



When Researchers Come to Your Program

Knowing What to Ask, Making Decisions That Work

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Research provides early childhood practitioners with valuable ideas about how to work with young children and their families. The body of knowledge gained through research contributes to our ability to provide worthwhile professional development. This knowledge is developed through the cooperation of practitioners, families, and children when researchers ask for their participation in studies.

Researchers have never been strangers to teachers and children in early childhood programs. Their presence continues, but with new intensity. For example, with the growth of more universal prekindergarten programs, an increasing amount of research is being conducted to examine program outcomes (see the research described on the NIEER [National Institute for Early Education Research] Web site at www.nieer.org).

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Research has always been a part of Head Start (see project descriptions at www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/project/projectIndex.jsp#ehs). Federally funded programs, such as Early Reading First, require classroom practice to be founded on “scientifically-based reading research” (U.S. Department of Education n.d.). Public school systems expect curriculum publishers to present research-based outcomes for their products. Early childhood faculty at colleges and universities pursue their own studies, such as producing scholarship that contributes to the field, and this is one of their job expectations. All of these types of research, whether funded by the government, sponsored by publishers developing products, or pursued by individuals curious to find answers to questions about early childhood practice, require that researchers come to programs.

Given current education and marketplace climates, research is both expected and rewarded. Therefore, it is likely that a researcher may knock at the door of your program and request the involvement of staff, children, and/or families. This could be exciting or intimidating or something in between. You might see it as an opportunity or as somewhat of a

burden. You may well feel you have no idea about how this works, what you need to be aware of to be a knowledgeable participant. So, what are your rights and responsibilities? What safeguards should staff, children, and families expect? In this article, my aim is to give early childhood program administrators and teachers a working knowledge of the world of research—ethics, regulations, and practice.

Why raise the question of research protections?

When you think about daily life in early childhood classrooms, research might not seem particularly risky. However, some dramatic examples of unethical research practices exposed during the mid-twentieth century

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emphasize the need today to ensure protection for all research participants. Nazi concentration camp prisoners suffered and died from scores of human medical experiments conducted. In the United States, Tuskegee Syphilis Study researchers tracked the course of the disease in low-income participants, African American men, but did not tell the participants that they had syphilis and did not treat them once a cure became available (Sieber 1992).

Even non-life-threatening risks in research have helped shape the ethos of protecting participants. The controversial psychologist Stanley Milgram indicated to research participants in one experiment that they were to give unseen partners a life-threatening electrical shock (Kelman 1967). Though

The Belmont Report outlines guiding principles for conducting research that are incorporated in the federal regulations governing institutions conducting research. One principle, *respect for persons*, emphasizes autonomy, declaring that participation in research studies should be an act of personal and informed choice. Also important to this principle is the notion that some people should receive special protections. *Immaturity* was included as an example, and so federal regulations include special considerations for children.

Researchers must also abide by any rules or policies established by the individual early childhood programs with which they hope to work. These might include policies about review of research requests, decision-making levels for program/agency participation, and required information to be submitted. Programs may or may not have policies in place, and it would always be timely to consider developing policies if they don't exist. Program review may go beyond questions of ethics to include questions such as, Will participation in this study cost us anything in terms of resources or time?

this was not actually happening, Milgram wanted to study how participants followed orders and how far they would go in continuing to deliver the shocks.

As a result of these studies and other events, defining risks for research participants is mandatory. Risks may be related to physical health and well-being; they may also be social or psychological in nature, including bringing on distress. Today we recognize that participation in research also can pose a risk for a person's reputation or employability, based on the type of information collected. Perhaps the most all-encompassing risk that has been defined is research participants' potential loss of confidentiality.

Rules of the road for research

The information about your rights as a program administrator or teacher and the rights of children and families

Links to Organizations and Ethical Standards for Research

American Educational Research Association
www.aera.net/AboutAERA/Default.aspx?menu_id=90&id=717

American Psychological Association
www.apa.org/ethics/code2002.html#8

American Speech-Language-Hearing Association
www.asha.org/about/ethics

Council for Exceptional Children www.dec-sped.org/pdf/positionpapers/PrioritiesPaperFinal.pdf

National Association for the Education of Young Children www.naeyc.org/resources/research/research_02_02.asp

Society for Research in Child Development
www.srcd.org/ethicalstandards.html

is a starting point in considering what is important to understand before agreeing to participate in a research project. In light of varied risks in research participation, researchers must now abide by both codes of ethical conduct and federal regulations.

Most researchers interested in early childhood education belong to one or more professional organizations that have a code of ethics (see "Links to Organizations and Ethical Standards for Research"). Reading these codes of



ethics is one way to become familiar with how researchers approach their jobs. A common ethics document, the Belmont Report (see box, p. 2), has general application for researchers in all fields. Written by a group commissioned by the federal government, the report identifies basic ethical principles for all research involving human subjects (NIH [1979] 2008).

How research protections operate

Each institution conducting research follows broadly drawn guidelines for research that are codified as ethics reports and regulations. Appointees make up an institutional review board (IRB); on a case-by-case basis the board applies ethical principles and regulations to evaluate planned research projects. The IRB is responsible for ensuring protection for research participants, meaning that researchers must minimize potential for harm and safeguard personal rights to self-determination and confidentiality.

Some early childhood programs and schools collect information for their own use, for instance, to examine curriculum effectiveness, job satisfaction, or family satisfaction. Generally,

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gathering such information is for internal use in ongoing program evaluation. University students wanting to conduct small-scale projects in order to learn how to do research may ask a program to participate. Commonly, this type of study is strictly a learning experience for the student, who also does not plan to publish the research. Even on this scale, you may choose to use some of the suggestions below to consider your participation. Certainly you want to ask who has reviewed the project and how the student's project or study will be supervised.

Research projects are typically reviewed by the university, college, or organization at which the researcher is enrolled or employed. You may ask the researcher whether a project has received IRB review. But it is still up to you to decide if a project seems a good match for your setting. As a potential participant, it is appropriate for you to ask questions and expect the researchers to respond (see "Basic Rights of Research Participants," p. 4). You also have the right to decline par-

ticipation, just as do parents and staff. To ensure you are comfortable with the project and the research methodology, you may use the suggestions below to consider your participation.

Your rights in the research process—Getting to "yes"

After the researcher has contacted your program, it is time to consider whether to participate in the study. Most initial contacts are by phone or letter, but there should always be an opportunity to speak directly with a member of the research team to ensure you have the information you need to make a decision. Remember, participating in research is responding to an invitation. You can ask for information and then consider whether or not to accept the invitation. The process of joining a study is formalized through a letter of informed consent, a document that summarizes basic information about the study. Most often, the researcher will ask you to sign a copy of the informed consent. This is the researcher's record that she or he has followed procedures. Because the letter of consent contains important information, you should receive a copy to keep.

Throughout the research process, you have a right to ask questions. If researchers are not willing to explain their study, you may want to consider whether you are still comfortable engaging in the project.

There are some matters that researchers are often reluctant to discuss, because they want to ensure collection of valid data unshaped by participants' preconceptions. They might be protective of their research questions and specifics concerning the information they wish to gather. A



Basic Rights of Research Participants

All participants—administrators, teachers, families, and children—share the same rights, to

- Ask questions throughout the process
- Have contact information for the researcher(s) and the sponsoring institution
- Understand the general nature and methods of the study
- Know the length of time the study will take and how often researchers will be in the classroom
- Be briefed on how participation in the study may affect the children, their families, and the functioning of the classroom
- Expect confidentiality, including an explanation of how it will be respected and protected
- Be assured of a participation that never feels coerced or pressured
- Withdraw from participation at any time should a need arise or any participant have a change of mind

researcher may not want to show questionnaires or observation instruments before the study, out of concern that participants might be inclined to tailor/adjust their responses or behaviors to fit what they think the researcher wants to find. A researcher's reluctance to talk about the questions the study postulates (for example, Do children have larger vocabularies if teachers read to them more often?) can be due to apprehension that such a discussion might influence classroom activities and interactions.

What to expect

What can an educator expect to know about a study before signing on? You're entitled to know the gen-

eral nature and focus of the study. Rarely do educational researchers use deception—telling participants a study is about one thing when it is really about something else. Deception studies occur more often in psychology than in any other field (with the researcher required to tell participants of this deception at the end of the study). Early childhood researchers typically explain the topic of inquiry, such as children's dialogues in dramatic play or teachers' use of literacy-teaching strategies. This information gives teachers a basic comfort level with what will be happening.

The researcher will explain how information or data will be collected.

Will there be questionnaires to fill out or interviews to participate in? If so, you can ask about the general types of questions to be answered (for example, "How do center staff members interact with families?"). If researchers plan to observe classroom activities, you will need to know the frequency, times of day, and length of observation periods and the number of observers at any one time. It's important for teachers to know how much additional time their involvement in the research will require. Being aware of the methods and time involved helps participants decide if a research project is compatible with their teaching responsibilities.



Effect upon participants

It is valuable to think through how a program's participation in a study might affect staff, the children, and their families. In many studies researchers want to examine what happens in classrooms; this can have minimal impact on daily events. In other cases researchers want to try out new materials or approaches to investigate the outcomes. If the study involves a type of intervention, for example, using a different strategy for book sharing, it's important to know what's expected, from participating in training about the strategies to implementing them. If teachers feel uncomfortable using the new approach, then participation in such a study may not be for them. The researcher can then find other participants who may welcome the opportunity to try out new strategies and be eager for their work to be part of the study.

Research participants have rights and responsibilities. Researchers expect participants to be conscientious and willing to meet requests for as long as they are involved in the study. Participants who do not want to attend professional development training or experience new methods or practices compromise the researcher's work when elements such as these are essential to the study.

Risks and benefits

Participants should expect researchers to explain the types of risks and benefits that accompany the project. The risks in educational research are often minimal, but review this information carefully. Often, the major risk is loss of confidentiality, so

ask how everyone's confidentiality will be protected. Researchers frequently use a system of numbers to identify information, so that personal names or other identifying information (for example, social security numbers) are not included in their databases. Researchers should not share individual responses with anyone beyond the study team, including program supervisors or administrators. You can also anticipate some identity protection for your program or school unless either desires recognition for its participation.

Any large study brings some assurance that individual identities are fairly well concealed within the large numbers of participants; however, for some studies this is not possible. For example, an in-depth examination of a specific classroom or two can result in research participants being easily recognized, even if not directly identified. In this type of study, the researcher can explore with participants how she or he will protect their identities. All participants need to feel comfortable with any potential risks presented by a study before signing on.

Participants should understand if there are any personal benefits to involvement in the project. Most often there are no benefits to professional knowledge and skills beyond the satisfaction of participation. A teacher or administrator rarely experiences personal or professional change or growth by filling out a questionnaire, participating in an interview, or being observed. The benefit in most studies is their contribution to the body of knowledge in the early childhood field. And as professionals, we can all benefit from what is learned through research. Researchers who have

funding for their work may be able to provide stipends or other remuneration for participation in their studies. When it is possible to offer such remuneration, it is regarded as a thank-you for time and effort.

Ethical issues

Participants who agree to be in a study always retain the right to change their minds later and withdraw. The researcher must be willing to tell you what will happen to information you have contributed to the study if you later want to withdraw. The researcher may choose to destroy or keep the data; either possibility meets ethical standards. Your right is to know at the outset what would happen if you agree to participate and later withdraw.

Most important, all participants—administrators, teachers, and families—have the right throughout the research process to operate as free agents, willing volunteers. If a participant feels pressured to participate, something is wrong in the process. Sometimes the pressure for a teacher's participation comes from a program administrator who is eager to take part. One option is to let the researcher know what is happening. The researcher can find a way to honor an individual's request to not volunteer. Be cautious about your own involvement if you feel a researcher is asking you to persuade reluctant families to participate in the study.

An informed consent letter for all participants should include information about whom to call if you have a complaint or concern about a study. Typically, this is the individual responsible for research oversight at the researcher's institutional review board. Feel free to talk with this individual if you have questions, complaints, or concerns about how a study is being conducted. If you have not received a contact name and number, call the institution and ask for the person in charge of research compliance.

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What about children and families?

The previous section, although addressing administrators and teachers, applies equally to participating families who will contribute information to the researcher. Parents/guardians must give informed consent for researchers to gather information from children in the classroom.

Families have the same rights as other participants, including understanding the nature and methods of the study, the time that will be involved, and the protections for participants' confidentiality. Families also have the right to ask questions and, if they wish, to withdraw their child and/or themselves from the study. If families are not fluent in English, the researcher must provide translations of all communications involved in the consent process. Likewise, it is essential to present information using simple terms and clear language.

Federal regulations regarding research also include the process of child assent (Protection of Human Subjects 2005). Families must first give

consent, before children's assent is sought. Each institutional review board judges at what age it believes the assent process should be formalized. Typically, school-age children receive a brief, simple explanation of the study and their rights and are asked to sign their name. This assent form should be written at the children's reading level, using language that explains things simply and in a straightforward manner. For example, in writing about being able to drop out of the research project, the researcher might explain, "No one will be mad at you" (University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee n.d.). Although preschool-age children are not usually asked to sign an assent letter, there are simple verbal ways to invite them to participate and give them a chance to leave the room during any individual assessments.

Some types of research requests involve only the adults in the classroom. However, if data are being collected about children, and their families have not been involved in a consent process, ask the researcher about this or talk with a representative at the researcher's institution who handles concerns about the conduct of research.



Questions to Ask about Research Logistics

- What is my program or school's policy on research in the classroom?
- What is the project time line and projected finish date?
- What information will I receive once the study is complete?
- How will my help be needed, such as communicating with families?
- With whom will I be most involved, and how can I reach him/her about the project schedule or last-minute changes?
- Whom can I contact if I have other questions?

Questions to ask

It can be helpful to formulate the types of questions you may want to ask (see "Questions to Ask about Research Logistics"). Often, participants are interested in a study's findings. Researchers do not provide individual results from information you contributed to the study, because of their concern for the confidentiality of individual children or families. You can request a report summarizing the study's outcomes.

Researchers value teachers' help in serving as a "distribution point," because they do not have direct contact with families. A researcher might best appreciate assistance in distributing letters to families or collecting

consents returned by families, but teachers or administrators will want to ask how else they will be involved. You can ask about the research project calendar, time line, and staffing.

Often a research team includes a faculty member and graduate students. Once the study is under way, your major contact may be with research team members. Early on ask who will be the central contact should you need to call at the last minute with a change in the observation schedule if a child to be observed is absent that day. Save all contact information for members of the research team, so that you can call with questions and address any concerns, such as a team member not arriving or coming late without previously notifying you.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that well-done research provides us with valuable insights into our work in early childhood programs. Research abuses are much less likely to occur today than in the past. More so now, people who volunteer to participate in research are treated with respect and dignity. The majority of researchers approach volunteers with good intentions, but occasionally as time and funding are

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cut, good intentions may shift to the background.

The information provided here can help potential research volunteers become knowledgeable and empowered participants. Sometimes, even with the most ethical researcher, potential participants can feel intimidated if they do not understand the processes. Knowing what you can ask and expect can help reduce any stress associated with the new experience.

Research depends on the willing consent of volunteers, with many feeling positive about their participation in a study, both in how they were treated by the researcher and in being able to contribute to extending the knowledge base in the early childhood education field. Participation in research can often provide some new professional networks.

Applied research projects contribute information to our field that bene-

fits the young children and families we serve and all of us who work conscientiously to improve the quality of early care and education. When researchers invite you to participate in their projects, your knowledge of the research process will empower you and the families of children in your class to make good decisions.

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