

Institutional Policy for Research

College of Social Work, Nirmala Niketan is committed to developing a scientific rigor among the students as well as encouraging faculty members to undertake research studies on relevant topics. The training in research methodology is imparted to the students through the courses, workshops as well as research practicum.

The College also has a Research Unit which was started in 1993 to undertake systematic, fact-based and action oriented research that creates knowledge for education, field practice, social policy, and advocacy. Till date, it has completed over 90 research projects commissioned by various Government bodies, NGOs and Corporates and also funded by the management.

Research Unit as well as the research studies conducted by the students as well as faculty adhere to the ethical research practice principles.

Research Unit:

The studies initiated by the Research Unit are sent to the Ethics Committee for approval. The Ethics committee is expected to declare any actual or potential conflicts of interest that affect the research and be honest and transparent throughout the ethical approval process and the research process.

Ethical Guidelines for Research

- ▶ **Avoid bias:** The quality of research is threatened whenever the researcher consciously or unconsciously introduces a bias that can interfere with the results of the study. For this, the researcher/s should observe neutrality in research. In social work research, the researcher/s have to keep extra aware of this as the role of research can get overshadowed by that of a social worker.
- ▶ **Seeking informed consent:**
 - Inform participants about purpose of research
 - Answer their questions pertaining to the study
 - Seek permission for data collection from them. Research participants must give their informed consent to participate in the research, if capable. If not, then assent must be obtained from an appropriate proxy.

- Respect participant’s right to refuse to participate/ answer particular questions
 - Respect respondent’s right to withdraw at any stage
 - Inform participant about intended use of the results
- ▶ **Maintain confidentiality** of the identification data related to the respondents. Participants should be told about any limits of confidentiality and the methods to be used to ensure confidentiality.
 - ▶ **Adherence to highest possible technical standards:** Use of inappropriate research methodology, analysis techniques
 - ▶ No misrepresentation of yourself or your role
 - ▶ No discrimination, exploitation or harassment of the respondents
 - ▶ **Minimum risk-** avoidance of any kind of harm to participant/respondent. The benefits of a research project should outweigh any foreseeable risks and this decision should rest with the sanctioning body.
 - ▶ Social workers engaged in evaluation and research should follow guidelines developed for the protection of evaluation and research participants. They should consult with appropriate IRBs.
 - ▶ Social workers should take steps to ensure that participants have access to appropriate supportive services.
 - ▶ Not breaking any law and indulging into any illegal activity for research
 - ▶ Respect respondent’s culture including moral and legal standards (particularly if different from one’s own)
 - ▶ Avoidance of conflicts of interest
 - ▶ Avoidance of plagiarism
 - ▶ Correct reporting of findings; not ‘inventing’ findings; not using the information gained from the respondents inappropriately.
 - ▶ No plagiarism or intellectual dishonesty: Plagiarism- “failure to give due acknowledgement by copying other people’s work without citation or by copying the work of other students or fellow researchers”. (*Guthrie, 2010*). **Plagiarism is a serious crime in the academic context.**

Ethical Duties towards Funding Body /Academic Institution

- ▶ Find out and follow rules of the institution or funding/commissioning body for approving research
- ▶ Prevention of the misuse of information gathered during research

Ethical Guidelines for Research studies with Children:

a) Participation is voluntary and based on valid and informed ethical consent.

- A crucial element of ethical research is that participants in the research should consent to engage voluntarily after receiving adequate information. It's vital to note that this isn't a one-time decision, but rather a continuous process, and researchers must do adequate checks to ensure that participants are still willing to take part.
- Participants should also be made aware that, even if they provided consent at the start of the process, they have the right to refuse to answer any specific question without providing a reason, to withdraw from the study at any time without providing a reason, and to request that their data be removed from the study.
- The capacity of a participant to consent must also be considered; this will depend on their level of understanding as well as the potential risks and benefits of participating in research. Consent is required from young people and child(ren), as well as from the parent, guardian, caretaker, or other appropriate adult with a duty of care towards the child.
- It is appropriate to seek consent (parental, guardian, caretaker, or other appropriate adult with a responsibility of care toward the child) before obtaining assent from the child for younger children.
- If a child or young person refuses to assent or consent, the parent's or guardian's consent to participate in the research should be revoked as the wishes of the child takes precedence in research.
- Assent or consent, whichever is most appropriate given the child's cognitive ability and the nature of the research, should be obtained from the children using age-appropriate information and support.

b) Risk Assessment and Mitigation Plan:

The staff at the College of Social Work (Autonomous), Nirmala Niketan, Research Unit will conduct a risk assessment and devise a mitigation plan to avoid or minimize the harm, risk, or damage that the children may suffer during the course of study.

The following aspects should be considered while assessing the risk of participants:

- Researchers must assess how vulnerable participants are
- how sensitive the research topic is
- the relevance and acceptability of the research method
- how much strain data collection is likely to inflict on the participant given the circumstances

To help mitigate the risk, researchers should consider

- how they can prepare respondents for participation (as part of the informed consent process) and how data collection can be minimized to reduce distress (for example through taking appropriate breaks or leaving gaps between episodes of data collection)
- The positioning of sensitive questions in a questionnaire, as well as the provision of support services or contact information, depending on the likelihood and severity of the distress caused.
- If support or helpline numbers are provided, researchers must ensure that interviews are conducted when the services will be available. Due to the fact that many services are closed on weekends, it is usually best to avoid conducting interviews from Friday afternoons till Sundays, or before public holidays.
- It is acceptable to provide information or encourage people to seek help if an unmet need, such as depression, is disclosed, after taking the consent of the respondent.

c) Non-disclosure of identity and personal information:

Although there are exceptions to confidentiality, such as in cases of child safety, a participant's personal information and identity should not be shared in general.

This confidentiality should be maintained on at least two levels:

- Only those who need to know a participant's identity and personal information should have access to it within an organisation. Normally, this will only apply to those who are part of the immediate research team.

- Beyond the research organisation, findings that are published or made available to others must be written in a way that ensures that personal information and identities are not revealed. This involves paying close attention to the quotes used in reports. Where this is not practicable, such as when there are only a few potential participants, the constraints of confidentiality should be made known to participants before they participate, and the intended dissemination strategy should be discussed. In accordance with the General Data Protection, researchers should have suitable procedures in place to ensure data protection.

d) Ethical application and conduct of research methods

The Research Ethics Committee, an advisory body with an external chair and a majority of external members, will review, recommend, and approve the approach, tool, and final study, taking into account all ethical considerations.

- Some methodological concerns may have an ethical dimension that should be considered. Designs that are fatally flawed or have an inherent bias that makes the research deceptive or harmful for the child(ren) should be rejected.
- Researchers should pay close attention to whether the study's findings justify the risk of harm or distress caused to the child(ren).
- In their applications, researchers should explain how their research will fill gaps in the evidence base or be useful in policy and practice pertaining to the protection of the rights of the child.
- Researchers must also defend their study design, demonstrating that it is appropriate and robust for the issues under investigation.

Finally, it should be ensured that the researchers are given appropriate training to conduct the study and should be experienced in handling the studies pertaining/involving child(ren).

Ethical Guidelines when Interviewing Children for Research:

1. It is preferred that the researchers / data collectors are trained in the rights of children.
2. In certain circumstances, for instance when the children to be interviewed have gone through experience of abuse (sexual, physical or emotional) in the hands of the adult of opposite sex, it is preferable that they are interviewed by the researcher / data collector of same sex.

3. Researcher / data collector should find out as much as possible about the child's case (especially in case of children who are institutionalized or in need of care and protection or in conflict with law) prior to the interview.
4. Researcher / data collector should select a space that is safe and comfortable for conversation (include toys, books, games etc. whenever necessary to help build a rapport) and make clear and friendly introductions.
5. Researcher / data collector should establish a rapport with the child before starting with the interview. It is strongly recommended that in the beginning the researcher or data collector does not talk or do things that are related to the negative or traumatic experience the child has experienced in the past.
6. Children need time to put their opinions, feelings and experiences in words. Sometimes due to various reasons, they might need more time to open up. The researcher / data collector should dedicate adequate time for discussions. He/she should not rush or convey their impatience in verbal or non-verbal ways when the child is taking time to respond or has paused before starting to talk again in answer to the question.
7. The researcher / data collector should keep the atmosphere relaxed and informational, rather than interrogational.
8. The researcher / data collector should use appropriate language (that reflects respect and non-judgmental attitude). He / she should use child-friendly language, wherever possible.
9. The researcher / data collector should explain things in a manner the child can easily comprehend. He/she needs to use visual aids when required.
10. Questions need to be adapted in order to take into consideration the age and mental capacity of the child.
11. The researcher / data collector might need to take help of other professionals such as a sign interpreter or a translator and in cases of children who have undergone trauma, a therapist / counsellor / social worker, if appropriate and needed, at the time of data collection. As the presence of any of these professionals mean that they would be privy to the responses of the child, this should be conveyed to the child in related to the concept of shared confidentiality, BEFORE such arrangement is made. These professionals should be called during data collection ONLY IF the child gives consent for the same. Whenever any of these professionals are invited to be present to provide assistance during interviewing the child, they need to sign an agreement (or MoU) regarding maintaining confidentiality of the data.
12. The researcher / data collector should not pursue and press for details when there are signs that the child has told you all he or she knows.
13. The researcher / data collector should not continue asking questions or probing when child is showing signs of discomfort, sadness or agitation. At such times, the researcher should stop the line of questioning immediately. The first course of action on the part of the researcher / data collector should be directed at ensuring the child's mental health. The interviewer / data collector can take assistance of the therapist or counsellor or social worker at such times if required and possible. After the child regains composure, he or she can do any of the following:
 - a. ask the child whether he/she wants to stop the interview and continue at a later date;

- b. ask the child whether he/she would like to take a break for some time and then resume the interview on the same day;
 - c. give the option to the child by asking open ended question as to what he/she would like to do.
14. The data collector / researcher should conclude the interview acknowledging the child's contribution in research, i.e. thanking the child for his/her participation and asking the child whether there is anything he/she wants to ask the data collector / researcher.

(The research team (the faculty and staff involved in a research study with children from the College of Social Work, Nirmala Niketan as well as the staff of the other NGO/s and organization/s who are partnering / collaborating or contributing to the said research study with children are also required to go through the Child Protection Policy of the Research Unit, College of Social Work, Nirmala Niketan).

Source: These guidelines have been compiled from the information given in the books given below:

1. Guthrie, G. (2010) Basic Research Methods: An Entry to Social Science Research. New Delhi: SAGE Publications India Pvt. Ltd.
2. Kumar, R. (2014) Research Methodology: A Step-by-Step Guide for Beginners. New Delhi: SAGE
3. Rubin, A. and Babbie, E. (2008) Research Methods for Social Work. Belmont: Thomson Brooks/Cole
4. 'Toolkit to Combat Trafficking in Persons: Global Programme against Trafficking in Human Beings', an e-document of United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. URL: https://www.unodc.org/documents/human-trafficking/Toolkit-files/07-89375_Ebook%5B1%5D.pdf).

Students' Research: