

Unpacking Ethics

Procedurally, there are a number of ethical standards/practices that should be followed when conducting any kind of research with people. These are basic ethical steps that any research design needs to embed in the data collection process.

1. Do no harm to participants.
2. Participants are informed about the research and consent to participate.
3. Participant privacy is not invaded.
4. Participants are not being deceived.

Item one requires consideration of who is in the survey sample, what questions are being asked, what that data will be used for, and who it will be reported to. Is participation itself safe for the participant? What consequences might come from someone participating? These are difficult questions and require you to attempt to anticipate potential risks and/or harms, and to avoid them where possible.

Item two relates to two particular aspects of the research process: providing sufficient information for participants to make an informed decision about whether or not to participate, and providing a mechanism for them to consent to participate.

Informed consent relies on the premise that the participant has the cognitive capacity to understand the information provided to them about the research, and what consenting to participate will mean for them. This suggests that some people may not be able to give informed consent: for example, someone who is asleep, or a person suffering the effects of advanced dementia, cannot operate in their own best interests.

Children are usually considered unable to give informed consent, unless they are deemed mature enough (or in some cases meet legal and ethical tests of competency) to engage in autonomous decision making. The age of a child is an obvious starting point for making that determination. In most cases it is recommended to obtain informed consent from a guardian who may legally act on the child's behalf.

Informing participants (or their guardians) includes providing information on:

- what the research is about
- what the data will be used for
- who is conducting the research
- what the participant is being asked to do (i.e. take a survey, how long that might take, how it should be done (alone, by computer and so on))
- how responses will be handled – confidentiality, anonymity and de-identification of the data
- contact details for any questions participants may have.

This information should be presented in a way that is suitable for the participant. For example, an information sheet could be translated into various languages for potential participants of non-English speaking backgrounds. It should also suit the mode of data collection – for example, for an online survey it should be the first page of information and not be too onerous or lengthy; for an interview it could be a written sheet, or a clear discussion when recruiting. When a parent or guardian is providing consent, it can be a letter to the child's parent/guardian.

The actual consent process is often written, but can be oral or expressed by actions such as continuing on with an online survey, or consenting at the start of the interview and recorded as such. What kind of consent you seek depends on the nature of the information you are collecting. The higher the risk to the participant, the more formalised and rigorous the consent process needs to be. Even if you consider your research to be fairly benign, consent should be sought as a reflection of transparency and ethical practice. For a rigorous example of how to write an information sheet and consent form, go to Appendix 2 of the State Education Research Application Process (SERAP) Guidelines 2019 ([click here](#)).

Note that even if a parent has provided consent for a child to participate, assent should be sought from the child. Assent without informed consent is not consent. But not seeking assent from a child to take, for example, a survey could be considered coercion (see below), even if guardian informed consent has been acquired. When seeking assent from a child, it is important to tell them what they are about to do, that their parent or guardian has ok-ed their participation, that they are free to decide not to participate, and that if they decide not to there will be no repercussions for them.

Note also that blanket information sheets from schools to parents informing of activities for the year, often with opt-out options, do not represent an informed consent process for research purposes.

Item three is about protecting the participant. It usually encompasses confidentiality, anonymity and data de-identification. This information should be included in your information sheet/statement.

- Confidentiality relates to an agreement between the participant and researcher that all information the participant provides will be safeguarded and kept confidential at all times. Without the promise of confidentiality, very few participants would willingly provide you with the information you seek.
- Anonymity allows for participants to participate without anyone knowing who they are. It allows participants to answer freely without fear of repercussions for their honesty.
- De-identified data simply means removing any information that might identify a participant in the final dissemination of the survey results. Names would be changed, addresses and other locational information removed or changed.

Item four requires that participants should be aware that they are taking part in research, their participation should be sufficiently informed, and they should be aware that participation is voluntary. It also includes truthfully representing the research to participants – telling them you are interviewing for one thing, and then asking questions and analysing the data to do something completely different equates to deception.

One other aspect that is implicit within this list, but not overtly stated, is the issue of coercion – participants should not be coerced into participating. At a coarse level, we might consider coercion to be bullying or bribery or threatening, but in the research context coercion can be much subtler.

Coercion reflects relations of power between participants and those collecting the data – researchers, educators, or you. It might be as subtle as a Year 3 student feeling they must do a survey lest they disappoint their teacher, or because the teacher has not informed them that they do not have to do a survey if they do not want to (consent/assent).

Consider what protocols you will need to be aware of should you be surveying with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders – NHMRC guidelines can give you direction.

For help with general procedures, and things to keep in mind, refer to the [AISNSW Ethical Guidelines](#).