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Coronavirus Research by the European Children's Rights Unit

COVID-19 and Safeguarding Children's Rights in Research



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Coronavirus (COVID-19) #LivUniCOVID
Research and response

Briefing Paper #8

Leona Vaughn

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COVID-19 and Safeguarding Children's Rights in Research

Dr Leona Vaughn

COVID-19 has changed all of our lives in so many ways.

For researchers doing qualitative research in particular, many are or have been looking at ways to innovate with different methods. Both to collect data and insights for existing research projects and to formulate new projects to gather evidence on children's experience of lockdown and beyond.

It is important, however, that safeguarding children's rights, and the broader ethical and legal responsibilities for safeguarding children, are not [overridden or side-lined](#)ⁱ in the rush to ensure that information and data continues to be acquired about children's experiences. Especially during this extraordinary time of their life.

Children's COVID-19 Reality

Children are being adversely impacted by this pandemic on multiple levels.

In addition to being typified as 'super spreaders'ⁱⁱ of COVID-19 in government and media narratives, their lives, their health and wellbeing have been disrupted and damaged by the well-intentioned efforts to control the pandemic in ways we are only just beginning to understand.

Children, most of whom are not in education at this time, are reported to have experienced intensified harms and stresses in relation to poverty, isolation, loneliness, health concerns (mental and physical), bereavement, familial violence, sexual, physical and mental abuse. These experiences are also affected by social inequalities, such as socio-economic and [racial inequity](#)ⁱⁱⁱ.

It is important to acknowledge the unprecedented global protests during this pandemic against worldwide racial injustice and police killings of Black people, particularly in America. This has been referred to as a 'double pandemic'. We know very little about the combined impact of this and COVID 19 on children, especially those who are Black, but it can be assumed that children, like adults, have not been unaffected.

This period has intensified family conflicts, with domestic [violence](#)^{iv}, in particular, increasing dramatically. The increased insecurity in homelife or living arrangements, have affected some children more than others^v with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer+ ([LGBTQ+](#))^{vi} children, looked after children, children who are deprived of liberty^{vii}, children not in employment, education or training (NEET), children with disabilities and children who are homeless or in homeless families^{viii} especially vulnerable to being harmed. These harms may be exacerbated in an international context, especially for children in [Lower- and Middle-Income Countries](#)^{ix} (LMIC) who may not have any access to support.

For the UK, UNICEF's report '[Children in Lockdown: What Coronavirus Means for UK Children](#)' not only quantifies these harms, it also highlights the harm that has been inflicted on children by the UK Government not including or consulting them on decisions which impact so significantly on their future^x.

Therefore, it is not the case that research with children at this time is *too risky*, but rather that research which authentically engages and gives children a voice is needed now *more* than ever.

Three Key Considerations for Research

Research methods and methodological approaches always have to be carefully considered in relation to the risks or dangers, often unintentionally, they may pose to child participants but in the context of the current pandemic we have additional safeguarding considerations to make.

Research institutions and researchers need to consider with care and respect, the design and delivery of research during or relating to this pandemic, to ensure that children who may be experiencing stress and trauma related to this specific time, experience and are involved in good quality, ethical research with integrity.

1. Ethics and ethicality

It is important to consider whether training and education on ethical research can be responsive to the challenges circumstances such as these pose and use children's rights as their starting point. Input

from children and young people via e.g. University of Liverpool's Young People's Advisory Group (YPAG) or local school's parliament, from experienced researchers who work with children, and from external practitioners who have expertise in working with children at times of stress and trauma, will give researchers specific knowledge and understanding about what ethical research with children looks like.

In relation to ethical approval processes, consideration should be given to how much thought has been given to methods and how or if the researcher is aware of and equipped to manage the risks the research may pose to children. An important aspect of this is whether children are able to self-identify potential risks/harms which the research may create or exacerbate. This includes collaboration with children to co-develop and/or direct the research design e.g. choice on methods that are appropriate and input into the interview/survey questions. It also means that researchers should have up-to-date knowledge of who children can be signposted to for support. For child research participants in [overseas development contexts^{xi}](#), there are additional considerations to be made about challenges and dangers specific to their country context.

It is necessary to highlight here, however obvious it may seem, that ethical considerations do not end when ethical approval is given – to address the unfolding issues, researchers need to give constant attention to changing needs or challenges throughout the research process.

2. Research Design and Delivery

Collaboration or 'co-designing' research with children and/or those practitioners who work with or advocate for children, will ensure early thinking is integrated into the design of research projects on safeguarding and ethical issues and will place the needs and rights of children at the heart of the research process. In order to have research which is child-centred, rather than adult-centric, researchers need to consider that independently formulating research questions, without input from others, may miss the key aspects of the phenomena occurring in children's lives. Children can also direct researchers as to what will or will not work for them as participants. Practitioners will have extensive experience in

responding to the challenge of continuing service provision during this time that researchers can learn from.

Collaborating with children and the practitioners who work with or for them, is a way to enable continuous meaningful consideration of ethical and safeguarding issues. If researchers are reconsidering how to change their research design/do fieldwork as a result of the impacts of COVID 19, changing to participatory research should be their first methodological consideration. Empowering children and young people to research their own experiences, as peer researchers, especially where stigma is high, has been acknowledged to be transformative to our understanding of other epidemics^{xii}.

Give extra attention to processes for consenting to and withdrawing from research, to ensure that children can articulate the boundaries of the information they wish to share. This is especially significant as children may fear statutory interventions in relation to e.g. poverty.

3. Research Methods

There are benefits to virtual interviews or focus groups. Children and young people can often be more comfortable communicating with researchers in this way, as they are adept at using online platforms in other areas of their life. However, it is worth considering that the 'building rapport' stage of interviewing, in the absence of a physical meeting, can become of an even greater importance to ensure that young participants feel at ease.

Multi-phase interviews or focus groups (broken into 2 or 3 parts) as opposed to long virtual meetings, help participants to stay engaged in, but also gives an opportunity for them to get to know the researcher, and vice versa. This lends itself to building a level of trust that can seem hard to establish when you cannot physically meet.

Many arts-based or creative methods can be adapted to work at a distance. For example, photo-elicitation or photo-voice can be combined with online interviews or focus groups; digital video diaries and first-person videos can provide a format for young people to document elements of their lives; and new methods of data-gathering using social media or smartphone technologies can produce real-time research.

It is important that children can remind themselves of what they do or do not consent to when research may take place over a number of occasions. For example, a child may consent to taking photographs of their lockdown experience, but then when they review their photographs may decide that they do not want to share some images. It is important that children are empowered to make informed and autonomous decisions during the research process, especially when their COVID 19 experience may be the antithesis of this.

In formulating questions for interviews, focus groups or surveys at this time, consider how to avoid or manage the 'triggering' of negative experiences or emotions in children and young people at a time of lockdown or 'social distancing'. There may be an over-exposure to news/social media, which can heighten children and young peoples' concerns about the future, death, racism, recession, unemployment, over-policing^{xiii} and health, for example. Therefore, care is required when formulating questions to explore issues of e.g. family, home, identity, health, future worries, with an appreciation that in this time children and young people may be isolated from peers and support networks.

Take advice about devising questions from the experts (children, young people and practitioners who work with them) on what is appropriate. Research what support agencies are operating at this time and how children and young people can be signposted to get support, especially on mental health and well-being, without any attached stigma.

This situation is difficult for all who are involved in research, researchers and participants alike. It does however provide an opportunity for the research community to re-think how we engage with children and young people more meaningfully in future and to hone our skills for [collaborative research](#)^{xiv}. Methodological approaches and methods, informed by the needs and experiences of children and the practitioners who work with and for them, that engage them in a dialogic process and challenges entrenched (and harmful) power relations can become our new normal.

ⁱ Renton, L and Vaughn, L (2020) 'Decolonising Safeguarding in A Pandemic: Who Has the Power to Define Risk and Harm?'. Discover Society. Available at: <https://discoversociety.org/2020/05/12/decolonising-safeguarding-in-a-pandemic-who-has-the-power-to-define-risk-and-harm/>

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- iii Simpson, F (2020) 'Coronavirus Impacts BAME Children's Mental Health More Than White Peers, Research Shows'. *Children and Young People Now*. 22nd June, 2020. Available at: <https://www.cypnow.co.uk/news/article/coronavirus-impacts-bame-children-s-mental-health-more-than-white-peers-research-shows>
- iv Social Care Institute for Excellence (2020) 'Domestic violence and abuse: Safeguarding during the COVID-19 crisis' <https://www.scie.org.uk/care-providers/coronavirus-covid-19/safeguarding/domestic-violence-abuse>
- v National Youth Agency (2020) 'Out of Sight? Vulnerable Young People: COVID-19 Response' <https://nya.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Out-of-Sight-COVID-19-report-Web-version.pdf>
- vi The Albert Kennedy Trust 'How We are Helping Young People in Lockdown' <https://www.akt.org.uk/news/how-we-are-helping-young-people-in-lockdown>
- vii Article 39 (2020) 'Government changes law to legitimise abusive conditions in child prisons' <https://article39.org.uk/2020/07/07/government-changes-law-to-legitimise-abusive-conditions-in-child-prisons/>
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- ix UNICEF (2020) 'Protecting the most vulnerable children from the impact of coronavirus: An agenda for action'. Available at: <https://www.unicef.org/coronavirus/agenda-for-action>
- x UNICEF (2020) 'Children in Lockdown: What Coronavirus Means for UK Children'. Available at: https://downloads.unicef.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Unicef-UK-Children-In-Lockdown-Coronavirus-Impacts-Snapshot.pdf?_ga=2.80417623.1339784927.1594212474-1551468288.1590676959
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- xii Oliveras, C, Cluver, L, Bernays, S and Armstrong, A (2018) "Nothing About Us Without RIGHTS-Meaningful Engagement of Children and Youth: From Research Prioritization to Clinical Trials, Implementation Science, and Policy." *Journal of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndromes*, 78 (1): S27-S31.
- xiii Policing the Pandemic Survey: Exploring Young People's Experiences and Recommendations for Change <https://www.safe4me.co.uk/2020/05/27/policing-the-pandemic-survey-for-young-people/>
- xiii Vaughn, L (2020) Risky Research? Researching Risk-Work in Young Lives during a Pandemic <https://riskworkresearch.wordpress.com/2020/05/29/risky-research-researching-risk-work-in-young-lives-during-a-pandemic/>

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She has extensive experience as a professional and academic researcher in the field of equalities and social justice in public and charity sectors in the UK and operating internationally.

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