

## Summary

# Ethical Issues in Studies with Children

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Protecting participants and maintaining their well-being are thought to be important as much as answering research questions in human researches. Research with children requires more attention and care because participants are more sensitive. Research ethics should be based on developed ethical principles and standards. Society for Research Child Development prepared a guideline that contains ethical standards for conducting research with children (SRCD Directory Members, 1999-2000). This guideline provides a source for professionals working with children and conducting research about children. However, there are no guidelines of ethical principles or standards for research with children in our country and Ethical Regulations of Turkish Psychologists Association does not contain a separate section for research or therapy ethics with children's participation. Sayıl and Yılmaz's (2001) and Kumru's (2001) articles about ethical standards and controversial issues are sources for psychologists who study with children. It has been realized that psychologists who conduct research with children can only benefit from these two articles. In accordance with this purpose, child rights and confidentiality, informed consent and competence, research with vulnerable children and children in institutions, abuse, proper use of language, researcher competence issues are mentioned in the current article and some suggestions are made for all professionals especially psychologists conducting research in this field.

### *Child Rights and Confidentiality*

Child rights are based on the basic idea that children are unique and sensitive (Bell, 2008). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) is the most current and commonly used source. To apply this convention is also compulsory in our country who is a member of United Nations. The convention stated that child is an individual, competent, have rights to express their ideas and make decisions about situations that affect their lives. Furthermore, children are accepted as passive objects under their parents' care and protection

(Barrow, 2002) are now regarded as active research participants in the literature (Cashmore, 2006; Farrel, 2005; Hopkins, 2008; Skelton, 2008). When conventions and related literature are assessed, it can be concluded that children can express their opinions about research process. The information that is given by children during research process should be kept confidential in terms of right of privacy and confidentiality principle. As in research with adults, confidentiality principle should be applied in children research; however, what it should be done when the child reported an abuse situation is mentioned under the "abuse" subtitle.

### *Informed Consent and Competence*

It seems that one of the important topics about research with children is informed consent. According to Morrow (2008), the power of informed consent which is taken from children increase the ethics side of the research. First, the question of whether a child has competence of deciding to participate a research should be addressed in the informed consent. In recent years, it has been emphasized that in addition to written and signed informed consent from parents, children's assents should also be taken (Sterling & Walco, 2003). Consent and assents concepts can sometimes create confusion. Assent is a process in which child is asked whether s/he wants to participate to the study and stated that s/he can quit at any stage of the study. On the other hand, consent also includes purpose and process of the research and explaining possible risks (Davidson & Brien, 2009). It is recommended that informed consent should be taken from parent and assent should be taken from child in the situation that child is young and cannot understand topic, process and possible risks. In addition to differences among laws of countries there is no consensus about age range in the literature. For instance, according to Gillick Competence Principle that was published by National Research Ethics Services have been applied in England and North Ireland (Cashmore, 2006), children between the ages of 10-16 can give their consent to participate in the study if researcher

thinks that the child has enough understanding, the parent cannot object to this desire of the child. Children over 16 years old can give their informed consent without asking their parents. Similarly, many studies in the literature stated that children, if they want, can participate to the risk free researches unless their parents do not allow. In Turkey, every individual is considered a child until the age of 18, and the parent is legal guardian. For this reason, if an individual under 18 years of age is involved in the research, the researcher must take informed consent from the parent. However, in terms of ethics, it should not be forgotten that in addition to informed consent verbal assent should also be taken from the child.

### ***Research with Vulnerable Children and Children in Institutions***

When studies target vulnerable children, more attention should be paid than conducting research with normally developed children. Furthermore, while allowing such work to be carried out by children, ethical committees need to conduct a preliminary literature review, assessing the risks and benefits. According to Rumney, Anderson and Ryan (2015), children who do not have enough competence should also be informed appropriate to their capacity. The research procedure with children in institutions are stated in the “Guidelines for the Involvement of Children” which was published by American Health and Human Services. In the related section, it is stated that the research design must be suitable for the age of the targeted children, and should be removed or minimized. Moreover, it is emphasized that in cases where the risk is not minimized, children living with the parents should also be included if the research is to be conducted with the children in institutions.

### ***Abuse***

The status of abuse reports depends on the laws of the country of origin, the professional ethics, the situation or behavior that caused the suspicion, the type of notification or the person who reported it. In addition to all this, the psychologist can remain in conflict between complying with the principle of confidentiality and the obligation to protect the participant from harm if suspected of abuse (Liss, 1994). Although there is some debate over reporting abuse cases in the literature, there is consensus that declaration is required. Some researchers propose that abuse cases should not be declared in the context of confidentiality (Sieber, 1994). Moreover, it is assumed that researchers might make type 1 error ( $\alpha$  error). Contrary to opposers’ arguments, Convention on the Children’s Rights of United Nations states that children have right to protect from all forms of abuse (protection from abuse and neglect, sexual abuse, eco-

nomic abuse, sale, abduction and forcible detention and torture). Ethical Regulations of Turkish Psychological Association clearly state that confidentiality may be overlooked in certain situations:

“If the service area is any individual with no criminal responsibility such as children or adolescent under the age of 18, elderly or disabled.”

In the light of these information, psychologists who suspect or realize abuse case has to inform Child Services Department affiliated with the Ministry of Family and Social Policy.

### ***Proper Use of Language***

Morrow (2008) argues that children’s competencies, perceptions and perspectives are different from adults, and that children are more sensitive and adults are more responsible. In the context of the sensitivity-responsibility line, the more responsive the child is, the greater the responsibility of the investigator. The study design and research questions should be chosen according to the developmental stage of the target sample. For example, it is expected that different questions or methods should be used for adolescents and primary school children.

### ***Researcher Competence***

The first principle of the Ethical Regulations of Turkish Psychological Association is competence. In the related text, it is stated that a psychologist takes the responsibility of obtaining competence and maintaining international standards at the highest level. Furthermore, it is emphasized that education is a priority to gain competence and to know the boundaries of his/her field. There is no statements about psychologists who conduct researches with children, but all psychologists in Turkey have to study in the context of Ethical Regulations of Turkish Psychologists Association. Psychologists who work with children should have enough competence about methods to minimize problems and to manage possible crisis. Due to the fact that children are more sensitive than adults (Morrow, 2008), the investigator should pay attention to the body language, empathize with children (Hopkins, 2008). Researchers should always be open, honest, and accessible to the parents of the child and should be able to explain all the details patiently (Modi et al., 2014). As mentioned above, ethics of research with children is a developing area and new opinions have been delivered every year; therefore, psychologists should follow current literature.

### ***Conclusion***

As a result, there has been an increase in the work carried out with the participation of children in Turkey as

it is in the world in recent years. Because of the fact that the competence, perceptions and perspectives of children are different from adults and they are more sensitive than adults, these types of work need to be approached with much more care during planning and implementation phases. Besides, ethics become more important since it is accepted that children are unique individuals and

active research participants in the literature. There are no guidelines for ethical standards in studies conducted with child participation in Turkey. It is not possible to discuss such a significant and broad topic in such a short article. However, it is aimed in the current article to create a resource and an ethical standard for psychologists conducting research by mentioning different situations.