

The MESSI Project –Involving Children in Social Research: Balancing the Risks and the Benefits

(ARC Discovery Project DP150100864)



There is now broad consensus that children’s participation in social research is important: holding different standpoints, conceptualisations and experiences of the world to adults, children and young people’s views can help develop knowledge about the social problems they encounter and assist adults to better consider their needs. However, considerable uncertainty remains around children’s inclusion in research on ‘sensitive’ issues. Key to this are deeply embedded assumptions and beliefs about children and childhood, especially concerning notions of capacity and vulnerability.

This study aimed to better understand and address the tensions between the protection of children and their participation when involved in research on sensitive issues. It focused on exploring how Human Research Ethics Committees, parents, other gatekeepers and children themselves manage and navigate the tensions between children’s participation and protection in research on sensitive issues.

Research Design

This study adopted a mixed method approach involving four aspects:

1. Describing the processes through which children’s participation in research is determined, asking: what are the ontological (the way children are constructed), epistemological (what children know), methodological, ethical, professional, ideological and practical factors that influence the decisions of HRECs, gatekeepers, parents and children.

2. Identifying the key barriers and enablers to children's participation in research about sensitive issues.
3. Identifying, through the use of scenarios, the factors that influence decision-making including: how gatekeepers assess risk level and the appropriateness of particular research topics and methodologies.
4. Using the information collected to provide more nuanced and urgently-needed guidance to HRECs and other gatekeepers on how to best identify the risks and benefits of children's participation in research, and guidance to researchers on how to help ensure children's rights *and* wellbeing are attended to throughout the entire research process.

Research Team

Investigators: Prof Morag McArthur (Australian Catholic University – lead institution), Prof Anne Graham (CCYP, SCU), Dr Merle Spriggs (University of Melbourne), Dr Jenny Chalmers (University of NSW), A/Prof Tim Moore (Australian Catholic University), A/Prof Stephanie Taplin (Australian Catholic University), Dr Mary Ann Powell (Project Officer, CCYP, SCU), Dr Bianca Hoban (Project Officer, ACU).

Outputs to Date

Academic Publications

Powell, M.A., McArthur, M., Chalmers, J. Graham, A., Moore, T., Spriggs, M. & Taplin, S. (2018). Sensitive topics in social research involving children. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 21(6), 647-660. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2018.1462882>

Selection of Conference Presentations

Powell, M., Graham, A., McArthur, M., Taplin, S., Moore, T., Chalmers, J., & Spriggs, M. (2016, September). Involving children in social research on sensitive issues. Paper presented at the 3rd Aotearoa New Zealand Childhood Studies Colloquium, Hamilton, NZ.

McArthur, M., & Taplin, S. (2017, July). Involving children in social research on sensitive issues. Paper presented at XXXVth International Congress on Law and Mental Health, Prague.

Hoban, B., Chalmers, J., McArthur, M., Moore, T., Graham, A., Spriggs, M., Powell, M., & Taplin, S. (2017, September). The Managing Ethical Studies on Sensitive Issues (MESSI) study: similarities and differences in the assessment of risk between parents and

professionals who make decisions about children participating in research. Paper presented at Australian Social Policy Conference 2017, Sydney.

Hoban, B., Chalmers, J., McArthur, M., Moore, T., Graham, A., Spriggs, M., Powell, M., & Taplin, S. (2017, October). Facebook recruitment for surveys with children & adults: Managing Ethical Studies on Sensitive Issues (MESSI) study. Poster presentation at 2017 NDARC Annual Research Symposium, Sydney.

