

PRINCIPLES AND GUIDELINES FOR ETHICAL REPORTING ON CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE UNDER 18¹

Reporting on children and young people has its special challenges, especially in emergencies. In some instances reporting on children places them or other children at risk of retribution or stigmatisation.

The following principles have been developed to assist journalists as they report on issues affecting children. They are offered as guidelines that UNICEF believes will help the media to cover children in an age-appropriate and sensitive manner. The guidelines are meant to support the best intentions of ethical reporters: **servicing the public interest without compromising the rights of children.**

I. Principles

1. The dignity and rights of every child are to be respected in every circumstance.
2. In interviewing and reporting on children, special attention is to be paid to each child's right to privacy and confidentiality, to have their opinions heard, to participate in decisions affecting them and to be protected from potential and actual harm and retribution.
3. The best interests of each child are to be protected over any other consideration, including advocacy for children's issues and the promotion of child rights.
4. When trying to determine the best interests of a child, the child's right to have their views taken into account are to be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity.
5. Those closest to the child's situation and best able to assess it are to be consulted about the political, social and cultural ramifications of any news reports.

6. Do not publish a story or an image which might place the child, siblings or peers at risk – even when identities are changed, obscured or unused.

II. Guidelines for interviewing children

1. Do no harm to any child; avoid questions, attitude statements, opinions or comments that are judgmental and insensitive to cultural values, that place a child in danger or expose a child to humiliation, or that reactivate a child's pain and grief from traumatic events.
2. Do not discriminate your choice of children to interview because of sex, race, age, religion, status, educational background or physical abilities.
3. No staging: Do not ask children to tell a story or take an action that is not part of their own history.
4. Ensure that the child and the guardian know they are talking with a reporter. Explain the purpose of the interview and its intended use.
5. Obtain permission from the child and his/her guardian for all interviews, videotaping and, when possible, for documentary photographs. When possible and appropriate, this permission should be in writing.
6. Obtain permission in all circumstances to ensure that the child and the guardian are not coerced in any way and that they understand and agree that they are part of a story that might be disseminated locally and globally. This is usually only ensured if the permission is obtained in the child's language, and if the decision is made in consultation with an adult the child trusts.
7. Pay attention to where and how the child is interviewed. Limit the number of interviewers and photographers. Try to ascertain that the child is comfortable and able to tell his/her story without pressure from anyone, including the interviewer. In film, video and radio interviews, consider what the choice of visual or audio background might imply about the child and her or his life and story. Ensure that the child would not be endangered or adversely affected by showing their home, community or general whereabouts.

III. Guidelines for reporting on children

1. Do not further stigmatise any child; avoid categorisations or descriptions that expose a child to negative reprisals - including additional physical or psychological harm, or to lifelong abuse, discrimination or rejection by their local communities.
2. Always provide an accurate context for the child's story or image.
3. Always change the name and obscure the visual identity of any child who is identified as:
 - a. A victim of sexual abuse or exploitation.
 - b. A perpetrator of physical or sexual abuse.

- c. HIV positive, living with AIDS or has died from AIDS (unless the child, a parent or a guardian gives fully informed consent).
 - d. Charged or convicted of a crime.
4. In certain circumstances of risk or potential risk of harm or retribution, change the name and obscure the visual identity of any child who is identified as:
 - a. A current or former child combatant.
 - b. An asylum seeker, a refugee or an internally displaced person (IDP).
5. In certain cases, using a child's identity – his or her name and/or recognisable image – is in the child's best interests. Take note, that when the child's identity is used, the child must still be protected against harm and supported through any stigmatisation or reprisals.

Some examples of these special cases are:

 - a. When a child initiates contact with the reporter, wanting to exercise his/her right to freedom of expression and his/her right to have their opinion heard.
 - b. When a child is part of a sustained programme of activism or social mobilisation and wants to be so identified.
 - c. When a child is engaged in a psychosocial programme and claiming his/her name and identity is part of his/her healthy development.
6. Confirm the accuracy of what the child has to say, either with other children or an adult, preferably with both.
7. When in doubt about whether a child is at risk, report on the general situation for children rather than on an individual child, no matter how newsworthy the story.

Footnotes

- 1 Sources: The Convention on the Rights of the Child; *Child Rights and the Media: Guidelines for Journalists*, International Federation of Journalists; Media and Children in Need of Special Protection (internal document), UNICEF's Division of Communication; and Second International Consultation on HIV/AIDS and Human Rights, United Nations Secretary-General.