Ethical considerations in researching children

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Changing tradition

- Long tradition of research about children rather than involving them directly

- The reasons for not conducting research with children in the past have centred on:
  - the belief that data collected from children was unreliable (children viewed as too immature to understand their worlds)
  - lacked the necessary verbal & conceptual abilities to convey their experiences
  - children assumed to be incapable of distinguishing between fantasy & reality
  - ethical concerns over their vulnerability to exploitation by researchers & hence, the use of adults as proxies

- Children are now constructed as active agents rather than passive objects of research
Informed Consent

- Process of obtaining consent is more complex as it may be necessary for both adults & children to give consent

- Informed consent is based on 3 aspects:
  - potential participants gain knowledge through the provision of information they can understand
  - consent is voluntarily given
  - the potential participant has the capacity or competence to give their consent

- Role of incentives & consent
Confidentiality and disclosure

- Confidentiality is more complex:
  - adults may expect to be told about the private lives & thoughts of children under their care
  - obtaining space separate from the main family room can be a sensitive issue
  - some families may not see children as having a need for privacy

- If confidentiality is a challenge it may lead to:
  - children not disclosing information on sensitive issues such as abuse/exploitation & other risks
Power relations

- Take into account the role:
  - gender inequality
  - power imbalance in the ability of boys & girls to participate & the risks they face

- Child & adult interactions in particular setting
Considerations for especially vulnerable children

- Children in vulnerable situation require additional safeguards to protect their welfare
  - those without a parent/guardian
  - those not protected by an effective legal system because of displacement, refugee status or social marginalisation

- Approval from a child’s parent/guardian is required whenever possible but many vulnerable children may not have a legally responsible adult to look after their interests
Issues for reflection

- Who has authority to grant permission for access to children as participants?
- To what extent does a child feel personally empowered to agree to participate in an activity?
  - parent consenting & child not assenting
  - role of incentives in the assent/consent process
- What will happen if the child reveals information indicating legal or illegal activities that could bring harm to the child, family, or community?


