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Invited Commentary

Ethical issues concerning consent in obtaining children's reports on their experience of violence

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Introduction

Over the last two decades, there has been increasing recognition of the importance of listening to and taking account of children's views and experiences in research, policy and practice, and in decision-making that affects their lives (Hallett & Prout, 2003; John, 1996; Lewis & Lindsay, 2000; Qvortrup, Bardy, Sgritta, & Wintersberger, 1994). As a result, more attention is being paid to the ethical and methodological issues inherent in involving children in research, evaluation and consultation processes (Alderson & Morrow, 2004; Farrell, 2005; Greene & Hogan, 2005). The article by Carroll-Lind, Chapman, Gregory, and Maxwell (2006) reports on some of the important methodological and ethical issues concerning children's right to participate in research, to express their views, and to report on their experiences of violence. It outlines the arguments for obtaining direct reports from children of their experiences and describes the approach taken to obtaining the consent of children to participate in a national survey of their experiences of violence both at home and at school. The survey included 2,079 children aged 9 to 13 years attending 28 randomly selected schools in New Zealand. The focus of the paper is on the methodological and ethical issues rather than the findings of the survey.

As Knight et al. (2000) pointed out, conducting research about child abuse and neglect “may well be one of the most difficult tasks in social science research” but an important and little explored part of this research—obtaining children's “self-reports” about their experience of abuse, and especially neglect—is even more difficult. It is important because children's reports provide different and possibly more accurate

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estimates of the prevalence of various forms of maltreatment, which are by their very nature generally private and known in many cases only to those who mete it out and those on the receiving end. Understanding children's perceptions and experiences is also important in shaping policy and practice in relation to child maltreatment. Such research is difficult because it carries with it a host of ethical and methodological issues, as Carroll-Lind et al. (2006) and others, including the various authors cited by them, point out.

The need for parental consent

One of the contentious issues that Carroll-Lind et al. (2006) focus on in their article is the need for parental consent, and in particular, the possibility that the absence of parental consent may prevent children's views being heard in research, especially in relation to sensitive areas. In research concerning family violence and child abuse, parents and legal guardians may exercise their right to refuse consent in what they see as the "best interests" of their children but they may also do so to protect the privacy of the family and to prevent children from revealing problems within the family – in effect, to censor or control the expression of children's views (Masson, 2000). The particular concern for researchers is the effect of such control or selection bias on the representativeness of the available sample and the validity of research findings.

One approach, and the one taken by Carroll-Lind et al. (2006) in their study, was to suspend the "usual rules" about parental consent by using "passive consent" procedures.

Rather than following the conventional requirement of institutional review boards or research ethics committees that parents give "active" informed consent for their children to participate (Halse & Honey, 2005; National Health and Medical Research Council, 1999, para 4.2; Wagener et al., 2004), "passive consent" allows children to participate where their parents do *not refuse* consent. The "trick" here of course is to ensure that parents know about and understand the process (Hughes & Gutkin, 1995). In this New Zealand study, the schools posted letters to each child's home to ensure parents received the information and they provided stamped addressed envelopes for parents to return their form if they wished to refuse consent. Whether parents read and understood the procedure is not certain, but Carroll-Lind et al. (2006) report that there were only 10 queries (out of 2,236 letters) indicating concern about it. There is no evidence that children were harmed by this process, and in fact a number of children in this and other studies have reported positively on having the opportunity to discuss such issues (Mason & Falloon, 2001; Neale & Smart, 1998). There is, however, little research focusing on the impact on children of being involved in research or on their understanding of the ethical rules governing the conduct of research (Fisher, 1993; Runyan, 2000).

The participation rate for children obtained by Carroll-Lind et al. (2006) was very high (overall 93% across schools), consistent with the findings of other research comparing the participation rates for active and passive consent approaches, and consenting, non-responding and refusing parents (Baker, Yardley, & McCaul, 2001; Pokorny, Jason, Schoeny, Townsend, & Curie, 2001). In all likelihood, this approach allowed more children to participate than might otherwise have done so, not least because inadvertently mislaid or forgotten consent forms did not deny children the opportunity to participate if they wished to do so.

The requirement for parents' or guardians' consent and/or the consent of children is clearly an area where there is a wide range of views, especially in relation to older children and adolescents. It varies

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