

## CHILDWISE APPROACH TO SAFEGUARDING AND CHILD PROTECTION

CHILDWISE researchers are all individual members of the Market Research Society (MRS), and all are DBS checked too.

We recognise the importance of adhering to high standards throughout our research projects, and by doing so we are able to reassure our schools panel, the wider public, and our clients that we are carrying out research in an ethical and professional manner. As members of the Market Research Society we always adhere to their Code of Conduct for working with children and young people:

- Gaining **verified permission from a responsible adult** for all interviews with those aged under 16.
- Asking for their own freely given, specific, **informed and unambiguous consent** to take part in the research.
- Allowing the option to **opt-out** of the research at any time.
- Ensuring the subject matter and approach are **age appropriate**.
- Being mindful of how much we are asking of them
- Considering **accessibility needs** throughout the project, and sense checking our approach with other relevant professionals where necessary.
- Signposting relevant **support** services relating to any of the issues raised

We don't generally collect or store personally identifiable information from children and young people as part of the research process. We only collect child names where a project demands it for identification purposes, or if the project covers a sensitive topic and there is an increased chance of disclosures. Where names, or any other personally identifiable information is collected, data is stored on a secure server, and PII removed when it is no longer necessary for the purposes of the project. The client will only ever receive anonymised data and reporting.

### 1.1 Approach to Safeguarding

We have a rigorous approach to interviewing children and young people. Verified permission is requested from a responsible adult for all research with children aged 16 and under. In schools this is generally via a teacher, but parental consent can also be obtained via an explanatory letter or email. In all cases, the young person must provide their own freely given, specific, informed and unambiguous consent to take part in the research – and they are always made aware that they are free to end their involvement at any point. Our researchers make every reasonable effort to ensure that the young person understands the purpose of the research and the implications of their participation.

As much of our work involves partnering with schools, we ensure that our safeguarding practice aligns with the principles and expectations of the Department for Education's 'Keeping Children Safe in Education' (KCSIE) guidance. This sets out the responsibilities of school staff, including how concerns should be identified, responded to, and escalated to protect children from harm. Although CHILDWISE is not bound by KCSIE in the same way as schools, we recognise its role in shaping school safeguarding expectations and ensure that our approach supports Designated Safeguarding Leads in meeting their responsibilities. In particular, we ensure all researchers working in schools

are DBS checked, we have clear escalation routes to DSLs for any disclosures or concerns, and we maintain established processes for documenting decisions and sharing information.

We recognise that children and young people may face different risks depending on their background, personal characteristics, or identity. All children have an equal right to feel safe and protected, regardless of their age, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, nationality, ethnic background, race, language, beliefs, disability, health, family situation, or socio-economic background. Our approach to safeguarding takes these differences into account, using an intersectional lens to ensure that our policies and practices are fair, inclusive, and responsive to the needs of every child and young person.

Care must always be taken to ensure that children and young people are protected from any contentious, disturbing or distressing subjects, stimulus or areas of questioning for their age group. If there is a valid or important research justification for covering any sensitive subjects, it is essential that a full explanation is given to the responsible adult and that their full consent is obtained. Steps must also be taken to ensure that the child/young person is not worried, confused or misled by the questioning.

We make children aware from the outset that their responses will remain private, unless they tell us something that makes us worried for their safety. We explain that if this were to happen, we would need to follow this up and check that they are okay. We can provide children with examples of what re-contact might look like, such as reaching out to the safeguarding lead at their school, or a parent.

## **1.2 Online Surveys**

### *1.2.1 Reviewing Responses*

CHILDWISE Project Managers are responsible for reviewing survey responses at regular intervals during fieldwork and must report any concerns that arise directly to the Research Director. The Project Manager might also liaise with the client on any topic-sensitive concerns, to help give clarity and consensus. This would be done without revealing any respondent PII.

We follow an internal flagging protocol to ensure that any concerning responses are quickly highlighted – for example, whenever a respondent’s answer indicates that they may feel unsafe, scared, anxious, or at risk, or if there are signs of bullying, abuse, neglect, or emotional distress. The threshold for reporting concerns is deliberately low to ensure early identification and swift escalation where needed. All decisions- regardless of whether a flagged concern is escalated or not – are documented, in line with best safeguarding practice.

In the event that it is decided a concern should be raised, the Director will take action – the course of which will depend upon the method of recruitment.

As per the market research society’s guidance, we ensure that all children and parents taking part in research about difficult or upsetting topics are provided with support materials and signposted towards relevant helplines at the end and throughout the research session. This ensures that should any respondents be adversely affected by the content of the research, they know where they can go to seek support and advice.

## 1.2.2 *Managing Disclosures*

Allegations of harm or abuse among children under 16 must be disclosed to an appropriate adult or authority, as per The Children Act (2004). GDPR does not prevent the sharing of information for the purposes of keeping children safe and promoting their welfare. We will also take action to address any allegations of harm or abuse among those aged 16 or above, with special care taken to preserve their anonymity as far as possible.

When a child discloses that he or she is at risk of harm or abuse, it is an opportunity for us to help them connect to professional services that can keep them safe, provide them with support, and help to facilitate their recovery. As researchers we are bound by a strict set of codes that emphasise the importance of confidentiality and respondent anonymity. However, if a respondent tells us something that makes us worried for their safety, we will always take action to address this.

## 1.2.3 *Disclosures via Schools*

In the event that a concern is raised by a child or young person taking part in a survey via the CHILDWISE Schools Panel, we will ascertain which school the response has come from, the age of the child in question, and the time / date of completion.

It won't be possible to identify the student by name because we don't ask for this information (to preserve anonymity). However, schools are only asked to provide around 30 responses (the average class size). This coupled together with the age of the child, the time of completion and general profile information, means that when we approach the school, we are generally able to focus our attention on a relatively small sample of individuals

In the first instance CHILDWISE would seek to ascertain the extent to which the school's Safeguarding Lead is already aware of a child at risk of harm or abuse (who fits the profile description). In our experience they are often able to use such information to confirm that they already know about the issue and are taking appropriate action. If we are in any doubt that that this is the child in question or that the needs of the child are being met, we would submit a formal report to the Safeguarding Lead.

In the rare event that the Safeguarding Lead or class teachers are unable to identify the child in question, there are a number of other approaches that can be taken. They can raise awareness of such issues in class and ensure that students know how and where they can go to get support. Or if the issue is more widespread it may be appropriate for teachers to bring it to an assembly. Schools are highly trained and experienced in dealing with such matters and do so on a daily basis. They are trained to ask enough questions to clarify whether there is indeed a child protection concern and a referral needs to be made, or whether it is something they can monitor locally with pastoral support. When we raise a concern with schools on our panel, they respond quickly and sensitively – and if we were ever in doubt that the needs of the child were being met, our protocol is to consult with expert consultants from the NSPCC as a matter of urgency, with a view to alerting Children's services in their area.

## 1.2.4 *Disclosures via a Panel Provider*

Our Panel Providers operate stringent quality checks. In the event that a disclosure is made and found *during* the data collection process, the Project Manager will report this to the company's legal team. If it is judged that action is required, an email will be sent to the respondent's parent or guardian (if under 16).

In the first instance the panel provider will seek to ascertain the extent to which the parent is aware of any potential risk or harm to the child. When the primary contact is a parent rather than a safeguarding lead, we know that they are likely to have further questions or will want to talk more about their child's wellbeing. We make sure they are provided with a list of relevant professional services and that they know who they can talk to for support. And again, if we are in any doubt that the needs of the child are being met, we will review the matter internally and with expert consultants. If necessary we would alert Children's services.

If a disclosure was made and found by CHILDWISE *after* the data had been handed over and fieldwork was complete, as the new data controller, we would report this directly to the project manager at the panel provider, along with the relevant respondent ID.

The panel provider's legal team would ascertain what course of action was required (as above). If we raise a concern with them, we are confident that they will respond quickly and sensitively. CHILDWISE would be kept updated on the course of action taken and any resolution.

### **1.3 Groups with children and young people**

For discussion groups or interviews with children, parental consent is obtained for research via an explanatory letter or email, and depending on the interview topic, this can be a positive opt-in, or an opt-out only. In all cases, the young person must consent to taking part too, and they are always made aware that they are free to leave or end their involvement at any point.

When visiting schools, all CHILDWISE interviewers (and anyone working on behalf of CHILDWISE) are required to present an enhanced DBS certificate, obtained within the last three years. During groups or workshops we make sure students are comfortable with the process and understand that we value their independent views and opinions. We also make them aware that their responses will be held in confidence and that nothing will be reported back to the school – unless they tell us something that makes us concerned for their wellbeing or safety. In this instance, we have an established protocol to report our concerns to the Child Protection Officer at the school, who will document and handle the disclosure.

Some topics can make children and young people think about things that are happening (or have happened) in their lives. Our researchers are not required to determine absolutely whether a child is at risk of harm or not – however, they are equipped to recognise the potential signs that a child could be at risk of harm, and they have a duty of care to respond to this sensitively and proactively. In a

research setting, indicators of abuse tend to take the form of an inappropriate or concerning response – or in extreme cases, a verbal allegation or description of abuse. We have first-hand experience in responding to disclosures from young people relating to allegations of rape and sexual assault, sexual harassment, desires to self-harm, extreme cases of anxiety and depression, and suicidal thoughts. In each case, our researchers followed our disclosure policy and appropriate action was taken to support these individuals.

We will always take any potential disclosure seriously, and will listen, encourage, but not ask further questions that assume anything. Depending on the severity of the disclosure, the researcher will either respond immediately (by removing the respondent from the session) or if it's appropriate, they will wait until the end. The student will be made aware that the researcher has concerns for their welfare and that they need to speak to the safeguarding lead at their school (or their parent). Efforts will be made to reassure the young person, and the researcher will record their observations and what the student said at the earliest appropriate opportunity.

In the first instance we seek to ascertain the extent to which the school's Safeguarding Lead (or the parent) is already aware of the child being at risk of harm or abuse. Contact is made as soon as possible (for high-risk face to face projects we make sure contact information is made available to our researchers before a session takes place), and in our experience they often confirm that they already know about the issue and are taking appropriate action. Schools are highly trained and experienced in dealing with such matters and do so on a daily basis. They are trained to ask enough questions to clarify whether there is indeed a child protection concern and a referral needs to be made, or whether it is something they can monitor locally with pastoral support – and they will keep us updated as to the outcome of this decision. The schools on the CHILDWISE panel all have their own safeguarding policies and procedures that they must adhere to. When we raise a concern with them, they respond quickly and sensitively – and if we were ever in doubt that the needs of the child were being met, our protocol is to consult with expert consultants from the NSPCC as a matter of urgency, with a view to alerting Children's services in their area.

When our primary contact is a parent rather than a safeguarding lead (for research outside of a school setting), we know that they will generally have further questions or will want to talk more about their child's wellbeing. We make sure they are provided with a list of relevant professional services and that they know who they can talk to for support. And again, if we are in any doubt that the needs of the child are being met, we will review the matter internally and with expert consultants. If necessary we would alert Children's services.

Where a child protection investigation is undertaken, it is likely that a social worker and possibly a police officer will need information about the disclosure, or the reasons for concern from the researcher. In some instances a police statement may be requested. Thereafter the involvement of the researcher is likely to end.

### *1.3.1 Exploring sensitive or upsetting topics*

When exploring topics of a sensitive or potentially upsetting nature, we work closely with the client to structure the research in a way that will help young people to understand what is being asked and

to give them the opportunity to ask questions and talk about their feelings. We might also consult with specialist organisations or charities beforehand to ensure that we have a more in-depth understanding of the issues that could be raised and are better equipped to recognise the signs that a child may have experienced harm or abuse.

When planning the research, we must also decide on the most appropriate group size for the discussion – this will often depend on the topic, the needs and maturity of the young people involved, and the practicalities of where the research is taking place. There are benefits to having the discussion in an established group with friends or peers, and within an in-school setting (familiar environment, allowing less time for a warm up and better in-depth discussion). However, not everyone feels comfortable talking openly during a group discussion, and it's important to consider different ways that children can explore a topic, including one-to-one interviews and friendship depths.

Whether talking to a group or an individual about a sensitive or potentially upsetting topic, we are guided by the following general principles, as set out by the NSPCC:

- **Help them to feel comfortable** – acknowledge that the topic isn't easy to talk about but explain *why* it is important to talk about it.
- **Show you're listening** – encourage children to talk opening and make it clear that you value their opinions.
- **Give them time** – allow children to set their own pace. They may need more time to process certain topics.
- **Stay neutral** – avoid displaying strong emotions such as shock or embarrassment in response to something a child or young person says.
- **Be open and honest** – encourage children and young people to ask questions. Answer them as honestly as possible, whilst taking into consideration their age and emotional maturity.
- **Get the facts straight** – if you don't know the answer to a question, say so – don't provide young people with information that's incorrect.
- **Use the right language** – make sure children understand the terminology associated with the topic and that it is age-appropriate. Avoid using euphemisms.
- **Be clear about confidentiality** – it's important that children feel able to share their experiences with you. But if you have any concerns about their wellbeing you must make a report following child protection procedures.
- **Put support in place** – following the discussion, children may have further questions or want to talk more about the issue. Make sure they know who they can talk to. Consider letting parents know what you've been talking about, so they can provide further support at home.
- **Recognise the signs** – talking about difficult or upsetting topics might make some children and young people think about other things that are happening (or have happened) in their lives. Make sure researchers are equipped to recognise the signs that a child may have experienced abuse and know how to respond.

## 1.5 Safeguarding of Researchers

All Researchers within a team attend a fieldwork briefing before any fieldwork takes place, where safeguarding policies for the staff and respondents are spoken through in detail.

If the fieldwork is exploring sensitive topics that could have an impact on the researcher, the following processes are in place to mitigate and manage:

- All researchers understand the topic that they have 'opted in' to conduct fieldwork around
- Researchers are experienced at working on research involving children
- Regular check-in sessions will be booked to take place between the research team to monitor staff welfare
- Researchers have agreed to report any issues directly to the Project Director and ask for support when and if required.