

Ethical Issues in Maltreatment Research With Children And Adolescents

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Recent national studies document high rates of familial and extrafamilial victimization in children and adolescents (Finkelhor & Dziuba-Letherman, 1994). There is considerable evidence that experiences of childhood victimization and maltreatment significantly contribute to a range of negative psychological, social, and medical outcomes (National Research Council, 1993). Victimization of children is now recognized as a major public health problem in the United States and is attracting the interest of mental health, medical, social, and criminal justice researchers.

This chapter addresses some of the complex ethical and legal dilemmas raised in research with maltreated and victimized children. Our goal is to articulate a set of ethical issues, particularly as they pertain to informed consent and the potential disclosure of maltreatment by participating children. There are no simple or universal answers for these dilemmas; each researcher must determine the appropriate balance of conflicting ethical and legal duties raised by the specifics of his or her research study.

We begin by considering why it is important to directly question children about possible victimization. Next, we consider the general legal and ethical principles for informed consent/assent with minors and the role of parents in consenting for their children to participate in research studies. We enumerate common concerns raised by researchers and institutional review boards (IRBs) considering research protocols with maltreated children. One of the most difficult dilemmas is raised by the conflict between the usual guarantees of confidentiality explicit in research and the legal and ethical requirements to report suspected or confirmed maltreatment. Foster care children are often in legal limbo with respect to the informed consent/assent potential solutions to this problem. Finally, we discuss the range of mechanisms available for clarification to this array of problems. The appendix contains a synopsis of all recommendations discussed in the text.