

## **Safeguarding considerations in the context of research with young people in care**

Dr Katie Ellis, Health Sciences School

Katie's PhD research was an ethnographic study based at a Local Authority secure children's home (or 'secure unit'), involving observations and interviews with both staff and residents over a 12 month period. Residents were vulnerable young people between the ages of 10-16, many of whom had experienced significant trauma in their lives.

One of the key challenges Katie faced in carrying out the research was ensuring that clear boundaries were set between herself as a researcher, and other professional adults with whom the young people came into contact (e.g. social workers, youth justice workers, CAMHS, etc). This was more of a challenge due to the fact that Katie became quite well known to staff and young people during the research. Katie was also conscious of the power differential between adult and child during the interviews, and the need to make it very clear that young people did not have to participate in an interview if they did not want to (particularly important because in some cases care workers encouraged them to take part).

One approach involved taking care at the start of each interview to remind young people about the role of a researcher and to set clear parameters regarding the kinds of things they might want to tell her. For example, while reassuring young people that information discussed in an interview setting would be confidential, Katie carefully explained that she would have to report information if she felt that the young person was putting themselves or someone else at risk.

Katie put the safeguarding needs of participants at the forefront in the research design and built in extra ways for them to 'opt out' of sensitive discussions. Katie developed topic cards, each listing 3 or 4 interview questions, for use during the interviews with young people. The cards were in a large font, in colour and contained pictures to make them more readable/accessible. Young people were encouraged to have a look at the cards and if there were any topics/questions that they were not comfortable discussing they could remove them from the table and they would not be covered in the interview. Young people were reminded that they could change their mind about being involved at any time, and Katie practiced phrases that they could use to decline questions that felt uncomfortable.

In terms of practical considerations, Katie undertook a DBS Check before carrying out this research; she also obtained ethics approval from the University, as well as undergoing the ethics approval procedures operating in both the Local Authority and the Secure Unit itself. She made sure she always wore a visitor badge within the unit to remind staff and young people that she was an external visitor and not unit staff. The unit is secure, so all rooms and corridors were locked at all times. To reiterate her position, Katie opted not to have access to unit keys, therefore avoiding difficult requests from staff and young people that might have harmed the research relationship - such as being asked to sanction a child by removing them from a group situation. Instead of keys, Katie carried a bleeper to enable her to call for help in case of emergencies.

By contrast to the above study, another study undertaken by Katie involved interviews with care leavers in relation to their experiences of University. This raised different safeguarding challenges, as although the participants were over 18, they were not as well supported as the young people living in secure care. To help address this, Katie looked at the policies and guidance of the Universities the participants were attending, to identify sources of potential support to direct them to in case of need (e.g. mental health support).

The following page shows the information sheet\* Katie provided to the young people invited to participate in her PhD project, as discussed in this vignette.

\*Please note that this project was undertaken prior to the introduction of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and UK Data Protection Act 2018, so it does not cover all the aspects that would be expected to meet the current data protection requirements.



The  
University  
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Sheffield.

Centre for the Study  
of Childhood and  
Youth



## Decision Making in Secure Accommodation



My name is Katie Ellis and I work as a researcher for the Centre for the Study of Childhood and Youth at the University of Sheffield.



I am interested in talking to girls in Secure Accommodation to see how you make decisions in your everyday lives and to look at how being in Secure Accommodation changes the way you might make decisions now and in the future.

I am interested to see what types of things affect how you make decisions, like:  
Magazines, Radio or TV  
Friends and family members  
Professionals (like teachers, YOT workers or social workers)

### **What would I have to do?**

Meet me three times to share your experiences of being in secure accommodation and chat about how being in secure accommodation might change the way that you make decisions now and in the future.

### **What would happen when we meet?**

The first time we meet I would help you to complete a time line so that we can see how and when you have made 'major' decisions in your life so far. After this we will chat about how you came to be in secure accommodation.

The second time we meet I would like to chat to you about the decisions you make in your everyday life now that you are in secure accommodation.

*This might include things like:*

What to have for breakfast

Which magazines to read

Which clothes to wear

The third time we meet, I would like to discuss your experiences of secure accommodation and how being here might have influenced the way in which you might go on to make decisions in the future.

After the third visit, you would receive a £15 HMV voucher to say thank you for your help

### **Who would hear the things I say?**

All answers given would be kept private and not shared with unit staff, social workers or anybody else.

If you would be interested in taking part I would love to talk to you. If you would like more information about the study, you can call me on XXXX or email me on XXXX

