Prepared by the Department of
Children, Disability and Equality
gov.ie/dcde

Co-Creating Ethical Research

A Framework Informed by Babies, Children, Young People, and Adults

May 2026

RESEARCH + EVALUATION

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The Department of Children, Disability and Equality should be acknowledged in all references to this publication.

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Co-Creating Ethical Research

A Framework Informed by Babies, Children, Young People, and Adults

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Acknowledgments

As authors of this report, we wish to express our sincere thanks to all those who generously gave their time to participate in this research study. We are especially grateful to the children and young people who contributed to the project, including babies and toddlers, primary and post-primary aged children, and the members of the Care Experienced Expert Panel.

We also extend our appreciation to the educators in the Early Years Settings who acted as co-researchers supporting us in the data collection process and the national and international experts who contributed valuable insights through the stakeholder interviews. Our thanks also go to the Children and Adult Advisory Groups for their expertise, guidance, and continued support throughout the project.

Finally, we are deeply thankful to the team at the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) for funding and supporting this important and timely piece of work.

Introduction

In April 2012, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) published *Guidance for Developing Ethical Research Projects Involving Children*, which outlined good practice principles for research with children and young people. This document established core ethical principles and concepts in child-related research, including minimising the risk of harm, informed consent and assent, confidentiality and anonymity, child protection, legal obligations and policy commitments, and adopting a child-centred, inclusive approach to research (DCYA, 2012). Since then, Ireland has seen significant developments in the legal and policy landscape, including the enactment of the Children First Act 2015, which places statutory child protection reporting obligations on professionals, including researchers, and the growing incorporation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) into national policy. These changes reinforce children's right to be heard (Article 12 UNCRC) and have prompted a shift toward more participatory, inclusive, and rights-based approaches in research involving children.

In light of these developments, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) commissioned Stranmillis University College: a College of Queen's University Belfast to undertake a comprehensive programme of work to update the guidance. This reflected the need to support more meaningful and ethically sound participation of all children, regardless of age, ability, identity, beliefs, or socio-economic background.

This programme of work consisted of four work packages:

Work Package One established advisory working groups to inform, guide, and shape the project: three Children and Young People's Working Groups (CYPWGs), representing pre-school, primary and post-primary age groups, and an Adult Working Group (AWG). These groups contributed throughout the project by providing insights into key policies and evidence, informing the methodology and consultation strategy, and helping to shape the interpretation of the findings.

Work Package Two comprised a comprehensive evidence-based review of relevant literature and policy developments at both international and national levels. The aim was to update understanding of the literature, legal context,

and policy developments relating to ethical research involving children and to reaffirm good practice principles.

Work Package Three involved a programme of online qualitative interviews with twenty international and national experts from a range of disciplines, including education, psychology, sociology, and health research. Participants represented academia, policy, practice, and children's sector organisations. The thematic analysis of these interviews identified current principles, priorities, and practices in high-quality ethical research with children and young people.

Work Package Four developed consultations with children and young people through playful conversations and focus groups. The diverse sample included babies, toddlers, and pre-school children; primary and post-primary school-aged children, and an expert panel of care-experienced young people (CEEP). For the youngest participants, babies and toddlers, Participatory Action Research (PAR) methods were facilitated by skilled early childhood educators, ensuring their expressions, interests, and experiences could be meaningfully interpreted and represented. Efforts were also made to include hard-to-reach and seldom-heard voices, such as children with special educational needs, those from Traveller and Roma communities, refugee and newcomer children, and children impacted by poverty.

The final report consists of seven chapters:

- Chapter One outlines the methodology employed throughout the project.
- Chapter Two provides a critical review of developments in policy and literature from 2012 to 2025.
- Chapter Three presents the analysis of consultations with children and young people.
- Chapter Four shares insights from the expert panel of care-experienced young people.
- Chapter Five details the thematic analysis of stakeholder interviews.
- Chapter Six discusses the findings across all work packages and reflects on developments in ethical research with children, identifying good practice principles and priorities.
- Chapter Seven concludes the project with a summary of the work completed.

Chapter 1: Methodology

Introduction

This study aimed to inform the development of updated ethical guidance for research with children and young people, leveraging expertise from both young participants and adult specialists. Using a rights-based, co-produced methodology, the project sought to deepen understanding of how to conduct research that is ethical, inclusive, and respectful of children's voices and agency.

A Rights-Based Approach

Grounded in the Lundy Model of child participation (Lundy, 2007), this consultation was underpinned by a rights-based approach, emphasising a comprehensive interpretation of, Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Article 12 stipulates that:

- States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.
- For this purpose, the child shall, in particular, be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law (United Nations, 1989).

In practice, Article 12 of the UNCRC is often interpreted narrowly as listening to children's voice. However, Lundy (2007) argues that voice alone is insufficient. Focusing solely on voice risks overlooking the broader obligations embedded in Article 12, such as the child's capacity to form views, the obligation to give those views due weight, and the need for transparent and effective processes for participation. Lundy's model offers a more comprehensive conceptualisation of Article 12, guiding duty bearers to uphold all dimensions of the right through four key elements: Space, Voice, Audience, and Influence (Lundy, 2007; see Figure 1). Widely recognised as a global standard for conceptualising meaningful child participation, the Lundy model underscores the importance of engaging children in ways that fully realise their participatory rights under the UNCRC.

Figure 1: Lundy Model of Child Participation

Work Package 1: Working Groups

The consultation team employed a co-produced, children's rights-informed methodology involving three Children and Young People's Working Groups (CYPWGs), and a separate Adult Working Group (AWG) composed of experts in the field. Mirroring the approach taken in the development of the 2012 ethical guidelines, the AWG was established to guide and shape the programme of work and outputs.

The AWG comprised eight leading academics and respected advocates for child and youth participation, with expertise across sociology, early childhood and primary education, child psychology, and participatory research. Members brought extensive experience in designing, conducting, and reviewing research with children and young people using ethical, inclusive, and participatory methodologies. Notably, one member had played a key role in developing the original 2012 guidance. The AWG convened twice online during the project and provided input on various research processes, including interview design, child consultations, and the drafting of updated ethical guidance.

In parallel, three age-specific sub-groups of children, preschool[1], primary, and post-primary, formed the Children and Young People's Working Groups (CYPWGs). Each

[1] Please note, in the case of the pre-school, the trailing of the instruments was completed with the support of the educators with whom the babies, toddlers and young children have already formed a sound relationship.

group participated separately in in-person morning or afternoon sessions. They advised on the child-centred qualitative interview frameworks, piloting the research instruments and suggesting refinements. A feedback session is also planned for all three CWGs, to share key findings and provide age-appropriate insights into the ethical code.

Work Package 2: Policy and Evidence Review

A critical scoping review of relevant policy, evidence, and best practice was undertaken.

Inclusion Criteria comprised:

- Multi-disciplinary literature (e.g., education, health, social care, social sciences, computer science);
- National and international sources, including academic studies and policy documents/reports;
- English-language publications; and
- Materials published between 2012 and 2025.

The review scope began with a broad search of literature related to ethical research with children and young people, covering a range of disciplines including education and care, medicine and health, social care, social sciences, and computer science. The search strategy was keyword-based and utilised the following search string:

Keywords: infant OR children OR young people; AND rights OR voice OR perspectives OR participation OR participatory; AND research OR consent OR assent; AND digital OR methodology OR participatory approaches OR co-production; AND recent.

The review aimed to provide researchers and policymakers with a synthesis of recent developments, emerging ethical issues, and evidence-based good practices in research involving children and young people. Building on the foundational guidance (e.g., DCYA, 2012), it explored changes in legislation, conceptual frameworks, ethical risks, and research practices since 2012, particularly within multidisciplinary and digitally mediated contexts.

Key areas of focus included:

- National and international legislative and policy developments

- Evolving ethical concerns in child-centred research
- Methodological innovations and examples of best practice
- Research in digital environments (e.g., online platforms, artificial intelligence)
- Inclusion of vulnerable or underrepresented groups (e.g., very young children, LGBTQ+ youth, children with lived experience of abuse or exclusion)
- The impact of data protection regulations such as GDPR
- Implementation of the UNCRC
- Relevant changes in Irish law

A number of academic databases were searched (British Educational Index (BEI); Bloomsbury Education and Childhood Studies; Child Development and Adolescent Studies; Digital Education Research Archive (DERA); Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ); EBSCO; Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC); ProQuest Education; SAGE Premier Journals; WorldCat; PubMed and Google Scholar).

Work Package 3: Stakeholder Engagement (adults)

Participants: Relevant international and national stakeholders were identified in consultation with DCEDIY and the AWG, resulting in a group of 20 stakeholders representing policy, practice, government, advocacy, and academia. See Table 1 for details on the organisations represented in the stakeholder interviews.

Table 1. Stakeholder interviews: Organisations represented

International and National Experts from Higher Education	National Bodies and Policy Organisations	Advocacy and Interest groups
British Educational Research Association	Early Childhood Ireland (ECI)	Barnardo's Ireland
NUI Galway	Economic & Social Research Institute (ESRI)	Pavee Point
Queens University Belfast	Hub na nÓg	Trans* Research Association of Ireland (TRAI)
Trinity College Dublin	National Council for Special Education (NCSE)	
University College Cork	National Parent Council (NPC)	
University College London		

Procedure: The adult stakeholder interviews, conducted online, explored a broad range of issues relevant to ethical research involving children and young people. Participants were invited to share their perspectives on key topics, including e.g., what constitutes ethical research with children and young people; relevant legal and ethical frameworks; how researchers can meaningfully engage children and young people in ways that respect and promote their agency; and how to balance the need for valuable insights with the obligation to protect children's rights and well-being. Additional areas of discussion included the impact of existing policy and legal standards on research practice, as well as the types of practical resources or guidance that would best support researchers working with children and young people.

All interviews were scheduled at a time convenient to participants and conducted via Microsoft Teams. A semi-structured interview protocol guided the conversations. Each interview lasted between 30 and 90 minutes, was audio recorded, and subsequently transcribed verbatim using MS Teams.

Analysis: All transcriptions were manually checked for accuracy. Using these verified transcripts, the research team employed a grounded approach to qualitative analysis, applying thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), which emphasises a rigorous and systematic process.

Work Package 4: Stakeholder Engagement (children)

Participants: Core to this work was the meaningful consultation with children and young people spanning the full age range from babies and toddlers to post-primary pupils and young adults. In total consultations took place across two early years settings, three primary schools and two post primary schools.

Participants in Early Years Setting 1

The first early years setting was located in a large town. While the wider county is among the most affluent in Ireland, the town itself comprises a mix of private and social housing, resulting in a socioeconomically diverse catchment area. Families attending the setting ranged from relatively affluent households to those experiencing financial hardship, reflecting the local blend of stability and disadvantage.

Table 2. Participants in Early Years Setting 1

Group	Number of Children	Age Range	Gender	Ethnic Background	Family Structure	Additional Notes
Baby 1	1	17 months	Female	White Irish	2 working parents	Additional need: hip dysplasia; non-verbal; sensitive to noise
Baby 2	1	16 months	Female	Asian/Indian	2 working parents	
Toddler Room	12	2 – 2 years 6 months to 3 years	6 boys, 6 girls	4 White Irish, 5 Other White background, 2 Mixed background, 1 Black background	All two-parent working families	
ECCE – Green Pod	14	4-6 years	6 boys and 8 girls	4 White Irish, 6 Other White background, 1 Asian Chinese, 2 Asian Indian, 1 Other Asian background	Not specified	
ECCE – Purple Pod	15	4-6 years	7 girls, 8 boys	10 White Irish, 2 Other White background, 3 Mixed background	11 two-parent working families; 4 with one or no parent at home	2 children with additional needs (Aim level 7)

Participants in Early Years Setting 2

The second early years setting was located in a densely populated, multicultural inner-city neighbourhood. The area experiences some of the highest levels of deprivation in Ireland, with persistently high unemployment.

Table 3. Participants in Early Years Setting 2

Child	Gender	Age	Ethics background	Family Structure	SEN/Additional Needs
ECCE Child 1	M	5.2	Father is Turkish; mother is Irish	Lives with parents, older sister and two younger brothers	
ECCE Child 2	F	5.2	Ukrainian refugee	Lives with mother and older sister	Has speech disorder, receiving speech and play therapy
ECCE Child 3	F	5.1	Romanian	Lives with mother and 6 siblings	
ECCE Child 4	M	4.11	Brazilian	Shares his time with his Brazilian parents, has one older brother	
ECCE Child 5	F	4.9	Chinese	Lives with parents, older sister and 2 older brothers	Receiving speech and play therapy for expressive language difficulties
ECCE Child 6	F	4.8	Chinese	Lives with parents and older brother	
ECCE Child 7	F	4.7	Irish	Lives with mother, older sister and grandparents	

Procedure: Drawing on the work of O'Toole, Walsh, and Kerrins (2023) with babies, toddlers, and young children, data from the youngest participants in this study were collected by early childhood educators who were familiar to them and embedded in their daily routines and environments. This approach helped mitigate common challenges associated with accessing young children's voices in research by leveraging trusted relationships and familiar settings.

Following a participatory ethos, the research was designed so that early childhood educators played an active and collaborative role throughout. Rather than being treated as facilitators of a pre-designed process, they were invited to co-construct the research approach. A joint planning session brought together researchers and educators to build shared understanding of the project's goals and to explore, together, the most appropriate and respectful ways to engage young children. This collaborative planning process was grounded in mutual dialogue and trust, drawing on educators' deep knowledge of their settings and relationships with the children to shape context-sensitive and developmentally appropriate methods of data collection.

To capture children's experiences and perspectives, educators used a variety of tools aligned with the Mosaic approach (Clark, 2007), which values multiple forms of expression and combines visual, verbal, and observational methods to elicit young children's views. Through learning stories, drawings, photographs, video clips, and play-based interactions, children communicated in ways that were developmentally appropriate and meaningful to them. Educators acted as active interpreters of children's meaning, not merely as observers. As Wall, Arnott and Hall (2019) note, in research with very young children, good pedagogy is good research, an idea central to this participatory and ethically grounded approach.

To support the validity of findings and offer an additional interpretive lens, a member of the research team with experience in early years education visited each setting either for a full morning or afternoon. These visits involved observing interactions, engaging in informal and playful conversations with children and educators, and reflecting on the documentation in context. This step provided an opportunity to affirm the authenticity and relevance of the data while upholding the collaborative spirit of the research.

Analysis: All data handling throughout the project complied fully with GDPR requirements, with strong safeguards in place to protect participant privacy. Data were anonymised, coded, and stored securely on password-protected devices. Co-researcher educators uploaded anonymised files via individual, password-protected Microsoft Teams channels accessible only to the project team. Data was analysed using the NVivo software.

Primary Settings

Participants: The first primary setting was a DEIS Urban infant school situated in a residential area of a large town. It served a diverse intake, including both long-established local families and an increasing number of children from migrant backgrounds. The catchment area comprised a mix of private and social housing, with varied levels of need. The school received additional supports to address educational disadvantage and emphasised early intervention and inclusive practices in response to its community's diversity.

Table 4. Primary Setting 1

Child	Gender	Age	Ethic Background
Junior Primary Child 1	female	7.6	Irish
Junior Primary Child 2	female	8.2	Latvian
Junior Primary Child 3	male	7.6	Lithuanian
Junior Primary Child 4	male	7.8	Irish
Junior Primary Child 5	female	7.6	Zimbabwean
Junior Primary Child 6	female	7.10	Lithuanian

The second primary setting was a DEIS Band 2 urban girls' senior school located in a sizable town. It draws pupils from both the town and surrounding rural areas. The pupil body reflects a broad range of socioeconomic backgrounds, including established local families as well as those from migrant communities.

Table 5. Primary Setting 2

Child	Age	Ethnic Background
Senior Primary Pupil 1	11:4	Irish
Senior Primary Pupil 2	12.8	Irish
Senior Primary Pupil 3	10.2	Irish (family originally from Lithuania)
Senior Primary Pupil 4	12.9	Irish
Senior Primary Pupil 5	10.7	Irish (family originally from Latvia)
Senior Primary Pupil 6	9:1	Latvian
Senior Primary Pupil 7	9.9	Polish
Senior Primary Pupil 8	9.8	Irish
Senior Primary Pupil 9	10.8	Irish (family originally from Lithuania)
Senior Primary Pupil 10	10.6	Bangladeshi

The final primary setting (Setting 3) was a rural, co-educational DEIS primary school. The pupil intake reflected a range of family circumstances, including both well-established local households and those experiencing economic disadvantage.

Table 6. Primary Setting 3

Child	Gender	Age	Ethic Background
Primary Child 1	Male	9.2	Irish
Primary Child 2	Female	10.6	Irish
Primary Child 3	Female	10.8	Lithuania
Primary Child 4	Male	9.6	Polish
Primary Child 5	Male	9.4	Irish

Procedure: Data in the primary settings were gathered through playful, informal conversations with the children. A range of warm-up activities were used to help the children get to know the researcher and feel more at ease with one another. These initial tasks fostered a relaxed atmosphere in which children could participate comfortably. Conversations were then guided by a series of open-ended prompts, using pictures, drawings, actions, and accessible language to explore their views on safe and respectful ways of engaging with children and young people.

Post Primary Pupils

The first post-primary school was a voluntary, all-girls, non-fee-paying secondary school based in a provincial town. As part of the DEIS programme, the school receives additional supports to address educational disadvantage. The student population reflects a diverse socioeconomic and cultural profile, including pupils from both long-established local families and migrant backgrounds.

Table 7. Post Primary Setting 1

Pupil	Age	Ethnic Background
Post Primary Pupil 1	17.2	Irish
Post Primary Pupil 2	17.3	Irish
Post Primary Pupil 3	17.9	Irish
Post Primary Pupil 4	15.9	Irish
Post Primary Pupil 5	17.3	Irish
Post Primary Pupil 6	17.7	Irish
Post Primary Pupil 7	14.6	Irish (but family from Nigeria)
Post Primary Pupil 8	12.10	Irish
Post Primary Pupil 9	15.2	Irish
Post Primary Pupil 10	16.11	Irish

The second post-primary school was an inner-city, co-educational school serving a diverse and densely populated catchment area characterised by high levels of socio-economic disadvantage. Many families face economic hardship, and the student population reflects a broad mix of cultural and linguistic backgrounds. As a DEIS-designated school, it receives additional supports to address educational inequality and promote inclusion.

Table 8. Post Primary Setting 2

Pupil	Gender	Age	Ethic Background
Post Primary Pupil 11	Male	15.2	Irish
Post Primary Pupil 12	Male	17.1	Irish
Post Primary Pupil 13	Female	16.10	Polish
Post Primary Pupil 14	Male	17.3	Lithuanian
Post Primary Pupil 15	Female	15.8	Polish
Post Primary Pupil 16	Female	16.5	Irish
Post Primary Pupil 17	Male	16.8	Romanian

Procedure: The interviews with groups of post-primary pupils began with a brief warm-up session where they engaged playfully with one another to build comfort and rapport. Following this, key questions were posed about engaging ethically, sensitively, and respectfully with others. Pupils responded through a combination of verbal answers, drawings, and by discussing pictures, allowing for diverse and expressive participation.

Marginalised Voices

The Care Experienced Expert Panel (CEEP) in Ireland is composed of individuals with lived experience of the care system who provide crucial insights to shape policy and practice. For the purpose of this consultation, panel members were invited to participate in an online small-group interview, and three members, one male and two females, volunteered to share their perspectives. Their input focused on ethical engagement and consultation with care-experienced young people, helping to ensure that involvement is respectful, authentic, and inclusive of marginalised voices within the care system.

Analysis

All interviews and focus groups across the primary and post-primary settings, as well as the CEEP, were transcribed verbatim. The data were then analysed using thematic analysis, following the rigorous approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Ethical Considerations and Data Protection Throughout the Project

This study received ethical approval in January 2025 from Stranmillis University College's Research and Ethics Committee, in alignment with external frameworks such as BERA's Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2024) and EECERA's Ethical Code for Early Childhood Researchers (Bertram et al., 2024). Ethical decision-making was central to all stages of the project, ensuring respect, consent, and safeguarding were prioritised from data collection through to analysis and reporting.

All consultations, involving participants from babies through to adulthood, were conducted within a rigorous ethical framework. Age-appropriate information sheets were provided to participants and their parents or guardians where applicable. For younger children, assent was sought continuously during interactions to confirm their willing engagement, alongside formal consent from guardians. This approach ensured participation was fully informed, voluntary, and respectful of each child's capacity.

To protect participant privacy and confidentiality, all data handling complied strictly with GDPR regulations. Personal identifiers were removed to maintain anonymity, and data were stored securely on password-protected devices accessible only to the research team. These measures safeguarded the confidentiality of all participants and upheld the highest standards of data protection throughout the project.

Summary

Using a rigorous, co-produced, rights-based methodology, this study integrated insights from children (from babies through to young people) and adult experts on how to ethically engage when consulting with them.

Through advisory groups, stakeholder interviews, literature reviews, and embedded consultations across age groups and contexts, the process ensured that children's voices were not only heard but meaningfully influenced the design, conduct, and outcomes of the research. This holistic approach will help to deliver updated guidance that is ethical, inclusive, and practically informed by those it serves.

Chapter 2: Review of Evidence

Introduction

Ethical research involving children and young people has evolved significantly in recent years, reflecting a growing recognition of their rights, agency, and participation in knowledge production. Recent developments emphasise child-centred approaches, more nuanced understandings of informed consent and assent, and the use of innovative, participatory methodologies that prioritise children's voices while safeguarding their well-being. Advances in international ethical frameworks, the rise of co-research with children, and increasing attention to power dynamics have further shaped best practices. However, modern challenges, such as navigating digital ethics, ensuring inclusivity in diverse contexts, balancing protection with participation and an increased awareness of the need for environmental sustainability, continue to complicate ethical decision-making in research projects involving children.

Therefore, this review intends to provide researchers and policymakers with a synthesis of relevant developments, emergent ethical issues, and evidence-based good practice approaches to research involving children. Building on the important contribution of the previous guidance (DCYA, 2012), this review aims to explore the evolving legislation, concepts, practices and ethical risks associated with children's participation in research activities in multi-disciplinary contexts. The review will identify national and international legislative and policy developments, exploring evolving ethical issues and highlighting current methodological and best practice approaches to ethical research with children and young people.

Approach to the Review

The search strategy devised for this review adopted a multidisciplinary approach to identifying legislative, policy and research evidence from a wide range of fields such as education and care, medicine and health and social care as well as social science and computer science. The search strategy utilised keyword searches and applied the following search string:

> Infant OR Children OR Young People) AND (rights OR voice OR perspectives OR participation or participatory) AND (research OR consent OR assent) AND (digital OR methodology OR participatory approaches OR co-production) AND (recent)

A number of academic databases were searched (British Educational Index (BEI); Bloomsbury Education and Childhood Studies; Child Development and Adolescent

Studies; Digital Education Research Archive (DERA); Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ); EBSCO; Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC); ProQuest Education; SAGE Premier Journals; WorldCat; PubMed and Google Scholar).

Searches were refined to English language publications covering the period 2012 to 2025. Hand search methods were also employed to include known authors, publications recommended by members of the Advisory Working Group for the project and works of significance that were not returned through electronic searches.

An initial search was completed in December 2024, identifying a selection of peer-reviewed journal articles and research reports in addition to a plethora of relevant national and international policies and guidance documents. In May 2025, the search was updated using the same parameters as the initial search for the time-frame January to May 2025. This update did not produce any additional publications that met the inclusion criteria. Included publications were reviewed, analysed and synthesised in line with the key thematic areas identified in the preceding 'Guidance for developing ethical research projects involving children' (DCYA, 2012), namely:

- Minimising risk of harm.
- Informed consent and assent.
- Confidentiality and anonymity.
- Child protection principles.
- Legal obligations and policy commitments in relation to children.
- A child-centred, inclusive approach to research.

Minimising Risk of Harm

A core ethical responsibility in research is ensuring participants' safety and reducing potential harm (DCYA, 2012; UNICEF, 2013; BERA, 2024; Bertram et al., 2024). When conducting research with children, it is essential to consider the extent of risk they may encounter. Risk can take various forms, including physical, emotional, or social harm. While some studies, such as early-stage clinical trials, have evident risks, even research perceived as low-risk can lead to unintended negative effects, such as psychological distress or reinforcing stereotypes about particular social, cultural, racial, or religious communities.

Ireland's obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) provide a foundation for ethical research with children,

including the need to minimise risk. For example, Article 6- Right to Life, Survival, and Development highlights researchers must safeguard children's well-being and protection in all research activities. Likewise, the Right to Protection in Research, as articulated in Articles 19 and 36 of the UNCRC, emphasises that children must be protected from harm, abuse, and exploitation in all research contexts. These rights require a commitment to ethical reflection and rigorous safeguarding measures in research design, particularly as methodologies continue to evolve.

The International Ethical Guidelines for Health-Related Research Involving Humans (Council for International Organisations of Medical Sciences (CIOMS), (2016) and the World Medical Association's Declaration of Helsinki, (2023) advocate for a minimal risk standard, meaning that potential harm should not exceed what children encounter in everyday life or routine medical and psychological assessments. However, risk levels vary depending on the vulnerability of participants, and ethical decision-making must consider the balance between risk and benefit. Overestimating risk may lead to unnecessary exclusion from research, while underestimating risk can expose children to harm (Beckett and Warrington, 2024).

Risk of Harm in Sensitive Research

Importantly, research on sensitive topics should not automatically be classified as high-risk. For example, Beckett and Warrington (2024) highlight how ethics bodies may inadvertently limit children's involvement in abuse-focused research due to overly cautious risk assessments, potentially leading to negative consequences for both individual children and society. They argue for contextualised and proportionate approaches to risk assessment rather than blanket exclusions from sensitive research.

Ethics committees and researchers must assess risks in relation to children's typical experiences and ensure protective measures are in place, including pausing or halting research if a child's well-being is compromised.

Risk of Harm in Digital Research

Research involving children in digital contexts, including artificial intelligence (AI), has raised ethical concerns in recent years. Kucirkova et al. (2024) reviewed ethical challenges in participatory and non-participatory digital research methods, identifying risks related to deception, privacy violations, and data protection. They recommend inclusive, collaborative research practices that prioritise children's best interests in understanding their digital experiences. Similarly, Tolksdorf, Siebert and Zorn (2020)

outlined a number of ethical considerations in a study of child-robot interactions in a kindergarten context including safety, liability, and privacy, as well as the use of unevaluated learning content and adult supervision of child-robot interactions. The authors conclude with the recommendation for critical reflection on the use of this type of technology and the necessity of an ethical framework for exploring technology in the early years context.

Wang et al (2024) mapped the current global landscape of existing ethics guidelines for Artificial Intelligence, identifying the critical challenges in translating such ethical AI principles into practice for children including limited consideration of child development and diversity; minimal consideration for the role of guardians; too few child-centred evaluations that consider children's rights, best interests and wellbeing; and an absence of a coordinated, cross-sectoral, and cross-disciplinary approach to formulating ethical AI principles for children. The authors recommend increasing the involvement of key stakeholders (parents and guardians, AI developers, and children themselves) and direct support for design, development and implementation of ethical AI principles and systems in order to upload this long-standing ethical principle in a rapidly changing digital landscape. Schmuecker et al. (2024) further review the ethical underpinnings, promise, and risk of children's use of emerging technologies such as generative artificial intelligence (AI) and extended reality technology. The authors highlight the necessity of ethical evaluation in the development and implementation of such technologies through the use of participatory and inclusive methods to democratise approaches and understandings of how digital experiences shape children's development.

Minimising harm in research involving children requires a context-sensitive, proportionate, and child-centred approach. Ethics committees and researchers must ensure that risk assessments are balanced, evidence-based, and grounded in children's rights. As sensitive issues continue to emerge and research methodologies evolve, particularly in digital and AI-driven contexts, ongoing ethical scrutiny, multidisciplinary collaboration, and adaptive safeguarding measures are crucial in minimising risk for children while enabling meaningful participation in research that impacts their lives.

Informed Consent and Assent

Like minimising the risk of harm, ensuring informed consent and assent is a well-established ethical principle in research studies involving human participants (DCYA, 2012; UNICEF, 2013; BERA, 2024; Bertram et al., 2024), not least those involving children and young people. In such studies, this ethical principle involves gaining both the informed consent of parents/legal guardians and the assent of children themselves.

Parental Consent

The HSE National Policy for Consent in Health and Social Care Research (2025) allows for children aged 16-17 years old to consent to participation in research. Younger children will still require consent from a parent or guardian, as will children under the age of 18 in other research contexts. The policy states:

"...the protocol for obtaining consent must be carefully considered in order to ensure that the consent is freely given, is not given under any duress, and is not given as a result of a perceived imbalance of power or dependency, an unequal relationship with the researcher, or therapeutic misconception[2]" —

In parallel, the EU Clinical Trials Regulation (EU Regulation 536/2014) stipulates that children may only be involved in clinical trials if both the child provides assent and the parent or legal guardian gives informed consent. Both assent and consent can be withdrawn at any time.

Ireland's obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) further reinforce the importance of involving parents in the consent process (Article 4), while also recognising the child's evolving capacity to make decisions. This approach calls for a balance: respecting the guiding role of parents and carers while supporting children's growing autonomy. Kennan (2015) similarly argues for consent processes that both ensure parental involvement and recognise a child's ability to assent, especially in adolescence. In practice, this means that parental consent generally comes first, followed by the child's assent. However, there has been limited exploration of the ethical and practical tensions that may arise when a child is willing to participate but a parent refuses consent. In practice, parental

[2] "Therapeutic misconception refers to a situation where consent is given based on a misunderstanding of the research's purpose, risks, or benefits—leading to ethically problematic consent.

consent generally precedes the child's assent. This raises important ethical questions and highlights the need for a more nuanced, child-centred approach, one that safeguards children, but also values their developing competencies and respects their agency.

Children's Assent

In addition to parental consent, the HSE National Consent Policy (2025) argues appropriate children's assent should be sought in a child-appropriate manner and a child's refusal to participate or continue in research should be respected. Similarly, the EU Regulation 536/2014 Clinical Trials Regulation, acknowledges children and young people are capable of forming an opinion, assessing information and making decisions about their participation. Therefore, they must be fully informed of the risks and benefits of a research project in age-appropriate ways.

In addition to the informed parental consent, the recent fifth edition of the British Educational Research Association's Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (BERA, 2024) emphasise the principle of assent for children and young people with a need for consideration of the age, maturity and capacity of children and young people to make informed decisions. To aid this, the guidance outlines the requirement for appropriately designed information sheets and consent forms in clear accessible formats which take account of the differing ages, reading abilities and attention spans as well as neurodiversity of children participating in research. Moreover, researchers must consider the ways in which they can support processes of assent through collaboration with parents and carers and making appropriate use of written and verbal information. Likewise, within the ECCERA guidelines (Bertram et al., 2024), it is stated that consent to participate in research should be sought from children and young people in meaningful and child friendly ways with the need for ongoing assent to be obtained through careful consideration of non-verbal communications. Therefore, researchers should tune into the multiple communication methods of individual children (Horowicz and Stalford, 2023). This is further reinforced in Ireland's obligations under the UNCRC (United Nations, 1989) Freedom of Expression (Article 13) and Freedom of Thought (Article 14).

Modi et al., (2014) discuss procedures for consent, assent and dissent in clinical research involving children and note that a lack of objection on the part of children should not be taken as assent. Dissent is defined as the refusal to participate or the withdrawal of consent or assent, meaning consent or assent is more than the absence

of dissent. The authors note that dissent should be respected, even when parental consent has been obtained. In this way, whilst parental consent precedes the child's assent, dissent, or a lack of assent from the child overrides parental consent.

Overall, best practice principles suggest that informed consent and assent should be reflexive, ongoing, and renegotiable (Hammersley, 2014). Hagell and Benniche (2022) criticised practices which prioritise institutional requirements over the understanding and best interests of children and young people.

Assent for Very Young Children

The age and developmental stage of very young children poses some particular challenges in relation to gaining assent for participation in research projects. As a result, this age group has traditionally been under-researched and seldom heard.

However, some recent studies have explored the concept of assent with this age group and offer initial insights into including their voice in the relevant research projects. For example, Arnott et al (2020) adopted a rights-based perspective to examine three practical approaches (animated video information, narrative picture book, and reflective ethical helix) to negotiating informed consent in research involving children under 6 years old. The authors reviewed four studies which utilised creative methods to facilitate children's decision making in research participation and questioned the concept of a parent or carer in the role of a gatekeeper or proxy for the child's voice. The findings suggest there remains a need for pedagogically appropriate methods which match the maturity and capabilities of the children, and which facilitate of continuous negotiation of informed consent through reflexive questioning. Therefore, the review recommends four principles of gaining informed consent with very young children. These are:

- discrete opportunities for children to consent.
- continuous negotiation of consent, not just at the beginning of the project.
- pedagogically appropriate approaches.
- the creation of spaces for dialogue and children's reflection about their role.

Another example is outlined in Kyritsi's (2019) ethnographic study of creativity in the primary classroom. Kyritsi (2019) explored ways to elicit the active involvement of 25 primary school aged children in methodological decision-making through observation and qualitative interviews with children and their teachers. Addressing the unequal position of the children within procedural ethics practices, the author developed a

box system which enabled the children to renegotiate their ongoing consent, addressed the issue of classroom peer pressure and respected their right to privacy. The system involved two plastic boxes of different colours, one of which contained small pieces of paper with "yes" and "no" options, through which the children could indicate their preference to participate or opt out of the research at any time. The children selected a piece of paper, marked their choice and signed their name, placing the paper into a second box. Kyritsi (2019) concluded that the use of flexible research designs enabled the children to shape their participation and express their views authentically.

However, for the youngest children (infants and toddlers), and indeed those with certain special educational needs or disabilities, being preverbal or nonverbal means even those more creative approaches outlined by Kyritsi (2019) are unlikely to be workable in practice. For such children, O'Toole et al (2023) adopted a relational approach to ethics (Arnott et al., 2020) whereby assent was obtained on an ongoing basis through known adults attuning and responding to the subtle, individual, and multifaceted modes of communication of babies, toddlers and young children (Skånfors, 2009) alongside formal ethical procedures.

Assent from Young People (over 16 years)

At the other end of the age spectrum, assent and consent can also be particularly complex in research involving young people over the age of 16, especially when the study focuses on sensitive topics such as sexual health, contraception, and adolescent behavioural studies. Modi et al. (2014) highlight the inherent tensions between protecting young people's confidentiality and privacy while also ensuring appropriate consent processes are in place. In such cases, strict adherence to parental involvement may discourage participation, particularly when young people fear judgment, stigma, or breaches of confidentiality.

Taplin et al. (2022) further emphasise the challenges faced by research ethics committees in balancing the need for parental consent with the rights of children and young people to participate in research that may be both sensitive and beneficial to their development. Ethical review boards must weigh the potential risks of excluding young people from important research, such as limiting their access to information or interventions that could enhance their well-being, against the legal and ethical obligations to safeguard minors. The evolving nature of ethical guidelines and policies adds further complexity, with some frameworks advocating for more autonomy for

older adolescents in research participation, while others reinforce the role of parental oversight. This ongoing debate underscores the need for nuanced consent models that respect young people's rights while maintaining ethical integrity and safeguarding their welfare.

Digital Consent

The concept of digital consent adds to the considerations of differences in assent and parental consent for children over and under 16 years of age, with the age of digital consent in Ireland being 16 years old. For children under 16, parental consent must be obtained for use of digital platforms and services (Data Protection Commission, 2023). However, the ethical implications of digital consent are complicated by the accessibility of digital technologies from the earliest age.

For example, Flewitt et al (2024) reports the 'Toddlers, Tech and Talk' study which sought to develop knowledge on very young children's early talk and literacy learning at home across the four nations of the UK. The multiphase research utilised an online survey of 1444 parents and carers of children aged 0-3 years followed by interviews with 40 parents and 20 early years practitioners. The final phase examined 40 participatory case studies of children in the home. Key findings included descriptive information on the use of digital technology within the home environment by very young children. Findings revealed that children in the UK were born into highly technologised home environments with a high level of internet access. The survey reported that two-fifths of children aged 0 -3 years had access to a tablet within the family home, indicating that digital media are woven into the fabric of everyday life for children aged 0 - 3, with implications for children's communication and playful learning with technology. The study concludes with a need for further research to develop reliable, research-informed information to help ensure young children's positive experiences with digital devices.

Furthermore, the ethical landscape continues to be shaped by the evolving nature of digital technologies and their impact on children and young people (Pothong and Livingstone, 2022). Jörgensen et al., (2022) completed an international review of online research methods used to elicit children and young people's views and experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Analysis of 27 studies found that online surveys were widely used in this period with limited ethical consideration or participation in research design by the children and young people.

Informed consent is identified as a significant ethical challenge in online research with children and young people (Shukla, Pocock and Fegert, 2020). Hokke et al., (2018) highlighted the complexities of engaging child participants through digital platforms in an international scoping review of 65 research publications over the period 2006 to 2016. Ethical concerns identified included difficulties with parental and informed consent through online methods, the challenge of age verification in online interactions, participant vulnerability, privacy, confidentiality and anonymity, disparities in access and sample representativeness, as well as risk to researchers. The study emphasised importance of ongoing negotiated consent practices due to the flexibility of digital platforms. The authors concluded that digital methodologies brought unique ethical challenges requiring careful consideration by researchers and recommended the dearth of academic guidance on digital research methods with children and young people be addressed through dissemination of ethical guidance and methodological reporting.

Confidentiality and Anonymity

As acknowledged by DCYA (2012), confidentiality means that research data containing identifiable information about participants must not be shared with others without their explicit consent, except in cases involving child protection concerns. Data should be gathered with the participant's consent, and researchers must clarify who will have access to the data and for what purpose. Anonymity ensures that individual participants cannot be identified in research documentation unless they have explicitly agreed otherwise.

Ensuring confidentiality and anonymity in research involving children is a fundamental ethical and legal requirement. Children are recognised as a vulnerable group, necessitating additional safeguards to protect their personal data and privacy rights.

Legal and Ethical Frameworks for Data Protection

In Ireland, the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2016) establishes fundamental legal principles for protecting personal data, with specific provisions for children due to their vulnerability. GDPR mandates that researchers adhere to seven key principles of data protection to safeguard privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity. Transparency is crucial, requiring that information on data collection, storage, and dissemination be

presented in age-appropriate and comprehensible formats. Data collection must be purpose-specific, ensuring that children's personal data remains confidential through anonymisation and other protective measures.

Similarly, the Data Protection Commission's Children Front and Centre: Fundamentals for a Child-Orientated Approach to Data Processing (2021) outlines fourteen child-specific data protection principles. These principles emphasise the need for child-focused consent procedures, the prioritisation of children's best interests in data processing, and the necessity of safeguarding against profiling for commercial purposes. The document also highlights the importance of incorporating data protection measures by design and default to create privacy-respecting environments for children in both online and offline contexts.

The Health Information Bill (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2024) further reinforces data protection considerations, particularly in health research. This legislation introduces the establishment of a Digital Health Record, digitising patient records (including children's) to enhance accessibility while ensuring data protection. Ireland's commitment to the European Health Data Space (EHDS) Regulation places additional obligations on researchers and policymakers to balance data accessibility with confidentiality protections.

Ireland's commitments under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) provide an essential ethical foundation for data protection in research involving children. Article 16 affirms every child's right to privacy, necessitating strong ethical research procedures to ensure confidentiality, anonymity, and data protection. Additionally, Articles 19 and 36 highlight the need for protective measures against harm and exploitation in research settings. Ethical research must align with these rights by ensuring children's data is used responsibly and in ways that do not jeopardise their privacy or well-being.

Beyond legal requirements, ethical frameworks provide additional safeguards for maintaining confidentiality and anonymity in research with children. UNICEF's Ethical Research Involving Children (Graham et al., 2013) underscores the importance of researcher responsibility in ensuring privacy and confidentiality. It advocates for robust ethical safeguards when engaging with young participants, recognising their potential limited capacity to fully grasp privacy risks.

Digital Privacy

The updated British Educational Research Association Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (BERA, 2024) highlight the evolving challenges of digital research. This guidance stresses that fundamental ethical principles, including privacy and confidentiality, must be upheld even in rapidly changing online research environments. Likewise, the European Early Childhood Education Research Association (EECERA) Ethical Code for Early Childhood Researchers (Bertram et al., 2024) expands these principles to address new technological developments, including visual imaging, tracking technologies, and artificial intelligence. The code cautions against data collection through third-party platforms such as social media.

Adding to this, Schneble et al., (2021) note that social media terms and conditions often lack clarity, leading to potential privacy breaches. This is particularly concerning as children may not fully understand the implications of sharing personal information online. Methodologically, while social media offers opportunities for engagement and data collection, ethical frameworks have yet to comprehensively address its risks, especially regarding children's ability to provide informed consent in digital environments (Hunter et al., 2018).

Overall, balancing data accessibility with stringent protection measures, in both online and offline contexts, remains crucial to uphold children's rights and ensure ethical integrity in research involving young participants.

Child Protection Principles

Ensuring child protection in research requires a robust ethical framework that integrates legal obligations, international commitments, and best practice guidelines. Ethical research with children must prioritise their rights, well-being, and meaningful participation while safeguarding against harm. This necessitates a rights-based approach, underpinned by national legislation and international standards.

Legal and regulatory frameworks in Ireland reinforce these ethical principles. The Children and Family Agency Act (Government of Ireland, 2013) established Tusla, the central agency for child and family services, mandating that children's voices be considered in service planning and evaluation. The Children First Act (Government of Ireland, 2015) further enshrines child protection responsibilities, placing statutory duties on professionals and organisations, including researchers, to safeguard children from abuse and neglect. These legal measures ensure child protection is embedded

within research processes, necessitating clear reporting procedures, interagency cooperation, and rigorous ethical review.

As with previous core ethical principles, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) provides a foundational framework for child protection, particularly through Articles 3 and 12. Article 3 mandates that the best interests of the child must be a primary consideration, requiring researchers to minimise risk and maximise potential benefits. Article 12 affirms children's right to express their views freely in matters affecting them, emphasising the importance of participatory methodologies that authentically capture children's perspectives. Research must navigate the ethical complexity of ensuring children's voices are not misinterpreted or tokenised, as noted by I'Anson (2013), who critiques adult-centred narratives in research and advocates for methodologies that genuinely respect children's agency.

In practice, ethical research with children must balance protection with empowerment. The ERIC (2013) framework emphasises that ethical research is deeply connected to researchers' attitudes, values, and assumptions about childhood. Graham et al. (2013) discuss the increasing recognition of children's competence and agency, highlighting the ethical responsibility to ensure they are well-informed, able to consent or decline participation, and free to withdraw at any stage. Ethical dilemmas, such as power disparities in adult-child relationships and the ongoing nature of ethical decision-making, require researchers to engage in reflexive practices.

In order to uphold this key ethical principle, high-quality research with highly competent researchers is required. Modi et al. (2014) stress the link between ethical conduct and researcher training, advocating that those working with children be appropriately qualified, trained, and experienced. The Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA) National Standards for Children's Services (2018) provide a structured framework for safeguarding children in research settings, emphasising rights-respecting, child-centred approaches to care and support.

Legal Obligations and Policy Commitments

The legal and policy landscape governing ethical research with children in Ireland has evolved significantly in recent years, reflecting commitments to children's rights, participation, and well-being. These frameworks reinforce the necessity of ethical

considerations in research, ensuring that children's voices are heard and that their rights are upheld.

A foundational legal development in Ireland was the 2012 Referendum on the Thirty-First Amendment of the Constitution - Children Bill (Government of Ireland, 2012), which resulted in the incorporation of Article 42A into the Irish Constitution. This amendment affirmed children as independent rights holders, distinct from their parents or carers, and reinforced their right to be heard in judicial and administrative proceedings affecting them. It also refined the legal basis for state intervention in cases of abuse, neglect, or harm and facilitated adoption for children whose parents could not provide adequate care, particularly those in long-term foster care. This amendment aligns with the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), ensuring that children's welfare and participation are central to decision-making.

Complementing this constitutional change, a series of national policies have sought to embed children's rights and participation into governance and service provision. Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People (2014-2020) (DCEDIY, 2019) established five national outcomes relating to health, learning and development, protection from harm, economic security, and participation. It also set out six transformational goals to improve policy effectiveness, including early intervention, listening to children, and ensuring quality services. Building on this, Young Ireland: National Policy Framework for Children and Young People (2023-2028) (DCEDIY, 2023) further embedded these principles, aiming to place children's needs at the centre of government initiatives, with specific strategies outlined for collecting and using disaggregated data on children and young people to inform policy and practice.

In addition to these constitutional and policy frameworks, research with children in Ireland must also comply with statutory safeguarding obligations, including those outlined in the Children First Act 2015 (Government of Ireland, 2015), which establish mandatory reporting, Child Safeguarding Statements, and designated liaison roles for organisations engaging with children.

Participation

The Participation of Children and Young People in the Decision-making Action Plan (2024-2028) (DCEDIY, 2024) represents the second iteration of Ireland's national

strategy for ensuring children's voices shape decision-making. This action plan focuses on embedding participation across government, policy, legislation, and research, while also promoting inclusive and accessible structures to support engagement in communities, education, health, social services, the judiciary, and online environments. It reviews progress made in the initial action plan and sets out a revised approach to strengthening participatory frameworks.

At a European level, the EU Youth Strategy (2019-2027) (Council of the European Union, 2018) emphasises engagement, connection, and empowerment, fostering youth participation in consultation processes and civic life. Similarly, Ireland's First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families (2019-2028) (DCEDIY, 2018) highlights the importance of a rights-respecting approach to early childhood policy, with a particular focus on research, data, and evaluation to enhance outcomes for young children.

Children's perspectives have also been directly incorporated into policy through consultation initiatives such as What WE Think - Consultation with Children and Young People on Children's Rights (DCEDIY, 2021). This study, conducted by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY), gathered views from 1,215 children (aged 4-13) and 46 young people (aged 13-18) in schools and youth councils. These insights contributed to Ireland's reporting on the UNCRC, the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), and the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), reinforcing the importance of direct engagement with children in shaping policy and research.

Sustainability

Ethical guidelines for research with children have also evolved to reflect these commitments. The British Educational Research Association (BERA) Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2024) set out key principles for researchers, emphasising responsibilities such as ensuring children's welfare and promoting environmental sustainability. Similarly, the European Early Childhood Education Research Association (EECERA) Ethical Code for Early Childhood Researchers (Bertram et al., 2024) acknowledges the need to balance quality of life for children with environmental sustainability, reinforcing the intergenerational responsibility of researchers.

Together, these legal and policy frameworks provide a robust foundation for ethical research with children, ensuring that their rights, voices, and well-being remain central to decision-making and academic inquiry.

A Child-Centred, Inclusive Approach to Research

It is increasingly acknowledged that research involving children must be underpinned by a rights-based framework that ensures their participation is meaningful, ethical, and inclusive. Ireland's obligations under the UNCRC (United Nations, 1989) emphasise key principles such as non-discrimination (Articles 2, 20, 22, 23) and respect for children's views (Article 12), ensuring all children, regardless of background, ability, or status, are included in research opportunities. This includes looked after children (20), refugee children (22) and children who have special educational needs (SEND). Ethical research must therefore actively avoid exclusionary practices and ensure children's voices are heard, valued, and acted upon.

The National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making 2015–2020 (DCYA, 2015a) was a pivotal step in embedding a participatory culture, guided by the Lundy Model (Lundy, 2007). This strategy focused on creating supportive legal, policy, and infrastructural frameworks to promote the participation of children across various sectors. Similarly, the DCYA's Practical Guide to Including Seldom-Heard Children and Young People in Decision-Making (DCYA, 2015b) provided a structured approach to overcoming barriers faced by those with fewer opportunities to participate.

Global frameworks such as UNICEF's Ethical Research Involving Children (Graham et al., 2013) have further strengthened ethical research practice by advocating for respect, beneficence, and justice. This compendium highlights the importance of transparency, reflexivity, and collaboration, ensuring that ethical decision-making is embedded within all stages of research involving children.

Participatory Approaches in Research with Children

The conceptualisation of children and young people as active participants in research has evolved significantly. Children's participation is no longer confined to being passive subjects; rather, they are increasingly recognised as co-researchers with agency and evolving capacities (Sun et al., 2023). Shaw, Brady and Davey (2011) proposed a model illustrating various levels of children's involvement, ranging from

consultation to full collaboration in research processes, including decision-making, data collection, and dissemination. This shift aligns with the BERA Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2024), which highlight the need for reflexive and situated approaches that recognise structural inequalities and power dynamics.

A key challenge in participatory research is ensuring that engagement is meaningful rather than tokenistic (Kennan, Brady and Forkan, 2018). Montreuil et al. (2021) examined 57 studies on participatory approaches used with children aged 0–12, identifying prevalent ethical considerations such as power dynamics, authenticity of children's voices, and protection of their best interests. The study found that children were most frequently involved in data interpretation and analysis (65%), research design (46%), and research question development (44%). The authors stress that ethical participatory research must address disparities in power relationships and avoid exploitative or superficial engagement.

Save the Children (2021) Nine Basic Requirements for Meaningful and Ethical Children's Participation provide a structured framework to ensure ethical engagement, advocating for participation that is transparent, voluntary, respectful, inclusive, and accountable. TUSLA's Child and Youth Participation Strategy (2019–2023) and Child and Youth Participation Toolkit (2016) similarly reinforce the importance of diverse methodologies, such as focus groups, youth advisory boards, and digital tools, to ensure children's voices are incorporated in research and decision-making.

Participatory Approaches with Very Young Children

There is growing recognition that very young children, including infants and toddlers, can contribute meaningfully to research when appropriate methodologies are used (Horgan, 2024). EECERA's Ethical Code for Early Childhood Researchers (Bertram et al., 2024) emphasises the importance of refining ethical protocols to include under-researched groups such as children aged 0–6.

O'Toole, Walsh and Kerrins et al., (2023) conducted a national study consulting with babies, toddlers, and young children to inform the revision of Aistear, Ireland's Early Childhood Curriculum Framework. This research employed a participatory action research (PAR) approach, where early childhood educators acted as co-researchers using learning stories, photographs, and observations. Findings highlighted the importance of relationships, play, and hands-on experiences, reinforcing the need for

a slow relational pedagogy that nurtures children's engagement. The Lundy Model was instrumental in ensuring children's views were not only heard but acted upon during the curriculum revision process.

Despite the progress in including very young children in research, Lundy et al., (2024) warns of the limitations imposed by traditional notions of competency and agency. Researchers must balance ethical obligations to protect young children while creating methodologies that allow their voices to emerge authentically. O'Toole and Hayes (2020) advocate for a more nuanced understanding of participation, where children's contributions are recognised as multifaceted and accessed through diverse methods beyond verbal articulation.

Summary

Ethical research with children requires ongoing reflection on power relations, agency, and the protection of children's rights. Schmid and Garrels (2024) propose an ethical toolkit to address key concerns such as informed consent, confidentiality, and relationships between researchers and child participants. Similarly, Hagell and Benniche (2022) highlight the need for robust ethical scrutiny in participatory research within healthcare settings, advocating for a shift towards dynamic, iterative ethical governance rather than rigid procedural ethics.

As Corney et al. (2021) assert, consultation alone is insufficient for genuine participation. Researchers must move beyond superficial engagement and ensure that children's perspectives shape research design, implementation, and outcomes. Robson (2018) calls for an expansion of children's participation in ethical scrutiny, citing examples from international paediatric medical research where young people contribute as advisory members in ethics committees.

Overall, this evidence review has provided an assessment of recent developments in multidisciplinary ethical research involving children. It has highlighted the significant advancements in national and international legislative and policy contexts, as well as the evolving ethical issues and best practice approaches. The review underscores the importance of modernising ethical principles, practices, and governance procedures to ensure currency, relevancy and effectiveness within the changing landscape in child-focused research. By synthesising research evidence from 2012 to 2025, this review has identified key themes such as children's participation as co-researchers, inclusion of very young children, sensitive research topics, and research in the digital

environment. In all contexts, researchers must engage in reflexive practices, acknowledge power differentials, and adopt participatory methodologies that authentically capture children's experiences and perspectives. Ultimately, research with children should not only include them as participants but empower them as co-creators of knowledge, ensuring their views influence both research processes and broader policy decisions.

Chapter 3: From Toddlers to Teens: Young Voices, Views and Experiences

Introduction

This chapter shares the voices, views, and lived experiences of children and young people who took part in the project, offering powerful insights into how they believe they should be ethically engaged in matters that affect them. The sample was deliberately broad and inclusive, involving babies and toddlers and pre-school children in the ECCE programme, junior and senior primary pupils aged 7 to 12, and post-primary students aged 12 to 17.

What sets this chapter apart is that children were not simply participants, they were commentators on the very process of participation itself. Across all age groups, children thoughtfully expressed how adults should listen to them, involve them, and create environments of trust, choice, and respect. Their contributions highlight the importance of ethical engagement that is voluntary, inclusive, and meaningful and they offer clear, age-appropriate guidance on how this can and should be done.

Willing Participants

All children and young people who participated in this project affirmed the importance of having their voices heard and respected in matters that affect them. The ethical principle of participation was reflected even among the youngest participants in the toddler room, who, according to their educator, expressed their views, for example, by sharing preferences about nap time.

> *By actively listening we can tell if they are ready to move on. Asking intuitive questions that are open ended ensures we are giving them the opportunity to let us know what they want. Questions we ask include: What do you want to do? How do you feel about doing this? Their behaviour and opinions encourage us to change the routine when it is necessary. For example: Sleep time: The children pick who they want to put them to sleep. Children show different attachment to different educators regularly. The children were finding the transition from play time to sleep time difficult so after collaboration with them and the educators we decided to alter our sleep routine to include a wind down period. This involves the children choosing calming music, turning off the lights and relaxing for a few minutes. All changes are reviewed and reconfigured as per the children's needs, views and opinions. (Toddler room)*

Pre-school children also enjoyed the participatory experience as summed up by a four-year-old ECCE boy (Purple Pod): *"I have lots of things to tell you … teachers have to listen to us …and give us choices."*

Primary aged children agreed that their views and opinions matter as is evidenced in the following statements:

> *"I think that our views would be kind of more important, because we're like children, and we know like, what kids like, like on the playground, and adults like might just like, put in a swing or something like one swing for, like, the whole people outside, and more than one swing, because obviously everybody's going to be fighting over the same one." (Senior Primary Pupil 3)*
>
> *"I like it because you get to put your own opinion from like a child's point of view instead of an adult one all the time, because adults have different views on things than children do, because adults go through things differently than children do." (Senior Primary Pupil 5)*
>
> *"I would feel like happy, because it would make me feel like I've been heard and I'm important." (Primary Pupil 2)*

Post-primary pupils echoed these perspectives and further developed the ideas expressed by the younger children, reflecting a growing maturity and sustained commitment to rights-based participation as children grow older, as evidenced below:

> *"It makes us feel valued. Our opinion is valid." (Post Primary Pupil 12)*
>
> *"Like it'd be nice to be considered by people who are making the decisions." (Post Primary Pupil 4)*
>
> *"It's important for adults to speak to find out what we think or feel, because even if they think they have an idea, like, obviously adults were children at one point as well. Like, there's different circumstances nowadays, and like social media, like young people mightn't feel the same as their parents did when they were young, and so it's important to find out how we feel, how we feel adults aren't dictating all the time in that sense." (Post Primary Pupil 10)*
>
> *"Yeah, I agree as I think it's especially important because it's adults and parents that make a lot of the decisions for young people and for children and people who are growing up at the minute. So, if you don't understand what's important to them and how they feel about certain situations, you can't really make decisions that will help them." (Senior Primary Pupil 5)*

> *"Sure, why would adults even care about sustainability issues, for example, they are not going to be around long enough for such issues to impact them." (Post Primary Pupil 8).*

> *"There's always been a big disconnect between adults and children, and that shouldn't be the way at all. And parents and adults should be taking children's, like, ideas into consideration, because they're all valid, and should bridge that gap." (Post Primary Pupil 3)*

Voluntary and Agentic Participation

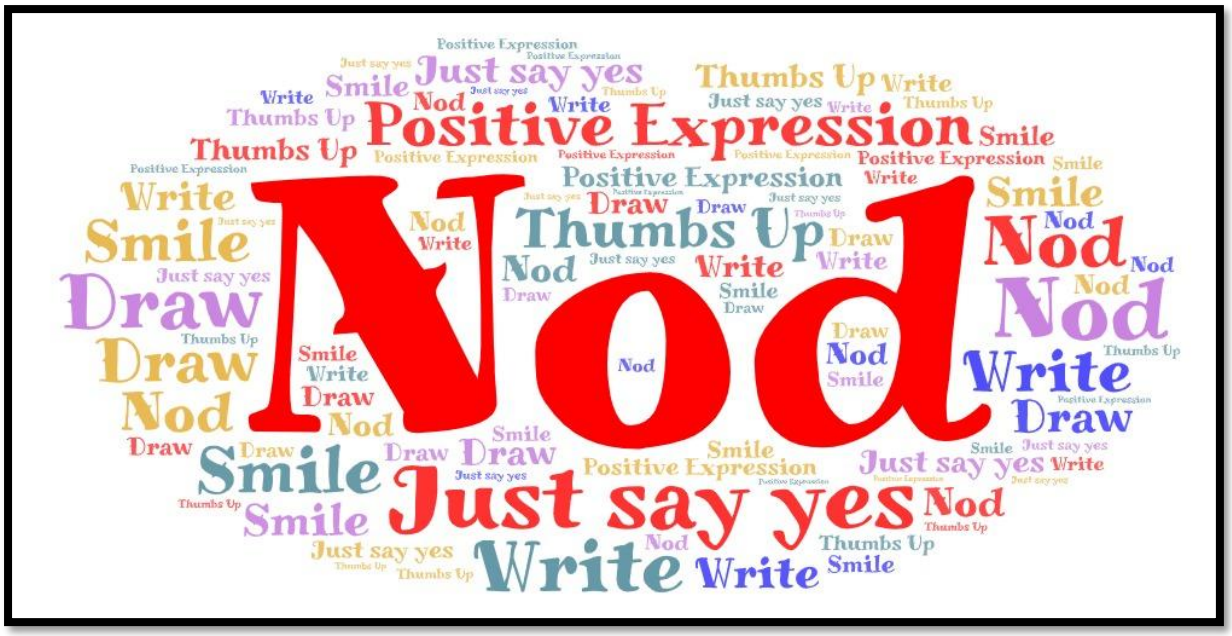
Ethical participation requires more than simply involving children and young people, it demands recognition of their evolving capacities, individual preferences, and varying levels of interest and readiness. Respecting ethical participation means, according to the children's evidence, acknowledging each child right to choose how, and to what extent, they wish to be involved, ensuring that participation is flexible, voluntary, and meaningful.

Integral to meaningful and ethical participation, as evidenced in the children's citations below, is that the process must be entirely voluntary. This means participants are free to choose whether or not to take part, without any pressure, coercion, or obligation.

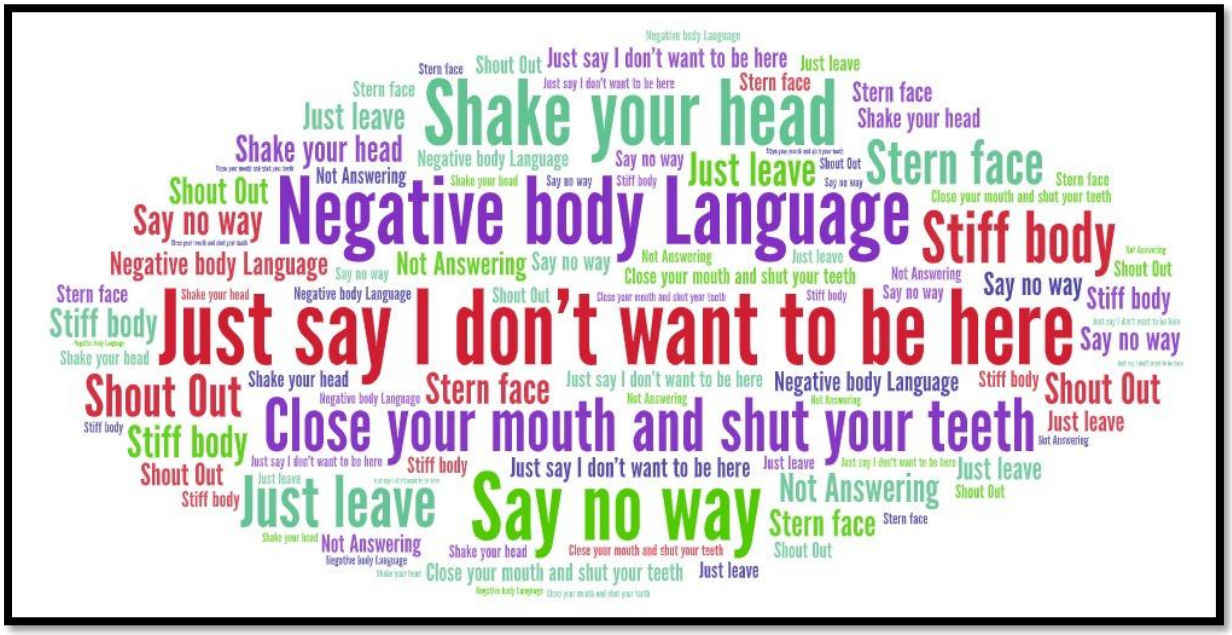
> *"I would want to have freedom to say yes or no and not feel forced to participate." (Post Primary Pupil 10)*

> *"I would want to tell them yes I want to do it or no, I don't." (Junior Primary Pupil 3)*

The children were quite forthcoming in identifying the various ways they could showcase their willingness to engage, many of which are detailed below:



Likewise, all children, including some of the youngest, were quite articulate about the ways in which they could show their disapproval:



Yet, older children in particular, seemed to recognise that power dynamics could play a part especially when 'professional' adults are involved. As one primary school girl explained:

> *"Because you are always told to like, respect people that are older than you, you might not want to say no in case they think you are being disrespectful – so it has to be made very clear that you don't have to do it if you don't want*

> *to. And maybe having your parents there too, or someone like a teacher, so you would feel confident enough to say no." (Senior Primary Pupil 2)*

It is paramount therefore, as recommended in the above citation, that the voluntary nature of participation is made explicit from the outset, before the research begins. The child's level of involvement must be entirely their choice, and they should be free to withdraw at any time, without any pressure or coercion even in the form of offering incentives. This underscores the ethical principle of agency, as summed up in the comments below:

> *"It has to be your decision. I wouldn't want to feel pressurised to do anything that I didn't want." (Senior Primary Pupil 5)*
>
> *"I would want to be free to walk away even if I had agreed in the first place." (Post Primary Pupil 4)*
>
> *"Involvement must be genuine, like, if you just agree to being involved because there is a reward or something, you really wouldn't care what you did. But if you like volunteer, like with no pressure, no incentive, well then you like want to do it and you will give like your proper views you know what I win, like you're just there to win." (Post Primary Pupil 7).*

This level of agency and autonomy was also clearly in evidence in the baby room when:

> *"The educator knew once again to sit back and allow Baby I the independence and autonomy to choose whatever item she wanted to play with next. Baby I decided the game was over and she wanted to move on to something else. As an experienced educator, R knew to allow her time and space to continue exploring."*

Informed and Authentic Consent and Assent

To ensure that children can make a meaningful choice about participating in the consultation process, it is essential that consent or assent is based on a clear understanding. This means providing participants with sufficient, age-appropriate information so that they fully grasp what their involvement entails, as summed up by a primary school girl aged 10:

"You need to be clear at all times about what you're going to be talking about and you also need to be clear where the messages are going and that kind of thing before you would say yes." (Senior Primary Pupil 8).

For very young children, informed consent often takes the form of ongoing, in-the-moment assent, often called "tuning in." This involves closely observing children's verbal and non-verbal cues, such as body language, to assess whether they are comfortable, engaged, or in distress as evidenced by the educator in the baby room below:

For babies it is so important to us that we tune into their cues, needs and wants. By fully understanding the tiniest cue our key staff in the baby room can recognise if a child is out of sorts or behaving differently. This might be the slightest cue that someone who does not know the child to this level would miss

V likes to use gestures to show us what she wants. She will point to an item that she wants or point in a direction she wants to go. The other day she was pointing in the direction of the phone. C, her key person, thought she might like to go for a wander around the crèche, so brought her out for a little walk around, but that did not satisfy her need. Then C thought that it might be because her Dad calls the phone when he arrives at the front door to collect her. C talked to V about Dad coming later and distracted V with other things. She still pointed at the phone, and it still could be that she wants Dad to arrive and the phone to ring to say he is here. Then C remembered that they have a play phone in the room but the Wobbler Room borrowed it and had not returned it. C and V went in search of the phone, which C found. They returned with the phone and V happily played with the phone.

Yet, this type of relational and responsive engagement is not only essential for babies and toddlers (as seen in the Baby Room observations), but equally relevant for older

children and young people too. It reinforces the idea that assent is not a one-off event, but an ongoing ethical process which affords participants the opportunity to change their minds.

> *As senior primary school child 8 reflected: "sometimes, I mightn't feel confident enough to say anything, but my face might show it, so it's important for the adult to keep checking if children are okay."*

This highlights the ethical imperative to assent as a dynamic, dialogic process, not a one-time agreement, evidenced by a one-off hand print, smiley face or signature, and to uphold the rights, agency, and emotional safety of children and young people at every stage.

Yet a child's assent does not replace the importance of informed consent. Both the child and their parents should be clearly informed, in an age-appropriate and child-friendly way, about what the process involves before any participation begins. Having parents go through the requirements with their child and giving their agreement provides an added layer of reassurance and validation that what is happening is safe and appropriate.

As for post-primary pupils, while sometimes teenagers can feel constrained by adult authority, having their approval can also be a source of reassurance as evidenced in the following comments:

> *"Why is this whole issue of consent so important? Because they are our guardians… and even though we're 17, we might think we're mature enough, they sort of have a bit of a say in what we do." (Post Primary Pupil 7)*

> *"You wouldn't agree to something unless your parents had read it, or were with you, or unless you really understood it. Like, what's happening, where's it happening, who is it with?" (Post Primary Pupil 12)*

Some children also referred to the child-friendly information sheet they received, as well as the one provided to their parents, as helping them feel "much more prepared" (Primary Pupil, 3) for what the consultation process would involve. As a result, they felt "more at ease" (Post-Primary Pupil, 6) with what was to come, summed up as follows:

> *Nothing is left unsaid, and that we know exactly what is expected of us. And that was an official letter, and our teachers would have said Stranmillis University College goes on the top…. a kind of logo… so it wasn't just anybody asking us." (Post Primary Pupil, 7).*

An educator from one of the preschools also noted how helpful the preparatory video was in getting the younger children ready for the researcher's visit. The children responded positively to the researcher's friendly and welcoming tone and were especially excited about the arrival of Sparky the puppet, eager to play and engage with him, asking every morning "*is Sparky coming today?*"

Clear and Open Communication

In this way, effective, clear and developmentally appropriate communication is essential at all times, to uphold the respect, autonomy, and agency in participatory processes involving children. Not only should children receive information that is accessible, transparent and tailored to their age, culture and understanding as explained by one young primary school pupil (junior primary pupil 3): "*I can't read very well as yet, so I really liked the pictures, they helped me understand what I needed to do.*" Another primary school pupil (Primary Pupil 4) who used English as a second language agreed: "*I liked the pictures too.*"

Researchers try to find things out.

In our research, we are trying to find out your ideas about how best to chat to you as adults and learn from what you have to tell us on important issues that matter to you!

That means you would talk and draw about what, when, where and how you are happy to speak with adults and what, when, where and how you are not happy to speak with adults.

Would you like to take part in a research project?

Here is some information about how the research project will work.

The research will start at X time in pre-school and finish up X.

You can show me your favourite toy or book; draw a picture or you can bring me on a tour of your room. You choose!

I would like to watch you playing and take photos of your drawing and play and write down some of your ideas.

When I want to take a photo of your work I will ask for your permission.

If it is okay, you can put a smiley face sticker on your work.
If I see the smiley sticker on your work, I know you are happy for me to take a photo of it.

If you do not want me to take a photo of your work that is fine; no one will mind.

But clear and open communication is just as important during the engagement process

itself, to ensure that children fully understand what is being asked of them, and that the researcher, in turn, accurately hears and interprets what the child is expressing as outlined by the children and teenagers themselves.

> *"It's important that they don't overwhelm us by keeping on asking questions" (Senior Primary Pupil, 10)*
>
> *"Give people time to speak" (Senior Primary Pupil, 2)*
>
> *"Don't pick people out randomly, maybe wait until they put up their hand" (Senior Primary Pupil, 8)*
>
> *"It's important that you understand what they are on about and they don't start asking you all of these random questions. You need to understand what you are being asked." (Post Primary Pupil, 14)*

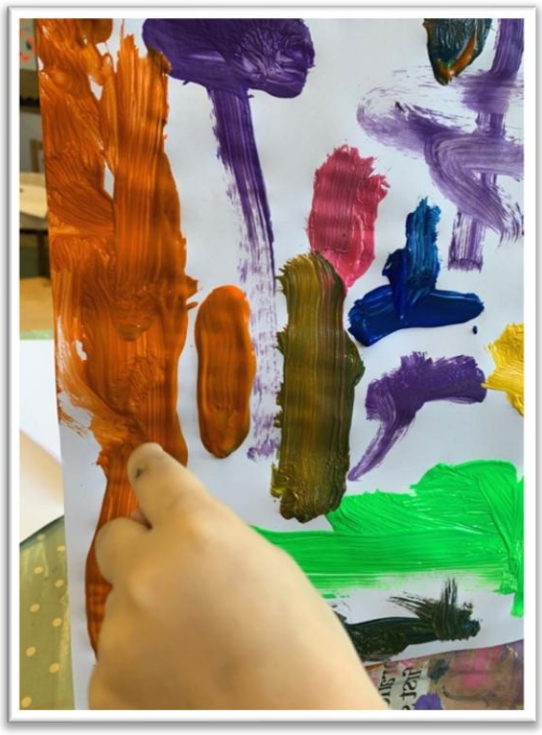
Recognising the critical role of effective and meaningful communication, the children and young adults contributed a variety of creative ideas for how it can best be facilitated. The following excerpt from one of the preschool/ECCE classes reflects a rich tapestry of multimodal communication (spoken language, symbolic art, imaginative play, stories, and emotional expression, illustrating how young children can express their ideas, interests, and creativity through both verbal and non-verbal means.

> *One of the children brought in a fairy door to show her friends and it was the igniting spark that inspired the children to bring fairies into their play. We invited the children to express their thoughts and ideas around how to develop and enhance this interest in a meaningful way.*
>
>
>
> *The children were interested in making a fairy garden from our nature table. So, we set up the tuff tray with the fake grass and flowers sand and small world. This transferred to a creative activity where the children made a fairy garden*
>
>
>

using paper, glue and leaves and flowers from outside. The children were still referring to the fairy door that sparked their interest and so we gave them the lollipops sticks, sequins and butterflies. And they made their own fairy doors to put in the garden.

This activity extended to the flowers in our garden. When they saw the fairy house and toad stool in the floor planters the children asked if they could tend the garden. So, we took a small group of them to water the plants with the watering can.

In the other preschool setting, where the majority of children use English as a second language, further creative suggestions were observed. The children expressed themselves through painting and even during play, such as in the sand tray.



"I want to mix the blue and orange… I can paint more things" (ECCE child 7)

Two girls, ECCE child 5 and 6, wanted to show the educator what they like doing in the sand: "it's a dinner".

In the junior primary setting, the children mentioned singing, dancing, and playing games, and also referred to iPads as a helpful communication tool. Notably, as the children grew older, digital tools became more prominent, as detailed below:

> *"Well, maybe some people in their school, in our school, wouldn't want to, wouldn't like to voice their opinion so maybe an anonymous vote, or something like, on the computer would work." (Post Primary Pupil, 10)*
>
> *"It's more fun for our age to complete it on tablets and that kind of thing, and you're much more familiar with doing it, because we are more familiar with phones, social media and that type of thing." (Senior Primary Pupil, 8)*
>
> *"An online survey or social media in some way might be good" (Primary Pupil,4)*
>
> *"It's a lot less daunting having to do it like online rather than in face to face, because you're saying these things out loud, and you're like really thinking others are listening to me, if you're writing them down or like texting or typing them, you don't care as much, if you get me." (Post Primary Pupil, 12)*

But as one of the post primary pupils articulated:

> *"Although online, you'd never know if the person's being honest, and like, you wouldn't know if the person is really, like, taking time to, like, read and understand everything that's going on, whereas in like, whenever it's in real life, you kind of see the person's body language and how they feel with all the questions being said." (Post Primary Pupil, 7)*

Respectful and Trusting Relationships

The evidence gathered also showed that building up trusting relationships with adults matters greatly to children, creating the foundation for integrity, accountability, and meaningful engagement, as clearly depicted by R, the educator from the baby room, in the following cameo:

Slow relational pedagogy is very important in our practice. We believe the best place to be is sitting on the ground interacting with the children. Knowing when to step in and support a child with their autonomy and independence and when to pause and wait is a key trait in an experienced educator.

Here R patiently sat on the floor beside Baby I while she explored what she would like to play with. Baby I accessed a box of toys that she regularly frequents and opened it up to explore the contents. She found several items she was interested in. R watched and encouraged from her seated position. I would glance over at R, perhaps checking she was still there and close by, but she appeared very happy to continue to explore the toys. Baby I found some material and began to move the game that I was referring to, as she regularly plays this game with R. As baby I lifted the material R instinctively knew what I wanted, and R began to play peek-a-it around. R is familiar with the boo with baby I. R firstly placed the material over her own face and pulled it off. R knew the importance of going slowly around baby I. R did this several times, each time using the same words and looking straight at baby I.

R then placed the material over I's face and pulled it off. Baby I is smiling and looking straight at R as this occurs. The second time R places the material over I's face I reaches up to take it off herself. This continues several times, each time Baby I is laughing harder and harder. Baby I is looking directly at R, while she is laughing. The connection between them is visible throughout the interaction. It is clear there is a trusting secure relationship here.

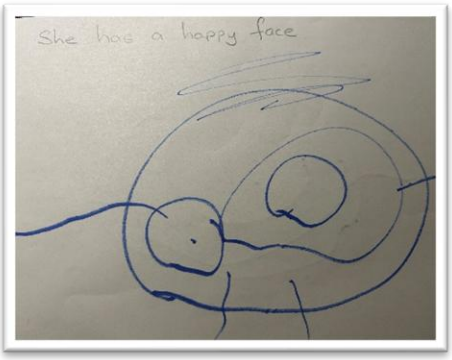
The significance of building a trusting relationship with the adult who is conducting the consultation was reinforced by several of the children as evidenced below:

> *"...and maybe if you trusted the person, like, if you knew the person asking the question" (Senior Primary Pupil, 3)*
>
> *"Really approachable that you could just go up to and ask any question, or you could say no to them" (Post Primary Pupil, 5)*
>
> *"Know them and feel at ease" (Primary Pupil, 3)*
>
> *"It is important that you have a relationship with the person and that takes time – to get the best answers, the child needs to feel a sense of trust" (Post Primary Pupil, 7)*

The following quotes and illustrations by the children and young adults exemplify the type of adult that the children and young adults would be willing to build up a relationship with.

For the youngest children, familiarity and physical features seem to be of greatest importance to them. Several of the young children made reference to their mum as being someone they would like to talk to, as well as referring to facial expressions such as hugs.

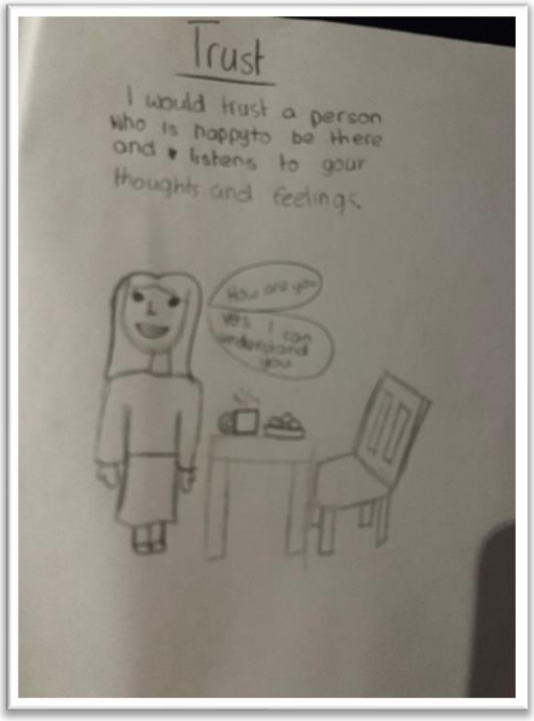
"Yes Mum, trustworthy, understanding, kind, girl" (Junior Primary Pupil)



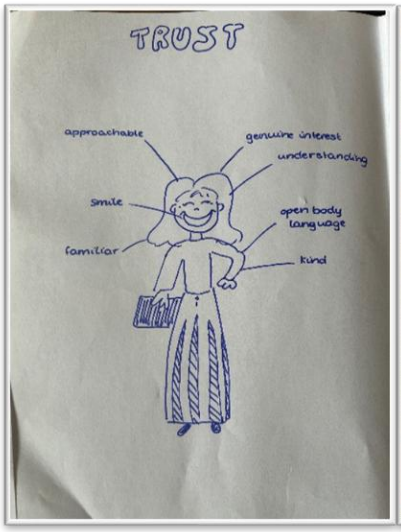
"She has a happy face" (ECCE Child in Green Pod, EY's Setting 1)

"I like nice, pretty, doesn't scold, smiles" (Junior primary pupil)

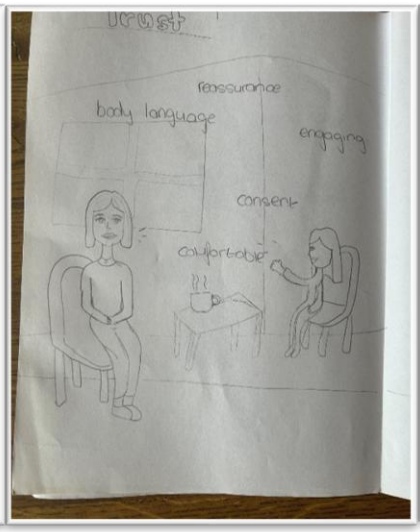
While familiarity and physical features were also important to them, older children appeared more concerned with the adult's personality as showcased in their citations and illustrations.



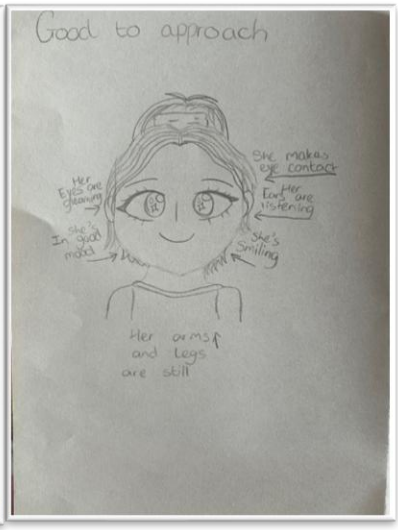
"I would trust a person who is happy to be there and listens to your thoughts and feelings." (Senior Primary Pupil)



"Approachable, smile, familiar, genuine interest, understanding, open body language, kind." (Post Primary Pupil)

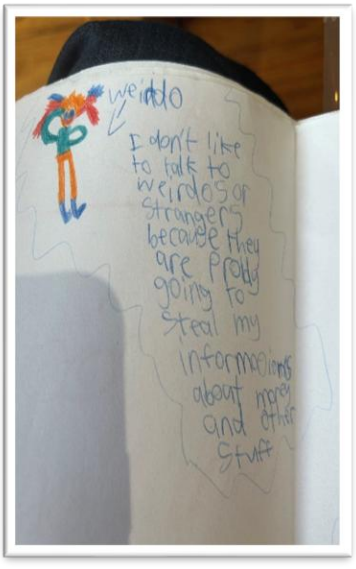


"Trust, body language, reassurance, engaging consent, comfortable" (Post Primary Pupil)

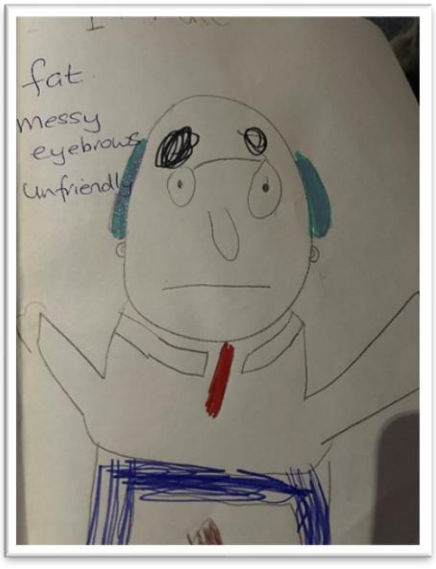


"Her eyes are gleaming, she's in a good mood, she makes eye contact, her ears are listening, she's smiling, her arms and legs are still" (Senior Primary Pupil)

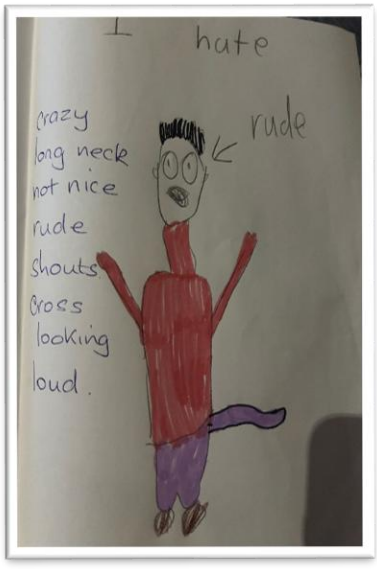
With regard to adults that they would not trust or not be willing to talk to, the children's suggestions were plentiful as detailed in the illustrations and citations below, with the children's reasoning becoming more sophisticated with maturity.



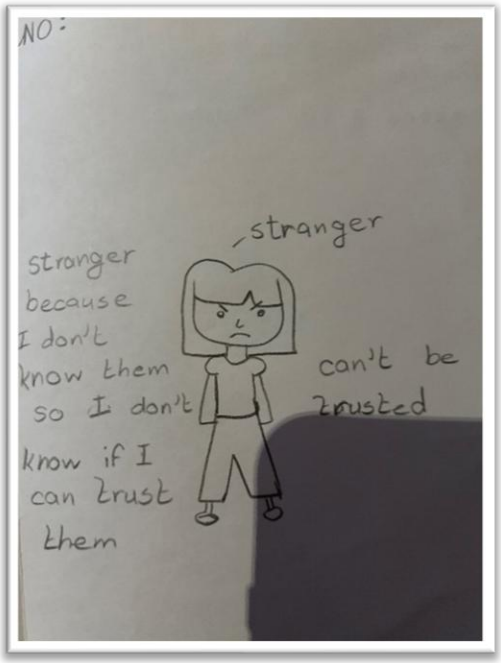
" I don't like to talk to weirdos or strangers because they are probably going to steal my information about money and other stuff" (Primary Pupil)



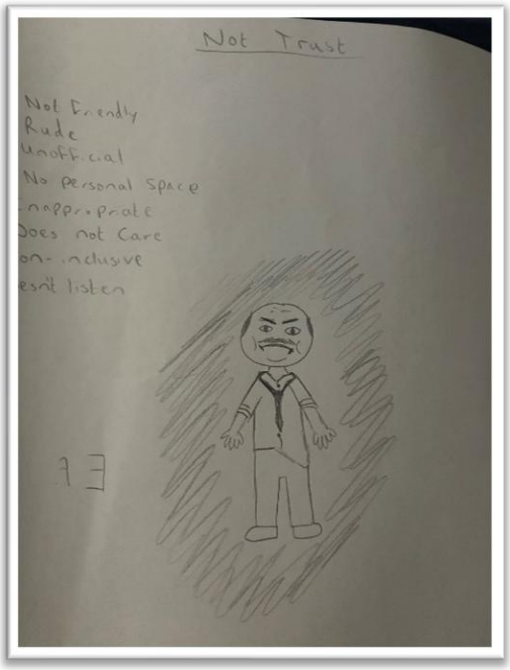
"I hate fat, messy eyebrows, unfriendly" (Junior Primary Pupil)



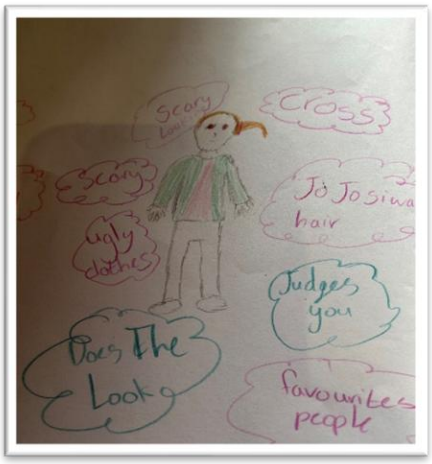
"I hate crazy, long neck, not nice, rude, shouts, cross, looking loud, rude" (Junior Primary Pupil)



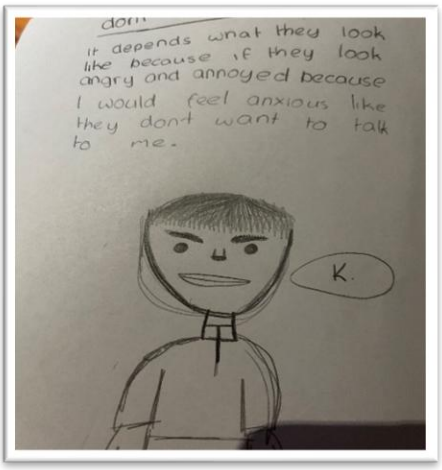
"No [to] stranger because I don't know them so I don't know if I can trust them; stranger can't be trusted" (Senior Primary Pupil)



"Not friendly, rude, unofficial, no personal space, inappropriate, does not care, non-inclusive and doesn't listen" (Post Primary Pupil)



"Scary, scary looking, ugly clothes, does the look, cross, strange hair, judges you" (Senior Primary Pupil)



"It depends what they look like because if they look angry and annoyed because I would feel anxious like they don't want to talk to me" (Senior primary Pupil)

Enabling and Empowering Environment

According to the children's perspective, an enabling and empowering environment also played a crucial role in fostering their trust, sense of security, and confidence to engage and participate meaningfully. This highlights the importance of creating spaces, both emotionally supportive and physically responsive that reflect an ethical commitment to inclusion, respect, and the genuine valuing of children's voices.

In the case of babies and toddlers, it is the nurture and emotional security they experience when close to a familiar adult such as their educator, as is the case in the following cameo:

> *Baby I started picking up a soft ball. She began touching the ball, placing it in her hands and her mouth. She was shaking the ball and dropping the ball. Experimenting with items allows the children to explore the world around them and teaches them that they have the ability to alter the world around them. Baby I glanced over several times ensuring that R was still there. R knew that baby I needed the comfort of her presence but was very happy exploring on her own. This level of intuition and knowledge shows a deep understanding of Baby I's emotional needs, allowing her to be 'the boss' of her play.*
>
> *Listening to children and ensuring their rights and voices are heard is imperative for them to feel valued. In this observation R knew when to get involved and when to pause and allow Baby I to lead the play. This comes from having a deep understanding of the children in her care and can only be achieved if there is a deep and meaningful relationship already established between R and Baby I.*

For pre-school (ECCE) children, a safe space also included a sense of relational closeness with family members or a familiar adult, offering emotional security and supporting their confidence to engage:

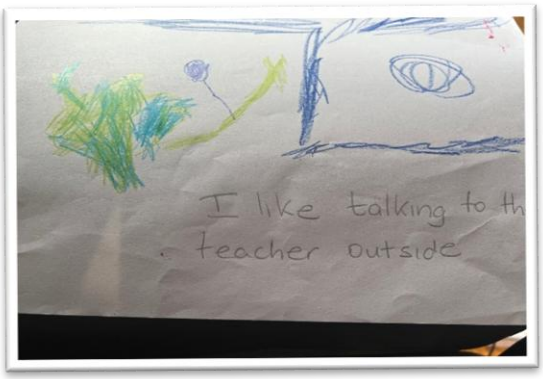
An ECCE girl, aged 4, drew a house – "it's my house, windows, a door and that's the chimney … it's got me and my Mum, talking"

Another ECCE girl, aged 4, used drawing and collage: “My house, me and a bird … my Mum and Dad inside”

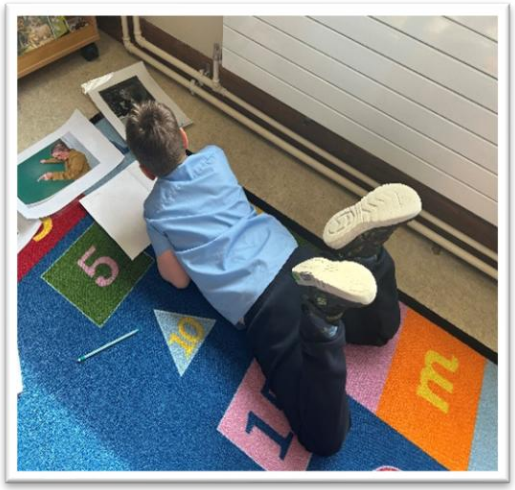
An ECCE girl, aged 5, also chose blocks and recreated the school (she currently lives in a challenging domestic situation) “the school, the roof …. the door”

Evidence from the junior primary children suggested that they enjoyed a comfortable, relaxed, and homely environment, which offered a safe space where they felt respected, enabled and empowered to share their views and perspectives with others.

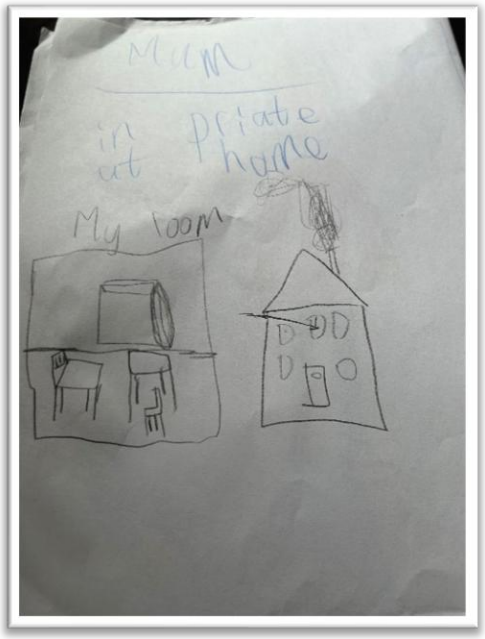
> *“I would rather be lying down on a comfy seat or on the ground with not too many people around.” (Junior Primary Pupil, 3)*
>
> *Outdoors was also important to these children: “You are much more relaxed there.” (Junior Primary Pupil, 2)*



"I like talking to the teacher outside" (Junior Primary Pupil)



"I like to talk to people in houses because it is nice and quiet"
(Junior Primary Pupil)



"Mum; in private; at home; my room"
(Junior Primary Pupil)

Older primary school children also had lots to say about the significance of a secure and relaxing environment in enabling them to voice their opinion with the importance of friends becoming more significant as they grew older, as evidenced below:

"Outdoors with my friends that I can trust" (Senior Primary Pupil, 6)

"Sitting on a bench in an open space with good friends." (Senior Primary Pupil 2)

"When there is somebody else like my best friend there I trust and outside in calm and sunny weather." (Senior Primary Pupil, 4)

"With people I trust" (Senior Primary Pupil 9)

"Outside, lying down on a blanket talking but not too loud with music playing in the background." (Senior Primary Pupil, 9)

"I like indoors too as I can be more focused and listen better but I wouldn't like to be on my own." (Senior Primary Pupil, 8)

Post primary pupils were in agreement that a more relaxed atmosphere in comfortable surroundings helped you to open up best, particularly if you wish to share something of a sensitive nature, and according to them, the actual technique can play an important role too where you engage in a conversation rather than what can sometimes be perceived as a formal interview. The following citations help to explain their thinking more fully:

"I think as well with a group, if somebody says an answer, it'll sort of make you like think, but yeah, I think just sort of making a more comfortable environment like this is and having more of a conversation than feeling like you're being interrogated." (Post Primary Pupil, 7)

"I'm not sure. Yeah, it's called the 'hub' over on your way to the staff room, and it's just sort of like these comfortable chairs. It's sort of like warmer and nicer, like, it's just sort of more like, more comfortable and not very formal. And I think it'd be easier to have a conversation, especially if you're gonna talk about sensitive, more sensitive topics. It would just be easier to have a conversation rather than feel like it's an interview." (Post Primary Pupil aged 10)

"Yeah, somewhere more private as well, like you're not going to be asked confidential questions in a room full of people, or somewhere where loads of other people can hear, I think you know where, like a meeting room, or, like, wherever it is, just somewhere that there's not a lot of other people around and kind of just a few people like friends." (Post Primary Pupil, 5)

Protected Not Silenced

The final theme to emerge from the children's data highlights the ethical dilemma of protecting children's identities through anonymity and confidentiality, essential for their safety and rights, while also acknowledging that this can unintentionally silence their contributions. Several of the primary school pupils appeared to understand why

safety measures are sometimes put in place in, for example, a research report such as adding an emoji or pixelating a photograph as evidenced below:

> *"It's not revealing your identity" (Primary Pupil, 5)*
>
> *"It's for your safety…they could, like, say find pictures online and get your information" (Senior Primary Pupil, 8)*
>
> *"I would feel appreciated as somebody wants to keep me safe" (Senior Primary Pupil, 6)*
>
> *"Someone reading the report could, could like screenshot it or anything and your face would be copied and no one would know" (Senior Primary Pupil, 9)*

However, despite the protective measures in place, several of the children expressed a strong desire for their faces and/or first names to be included in the written report, as a way to acknowledge and validate their meaningful participation in the engagement process.

> *"I wouldn't have an issue with it. After all, I was the one involved and I would like recognition for it" (Post Primary Pupil, 5)*
>
> *"Yes, I would feel a sense of pride being there – if I did actually say or do something valuable enough to be shown in a report, I would want everyone to know that it was me who did it" (Post Primary Pupil, 12)*
>
> *"Of course, they should ask for permission before they post anything, but I would feel so proud if I saw myself there." (Post Primary Pupil, 6)*
>
> *"I would definitely want my name there, even if it was just in very small writing, just to show that it was me who said it." (Senior Primary Pupil, 4)*
>
> *"I would feel betrayed if I ended up with an emoji on my head – I would want everyone to know it was me." (Junior Primary Pupil, 3)*
>
> *"I would want the whole world to see my beautiful face – I would be so proud." (Primary Pupil, 2).*

Indeed, some children went further to suggest that, before anything is shown or written in a report, they should have the opportunity to engage in a verification

process to ensure that what they said has not been misinterpreted as summed up in the citation below:

> *"It wouldn't be cool if those silly pictures we drew were included in the report. When you write it up, can you let us see it so that we can check." (Primary Pupil, 3)*

Finally, others were keen to be involved beyond data collection by helping to design child-friendly summaries, posters, or videos by way of dissemination of the findings as suggested in the following comment:

> *"It'd be great to help make a video for other kids, with bright colours and fun stuff to show them what we did. It'd make us feel really proud." (Post Primary Pupil, 16)*

Summary of the Children's and Teenagers' Findings

Children want to be heard and taken seriously

From toddlers to teens, participants expressed a strong desire for their views to be acknowledged and used to shape decisions that affect them.

Participation must be voluntary and meaningful

Children and teenagers emphasised that taking part should always be their choice, free from pressure or obligation. True participation goes beyond presence. It must be respectful, engaging, and appropriate to each child's needs and interests.

Agency and autonomy are critical

Children of all ages demonstrated the ability to express their preferences and boundaries. They articulated how they show willingness or unwillingness to participate and want these cues to be respected.

Ethical participation is dynamic and relational

The findings reinforce that consent/assent are not one-off events but ongoing processes. Participation must continuously adapt to children's signals, needs, and evolving understanding.

Communication must be clear, age-appropriate, and ongoing

Children and teenagers valued honest, accessible explanations about the purpose of the consultation or research. They highlighted the need for ongoing check-ins during the process to ensure they remain comfortable and informed.

Children use diverse ways to communicate

Verbal expressions, body language, play, drawings, technology, and creative activities were all used by children to share their thoughts and feelings. Participation methods should be flexible to reflect this diversity.

Trusting relationships support participation

Feeling safe and secure with adults, especially familiar, respectful, and kind adults was identified as a key factor in children's willingness to engage. The children and teenagers showcased how trust takes time to build and plays a central role in ethical participation.

The environment matters

Comfortable, familiar, and safe spaces, both doors or outdoors, with trusted peers or adults help children and teenagers feel more relaxed and open. Children of all ages described ideal settings in detail, often preferring informal and child-led environments.

Anonymity versus recognition

While children and teenagers understood the importance of safety and privacy, many expressed a desire for acknowledgment, such as having their name or face included (with permission) to feel proud of their contribution.

Desire to be involved in sharing findings

Several children suggested helping to create child-friendly outputs, like videos, posters, or colourful summaries, to share the outcomes with other children. They wanted to be part of the process from beginning to end.

Chapter 4: Voices from the Margins: Children and Young People from Vulnerable and Seldom Heard Communities

Introduction

This chapter shares the perspectives of a panel of articulate care experienced young adults, who bring vital expertise on how research involving children and young people from marginalised, vulnerable and seldom heard communities should be conducted ethically. Their reflections highlight three key themes essential to ethical participation: Theme One, Pillars of Ethical Participation with Care Experienced Children and Young People; Theme Two, Relationships at the Heart of Ethical Participation; *and Theme Three*, Protected, Not Silenced – Reframing Participation and Protection. Together, these themes provide a roadmap for ethical consultation that honours the lived experience of care experienced children and young people and promotes their meaningful inclusion in research.

Theme One: Pillars of Ethical Participation with Care Experienced Children and Young People

A key message from conversations with care experienced young people about being involved in decisions that affect them was that participation must be **ethical**, **meaningful**, and **centred on their needs and rights**. From their perspective, participation is not just about ticking boxes or being heard superficially. It is about being respected, feeling safe, and genuinely influencing outcomes in ways that honour their unique stories and challenges.

These young voices highlight core pillars, each of which is detailed below, that must underpin all engagement efforts, ensuring participation is empowering rather than re-traumatising, inclusive rather than isolating, and respectful rather than dismissive.

Inclusive Participation

The expert panel emphasised the **importance of listening to all voices,** including consultation with care experienced children and seldom heard stakeholders more generally, such as children with additional needs and very young children.

"You're always consulting your stakeholders and that should be a merit. Like that should be a stamp of approval on your research that they've been consulted in a pilot phase, or they've been consulted as researchers to draft the questions…. So not just care experienced people, people who have disabilities consulted disability researchers, for people who have been in hospital it's public and patient involvement (PPI), whatever it is yes" (Care Experienced Expert 1).

"I think care experienced people should be brought in at the early stages because they've got the knowledge, they've got the lived experience, they're the ones who have been through it and there's several different types of care experience out there" (Care Experienced Expert 3).

"Like it's asking … a baby do they consent? Well, we know they cry, their voice might go up or down when they like something, they laugh, you know what I mean, whatever it is. But I think there's something about assuming somebody shouldn't be involved" (Care Experienced Expert 1).

Meaningful Participation

The panel highlighted the importance of offering **participation at different levels,** and considering opportunities for care experienced young people to meaningfully participate at **all stages** of the research process and adopting the role of co-researchers.

"It's kind of hard when people talk about participation and it's never talked about from the outset of different levels. Maybe I'd love to give an interview. Maybe I just want to do the interview and that's it. Maybe I want to be there designing the questions, and I want to be disseminating as well… it needs to be tailored" (Care Experienced Expert 1).

"And then I think after it's the dissemination. And have you built that into the start? Like, will young people be involved? Will they ever hear again? How will they hear again? If you meet them on the street, do you talk to them like those kinds of conversations?" (Care Experienced Expert 1).

"… Actually, some people might want to give more and can give more, have the capacity to give more and want to follow it through and become researchers in their own right, or co-researchers and so on" (Care Experienced Expert 1).

The panel described the use of an interview guide that was co-designed by the care experienced young people themselves, specifically to support meaningful

participation and provide structure for their engagement at all stages of the research process.

> *"I think a smaller CEEP group have put together what we thought would be good in terms of a pre designed dissemination, you know, afterwards. OK, so it's just the questions that I suppose the pointers we would have given… Because I think what we were seeing was a lot of the time we were being asked to be involved in research and we were learning really good things and really bad things that we were seeing and differences in researcher styles and you know, I suppose how researchers talk to us and the language they used and so on. So, I suppose it was a small group of us decided, could we put something together from CEEP's point of view on this" (Care Experienced Expert 1).*
>
> *"… can we do it as a page of, you know, pre design, you know, when you're thinking about putting the research together, what you should think about when you're doing the research, what we'd like from our perspective for you to have thought about ….., And, and what we've learned are good and bad experiences. So that that's where it came from" (Care Experienced Expert 1).*
>
> *"Hopefully it'll all be in the guide. It's the pre design, it's the how much they'll be involved, how much participation, if you're looking at the Lundy models or if you're comparing it to some sort of benchmark" (Care Experienced Expert 1).*

Building on their experiences of co-design, the panel suggested that the guide could be adapted to promote more inclusive research practices and support the meaningful participation of diverse groups of children and young people, including those from the LGBT+ community and those with disabilities.

> *"I think this guide will need to include some tweaks and tips for, you know, members of the LGBT community — like, this is how we engage, or this is how we approach disability." (Care Experienced Expert 1).*

Respectful Participation

Careful language use and questioning technique was identified as an issue for care experienced children and young people.

> *"I think that's just a huge part of it… in regard to the trauma, it's how you word the questions…. You're not forcing them to give you the answers. You're probing them instead of forcing" (Care Experienced Expert 3).*

> *"It's … how you would talk to them, like the guys were saying about language that you're well informed yourself i.e., not saying a term that is going to be non-trauma informed or not relatable. Some people still say care leavers and I go, oh, OK, don't know if I call myself that anymore" (Care Experienced Expert 1).*

> *"It's important like when you're doing the interview process as well, not to make the language too like jargon. Make sure they understand what you're actually asking them. Because I suppose if you read a document or if you read a question like sometimes you may not understand the question first time and you can imagine like it can be difficult for a child to process that. So, just imagine like sitting there talking to you and they don't actually understand what you are asking them. So, what I'm saying is basically to simplify the question and don't make it too like professional" (Care Experienced Expert 2).*

The language used by researchers was an important ethical practice. Consideration of the individual experience of each participant was outlined as an ethical starting point in research with care experienced children and young people in relation to age-appropriate communication.

> *"When you're asking them questions, especially with the age of children as well, let's say that they could be an 8-year-old, but mentally they could be 20. Do you know? So, if you're talking to them in a childish tone or whatever, it can make them feel demeaned and stuff like that, you know. So, I think each case, I guess you'd know yourself, each case is different. If a child comes into the room and they're speaking to you much older than they should be treated that way, then you know yourself" (Care Experienced Expert 3).*

For care experienced children and young people having the opportunity to **feedback or check** over their data or interview transcript was noted as a key ethical practice so that they could check the accuracy and meaning of their contributions and self-censor on sensitive topics when appropriate.

> *"Because it's something that actually isn't given a lot of time when you're doing research projects. I never got the transcript beforehand, you know, so it would have been nice to see something or read it before it was given to me before it went to the printers or something, you know?" (Care Experienced Expert 3).*

Voluntary, Agentic, and Informed Participation

Additionally, information about their right to withdraw was highlighted as an important aspect of ethical practice to be communicated clearly to care experienced children and young people in order to support their engagement.

> *"I think one thing for me with been doing these since I was in care myself is always that you can pull out whenever you want. Your research doesn't have to be used. Like if that's consistently said to you, you're kind of a bit like, 'all right, OK, so even if I did say something I probably didn't want the world to know'. I can just say, 'OK, I don't want that piece in or something'. So just constantly encouraging them that if they do say something that they're kind of like, 'I don't want anybody to read that about me' or whatever that they can retract, you know?" (Care Experienced Expert 3).*

> *"I know it's quite difficult, but before the young person starts the research, it's important, like if, that young person says to you, 'oh, I don't want to do this research anymore'. If they say to you like, 'oh, maybe, I thought it was a good idea taking part' and then they say to you, 'I don't, I don't want to take part'. It's important to not take their choice away because it's a voluntary thing. They're giving you their time to do the research. So, they are entitled to say, 'this is not for me', even if it's halfway through an interview and that young person says to you, 'I need, I need to stop, I don't feel comfortable'… like it's about protecting that young person. They don't feel comfortable. I'm not saying every young person will say I want to stop, but you do get that young person who will say 'Oh yeah, I'll do that'. And when the time comes, then they think, 'I don't want to do this anymore'. So, it's just being careful of the protection of the young person and also the protection of the research itself… And yeah, so it's probably just about looking after the young person's best interest" (Care Experienced Expert 2).*

> *"The withdrawal. But also, just the reassurance that if you're not happy about how the interview went, that you can kind of say, look, 'can we keep the rest in but take that little bit out, do you know?'" (Care Experienced Expert 3).*

Similarly, providing sufficient information to care experienced children and young people to ensure they are **fully informed** about the research and **manage their expectations** of the outcomes associated with research participation.

> *"It's important that you tell the young people who you are, this is why we are doing the research. This is what is going to come out of the research. This is where the research is going to go" (Care Experienced Expert 2).*

> *"And there's a lot of advocacy unintentionally put on them. And there's a lot of hopes put on them unintentionally by a young person telling the story, because we all do — we all think, maybe this will change something. And hopefully it does, and sometimes it doesn't, and that's fine too. But I think that whole idea of them being in that role of advocacy without even knowing it — that's important. They need to see that." (Care Experienced Expert 1).*

Likewise, ensuring their agency in the whole engagement process is of paramount importance as summed up by CEEP Expert 2:

> *"At the end of the day, it's completely up to that person." (Care Experienced Expert 2)*

Enabling and Empowering Participation

A number of practicalities of participation in research were suggested as key considerations for care experienced children and young people, emphasising the need to enable their meaningful involvement and empower them to actively shape qualitative research.

Firstly, **the location** of where the research was taking place was of importance. All members of the panel agreed that this must be carefully chosen to avoid the potential for discomfort and re-traumatisation.

> *"Even times, you can use the TUSLA offices for a research interview would impact whether the young person is available to even go at that time and maybe they're not and so on." (Care Experienced Expert 1)*

> *"So, you know, you're not going to feel comfortable talking about TUSLA in a TUSLA building." (Care Experienced Expert 1)*

> *"It's a big, it's a big factor because you have to think if somebody is coming from whatever background it is, going to the likes of a big office can make them feel, I don't know, like they're… it just brings back all the memories or can make them feel like they're in somewhere where everybody's superior to them. Like, you know, it's better to always do the research where the power dynamics are lessened, but also like a child in care, they've spent most of their life going in and out of social work departments, you know. So, if you're going into big offices, it can kind of bring back all those memories." (Care Experienced Expert 3)*

> *"I think where you do the research is a big factor… we said like the likes of a library or maybe a small office or somewhere that's small and won't make them feel on edge because they're surrounded by people who are of a professional stance." (Care Experienced Expert 3).*

> *"But for them to be in an office like it's not a good environment because they're being in and out of offices all the time where if it's care review meetings, or stuff like that, it brings back trauma. And they don't want to be there. You won't get the best out of them in the interview because they're not in a place of comfort and they don't feel confident telling you things because they're not in a place where they feel comfortable or they're not in a place where they can express themselves. Where if they're in a place where they can express themselves, it will come easier." (Care Experienced Expert 2)*

Secondly, consideration of the travel required by the child or young person was also raised by CEEP Expert 1, as long or difficult journeys could create barriers to participation and leave them feeling excluded or overwhelmed, which undermines the goal of empowering their involvement.

> *"I was just going to add even about how to get to the space, you know, wherever the space is. I mean, are expenses paid? Can somebody even travel? What time is it on? How would they get home?" (Care Experienced Expert 1)*

> *"I mean, a lot of those things aren't considered for the young person and a lot of time they're not paid in advance. I'm not sure how somebody on very low income who is homeless can participate in an interview and not get paid, you know what I mean? So, there's pieces like that." (Care Experienced Expert 1)*

> *"I think t it's also about the setting the scene for it, you know, so getting there, and like I said, checking in with young person that they actually can get there and go realistically, do you have to pay for a bus, or do you have to pay for a taxi? And researchers doing that themselves beforehand, you know. Again, the participants are there to help them [the researchers]. So, you know, that really that needs to be factored into the study from the outset of what other expenses are there to be incurred and if the permission, I suppose, or approval for that funding, you know." (Care Experienced Expert 1)*

Thirdly, simple considerations such as physical comfort, timing, and accessibility, as well as the opportunity to make choices about the research process, are essential for creating an environment that respects their needs and empowers their involvement.

The following insights from care experienced experts highlight these often-overlooked aspects.

> *"Even food is so important to have some snacks there. Do you know what I mean? A lot of people are not going to say they're hungry. And if you're hungry, you're not going to be concentrating on an interview or if the chair is uncomfortable." (Care Experienced Expert 1)*
>
> *"You know, sometimes it's even having choice over when you can meet someone, you can talk to them, if they're like they male, female and so on. Like I'm not sure how I'd go with the male if I had to talk about something very personal or, you know, that would be a different dynamic. So, I think all of those dynamics fit in." (Care Experienced Expert 1)*
>
> *"But if we didn't know each other before meeting we'd never think to ask is there any accommodation you need." (Care Experienced Expert 1)*
>
> *"It's important if the participant is in a wheelchair or has a disability that the building is wheelchair accessible because you're not going to get a person in a wheelchair upstairs." (Care Experienced Expert 2)*

Fourthly, the young people emphasised that having the option to bring a supportive person or advocate to the research setting was an empowering practice, one that enabled them to feel safe, heard, and better able to engage meaningfully throughout the research process.

> *"Some people are more comfortable when they can bring a support person with them as well. .... It just might ease the situation for them as well. I don't know how that would pan out in a research setting, but it just can make their anxiety a bit less, you know?" (Care Experienced Expert 3).*
>
> *"Yeah, if that person gets emotional, it's only you and that person in that room. So, the support person would really help, because as I said, like it is only you and that person in the room. If that person needs to take a break or needs to go out because they're emotional." (Care Experienced Expert 2)*
>
> *"It's important that they have a second person if they want to have that second person to chat to e.g., 'maybe I should have said that in a different way' or 'sorry for getting emotional'. Maybe they need somebody else to talk to apart from the researcher or the research team... it's having that option for that young person or child to have that opportunity to speak to their*

> *support person, whether it's mum or dad or I don't know, but it's really important that they've given that opportunity." (Care Experienced Expert 2)*

Finally, the issue of **recognition** was also noted by the panel as a key aspect of ethical practice which demonstrated the value of their participation in research activities.

> *"We are there to help you… the younger ones might struggle, but we kind of know that we're there to help you and we want to help you. So, it's important that young people are valued when they do this ethical research because it's them giving their time to you, to do that research. So even at the end, even if you give a thank you e-mail or even if you send something out to the organisation for them individually, even to say thank you for taking part in this research. We really did appreciate it kind of it gives them purpose. Oh, we're valued and we kind of want to take part in another research project." (Care Experienced Expert 2)*

Purposeful Participation

For care experienced children and young people, participation in research holds deep significance when it is **purposeful.** The panel was clear: participation must not be symbolic or tokenistic. Instead, it should reflect genuine engagement where their time, insights, and lived experiences are recognised and respected. Ethical participation involves **being heard, being valued, and seeing the tangible impact** of their contributions, whether that is change in the care system, researcher learning, or personal benefits such as therapeutic reflection.

Importantly, the care experienced young people highlighted the need to **acknowledge their input**, even in simple ways such as a follow-up message or feedback about how their voice influenced the work. Recognition and reciprocity help ensure their involvement feels worthwhile and impactful, rather than extractive.

> *"People get involved in these research projects for specific reasons. They want to make changes. They want to make a better care system for the children who follow after. So, it's important to note that." (CEEP Expert 3)*

> *"You're giving them your time… so valuing us." (CEEP Expert 2)*

> *"Even a thank-you email at the end means something… 'Thank you for taking part in this research.'" (CEEP Expert 2)*

Beyond this, participation was viewed as beneficial in its own right, a space for therapeutic disclosure, peer advocacy, and meaningful dialogue. For many, the process of contributing to research was empowering, giving them voice in systems that have often excluded them.

> *"They… find that very therapeutic to actually disclose." (CEEP Expert 1)*
>
> *"It's good they're not in our area… because then they [researchers] kind of become an advocate for us… 'This is actually really tough what they're going through.'" (CEEP Expert 1)*
>
> *"They want to ensure we're making a better care system for whatever children follow after us… they're there for as much reason as you are." (CEEP Expert 3)*

Minimising Harm in Participation

For care experienced children and young people, ethical research is not just about following procedures, it is about creating an environment where **dignity, choice, and safety** are central. A key ethical concern identified by the panel was the **potential for re-traumatisation** when participating in research: "… *ensure that you're not going to bring back the trauma*" (Care Experienced Expert 3). Care Experienced Expert 3 develops this thinking more fully in the citation which follows:

> *"Well, like you're doing research with children in care. So, you need to make sure that you're minimising the risk when you're asking these questions. So, whatever the questions may be, each child is different, each trauma is different, each situation is different… most of the time when children in care are taking part in research, we are looked at as the victim or whatever. But people who come from care don't see it that way. No, not, not that I'm saying that all children do or don't, each person is different. But like for some people today, that situation was normal, you know" (Care Experienced Expert 3).*

They stressed that care journeys are deeply personal and diverse, requiring researchers to **approach each participant with sensitivity and awareness**, without assumptions or pressure, as evidenced in the following comments:

> *"I suppose you have to be quite careful because they are children at the end of the day, you don't want to go, you don't want to go too deep into it, into a child's care journey, especially if they're under the age of 18, because they*

> *might not want to tell you certain aspects of that journey." (Care Experienced Expert 2)*

> *"But it wasn't always positive as you can imagine, if for a child in care, it's quite difficult. I suppose doing ethical research, you have to be well aware that the child needs to be comfortable, and they need to be in a comfortable environment telling you the story. And it's important that you don't pressure the child, our young person to tell you what you want to hear. It's up to them what they want to tell you. I suppose it's a really delicate area, but it is really good research to do. You just need to be mindful that the child or the young person is a human person, is a human being at the end of the day. It's completely up to that person." (Care Experienced Expert 2)*

There was also concern about the over-reliance on the same individuals within a small care-experienced community, which could lead to over-participation, burnout, and longer-term disengagement. In this context, the panel highlighted how poor ethical practice can cause harm not only to individuals but to the wider research culture, while good practice builds trust and enables future involvement as detailed below:

> *"… where I would have the concern is over participation, where we're relying on the same people to participate." (Care Experienced Expert 1)*

> *"…like the care experienced community is so small that the majority of the time it's the same people who actually carry out the research. So, I would know in Ireland that if somebody doesn't do well, I am not going back a second time, you know, where if I felt… and I would say that within the care community, like I've, you know, we'd often share things from other researchers. So, they have to realise that communities are quite small when you're looking for research participants and that snowballing effect won't happen unless there's is good research practice. You're not going to advertise somebody to tell their trauma to if you feel the researchers are not going to listen to them." (Care Experienced Expert 1)*

Negative or distressing experiences in research activities had the potential to disempower and **discourage engagement** with researchers and further participation.

Theme Two: Relationships at the Heart of Ethical Participation

For care experienced young people, the process of participating in research is deeply influenced by the relationships they build with those involved. The CEEP panel raised relationships as a crucial and recurring theme, highlighting that the connection

between researchers and participants, shapes not only how young people engage, but also how safe and supported they feel throughout the research journey. In the section which follows, the CEEP panel invite us to consider participation not simply as an activity, but as a relational experience grounded in respect, care, and ongoing connection.

Building a Trusting Relationship with the Researcher

The relationship with the researcher was reported by the experts as a critical component of their engagement in participatory experiences. A sense of familiarity with the researcher was viewed as making participation desirable to care experienced children and young people and was suggested to put the child or young person at ease throughout the process.

> *"I think the ethical piece is more than just about the participants. It's about the whole research…. It's about it should be, sorry I'll phrase it a different way, it's about the researcher and it is that relationship. Like to me, that's how I know something is ethical. That's how I'll participate in something" (Care Experienced Expert 1).*

> *"The researchers through the whole process, I mean, what questions they ask, how they answer the phone, I mean, like it's a bit of both. I mean, it's, you know, are you comfortable enough to share with them, how they approach things, you know what I mean? … If you don't know them and you haven't got a chance to Google them and see what they look like, you can be a bit nervous already. Do you know what I mean? You are walking into a room, and you don't even know who you're meeting" (Care Experienced Expert 1).*

> *"I think it's about the vibe of the researcher - it feels like a relationship, you know? And if you know the researcher, and understand why they're doing the research, that's really important for me in deciding whether to get involved. Is it just for a PhD, or do they actually have publications in the area? Are they known for this kind of work? Do they genuinely like the topic and want to learn more about it, or is it more of a commissioned project for a government department that someone's just completing? For me, it's about the rationale — and sometimes that's not disclosed enough. You don't always know why the researcher is doing it or what their real interest is. Of course, it might be part of their qualification, but it's very different when they have a genuine interest — and that really comes across" (Care Experienced Expert 1).*

When that relationship is in place, the researcher, according to the CEEP, is in a position to provide support for **distress or disclosure** of sensitive information in the

course of qualitative interviews or focus groups, as summed up in the following comment:

> *"And I suppose one of the other things about research is disclosure happens within research. So that leads into other issues where researchers should be aware, you know. However, I find that if it's gone through ethical processes …., there shouldn't really be a concern at that stage about protecting because what will be will be. Sometimes you will be upset by something, sometimes you mightn't be for six months or six years later…. I think if that is the case, that shouldn't stop people from interviewing to get answers, even if it's something really horrific that they've been through, because I think there's a process in a way in which you do that correctly" (Care Experienced Expert 1).*

Sustaining Trusting Relationships

Key preparation in terms of the researcher taking time to get to know their participants was also deemed essential by the expert panel. It was suggested that **a higher level of contact** with the researcher or research team was important to establish a trusting relationship which could facilitate meaning engagement in research activities. The panel underscored the value of **multiple interactions with researchers,** in the form of a preparatory meeting with the children and young people to build the relationship **in advance** of data collection, **a debrief immediately after** data collection and **a follow up in days or weeks after**. This was viewed key to the ethical conduct of research with care experienced children and young people.

> *"…Like you're saying…. maybe they could meet the researcher before the interview. And maybe you could say, this is the questions I'm going to be asking here. Or this is like, this is how the interview can go or this is how long the interview will be. So, they can have a sense of, OK, I met this person before he interviewed me. I met this person like even after the interview, you could say, 'how did you find that? Would you give any feedback on the interview.'… a little debrief of any concerns" (Care Experienced Expert 2).*

> *"… sometimes researchers aren't allowed follow up. So, they have these really big in-depth conversations and we're kind of told, well, you're not a counsellor, you're not trained, you're not whatever. And sometimes that adds to a thing where you're leaving a leaflet with somebody saying go and contact another service there. And it's really cold, when sometimes the researcher is nearly best placed to go, 'well, actually, what do I need to change for the next interview? And how did you find that and what can I learn from it?'… So actually, it's probably nearly secondary trauma that comes from that because somebody has just gone off and heard the story. Whereas if that person rang a couple of weeks later and said actually, 'how are you getting on? And*

remember you said you were doing that; how did it actually go?' I would have no problem with that because I'd be actually thinking, well, that researcher is going to learn. It's the same person coming back to me. They're following up on something. But a lot of the time they're told not to do that because there's a professional boundary" (Care Experienced Expert 1).

"Sometimes it's hard to see somebody give you a list of names to contact if you feel distressed and you're like, you're getting your PhD out of this, so you're getting your qualification, and I've just told you my life story… you're like I've just told them my whole story, like, and now they get to go away with that and of course it is anonymised, but I'd rather them call me back, than have to ring a new service and go 'oh yeah, I was partaking in a research thing and it traumatised me and it triggered me' and have to relay that again. I'd nearly prefer them, out of respect to go, 'how did you find it? 'You've had a couple weeks, is there anything else?'" (Care Experienced Expert 1).

Navigating Power and Relationships

Closely associated with the researcher-participant relationship was the role of the **gatekeeper, or institution** bridging those relationships, and how the **power dynamics** across those relationships had the potential to influence the young person's experience of ethical research practice.

"I suppose sometimes the role of the gatekeeper there on what their thoughts are about research, what they can do, whether they can support the young person, whether there's a distress protocol in place with them" (Care Experienced Expert 1).

"I think there's a lot of formal things, even getting an e-mail from somebody with a big signature on the bottom, if you're not in that space, you don't know what that's about and all these letters and whatever and what do they mean exactly?" (Care Experienced Expert 1).

Theme 3: Protected, Not Silenced – Reframing Participation and Protection

While protection is a core ethical concern in research with care experienced children and young people, the panel cautioned against an overly vigilant or paternalistic approach that risks silencing their voices. They described how assumptions about vulnerability, trauma, or capacity can lead to exclusion from meaningful research participation, often under the guise of "doing no harm."

Instead, the CEEP panel advocated for ethical research practices that centre on **choice, agency, and voice**, where young people are protected through respectful, inclusive processes, not by being prevented from participating. In their view, truly ethical research must strike a careful balance: enabling participation without compromising wellbeing, and being reflective without defaulting to risk-averse barriers. The following reflections challenge researchers and gatekeepers to reconsider what protection truly looks like in practice.

> *"...we tend to jump at the word protection. But it's not always like protection, not always the blueprint word that we should use at every single thing we're trying to say. Like I know it's a sensitive topic like children, children and young people in care, but protection is not the keyword that should be used at every single conference, at every single thing we do" (Care Experienced Expert 2).*

The panel described their perception of an **attitude of over-protection** which influenced the conduct of research with care experienced children and young people.

> *"And then that kind of protection versus participation that [name of panel member] talked about, you know, you want to protect somebody, but you may be making them more vulnerable because you're doing so. Do you know what I mean? So yeah, I suppose just points on that really to consider that sometimes being a gatekeeper, for example, has an implication of protecting somebody and then not getting those seldom heard voices because we're actually protecting them too much and not letting them participate. So, I think there's an over-protectionism that can happen thus allowing non participation" (Care Experienced Expert 1).*

The over-protective attitude of **gatekeepers** was also felt to prohibit and exclude care experienced children and young people's participation in research.

> *"But sometimes there's a protectionism from gatekeepers also to say we're not getting involved in this research because it's about homeless people, and sure we can't give them a house or something. Do you know what I mean at the end of the day? Or it's, you know, 'oh, they're too vulnerable'. Sure. They were only crying about care yesterday when actually they could come into a research interview and find that very therapeutic to actually disclose" (Care Experienced Expert 1).*

For researchers, this could take the form of making the assumptions about care experienced children and young people **as victims.**

> *"So, whatever the questions may be, each child is different, each trauma is different, each situation is different. So, you need to be, I don't know, like remorseful in a way, like, you know, you need to be able to have a conversation with them but not playing them as the victim" (Care Experienced Expert 1).*

Anonymisation, as an ethical practice, while seen as important was also viewed as a form of over-protection.

> *"You know, so in some cases we over-anonymise where somebody would love to be at the dissemination launch and maybe just sitting there happily in the crowd and maybe not be known as the pseudonym, but maybe others would be like, yes, I did… I am a happily proud member who has participated in that research… We can't actually say I was one of those young people who helped somebody get a PhD or get this or get whatever. (Care Experienced Expert 1).*

Researcher reflexivity was suggested as an ethical practice which could enhance participation and protection of care experienced children and young people in ethical research.

> *"… we all make mistakes. It's just making the mistakes in the right way. And like the researcher saying to themselves, 'oh, I made a mistake there. How can I fix it? Is there a better way I can ask questions; is there a better way I can use language" (Care Experienced Expert 2).*

> *"I think for the researcher, if they're able to kind of come back and say, how did you find that today? I wouldn't actually care if they made a mistake. I'd be at least like, OK, at least they're critiquing themselves and they're wanting to improve" (Care Experienced Expert 1).*

Summary of Key Findings

Theme One: Pillars of Ethical Participation

- The primary ethical concern is avoiding re-traumatisation and over-sampling of care experienced children and young people.
- Researchers must recognise the unique and varied experiences of each participant, avoiding assumptions and treating each child or young person as an individual.

- Preparation is essential, including clear communication about the research process and using interview guides to support meaningful engagement.
- Practical considerations such as research location, travel arrangements, and presence of supportive persons are important to create a safe and comfortable environment.
- Researcher reflexivity and the ability to learn from mistakes are critical components of ethical research practice.

Theme Two: Relationships at the Heart of Ethical Participation

- Establishing and sustaining trusting relationships between researchers and participants is fundamental to ethical engagement.
- Building familiarity over multiple interactions, including preparatory meetings and follow-ups, supports meaningful participation and participant wellbeing.
- The quality of researcher interaction, including responsiveness, empathy, and clear explanations, impacts participants' willingness to engage.

Theme Three: Protected, Not Silenced – Reframing Participation and Protection

- Balancing protection with meaningful participation is key: over-protection can lead to exclusion from research opportunities.
- Gatekeepers have significant influence, and their attitudes or policies may create barriers that limit young people's voice in research.
- Anonymisation, while important, can sometimes be experienced as distancing or over-protection, highlighting the need for transparency and respect in the process.
- Researchers should avoid positioning participants solely as victims and instead recognise their agency and expertise in their own experiences.

Chapter 5: Voices from National and International Stakeholders

Introduction

Work package three involved a programme of interviews with twenty stakeholders. Interviews focused on eliciting the views and perspectives of experts on the principles, practices, and challenges of ethical research with children and young people, with a focus on the developments since the publication of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, '*Guidance for developing ethical research projects involving children*', in 2012.

Relevant stakeholders were identified nationally and internationally across the fields of policy, practice, government, advocacy, and academia and contacted via email with an invitation for participation. An array of interdisciplinary international academics and experts, as well as those within Irish universities, agreed to participate. Moreover, a number of national government bodies and advocacy bodies also contributed to the study (Table 9). In total, twenty individuals from fourteen different organisations took part in qualitative interviews.

Table 9. Stakeholder Participation

International and National Experts from Higher Education	National Bodies and Policy Organisations	Advocacy and Interest groups
British Educational Research Association	Early Childhood Ireland (ECI)	Barnardo's Ireland
NUI Galway	Economic & Social Research Institute (ESRI)	Pavee Point
Queen's University Belfast	Hub na nÓg	Trans* Research Association of Ireland (TRAI)
Trinity College Dublin	National Council for Special Education (NCSE)	
University College Cork	National Parent Council (NPC)	
University College London		

This chapter is structured around discussion of four key themes, namely:

- Children and Young People's Participation and Agency in Research,

- Balancing the Rights and Wellbeing of Children and Young People,
- Inclusion of Seldom Heard, Marginalised and Vulnerable Children and Young People,
- The Irish legal, Ethical and Policy Frameworks and Guidance.

Theme One - Children and Young People's Participation and Agency in Research

> *"If you really believe in children and you really care about them and you believe they have a right to have a say and participate in decision making your life will be a lot easier. Your research life… You can fight for the right for children, all children to be involved and have their say much more easily than you can fight for your own personal right to do this piece of research…. In fact, maybe the ethics should be developed by children." (National expert 1)*

All participants agreed on the importance of adopting a **rights-based approach** to ethical research rooted in respect for children and young people and their right to participate in research which could benefit their lives. The UNCRC Article 12 and the Lundy Model of Child Participation were identified in nine interviews as significant frameworks supporting the involvement of children and young people in research activities.

> *"Yeah, I think it [UNCRC] has been really important in terms of recognising the rights of the child and the rights of children to be involved and certainly … the Laura Lundy model and the frameworks that are developed are also very helpful. I think it has helped us in terms of how important it is to listen to the child's voice in these matters." (National expert 12)*

> *"Obviously, Article 12 in participation, which will be our starting point… So that we do whatever we can to maximise children's participation where they want to have their voice heard on a matter. Also, that shapes the work then that we engage with advisory groups, making sure that young children, young people, have a voice from the outset of the project as early as possible, right through to what we do with that." (National expert 14)*

> *"We use the Lundy Model to frame our participation. Yeah, I think it's been significant in that it gives a kind of imperative to include the voice of the child and it gives a framework." (National expert 17)*

Across the interviews, stakeholders put forward an emerging rights-informed understanding of the **position of children and young people**, both within research practice and in wider society. This positive perspective acknowledged the capacity of children and young people as competent social actors with the capacity to make rich and meaningful contributions to knowledge creation.

> *"… even the very youngest children have much more to give and know far more than is usually acknowledged… Babies are so full of ideas that they also understand morality, justice, kindness, trust, fear. And all of this in the first year before people can explain to them… First of all, to begin the ethics of research with children is to begin by knowing that children are enormously much more capable, competent and more capacity than we assume." (International expert 2)*
>
> *"I think children can play a huge part in shaping the questions and what's important to them. It goes back to their rights and what issues matter to them so they can play a really important role of shaping that." (National expert 3)*
>
> *"I always think we should run it past the children because they think they come up with ideas and ways of looking at problems as adults we kind of we've lost that ability to look at things from a different angle and sometimes just to get a child's view, even just around the clarification on questioning is absolutely invaluable." (National expert 16)*

All participants discussed varied experiences of involving children and young people at **distinct levels and stages of research** activity from piloting, design, data collection, data analysis, and dissemination. Additionally, examples were presented of children and young people participating in consultations, advisory roles, and as co-authors, illustrating their involvement in participatory methodologies within co-creation or child-led research.

> *"…I've been really privileged to learn that you can trust children, and it doesn't really matter which children or what context or about what. You know, they're unbelievable what they come out with and the clarity of their perspectives and how much they give… it's just someone who doesn't work directly with children couldn't imagine that children can do this." (National expert 1)*
>
> *"I think there's no particular kind of golden rule around it. I think it does vary according to the project. So different projects and research questions will require different levels of involvement from children and young people in terms of guiding the research. I think the kind of factors that you need to take*

into account as a researcher in deciding the level of participation in co-design or guiding the research by children is what's the time scale for the research." (National expert 3).

"I mean obviously co-creation is gold standard, but that might not be possible for every piece of research." (National expert 7)

"… being named as co-authors or as part of the advisory group if that's what they wish. I don't think guidance in any way should prohibit that opportunity… they really wanted to be very kind of front and centre as part of the research, and they certainly wanted to be named, and they wanted their photo…But they did the forward for the research report, and they got in some of their own views into that as well." (National expert 8)

"I mean, look, if I had a magic wand, I'd say that all research needs to be co-produced with young people. I think that there can be varying levels in terms of how that's actually accomplished." (National expert 18)

Children and young people's participation depended on the nature, aims and resources available within a programme of research. **The time scale** of a project was crucial for ethical research with children. While one stakeholder cautioned against the '*parachuting in and out of children's lives*,' others pointed to the investment of time required to get to know the children and young people at the research design phase of a project to avoid tokenistic practices and ensure the use of developmentally appropriate methods.

"I think as researchers, we have to be realistic about the level of time and commitment children can give to a project. we might have all of the best plans in the world about the level of involvement by children being involved, being involved in advisory groups, steering committees and giving feedback on surveys and other data collection methods, helping with the piloting, reviewing the results, engaging in data analysis… But I think we totally underestimate the timeframe and the level of commitment that children have to give when we have these expectations…" (National expert 3).

"Co-designing with children and young people genuinely takes a long time, and I'd rather it wasn't done if it was done at the lip service exercise just to say we did it…" (National expert 11).

"Now it's much more time consuming, but I have done it in the past where I have engaged young people in analysis. I think that is hugely fruitful in terms of reiterating that kind of co-production" (National expert 18).

Taking the time to develop **rapport and relationships** with the children and young people engaged in a research project was discussed as an essential ethical practice by the majority of the respondents who suggested this was important to promote their participation, support children and young people's agency and ensure meaningful interactions.

> *"I guess getting to know and building that rapport and the relationship with the child helps you then to perhaps… You know, ensure that they have freedom to speak, ability to take part or not or, willingness or whatever." (National expert 5)*

> *"And it's not just around the Lundy model or Article 12 or any of those. I think if we're going to do it properly, co is the word you were saying co-participate, co…. So, it has to be bi-directional; otherwise, to me, it's not meaningful. I'm not saying I'm good at this, but I'm saying I think these are the things we're learning we have to do. Things have to be meaningful. People have to feel that they belong." (National expert 15)*

Developing relationships with children and young people was identified as a method for researchers to build trust, balance power dynamics, and create a comfortable environment for research activities.

> *"Ethical research should be motivated by a genuine desire to honour and help children, understanding the power dynamics involved." (International expert 2)*

> *"…there's always a perceived power dynamic when you are talking about young people and adults, so you've got to get over that and without those skills really highly tuned and having experience of having conversations with children and young people prior to this piece of research that you're going to do, I think that's very hard to shift that power dynamic." (National expert 11)*

> *"But there's just there's such a huge time constraint there and for researchers to go in and really embed themselves in the relationship with the child, who are really get the best out of that child or really, you know, where they'll get the clearest communication with that child… And I suppose ideally it would be done by somebody that the children are happy with, in a place where the children are comfortable and secure. That's very difficult in the research space." (National expert 16)*

> *"Time. You don't want to just boot in and do a really quick interview and then out again. You want to kind of get to know them? It might be one or two*

> *times that you'd be talking to them, or you might have a quick meeting and then follow up with an interview or something. Let them think about what it is they're going to talk about. Sending questions or running through the questions in advance, so to give them a really fair crack at it, you know, making sure they understand it and have had time to think about it." (National expert 19)*

Additionally, **clear, and honest communication** which managed the expectations of the children and young people was also viewed as essential ethical practice. Stakeholders stressed the need to fully inform children and young people about research activities. Several stakeholders placed an emphasis on ensuring children and young people were clear on the potential direct and indirect implications of participation in research activities.

> *"I think that's one of the things that I've really learned that kind of really ensuring that the children understand what can and can't happen as a result of the research and that it's not ongoing." (International expert 4)*

> *"…they really kind of fully understand what it means to take part in research and that their expectations are not kind of unrealistically raised as to what that research is going to mean for them." (National expert 16)*

Several stakeholders emphasised respecting children's agency by allowing them to participate in research freely and comfortably, typically within their classroom environment. This was achieved by utilising age appropriate and methodologically flexible approaches which are responsive to the young participants.

> *"We never direct them ever. You know, 'we never say stop, sit down. Let's also speak.' We really don't do that. We let it happen the way it happens. So does that element about … they have the freedom to speak or not speak, to participate as much or as little as they want. We don't tend to ask very private questions. Children can say something or not" (National expert 1).*

> *"We've got to be flexible. I think in our methodologies we've got to always have a Plan B and a plan C when we're when we're working on data gathering with children… The methodologies that we choose and that we adopt when we're researching children, I think those have to be child appropriate, age appropriate, developmentally appropriate. I think they have to respond to the reactions of children because very quickly as you're rolling out for research and you're gathering your data you realise whether your methods are*

actually appropriate or not, whether children are interested in …" (National expert 3).

Providing feedback to children and young people was frequently mentioned as a crucial ethical practice for researchers, aimed at enhancing understanding and encouraging active participation throughout the research process.

"I think the feedback from children is essential right throughout the process… They have a right to information about the research and for us to feedback to them what the key findings were in a way that's appropriate to them and developmentally and age appropriate to them. So that kind of follow up, I think, and feeding back to children about the research outcomes is really critical." (National expert 3)

"I think it also may be the responsibility for feedback to young people has become more important than it would have been back then. So, we might well have felt that it was really important to consult and involve and engage young people, but I'm not sure we always felt we had to report back to them what we'd got from that and what change that made because of their voice. So, I think that has improved over that time as well. Not just the benefit of consulting, but their right to be consulted and their right to have information on that, the basis that they were consulted on." (National expert 11)

"For example, any of the research we do, you know we always have a policy output, or we have an academic output, but we always have that core findings are fed back to the community, so whether through infographics or through small leaflets or whatever, or small videos. But I think that's important, and I think it's important not only symbolically to make sure that you're feeding back, but also that communities don't feel like they're being pillaged almost constantly all the time." (National expert 20)

Several stakeholders described returning to children and young people to **check through transcripts** of qualitative data which supports meaningful participation, anonymity, accurate interpretation, and ethical dissemination.

"I think I always use the phrase, it's like a smash and grab, people come and get the data, but they never follow through. I think with these particular populations, because they're over accessed, over researched, we need to go back in a very meaningful way. That's almost like a secondary part of the data collection. Go back in and sense check it, go back and talk to them." (National expert 15)

"I think we need to feedback to them 'this is what I heard, this is what I think you mean by that. Are you sure that is?' and do that in a timely fashion because that may take us three or four months, you know, and in the lifetime of an 8-year-old that just they've moved on to something else." (National expert 16)

"I experienced this when I worked in service provision where we would have great researchers who come in, they would work with young people, and then the young people would never hear from them again and they'd be asking us as an organisation, 'whatever happened to that, they interviewed me for two hours. I gave them hugely significant personal information, and I have no idea what happened with that'. So, there's an onus on researchers to come back to young people and to let them know what they did with their information." (National expert 18)

"You could have a youth advisory group, where you could have young people as part of the advisory group. But also, in terms of like feeding back analysis when it's coming back, having young people at the table and saying, 'this is what was said' or 'this is what's coming up, is that does that reflect reality? or is there something else happening here that we're not getting? How would you present it?' (National expert 20)

Five stakeholders identified an important ethical consideration regarding children and young people's participation, specifically the practice of **recognition and remuneration** for their time and effort in research participation.

"There's a big, ethical debate and philosophical debate around payment and recognition of young people who are very involved in research projects and some level of acknowledgement I think has to be planned for and whether that's in terms of remuneration gift tokens, but at both the monetary level and kind of acknowledgment of their time and their expertise through recognising them through certification." (National expert 3)

"… you know, gratuity or children, young people receiving tokens of gratitude or being paid for participation researcher. That's a big question. I think that… there's obviously ethical considerations around both sides of the coin of that." (National expert 10)

"Which brings me on to another point, just in terms of the kind of exploitation piece like, I feel very strongly about the compensation of participants' time irrespective of their age. I think it becomes it becomes thornier with young people in terms of how that's managed, and it can be quite more challenging for just participation in the round. Like institutional ethics will often dictate how that's managed. I have never been in an institution that'll allow for physical monetary payments to participation. And I understand that to be

> *the case. But I do think that people's time has to be acknowledged, particularly for marginalised communities where they are weighing up the choice, will I go to this meeting now for two hours to help out on the research or will I do my part time job and actually get a little bit of money in my pocket." (National expert 18)*

> *"One of the things that we strongly always push back against is paying participants. So, whether that's vouchers or whether that's money. Because we would see that that's a huge ethically… we would say that there's huge questions around that. Now, obviously in terms of facilitating people's participation, you might have to make to provision around lunch or whatever, but that is something we're seeing more often, particularly in terms of commissioned research. You can have a voucher, and we think that's totally inappropriate and it's totally unethical." (National expert 20)*

The active participation and agency of children and young people in research was essential to ensure that their voices are heard and respected. The insights from stakeholders underscore the importance of adopting a rights-based approach, appreciating children as competent social actors with capability to make meaningful contributions to all stages of the research process. Co-production and participatory methodologies are regarded as the highest standard in conducting research with children and young individuals. Building genuine relationships, ensuring clear communication, and using developmentally appropriate methods are considered essential aspects of ethical research practice. However, recognising their contribution and remunerating children and young people's contributions to research remained a key ethical dilemma.

Theme Two - Balancing the Rights and Wellbeing of Children and Young People

Theme two addresses two interconnected concerns identified by stakeholders: balancing the right of children and young people to participate in research with their wellbeing and ensuring their right to privacy and confidentiality.

Protecting Children and Young People's Wellbeing

> *"... The do no harm principle, I guess is the overriding principle." (National expert 6)*
>
> *"... Research can never be more important than the individual child." (National expert 11)*

Both international and national experts discussed the core ethical principle of **'do no harm'** to children and young people in the conduct of research. However, there was a lack of consensus on this issue amongst stakeholders who offered varied conceptualisation of the dilemma between protection and participation of children and young people in research activities. The majority stakeholders described the competing priorities of protection and participation as **'a tightrope,' 'fine balance' or 'tricky.'** Ultimately, striking this balance necessitated a nuanced and sensitive rights-based approach that prioritised both the agency and well-being of young participants, ensuring they felt valued, understood and protected throughout the research process.

> *"There's a balance to be had between protecting those children's rights and ensuring that those voices are heard." (International expert 4)*
>
> *"...if we don't collect that data, those data we don't know about the lives of the most vulnerable, but on another hand are we risking kind of re-traumatising that group of children. (National expert 7)*
>
> *"...having a holistic rights-based approach... it isn't seeing rights in competition or in conflict with each other, no one's more important than the other. It's about actually seeing them together." (National expert 13)*

Experts identified key risks of harm to children and young people within research practices such as **causing distress, discomfort or upset** when engaging in data collection or in discussion of sensitive subjects.

> *"If a child is upset or they're clearly uncomfortable or you just even suspect that a little bit uncomfortable, it's just not the right time for them or that's not the right day or you've got on the wrong perfume or, you know any of those kinds of things. I think as adults then you know, it is not about balancing the insights that they might give us. It's about backing off and certainly protecting their rights and well-being." (National expert 11)*

"The fear that you will do anything that will make things worse for them, you know, and particularly the topics that I've always explored, very sensitive topics. So, it was always we have to be had to be really careful to make sure that everything was clear in terms of the information that was provided, we have protocols in place, that if somebody is becoming distressed or upset, we know exactly what to do." (National expert 12)

"There's just a huge chunk of work there than just making sure that they don't come away from any interview feeling upset, feeling troubled, or feeling uncomfortable in any way." (National expert 16)

"I remember just feeling, 'oh, I went too far.' I mean, I didn't…But for him, I did, and I really should have taken a step back and went 'OK, we won't, we'll just leave that topic. We'll move on to something else.' You know, it was a thing that happened to him in school that was obviously had caused him, great distress… so it's being led by the young person themselves and really being aware and watching their body language and how they are, and maybe even if you know if you're getting them through a third party, finding out a little bit about them if you can without probing too much. Like, what should I look out for? If they get upset, what do they do?" (National expert 19)

Similarly, there was concern that high levels of involvement in research, specifically co-creation or participatory approaches could place an **unfair burden** on a child or young person in relation to the time and effort required to complete the research activities.

"… Somebody issues a tender and they want a response in a couple of weeks and it's like but hold on, you want youth participation, and you know so and I appreciate those people are under pressure as well… Changing that system a little bit would be good, recognising the challenges of undertaking research, doing it well with children and young people." (International expert 5)

"We totally underestimate the timeframe and the level of commitment that children have to give when we have these expectations. What's the time scale for the research? If it's short-term project, it's not feasible for children to be co-designing to a to a great extent." (National expert 3)

"… the more marginalised the young person is, particularly in terms of their economic status, the more challenging it's going to be for them to sign up to essentially free labour of being an advisory committee." (National expert 18)

Additionally, some stakeholders noted that children and young people may experience pressure or feel overwhelmed by researchers.

> *"We do know that children, depending on what age they are, really have this feeling of wanting to please and wanting to get things right. A lot of their Monday to Friday in school where they're judged on whether they get things right or wrong when adults ask them questions. So, you've got all that context when you're doing research with young people." (National expert 11)*

> *"It's not about balancing the insights that they might give us. It's about backing off and certainly protecting their rights and well-being. I just think we need to be really acutely aware of that. They're doing as a huge favour by giving their time and their opinions to us. And I think we need to be respectful of that because we want to be careful that … the children don't feel that they're obliged to speak to us to adults just because it's something that we think is important. So, I think we need to really err on the side of caution..." (National expert 16)*

A concern raised by a minority of stakeholders was the **potential for over-research or research fatigue**, emphasizing the issues of localism and redundancy in studies involving children and young people.

> *"…if we already have children's views on that issue. You know, if young views have already been collected and are fairly up to date and then you know in terms of you know to safeguard against the risk of research fatigue and burn out young people and you know, it might be more ethical to actually analyse where you know the secondary research on where we already know their views on a particular issue you know" (National expert 8).*

> *"I think it's important not only symbolically to make sure that you're feeding back, but also that communities don't feel like they're being pillaged almost constantly all the time, and this is where you're getting huge research fatigue" (National expert 20).*

An alternative conceptualisation of this issue suggested this framework as **'overly protectionist'** serving to undermine the rights of children and young people to research participation. This was suggested to promote paternalistic or tokenistic ethics, excluding children and young people considered too vulnerable or sensitive.

> *"I feel our current approach is overly protectionist...it's undermining children's rights." (National expert 3)*

> *"You can see why people would shy away from research with children. And there is the fear that it becomes tokenistic and it's a tick box and people are under pressure, and they're rushed and they're rushing what should be a very important process to think about to really take the time." (National expert 12)*

> *"I think there's a tendency to I suppose err on the side of caution when it comes to children, you know, to maybe not include children in a study because it might be a sensitive topic. Maybe just to not go there because there's going to be extra ethical considerations needed. There'll be extra rigorous ethical procedures to go through, getting through ethics is harder if you're going to be including children because, they're more vulnerable and you have to take extra steps. So, it's supposed to that it is more challenging. And I suppose there's a tendency to maybe say, oh, we won't go down that route." (National expert 17)*

Stakeholders identified several important protective mechanisms that serve as **'checks and balances'** in research practice, including informed consent and assent, parental consent, withdrawal, and safeguarding protocols. The **informed consent** of children and young people was regarded as a critical yet complex ethical consideration, advancing beyond traditional methods of parental consent and child assent. Grounded in the researcher's duty of care, this practice was considered essential to guarantee informed, continuous, and voluntary consent.

> *"It is a balancing act because traditionally I suppose in society we think of parents being the ones who give consent and children doing what they're being told and I think before 2012, that's obviously shifted, but it continues to shift so that that balance between protection and information and choice for young people is something that I think they'll always need their parents involved with to us to a point why they're a child, but the capacity increases for most children and that needs to be recognised" (National expert 11).*

> *"We had other participants who maybe wanted to take a break and then come back or wanted to come back a different day. And I think that actually made me really happy when people would, even though it's not great for your research, it made me really happy because I felt, this is great, that they are actually recognising that they have the power around how and whether they're going to give their assent or not." (National expert 12)*

> *"We often hear about and see and speak about assent. I think it is a challenge with particularly young children to go that step further really and ensure that it's informed consent that they understand the research and why it's*

happening and why they've been asked to participate and then request their consent based on that." (National expert 13)

"…consent needs to be a consistent process in the research… consistently have open conversations around young people like 'now we're going to do this, are you happy to do that? Now we're going to have a question about this. Are you OK to talk about that?" (National expert 18)

A few participants suggested that **tokenistic child assent practices** in education, health, and sociological research could potentially cause distress or psychological harm.

"Consent is active corporation. Yes, you can put the needle in here or active resistance. (Gestures and physical demonstration). This is what consent really is, your body. And even little children can do this extremely vigorously and clearly.... It's so important the children understand that, otherwise children assume 'I've been naughty, it's my fault I'm being punished' and they're terrified. So, this is all about the ethics of understanding children as sensitive, thoughtful, moral. vulnerable, physical, social beings right from the start." (International expert 2)

"I've been involved in many research projects over the years where there is an issue or there are questions around the level of autonomy that children and young people have in terms of giving their assent. So sometimes, a school principal or a teacher or a parent will be very, very keen for children to be involved in a research project. And you know, I think as researchers, we have to be very careful and very clear that it is completely the choice of the child or the young person to be involved, no matter how worthwhile the adult feels the process is or the project is. I think we, as researchers, have a duty of care to children to ensure that that consent is completely voluntary. And that's very difficult. It's very challenging." (National expert 3)

Informed, ongoing, and negotiated consent was described as being attuned to the nuance of children and young people's communications and behaviour to infer their level of comfort and level of engagement with researchers.

"Working with nonverbal autistic children… saying no wasn't particularly an option for these children… the most powerful thing was if the child wanted, they knew what she was there for. She came into a setting. If they wanted to participate that day, they'd grab her sleeve and tug her off to where she would, and she said if they didn't, they just turned their back and looked the other way, like she didn't exist and wasn't there. And even typically developing children quite often if they don't want to be participating, they'll

> *yawn, not give an answer and that's the strategy of I don't want to participate. So, I think that's really quite important that we're attuned, if we're saying we're saying participation is voluntary. Then it's not a one off, so it's not like the parents informed consent. It is every time if that child or young person is involved in a different session, then every time we respect that right to either participate or not." (International expert 4)*

> *"...one of the children didn't appear to be consenting to participate in the research. It was difficult to make eye contact and when I was in her space, she seemed to move away. So, I just, in the moment had to make the decision... I took it as her choice not to participate." (National expert 13)*

Secondly, with older children, some experts viewed **parental consent** as a potential constraint to meaningful participation in ethical research with children and young people.

> *"There were instances where we would go into a class and maybe there were twenty children in the class and four parents had not given their consent and you could see for some of those children, they really, really wanted to participate ... but we couldn't because the legislation does not allow us if their parents don't give consent. ... for me it's an overly protectionist stance around research." (National expert 3)*

> *"The requirements for seeking parental consent for certain ages can be problematic, so certainly some of the research that I do on homelessness and domestic violence, you know, children may be estranged from parents, or it might put them at risk if we were to contact parents." (National expert 14)*

There was a lack of consensus among stakeholders regarding the age of consent for children and young people in the Irish context. Some stakeholders outlined the age of consent as 18 years, while others adhered to the TUSLA guidelines, which specify sixteen years of age. Several national experts proposed that individuals aged sixteen years and older possess the capacity to provide informed consent for their participation in research studies.

> *"Do they need parental consent and what age of that is necessary. I might argue that actually somebody at the age of sixteen and older doesn't need parental consent, but there is obviously an argument around that." (National expert 5)*

> *"The digital age for consent is sixteen as I think I'm right in saying that. So, I do think we should review that blanket ethical requirement for parental consent up to the age of eighteen and maybe consider lowering it to sixteen..." (National expert 8)*

> *"There needs to be a greater kind of nuance around the ways in which consent is positioned in guidance. Like I feel very, very strongly that at an absolute minimum, young people sixteen and up, irrespective of who they are, can consent to their own participation." (National expert 18).*

Conversely, a comparable group of national experts expressed their hesitation to deviate from established parental consent requirements, viewed as essential safety measures for researchers.

> *"Yeah, it is a really tricky one in terms. I think there's a lot of comfort for researchers having parental consent up to 18. You know, I think that makes me feel far more at ease. You know, we know when we look at brain development in terms of the prefrontal cortex not being fully developed until age 25 and you know, decision making. And I think having an adult there to explain and someone that's a trusted person in their lives. But I do see that it does exclude anyone who might want to share their opinion on things, and maybe there are maybe more participatory ways that we can involve children..." (National expert 12)*

It was suggested that the current policy framework may unintentionally exclude children and young people and infringe on their rights to participate. One stakeholder raised concern that parental consent procedures in the national context do not align with **European standards**, impacting collaborative large-scale research projects.

> *"So, for example, one of our partners were in Spain and in Spain the GDPR requirements have the age of consent at 14. In Ireland it is sixteen, so immediately it meant that when we went into schools... This was it was much more challenging for us as Irish researchers in the Irish context than for our Spanish counterparts." (National expert 3)*

Respectful and age appropriate, child friendly **withdrawal procedures** were identified as a third method of protection for children and young people in ethical research practice. Experts stressed the need for continuous, clear, and accessible protocols for children and young people be communicated at outset of a piece of research and continually negotiated throughout the engagement with the research team.

> *"If they want to remove themselves or if they want to stop...we designed a menu of options that they could choose from...handing them something that they can put down on the table so that they don't even have to verbalise..." (National expert 12)*

> *"Making eye contact with them at the time when you're saying that and just being really, really sincere about it...if there's any questions you don't want to answer, that's absolutely fine. We'll just move on. If at any time we want to take a break, that's absolutely fine. Or if you want to stop the interview..." (National expert 19)*

A significant number of experts discussed the importance of developing a protocol for managing **disclosures** of harm and or abuse by children and young people as a further protective mechanism embedded in research design. Several national experts outlined their practices and procedures for informing children and young people about the mandatory reporting requirement under the Children First Act 2015.

> *"We can't have very clear child protection procedures where reporting is required if we know the identity of the child and we know that they meet the threshold of risk or harm as laid down in Children First and have a different standard of reporting because it's research than if they were in a school or if they were in a shopping centre or we can't have different standards." (National expert 11)*

> *"We were trained in child protection... if anything was disclosed, we had outlined steps as to who we would inform. We actually also mentioned this... to children, we did say... that if they mentioned anything that to us was that put themselves or someone else at harm that we would have to, you know, notify someone. So, they were kind of made aware of those parameters at the start..." (National expert 12)*

> *"If anything comes up around any risks to the health, the welfare, the well-being of the child that we are mandated reporters, so that is a limit to their confidentiality and anonymity." (National expert 17)*

In contrast, some experts have indicated that the safeguarding practice presents a significant ethical dilemma regarding the ongoing participation of children and young people. They emphasised the need for explicit guidelines and a uniform approach to protect children and young people involved in research.

> *"That enables them to self-censor. 'Do I really want to say this' unlike in an interview where once you've said something, you've said it. And OK, you can say I want to withdraw that. But really, are children and young people going to do that?" (International expert 4)*

> *"… if you say to children, as we do, you know anything you say that gives me good concern for your safety, I have to report, and I will report and I will discuss it with you first. That sort of blocks children from actually saying anything… It's not surprising that they don't want to. They don't want to disclose." (International expert 9)*

> *"The risk is that if they do tell you something that a) they don't feel that you've acted on it when they've trusted you enough to tell you or b) that they're worried if they do tell you something that you will act on it and they'll be in some kind of trouble, certainly for some of our learners, they would be anxious around consequences of maybe their teachers, knowing that they weren't happy, or that there was something else going on. But then as a researcher, do you sit on that information that a very small change could make a very big difference to them." (National expert 16)*

There was agreement across the stakeholder interviews on the duty of researchers to provide relevant **professional supports** to children and young people in the case of disclosure, distress, or harm within research activities. This took the form of a supportive adult with the child or young person present when the research activity was taking place or referral to other supportive organisations.

> *"I think that's really a piece, in terms of ethics committees that really needs to be considered and needs to be developed in terms of what like the safe approaches, for example, really making sure that there is an adequate distress protocol or there's adequate supports in place. I have seen like really, really great support and follow up in a longer-term piece in terms of support sessions or funding for counselling provided if it's direct distress or issue from that's arisen from being involved in the research, and that being funded by the whoever's funding the piece as well." (National expert 10)*

> *"We need to have expert professional supports lined up that we can help. So, the main thing is like that we don't do research that's tokenistic… we have protocols in place, that if somebody is becoming distressed or upset, we know exactly what to do." (National expert 12)*

Protecting Children and Young People's Privacy and Confidentiality

All stakeholders highlighted the principle of protecting children and young people's **confidentiality and privacy** in research practice. This was embedded within essential ethical considerations of harm. Confidentiality was maintained through rigorous procedures for removing identifiable information, anonymising research data, and adhering to data protection practices.

> *"The basic point is about anonymising data... ensuring that when you produce your report and publish your results that no individual child is identifiable or no particular school or setting is identifiable." (National expert 3)*

> *"I think otherwise that they get the same rights as anyone else; what they say should be confidential." (National expert 7).*

Confidentiality and privacy also extended to the representation of children and young people, in the form of drawings, photographs, and videos of young participants. Drawings produced by children through co-constructions were preferred by the majority of stakeholders, with limited use of photographs and videos of children and young people in research outputs.

> *"I don't do that. No, no. I think it if it's possible for a child to be identified, it's not appropriate... It's not necessary to tell my story and or to tell the research, the evidence, the data stories, I think." (National expert 1)*

> *"And thinking about particularly if there's stuff in the background... then making sure that you know, blur it out... they'd used cartoony type characterization. So, in instead of using the video, they 'cartoonised' it. Because again, it's a way of thinking about protecting those identities." (International expert 4)*

A number of experts described the efforts taken to alter photographs to protect the privacy of child and young people. Innovative methods included obfuscation of children's faces, and school uniforms through blurring, pixilation, cartoon animations and the use of emoji. Additionally, some national experts described the use of child-led participatory approaches to anonymisation such as asking children to choose a pseudonym, and in doing so develop their understanding of children's right to privacy.

> *"I'd said to this little boy about, you know, so long as it's not rude, you can choose a name that you would like to be known as, not your real name, because that protects you a bit … And this little boy said, 'oh, OK, I'm 'unhearable'; it was kind of she thought it was his choice of 'unhearable', which is actually when you are dealing with a child who is partially deaf, it was a really cool name..." (International expert 4)*

> *"In some cases, we've asked the children to come up with their own pseudonym so that they feel they understand what we mean by that." (National expert 13).*

For a small number of stakeholders, the duty of confidentiality involved a further contradiction in research practice balancing the need for children and young people's participation and recognition and **choice of methodological approaches for researchers**.

> *"…I think that the legal and ethical framework have constrained the use of video as a research instrument. So, I think in Ireland we have had less work that that focuses on classroom interaction or even peer interaction, because of those constraints on the use of video. I'm not sure how you reconcile them. I think it is it is a loss because I think. There are certain processes and interactions that we're not capturing." (National expert 7)*

> *"It's a real challenge about actually we're researching with children and we're saying it's because we value children's participation and then children's faces become invisible or blocked out, or something that that seems to contradict a little bit of that. So that's the dilemma that we haven't resolved..." (National expert 13)*

Again, the issue of **recognition** of children and young people's contributions to research as co-researchers was highlighted as an unresolved tension within confidentiality procedures.

> *"But there was an argument to actually, especially if they shape policy and there's a recognition for their input whereby … we want to actually celebrate and appreciate publicly on a report or whatever, that these young people, they're almost like co-authors or if they have been so heavily involved in the co-design and the shaping of the research, there's a potential argument there." (National expert 8)*

> *"They are doing you a favour. You are not doing them a favour, and I think if we come from that point. Whilst it is your research and is very important, the children and young people are doing you a favour by speaking to you. So, their thoughts and opinions just have to take precedence over everything ..." (National expert 16)*

> *"And to be honest, I mean like we're often happy.... I prefer not to be anonymous, because then at least you know your positions and where you are standing because it becomes this kind of sanitised exercise." (National expert 20)*

Digital technology and the use of social media was acknowledged as a further challenge to confidentiality and privacy for children and young people, particularly in the context of social media.

> *"In this digital age, absolute confidentiality and anonymity is very, very difficult I would suggest because doesn't take much to kind of figure out oh, that person's affiliated with that organisation." (International expert 4).*

While digital research offered possibilities of participatory approaches with children and young people, for example, use of head cameras, and photo-voice as data collection tools. It also carried significant **ethical complexities** for international and national experts.

> *"I think sometimes we tend to see them as two very, very different spaces for data gathering. And I do think the main ethical principles are the same whether you're conducting research online or in person. And so that's, I suppose my that's my bottom line is that the ethical principles still apply." (National expert 3).*

> *"I have no idea. And I'll be perfectly honest with that, and I have no idea because I don't under... I obviously understand social media, but do you know what I mean? I don't understand the full implications of that... I think the things that we think may be a danger, they've gone so far beyond in that digital space that we would have no idea." (National expert 12)*

Stakeholders highlighted a number of key issues which they wished **for future guidance to address in relation to digital technology.** Research guidance should be developed in this area as children and young people are increasingly acknowledged as 'digital natives' who use such technology much more fluently than researchers.

> *"The online is a huge benefit and I think … some children do and are very comfortable in the online space. So, I think we're dealing with digital natives, children who have known nothing else but online engagement in many cases so that they are huge advantages. You already have an audience that is very capable, very expertise in using online spaces and occupying online spaces. It's less expensive." (National expert 16)*

Both national and international stakeholders highlighted the need for further development of research and guidance in this area, lamenting a lack of understanding of the implications for research practice. Concerns about the age of digital consent was noted within by experts as a key tension for researchers who report inconsistent standards of ethical practice for commercial companies and social media platforms.

> *"Industry is allowed to do so much, and researchers are not…. Their rights are not being respected in terms of being protected from harm, like in terms of commercial interests' bombard kids no matter what they say." (National expert 5)*

> *"The risks around that the social media piece in particular is that they're ungovernable, they are not beholden to national law. They operate very much outside of the boundaries of that, and that presents challenges to yourselves in terms of how you construct guidelines around it, but also to researchers as well in terms of this is what national law has around, young people's ability to consent to their data sharing or engagement in that way, but in practice is that actually what's happening." (National expert 18)*

The insights from national and international experts highlighted the importance of adopting a rights-based approach that balanced the right to participation with the duty to protect the well-being of children and young people from exclusion, over-protection, harms, burdens, and research fatigue. Protective mechanisms included informed consent, parental consent, withdrawal, and safeguarding protocols. Moreover, while children and young people's confidentiality and privacy were secured through rigorous anonymisation procedures, key ethical complexities remain for researchers in appreciating children and young people as co-researchers and in the use of digital technologies.

Theme Three – Inclusion of Seldom Heard, Marginalised and Vulnerable Children and Young People

> *"Children don't speak with one voice any more than the rest of us do... you need to try and capture the experience of different groups of children and different social backgrounds, as well as talking about cultural, ethnic differences and age differences and disability differences." (National expert 7)*

Stakeholders highlighted the importance of engaging children and young people **with seldom heard voices in research**, emphasising commitments to inclusion, recognising children and young people as a heterogeneous group, valuing their **diversity,** and seeking out underrepresented or marginalised voices. This was identified by national experts as a key gap within the 2012 guidance.

> *"And I think it's simplistic to think that we see children as this kind of homogeneous sort of group you know… Because that's obviously not the way it is… I guess it's just about listening to the experiences of researchers who've been in the field and who work with children from different backgrounds and children of all ages and have an understanding of the context of children's development, you know. I think that's really important." (National expert 6)*

> *"I don't think there's much recognition of diversity among children and the need to adopt particular approaches to dealing with some groups of children and young people. I think that was the main thing that I thought was lacking, that kind of recognition of difference and diversity as another principle. Really you need to try and capture the experience of different groups of children and different social backgrounds, as well as talking about cultural, ethnic differences and age differences and disability differences. (National expert 7)*

> *"There's a lot greater probably gaps with regards to lots of groups of what we in we refer to as seldom heard children and young people who may not have those same opportunities. But I think it may be, it may take a lot more time and it may take a lot more innovation to be able to reach those groups." (National expert 10)*

> *"A key kind of starting point is a consideration around the different kind of cohorts of young people... I have found as a result of my work that when I've been exploring kind of ethical guidance... there's a kind of a consistency across documentation to position young people as a homogeneous group... My starting point is who is the cohort of young people that I'll be engaging*

> *with and then drilling down into what are the specific ethical considerations around those young people." (National expert 20)*

These efforts span across a range of marginalised and less visible groups of children. It was acknowledged that stakeholders balanced the need to gain insights into these groups with the risk of **oversampling or over-researching** these key cohorts.

> *"Sometimes researchers want to get access to fairly rarefied samples because they're different, they're unique, but quite often they become oversampled, over accessed. And I think we have to be so, so careful not to do that because it's not fair." (National expert 15)*

> *"Traveller children in particular, Travellers are the most over researched group. I would say in Ireland. And often what we've had historically have been voyeuristic researchers, voyeuristic reporters, voyeuristic reporting and have often, took the opportunity to exploit those opportunities and exploit parents and children." (National expert 20)*

Central to participatory approach was acknowledging the expertise and lived experience of children from a vast array of children and young people from diverse backgrounds.

> *"I suppose it's nothing about us without us, that if you're doing something on about young people that you need to hear their voice. So, you know you can ask parents. You can ask teachers, you can ask school, but you need to hear what they think of things too. To me, it is that their voice has to be included... we always make sure that the child's voice is in there in some form or other and thus the child's voice is heard." (National expert 19)*

> *"One of the key issues that we are really pushing for but also, encouraging other colleagues to think about is. You know who sets the research agenda?... we are saying no, it needs to emerge from the community and by the organisations working within the community." (National expert 20)*

The following four sub-theme are structured around the inclusion of key groups of children and young people: very young children, children with Special Educational Needs, Traveller and Roma children, and LGBTQ young people.

Including very young children

Eleven stakeholders described good practice in the inclusion of **very young children** (aged below six years old) in research activities through creative, age-appropriate methods which are adapted to the interests, capabilities, and communication styles of very young children.

> *"… the children wore head cameras. And one thing was that the preschool is shown from their perspective low down and looking up. And then, they sent her the videos, and she analysed them and then she went in to meet the three- and four-year-olds and to discuss the videos with them, clips, and videos with them. They were in charge of the data collecting." (International expert 2)*

Researchers attuned to the nuances of early childhood communication and behaviour, used a range of play-based methods and, mediated by a trusted adult, ensured meaningful participation for non-verbal and pre-verbal children.

> *"…the positionality of younger children, nonverbal children, children with special education needs, or additional needs and challenges and how we can fully ensure as much as we can ensure that their rights are upheld within the research process. And I think that's more challenging for certain cohorts of children than others." (National expert 3)*

> *"We have done some work with like very young children, as in preschool age. We are using kind of creative research method you have to adapt your approach because they need to be interested and engaged. Whereas for very young children play is what they you know, that's how they learn. That's how they communicate often." (National expert 5)*

> *"I think when you've got nonverbal and pre verbal children, it becomes very different…carers and people who know the child and understand the child, generally the parent… are integral to doing research with any children that are non-verbal or pre-verbal or with children with cognitive difficulties." (National expert 11)*

In particular, experts noted the practice of consent procedures adapted to the needs of very young children.

> *"We really try and think about consent and how we obtain informed consent from children, particularly the youngest, and how we navigate and negotiate with gatekeepers….It's a challenge with particularly young children to go that*

> *step further really and ensure that it's informed consent that they understand the research and why it's happening and why they've been asked to participate…" (National expert 13)*

One stakeholder commented on the need for inclusion of the youngest group of children in updated guidance to ensure meaningful participation and adequate protection.

> *"A lot of the guidance that comes out is for older children, and it often needs to then be adapted for younger children." (National expert 13)*

Including Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs

Thirteen stakeholders considered the inclusion of children and young people with Special Educational Needs in ethical research practice. This group were viewed as silenced due to their perceived vulnerabilities and the consequent ethical difficulties in accessing and engaging this group of children and young people.

> *"…children, young people with disabilities and I think quite often they're silenced." (International expert 4)*

> *" I think in particular young people with a disability or special educational need…But given the numbers of such young people in mainstream settings that we do need to make sure that they're included and that we use more creative ways to include them." (National expert 7)*

> *"I think we need to link in with people who understand that context. So, if it's Down syndrome, if it's a rare disease, if it's particularly autism, if it's maybe dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia, to link in there and to find those kind of things out from the families, the carers, but especially the young people." (National expert 15)*

A key ethical consideration was emphasised as considering **the individual capacities and evolving abilities of children and young people**. Good practice for supporting the participation and agency of children with Special Educational Needs and disability focused on use of tailored approaches, creative, flexible, and accessible methods suited to the needs of individual children and their communication preferences.

> *"The main challenge is really making sure that you have a communication style that suits the child, that you are speaking to, or even just, as a researcher, having a really good understanding that that communication style may be different. ... So really just to give not only a choice around communication styles." (National expert 16)*

A few stakeholders provided insight into their experience conducting research with autistic children and young people, emphasising the ethical necessity of **a high level of preparation** for research activities.

> *"Creating an environment that was really important to me when we were doing the research with autistic students trying to create an environment and do like an initial kind of prep for that. There might be certain … there are different needs, what kind of a setting would make them feel comfortable. Maybe they want to know the questions that are going to be asked. Maybe they want to be able to bring something familiar with them and talk to you about them and kind of having all of that prep work I think is really important..."(National expert 12)*

> *"I think just in terms particularly for autistic children, much like you did yourself, in giving out the questions before that the children are given a chance to see questions in advance and really just then they are quite clear on the expectations and it's predictable to them… I am doing a bit of research with autistic children just now and …, I recorded a presentation of myself speaking so they could see me so that even though they had met me before, that it was a spoken social narrative. So, they could play over and over again, and they knew what to expect. So, they knew what I look like, what I sounded like … There's no big surprises because that obviously can really throw our autistic learners in particular." (National expert 16)*

For autistic children and young people, ethical research preparation included taking account of communication **preferences and sensory sensitivities.**

> *"…if a child is going to be taking part in any research, it is really important to link in with them or a parent beforehand and kind of get some background information on them. What are they interested in? What will make them comfortable? Are there any things like sensory needs that needs to be accommodated?" (National expert 12)*

> *"Or having things like pens and whiteboards that they can write it if they don't feel like saying it. Certainly, you know, I had a couple of wee ones and because there's another adult in the room, they were like, 'I'm not*

> *comfortable saying it.' But they wrote it, or I had prompt cards, and they put together sentences for me. Or do you know me figures or whatever. And that's absolutely perfect." (National expert 16)*

Again, it was noted that there was a need for guidance to support ethical good practice in the inclusion of children and young people with Special Educational Needs in research activity.

> *"There is more guidance and support and certainly when we were doing research with that neuro diverse group, we really did feel kind of at a loss as to kind of having really directive support." (National expert 12)*

Including Children and Young People from Traveller and Roma Communities

One stakeholder provided insight into meaningful and ethical approaches to balancing the participation and protection of children and young people for the Traveller and Roma communities. Importantly, researchers were advised to adopt a partnership approach with the Traveller and Roma communities.

> *"Who sets the research agenda? ... it needs to emerge from the community and by the organisations working within the community…. Any research that is taken on or with a focus on Travellers and Roma needs to be with in partnership with travel organisations and groups… ensuring an inclusive research design." (National expert 20)*

The advancement of ethical, inclusive methodologies and culturally relevant practices could be facilitated through researcher training, co-creation, and the establishment of relationships across various communities.

> *"You have to do anti-racism training ... you have to have a clear briefing around what the parameters of the work, but also some of the nuances that you might not know ... 60% of Roma, their first language is Romani. There's no Romani interpreters… you have to build up rapport. You have to build up trust and unfortunately Travellers and Roma, the experience with research to date hasn't always been positive and racism discrimination has lived reality." (National expert 20)*

> *"It is around setting the research agenda. It is around respectful working and also recognising the expertise of the community sector. We would have worked in partnership with them to develop a research team of Roma*

researchers to also, not only to undertake the research, but also to pull together the analysis and also to put together policy recommendations." (National expert 20)

"Travellers and Roma are made vulnerable in many instances but are well able to articulate themselves and actually so some of that framing needs to be challenged and to be addressed." (National expert 20)

Including LGBTQ young people

It is vital to adopt good practices for supporting children and young people from diverse backgrounds, including those who identify as LGBTQ. A number of key ethical risks were highlighted for this specific cohort such as the risk of being outed, over-researched and exploited by researchers.

"I think there's a couple of risks that are just indicative of working with LGBT young people. A huge one is the risk of young people become being outed as a result of their participation." (National expert 18)

"I think the conversation is starting around it, LBGT young people are both under and over researched in different ways in an Irish context. And that is down to a large part of a sort of a top-down approach to the construction of research projects and research design… And some of it is also a methodological challenge, like young people being like 'I'm not doing another survey like I'm sick of it'." (National expert 18)

Addressing these key risks, through inclusive and ethical practices could enhance the participation and protection of LGBTQ young people in Irish research. One expert urged careful adaptation of language, consent protocols, and use of co-creation and participatory approaches at all stages of the research process to engage young people in meaningful research opportunities.

"if you don't have a research design that's LGBT inclusive, young people aren't going to get involved and if that's not clear across the project, have you thought of the nuances around like how gender is it captured within the project, how you're asking those questions, how you're then coding and analysing the data. And then also questions of sexuality as well. There's lots of ways in which research designs can kind of reproduce micro aggressions for LGBT young people. And I think that if that's even slightly present, it's obviously going to dissuade young people from getting involved." (National expert 18)

> *""It kind of has to be said that the socio-political climate for LGBT young people, particularly trans young people, is incredibly hostile, and research has historically and both now persistently being like heavily weaponized against the liveability of those young people. So, we're now seeing an increased reluctance of young people to engage in research programmes where they are uncertain of the ambitions of the project." (National expert 18)*

> *"There is a lack of engagement in the literature around the limitations of the kind of absolutism around parental consent, particularly for young people who that poses a very significant barrier to their participation. So, I'm thinking specifically around LGBT young people where we know from the literature that there are high levels of unacceptance, particularly for younger cohorts in familial context, and then also in different interpersonal relationships. Some of those young people are not likely to be out, and if you have a research project that's very specific to their experiences as LBGT young people, the absolute requirement of parental consent is immediately going to present itself as a barrier to their participation." (National expert 18)*

Across the stakeholder interviews, there was a strong consensus that ethical research with children and young people must be inclusive with careful attention paid to marginalised groups. National experts suggested that collaborative partnerships with advocacy and community organisations could enable ethical engagement with diverse, marginalised, or vulnerable groups of children and young people.

> *"I've worked with a number of those bodies, in particular Children's Rights Alliance and Hub na nÓg and Barnardo's in various capacities, around participatory research… I think it's critical that we have these bodies and these agencies as advocates for children. And I think while all of them are very strong on the need to protect the rights and best interests of children." (National expert 3)*

Most stakeholders reported positive experiences working with **children's organisations and advocacy bodies**, highlighting the roles of various organisations in service provision and practice, consultation with children and young people, safeguarding, advocacy, and campaigning on particular issues or on behalf of vulnerable groups. At a higher level, it was acknowledged that organisations such as the Ombudsman for Children had a role in setting the national agenda on children's research, protecting, and implementing children's rights under UNCRC and filtering such practices and perspectives into research practice.

> *"I think it's critical that we have these bodies and these agencies as advocates for children. I think while all of them are very strong on the need to protect the rights and best interests of children, and they really are calling for better regulations and guidance around research with children, particularly upholding the rights of children to be involved in research because at the moment I just don't think we're doing that, and I think groups like the Children's Rights Alliance, Hub na nÓg, and the Ombudsman himself has been has been calling for that for quite a while." (National expert 3)*

> *"Also they can play a key role in terms of that protection element of children and young people or that protection-participation kind of balance as well and you know really taking on their advice that they're working with children, young people on a regular basis and listening to them on their views on how they want research conducted." (National expert 14)*

> *"They will have that support of infrastructure, and they will be able to give really meaningful insight to researchers. They'll be able to provide us an additional supportive factor if there's a particular risk element to the experience of the young people that they're engaging." (National expert 18)*

Other key organisations for supporting research activities were identified as National Youth Council of Ireland, Secondary School Students of Ireland, TUSLA, National Parent Council, PPI Ignite, and Barnardo's Ireland. Such organisations were perceived as having a role in research practice, campaigning and advocacy for children and young people in the Irish context. A small number of stakeholders emphasised the expertise and wealth of experience with such organisations with children, young people, and their families, and proposed further collaborative partnerships to enhance the capacity of research to meaningfully engage with children and young people, and access hard to reach groups.

> *"I think is a huge piece, you know, with regards to how things can be done because we do have a lot of, and it's probably something in the future, perhaps … look at in partnership with the university and new experts who have in research, good practice examples that are accessible and approachable with working with research with different groups… We have a lot of good practice examples that look at space, voice, audience and influence and feedback" (National expert 10).*

National and international experts have highlighted the need for inclusion of seldom heard, marginalised and vulnerable children and young people in research. There is a need for tailored, flexible, and accessible approaches that address the unique risks

and challenges faced by each group of children and young people. Advocacy groups were perceived to play a pivotal role in eliciting, advocating, and supporting the voices of children and young people are heard and their contributions are valued. Efforts to refine guidance and engage with these groups is vital to upholding the highest ethical standards in research.

Theme Four: Irish Legal, Ethical and Policy Frameworks and Guidance.

Legal and ethical policy frameworks were viewed by stakeholders to **both shape and constrain** ethical research practices with children and young people.

> *"While sometimes the regulations, the rules, the frameworks, the guidance is there to protect children it inadvertently prevents them from taking part in something that they might actually want to do." (National expert 5)*

> *"Children are experts in their own lives, that we can learn so much through direct research with them. At every turn we're finding hurdles and barriers in terms of accessing those children. And so, I do think we're undermining children's rights." (National expert 3).*

Time and funding were highlighted as factors which challenged children and young people's participation in research activity.

> *"… Securing ethical approval for any kind of research with children now even the most basic, there are so many barriers between researchers and children now that have been built up into these through these regulations and legislation and guidance. And I think that kind of restricting researcher access to children is very, you know, it's very unhelpful." (National expert 2).*

While the stakeholders sought to offer a balanced view of the impact of the current policies, legal and ethical frameworks, the overwhelming message was that current frameworks constrain research practice with children and young people. Regional ethical guidelines were described **as taking an overly protectionist stance**. It was suggested that current guidance was indirectly limited the attitudes and activities of Research Ethics Committees (RECs) within higher education to a risk-averse and limited approach to proposed research with children and young people. This

attitudinal barrier impacted researchers through delayed progress and funding difficulties.

> *"I think they're overdone and they're very restraining at the moment and often very, very unhelpful, delaying projects, wasting researchers time and opportunities, run by bureaucratic interests and also most of all institutions, worry about being sued if anything goes wrong. So, money is driving it, and I think it's taken a really wrong turn, ethics and it is unfortunately getting a bad name." (International expert 2)*

Moreover, stakeholders highlighted that the GDPR framework also constrained practice in a number of ways; imposing inaccessible research bureaucracy on research participants, and the need for Data Protection Risk Assessments added an additional burden for researchers.

> *"For me it's an overly protectionist stance. We have to protect children, but I think we have an overly protectionist stance around research and I think our GDPR legislation is quite restrictive in Ireland actually compared to other countries…" (National expert 3)*

Improvements for guidance were offered by a number of stakeholders across sectors in terms of the format of guidance to allow for ongoing review and revision. Current 2012 Guidance was critiqued as inaccessible on the DCEDIY website, with a need to make accessible the most recent version and highlight successive changes for researchers. Currency could be achieved through special guidance on key issues or addendums to core guidance as most of the stakeholders noted that the essential ethical principles remained the same but key issues have arisen.

> *"But I mean these principles shouldn't need to change too often, like they are basic principles about of humanity and of fairness. Like that doesn't change, so all the basic stuff. If there's a new issue, for example like digital data collection or spying on people on their public social media sites or whatever that needs treatment. But that doesn't, that's not going to require a whole new document." (National expert 1).*

A feedback mechanism was noted by a number of stakeholders as a potential development in line with existing consultation frameworks in order to evolve principles and practices.

> *"I think we could be doing a lot more in terms of … the Laura Lundy model that underpins our national framework in the Republic. Like, I think that feedback loop that's really important. How are we going to improve practise? How are we going to improve our ethical approach to research with children if children aren't informing that process….We do need that feedback loop with children and some kind of ongoing process so that the guidance is child informed and not just researcher informed in our research practices with children, they come back to tell us then children themselves and I'm not sure that we're thinking that way enough at the moment." (National expert 3)*

> *"There is this habit of revising guidelines to take account of new situations and evolving climate and context. I think having that feedback loop is really, really quite important and I think as researchers we can kind of forget about that bit that. We've done tick next project, whereas how do you build in legacy and updating. I don't know how you do it, but I think it's important." (International expert 4)*

> *"I think sometimes we tend to see them as two very, very different spaces for data gathering. And I do think the main ethical principles are the same whether you're conducting research online or in person. And so that's, I suppose my that's my bottom line is that the ethical principles still apply." (National expert 3)*

Stakeholders highlighted a number of key issues which they would like guidance to address and evolve. It was suggested that research guidance should be developed in this area as children and young people are now 'digital natives' and can use this technology much more fluently than researchers.

> *"The online is a huge benefit and I think there's there, you know, some children do and are, you know, are very comfortable in the online space. So, I think we're dealing with digital natives, you know, children who have known nothing else but online engagement in many cases so that they are huge advantages. You already have an audience that is very capable, very expertise in using online spaces and occupying online spaces. It's less expensive." (International expert 4)*

Stakeholder comments highlighted the need for more work in this area, suggesting a lack of understanding of the implications for research practice. Stakeholders discussed the benefits using digital technology supporting their agency and engagement in research. The following sub-themes were prevalent. The age of digital consent was noted within the interview discussions but not highlighted as posing a

significant problem for researchers who do not exclusively use digital methods to engage with children and young people.

A range of suggestions for future guidance were offered as beneficial for researchers including:

- A live document structure to allow review, addendums and enable researchers to submit evidence of good practice,
- The development of online materials in the form of journals, blogs, online lectures, and special interest groups.
- The need for jurisdiction specific guidance in addition to international ethical principles.
- Updates on publications in ethics, practice, and disciplinary journals. Version numbers used to identify the most up to date guidance documents.
- Researcher reflexivity to fully engage with consideration of ongoing ethical issues in research with children and young people.
- There is a need for researcher training programmes in participatory methods and inclusive approaches to research with children and young people.
- The development of a community of practice on ethical research with children and young people to support early-career and experienced researchers to collaborate and seek advice when facing complex and novel ethical situations.

While the current Irish legal, ethical, and policy frameworks provide necessary protections for children and young people in research, they also present significant challenges and constraints. Stakeholders emphasised the need for a balanced approach that recognises the rights, agency, protection, and wellbeing of young participants without unduly hindering research progress. Future guidance should aim to be more accessible, adaptable, and responsive to the evolving research landscape, specifically in the context of digital technology.

Summary and Key Findings

Theme One - Children and Young People's Participation and Agency in Research.

- National and international experts identified the importance of adopting a rights-based approach to ethical research, rooted in respect for children and their right to participate based in frameworks such as the UNCRC Article 12 and the Lundy Model of Child Participation.
- Children participation in varied levels and stages of the research appreciated children and young people as competent social actors who can contribute meaningfully to research.

- Methods of building ethical participation include building genuine relationships, clear communication, consider power dynamics, manage expectations, enable free engagement, feedback information and use developmentally appropriate methods was stressed.
- Time was highlighted as an ethical challenge to such approaches. Recognition and remuneration for children and young people in participatory and advisory roles was reported as an unresolved issue for researchers in the Irish context.

Theme Two- Balancing the Rights and Wellbeing of Children and Young People.

- All experts outlined an understanding of the 'do no harm' in research with children and young people.
- Stakeholders indicated balancing protection and participation, describing it as a 'tightrope' or 'fine balance', with some advocating for a nuanced, rights-based approach that prioritises both the well-being and engagement of young participants.
- Key ethical risks included causing distress or discomfort, sensitive subjects, undue burdens on children in participatory research and over-sampling.
- Key mechanisms such as informed consent, parental consent, and safeguarding protocols provide essential 'checks and balances' in research practice. However, there was a lack of consensus on the age of consent for children and young people in the Irish context.

Theme Three – Inclusion of Seldom Heard, Marginalised and Vulnerable Children and Young People

- Efforts to include seldom heard voices and underrepresented groups were highlighted as a priority to maximise children and young people's participation and protection.
- Use of creative, age-appropriate methods can be used to engage young children, emphasising their evolving capabilities and communication styles. Researchers can meaningfully include very young children through play-based activities, adult mediation, and age-appropriate consent practices.
- Including children and young people with SEN required consideration of their individual capacities and evolving abilities as well as a higher level of preparation to ensure methods were aligned with communication preferences and sensory preferences.
- Ethical research with Children and Young People from the Traveller and Roma communities should adopt partnership and co-creation approaches to ensure inclusive methodologies and culturally relevant practice facilitated through researcher training.
- Good practices for supporting LGBTQ children and young people addressed key ethical risks such as being outed, over-researched, and exploited by researchers. Inclusive and ethical practices, careful adaptation of language,

consent protocols, participatory approaches to enhance their participation and protection in research.

- Stakeholders emphasised a wide-ranging role for advocacy and community organisations supporting children's participation, protection, and rights in ethical research practice.

Theme Four – The Irish Legal, Ethical and Policy Frameworks and Developing Guidance

- Time and funding are perceived as significant challenges in children and young people's research. Securing ethical approval is described as increasingly difficult due to regulatory, legislative, and guidance barriers.
- Regional ethical guidelines were described as overly protectionist, cautious, and constraining, indirectly limiting the attitudes and activities of Research Ethics Committees (RECs) within higher education.
- GDPR framework is viewed to impose additional bureaucratic burdens on researchers. The age of consent at 16 years in Ireland was seen as a constraint on research practice with young people, impacting large-scale European collaborations.
- Stakeholders suggested improvements for guidance, including making the most recent version accessible, highlighting successive changes, and allowing for ongoing review and revision, the addition of special guidance on key issues as addendums and a feedback loop.

Concluding Comments

With a view to informing updated guidance, this study explored recent research, legal and best practice developments in ethical research with children and young people, and engaged with a wide range of key stakeholders. Participants included national and international experts and policy makers, as well as a richly diverse group of children and young people across all stages of development. This included babies, toddlers, preschool children, primary school children, and post-primary young people, ensuring that the perspectives and lived experiences of even the youngest participants were actively heard and meaningfully incorporated. A dedicated panel of care-experienced young people also provided critical insight, particularly on the ethical complexities of engaging with marginalised and vulnerable groups. This breadth of engagement reflects a deliberate and sustained effort to recognise the full spectrum of childhood and youth in the development of ethical research practices.

Key Themes in Work Package 2

Work Package 2 delivered a critical review of relevant policy, evidence and best practice, drawing on national and international sources. The review underscored the importance of modernising ethical principles, practices, and governance procedures to ensure they remain current, relevant and effective in a changing research landscape. Key themes were the importance of children's participation as co-researchers, increasing efforts to include very young children, dealing with sensitive research topics, and research in the digital environment. In all contexts, it was highlighted that researchers must engage in reflexive practices, acknowledge power dynamics, and adopt participatory methodologies with a view to empowering children and young people as co-creators of knowledge on matters that affect them.

Key Themes in Work Package 3

Work Package 3 elicited the views and perspectives of experts and policy makers on the principles, practices, and challenges of ethical research with children and young people, with a focus on recent developments. It explored four key themes:

Theme 1: Children and Young People's Participation and Agency in Research

Experts agreed that children's active participation and agency is essential to ethical research. A rights-based approach, guided by frameworks such as the UNCRC and

the Lundy Model, was endorsed to ensure children are respected as capable contributors. Co-production and participatory methods were seen as gold standards. Building trusting relationships, clear communication, and age-appropriate methods were identified as critical, though ethical dilemmas remain around how to fairly acknowledge and compensate children's contributions.

Theme 2: Balancing the Rights and Wellbeing of Children and Young People

Striking a balance between enabling participation and protecting children's wellbeing was seen as vital. Ethical concerns included over-sampling, research fatigue, and dealing with sensitive topics. Mechanisms such as informed consent, parental consent, the right to withdraw, and safeguarding procedures are standard practice, though debates continue around the appropriate age for independent consent in Ireland. The use of digital tools also presents emerging ethical complexities, particularly regarding privacy and children's roles as co-researchers, and further guidance in this area was requested. Challenges also remain around balancing confidentiality with recognition of children and young people's contributions.

Theme 3: Inclusion of Seldom Heard, Marginalised and Vulnerable Children and Young People

There was strong consensus on the need to include underrepresented groups, such as very young children, children with special educational needs, Traveller and Roma children, and LGBTQ youth, through tailored, flexible, and accessible approaches. Experts stressed the importance of engaging advocacy organisations to help reach and support these groups and to ensure their perspectives are meaningfully included, and further guidance on engaging with these groups is needed.

Theme 4: The Irish Legal, Ethical and Policy Frameworks and Guidance

While Ireland's current legal and ethical frameworks offer important protections, experts noted that they can also hinder research due to complex approval processes, time constraints, and limited flexibility. Experts expressed a need for guidance that better balances children's rights, agency, and protection with the realities of conducting research, especially in digital contexts where ethical standards are still evolving.

Key Themes in Work Package 4

Work Package Four engaged a diverse group of children and young people, from babies to young adults. Across all ages, participants emphasised the importance of being heard in matters affecting them, and that participation must be voluntary, flexible, and meaningful.

Children demonstrated a clear ability to express preferences and boundaries, valuing honest, accessible, and ongoing communication tailored to their capacities. They stressed that assent is not a one-off gesture, but a continuous, dialogic process, crucial for upholding their rights, agency, and emotional safety.

Trusting relationships with adults and safe, familiar environments were key to their willingness to engage. For the youngest children, familiar adults, smiles, and comforting gestures were especially important, while older children focused more on the adult's personality and trustworthiness.

Importantly, children noted that research should be relevant to their lives, and methods should be adapted to their age, interests, and abilities, such as using play, creative tools, or informal conversations.

While safety and privacy were valued, many children also expressed pride in their participation and a desire to be involved in sharing research findings. Their input highlights the ethical importance of creating emotionally supportive and physically responsive spaces that foster trust, inclusion, and the genuine valuing of children's voices.

As part of Work Package Four, the project team consulted with an expert panel of care-experienced young adults to explore ethical considerations in conducting research with children and young people from marginalised, vulnerable, and seldom-heard communities. Their reflections offered valuable insights, highlighting three overarching themes:

Theme 1: Pillars of Ethical Participation with Care-Experienced Children and Young People

Participants emphasised that participation must be ethical, meaningful, inclusive, and rooted in the rights and individual needs of each child or young person. They raised concerns about the re-traumatisation and over-sampling of care-experienced children

and young people in research, stressing that inclusion should be purposeful and respectful, not tokenistic.

The importance of recognising each child as an individual was strongly affirmed. This includes using clear and sensitive language, managing expectations, and ensuring that children understand their role and the scope of the research. Practical aspects such as the location of the research, travel arrangements, and the presence of supportive and trusted individuals were also seen as essential in creating a safe and comfortable environment.

The panel identified researcher reflexivity, the ability of researchers to critically reflect on their own assumptions, behaviours, and methods, as key to improving ethical practice over time and ensuring responsiveness to participants' lived experiences.

Theme 2: Relationships at the Heart of Ethical Participation

A recurring and central theme was the significance of trusting, respectful relationships between researchers and participants. These relationships were described as critical to ethical engagement, particularly for children and young people with experience of care.

Participants noted that building trust requires a genuine investment of time and effort, as well as a commitment to continuity. Ethical research was seen not as a one-off event but as a relational process, where researchers remain engaged beyond the data collection stage. Sustained connections were associated with emotional safety, trust, and a sense of being valued, all of which were vital for meaningful participation.

Theme 3: Protected, Not Silenced – Reframing Participation and Protection

While protection remains a core ethical principle in research involving care-experienced children and young people, the panel called for a careful balance between protecting participants and enabling their meaningful involvement. They challenged assumptions that protection must come at the cost of participation, instead advocating for approaches that centre choice, agency, and voice.

Crucially, they stressed that involving children from the outset, and offering them opportunities to shape the research process, made participation feel more respectful, empowering, and relevant. This not only strengthened engagement but also affirmed their right to be heard and to influence matters that affect their lives.

Again, researcher reflexivity was highlighted as a tool for maintaining this balance, helping researchers remain attuned to the power dynamics, emotional risks, and ethical complexities of participatory research with care-experienced children and young people.

Cross-Cutting Themes in Ethical Research with Children and Young People

Across the work packages, several interlinked themes emerged that collectively point to the core elements of ethical research practice with children and young people. These themes consistently underscore the need to centre children's rights, agency, and voice, while navigating complex ethical considerations around protection, inclusion, power, and evolving research contexts.

A strong, shared message across all work packages is that ethical research must be rooted in relationships of trust, care, and respect. Participation is only meaningful when children feel emotionally safe, listened to, and valued. A relational ethic, focusing not just on procedures, but on genuine human connection and accountability, is essential, particularly when engaging with marginalised and vulnerable groups.

Another recurring theme is the central role of researcher reflexivity. Reflexive practice helps ensure that researchers remain responsive to children's diverse needs and guard against extractive or one-sided approaches. Young people, in particular, highlighted the importance of emotional safety, the need for ongoing connection, and the rejection of exploitative or transactional engagements.

Ethical participation cannot be achieved through formalities or isolated consent procedures alone. It must be cultivated through sustained, trust-based environments in which children are treated as equal partners. This means recognising their capacities, respecting their boundaries, and engaging in ways that are accessible, empowering, and relevant to their lived experience.

The strong endorsement of participation by children and young people was a common thread across all work packages. Participants agreed that protection and participation must be carefully balanced. Children emphasised the fluid, ongoing nature of consent, while care-experienced young people in particular called for a reframing of protection, not as a reason to silence voices, but as a framework for enabling safe, supported participation grounded in preparation and trust.

There was also a clear commitment to inclusion, ensuring that marginalised, seldom-heard, and very young children are represented in research. Participants highlighted the need for tailored methods, flexibility, and a respectful approach that accounts for individual differences and communication styles.

Finally, an essential theme that emerged across all work packages was the importance of follow-up and validation. The Care Experienced Experts Panel (CEEP) made it clear that being heard is not enough - they want to know their voices have made a difference. Ethical research must include mechanisms to return findings to participants, share results in accessible formats, and acknowledge their contributions meaningfully.

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