

Best practice guidelines for Research Ethics Committee Review of projects involving schools

Summary and Recommendations

About these guidelines

These guidelines were drawn up in July 2024 following interviews with UoB researchers, school teachers and parents.

Background

In the context of medical treatment, children 16 and older are deemed capable of giving sole consent for low-risk research studies, and mechanisms exist for younger children to give sole consent. For younger children to give consent, they must be deemed 'Gillick competent', that is, mature enough to make decisions about things that affect them. There is no standard form for assessing this, but if this conclusion is reached it needs to be documented as part of the consent process.

For most university sponsored research, the consent process should require 'parental' involvement. If this is not the case full documentation of the rationale is essential.

Who is the 'parent'

In a school setting, the consent of the headteacher or their representative can be taken as equivalent to 'parental' consent to involvement in the research, if all three of the criteria below are satisfied:

- (i) The school informs parents that research may be carried out.
- (ii) The research is in line with standard curriculum practice such as participation in surveys.
- (iii) A risk assessment has been carried out and has not identified any significant risks.

Outside of a school setting, where researchers are involved in working with children in the community, a process including full Research Ethics Committee review is the appropriate approach.

Safeguarding considerations

Students who are supervised while working with pupils in a voluntary capacity may not require DBS checks, if a responsible individual (e.g. the head teacher) decides that they are not carrying out a regulated activity¹.

Students should not interact with pupils 1:1.

Pupils who disclose information that raises cause for concern should be identified to the school contact (e.g. supervising teacher); this overrides considerations of confidentiality.

¹https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/280881/supervision_of_activity_with_children_which_is_regulated_activity_when_unsupervised

Recommendations

Here 'pupils' will refer to school students in school or on university premises and 'students' to university students.

For low-risk studies that involving pupils older than 13 that will not concern subjects of enquiry that are deemed sensitive (e.g. gender, menstruation, body-mass etc).

1. Document the consent of the school to the project.
2. Confirm that the school has a policy for informing parents about school activities.
3. Determine whether students on school premises will be supervised; if they will not be supervised, the researcher should make sure that a DBS check is in place where necessary.
4. Agree with the school how safeguarding concerns will be managed, with an awareness that these may conflict with considerations of confidentiality.
5. Agree with the school that any concerns relating to a pupil's participation in the study will be directed to the Research Governance Team:
research-governance@bristol.ac.uk.