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Gaywood, Donna ORCID logoORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4169-3638> and Lyndon, Helen (2025) The visibility of ethics within early childhood research; revised standards for our international community of practice. European Early Childhood Education Research Journal, 33 (1). pp. 1-3. doi:10.1080/1350293X.2024.2446052

Official URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2024.2446052>

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2024.2446052>

EPrint URI: <https://eprints.glos.ac.uk/id/eprint/14681>

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EECERA editorial 33.1

The visibility of ethics within early childhood research; revised standards for our international community of practice.

Donna Gaywood and Helen Lyndon

dgaywood@glos.ac.uk University of Gloucestershire

h.lyndon@crec.co.uk Center for Research in Early Childhood (CREC)

Being a researcher is a privilege, and we know that undertaking this role places us in positions of both trust and power. As we endeavour to understand the world of early childhood education and care, find patterns, develop methodologies and create new ways of knowing, it is vital that we are mindful of how we exercise that power. We find it sobering to gaze at world events and the behaviour of those who hold power. Now more than ever, it feels important to pursue integrity and ensure we operate equitably, authentically, with both openness and kindness.

Ethics are primarily concerned with *how* research is conducted. Put simply, *how* research participants are treated and *how* we interact with each other as colleagues. The EECERA ethical code for early childhood researchers (Bertram et al. 2016) has provided not only a bedrock for ethical research practices, but also a gauge for early childhood researchers to measure their work against. It has offered vital guidance which has set high standards across the globe for research with the world's youngest citizens, and all matters affecting them; it has influenced our own research and supported our professional development. Humans are an evolving species and knowledge about the world continues to grow. Ethics are responsive, situational and contextually sensitive. Therefore, to ensure that the EECERA ethical code continues to keep pace with the fast-changing world, this first edition of 2025 launches the revised EECERA ethical code. This EECERA ethical code sets a framework for those engaging in research and seeking dissemination and aims to support our community in reaching the highest international academic standards.

We both felt fortunate to be invited by trustees to join the EECERA ethical working group early in 2024. The group included established researchers with long careers working in early childhood and related fields, early career researchers and practitioners, representing several different countries and work across continents. This mix of experience, perspective and knowledge meant that the subsequent review was infused with a broad variety of understandings; the voices of all participants were valued. As a result of wider discussion and following the careful consideration of all members, notions about vulnerability were re-configured to prevent us from negatively defining the lived experience of others. A collective decision was made to no longer describe research participants as 'subjects' and to encourage active participation and co-research processes. There was a call for the need for a deeper engagement with ethics when undertaking desk-based research and, caution and transparency were called for concerning ethical encounters with generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) as we acknowledge that we are yet to understand this to its full potential. Ideas of respect, inclusion and power were re-examined to

ensure the ethical code was robust and had continuing relevance in the academy, specifically reflecting our research with the youngest participants.

In this edition of EECERJ we find present many of the ethical dilemmas discussed as part of the working group and we also find researchers spotlighting aspects of the EECERA ethical code that presented them with challenge or required additional consideration.

Our first research paper by Hoff-Jensen investigates children's experiences of becoming a school child. From an ethical perspective, she constructed her research to specifically capture the child's voice, in line with Article 12 of the United Nations Convention of the Right of the Child (UNCRC) (UN 1989) and made explicit reference to children's right to withdraw from the research. Fuertes et al. also frame their research through the UNCRC (UN 1989) exploring the benefits of play for adults as well as children and they specifically seek children's consent through a drawing method to ensure it is appropriate for children's needs. The topics we encounter in early childhood education and care lend themselves to unpicking the ethical complexities of research with children and oftentimes are situated in practice. Çetin et al. illustrate how ethical subjects are so prevalent within early childhood research; the parents in this study value ECEC for the socio-emotional aspect, including ethical development, afforded for children.

Cole-Alback et al. illustrate the sensitivity required when researching with the youngest children and outline the researcher's duty of care to allow time for children to adjust to the researcher and their tools. They also outline the importance of assent and dissent when seeking the consent of children including the interpretation of non-verbal cues such as facial expression; the agency of the child to choose participation is evident in this. The specific complexities of researching with the youngest children in familiar contexts is also evident in Kim's research where the ethical sensitivities required in undertaking research within our own family situation are discussed at length and framed as co-research providing the child agency, power and voice.

The ethical responsibility of the researcher cannot be underestimated, and it is vital that these are made explicit during dissemination. Eglisson's ethical discussion highlights the potential for power to dictate the focus and direction of group interviews; this sensitive overview recognises the researcher's role in mitigating power and maintaining the anonymity that is offered to participants. Cao et al illustrate the consideration for the rights of individual participants in a much larger scale digital survey and outline the rights of participants to understand research processes; the individual behind much larger data sets remains intact and evident in this article. Junge and Torill Meland deal with the ethical complexities of participant anonymity when rich data is gathered from a small sample size; care and attention is taken to maintain the internal anonymity of participants whilst meeting the ethical demands of valuable dissemination.

Practitioner research comes to the fore in the next two articles within this issue. Abanoz and Kalelioğlu utilise documentation collected by early childhood teachers on their own pedagogic practice and the

impact on children developing algorithmic thinking; here through established relationships the children participate in the activities comfortably. Nur İnönü et al. have also utilised documentation gathered by teachers and their enquiry spotlights these important perspectives in a piece that is sensitive to the professionalism required when observing children. The value of practitioner research is central to the development of knowledge within Early Childhood Education and Care and, as researchers, we retain an ethical responsibility to support the dissemination of this.

In the final article of this issue Martikainen et al. highlight the importance of both child and caregiver consent and ongoing assent through their research into health-related quality of life and offer one of the first studies in their region that seeks the views of the youngest children in relation to this topic. We are reminded that the youngest children have been excluded from some previous research, and we know that their inclusion is essential to ensure our understanding of all matters that impact them is reflective of their truth.

EECERA is a global research community of practice, with members sharing values about the importance of children, the vital role of early educators and the drive to undertake research to further our understanding. The revision of the EECERA ethical code offers our community a challenge. This challenge is to think more deeply and investigate more critically the ethical issues that are embedded in our research and dissemination practices. We need to carefully consider power throughout the research process, find new and innovative ways to remediate it and to fully acknowledge the capacity and competence of children to engage in sophisticated research processes. The provocation offered by the revised EECERA ethical code is to engage with ethical endeavours beyond our university ethics committees and to strive to embody authentic ethical practices, rather than adhering to a prescribed set of guidelines. The code offers us an opportunity to deeply consider research participants, matters of inclusion and the way we interact as both colleagues and academics. The code acknowledges complexity and encourages discussion and transparency when ethical choices have been made. The revised EECERA ethical code is a rallying cry to continually strive for quality research, that is undertaken in a power sensitive, mindful way which ultimately increases knowledge and improves everyday early education practices for children, their parents and educators. We encourage you all to continue to make ethics visible in all aspects of your work.

Bertram, Tony, Julia Formosinho, Colette Gray, Chris Pascal, and Margy Whalley. 2016. "EECERA Ethical Code for Early Childhood Researchers." *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal* 24 (1): iii–xiii. doi:10.1080/1350293X.2016.1120533

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