



**THE ALLIANCE**  
FOR CHILD PROTECTION  
IN HUMANITARIAN ACTION

# Resources for Conducting Ethical Research with Children in Humanitarian Contexts



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## Abstract

This Resource List catalogues critical resources to guide ethical good practices in participatory research with children in humanitarian contexts. It is not an exhaustive compilation, nor does it propose new ethical guidelines. Instead, it highlights existing tools that help researchers and practitioners understand, utilise, and apply well-established ethical principles. These resources are grounded in the core tenets of child protection and safeguarding, humanitarian action, and participatory research, focusing on the complexities of conducting research in crisis-affected settings. Ethical practice in these contexts is imperative, as children's heightened vulnerabilities demand careful reflection, planning, and safeguarding measures to ensure their rights and well-being are upheld. The list is divided into three sections: foundational guidance on ethical research with children, guidance specific to emergencies and sensitive topics, and case studies demonstrating real-world application.

## Introduction

Engaging directly with children in humanitarian contexts can help ensure that the response is tailored to their needs. This involvement also includes partnering with children in research and evidence-generation processes. Research involving children requires special considerations to uphold and protect their rights, dignity, and well-being. When conducting research with children in humanitarian contexts, these considerations become even more critical due to the heightened vulnerabilities and risks children face in what are often rapidly changing environments. This added complexity requires greater diligence, reflection and planning to establish and maintain ethical good practices.

Participatory research with children in humanitarian contexts sits at the intersection of three large and complex domains: child protection and safeguarding, humanitarian contexts, and participatory research methods. Understanding these domains and how they overlap is a critical starting point to address the ethical challenges inherent in this type of research.

- **Child protection** refers to work to prevent and respond to all forms of abuse, neglect, exploitation, and violence against children.<sup>1</sup> **Child safeguarding** refers to the actions, policies, and protocols that organisations implement to ensure that their operations, staff, and partners do no harm to children. It includes creating safe environments that actively prevent abuse and take swift, appropriate action if incidents arise.<sup>2</sup>
- **Humanitarian contexts** refer to situations where a crisis causes widespread suffering, requiring urgent action to save lives, alleviate distress, and uphold human dignity. These crises may result from climate change-induced natural disasters, conflicts, infectious disease outbreaks, or other events that exceed the affected population's capacity to respond. Humanitarian action follows the principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence, which also must be embedded into research practices involving children in these settings.
- **Participatory research** is an approach where research is conducted by or with the affected population. The overarching purpose is often to ensure that the affected population's perspectives, knowledge and lived experiences influence a study's outcomes. Participatory research is an overarching term frequently used to describe both collecting data with

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1 See: UNICEF. (2021). Child Protection Strategy. <https://www.unicef.org/documents/child-protection-strategy>

2 See: Save the Children (n.d). Safeguarding Children. <https://www.savethechildren.org/us/what-we-do/safeguarding-children>

children and involving them in decision-making about the research process.<sup>3</sup> While there is no universally agreed-upon definition of the level or type of participation required for research to be considered 'participatory,' it generally involves participants (in this context, children) informing, co-producing, or even leading various aspects of the research process. Lansdown and O'Kane (2014) propose that children's participation can range from consultative (children inform) to collaborative (children and adults work together) to child-led (children initiate activities and are involved in decision-making).<sup>4</sup> This spectrum creates a helpful framework to help researchers determine how to include children ethically and meaningfully, considering their capacities and the risks involved.

These three domains present complex ethical challenges that must be addressed to ensure research is conducted responsibly and effectively.



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- 3 Montreuil, M., Bogossian, A., Laberge-Perrault, E., & Racine, E. (2021). A review of approaches, strategies, and ethical considerations in participatory research with children. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 20, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406920987962>
- 4 Lansdown, G., & O'Kane, C. (2014). A toolkit for monitoring and evaluating children's participation: How to measure the scope, quality, and outcomes of children's participation. Save the Children

## The imperative for ethical good practices in participatory research with children in humanitarian contexts

Increased attention to rights-based programming and accountability to affected populations has increased the interest and demand for participatory research approaches across many sectors, including in humanitarian contexts. At the same time, evidence quality can be significantly enhanced when informed by and co-created with study populations. As a result, there are growing numbers of voices in academic and policy literature both employing and advocating for participatory approaches to data collection, evidence generation, and analysis. Increasingly, participatory research is viewed as the “gold standard” for ensuring that the voices of affected populations are included in evidence-based decision-making processes.

In humanitarian settings, where children face long-lasting effects such as disrupted education, family separation, and exposure to violence, their input is crucial in designing interventions and informing policies that meet their needs. However, **while participatory research can offer many benefits in theory, it is not inherently meaningful, ethical, or beneficial simply because it involves children’s participation.** For research to be meaningful, beneficial, and ethical in practice, it must adhere to and apply foundational and well-established ethical principles<sup>5</sup> of research with children as a fundamental starting point.

**Figure 1: Foundational ethical principles of research with children**



<sup>5</sup> These ethical principles represent widely accepted foundational ethical principles of research with children. The language is informed by UNICEF’s guidelines for Ethics in Evidence Generation.

These ethical foundations must be applied according to each specific context. However, this becomes particularly complex in humanitarian settings due to the heightened risks and dilemmas inherent in crisis situations. As such, the risks associated with undertaking research with children in humanitarian contexts cannot be understated. Pages 8 and 10 highlight some of the many challenges.

While the **foundational principles of ethical research with children hold true regardless of context, applying them in humanitarian settings requires nuanced and context-specific support.** There are growing numbers and investments in resources related to these interrelated topics— research on sensitive issues related to child protection and safeguarding, research in humanitarian contexts, and research that involves children's participation. **Those conducting participatory research with children in humanitarian contexts must understand the principles in these resources and learn how to implement them in specific contexts.**



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# Protection and Safeguarding Risks

## Risks of participatory research with children in humanitarian contexts

In any participatory research with children, the broader research identifies many risks; however, a few are especially pertinent in humanitarian contexts. The crisis nature of these environments intensifies the ethical challenges already present in research involving children. Additionally, the degree of children's participation introduces further layers of ethical complexities. Below, we highlight some of the inherent risks in humanitarian settings and the unique challenges that arise with different levels of participation: consultative, collaborative, and child-led.



### Heightened Vulnerabilities

Children in humanitarian contexts face increased risks of abuse, neglect, exploitation, and violence. The instability and disrupted social structures in these settings present unique ethical challenges:

- **Informed Assent/ Consent:** Distress, lack of documentation, or misunderstandings about participation may affect children's ability to provide meaningful assent or consent.
- **Separation:** Many children are separated from parents or guardians who could provide consent, complicating ethical participation.
- **Need for Support:** A higher need for referrals and support services makes safeguarding a priority, yet these services may be lacking.



### Resource Constraints

Access to necessities like food, water, shelter, and health services is often limited in humanitarian settings, which hinders the ability to conduct ethical research effectively.

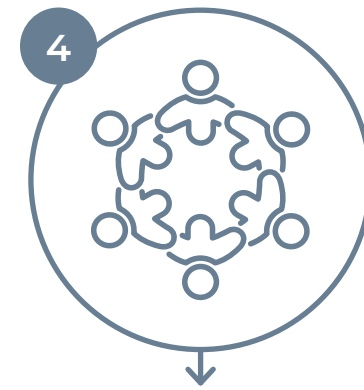
- **Coercion Risks:** Children might feel participation is mandatory to continue to receive services or to gain access to services.
- **Capacity Limitations:** When fundamental needs are unmet, children and communities may lack the capacity or willingness to engage in research activities.
- **Funding and Support:** Research may be deprioritised, inadequately funded, or held to strict timeframes, making it difficult to carry out safely and ethically. Additionally, there may be an absence of providers or services to make necessary referrals.



### Safety Concerns

Many humanitarian environments involve ongoing conflict or natural disasters, raising significant safety issues.

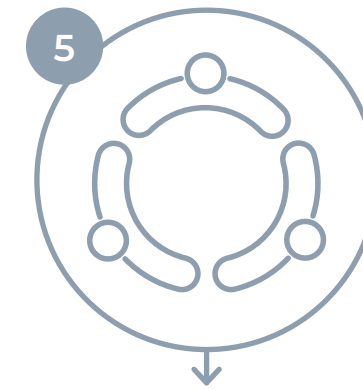
- **Researcher and Participant Safety:** Researchers might be unable to operate safely, while children face similar threats when participating in research activities.
- **Infrastructure Damage:** Disasters can destroy community infrastructure, hindering the organisation of meetings, interviews, and discussions.



### Dynamic and Rapidly Changing Environments

Humanitarian settings are inherently unstable, requiring continuous reassessment of ethical practices and research protocols.

- **Access and Participation:** Frequent changes in risk factors, such as child marriage, child labour, or family separation, can disrupt children's ability to participate safely.
- **Ongoing Ethical Evaluation:** Ethical considerations need constant revisiting and adaptation based on monitoring the evolving context. This demands additional time and resources to maintain ethical standards throughout the research process.



### Complex and Political Contexts

Humanitarian settings, particularly those related to conflict, are often politically charged.

- **Perception and Neutrality:** Aid actors' funding and intentions may be questioned, risking the perception of research as politically biased. Understanding the local context and reflecting on these dynamics is crucial to avoid unintended contributions to conflict.
- **Local Approaches:** Implementing Western research methodologies without understanding local knowledge and practices, cultural norms, and communication modalities can undermine ethical research efforts.
- **Political Sensitivity:** Children and communities might wish to share experiences that could endanger them in certain political climates. Researchers must carefully frame questions to avoid placing participants at risk.
- **Permissions and Restrictions:** Clearance from local or national authorities is often required and, given the complexity, might not be granted. Further, non-state or state actors might prevent children's participation in research activities.

## Risks Based on Type of Participation

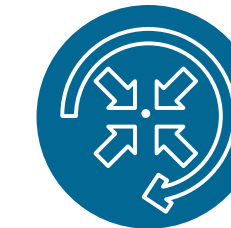
In addition to the risks outlined on pages 8 and 9, there are **added risks associated** with the degree to which children participate in research. Greater levels of participation often involve more ethical complexities, as detailed below.



### Consultative Research

This could involve consulting children on the design or findings of a study. Consultative research could also include conducting interviews or focus groups with children. While this can provide valuable insights, allowing researchers to hear directly from children in their voices, words, and framing, this approach raises concerns such as:

- **Privacy and Confidentiality:** Conducting interviews or focus groups may expose children to privacy risks, especially in settings where privacy is limited. This raises the risk that children's shared experiences may be overheard or misused in communal environments.
- **Emotional Impact:** Discussions about a sensitive topic or their own experiences may cause distress or trigger traumatic memories, requiring researchers to be vigilant about emotional safeguards.



### Collaborative Research

This could include co-designing survey questions or sampling methods with children. While more participatory, in addition to the risks outlined in consultative research, this approach raises concerns such as:

- **Fairness and Justice:** Involving children in designing survey questions or sampling methods raises concerns about who is selected and the fairness of participation incentives or compensation. There is also the risk of power imbalances between children involved in the research and those who are not.
- **Confidentiality Among Peers:** As children collaborate, they may become aware of who participates in the research. This can compromise privacy and lead to unintended consequences, such as stigmatisation or peer pressure.



### Child-Led Research

This could include putting children at the forefront of the research, allowing them to define its scope and execution. However, child-led research could contribute to risks such as:

- **Emotional Burden:** Facilitating children to be at the forefront and supporting them in defining the scope and execution of research can expose them to sensitive information, particularly from peers, placing a heavy emotional burden on them. They may encounter distressing stories that they are not equipped to handle.
- **Safeguarding Concerns:** Children leading research may inadvertently place themselves or others in vulnerable situations. For example, they might unintentionally elicit disclosures of abuse or trauma that require professional intervention.
- **Decision-Making Pressure:** Child-led research may pressure children into taking on responsibilities and decision-making roles for which they are unprepared, potentially leading to stress or burnout.



## Purpose and Audience

This Resource List aims to **catalogue** and **highlight** a robust sample of **existing resources** to help **guide ethical good practices** in participatory research with children in humanitarian contexts. This list is not an exhaustive compilation of all resources, nor does it propose new ethical guidelines. Instead, it **underscores currently available tools and guidance to build researchers' and practitioners' capacity to understand, utilise, and apply established ethical principles in their work**. These resources represent and build on an already-established body of literature and guidance on good practices in ethical evidence generation involving children. By spotlighting these tools, the list seeks to reinforce the core ethical principles, supporting researchers to implement safe, respectful, and meaningful participatory practices in humanitarian settings.

The target audience for this Resource List is researchers, monitoring and evaluation specialists, managers, funders, and others involved in planning, conducting, or executing participatory research with children in humanitarian contexts.

## What is included

The **Resource List** is divided into three sections:

### 1. Foundational guidance on ethical research with children in any context

This section provides resources that outline the foundational ethical frameworks for research with children, regardless of the context. These principles, such as do no harm, benefit, respect, fairness, accountability, integrity and non-discrimination, form the bedrock of any ethical research involving children, including in humanitarian settings. Anyone seeking to conduct research with children must know these foundations. Individuals who are new to participatory research should start here.

### 2. Guidance on research with children in emergencies and conflicts and on sensitive topics

This section builds on the previous section. It includes resources for conducting research in high-risk settings, on sensitive topics related to child safeguarding and protection, and with hard-to-reach populations. The guidance highlights ethical issues unique to these environments and provides examples of how various organisations have approached these challenges.

### 3. Research Reports and Case Studies

This section focuses on specific research projects and case studies, demonstrating the application of ethical principles in participatory research with children. These practical examples show how researchers have implemented ethical frameworks in real-world contexts.

**For every resource**, the following information has been compiled to help readers quickly identify key takeaways and assess which resources would be helpful to explore more:

Description	Participatory methods and approaches:	Ethical Principles Used, Addressed or Identified
This section summarises the resource’s core content and aim	This section highlights the type and level of children’s participation in the research process	This section details how different ethical issues related to children’s participation in the research process were addressed

## Methodology

### Identifying Resources

These resources were identified first using Google Scholar with combinations of the following keyword searches: child, participatory, research, participation, humanitarian, crisis, adolescent, childhood, ethics, ethical, disaster response, emergency, and youth. The Alliance’s Assessment Measurement and Evidence Working Group (AME WG) reviewed the initial list. Then, they identified other materials and grey literature that did not appear in the initial search, such as organisational reports or statements. Resources identified included guidance, case studies, and research reports. Reference snowball sampling was also conducted on resources.

Resources had to include participatory research conducted with children aged 0-18. Resources also had to cover or discuss principles or challenges in conducting participatory research well. For example, if a participatory study was conducted with children, even if it was an otherwise robust study, it was only included if it described how the participation was conducted or provided reflections on the methods used. While these studies can serve as promising participatory research examples, this Resource List specifically focused on identifying ethical practices that could help guide others. Resources highlighting ethical practices or those that were more practical were preferred. Resources that concentrate on humanitarian or crisis settings were preferred, they could also be included if the participatory research was done with children on other sensitive and related topics. In total, 50 resources were identified and reviewed against the criteria above. Following this review, 34 resources were included in this list.

### Validation and Analyses

All selected articles were reviewed and analysed according to the following categories:

1. participatory methods used
2. ethical principles proposed or discussed
3. age of children involved specified, or not

Because very few articles detailed guidance or approaches based on specific age ranges of children, a synopsis was written for the first two categories only. Each synopsis was reviewed in detail by two different members of the AME WG. The lead author initially analysed and identified common ethical principles across the identified articles. These were cross-compared with common themes identified by the other team members. Then, validation interviews were conducted to determine if and how these themes aligned with experts’ opinions. The validation interviews were conducted with three experts in child participatory research in different countries and humanitarian contexts.

## Limitations

Several limitations should be noted. First, this Resource List was not a systematic review; therefore, we cannot formally assess the state of the literature or the quality of each resource. In addition, the search and subsequent resources identified were only conducted in English; thus, the list lacks the diversity of views and approaches necessary to inform global practice. Another challenge is that ethical good practices are only sometimes explicitly labelled as such and often embedded within other documents under various categories, thus increasing the chance of overlooking other possible resources and ethical principles..

## Toward Advancing Ethical Good Practices: Future Priorities and Next Steps

Addressing the challenges in participatory research with children in humanitarian contexts requires a concerted effort from researchers, funders, and managers. While this Resource List provides one tool to support humanitarian actors in promoting and applying ethical standards, more work is needed. To further enhance ethical practices in this field, the following priorities and steps are outlined below.

### Capacity Strengthening for Researchers and Practitioners

- Develop specialised training programs that equip researchers with the skills necessary for ethical participatory research, including working in emergency settings, working with children and managing sensitive topics.
- Establish mentorship and oversight mechanisms to ensure researchers apply ethical principles consistently throughout the research process.
- Implement a robust communication strategy to raise awareness of existing ethical guidelines and resources for researchers and practitioners, such as creating online platforms, webinars, and collaboration with donors to embed these principles into research planning and design.

### Context-Specific Good Practices

- Promote comprehensive documentation of ethical considerations within each project, moving beyond the notion that ethics approval alone guarantees safe research. This documentation should be incorporated into both internal reports and public-facing publications.
- Develop and share case studies and vignettes illustrating how various projects have navigated specific ethical challenges, such as compensation and consent. By offering concrete examples, practitioners can better adapt ethical practices to their unique contexts.
- Create materials that capture the processes, challenges, and lessons learned across projects, highlighting practical solutions to common ethical dilemmas. This fosters a more informed, context-sensitive approach to research ethics.

### Monitoring and Evaluation of Ethical Practices

- Introduce mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating ethical practices in research involving children. This will ensure adherence to ethical standards and protect children's rights throughout the research lifecycle.

- Encourage a culture of continuous reflection and improvement, recognising ethical research as an evolving practice—support learning from successful research practices as well as from challenges.
- Advocate for a standard approach to project documentation, enforcing a default assumption that ethical considerations are only fully addressed if documented.

By implementing these steps, the Alliance and other humanitarian actors can establish a more consistent, ethically sound framework for participatory research with children. This approach safeguards the rights and well-being of children in humanitarian contexts and ensures their voices are heard, respected, and meaningfully integrated into research practices.



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## List of Resources included in Annex

### **Section 1: Foundational Guidance on Ethical Research with Children in Any Context**

1. [International Charter for Ethical Research Involving Children \(2013\)](#)
2. [Ethical Research Involving Children: Compendium \(2013\)](#)
3. [The Nine Basic Requirements for Meaningful and Ethical Children's Participation \(2021\)](#)
4. [Ethical Considerations for Research and Evaluation on Ending Violence Against Women and Girls \(2018\)](#)
5. [Ethical Guidelines for Ethical Meaningful and Inclusive Children's Participation Practice \(2008\)](#)
6. [So You Want to Involve Children in Research? A Toolkit Supporting Children's Meaningful and Ethical Participation in Research Relating to Violence Against Children \(2004\)](#)
7. [Participatory Research on Child Maltreatment with Children and Adult Survivors: Concepts, Ethics, and Methods \(2023\)](#)
8. [How to Research the Physical and Emotional Punishment of Children \(2004\)](#)
9. [Conceptual Framework for Measuring Outcomes of Adolescent Participation \(2018\)](#)
10. [International Guidelines for Ethical Review of Epidemiological Studies \(1991\)](#)

### **Section 2: Guidance on Research with Children in Emergencies, Conflicts, and Other Humanitarian Crises**

11. [What We Know about Ethical Research Involving Children in Humanitarian Settings \(2016\)](#)
12. [Children's Consultations in Humanitarian Contexts \(2023\)](#)
13. [Contextualizing and Measuring Child Well-Being in Humanitarian Action \(2021\)](#)
14. [Ethical Considerations for Children's Participation in Data Collection Activities During Humanitarian Emergencies: A Delphi Review \(2017\)](#)
15. [Child-Centered Multi-Risk Assessments: A Field Guide and Toolkit \(2018\)](#)
16. [No Research About Us Without Us \(2019\)](#)
17. [A Practitioner's Guide to the Ethical Conduct of Research on Child Marriage in Humanitarian Settings \(2021\)](#)
18. [Young People's Participation and Mental Health: A Protocol for Practitioners \(2022\)](#)
19. [Voicemore Handbook: War Child's Participatory Youth Advocacy Methodology \(2023\)](#)
20. [Child Protection Practices in UNHCR \(2014-2022\)](#)
21. [Using Focus Group Discussions with Children and Adolescents: A Practical Guide for Maximizing Their Effectiveness \(2019\)](#)
22. [Ethical Considerations When Conducting Research on Children in the Worst Forms of Child Labour in Nepal \(2005\)](#)

### **Section 3: Research Reports and Case Studies**

23. [A Review of Approaches, Strategies, and Ethical Considerations in Participatory Research with Children \(2021\)](#)
24. [The Value of Child Participation in Research: A Qualitative Child-Centered Approach to the Early Development of an Empowerment Inventory for Children \(2024\)](#)
25. [The Ethics of Social Research with Children and Families in Young Lives: Practical Experiences \(2009\)](#)

26. [Learning from Life Story Collection and Analysis with Children Who Work in the Leather Sector in Bangladesh \(2022\)](#)
27. [Research with Children Living in Situations of Armed Conflict: Concepts, Ethics, and Methods \(2006\)](#)
28. [Children Participating in Research \(2006\)](#)
29. [Implementing Community-Based Participatory Research with Communities Affected by Humanitarian Crises: The Potential to Recalibrate Equity and Power in Vulnerable Contexts \(2020\)](#)
30. [Pushing the Limits of Child Participation in Research: Reflections from a Youth-Driven Participatory Action Research \(YPAR\) Initiative in Uganda \(2020\)](#)
31. [Researching Sensitive Topics with Children and Young People: Ethical Practice and Blurry Boundaries \(2023\)](#)
32. [Child Participation and Accountability in Save the Children Colombia's Programming \(2019\)](#)
33. [Seeing Things from Both Sides: A Comic to Help Young People and Professionals Understand Each Other's Views about Young Survivors' Participation in Efforts to Address Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation \(2023\)](#)
34. [Life Under Coronavirus: Children's Views on their Experiences of their Human Rights \(2021\)](#)



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