parent's decision but the above issues would need to be addressed from a university perspective as the child's interests have to be protected.