Picture This . . . Safety, Dignity, and Voice—Ethical Research With Children: Practical Considerations for the Reflexive Researcher
Shanon K. Phelan and Elizabeth Anne Kinsella
Qualitative Inquiry 2013 19: 81
DOI: 10.1177/1077800412462987

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://qix.sagepub.com/content/19/2/81

Published by:
SAGE
http://www.sagepublications.com

Additional services and information for Qualitative Inquiry can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://qix.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts
Subscriptions: http://qix.sagepub.com/subscriptions
Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav
Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav
Citations: http://qix.sagepub.com/content/19/2/81.refs.html

>> Version of Record - Dec 27, 2012

What is This?
Introduction

Upon commencing this research project we aimed to do what many consider to be “the impossible,” to conduct qualitative research with children. To our surprise, this seemed to be a task that others would not dare to do. Not only did we want to interview children, we wanted them to take pictures. Many skeptical colleagues encouraged us to think practically, telling stories of others who were not able to get their projects through the institutional research board (IRB), who were not able to recruit many children to participate, and who were unable to get children to “talk enough” to garner “rich” data. You want to finish this project right? Have you considered the ethical issues? I wouldn’t if I were you. . . .

As researchers with backgrounds in occupational therapy, the first author having worked primarily with children in schools, our clinical experiences revealed another possibility. Children have stories, they tell stories, and they tell stories in many different ways. Eliciting those stories was one challenge, but the real challenge was to conduct research with children that was ethically sound. Discerning what that might look like and staying true to our ethical commitment required a great deal of researcher reflexivity, well beyond the parameters of what was required for the IRB. In particular we became aware of the ethical importance of reflexivity that attends to safety, dignity, and voice as ethical ideals in research with children and of how easy it might be to unintentionally neglect these dimensions.

This article draws on ethical considerations negotiated while conducting research with children. The research project investigates children’s activities, how they are implicated in the shaping of identity with school-aged children with physical disabilities, and how sociocultural factors shape children’s participation in childhood activities. The research uses several methods, including photo elicitation interviews (children take photographs of their daily activities, and use these photographs in interviews) and semistructured interviews within a case study methodological design.

We discovered that there are many ethical considerations when conducting research with children. Some of these considerations are important with respect to research with children in general, while others arise more particularly when using visual methods. In this article, we propose that the aim
of conducting ethical research with children involves an ongoing commitment to researcher reflexivity and that the tenets of enabling safety, dignity, and voice for children can prove helpful in assisting researchers to navigate the complex ethical issues that transpire when working with children.

Drawing on the above, as well as examples from our research, the following discussion is framed around two broad categories: procedural ethics and ethics in practice (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). In particular, five areas of ethical concern are considered: (a) assent or willingness to participate, (b) informed consent and assent using visual methods, (c) issues of disclosure, (d) power imbalances, and (e) representations of the child.

Procedural ethics and ethics in practice are considered by Guillemin and Gillam as two necessary and interactive dimensions of research ethics. “Procedural ethics” involves seeking approval from ethics committees and review boards. Ethical considerations pertaining to preparation of informed consent and assent procedures will be discussed as examples of procedural ethics, recognizing that there are overlaps with the “ethics in practice” dimension when implemented in the field. Ethics in practice refers to the everyday ethical issues that arise while conducting research (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). For instance, the researcher must decide how to respond or act in the moment, and these issues or dilemmas are often unpredictable. Guillemin and Gillam refer to “ethically important moments” (p. 262), which may include moments when participants indicate discomfort with their responses, reveal their vulnerability or moments when a researcher must decide how far to probe a participant about a distressing experience. This article considers ethical issues pertaining to disclosure, power imbalances, and representation as examples of ethics in practice and discusses some of the researchers’ experiences of negotiating “ethically important moments” (p. 262).

Procedural Ethics
Assent or Willingness to Participate

In order to uphold respect for a child participant’s dignity the child’s assent or willingness to participate is sought in addition to informed consent by the parents (Dockett, Einarsdottir, & Perry, 2009; Dockett & Perry, 2011; Mishna, Antle, & Regehr, 2004). Assent is sought after written consent from a parent or legal guardian is obtained. This occurs by explaining to the child the purpose of the research project and the child’s role in the process (Dockett et al., 2009; Dockett & Perry, 2011; Mishna et al., 2004). A number of scholars point out that the purpose of the study and the process of assent is to be explained in a way that a child can understand and that using pictures and/or age-appropriate language is helpful to foster the child’s comprehension (Helseth & Slettebo, 2004; Lambert & Glacken, 2011; Mishna et al., 2004). Acquiring assent reinforces the child’s right to refuse to participate or to dissent, even though consent by the parent has already been given (Dockett & Perry, 2011; Mishna et al., 2004).

Most IRBs will require a written assent form to be used in studies involving school-aged child participants. Some of the questions that informed the design of our assent process are as follows: Why are you [the research participant] here? Why are we [the researchers] doing this study? Will there be any tests? What will happen to you? Will this study help you? What will happen to your pictures? What if you have any questions? Do you have to be in the study? It was helpful to read the assent form with the child, or when feasible to have the child read the question and the researcher read the answer back to them. Creating opportunities for children to ask many questions is another consideration in obtaining assent (Lambert & Glacken, 2011). We discovered that when working with children with disabilities, this frequently required additional time and patience especially when children were using augmentative communication devices and suggest that this is worthy of consideration in the research design process. Most important, for purposes of assent, the researcher must be clear that the child is not required to participate in the research project if she or he does not want to, that the child is not expected to participate by the researchers or anyone else (including parents, teachers, etc.), and that the child will not face negative consequences if she or he withdraws from the study at any point which can be a child’s biggest fear (Bruzzese & Fisher, 2003; Dockett & Perry, 2011; Lambert & Glacken, 2011).

Assent forms are also signed by the child, which can potentially be a fun activity, particularly if children enjoy printing their names or “signing autographs.” Helseth and Slettebo (2004) contend that written assent “can often give children a feeling of significance in the situation and empowers the feeling that their consent to participation really counts” (p. 303). However, in our experience, for some children the act of written consent may feel like a school task, and be time consuming, especially if printing is not easy for them (which was often the case when working with children with physical disabilities). For example, in our research a child with cerebral palsy wished to sign her name on the assent form. She was able to sign her own name; however, it was somewhat difficult for her. She was determined to complete the task to show what she could do, as this was something she was proud of. For this reason, it was important to allow her to do so; however, completing her signature took approximately 45 minutes, which was exhausting for the child and almost the length of the planned session. This not only took a lot of time, but a lot of the child’s energy and attention, which may have been better utilized for the actual interview. In such cases, it may be beneficial to work into the ethics protocol the option to obtain recorded verbal assent, along with assent by marking an “X” or placing a sticker on the signature box. Another
possibility may be to ensure that the option for additional visits to complete data collection is built into the research design, should delays of this nature arise.

An additional caution is to consider whether children are signing their names simply to show they can, or to please their parents or the researcher, without truly understanding why they are signing and what it entails. For example, in our study some children became anxious to sign or print their names to show their skills with respect to this task or to get started quickly without going through the assent information and questions that were perceived as “boring.” Reflexivity in this regard may help the researcher stay attuned to the situation and ensure the assent process is enacted and revisited without moving on prematurely.

Obtaining assent can be easier said than done. It requires patience on the part of the researcher and sensitivity to ensure that the child truly understands what they are about to participate in and why, not only when completing the formalities of the assent form but throughout the research process. Although the completion of a formal assent document is in most cases required by the IRB, it does not mean assent is finite and should not be revisited throughout the research process (Dockett & Perry, 2011; Fine, Weis, Weseen, & Wong, 2000; Helseth & Slettebø, 2004). Cocks recommends that researchers make a conscious effort to remain vigilant to the child’s responses throughout the entire research process, becoming attuned to children’s ways of communicating in order to recognize moments when children are uncomfortable with their participation. Children can assent in different ways, including inviting you, as the adult/researcher, into their worlds (Cocks, 2006). In this study, the researcher began each session with time for “rapport building.” Spending time simply talking about the child’s day created opportunities for them to ask questions such as: “Why are you asking kids questions?” “What is your project for?” “When is your project going to be done?” Often in this time children invited the researcher to see their pets, bedrooms, poster collections, latest craft project, or computer game, which could be interpreted as accepting the presence of the researcher in their activities (Cocks, 2006).

Cocks (2006) contends:

It is the beliefs of the researcher that influence the ethical nature of a piece of work and impact the final product. Therefore, flowing through each of the core issues of the ethical framework, particularly through the application of “assent,” is the reflexivity of the researcher. (p. 261)

We propose that one reflexive practice of an ethical researcher is to ask yourself if you believe the child has understood and truly assented to participation in the study. This requires sensitivity, awareness, and acute observational skills. At times, the child’s expression or body language may reveal that she or he is uncomfortable or not sure of what is going on (Dockett et al., 2009). We observed that often children just want to move on to the “doing” of the research, the “fun stuff.” If you sense this might be the case, one option is to reiterate some of the information in a playful way, while also offering opportunities for children to ask questions and potentially stop participation if they no longer are interested. Consent and assent with children is better approached as a process versus a single event (Renold, Holland, Ross, & Hillman, 2008; Warin, 2011). Revisiting a child’s choice to participate at each stage of the research process is critical (Etherington, 2007; Warin, 2011). Such attention to the child during the research process requires ongoing researcher reflexivity and ethical mindfulness (Cocks, 2006; Etherington, 2007; Warin, 2011).

Informed Consent and Assent Using Visual Methods

When using visual methods with children, there is another level of informed consent required, and additional informed consent and assent procedures take place. Informed consent is also required from others who may appear in the pictures taken by the participants (Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001). This can be challenging for the participants to manage, especially if a child wants to take a picture of another child, as informed consent must be obtained from the other child’s parents and assent must be obtained from the child appearing in the picture. For example, in our study the following questions were used to design the assent process for children: Why are you being asked to be in a picture? What will happen to you? What will happen to the pictures?

In addition to all consent documents, Wang and Redwood-Jones (2001) contend, it is beneficial to offer the option for participants to choose if they would like their pictures to appear in research publications, presentations, or other appropriate venues in order to protect their privacy and ensure their confidentiality. Although participants may consent and assent for their pictures to be displayed in different media arenas or texts, there are a number of ethical implications that arise surrounding representation of the child. These are discussed in more depth later in this article.

When approaching others who may be photographed by participants, the consent and assent procedures are out of the researchers’ hands. We found it necessary to provide really clear and detailed instructions; it was helpful to provide participants with a folder, clearly marking the documents and highlighting places for signatures. When it is out of the researchers’ hands, it is difficult to know how the procedures took place and if other participants were clearly informed; therefore, we suggest emphasizing the importance of the consent and assent information and procedures with participants and their legal guardians.

This raises another question about the demands of the research that some may view as ethical: Is this process too...
much to ask of participants? Certainly reflectivity about the
pros and cons of the demands on participants of consent and
assent, especially when others may be involved, is a consider-
ation worthy of attention during the design of the research.

Ethics in Practice:
Ethics in the Moment
Issues of Disclosure

Given that children may not have the capacity to anticipate the
information they may be asked to disclose, children may not understand the potential risks and benefits to par-
ticipation in research. Visual methods can be particularly problematic in connection with anticipating potential risks
associated with disclosure, as images allow the researcher access to dimensions of an individual’s experience, in
more delicate and intimate ways than are possible when the researcher is physically present (Clark-Ibáñez, 2004).

Given the potential of the images to reveal aspects of the individual’s experience beyond their conscious control,
we found that researcher reflectivity was helpful in negoti-
tiating the potential risks of unintentional disclosure. Some scholars contend that these risks may be more per-
tinent in research with children (Mishna et al., 2004; Punch, 2002).

We suggest that researchers attempt to anticipate potential risks and explain them in a way that is meaningful to the
child, recognizing that we can never anticipate them all. Reflec-
tivity may increase researchers’ awareness of their own preconceived assumptions about children and child-
hood (Davis, 1998; Finlay & Gough, 2003) and heighten sensitivity to potentially harmful situations when anticipat-
ing ethical challenges and when actually faced with “ethically important moments” (Guillemin & Gillam,
2004, p. 262).

Based on the experience of interviewing children, we have found it best to let the child direct the interview to the
extent possible, thus offering the child a chance to choose what she or he feels comfortable sharing. The PEI method is
helpful, as children can choose the pictures they would like to discuss (or choose not to discuss) and share these in any
order they wish (Dell Clark, 1999; Dockett et al., 2009). Letting the child direct the interview can also help the
researcher be more sensitive to moments where the child may feel vulnerable after a response, influencing the
researcher’s decisions whether or not to probe difficult top-
ics. For example, an excerpt from one of the transcripts illus-
trates a moment where Shanon felt that the child began to reveal more than she initially intended. Shanon trusted
her gut feeling and did not probe the issue, letting the child
direct the next step.

Shanon: Do you think there is anything else that I
would need to know about you?

Sarah: Yeah.
Shanon: Like what.
Sarah: I don’t hang out with other kids a lot.
Shanon: No?
Sarah: No. I am kind of shy.
Shanon: Kind of shy?
Sarah: Yup. I don’t . . . can’t really . . . can’t really . . .
can’t really open up to other kids. Let’s just say
that.
Shanon: Ok.
Sarah: Oh, I’ve been to Respite [Community Organi-
zation] . . . [continues to discuss this experience].

In text alone, it may be hard to imagine the moment in
context. However, in this moment there was definitely some
tension and discomfort experienced by both the child and
the researcher. This discomfort was observed in Sarah’s
nonverbal cues; Sarah avoided eye contact, looked away
from the researcher and focused her gaze on the ground, her
voice became low and quiet, and she began to speak quickly
with hesitation at the end of each sentence.

Following this event we (the researchers) engaged in
reflective dialogue to explore if Shanon’s decision not to
probe further was the “right” thing to do. This was an “ethi-
cally important moment” for both researchers, as the ten-
sion between collecting important data and respecting the
child’s body language regarding her discomfort with disclo-
sure came to a point of tension. This was the first time the
child had talked about her peers, which was something the
researcher was looking to explore. The question of pursuing
the collection of additional data was weighed in light of the
ethical cost at hand. Glenn (2004) suggests that in many
instances silence can be just as powerful as speech. We rec-
ognized that interpretive insight into Sarah’s experience
could be gained by observing the silences, not necessarily
requiring a probe for more data that could be “heard.”
According to Macklin and Whiteford (2012), although
informed consent meets the demands of IRBs, researchers
may still face a moral conundrum in the field: “Clarity ver-
sus care; which to choose”? (p. 97). In this case, Shanon
opted for care. This is not to say that care supersedes clarity
in all cases, but we suggest that reflectivity on the part of the
researcher may help to negotiate the moral conundrums
researchers face.

In such situations the environment may play an impor-
tant role. Mishna et al. (2004) suggest that creating an envi-
ronment that is too comfortable might affect the ability of the
child to protect him or herself, leading to the unintentional
disclosure of information. Jokinen, Lappalainen, Meriläinen,
and Pelkonen (2002) contend that over time the participant–
researcher relationship can transform from stranger to
friend, “making it easier to acquire knowledge from the
informants’ point of view” (p. 166). This can be beneficial
from a research point of view; however, if a child sees a
researcher as a friend, she or he could in turn become increasingly vulnerable. Reflexivity may assist researchers in treading these very fine lines.

**Power Imbalances**

Issues of power and power imbalances in relationships with researchers are also of concern when conducting research with children (Phelan & Kinsella, 2011). Although a relationship that creates a false sense of “friendship” may raise ethical issues, so does a relationship that minimizes the child’s agency, creating another fine line that researchers may find it helpful to negotiate through reflexivity.

The way in which a researcher presents oneself, the language used, the clothes worn, the body language adopted, how one interacts with the child, and the context of the interview can each influence the balance of power in both negative and positive ways (Phelan & Kinsella, 2011). For example, dressing casually, using fun “child-friendly” language, and conducting interviews on the playroom floor may work to decrease power imbalances. Whereas wearing formal attire, conducting interviews at the dining room table where the child usually completes his or her homework, using language that the child may not understand or language that sounds like something a teacher might say may act to create power imbalances. Such approaches might favor the researcher as the powerful adult and the child as less powerful and expected to comply with whatever the adult asks or expects of them. The child’s perception of the adult researcher as unduly powerful is potentially dangerous. Ethical researchers are called to be reflexive about how to create conditions where children have agency and share power to the extent possible (Punch, 2002). We deliberated about how to present ourselves as researchers, not only on the first visit to the home but also during the following visits. Questions considered included (a) how the parents might perceive the researcher dressed professionally or casually, (b) how comfortable the parent would be inviting the researcher into their home based on first impressions, (c) how the children might perceive the researcher, (d) how important it was to appear approachable upon first impression from a child’s perspective, and (e) how to talk to both parents and children in ways they could understand, even if that meant explaining things two different ways. In the end, the choice was made to wear clothes that were plain, casual, and comfortable in order to facilitate getting down on the floor if the children wanted to work in different places. Each child was asked where she or he would like to work that day, and typical places like kitchen tables were not assumed. Interestingly, most children chose the kitchen table on the first session; however, second and third sessions were often conducted in different places like the playroom, bedroom, or a place that was less frequented by other family members (we assume for privacy).

One challenge is that children may fall into the familiar teacher–student role, where they feel they must perform to their best, be on their best behavior, and provide information that the “teacher” wants to hear (Burke, 2005; Cappello, 2005). Therefore, the establishment of a relationship that is distinct from the teacher–student relationship and one that elicits the child’s own perspectives is critical (Phelan & Kinsella, 2011). During this research, some children assumed that Shanon was meeting with them in their home as a “helper” (support staff) who would be coming to visit them on a regular basis like other care workers who come for respite or therapy. This positioned Shanon in a particular role with a significant degree of power, despite efforts to avoid a situation such as this.

Another issue related to power is the importance of ensuring that the child understands that he or she can choose to participate or withdraw at any time. Often children do not understand that they have a right to withdraw from the research project unless asked directly and assured that this is okay (Mishna et al., 2004). For this reason it is beneficial to create a safe and reassuring environment from the beginning and to offer the child opportunities to withdraw in ways that she or he feels it is safe to do so. One strategy that we adopted was to begin each session with an overview of what we were going to do that day, followed by asking the child if that sounded okay, if she or he had any other questions, and if she or he still wanted to participate. In one instance, on the third session, one child participant asked if she had to have her pictures shown in magazines, books, and presentations (assent and consent was formally obtained in the first session prior to taking the pictures).

Teresa: Oh and plus I wanted to tell you, [you] know that thing that says its fine if I go in a textbook or stuff? I don’t want to go in a textbook.
Shanon: Okay, that’s okay; we can take it off, no problem. I’ll show you. So it says here, your pictures in articles, book chapters, or presentations that I would do. . . .
Teresa: Not presentations.
Shanon: Not presentations. No. [Crossed out on the form]
Teresa: Or textbooks.
Shanon: Or text books, okay. [Crossed out on the form]
Teresa: I don’t really want to be in any.
Shanon: That’s perfectly fine. So I crossed those out.
Teresa: Okay. Maybe articles are fine I guess. Oh its, never mind.
Shanon: You know what? It is totally okay; we don’t have to use your pictures for anything.
This afforded the opportunity to go over the assent form again and clearly let her know that she did not have to say
yes, even if her mother did say yes. In this case the child decided she would rather not have her pictures published. Her mother overheard our conversation and came over to ask why, in a way that would be encouraging the child to change her mind. This provided an opportunity to reiterate that it was the child’s choice and that it was okay not to use the pictures. Warin (2011) encourages researchers working with children to be ethically mindful of the potential disparities between child and parent consent and assent, recognizing that often there can be a mismatch, explicit or implicit.

Nutbrown (2010) contends “children’s words, drawings, and images as well as the children themselves can become the objects of research if dynamics of power are not recognized, acknowledged, and addressed” (p. 7). Reflexivity has been noted as a vehicle for helping researchers to bring their awareness to power dynamics that might arise in the research process (Barker & Weller, 2003). This includes reflexivity about the power dynamics between parents and their children as these may also influence the research project with respect to data collection and fear of withdrawal (Barker & Weller, 2003). Balancing concerns about safety and protection of the child with issues of dignity and voice are an ongoing challenge for reflexive researchers working with children (Danby & Farrell, 2004).

The choice of research methods may also help to minimize power imbalances. An overarching assumption of the PEI method is that it has the potential to minimize power imbalances between the researcher (adult) and the researched (child) (Dell Clark, 1999; Phelan & Kinsella, 2011). Power may be shared with the child by asking the child to direct and take his or her own photographs making it possible for the child to have a sense of control over the research process (Dell Clark, 1999; Epstein, Stevens, McKeever, & Baruchel, 2006; Frohmann, 2005). However, despite the best intentions, this method can still be influenced by authority figures (i.e., parents or caregivers), which may limit the child’s control and level of participation in the research (Barker & Weller, 2003; Clark-Ibáñez, 2004). The study design and researcher’s decision regarding who will take the photographs inherently influences the distribution of power. For example, although it is possible to use researcher-produced photographs when conducting theory-driven research, one shortcoming is that this process reduces the child’s influence in the research process (Clark-Ibáñez, 2004). In more inductive research, photo elicitation “auto-driven” interviews (Dell Clark, 1999) allow participants to take their own pictures. This approach enables the child to “drive” the interview process so that what is discussed is more likely to be pertinent and relevant to the child and the child maintains a certain sense of shared control and power (Dell Clark, 1999). “Who” is generating the photographs and the rationale for anyone other than the child generating the photographs become significant considerations in photo elicitation research (Burke, 2005; Clark-Ibáñez, 2004; Dell Clark, 1999; Phelan & Kinsella, 2011). Such issues may have implications for determining whether or to what extent the “voice” of the child is represented and for contributing to contextualized interpretations of the data.

On one hand, the choice of methods, such as PEI, can help to balance power in the research process; however, one may argue that this too can be potentially harmful. Methods that are considered “fun,” novel, and more attuned to children’s competencies or interests may create an environment where the child is more comfortable or “at ease” with the adult researcher (Punch, 2002). This can be seen not only as an advantage but also as a danger in the sense that the child may become too comfortable, rendering them vulnerable to unintentional disclosure, among other risks. Punch suggests using both traditional and innovative research methods to balance and address both ethical and methodological issues associated with research with children.

Representations of the Child

Closely related to issues of power, the ethical implications of how the voices and images of children are represented in research are significant ethical issues. Wang and Redwood-Jones (2001) raise the issue of participants being “placed in a false light by images and by words” (p. 566). The ethical imperative is on the researcher to be sensitive to how participants are being represented in both dimensions. Attending to one’s own reflexivity in the writing and dissemination phases of research reporting, recognizing the ethical imperative to represent the child with dignity, and acknowledging that researcher interpretations and representations of a particular child are only one of many possible representations would seem to be ethically important.

When deciding whether to use photographs in publications or presentations, researchers might consider ways to hide the identity of the child, such as pixilation, blurring the face or image, or perhaps consider not to use the photographs but rather to use only text in representation of the findings (Nutbrown, 2010). This raises another ethical debate about voice—by deciding to blur faces or not use photographs, even though you may have consent and assent, might researchers be silencing children in attempts to protect them? Nutbrown challenges decisions to distort images of children or not to include images of children in research despite consent, suggesting that such decisions contribute to the “Othering” of children in research. Nutbrown wrestles with the notion of presenting distorted pictures to represent the experiences of participants and what the act of distortion might imply with respect to identity, voice, being true to participants, and integrity in research and as a researcher. She suggests that conducting research with an ethic of respect for persons, knowledge, democratic values, and quality of research might not be possible if researchers choose to manipulate images even though they have full consent to use.
them. This debate contributes to the representation conundrum. Barron (2000, cited in Nutbrown, 2010) cautions researchers to consider moments when children potentially become “vulnerable to representations that others impose on them” (p. 33).

In our work, we have wrestled with the tensions that have emerged surrounding decisions to use photographs in publications and presentations. In a recent publication we considered using a photograph and corresponding text to illustrate an example of photo elicitation and its ability to tap into social dimensions that may otherwise remain silent. The photograph depicted a very powerful image of disability, which could be interpreted as an example of resistance to dominant discourses of disability. However, it could also be interpreted to display a more negative view of a child’s experience. We considered the importance of including this representation, yet at the same time were unsure of how the child or parent might feel 5 or 10 years later, knowing that this picture was published in a book, where the child’s identity was clearly visible and potentially construed as vulnerable through the corresponding text. As we could not come to a decision we were comfortable with at the time, we decided not to use that particular picture as an example or to distort the image or add pixilation to hide the child’s identity. We are still wrestling with this tension, considering the arguments and counterarguments, drawing upon our own reflexivity, and engaging in reflexive dialogue to consider representation of this in future work. We recognize that the child has a right to her or his voice being heard (Lundy, 2007) and, however, that it takes time and reflexivity to consider how to represent her or his voice while attending to privacy, safety, and dignity.

In addition, with methods such as PEI the risks of invasion of privacy become amplified (Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001). Invasion of privacy may occur when photographs of others are taken without their knowledge. Researchers can attempt to address this concern through the use of written consent forms and assent forms for participants to use with others appearing in their photographs. However, as previously discussed, these forms and procedures have limitations.

Representation that maintains the voice, safety, and dignity of the child is a fine line, and reflexivity on the part of the researcher may help to work through some of these ethical issues. Guillemin and Gillam (2004) suggest that reflexivity on the knowledge produced and how the knowledge is generated is also important. Asking questions such as “How do I know?” and “How do I know what I know?” (Hertz, 1997) may help researchers to better discern how to represent findings in an ethical manner. Considering how children or parents might feel about their photographs appearing in print 5 or 10 years from now and considering any nagging gut feelings lingering with the researcher may also assist in discerning issues of representation. Furthermore, researchers might consider what the images add to the discussion: Are they necessary? Do they supplement the text to provide a richer picture? Are they just an added novelty?

Using photographs and text together can be more revealing and identifying by nature. If photographic images and text are to be used together in a larger document such as a book or thesis dissertation, the implications of all of these details in one place may raise additional ethical concerns. Despite pseudonyms used, the clear use of photographs together with detailed text from interview transcripts can allow for identification of the child and has the potential to compromise the child’s privacy and confidentiality. This may be dangerous for the child, especially if what is represented is of a sensitive nature. Researcher reflexivity may assist in determining where, when, and how the data is used together.

**Becoming a Reflexive Researcher: Guiding Questions for Research With Children**

Discussing reflexivity in relation to ethics and research is one thing; however, enacting reflexivity in our everyday research practice is far more challenging, or shall we say, easier said than done. Guillemin and Gillam (2004) contend that “reflexivity does not prescribe specific types of responses to research situations; rather it is a sensitizing notion that can enable ethical practice to occur in the complexity and richness of social research” (p. 278). Although we agree with this statement, we are also aware that being a reflexive researcher may appear to be a daunting and unattainable task for some. The question “Why be reflexive?” turns into “How can I be reflexive?” and it is our hope that the questioning does not stop there. Recently, several publications have proposed considerations and guidelines to assist researchers in being reflexive throughout the research process. Nutbrown (2010) suggests deeply considering (a) the need for “guardians” of child participants, not “gatekeepers,” and the researchers’ responsibility in ensuring that the guardians have the information necessary to act in the interest of their children (p. 10); (b) looking beyond the traditional notion of “protection” of research participants, to “a culture of caring, vigilance, sensitivity, and fidelity” (p. 11); and (c) the importance of self-reflexivity in order to see children not as Othered but as “Other-wise—having a different way of knowing” (p. 11). Warin (2011) suggests a set of guidelines for the practice of reflexivity and ethical mindfulness, particularly for conducting research with children, where she elaborates and adds to the considerations raised by Nutbrown. Warin suggests practical ways to address Nutbrown’s considerations, and challenges researchers to be explicit about their ethical practice in their published work, to commit to framing “consent as an ongoing and relational concept rather than a one-off activity” (p. 813)
and to enhance their capacity for reflexivity by working the hyphen between self and others.

In addition to these considerations, we propose the following reflexive questions that may help to guide researchers as they begin to consider reflexive approaches in their research with children (see Table 1). These questions are by no means an exhaustive list and are intended to prompt reflexive conversations in the hope of revealing ethical moments and points of consideration that may otherwise go unnoticed. Beginning with questions such as these has the potential to generate additional questions specific to the research and to encourage reflexivity to permeate through the work.

**Conclusion: A Call for Reflexivity**

Reflexivity is often used to demonstrate rigor in qualitative research (Finlay, 2002; Finlay & Gough, 2003; Jootun, McGhee, & Marland, 2009); however, reflexivity can be used as a tool to enact ethical research practice (Etherington, 2007; Guillemin & Gillam, 2004; Nutbrown, 2010) at every stage of the research project (Punch, 2002; Warin, 2011).

As Guillemin and Gillam (2004) suggest, “Adopting a reflexive research process means a continuous process of critical scrutiny and interpretation, not just in relation to the research methods and the data, but also to the researcher, participants, and the research context” (p. 275). They go on to state, “being reflexive in an ethical sense means acknowledging and being sensitized to the microethical dimensions of research practice and in doing so, being alert to and prepared for ways of dealing with the ethical tensions that arise” (p. 278).

Reflexivity begins before the research design. Nutbrown (2010) calls for reflexivity on the part of the researcher to examine “our own positionality, what brings us to the project, and what we really think about children” (p. 11). She also asserts, “We have to be clear about our values, the importance we give to children’s actions and views, how we value their perceptions, and how useful their view of the world is”

---

**Table 1. Reflexive Research With Children: Guiding Questions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethical issue</th>
<th>Reflexive questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Obtaining assent** | - In addition to consent from the parents, has assent from the child been solicited?  
  - If images/photographs are being used, have the child and parent been consulted about potential uses/dissemination?  
  - Has the child truly assented to participation?  
  - How have I made the conscious effort to revisit assent throughout the research process?  
  - What have I observed (or not) that leads me to believe the child has assented/dissented? Can I provide examples?  
  - Have I noticed any verbal/nonverbal cues?  
  - How might I/others have influenced the child’s decision to assent? |
| **Disclosure** | - Reflecting on the interview guide, context, and/or images used, what are the potential risks of unintentional disclosure?  
  - How have I ensured that the child and parent/guardian understand such risks?  
  - How can I increase my own awareness/sensitivity to such risks?  
  - Have I considered clarity versus care?  
  - Is the child’s dignity being upheld in all dimensions of the research process?  
  - Is the child’s emotional, psychological, physical, and spiritual safety being preserved in the research process?  
  - Have I allowed the child to direct what she or he feels comfortable sharing? |
| **Power** | - How have I presented myself to the child? How does the child perceive my role?  
  - In what ways have I created a safe space?  
  - What aspects of the research relationship are making me feel uncomfortable?  
  - What aspects of the research relationship are flourishing?  
  - How have I continued to offer opportunities for the child to withdraw? Ask questions?  
  - How do the methods used contribute to balancing power dynamics and allowing for the child’s influence on the research?  
  - Have I considered the benefits and risks to each method?  
  - In what ways am I sharing power with the child in the research process?  
  - Is the child’s right to share power with the researcher being upheld? |
| **Representation** | - Have I considered safety, dignity, and voice throughout the research and dissemination process?  
  - What are my preconceived assumptions about children/childhood?  
  - What are my intentions? Have I identified my “self” in the research?  
  - Whose voice is represented in the text/images?  
  - How might I be silencing participants’ voices? |
(p. 11). Reflexivity in relation to these issues and perceptions lends to the shaping of the research design, process, implementation, analysis, and dissemination. Ethical research practice is an overarching concern throughout this process.

Reflexivity as ethical research practice does not stop once data collection and analysis is complete. Holding one’s decisions up to scrutiny until the last paper is written or the last image is revealed holds ethical significance. Not only is there an imperative to be cognizant of the way children are represented in the present but also in the near and distant future.

As Nutbrown (2010) contends,

Though it is probably never possible wholly to protect all young children—no research, however interesting, however important, should knowingly put children at risk and researchers who involve children in their enquiry must remain aware that they carry a constant duty of care to their young participants. (p. 8)

In this article, we have highlighted particular ethical issues that researchers may face in research with children. Groundwater-Smith (2011) proposes the notion of living ethical practice in qualitative research, she calls for researchers to “put ourselves and our academic egos to one side and think instead of the well-being of those who are often vulnerable and lacking in power” (p. 209). Extending the discussion started by Guillemin and Gillam (2004), Ellis (2007), Etherington (2007), Nutbrown (2010), and Warin (2011) in Qualitative Inquiry (among others), we propose that a call for greater attention to reflexivity in qualitative research lies at the heart of living ethical practice in qualitative research and that the ideals of enabling child safety, dignity, and voice serve as useful guides in the quest for ethical practices in research with children.

Acknowledgments
The authors would like to thank the Faculty of Health Sciences, the Health and Rehabilitation Sciences Program, and the School of Occupational Therapy at the University of Western Ontario, as well as Thames Valley Children Centre for their ongoing support of this work. The authors would also like to extend appreciation to the participants for their generosity and for teaching us about reflexive research.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests
The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The authors disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This research has been funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the Canadian Occupational Therapy Foundation.

References


**Bios**

Shanon K. Phelan is a post doctoral fellow at Bloorview Research Institute, Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital, Toronto, Canada, and a lecturer in the School of Occupational Therapy at Western University, Canada. She currently teaches a course on ethics and professional practice in context. Her research interests include sociocultural perspectives of children’s identities, disability studies, visual methodologies, reflexive methodologies, and ethical approaches to both research and professional practice.

Elizabeth Anne Kinsella is an associate professor in the School of Occupational Therapy, Faculty of Health Sciences and in the Faculty of Education at Western University, Canada. Her work considers knowledge practices in research and practice with a particular focus on epistemologies of practice, the health professions, ethical issues in professional life, reflection, reflexivity, and professional knowledge.