



Conducting research with children and
young people

March 2006

Introduction

These Guidelines interpret the MRS Code of Conduct (revised 2005) and provide additional best practice advice. Unless otherwise stated, Guidelines are not binding. Rules B26 to B33 of the MRS Code of Conduct contain specific mandatory provisions relating to research with children.

Under the Code, children are defined as those aged under 16 years. These Guidelines also provide additional best practice for research with young people aged 16 and 17 years. There is no recommended minimum age for research among children but it is expected that researchers will involve very young children directly in research only when this is necessary and appropriate to the particular project.

The intention of the provisions regarding age is to protect potentially vulnerable members of society, whatever the source of their vulnerability, and to strengthen the principle of public trust. These guidelines cover any research directly involving people under the age of 18 whether carried out independently or in conjunction with a parent, guardian, carer or other responsible adult.

Their main aims are:

- To protect the rights of children and young people physically, mentally, ethically and emotionally and to ensure they are not exploited
- To reassure parents and others concerned with their welfare and safety that research conducted under these guidelines is designed to protect the interests of children and young people
- To ensure good quality research
- To promote the professionalism and value of research - among children, young people and the wider public
- To protect the researcher and client by publishing the necessary good practice required to meet their legal and ethical responsibilities

Rules from the Code of Conduct applicable in each section of this document are stated in the shaded boxes. These rules are binding on MRS members and breaches may result in disciplinary action. The guidance that follows the rules provides interpretation and additional best practice.

Members are reminded that this document is designed to compliment the MRS Code of Conduct and should not be consulted in isolation.

As specified in the Code, it is the responsibility of the researcher to keep abreast of any legislation which could affect research among children and young people and to ensure that all those involved in a project are aware of and agree to abide by the MRS Code of Conduct.

This material is provided for information only. It is not legal advice and should not be relied upon as such. Specific legal advice should be taken in relation to specific issues.

Definitions

Children and young people:

The MRS Code of Conduct defines children as those aged under 16 years. Where the term young people is used in these guidelines it refers to those aged 16 and 17 years. Where the term adult is used, it refers to someone aged 18 or over.

Responsible adult:

This is an adult responsible for the child/young person's safety and welfare at the time of the research. In a protected environment, like a school, the responsible adult will be the person in authority or overseeing the location who has responsibility for the protection of the child/young person. In any other environment - like the street or in home - a responsible adult will be a parent, guardian or other person on whom a parent or guardian has conferred responsibility for the child/young person (e.g. a relative, child-minder, au pair or neighbour).

Consent:

This is the permission given by the responsible adult to the interviewer which allows the interviewer to approach the child/young person. It is not permission to interview the child/young person, as the child/young person must have their own opportunity to decline to take part in the research.

Clearly there may be circumstances in which it's necessary for an interviewer to approach a child or young person in order to establish age before going through the appropriate consent procedure. These approaches should only be made where an interviewer has good reason to believe that the child or young person is old enough to be interviewed without consent. In all cases, the appropriate consent procedure must be followed before the child or young person can be taken through the interview itself.

Guidelines

1: Consent

A: Where consent is required

The Rules

B26 Consent of a parent or responsible adult (acting in loco parentis) must be obtained before interviewing a child under 16 in the following circumstances:

- In home/at home (face-to-face and telephone interviewing)
- Group discussions/depth interviews
- Postal questionnaires
- Internet questionnaires
- Email
- Where interviewer and child are alone together
- In public places such as in-street/in-store/central locations (see exception under B27)

B27 Interviews being conducted in public places, such as in-street/in-store/central locations, with 14 years olds or over, may take place without consent of a parent or responsible adult. In these situations Members must give an explanatory thank you note to the child.

Comment: Under special circumstances, permission to waive parental consent may be obtained, but only with the prior approval of the MRS Market Research Standards Board

Guidance

1. Where research is being conducted in schools with the consent of the responsible adult, researchers should suggest to the school that consent is also sought from parents or guardians for in school interviews. Where consent is sought for some interviews in a school, it should normally be sought for all interviews, including those with young people.
2. Further to the comment on B27, there may be occasions when obtaining consent for research into sensitive subjects would, for example, cause potential harm to the child or young person (e.g. researching the use of confidential helplines). In these cases – and in social research where there may be valid reasons to conduct interviews without consent – the requirement for consent may be waived but only with the explicit prior approval of the MRS Market Research Standards Board.

B: Obtaining consent and providing the necessary information

The Rules	
B28	Where the consent of a parent or responsible adult is required Members must ensure that the adult is given sufficient information about the nature of the research to enable them to provide informed consent.
B29	Members must ensure that the parent or responsible adult giving consent is recorded (by name, relationship or role).
B32	In all cases, Members must ensure that a child has an opportunity to decline to take part, even though a parent or a responsible adult has given consent on their behalf. This remains the case if the research takes place in school.

Guidance

1. Consent should be provided in writing but where it can only be provided verbally - e.g. in telephone interviewing - the responsible adult should be sent written confirmation if requested.

2. Responsible adults should also be fully informed about any products or stimulus material which the child may be asked to try or use and given the opportunity to inspect or even try these themselves.
3. If there is a research reason for the subject matter to be disguised, where possible a list of subjects, including that for the research, should be shown to the responsible adult in advance so that they receive a further opportunity to opt out.
4. In accordance with rule B32, the opportunity to opt out of the research must be made clear to the child and to the responsible adult. It is important that both fully understand that they are not obliged to take part and this includes their right to withhold answering a specific question or element.
5. In addition, when research takes place in schools, the right of individual children/young people to opt out must be stressed by the interviewer.
6. Quality validation should be carried out with the responsible adult who gave consent and not with the child respondent. Any quality validation carried out should therefore only cover the facts connected with the interview and not any of the responses or opinions given.

2: Subject Matter

Care must be taken if the subject is contentious, disturbing or in any way in advance of what the child/young person may be expected to know or understand. It is imperative to avoid certain subjects when interviewing younger children (e.g. a topic that might frighten the child), though the same subject might quite safely be covered with an older child/young person. This is a question of good research practice as much as ethics.

The Rules

A10 Members must take all reasonable precautions to ensure that Respondents are not harmed or adversely affected as a result of participating in a research project.

Guidance

1. Special care is needed when interviewing children and young people about:
 - Issues which could upset or worry the child (e.g. his or her relationships with other children)
 - Those which risk creating tension between the child and its parents
 - Those relating to potentially sensitive family situations (e.g. parental relationships, income, use of alcohol or drugs within the household, family illness)
 - Those relating to racial, religious and similar socially or politically sensitive matters
 - Those concerned with sexual activities
 - Those relating to illegal or otherwise socially unacceptable activities
2. If there is a valid or important reason for covering any of these sensitive subjects in a research project, it is essential both that a full explanation is given to the responsible adult and their consent obtained; and also that steps are taken to ensure that the child/young person is not worried, confused or misled by the questioning. (See Consent A2 for exceptions).
3. In accordance with rules A8, A10 and B8, sensitive subject matter is unsuitable for the conduct of research in public places where confidentiality cannot be assured. This means that neither research or stimulus material, nor a respondent's responses must not be overheard or seen by third parties
4. Examples of research prohibited by Rule A10 are:
 - Research carried out on behalf of manufacturers or providers of products or services, nor for promoters or lobbyists for products or services, which are illegal for the age group involved in the research (e.g. buying alcohol for under 18s or gambling for under 16s).

The only exception to this is when research needs to be conducted to ensure products or services are not manufactured or marketed in such a way that encourages under age use or consumption. In each case research may only be conducted with children with the explicit and prior approval of the MRS Market Research Standards Board.

- Research which encourages, or appears to encourage, illegal behaviour such as under age drinking or gambling.

5. Where the research involves the testing of any products, special care should be taken to check that:

- These are safe to consume (e.g. foods, confectionery) or to handle (e.g. toys). The researcher must confirm this with the supplier even though the latter may be legally liable for any adverse effects caused by the product
- The child or young person does not suffer from any relevant allergy (e.g. to products containing nuts or certain e numbers)
- There are no ethnic, religious or cultural barriers to the child or young person consuming or handling the product
- The child or young person is not asked to test a product which is illegal for the age group

6. In cases where consent is sought and obtained, or where a responsible adult is present, the views of the responsible adult about products they would not wish the child or young person to try should be complied with.

3: Interviewing

A: The questionnaire

The Rules

B33 Personal information relating to other people must not be collected from children unless for the purposes of gaining consent from a parent or a responsible adult.

Guidance

1. In accordance with rule B33, the questionnaire must avoid classification questions that are unnecessarily intrusive or are difficult for the child or young person to answer. Where consent is being sought, it may be preferable for some classification questions to be asked of the parent or responsible adult, rather than the child or young person.
2. The questionnaire content and language should be sensitive to the language, needs and feelings of the age group to be interviewed and their capabilities.
3. The questionnaire language should be kept as simple as possible and not be patronising.
4. The research should avoid questions which might result in a child or young person making unreasonable demands on a parent or guardian.

B. The interview

The Rules	
A10	Members must take all reasonable precautions to ensure that Respondents are not harmed or adversely affected as a result of participating in a research project.
B18	A Respondent's right to withdraw from a research project at any stage must be respected.
B27	Interviews being conducted in public places, such as in-street/in-store/central locations, with 14 years olds or over, may take place without consent of a parent or responsible adult. In these situations Members must give an explanatory thank you note to the child.

Guidance

1. It is not normally necessary for the responsible adult to be present during the interview. Where their presence would be undesirable for technical reasons - e.g. if it could introduce bias - this should be explained and consent sought to interview the child alone.

2. Further to rule B18, the child/young person must be reminded of their right to withhold answers to particular questions.
3. In accordance with A10, any disclosure of a confidential nature which may be potentially harmful to the child or young person must be dealt with in a sensitive and responsible manner.
4. Further to rule A10, Care must be taken to avoid any physical contact with the child/young person.
5. In accordance with rule B27, an MRS Thank You leaflet must always be handed out at the end of the interview. In the case of unaccompanied 14 or 15 year olds where adult consent is not obtained a note must be included giving an explanation of the subject matter and nature of the research and details of the researcher undertaking it, with contact information.

C: Research venues

The Rules

A10 Members must take all reasonable precautions to ensure that Respondents are not harmed or adversely affected as a result of participating in a research project.

Guidance

1. Research should only be conducted in safe and appropriate environments.
2. If the research is conducted in the client's domain, the client must share equal responsibility with the researcher for providing a safe and appropriate venue.
3. Further to rule A10, if a child is recruited in the street and taken into a central (hall test) location, there should always be another adult present in the same room throughout the interview.
4. It is advisable for research carried out in the home of the child/young person, either in person or by telephone, that an adult remains on the premises - though not necessarily in the same room - throughout the interview.

D. Incentives and rewards

The Rules

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| A8 | Members must not act in a way which might bring discredit on the profession, MRS or its Members. |
| A10 | Members must take all reasonable precautions to ensure that Respondents are not harmed or adversely affected as a result of participating in a research project. |
| B28 | Where the consent of a parent or responsible adult is required Members must ensure that the adult is given sufficient information about the nature of the research to enable them to provide informed consent. |

Guidance

1. Any incentives provided by the client or researcher should follow the same rules as those for products to be tested (see Subject matter 4 above) - i.e. they should be safe, legal and acceptable to responsible adults.
2. Any refreshments provided should be suitable and legal for the age group and care should be taken to avoid any products that are known to cause allergic problems.
3. Where incentives are used they should be suitable and acceptable for the age of the child/young person and fitting for the task required. Sweets or other high sugar content food stuffs should be avoided.
4. If a monetary incentive is provided to children it should be given in the form of vouchers and not cash. Researchers should take reasonable precautions to ensure the vouchers are not used to buy age inappropriate products, although final responsibility rests with the vendor. This can be done by restricting the voucher to a particular store.
5. In accordance with B28, parents or responsible adults must be informed of the nature and value of incentives at the time consent is being sought.

4: Special Cases

A: Qualitative research

The Rules

- A10 Members must take all reasonable precautions to ensure that Respondents are not harmed or adversely affected as a result of participating in a research project.
- B15 If there is to be any recording, monitoring or observation during an interview, Respondents must be informed about this both at recruitment and at the beginning of the interview.
- B21 Members must ensure that all of the following are clearly communicated to the Respondent:
- the name of the interviewer (an Interviewer's Identity Card must be shown if face to face);
 - an assurance that the interview will be carried out according to the MRS Code of Conduct;
 - the general subject of the interview;
 - the purpose of the interview;
 - if asked, the likely length of the interview;
 - any costs likely to be incurred by the Respondent.
- B34 At the time of recruitment (or before the research takes place if details change after recruitment), Members must ensure that Respondents are told all relevant information as per rule B21 and:
- the location of the discussion and if it is to take place in a viewing facility; and
 - whether observers are likely to be present; and

- when and how the discussion is to be recorded; and
- the likely length of the discussion including the start and finish time; and
- the Member, moderator and/or research agency that will be conducting the research.

Guidance

1. Once consent has been given, the child or young person can be asked the recruitment screening questions. With young children or where recruitment questions may be difficult for the child or young person to answer, it is recommended that the recruitment screening process is conducted with the responsible adult, rather than the child.
2. The researcher should take responsibility for safely handing over the child/young person after a group discussion or depth interview or ensuring that arrangements for them to get home safely are in place.
3. The researcher should ensure that the responsible adult has full details of the research venue, name of moderator, finishing time, etc.
4. Any observation should be kept to a minimum and handled appropriately.
5. In accordance with rule A10, stimulus material must be safe and appropriate for the age of children/young people involved.

B: Internet research

The Rules

- A10 Members must take all reasonable precautions to ensure that Respondents are not harmed or adversely affected as a result of participating in a research project.
- B31 For research administered electronically over the Internet, when it is known (or ought reasonably to be known) that all or a majority of Respondents are likely to be under 16, Members must ensure that Respondents are asked to give their age before any other personal information is requested. Further, if the age given is under 16, the child must be excluded from giving further personal information until the appropriate consent from a parent or responsible adult has been obtained.
- B33 Personal information relating to other people must not be collected from children unless for the purposes of gaining consent from a parent or a responsible adult.

Guidance

1. Recognising the particular difficulties of ensuring consent in Internet research, further to B31 researchers must have a method of independently verifying parental consent. Given that children may have unrestricted access to their parents email accounts, if consent is gained via email researchers should follow it up by a letter or phone call.
2. Further to rule A10, Internet questionnaires must also carry advice of any costs likely to be incurred for completion and warnings that they should not be completed by those under 16 without prior permission from an adult.
3. Further to B28, a notice to a parent or responsible adult, seeking their consent for their child to be asked to participate in the research, must be posted on the website or emailed to a parent. This notice should include:
 - A heading explaining that this is a notice for parents/responsible adults

- Name and contact details of the researcher/organisation conducting the research.
 - The nature of the data to be collected from the child.
 - An explanation of how the data will be used.
 - An explanation of the reasons the child has been asked to participate and the likely benefits.
 - A description of the procedure for giving and verifying consent.
 - A request for a parent's or responsible adult's contact address or phone number for verification of consent.
4. Where personal information collected from children will only be used for research purposes and no personal data will be fed back for any other purpose a return email from a parent or responsible adult giving their consent is acceptable, as long as additional steps are taken to ensure that the consent actually came from a parent or responsible adult – for example, following up with a letter or phone call. It is permissible under Data Protection Act 1998 and B33 to ask children to provide contact details for their parents in order for consent to be sought as long as this purpose is made clear in the request for information.
5. Prior parental consent will not be required to:
- Collect a child or parent/responsible adult's address or email address solely to provide notice of data collection and request consent.
 - Collect a child's age for screening and exclusion purposes.

C. Postal and self-completion research

The Rules

- B30 For self-completion postal questionnaires, Members must ensure that:
- when it is known, (or ought reasonably to be known) that all or a majority of Respondents are likely to be under 16, these are addressed to the parent or responsible adult; and
 - when it is known, (or ought reasonably to be known) that all or a majority of Respondents are likely to be under 16, that all questionnaires carry a note or notice explaining that consent is required for all children to participate.

Guidance

1. Where the age of the respondent is not known but it is known that some are likely to be under 16, all questionnaires should carry a notice explaining that consent is required for completion by children and include an explanation of the subject matter and nature of the research and details of the researcher undertaking it, with contact information.
2. There should be space on the questionnaire for the responsible adult to sign that they have given their consent for the child to complete the questionnaire. Where self completion questionnaires are administered to a large number of children at the same time, for example in a classroom environment, the responsible adult may sign a consent form rather than each individual questionnaire.
3. Postal packages should not contain sharp or potentially harmful objects.

D. Criminal Record Checks

The Rules

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| A8 | Members must not act in a way which might bring discredit on the profession, MRS or its Members. |
| A10 | Members must take all reasonable precautions to ensure that Respondents are not harmed or adversely affected as a result of participating in a research project. |

Guidance

1. Interviewers who will have contact with children should be checked against information held by the Criminal Records Bureau. This process is called Disclosure.
2. Research organisations that are not registered to ask exempted questions under the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974, should instruct interviewers to obtain a Disclosure via an Umbrella Body. A list of Umbrella Bodies can be found at: <http://www.crb.gov.uk/Default.aspx?page=349> . This list is made up of commercial and not for profit organisations.
3. Researchers should request that the interviewer apply for a Standard Disclosure. Standard Disclosures are primarily for posts that involve working with children or vulnerable adults. Standard Disclosures contain the following:
 - details of all convictions, cautions, reprimands and warnings held on the Police National Computer (PNC);

and if the position involves working with children or vulnerable adults and this has been indicated on the Disclosure application form:

- information from the Protection of Children Act List (PoCA);
- Information from the Protection of Vulnerable Adults List (POVA); and
- Information held by the DfES under Section 142 of the Education Act 2002 of those considered unsuitable or banned from working with children.

4. Research organisations should be aware that Disclosure information is highly sensitive and treated appropriately. Upon receipt of the Disclosure information, the organisation will be bound by the CRB Code of Practice, a copy of which can be downloaded from: <http://www.disclosure.gov.uk/Default.aspx?page=311> . This page also contains information on the secure storage, handling, use, retention and disposal of Disclosures and Disclosure information.

5. The fact that an applicant has a criminal record should not be an automatic bar to employment. The Chartered Institute of Professional Development, in conjunction with the Criminal Records Bureau, has produced guidance on how this information should be assessed. A copy can be found at: http://www.crb.gov.uk/PDF/3083_Employing_aw.pdf