

Case study 9. Assent vs Consent

A hypothetical case about research studies involving children's participation

Paula, a research postgraduate student, was in a rush to conduct an interview. The goal of her research was to investigate the study habits of junior secondary school students and their academic performance. This required her to talk with some students in a tutorial school. Paula has followed the approved procedures and distributed forms informing their parents about the interviews. Then, she started to interview the students who already knew her through her part-time tutoring job. She had asked for their agreement before audio-recording the interviews. A few days later, her supervisor told her that some parents complained to the school about her conduct of the interviews without the parents' permission and the children's assent. Paula believed she had followed the right procedures and had no idea what went wrong.

Reflection corner

1. What is informed consent?
2. Is it always necessary to seek the parents' consent before conducting interviews that involve children's participation?
3. What should Paula do in this situation?

Analysis: What is the difference between assent and consent?

Informed consent is required in all research experiments that involve human participants. In the case where children under 18 are involved, researchers should appropriately document parental consent as well as children's assent. According to the Operational Guidelines and Procedures of the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC), parental passive consent is normally sufficient for studies involving minimal risk. As regards children, they are legally not able to give consent; nonetheless, researchers should respect the developing autonomy of children and seek the children's assent when conducting research. In Paula's case, the experiment has been approved by the HREC and was conducted in a tutorial school with the principal's permission. Active parental consent is therefore not required in this situation. Audio-recorded oral consent can be used as an alternative in some cases. The guiding principle is that researchers should always seek consent and provide justification before carrying out the interviews to avoid disputes. In many cases, the best practice would be to seek written consent from the parents and written assent from the children. The assent forms should be written in an easily comprehensible manner at children's reading level. Researchers should follow the standard procedures and make sure the informed consent/assent is properly documented.

See more:

1. Operational Guidelines and Procedures of HREC:
<http://www.rss.hku.hk/HREC/guidelines.pdf>
2. Ethical Principles and Standards for Developmental Scientists, SRCD:
<https://www.srkd.org/about-us/ethical-principles-and-standards-developmental-scientists>