



ETHICAL ISSUES IN CONDUCTING PSYCHOLOGICAL RESEARCH IN PEDIATRIC POPULATION

Dental Science

Dr. Vishal Shrishail Kudagi	Assistant Professor, Department of Orthodontics, JSS Dental College and Hospital, JSSAHER
Dr. Shruti Shivakumar*	Assistant Professor, Department of Pediatric Dentistry and Hospital, JSSAHER, Mysore, India *Corresponding Author
Dr. Harsha Raj B S	Assistant Professor, Department of OMFS, JSS Dental College and Hospital, JSSAHER, Mysore, India
Anitha Subbappa	Reader, Department of Periodontology, JSS Dental College and Hospital, JSSAHER, Mysore, India

ABSTRACT

There has always been a strong correlation between childhood behavior and experiences and adult psychological well-being. Therefore, children are used in psychological research in order to gain better understanding of functioning and development of human mind. However, children are more vulnerable to psychological harm than adults and lack ability in decision making processes. This makes conducting psychological research in pediatric population challenging especially in relation to the ethical aspect of the study.

The researcher must take the moral responsibility to understand various issues regarding ethical consent in children and protect the confidentiality of the study. Researchers should respect the rights and dignity of the children participating and emphasize on efficient communication that can help go a long way in successful research outcomes. Being sensitive to the potential impact of the study's interventions and minimizing the effects is very important. There should also be a zero tolerance approach to any kind of deception in the psychological study.

Our presentation aims to revisit and discuss these sensitive issues when conducting psychological research in children which can guide researchers to design the study keeping the privacy and interests of the child as paramount.

KEYWORDS

ethics, psychological research, consent, pediatric research, vulnerable population

INTRODUCTION

Ethics are very important when carrying out any type of psychological research. Ethics refers to the correct rules of conduct necessary when carrying out research. We have a moral responsibility to protect research participants from harm. The **British Psychological Society (BPS)** has issued a code of ethics in psychology that provides guidelines for the conduct of research.¹

Researchers should respect the rights and dignity of participants in their research and the legitimate interests of stakeholders such as funders, institutions, sponsors and society at large. There are numerous reasons for behaving ethically. Participants in psychological research should have confidence in the investigators.

Good psychological research is only possible if there is mutual respect and trust between investigators and participants. Psychological investigators are potentially interested in all aspects of human behavior and experience. However, for ethics reasons, some areas of human experience and behavior may be beyond the reach of experiment, observation or other form of psychological intervention. Ethics guidelines are necessary to clarify the conditions under which psychological research can take place.²

Conducting research with children is both challenging and intellectually rewarding. There are also additional ethical and logistical considerations for conducting research with children. This article will help prepare you for these considerations before you begin conducting psychological research with children.

Children as Research Subjects

Since ages, children were viewed as vulnerable subjects who should be protected from the risks of research. The limited studies on children's behavior created a lacuna in the treatment planning for any disorders affecting a child's psyche. Additionally, some disorders primarily affect children, necessitating studies to develop therapeutics in these populations.³

The vulnerability of children arises from a number of factors. Children commonly lack mature decision making efficiency; they are subject to the authority of others; they may defer in ways that can mask underlying dissent; and their rights and interests may be socially overlooked. Some children may have serious medical conditions

requiring immediate decisions without adequate time for education and analysis. Some authors suggests that parental permission and child assent procedures alone cannot undermine these vulnerabilities. Rather, studies in the pediatric population must be designed to minimize risk and maximize the possibility of therapeutic benefit. Awareness of this vulnerability has led many countries to develop regulations or guidelines specific to research with children.^{4,5,6,7}

Children should not be enrolled in any investigation unless necessary to achieve an important scientific and/or public health objective concerning the health and welfare of children. The investigator must carefully weigh the risk vs benefit ratio of studying on a child.^{8,9,10}

By the current standards of psychological research ethics, many studies conducted in the earlier years have been deemed unethical.

The Strange Situation Experiment (Ainsworth and Bell, 1970) was criticized on ethical grounds due to the distress caused to the children on separation from their parent, as were various cultural variations on the experiment (Takahashi, 1986) which did not take into consideration the influences of cultural differences on the degrees of separation anxiety. The case of Little Albert (Watson and Rayner, 1920) is an example of where a lack of informed consent leads to reduced protection of the subject. Based on this, the Medical Research Council advises that children should only be used in research if adults cannot provide the same knowledge, and that the research results will be beneficial to children (Medical Research Council, 1991). As well as this, it recommends that the research must be approved by the relevant authoritative body, and that either the child or an adult on the child's behalf has given consent for the participation. Overall, it seems that there are benefits to using children in research- in the cases above significant findings were made in the areas of attachment formation and conditioning, however both also demonstrate the risks of not fully accounting for the vulnerability of the participants and the effects this could have, and this needs to be considered in all research.^{11,12,13,14,15,16}

Few important ethical guidelines:

Clearly ethical guidelines are important for the protection of all participants, however particularly where children are concerned, protection from harm, informed consent, confidentiality and deception become very important ethical considerations.

1. Informed Consent

Informed consent needs to be considered an integral part of research, rather than a just a formality to hurry through. Whenever possible, the investigator should inform all participants of the objectives of the study. The investigator should inform the participants of all aspects of the research or intervention that might reasonably be expected to influence willingness to participate. Where possible, the real consent of children in understanding or communication should be obtained. In addition, where research involves any persons less than 16 years of age, consent should be obtained from parents or from caregivers. If the nature of the research precludes consent being obtained from parents or permission being obtained from teachers, before proceeding with the research, the investigator must obtain approval from an Ethics Committee. The payment of participants must not be used to induce them to risk harm. In long term studies, consent may need to be obtained on more than one occasion. According to DHHS (1991) individuals become able to consent to participation at the age of 18.^{17,18,19}

2. Protection of Participants

Researchers must ensure that those taking part in research will not be caused distress. They must be protected from physical and mental harm. This means you must not embarrass, frighten, offend or harm participants.

Normally, the risk of harm must be no greater than in ordinary life, i.e. participants should not be exposed to risks greater than or additional to those encountered in their normal lifestyles.

3. Deception

The pursuit of scientific knowledge sometimes requires clinical investigators to deceive their subjects. Deception is necessary when accurately informing subjects could bias their responses, thereby impairing the validity of the data. Although deception is associated most commonly with psychological research, it occurs in clinical research as well. It may be impossible to study some psychological processes without withholding information about the true object of the study or deliberately misleading the participants. This is where participants are misled or wrongly informed about the aims of the research. However, participants must be deceived as little as possible, and any deception must not cause distress. If you have gained participants' informed consent by deception then they will have agreed to take part without actually knowing what they were consenting to. The true nature of the research should be revealed at the earliest possible opportunity, or at least during debriefing. If the participant is likely to object or be distressed once they discover the true nature of the research at debriefing, then the study is unacceptable.^{20,21,22,23,24,25,26}

4. Confidentiality

Participants, and the data gained from them must be kept anonymous unless they give their full consent. No names must be used in a research report. A study reported that a stronger assurance of confidentiality improves survey response by means of a meta-analysis of the experimental literature.²⁷

5. Withdrawal from an Investigation

From the very beginning of an investigation, participants must be aware of their right to discontinue participating in the study. Even at the end of the study the participant has a final authority to withdraw the data they have shared with the investigator.

Summary

In recognition of the benefits of pediatric research psychology, research ethics has evolved from a stand to exclude children to one of cautious inclusion, acknowledging the vital role of such studies, but accompanied by responsible consideration of the scientific context, evaluation of risks and benefits, and protection to participants. The regulatory agencies overseeing pediatric research need to make a careful ethical assessment weighing the complexities involved and protecting the health and welfare of the child. Treating each child as an individual deserving of dignity and respect is certainly within the realm of ethical psychological research.

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