

FAQ 28: What shall I do if a child respondent seems to be at risk?

What's the issue?

When working with children researchers should anticipate the possibility that they will meet children who could be at risk. This can happen both in qualitative and quantitative studies. In qualitative studies researchers often visit children's homes where they might see signs of neglect or even violence. In quantitative studies researchers might find written comments in a questionnaire or a pattern of answers indicating that a child is at risk.

Common practice

Researchers agree that the guiding light in all decisions in such situations should be the best interests of the child. Thus whether to take action or not should be guided by this principle. It is not possible to provide definite answers to what should be done under any circumstances. It is also worth noting that the law in some countries demands that the relevant authorities are notified if there is any suspicion that a child is at risk. An example of the enhanced protection of children in law is the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990).

If a particular respondent becomes distressed during the interview it is usually advisable to stop the interview immediately (Sammut-Scerri, Abela, & Vetere, 2012). Sometimes it might be the case that once the respondent calms down, further processing of what happened during the interview could give the researcher insight into the research process and into whether the respondent requires further assistance.

Questions to consider

It is always advisable for researchers who work with children to consider how they are going to deal with the possible situation of discovering that a child is potentially at risk. This involves, amongst other things, being familiar with the relevant legal framework in the respective country and the relevant institutions that deal with child protection. In studies that focus directly on sensitive issues such as pornography or violence it is worth considering whether to give information to all the participants in a study about where they can go to seek further information or assistance.

It is essential to adopt a reflexive stance to understand how participating in a study impacts on participants' beliefs, knowledge, and on the understanding of the research process and of their stories. This will enable researchers to discern whether the situation at hand involves potential risks and whether these risks are related to harm.

Sometimes it may be the case that the children have questions or doubts after the research has been carried out. Sometimes it may be the case that the children become aware that certain situations could be exposing them to risk after the study. Thus it is advisable to debrief the participants after the research and to provide them with information and a contact number that they can make use of if any of these situations arise. Participants can be asked to refer to the channels that they went through to participate in the study if they require further assistance or if want to discuss anything related to the research. It is also useful to ask the participants about how they feel after participating in the research and inquire about their experience of participation (Sammut-Scerri *et al.*, 2012). This could give valuable insight to the researcher as to whether the child could be at risk.

Pitfalls to avoid

If you realize that a child is at risk, you should not speak to the child immediately during the research but through the appropriate channels. You should also avoid shifting into the role of a helper or counsellor. Even though you might be trained to do so, your role during the research requires otherwise.

Be aware that your experiences are different from the children's experiences. Biases have to be kept in check to fully understand whether there is a situation that is risky for the child. It is important that during the research, the you check back with the child to make sure that the correct meaning of what is being said by the child is actually what is being understood.

A researcher's experience

During various research projects I have found that (in some cases) it can be necessary to have a look at children who seem to be at risk. In one case I thought that there might be sexual abuse in the family. I could not talk to the child or to their mother (I had interviews with a child aged eight and their mother), so I looked for an institution of trust to contact. I learned that it could be helpful to contact a priest in the community; thus I told him my suspicion and he started to take care of the child concerning that matter. It is the ethical responsibility of a researcher to actively react when he or she entertains a suspicion on such sensitive issues. (Ingrid Paus-Hasebrink, Austria)

In the UK Children Go Online survey, I was concerned about the child who answered 'yes' to the following sequence of (approximate) questions: have you met someone offline that you first met online, did you go on your own, did the meeting go badly (or well)? In the event, this was a rare occurrence. In writing the consent forms for children, it was made explicit that their answers would be kept confidential and anonymous unless the interviewer had real grounds for concern, in which case she would inform the child that she could not keep this confidential. I also discussed this eventuality with the market research company who were contracted to conduct the interviews with children, so that they could brief their interviewers on appropriate ways to respond. Last, in case after the interview was over children or their parents became concerned about something that had happened, we left all families with a leaflet with a helpline and advice contacts. (Sonia Livingstone, UK)

The 2005 National Center for Missing and Exploited Children Survey (Finkelhor, 2006) included a check for the interviewer to be completed after the interview. It relied on both the interviewer's observations and on the child's answers recorded on the computer. If the computer algorithm flagged the respondent as possibly in danger, or the interviewer had concerns based on comments or observations during the interview, the interviewer would then say: 'There is someone else connected with our study who may need to call you again. Is there a time that would be convenient?' [Get time and check telephone number.] 'I would also like to give you the address of a website with good information for young people about internet safety. The address is: www.safeteens.com or www.safekids.com'

References and further resources

Finkelhor, D. (2006). *The Second Youth Internet Safety Survey (2005-2006). Crimes against children*. Research Center & National Center for Missing and Exploited Children.

Sammut-Scerri, C., Abela, A., & Vetere, A. (2012). Ethical dilemmas of a clinician/researcher interviewing women who have grown up in a family where there was domestic violence. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 11(2), 102–131.

United Nations (1990). *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Available at www2.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm