

Research Guidance Note 5

Research involving vulnerable groups

The responsibility to conduct research rigorously, respectfully and ethically is magnified when undertaking research with people who are perceived as vulnerable. Certain people or groups of people may be considered potentially more vulnerable than others, but the term vulnerability is open to many interpretations.

Potentially vulnerable groups

Among the categories of people who are perceived to be vulnerable research participants are:

- a) People whose competence to exercise informed consent is in doubt, such as:
 - Children under 18 years of age
 - People who lack mental capacity (for example patients with Alzheimer's disease, adults with learning difficulties)
 - People who may have only a basic knowledge of the language in which the research is conducted
- b) People who may socially not be in a position to exercise unrestrained informed consent:
 - People who are in a dependent relationship with the research gatekeepers (for example university students, prisoners, asylum seekers)
 - Family members of the researcher
- c) People whose circumstances may unduly influence their decisions to consent, such as:
 - People who are in poor health
 - People who feel that participation will result in access to better treatment and support for them
 - People with disabilities
 - People who are in insecure employment (for example, agency workers or migrant workers)

Working with children and young people

If the involvement of children in a research study is justified then parents or guardians should provide informed consent. However, in some cases obtaining the informed consent of a parent may be inappropriate (for example, research with children who have been abused by a parent) or infeasible (for example, research involving homeless children). In such cases an advocate for the child should be involved in the consent process, and advice sought from the researchers 'gatekeeper'.

It is also best practice to obtain the consent of the child or young person as well. The researcher should consider that the ability of a child to give free and voluntary consent depends on that child's competence which varies with age, experience and confidence. An example of a consent form that could be used with children can be found in [Research Guidance Note 3](#).

If consent is obtained from the relevant adult but the child clearly withholds consent or shows distress, the wishes of the child should prevail.

In the case of research in educational settings, any special school policies or procedures should be followed.

Protecting Vulnerable Groups (PVG) Scheme

All research staff working with young people in schools and other establishments are required to disclose any criminal convictions and must have been cleared through the Disclosure Scotland System as an executive agency of the Scottish Government¹⁹.

The Protecting Vulnerable Groups (PVG) Act introduced the concept of 'regulated work' and will help to ensure that those who have regular contact with children and protected adults through paid and unpaid work do not have a known history of harmful behaviour.

Researchers wishing to regularly undertake research with children should consider joining the Protecting Vulnerable Groups (PVG) Scheme run by Disclosure Scotland²⁰.

¹⁹ Disclosure Scotland. Information available at <https://www.mygov.scot/disclosure-types/> [last September 2018]

²⁰ Protecting Vulnerable Groups Scheme – Disclosure Scotland. Information available at <https://www.mygov.scot/pvg-scheme/the-pvg-scheme/> [last accessed September 2018]