

DCU Anti-Bullying Centre

Re-Imaging Ethics and Research with Children

Symposium Report

March 2025



DCU Anti-Bullying Centre

DCU Anti-Bullying Centre (ABC) is a university designated research centre located in DCU Institute of Education. In line with DCU's Strategy, the core mission of the Centre is to be a future focused and globally connected European centre of excellence for research and education on bullying and digital safety.

The Centre hosts the UNESCO Chair on Bullying and Cyberbullying and the International Journal of Bullying Prevention. From 2018 to 2023 the Centre published over 100 academic publications and 22 scientific reports, achieving a current combined Field Weighted Citation Index of 2.4.

Members of the Centre are drawn from all five faculties of DCU and from seven other universities and take pride in our ethical practice in conducting research and the positive social impact our research has on tackling bullying and promoting digital safety.

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Re-Imaging Ethics and Research with Children Symposium

On 29th April 2024, the Anti-Bullying Centre (ABC) in Dublin City University hosted the '**Re-Imaging Ethics and Research with Children**' symposium at the DCU All Hallows Campus. This symposium brought together academics, researchers, and professionals from various organisations and institutions, including Dublin City University, University College Dublin, Barnardos Ireland, and Webwise, to discuss current ethical challenges faced while conducting research with children. The event was designed as a platform for interdisciplinary dialogue, fostering collaboration and innovation in addressing these pressing concerns.



Prof. Anne Looney, Executive Dean of the Institute of Education at Dublin City University, delivering the opening speech. (Photo Credit: Cillian Doyle)

The symposium was launched by Prof. Anne Looney, Executive Dean of Institute of Education, Dublin City University, who emphasised the challenges of ethical considerations in research involving children. In her keynote address, Prof. Looney highlighted the importance of bridging policy and practice to ensure ethical compliance in real-world research settings. The facilitated discussions were on supporting, respecting, and including children in research, aligned with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). This commitment echoes the assertion by Tusla that legal responsibilities to uphold children's rights must be balanced




with the principles of justice, consent, confidentiality, and the prevention of harm (Tusla, 2025).

The discussions at the symposium resonate with the rights-based and child-centred methodologies advocated by Bessell and O’Sullivan (2024), who emphasise the importance of positioning children as active participants rather than passive subjects in research. Such methodologies not only uphold children’s dignity, informed consent, and agency but also facilitate their meaningful engagement, fostering environments that minimise risks such as stigma or exploitative power dynamics. Similarly, Alderson & Morrow (2011) and Wiedenman and colleagues (2023) argue that researchers must consider the dynamics introduced by adults in the research space, as interactions between children and adults influence all aspects of meaning-making, relationality, and agency. These dynamics often shape the data collected, underscoring the need for reflexivity and adaptability in research design. By acknowledging the choreography of care and power dynamics, researchers can better understand children’s voices as mediated and framed by adults rather than detached or autonomous.

The alignment of these principles with the UNCRC underscores the ethical necessity of respecting children’s voices and contributions, a sentiment reflected in the Guidance for Research Participants Under the Age of 18 by Tusla. Article 12 of the UNCRC underscores children’s right to express their views freely in matters affecting them, a principle further supported by Irish law through Article 42A of the Irish Constitution and Tusla’s Participation Strategy. This strategy adopts the Lundy model, which outlines four essential steps for enabling children’s participation: creating safe and inclusive spaces, facilitating expression of their views, listening to these views, and ensuring their influence in decision-making (Tusla, 2025). Kousholt and Juhl (2023) further stress that when conducting research with marginalised groups, such as children, the researcher must ensure that all parties involved are seen as having valid perspectives, even if those perspectives are not immediately obvious or well understood by others, such as professionals or parents. This approach acknowledges the complexity and diversity of children’s lived experiences and ensures their perspectives are given due weight in the research process.

The attendees shared experiences, challenges, strategies, and innovative methodologies for promoting ethical research practices. The exchange of ideas highlighted the shared challenges and unique opportunities in fostering ethical practices across diverse research contexts. Involving children in research is not only a legal and ethical necessity but



also enriches the quality of research by incorporating children's perspectives on matters directly affect their lives (Tusla Research Office, 2025). As highlighted by Bessell and O'Sullivan (2024), adopting inclusive, child-centred approaches transforms research by emphasising children's unique insights while aligning with national policies such as Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures and the National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making (Tusla Research Office, 2025). Similarly, Kousholt and Juhl (2023) stress that research must move beyond detachment and anonymous reporting to transformative involvement, where the perspectives of participants, especially marginalised voices like children, are not only included but made central to the research process. This approach challenges the power dynamics traditionally inherent in research methodologies and seeks to empower participants, promoting a deeper understanding of their lived experiences. By focusing on these multi-layered dynamics, researchers can move beyond seeking an "authentic" child voice to a more comprehensive understanding of how children's perspectives are shaped and expressed within relational contexts.

This report aims to disseminate key insights from the symposium, contributing to broader efforts to address ethical challenges and promote best practices in research involving children. By sharing these findings, the report seeks to inspire further dialogue and actionable steps among researchers, policymakers, and practitioners working in this critical field.

Questions Posed to Attendees

Four critical questions were posed and addressed concerning ethical research with children, which were guided by the core principles of UNCRC:

Question 1: To what extent do our current research methods and ethical protocols discriminate against or promote the rights of children to participate in research?

Question 2: Can we maintain the best interests of the child in research, and if so, how?

Question 3: In what way does research support the development of children?

Question 4: How do we balance parental rights and the rights of the child to have their views heard in research?

For all questions, attendees identified challenges and opportunities in current research methodologies, emphasising inclusive practices, ethical integrity, and methodological adaptability to ensure children's voices are authentically represented. The importance of building trust, safeguarding privacy, and obtaining ethical approval while fostering children's active participation was highlighted.


Evaluating Current Research Methods and Ethical Protocols in Children's Participation

In assessing the extent to which current research methods and ethical protocols either impede or promote the rights of children to participate in research, several key insights have emerged. These insights were derived from a collective discussion among attendees who are deeply engaged in rethinking research practices. The following points reflect the group's initial consensus on how to better address access, representation, and ethical considerations in child-centred research:



(Photo Credit: Cillian Doyle)

- **Access and Representation:** Attendees highlighted significant challenges related to access and representation in research involving children. The group discussed how difficulties in reaching specific demographics often result in **biased samples**, which can skew our understanding of children's diverse experiences. There was a consensus that this issue is exacerbated by **resource limitations**, which can further restrict participation opportunities for some children and influence research inclusivity. The group advocated for more targeted outreach and increased resource allocation to ensure a more representative sample that truly reflects the diversity of children's experiences.
- **Ethical Considerations:** The importance of ethical considerations was a major point of discussion. The group emphasised that while obtaining **parental consent**, if necessary, researchers must also carefully handle **sensitive topics** to respect both the child's and parents' perspectives. This was a shared understanding that **consent and assent forms** need to be concise and comprehensible to avoid deterring participation. **Trust-building** was identified as a critical element, particularly when working with children with additional vulnerabilities, and participants proposed various strategies for fostering trust, such as sustained engagement and transparency in the research process.
- **Methodological Adaptation:** The group advocated for the adaptation of research methodologies to better engage children and accommodate their digital-centric lifestyles. Suggestions included employing up-to-date survey techniques, like Instagram surveys, and **participatory action research** methods that actively involve children in the research process. There was robust discussion on **the ethical use of incentives**, with the group agreeing that incentives should encourage participation without being coercive. Moving away from traditional paper surveys to digital methods was also recommended to align with children's **technological fluency**, thereby enhancing data accuracy and relevance. The group highlighted the need for a balance between survey length and depth to maximise both efficiency and data richness.
- **Ensuring Authentic Representation:** Attendees stressed the importance of capturing the **authentic voices** of children in research. The group advocated for methodologies that accurately reflect children's perspectives, free




from adult assumptions and biases. It was emphasised that **drawing from real-life experiences** and integrating these insights into research design is vital for ensuring that findings are grounded in the actual lived realities of children. The discussion also covered the importance of adhering to **GDPR guidelines** to protect children's privacy and maintaining robust **safety measures** to safeguard them from harm, reinforcing ethical research practices.


- **Overcoming Discriminatory Practices:** The group addressed the necessity of overcoming discriminatory practices within research frameworks. There was a collective call for greater inclusion of diverse voices in research outputs, extending beyond traditional academic circles to include community stakeholders and children's advocacy groups. Attendees also identified a need to challenge **adult-centric research measures** that fail to adequately capture children's experiences. Collaborating with child research experts was proposed as a strategy to navigate bureaucratic obstacles and ethics committee resistance, ensuring research is both respectful and reflective of children's needs.

Maintaining the Best Interests of the Child in Research

To ensure the best interests of children in research, a multifaceted approach is required, addressing ethical, methodological, and practical considerations. Through discussions, the group explored various strategies that researchers can employ to prioritise children's best interests. Key themes identified by the group include:

- **Child Rights and Well-being:** The group underscored that child rights and well-being should be at the core of ethical research involving children. Discussions emphasised the importance of adhering to **ethical guidelines** that ensure children are treated with respect and dignity. **Protecting privacy** was identified as crucial to minimising harm and maximising benefits. The attendees discussed strategies to avoid causing **trauma or distress**, such as involving child rights experts and forming advisory groups to maintain a balance between professionalism and approachability. There was consensus that **children should have control** over the conversations to ensure their autonomy and comfort. The group also highlighted the need to **support child participants** throughout the research process, clearly communicating the benefits to enhance their engagement and understanding.

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- **Building Trust and Engagement:** Attendees agreed that building trust between researchers and children is essential for conducting ethical research. The group discussed how trust not only improves the quality of data collected but also fosters a sense of belonging among participants. Including parents in the research process was seen as a strategy to ensure trust, cooperation, and the well-being of the child. The importance of effective communication and addressing power dynamics was emphasised to create a respectful and equitable research environment. The group advocated for encouraging active participation from children to ensure that their voices are heard and valued, reinforcing their role as co-researchers rather than mere subjects.
 - **Ethical Considerations:** The discussion highlighted that ethical considerations are fundamental to ensuring that research aligns with the best interests of the child. The group agreed on the necessity of recognising and addressing **power dynamics** between researchers and children to ensure respectful and equitable interactions. Implementing **distress protocols** and obtaining ethical approval were identified as critical steps to safeguard children's rights throughout the research process. Attendees noted the complexity of balancing researchers' interests with the ethical imperative of prioritising the child's well-being but affirmed this balance as a non-negotiable aspect of ethical research.
 - **Privacy and Confidentiality:** The group emphasised the importance of respecting children's privacy and confidentiality. Discussions focused on the need to safeguard sensitive information and ensure secure data handling practices, particularly when dealing with topics that could evoke trauma or emotional distress. Concerns were raised about data collection by tech companies versus research institutions, and the group advocated for transparency and trust-building with children and their families by clarifying these distinctions and ensuring robust data protection measures.
 - **Communication and Consent:** There was a consensus on the importance of effective communication and obtaining informed consent as foundational elements of child-focused research. The group proposed simplifying consent forms and making them more child-friendly to promote understanding and voluntary participation.




Clearly explaining the research benefits to children and their parents was seen as essential for ensuring transparency and trust. Attendees discussed the need to balance the researchers' objectives with the child's best interests to uphold ethical integrity.

- **Understanding Child Perspectives:** The group stressed the importance of recognising and respecting **children's agency** in determining their own best interests within the research process. It was agreed that children may have diverse perspectives on what constitutes their best interests, and these should be acknowledged and respected. Engaging children as active participants was seen as crucial to ensuring that research outcomes accurately reflect their experiences and needs. The group advocated for methodologies that allow children to express their perspectives freely and authentically.
- **Practical Considerations:** Discussions highlighted several practical considerations in conducting ethical research with children, including the need to tailor research methodologies to different age groups and overcome barriers to ethical approval. The group acknowledged the risk of **oversharing traumatic experiences** in focus groups and emphasised the importance of sensitivity and support throughout the research process. Attendees also addressed the broader challenges posed by organisational and institutional constraints, calling for more flexible and responsive research protocols to accommodate the unique needs of child participants.

Supporting Child Development Through Research

Research plays a critical role in supporting the development of children by addressing their unique needs, perspectives, and rights. The group discussed how research can contribute to children's development through inclusive, ethical, and participatory approaches. Several key themes emerged from these discussions:

- **Acknowledging Diversity and Inclusivity:** The group emphasised the importance of acknowledging **diversity among children** in research. Discussions focused on ensuring that various backgrounds, experiences, and needs are represented, moving **beyond a one-size-fits-all approach**. Attendees noted that researchers must be aware of factors that might trigger discomfort or harm in children and prepare to accommodate these needs



proactively. The group highlighted that not all research positively contributes to child development; some may inadvertently reinforce negative outcomes. There was a consensus that **developmentalist framing**, which assumes linear development, often oversimplifies children's experiences and should be approached critically.

- **Enhancing Engagement and Participation:** Attendees advocated for **participatory design** as a powerful tool to engage children in research. The group discussed how **co-participatory approaches** can empower children by giving them **agency** and ensuring their voices are heard throughout the research process. **Building rapport** with children and creating welcoming, inclusive spaces – akin to those seen in the **Children's Ombudsman Office** – were identified as crucial for meaningful engagement. It was agreed that children should not only be active participants but also have opportunities to **reflect on their experiences** before, during, and after the study. This reflective practice was seen as valuable for encouraging children to gain insights into themselves and their circumstances.
- **Supporting Rights and Empowerment:** The group highlighted the role of research in informing children about their rights and **empowering them** to exercise those rights. Attendees stressed the importance of fostering **civic engagement** by helping children understand their societal roles and potential impact. The group also emphasised the need for **critical literacy**, enabling children to understand the purpose and methods of research, thereby empowering them to make informed decisions and engage meaningfully in the research process.
- **Encouraging Creativity and Problem-solving:** There was a consensus that research should encourage **creativity and problem-solving** among children. The group discussed how **engaged research** promotes critical thinking and problem-based learning, providing children with opportunities to develop solutions to real-world problems. The importance of tailoring research methods to children's interests and abilities was emphasised to make these experiences **enjoyable and engaging**. Attendees agreed that **exposing children to new experiences** through research helps broaden their horizons, develop **cultural literacy**, and gain a deeper understanding of the world around them.


- **Ensuring Impact and Avoiding Tokenism:** The group strongly advocated for avoiding **tokenistic approaches** in research, where children's participation is reduced to a mere formality. Instead, the discussion highlighted the need for research to have a tangible impact, contributing to **generational justice** and informing policies that affect future generations. Attendees emphasised the importance of **accurately representing** children's real-life situations and considering the broader implications of the research. The group agreed that obtaining **feedback from children about what works and what does not** in services is crucial to ensuring their voices lead to meaningful change.

Balancing Parental Rights and Children's Voices in Research

Research involving children presents unique challenges, particularly when balancing parental rights with the child's right to be heard. The group identified several barriers and proposed solutions to navigate this complex dynamic effectively.

- **Barriers to Balancing Parental and Child Rights:** The group discussed several barriers that complicate balancing parental and child rights in research. A significant issue raised was the **age appropriateness** of children's participation in research and the variability in requirements for parental consent. Attendees noted that while a 9-month-old requires a parent to respond on their behalf, older children, such as those aged 13 or 17, might be capable of providing self-consent but still require parental approval. This inconsistency in consent requirements raises questions about children's autonomy and agency, especially since children are allowed to make other significant decisions, like creating social media accounts, without parental involvement.

Attendees also highlighted challenges with parental consent, noting that many parents are **unaware of, fearful, or sceptical about** the research process, which can lead to a lack of consent and hinder access to children's voices. This challenge is further compounded by perceived **power dynamics** between parent and child, which can undermine the principle that '**the child comes first.**' Attendees discussed the particular difficulties faced by **LGBTQIA+** children, for whom disclosing their identity in research could cause harm if parents are unaware of their sexual orientation.



Additionally, the **lack of gratitude incentives** for parents and children was noted as a barrier to participation. Ethical guidelines that limit researchers' ability to offer tangible rewards can result in reduced interest and engagement from potential participants.

- **Presence of Gatekeepers:** Gatekeepers play a significant role in social science research to have access to the target participants. However, the presence of multiple **gatekeepers**, while working with children, such as school principals, teachers, and field workers, was identified as another barrier. The group discussed how navigating through layers of consent before reaching the child often makes the process cumbersome, and complicated. Sometimes, these gatekeepers may also lack a clear understanding of the research's purpose, further delaying the consent process.
- **Strategies for Navigating Parental and Child Rights:** To address these challenges, the attendees proposed several strategies for effectively navigating the balance between parental and child rights. One key suggestion was involving **teachers as mediators** between parents and children. Teachers, along with **specialised researchers**, could help explain the purpose and importance of the research, fostering better understanding and encouraging participation.

They also emphasised the importance of **empowering parents** with **digital and media literacy** to reduce scepticism and building trust. By improving their knowledge and confidence, parents would be better equipped to make informed decisions about their children's participation in research. **Clear definitions of parental rights** and **children's rights** within the context of research were identified as necessary for navigating consent issues more effectively.

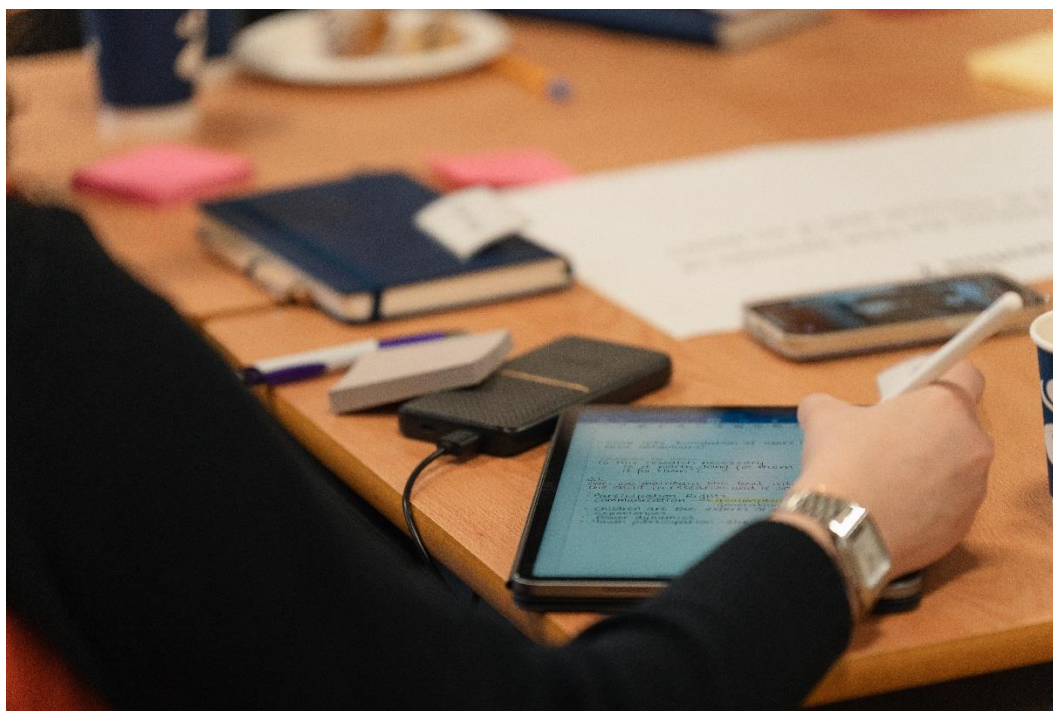
Developing child-friendly and parent-friendly plain language statements (PLS) was suggested as a way to improve clarity and understanding, making it easier for both children and parents to comprehend the research aims and procedures. Building trust between schools and communities was also highlighted as crucial for enhancing research participation. The attendees discussed how **rapport-building** efforts could help alleviate concerns and create a sense of security, facilitating the necessary consents and participation.

- **Using Innovative Methods:** Employing **diverse data collection methods** such as participatory approach or co-design studies was recommended to ensure that research is inclusive and adaptable to different situations. It was not advisable to rely on a single approach. Rather researchers can better engage with children and parents by accommodating their preferences and needs, and ultimately enhancing the quality and inclusivity of the research. It was reflected that the approach of working with children might be more useful than working for children.

Common Structured Messages and Shared Ethical Approach among the Participants

In conducting research involving vulnerable groups and sensitive topics, it is crucial to maintain an ethical approach that prioritises the well-being and protection of participants. The following messages outline a shared commitment to responsible, transparent, and adaptive research practices. These principles emphasise consultation, participant safety, and flexibility, ensuring that the research remains ethical and responsive to the evolving needs of the study. Below are the **key structured messages** reflecting this shared approach:

- **Adopt a dialogical and consultative approach** involving ongoing consultation about the research process, best practices in the field, and the inclusion of expertise on the ethics committee. This is particularly important when working with 'vulnerable' groups on 'sensitive' topics, ensuring that the research is conducted ethically and responsibly.
- **Prioritise the protection of participants, especially children and young people**, over institutional concerns. The ethical focus should be on safeguarding the rights, well-being and privacy of participants in the research.
- **Foster a flexible and open approach to research**, allowing space for continuous dialogue between the Research Ethics Committee (REC) and the researchers. This facilitates responsiveness to evolving ethical considerations throughout the study.




(Credit: Cillian Doyle)

The shared focus across these messages is the commitment to ethical research practices that prioritise the safety and well-being of participants, particularly those who are vulnerable. Group members advocate for a consultative, flexible approach where research ethics are continually assessed and adapted to ensure the protection of participants. By emphasising collaboration with ethics committees and prioritising participant welfare over institutional interests, the group aims to create a research environment that is both ethically sound and responsive to the complexities of working with sensitive topics and vulnerable populations.

Conclusion

In evaluating the current landscape of research involving children, it becomes clear that addressing the intricate challenges and ethical considerations is crucial for promoting children's rights and meaningful participation. As evidenced by both symposium discussions and scholarly literature, the complexities of maintaining the best interests of the child in research underscore the need for inclusive, child-centred approaches that prioritise ethical integrity and adaptability in research methodologies, as discussed by Bessell and O'Sullivan (2024). By fostering trust, safeguarding privacy, and enhancing communication, researchers can better support the rights and well-being of children throughout the research process, as emphasised by Kousholt and Juhl (2023).



Moreover, research plays a vital role in supporting children's development by recognising their diversity, encouraging active participation, and empowering them through knowledge and creativity. These efforts not only contribute to a deeper academic understanding of child development but also actively foster the growth, empowerment, and well-being of the children involved. This dual focus – on both academic knowledge and the well-being of participants – ensures that research outcomes benefit not just the field but also the children themselves.


Balancing parental rights with children's right to be heard is an ongoing challenge, yet it is an essential aspect of ethical research practices. Symposium participants underscored the importance of collaborative strategies, such as involving teachers as mediators, empowering parents, clearly defining rights, building trust within communities, and diversifying data collection methods, therefore researchers can navigate these challenges effectively. As Alderson & Morrow (2011) and Wiedenman and colleagues (2023) note, researchers must remain mindful of the dynamics introduced by adults, and how these relationships influence children's participation in research. For example, empowering teachers as mediators can provide a neutral space for children to express their perspectives while addressing parental concerns in culturally sensitive ways. Ultimately, these strategies mentioned by the symposium participants aim to respect both parental authority and children's autonomy, ensuring that research is conducted in a manner that is ethical, inclusive, and respectful of all parties involved.

In conclusion, by addressing these critical areas – methodological adaptability, ethical integrity, and inclusive practices – researchers can significantly enhance the inclusivity and ethical standards of their work, thereby promoting the rights and well-being of children in research. The integration of symposium participants' insights with existing literature reinforces the importance of these efforts. These efforts are not only fundamental to ethical research practices but are also essential for ensuring that **children's voices are heard, respected, and empowered** in a meaningful way.



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