

SEPTEMBER 2017 RESEARCH REFLECTION:

**Considering the Participation and Protection of Young People Taking Part in Research**

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The United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child recognises children and young people's citizenship rights. This includes their right to participate in decisions that affect them, including in the development and evaluation of services for them. An ethical issue in research and evaluation that involves young people is enabling their participation in ways that ensures that they do not come to harm. For instance, harm can occur if young people are coerced by adults into taking part in research and evaluation.

A contested issue is young people's competency and the extent to which they are able to weigh up the implications of taking part in a research or evaluation project and give consent without the need of parental/caregiver guidance. This is often decided based on age, with ethics committees in New Zealand requiring parental/caregiver consent for participation in research for under 16-year old's. However, some say that this creates a risk that some young people will be excluded from participation in research and evaluation, as in our attempt to protect young people we might actually end up excluding them. An example is marginalised young people who may be excluded from a project when it is difficult to obtain parental/caregiver consent.

Young people may also not want their parents to know that they have participated in a project due to the sensitive nature of the topic such as sexuality. Some now say that we should take a developmental rather than age based view of young people's capacity to weigh up the implications of taking part in research and evaluation. This starts from the position that young people are competent and able to make decisions for themselves and then considers this in relation to other issues such as vulnerability factors and the potential for young people to come to harm through participation in the project. This challenges the view that young people are inherently incompetent and are therefore always in need of adult expertise. From this perspective, young people are increasingly being seen as "highly informed experts in their own lives" (Williams, p 23, 2006). I think that Williams (2006) makes an important point when he says, "there is however an irony in the



situation in which young people are deemed competent to consent to receive services, but may at times be 'protected' from taking part in evaluative research aimed at improving those same services" (p, 21).

Lambert, V., & Glacken, M. (2011). Engaging with children in research: theoretical and practical implications of negotiating informed consent/assent. *Nursing Ethics*, 0969733011401122.  
<http://homepage.westmont.edu/bsmith/documents/ethicsconsentassentwchildren.pdf>

Williams, B. (2006). Meaningful consent to participate in social research on the part of people under the age of eighteen. *Research Ethics Review*, 2(1), 19-24.  
[https://ethics.grad.ucl.ac.uk/forms/Williams\\_RER2\\_1.pdf](https://ethics.grad.ucl.ac.uk/forms/Williams_RER2_1.pdf)