

Interviewing Children

A guide for journalists and others

By Sarah McCrum and Lotte Hughes

Second edition, extensively revised and updated



Save the Children

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13, from Villa El Salvador, a shanty town on the
outskirts of Lima, Peru, being interviewed about her
role as 'mayor' of her school council.

Interviewing children

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“There are some magazines for children but they’re all written by adults and they’re full of silly things.”

“They think we don’t know what we’re talking about, but we do. Teachers and adults and everybody, they just go around interviewing people, then you wonder, how come they never interview us?”

Introduction to the second edition

This is the revised edition of a booklet that first came out in 1994, with an accompanying tape. It was first designed as a training pack for journalists who need to interview children, or cover issues involving children. But it could be useful to anyone planning to interview children and gather information from them – such as aid workers, community workers, teachers, creative writers. This second edition has more to say about issues around ethics, confidentiality, and working with photographers.

When we talk about children, we also mean young people. But we won’t repeat that every time. For the sake of convenience, we use the words ‘child’ and ‘children’ to refer to people aged 18 and under. Teenagers usually prefer to be called young people.

Journalists are in a prime position to improve our understanding of children, because we hear and learn so much about children through the media. They also have a responsibility to portray children fairly, and without prejudice. Obviously, how they work and what they produce is governed by who they work for, the demands of the story, deadlines, house style etc. And they’re likely to be more interested in

getting a good story than thinking about the needs of children. We understand that – but we hope that they'll take the following tips on board, and find them useful.

Journalists are always looking for the new, the surprising, the different angle. In our experience, talking to children can provide that. One of the things we've learnt is that when you spend time really talking and listening to children, it's surprising and amazing what they come up with. They have a fresh perspective on the world and a different way of putting things. Getting children to speak can be difficult, but it's really worthwhile for everyone. This guide is intended to make communication easier all round.

Letting children speak for themselves raises their confidence and sense of worth.

Listening to children, and enabling them to get their opinions broadcast in any media, is also about giving up some of our adult power. Adults often tend to gag and censor children's voices. The balance of power needs to be redressed – speaking out is a powerful act in itself; by listening, we show respect for the speaker.

The original pack was researched with children in Barbados, Canada, England, Israel, Namibia, Northern Ireland, Palestine and Romania, who were quoted on the

tape and in the booklet. This time, when revising the booklet, we have also involved children from the Newcastle bureau of Children's Express, the children's news agency, which Save the Children supports financially. The children talked about their expectations and experience of the mass media, gave advice on how they like to be interviewed and what would make it easier for them.

Why is this guide needed?

Although we see a lot of children in newspapers, magazines and on television, and much is said about them, they are rarely quoted in their own words. Usually, we only hear what adults think about children, not what children think themselves.

From time to time, we've been critical of the way in which the media covers human disasters or crises. It's all too easy to show children in these situations as mere victims of war, poverty and exploitation. It's rare to hear or read children's own views; all we're shown is their mute misery. But we know – because children tell us – that even children living in the most appalling circumstances have thoughts and feelings, a sense of pride and dignity, and a distinct perspective on the world. Children say they don't want to be shown as mere victims – they feel that

demeans and misrepresents them. Most of us would feel the same way.

But it's not good enough for us just to criticise what journalists sometimes do. What is important is to find and share practical ways of meeting these challenges.

The easiest way to give children a chance to express their own views is to interview them. (You could also use art, drama, song and other media.) Don't just talk to adults – always remember to include children when you're dealing with any issue that involves or affects them. Children make up nearly half the world's population, and they are aware of what is going on around them. Most adults are surprised just how much children know and care about.

Children are seen as difficult to work with, if not downright dangerous. The joke goes: "Never work with children or animals." If you've tried interviewing children and been faced with frozen silence, hostility or embarrassed giggles, you may feel there's a whiff of truth in this. But the point of this guide is to show that it's possible to interview children very successfully, with a little preparation and understanding of where children are at. Working with children can be fascinating, inspiring and rewarding. We aim to help you find a way of working

easily and comfortably with them.

A starting point would be to:

- try listening to children on radio or TV news bulletins
- consider how they are used. How often do you hear them saying what they think and feel?
- think about the difference between what happens when adults talk about children and children talk about themselves.

What to avoid

The media tends to use children in particular and predictable ways. We know everybody uses clichés to some extent, but there is a set of clichés about children that adults seem to feel happy with and keep trotting out. It is as though they have found a few 'safe' formulae for describing and dealing with children, and the media rarely deviates from these. They may be acceptable from time to time, but repeated use leads to very inaccurate stereotypes of children. And these are the images that stick in the mind.

Children often complain that they are nothing like the images portrayed in the media. They say their parents sometimes pay more attention to the media than they do to their own children, and are more inclined to believe the media version of things. That is tough on children.

Think about some of those clichés. Do the following sound familiar? Children tend to get put in a narrow set of boxes, ranging from angels, innocents and brave little martyrs at one extreme, through to little terrors, tykes, tearaways, troublemakers, rowdy teenagers and downright delinquents at the other. Have you noticed how the words 'youth' and 'youths' are almost always used in a derogatory way? They've become synonymous with trouble. Young black people in the UK feel that they are often portrayed in the most negative way of all. And children with disabilities say they're fed up with being shown as different, freakish, or pitiable. The story is invariably one of "triumph over tragedy".

We asked children what they thought about how the media depicts them. This is what they said.

Children don't like to see...

- children's serious comments used as light relief or a joke (funny to adults, not so funny to children)
- a very 'cute' child used to add appeal
- photos and descriptions of children in miserable situations used as tearjerkers. They do nothing for children's self-respect, or for the audience's respect for them
- children being patronised and spoken down to

- adults speaking for children, when the children know more about the subject in question
- children being made to perform like circus animals
- adults showing off children's ignorance
- adults putting words in children's mouths, or interrupting them
- children being made to look passive when they're not
- young people lumped together as a problem group called 'youths'.

What do we want to promote?

Children want to be treated with respect and understanding, just as we all do. They are not adults, so they do need special help and protection at times. But they are not a different species, and in many ways they respond much as adults do.

- *try putting yourself in their place and ask yourself how you'd prefer to be treated*

Children want you to...

- let them speak for themselves without adult interference
- treat them as equals, human beings like everyone else
- ask them what they think about issues covered in the media
- give them the chance to speak freely to adults as well as other children

- see them as individuals, with their own thoughts, enthusiasms and concerns
- value their experience – they may be young, but they’ve already learnt a lot about life
- let them be themselves, not what other people want them to be
- take their opinions seriously.

Listening to children

Listening is the key to interviewing children – not just hearing their words, but really taking them in and listening to the thoughts and feelings behind them. A child may have a wonderful story to tell, but there is no point in telling it to someone who is not listening. Children know this very well and just won’t bother if they think you’re not listening. The more sensitively you can listen, the better you can work with children.

It is extraordinary how often children involved in the research said things like: “This is the first time anyone has asked us what we think.” Or as one extremely articulate and thoughtful 10-year-old in Northern Ireland said: “I’ve never told anyone what I feel about the fighting in Belfast. I think it’s all wrong, but I don’t think they’ll listen to children.” Why had no-one given her the chance to speak about it before?

Start with yourself

- *are you a good listener? When you interview people, are you interested in what they have to say or do you find yourself more interested in your questions and responses?*
- *do you enjoy listening to people, or do you often want to interrupt them?*
- *do you like children and enjoy being with them?*
- *can you take children seriously, as people with their own opinions and feelings?*
- *can you let children tell you what to do for a change?*
- *can you accept that children know more than you do about some things, without feeling threatened?*
- *can you accept that your preconceived view might be turned upside down after talking to children?*

If you feel unsure about any of these, try remembering your own childhood. Did adults take you seriously? How did you feel when they did? How did you feel when they didn’t? What was it about the adults who made you feel comfortable and able to talk freely – did they have special qualities?

It is a good idea to be aware of your strengths and weaknesses, because these will greatly affect your relationship with children. And they will be able to spot them a mile off.

Why interview children?

- children want to speak out
- children have fresh and interesting things to say
- children have a different perspective from adults
- some issues – such as education, play, child abuse – affect children more than they affect adults, so you should find out what they think about them
- sharing what children have to say increases mutual understanding between adults and children and helps to narrow the generation gap – very often, old and young demonise each other because they don't talk back
- it boosts children's confidence in their own abilities, and helps them to develop as people
- children are media consumers too, and they like to hear what other children think and feel, so you can increase your readership/audience by including children
- children have the right to be listened to, have their views taken into account, and express themselves in the media – these principles are enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (see page 35)
- you'll almost certainly learn something.

“The journalists – before they start talking about children, I think they should come and ask the children what they think about it.”

“They think that we don’t know anything like politics. When you say something about it they say, ‘Oh be quiet, you don’t know what you’re talking about!’”

Planning the interview

It’s worth doing some preparation before you start interviewing. Don’t go in with a preconceived idea of the story, and how long it is going to take to get. Always allow longer.

If possible, do some advance research about the child’s community or part of the world. Children, like adults, are not impressed by ignorant visitors who waste time asking obvious questions. You’d take a look at the cuttings, or in some other way research an adult ‘situation’, so why not do the same for children?

Consulting children

Involve children when you’re researching an article or programme, making a study or doing a survey. You could try to find out what issues they see as important, what kind of children might take part or be interviewed, where you can find the most appropriate children, when they are available etc. These are the same things you would research for any interview, but journalists often only ask adults, even when the subject concerns children.

Finding a subject

Children are interested in many different things – not just pop, fashion, games and other entertainment. They may surprise you by suggesting the most profound subjects. Children, like adults, talk best about subjects they're interested in – you will need to balance your agenda with theirs.

Talking individually or in groups?

Unless you are talking about a child's particular experience, it can be better to interview children in small groups. Children are so used to being controlled by adults, and having to do what adults tell them, that individual children may feel overawed by a strange adult and nervous about what you want from them. It may take them a long time to relax and speak their minds. They may feel happier and more relaxed being surrounded by their friends or classmates. Being in a group can make them feel more powerful, more in control. The shy ones may also feel encouraged to speak out (so long as you don't let the more confident children dominate the discussion). They will often spark each other off, and do most of your work for you.

Around four to six children is a good number – enough to get them talking, but not so many that they won't get a chance to speak. Any more, and you will have difficulty

tracking who said what, particularly if several children speak at once.

Think about the age factor. If the age gap within a group is too big, younger children will feel intimidated by the older ones. If possible, it is better to interview in same age groups, and sometimes in same sex groups.

Some children may only open up when you interview them one-to-one. Maybe they are afraid of other people overhearing the conversation, or distrust other children or adults present. Ask children what they prefer; be sensitive to the atmosphere. And remember there is a child safety issue here: many children, certainly in the UK, have been told not to talk to strangers. They may not want to shut themselves away in a room with you. Be careful not to act in a way that could be construed as exploitative. (See *Ethics of working with children* and *Choosing a space*.)

Which children?

All children have a voice and a right to express themselves. But those at the extremes tend to get a disproportionate amount of media coverage – the very privileged and super talented, or the underprivileged and suffering. This is unfair on children, but it also weakens media coverage – the most wonderful and extraordinary material can come from the most apparently ordinary children.

Be sure, if possible and appropriate, to include a representative balance of boys and girls among your interviewees. It is also important to get a balance of white and black children (or whatever reflects the ethnic mix of the community you're visiting), disabled and able-bodied, children of different classes and castes if that's relevant. The list could go on. Obviously, if all these 'categories' are not present in the community you are visiting, then you can't include them.

This isn't about being politically correct – you could be missing some brilliant stories or information by overlooking certain children. And by mixing children up in a group, you can get a lively discussion going if they start arguing from different perspectives. Again, remember that age can make a difference. Younger children often

have very interesting things to say, but it may take longer to elicit their views. Be patient with the under-10s.

If you are focusing on a particular event or issue, it is important to find children who have direct experience of it.

Where can you find them?

You could use local agencies – youth clubs, religious groups, children's centres, non-governmental organisations – to help find a variety of children. Talk to local reporters, teachers, parents, play and youth workers and others who work regularly with children. Schools are an obvious place to find children to interview, but they also present particular challenges (see page 12).

Cultural considerations...

You need to be aware of cultural conventions and expectations, not only around children but in relation to parents, schools and other groups. In many countries you need to have formal permission from parents, schools or the Ministry of Education before you can interview children. It is vital to check this out first. You can't assume it is all right to interview any child you meet in the street.

...and asking permission

When it comes to seeking permission to interview someone, and issues around confidentiality, the wishes and rights of children need to be balanced against those of parents or guardians. But we think that children's wishes and best interests should be paramount – because they have the right to speak out, and adults don't have the right to silence them.

This becomes a thorny issue when you want to talk to minors who are, say, in local government care. (They might be living on the street, but still officially in 'care'.) Or they could be young offenders in an institution, or under-age soldiers in an army – all situations where adults in authority may say you can't interview the children because they are at risk, or somehow spoken for. In the UK, the law says that you must get permission from the local authority to interview children under 18 who are in care. With under-16s who are not in care, permission must be sought from the parent or guardian.

However, we suggest you ask the children what they want. Are they happy to talk to you and to be quoted? Explain what the implications of that will be, if possible. Explain what the likely outcomes of the interview will be. That can be difficult in a

society where children are not familiar with the media. But children are usually perfectly capable of understanding all this, and saying 'no' if they don't feel happy about it. Leave it to the child to decide whether or not they want to be quoted.

In our experience, adults (particularly officials) may try to gag children because they are afraid of what they might say, or afraid it will show them in a bad light. But their classic excuse for trying to stop children being interviewed is that the children are vulnerable and need to be protected. That's rather patronising. The same thing used to be said about women.

Ethics of working with children

As a charity and development organisation working with children, we have to work within very clear guidelines. These cover such issues as disclosure, confidentiality, child protection, which journalists (and other interviewers) should also be aware of. Whenever adult professionals make contact with children in pursuit of a particular goal – be that capturing words, pictures or data – that goal should be secondary to ensuring that the best interests of children are met.

Children should never be placed in situations where they are put at risk, or subsequently abused or exploited.

The global issue of child abuse raises particular issues for those working directly with children. We all have a responsibility to ensure that children are protected, and kept safe from possible abuse.

Working alone with a child might get you the best story, but may increase the risks to the child. Any adult working directly with children has to balance the need to engage with them and the need to ensure they are not placed at risk. Equally, if the information you receive in the course of an interview suggests the child's safety or welfare is threatened, you have a duty to take appropriate action.

Beware of labels

You need to be sensitive to how children prefer to be described. Children who are particularly vulnerable, such as those who are HIV-positive, or working in the sex industry, may have very strong views about what they are called. The words you use to describe them could also have repercussions for the children, if the results of your interviews are seen or heard by people who know the children.

For example, a child prostitute may reject that label and want to be described as a sex worker or hostess. A girl who has been abducted by soldiers for sexual purposes may insist on being referred to as a 'wife'. Children who have been abused may want to be called survivors, not victims. Whatever you think about euphemisms, it is important to respect their wishes. And obviously, you won't get anywhere by using words that antagonise children at the outset. For example, children working in the sex industry in Thailand told a Save the Children researcher that they did not call themselves prostitutes – that was a label applied by others. Instead, they used expressions like "having guests" or "going out and catching foreigners".

Time

It is important to allow plenty of time when working with children. It takes time to gain children's confidence before any interview can start, and it is important to allow extra time at the end, to round off in such a way that the children feel good about the whole experience.

Allow at least an hour with a group of children, on top of the time spent with teachers, parents and other adults. It is always

better to have too much time than too little. If you can only manage 15 minutes in the middle of a hectic schedule, confine yourself to one or two very straightforward questions at the most. Or meet the children beforehand and prepare the interview with them.

Preparatory visit

If you have the chance, one of the best ways to do a really strong interview with children is to visit them beforehand. That gives you the chance to get to know them better, and more importantly, to let them get to know you. Children are naturally quite careful with strangers. It may take a while before they feel they trust you enough to tell you what they think.

A preparatory visit not only helps to get through this stage, but also shows the children that you are really interested in them. If you are going to use equipment during the interview – tape recorders, cameras – now is the chance to show it to them and explain what will happen.

Working with schools

Finding children to interview can often best be done through schools. But you need to be aware of certain issues first. Obviously, there are child protection issues

here. It is important to consult schools properly, and through the right channels. Though you might manage to get interviews in other ways, it could cause problems for the children after you've left. It would be very bad form to approach the children direct. You must get clearance from the head teacher, before mapping out a schedule with his or her staff. Certainly in the UK, teachers usually plan their work schedules well in advance – from a term to a year – and in many cases, these are not flexible. Contact the school well in advance so that they can schedule the time in.

Try to work in a variety of schools. You won't always find a representative cross-section of children in one school. In some countries, many children don't go to school at all. Some schools may have a majority of privileged, or underprivileged, children. It makes a difference if a school is urban or rural. Some schools are dominated by one ethnic or religious group.

All too often, the same school is used over and over again because it is easiest to get to, or simply because it has been used before.

Children may find it difficult to speak freely in front of their teachers. Try to arrange to speak with the children without a teacher present, unless the children want a teacher to be there. If it's necessary for another adult to be present, perhaps for cultural reasons, it would help if the children could choose who that person is.

There may be political considerations in the school – as with any institution – so you need to be sensitive to these. Teachers have pride in their schools – but if they choose the children for you, they may choose those they think will show the school in its best light. Often the liveliest and most talkative children are not the strongest academically, or the best behaved.

Remember to give feedback later – send the school the published article, and some copies of any photos taken. Schools are always looking for assembly material, things to put on display, and subjects for discussion in the classroom. Your visit, and what comes out of it, could be a useful talking point.

“A woman from a local radio station just rang me and was talking and then at the end she said, ‘Thank you for the interview.’ I didn’t know what was happening.”

“Talk softly and don’t say too many long words, and don’t say anything that we wouldn’t understand or wouldn’t have an answer to.”

The interview

The way you treat children and arrange the interview will show them what you expect from them, and tell them a lot about you. If you treat them as important people who have something interesting to say, they will try and live up to your expectations. If you think of them as silly and immature people who have nothing important to say, they’ll pick up on that and probably behave accordingly. You should also be prepared to let go of some of your adult power. Showing children your vulnerability can bring you closer together.

- *think about how you feel and behave if someone in authority treats you as an inferior*
- *how does it feel if they take you seriously and listen to your views? How does it affect your behaviour?*

Children are very similar: if you treat them with respect they will give you something back.

Choosing a space

You may not have much choice about where to hold an interview. But the most important thing to think about is the need to put children at ease. Try to choose a place that isn't too threatening – children may not feel relaxed in a classroom, and certainly not in the head teacher's study. Smaller, friendlier rooms with a choice of seating can help. Sit outdoors, if the weather allows it. Try to find a space that's private – it is very difficult for both the children and you if other people are listening in, or keep walking past.

If possible, particularly if you're talking one-to-one, make sure you're visible to others. Avoid an isolated spot. If indoors, you could keep the door open. If you're outdoors, sitting under a tree away from other people but within view of them is more appropriate than taking a child to a secluded spot. Remember there are safety issues here, and a duty to protect children.

Try to interview children in a space related to the subject matter. For example, if they are talking about their school garden, let them show you the garden as part of the interview. If they live on the street, talk on the street.

If possible, let the children choose. But make sure the place meets your needs, too. Explain to the children what is important from your point of view – like lack of background noise.

Children only?

It's usually better to ask other adults to leave, unless it is culturally appropriate for them to stay. Adults, particularly those in authority over children, tend to stand over them and interrupt or prompt. Some teachers can't resist correcting children; some social workers may dismiss what they say as lies or fairy tales. This does happen! Explain gently but firmly that this is children's business, and you'll come back to the adults later for background information.

However, some groups of children could feel more comfortable with a trusted adult around, e.g. a youth worker, especially if they sense a rapport between both of you. Talking to children on their own raises some child protection issues. (See *Ethics of working with children* and *Choosing a space*.)

Are you sitting comfortably?

Try to sit on the same level as the children. Don't take the best and biggest chair for yourself. If they're sitting on the floor or

the ground, join them. When working with a group, it's best to sit in a circle. It helps if you are not the centre of attention, but you need to be able to see all the children.

Think carefully about your body language, and always make eye contact (unless that's not culturally acceptable). It usually helps to put people at ease by 'mirroring' their body language. But don't make it look obvious!

Equipment

If your interview is for radio or TV, the equipment you use will affect what you're doing. If you want really strong material from children, it is important to minimise the impact of technology – don't let it get in the way. If the children need to behave in a certain way (e.g. for re-takes or cut-aways), explain what you're doing and why. Make sure everyone in the team does the same. Children usually enjoy and benefit from learning about it.

Cultural expectations

In some cultures, children are expected to behave in particular ways with adults – often rather formally, to show respect. Be sensitive to these norms, to avoid making the children feel uncomfortable (or offending their parents). But sometimes it is

worth questioning what behaviour is appropriate in an interview situation. Interviews generally work better if children feel valued and equal, and this can be difficult if they may not speak without permission or if they have to look up to you.

Introducing yourselves

It's worth taking time over this. Explain clearly and simply who you are, where you're from, what you're doing and why. It may be useful to bring a kind of calling card – such as a copy of the magazine or newspaper you write for, to show the children what you do and where the interview may be used.

A photographer could bring some of his/her photos. When American photographer Eli Reed visited South Africa for Save the Children, he took a copy of his book about black America. Sharing these photos with school children, and explaining the issues behind them, was a great way to break the ice and give something back.

Ask the children to introduce themselves individually. It may help to boost their confidence if they each get a chance to say something about themselves at this stage.

Setting boundaries

It is important to let children know what's happening – explain to them how you want to work, what you want them to do and what the 'rules' of the interview are, if any; for example, not interrupting each other, listening to everybody. Being straight with children will put them at ease and help ensure that there are no misunderstandings. Ask if they have any questions for you, or if anything is unclear. Sometimes children will ask you something quite unexpected, which may seem to you to be irrelevant or unrelated to what you've been talking about. Whatever they say, take it seriously.

The media is very exciting to children, and can raise unrealistic expectations. They may feel great disappointment and distress at the final result. Tell them how you expect to use the material, and how much is likely to be used.

Confidentiality and anonymity

Confidentiality is very important to children. Ask the children what they feel about having their names published. If there is any doubt, use first names only or fictional names. We are often unaware, as adults, of the risks that may exist for children if they express apparently harmless views.

Keeping it anonymous may give children the chance to express thoughts and feelings that they desperately want others to hear, but would otherwise be unwilling to talk about.

But some children may want to be named. There's a tendency among journalists and aid workers to use a child's first name only (often they haven't bothered to ask for the full one), and that can come across as patronising. It's like the way some white people still refer to black people by their first name only, particularly if they are in a subservient position – Jim the gardener or Gladys the cook. What dignity is there in that?

If you are working with a photographer, you also need to ask the children about publishing photos. Are they happy to have their pictures taken? Don't assume it. Do they want to be identified in the caption? It's important to explain how the pictures are going to be used, if that's possible.

You need to consider the children's safety. Sometimes, even when children are happy to be photographed, you may need to disguise their identities e.g. if they are minors, runaways, or particularly vulnerable to abuse in some way.

They could be photographed in shadow, or

with parts of their faces covered up with clothing or hands.

Sometimes you can't offer total confidentiality. If a child tells you they are being abused, or plans to seriously harm themselves or someone else, you have a responsibility to inform the appropriate authorities – in the UK, that would be the police or social services. We recommend that this should be done with the knowledge and consent of the child. If something as serious as this comes up in the course of an interview, explain to children what the consequences may be for them in disclosing. Be as honest as you can. (See *Very personal subjects*.)

Getting to know each other

Being interviewed is quite daunting for most children, so they will usually be nervous at first. The best way to help children relax is to get to know them, and to let them get to know you. There is no simple solution: it is different with each child and group of children, and it takes time.

To start with, maybe put away your notebook, tape recorder or other equipment until they are needed. It is better to really listen and concentrate, and not be obsessed with getting everything down. Good ice-breakers include playing a game together, singing or dancing together, or getting the

children to draw some aspect of their lives.

But don't force it – just be open and honest. Children are quick to sense insincerity, and won't open up to you if they don't trust you. If you feel unsure what to do or say, try asking them. They may be very willing to help you. Show your vulnerability.

If you're using any equipment, explain what it is and how it works. If possible, give them a chance to try out the microphone, look through the camera or see how you do shorthand. If you have the chance to do all this on a preparatory visit, it will be much easier when you come to the interview proper.

Use of language

Try to suit your language to the children. Use clear explanations which could be understood by anyone, adult or child. If you're not sure what's appropriate for a five-year-old or a 13-year-old, listen carefully to how they speak. If need be, check what words and concepts the child is likely to understand with an adult who knows them. Watch for signs that the children have understood you. If they have misunderstood you, try to find another way of explaining; simply repeating it isn't much help.

Try to understand what they mean, even when they don't quite know how to express it clearly. The simple fact that you're interested will help them. If you don't understand what they're saying, ask for clarification: "Could you explain that a bit more for me, please?" or "Could you tell me more about that? It's very interesting" or "What did you mean by that?"

- *are you ever talked down to? How does it feel? How could it be avoided?*
- *do people ever talk jargon that you don't understand? How could it be avoided?*
- *when you're having a conversation with someone, how do you tell if they've understood you? (Try watching other people chatting, or think about it next time you talk to a stranger.)*

Starting the interview

Conventional interviewing techniques are often inappropriate with children – they can clam up under direct questioning, or say what they feel their interviewer wants to hear rather than what they think themselves.

Children are asked questions all the time by adults – particularly teachers and parents. Adults are almost always looking for a correct answer, so children become adept at finding the answer they think adults want from them – the 'right' answer. But if you

want to know what children think, there is no right or wrong answer. Tell them that.

At first, children may feel very uncomfortable. You will see them searching for the 'right' answer to your question (particularly if adult authority figures, like teachers, police or social workers, are listening in – this is why they should be asked to leave you alone with the children). It's important to help them relax and realise that the interview is not an exam or test of their knowledge, but an exploration of their opinions or views. If you listen carefully and show interest in what they have to say, they tend to pick up this message quickly.

You can usually get the best from children when they feel they are in control. It helps to think of an interview with children as a conversation in which you are the least important person and they, naturally, are the most important. Once they start chatting freely, it will be easy to bring up topics you are interested in, or ask the occasional question.

If you are working with a group of children, encourage them to discuss the topic among themselves. The chances are, if you give them time to discuss it and really show interest in what they are saying, they will give you a breadth and depth of information

that you will rarely gather by questioning them formally.

Never push children to speak if they don't want to. They may not have chosen to be there; they may be afraid; they may feel they have nothing to say on the subject; they may just be shy. Their only defence may be silence.

Talking about a particular event

If you want children to talk about a particular event or something they've done, it is often easy to get them started by asking them to tell you all about it from their point of view. Keep the questions open, not closed: "How did you feel when that happened?" rather than "Did that make you cross?" Otherwise you may just get monosyllabic answers.

Exploring an issue or theme

It may take a little longer than it would with adults to get the conversation flowing, particularly with younger children. Here are some suggestions for starting points:

- ask them to tell you about something that has happened to them, related to the theme (e.g. "Can you tell me about a time when you were in danger?")
- show them some pictures related to the theme, which they can talk about to begin with
- ask younger children to draw a picture, then talk about it
- tell them a little story about yourself (perhaps funny, or showing that you're not perfect e.g. when you were frightened of a very small dog). They might ask you some questions about it first, and then tell their own stories.
- say something controversial and make it quite clear that they are not expected to agree with you e.g. "I don't understand the point of saving elephants. Can you explain to me why children feel so strongly about it?"

Exploring what children suggest

Sometimes it is very useful to talk in a more general way, to find out what topics children bring up themselves.

You often get the strongest results this way, and a few surprises. Here are a few useful starting points:

- "Do you find adults listen to you much? Do they take you seriously?" After discussing this for a while, children will often go on to talk about their particular concerns.
- "Have you ever heard children talking on the radio or TV? Would you like to do it yourself? What would you like to talk to people about?"

- “Do you sometimes feel really strongly about something and find that no-one listens to you much? Can you tell me about that?”
- Listen for hints of strong views when you first start chatting. Pick up later on any subject hinted at, and ask them to tell you more about it.

Asking questions

Try to make questions as open and unambiguous as possible. Give the children as much freedom as you possibly can to say what they really want; otherwise you may find that the interview reflects your views more than those of the children.

If you're working with a group and they are discussing a topic, they may start asking questions themselves. It is worth encouraging this, or suggesting it from time to time. They often ask very perceptive, direct questions that an adult would find difficult to ask. It is also another good way of looking at things from their perspective.

Sometimes, if the children are a bit shy, it can help to ask a closed question followed immediately by an open one. For example, you might ask: “Do you think children should be beaten when they're naughty?” ... “No” ... “Why?” Interrupting children often silences them and makes them feel they may be saying the ‘wrong’ thing. Try to wait

for a natural pause before you ask a question or ask for clarification.

Giving encouragement

Encourage children once they've started talking – let them know they're doing well, help them when they need it, try to keep them feeling at ease.

Sometimes children start talking passionately about a different topic from the one you're dealing with. It is well worth listening to them, and letting them ‘ramble’. It may be their way of arriving at a painful subject in a roundabout way. It might not give you the soundbite your editor wants, or the nugget you seek for your research, but you may get something much better. It may take you off at a different tangent, or give you a good idea for a future project, and it tells you what children care about.

If the interview is not going well, or the children are reluctant to talk, they may not understand what is expected of them, or they may not want to take part. Try asking them gently if there is any way you can make it easier for them. If they don't want to speak, they have a right not to.

Very personal subjects

You need to use great sensitivity when exploring very personal subjects with children,

such as their experience of violence, sexual abuse, bullying, racism, family problems or living on the street. A lot of disclosure is involved, unless you're talking at a very superficial level. There is no reason why children should share their most personal experiences with a stranger or anyone else, but sometimes they want to, perhaps to help other people understand them and to help other children in similar circumstances. Some children may even find it easier to disclose to a stranger – if they feel they can trust you.

Ideally, the children may bring up the topic themselves. Let them set the pace and the emotional tone, listen carefully, empathise and give praise. If they don't bring it up themselves, approach the difficult subject in an indirect way – don't ever say something as direct as: "Tell me about the time you were abused." Instead, you could say something like: "I get the feeling you've had a pretty tough time, and you've done really well to pull through. Can you tell me about that?"

It's a process that can't be rushed, and it may be traumatic for you as well as the children. Just being given the chance to express something painful can be worthwhile for children. By listening, and by giving children a platform, we give value to these expressions and what they have gone through. It's important to explain what you're going

to do with the material. If necessary, discuss possible negative consequences – for example, bullies recognising their victims. Check whether they are happy to let the material be aired in public. This may be difficult, as we said before, when interviewing children in certain communities who may not be familiar with media and books.

Occasionally, you will have to sacrifice something wonderful because a child doesn't want you to use it. Like adults, they have the right to talk on or off the record; respect their wishes. In some situations, where a child is clearly uncomfortable or upset, you should use your judgement and let a subject drop, or stop the interview altogether without waiting for the child to ask. But be sure not to leave them feeling angry or upset. (See *Finishing the interview*.)

A child can sometimes get upset even when you are discussing things which may not seem particularly sensitive to you. Be prepared for this, and handle the situation gently.

There are particular ethical considerations here, for example about disclosure of abuse. (See *Confidentiality and anonymity*.)

Allowing children to change their minds

Most children are not used to being listened to and taken seriously by adults. As they speak, they may be exploring ways of expressing their ideas.

Sometimes they contradict themselves. Sometimes they tell lies or make up stories. Adults do these things, too. The most important thing to remember is children have a reason for doing this, even if you don't know what it is. Don't push them to tell 'the truth', try to interrogate them or catch them out. Don't let other adults present do this, either. What is important is the child's perspective, not the exact facts or chronology of events – you can always check those later. Let the children say what they feel; they may surprise you.

- *have you ever felt you didn't want to tell someone the whole truth about something?*
- *have you ever 'told stories' as a way of expressing something personal? Remember how that feels, and understand what's behind it*

Problems?

Children rarely 'misbehave' if they are being treated with respect and taken seriously. Quite the reverse can happen: for example,

street children who may be acting rudely and aggressively towards passing tourists can change their behaviour dramatically if you approach them differently, and speak to them with respect.

But sometimes other aspects of their lives intrude on the interview, and can make them feel restless or unable to concentrate. It's the same with adults. Whatever the reason for difficult behaviour, it won't help if you get cross with them or feel it is your duty as an adult to discipline them.

If you can't handle the children for some reason, it is probably best to finish as soon as possible, without leaving them feeling that they have failed. Maybe switch to a different activity – younger children could draw pictures instead, or read you a story they have written. Focus on some small achievement, so the time is not wasted.

If you're having problems, put yourself in the children's place and see if you can understand why.

- *was the problem with you? Were you tired, too busy, thinking about other things, not interested?*
- *was the situation beyond your control? What can you learn from this?*

– *what could you do differently next time?*

Working with a translator

Unfortunately, what children have to say must often pass through the filter system of translation. When choosing and using a translator to interview children, there are a number of important things to consider. If you are planning an overseas trip, and your travel and interview arrangements are being made by people in the host country, brief them well in advance about your needs. Otherwise, they may hire or allocate a translator who is quite unsuitable for the job.

- avoid choosing an authority figure who may intimidate the children. If that's unavoidable (e.g. local teachers may be the only suitable translators available), choose someone with a quiet and non-authoritarian manner who will put the children at their ease
- consider whether a man or a woman best suits the situation, the subject, and the particular child or children
- sometimes it is possible to find a child who is competent enough in the languages you need. This can work very well
- you may need a translator who is proficient in more than two languages. The first language of a country – often a colonial legacy like French or Portuguese

– isn't spoken by rural people. Ideally, find a local person who knows the local languages

- a local person who knows the children you plan to interview is preferable to a translator from, say, the capital city. There may be a social gap, too, between 'city slickers' and village people, which can cause tensions. Be aware, however, that a local person may prevent children from talking honestly and openly
- before starting out, spend some time explaining your needs to the interpreter. Stress your need to know what the children say in their own words, not in the translator's third person version of their answers: "I" and "we", not "she says ... they say." Explain how important it is for everyone to take their time, and not to rush the children.

Explain at the outset that you want to hear everything, warts and all. Sometimes the interpreter will only want to show the 'good' side of the story (particularly if they have a vested interest in the subject, such as a school, or an aid project). They may twist the child's words or dismiss them altogether. If you suspect that this is happening, say quietly but firmly that you want to know what the child said, and ask for the question to be put again, if necessary.

Many of the suggestions elsewhere in this guide apply as much to interpreters as they do to interviewers. Try to ensure that the interpreter shows as much sensitivity as you do. You could ask them to read parts of this booklet before you start working together – *Introducing yourself, Setting boundaries, Getting to know each other* and *Allowing children to change their minds* are particularly relevant.

Working with photographers

Journalists will often be accompanied by a photographer, who will also need to be aware of the special sensitivities around working with children. Things to think about include:

- choose a photographer who actually likes and gets on with children
- brief them well before the job, sharing relevant sections of this guide
- tell them the job may take longer than usual because you need to give children time
- explain the importance of showing respect to children
- tell them to avoid clichéd camera angles which look down on children and make them look pathetic and diminutive (unless the story or situation really justifies that)
- ask them not to set up shots artificially e.g. don't get children to do things for

the sake of a picture that they wouldn't do normally

- explain that you'll want extra prints to send to the children.

It can get very expensive to send sets of prints to people, particularly if you are working on a charity budget. One idea is to ask the photographer to load one camera with colour film which you get developed into prints at high street prices, rather than at an expensive lab. So you would not send back copies of the press quality photos but cheaper snapshots. (If the photographer works largely in black and white, colour prints would go down better – people are often disappointed by black and white.)

How can a photographer put children at their ease, and get the best from them? Freelance Dario Mitidieri has had a lot of experience of working with children, particularly street children in India. Here are his tips:

"Showing respect is the most important thing. It's very important to acknowledge children and to acknowledge what they're doing – to make them feel that you're interested and caring about what they're doing.

"Being playful with them is also important. I enjoy working with children – the child part

of me comes out. I think the kids see that in me, and that's why they open up to me so quickly. I think it's very important to get down on their level – the best way to talk to a child is to get on your knees, at eye level."

What you don't do, says Dario, is bribe children to get them on your side – either with money or presents. When time is short and a photographer is under great pressure, bribery can be tempting. But even tough street children can respond well without it, if your approach is right. He gives an example of working with child beggars in India. "At the traffic light, kids come and beg from you and if you open the window and smile and talk to them, without giving them money, they will respond to you anyway. And if you go back three hours later or the next day, they will remember you. That already puts me in a position where I could get out of the car and talk to them."

If a child does not want to be photographed, he respects that. "But in nine out of ten cases, the child who does not want to be photographed at first will want to be photographed just like everybody else, after a few hours or the next day." Winning children's confidence takes time. Once they see that you're trustworthy and the whole thing is fun,

children will usually want to join in.

It is difficult, however, to have hard and fast rules about getting children's permission to photograph them. Very often it's not possible to develop a relationship with your subject – whether they are adults or children. Unless they have the luxury of spending days with the same subject, photographers work on the hoof, capturing the fleeting moment. In those situations, it is impossible to stop and ask permission:

"You don't have time to establish a relationship – if you start talking, the spontaneity and naturalness has gone." And you've lost the picture.

"It boils down to the relationship you have with the kids," says Dario. "In India, I didn't have to ask their permission any more because I was working with the same children every day. If a new kid came along and asked what I was doing, the other kids would explain for me."

What do you do if things go wrong? "Lots of times I have had to walk away when it wasn't working. Or the leader of the gang would say to go, and then everybody else would follow him. In that situation, I would not take photographs. I would spend some time with them regardless, laugh with them, let them get to know me a little bit. Leave

it and go back the next day or next week.”

In Dario's experience, problems are usually caused by interfering adults, not by children.

“Situations where it doesn't work are not likely to be to do with the children but to do with adults – they feel that they have the right to interfere. And then you feel, just forget it.”

"If you've got a particular message to get over, I think it's worth it."

"Sometimes when they don't use their name, they say a lot of things – mostly they're personal things. They just don't want anybody to know who they are."

Finishing the interview

Try to finish the interview in a coherent and planned way. Let the children know when you're about to finish, so that they can get their thoughts together and say what they want to say. Don't leave bad feeling and disappointment behind you when you've gone.

It's a good idea to ask, at the end of the interview, if they have any questions for you. It's a way of turning the tables – giving something back, and putting them in the driving seat. Children overseas are often curious, for example, to know how children live in your country. And they might have some messages for you to pass on to other children. "Tell the children in England to come and visit us," said some children living on a railway platform in Calcutta. "We only ever get adults coming to talk to us!"

Always ask the children if there is anything they've said that they don't want you to publish or broadcast. If they've been talking about school or home, they may suddenly realise at the end of the interview that they've said things that could hurt people close to them, or that could get them into trouble. It's not fair to put them in this situation, however good

or moving the material is. Discuss the options with them – giving false names, changing some details (let the child make these up). But always be prepared not to use some material if a child doesn't want you to.

Children may find that an interview gives them a chance to speak about things they've never talked about before. It can become a kind of emotional unburdening. They may be upset or excited at the end. Take a little time to unwind then; it will give the children a chance to regain control of themselves, or calm down. If possible, make sure there is a supportive adult who knows what the children have been doing and can help them after you've gone.

If you feel unable to cope with children's emotions, or do not have much time, try to avoid very personal or emotional subjects. Stick to practical or factual topics.

What will the children get out of it?

You should think about what you can give back – not in the form of presents, but something more meaningful. The best interviews are satisfying for both children and interviewer.

- will the interview give children the chance to have a say and speak out, or are they simply giving you what you need to satisfy your editor or research manager?
- will they enjoy the interview?
- will they learn anything from it?
- is there any way you can give something to them in return (enjoyment, your interest and commitment, a new experience, some education, not little gifts or prizes)?

It is important to share the fruits of the interview with children, maybe by sending them copies of any published articles, a broadcast tape, or some prints if photos are taken. Children love to display things like this in their homes or schools. But don't make promises you can't keep.

Feedback

It is extremely helpful to ask children what they felt about the interview, and how you could have made it easier for them. If they criticise something you've done, try to take it as helpful advice for next time; don't get defensive. Children tend to be very honest, so their feedback is particularly valuable.

Remember...

DO

- listen
- treat children as equals
- take children seriously
- ask open questions
- ask if it's OK to use their real names
- take time
- explain what you'll do with the information.

DON'T

- patronise
- sit or stand at a higher level than the children
- put words in their mouths
- or let other adults do so
- interrupt
- talk too much about yourself (unless asked)
- continue with the interview if a child gets upset (stop and take a break, ask if it's OK to go on).

"If we couldn't have edited it, it would have been a whole different story and we couldn't have got our message across."

"Journalists mess you around – they say things and never follow them through."

After the interview

Working with children does not finish when the interview is over. Follow-up is very important – the impact of the interview on the children may be bigger than you think.

Keeping children informed

Let the children know, if possible, when the material is to be broadcast or published. Never make promises that can't be fulfilled. If you don't know what is going to happen, say so.

Writing up/making the programme

When possible, let the children you have interviewed have some say in this process. You could give them a look at an early draft and ask for their comments.

If you can involve them more fully, even if only very occasionally, you will learn a lot about their perspective on an issue. It is all too easy, once you start writing or editing, to fall into a very adult way of thinking. Sometimes this is appropriate, but if you are trying to represent children's views, it helps if you check as much as possible with children.

Sending copies

Being in the media is very important and exciting to children. Make sure you send them copies of the finished product. They may not have access to newspapers, radio or TV.

If possible, also send some prints of photos that were taken. Children are often delighted to be able to display these in their school, community centre or homes. But don't promise to send every individual child a photo of themselves if you can't fulfil that promise; it may be beyond your control.

Whatever you share with them, it can become a future talking point and the basis for learning about the media (or research work etc, if you are interviewing children for other than media purposes). Their teachers could use it in a follow-up lesson, for example.

Evaluation

If the interview was recorded, it is very valuable to listen carefully to find out how you can improve the way you work with children. It is easy to hear what happens when you interrupt a child or ask a question they don't understand. You can also hear when they respond most easily. If you make a habit of evaluating your work in terms of

how you helped the children express themselves (and not just how you performed), you will probably find it starts to make a difference to your relationships with all children.

What did the children think?

When possible (or at least once in a while), try to ask the children you interviewed what they thought about the published or broadcast material. Avoid asking too many questions – just sit back and listen to what they have to say. Encourage them to tell you what they liked and disliked. Whatever they say, if you let them speak their minds you will learn a lot. This is a two-way process!

“When I grow up I want to be a journalist, and maybe start off with a newspaper and then go on to TV. I’d like to interview children as well and I’ll remember when I was younger and how I felt. Then if I were to talk to children, I would put myself in their place.”

“When we first began our radio programme, we were all excited and we thought we were going to be famous – but we weren’t.”

Responsibilities to children

All journalists have responsibilities. These are heightened when you work with children, because they can be particularly vulnerable, sensitive and impressionable. And, given the way that the world works in favour of adults, they don't have much power, either. You can help change that, so that everyone gains.

- **A responsibility to give children access to the media**

Children are usually only able to express their views through the media if journalists make a special effort to include them.

- **A responsibility to portray children faithfully**

If children find themselves misrepresented, they begin to lose faith in the integrity of adults and the media.

- **A responsibility not to exploit children**

In the excitement of an interview, a child can often be easily manipulated. At the time, the journalist may feel he or she is getting the material they want. In the long run, it will not only leave the child disappointed or hurt, but it will also lower

media standards. Journalists should know when to make an ethical decision not to push for or use information which could harm the child.

- **A responsibility to respect children's privacy**

Children have as much right and as much need for privacy as adults, if not more – if a child doesn't want to be interviewed, that is their right. If the parents are willing but the child is not, then the child should decide.

- **A responsibility to consider the consequences of your work**

For the children, life doesn't stop the moment you leave. Think about the impact of your visit and make sure that appropriate support is available for children after you have gone.

- **Role models**

Children look up to the media – it is a very powerful influence in many of their lives. They often want to become journalists. So the way you, as a journalist, present yourself and your life can affect them profoundly. Make sure your influence is positive.

Further resources

Communicating with Children: Helping children in distress by Naomi Richman

Save the Children UK, 2000

Price £5.95

A manual for people working in emergencies to develop their listening and communication skills with children

The Media and Children's Rights: A practical introduction for media professionals,

Presswise and Unicef, 1999

A pocket-size booklet that promotes responsible media coverage of children

Putting Children in the Right: Guidelines for journalists and media professionals by Peter McIntyre

International Federation of Journalists, 2002

Journalists' guidelines and principles for reporting on issues involving children

Children, Ethics, Media by Helena Thorfinn

Save the Children Sweden, 2002

An overview of children's relationship with the media

MAGIC (Media Activities and Good Ideas by, with and for Children)

www.unicef.org/magic

A website that looks at the role of the media in promoting children's rights. It includes further guidelines on working ethically with children.

Presswise

www.presswise.org.uk

The website for Presswise, a media ethics charity that aims to promote high standards of journalism. The site includes information on its work with children and the media.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

Set out below are some extracts from the Convention that are particularly relevant to the mass media and interviewing children. Full texts of the Convention are available from Unicef.

Official text

Article 2

1 The States Parties to the present Convention shall respect and ensure the rights set forth in this Convention to each child within their jurisdiction without discrimination of any kind, irrespective of the child's or his or her parent's or legal guardian's race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status.

2 States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that the child is protected against all forms of discrimination or punishment on the basis of the status, activities, expressed opinions, or beliefs of the child's parents, legal guardians, or family members.

Unofficial summary

Non-discrimination

This is about the principle that all rights apply to all children without exception, and the state's obligation to protect children from any form of discrimination. The state must not violate any right, and must take positive action to promote them all.

Official text

Article 3

I In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.

Unofficial summary

Best interests of the child

All actions concerning the child should take full account of his or her best interests. The state is to provide adequate care when parents or others responsible fail to do so.

Article 12

I States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

The child's opinion

The child has a right to express an opinion, and to have that opinion taken into account, in any matter or procedure affecting the child.

Article 13

I The child shall have the right of freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice.

Freedom of expression

The child has a right to obtain and make known information, and to express his or her views, unless this would violate the rights of others.

Official text

Unofficial summary

2 The exercise of this right may be subject to certain restrictions, but these shall only be such as are provided by law and are necessary:

- (a) for respect of the rights or reputations of others; or
- (b) for the protection of national security or of public order (*ordre public*), or of public health or morals.

Article 14

1 States Parties shall respect the right of the child to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

2 States Parties shall respect the rights and duties of the parents and, where applicable, legal guardians, to provide direction to the child in the exercise of his or her right in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child.

3 Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.

Freedom of thought, conscience and religion

The child has a right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, subject to appropriate parental guidance and national law.

Official text

Article 16

1 No child shall be subjected to arbitrary or unlawful interference with his or her privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to unlawful attacks on his or her honour and reputation.

2 The child has the right to the protection of the law against such interference or attacks.

Article 17

States Parties recognise the important function performed by the mass media and shall ensure that the child has access to information and material from a diversity of national and international sources, especially those aimed at the promotion of his or her social, spiritual and moral well-being and physical and mental health.

To this end, States Parties shall:

- (a) Encourage the mass media to disseminate information and material of social and cultural benefit to the child and in accordance with the spirit of article 29 (aims of education);

Unofficial summary

Protection of privacy

The child has a right to protection from interference with privacy, family, home and correspondence, and from libel/slander.

Official text

(b) Encourage international co-operation in the production, exchange and dissemination of such information and material from a diversity of cultural, national and international sources;

(c) Encourage the production and dissemination of children's books;

(d) Encourage the mass media to have particular regard to the linguistic needs of the child who belongs to a minority group or who is indigenous;

(e) Encourage the development of appropriate guidelines for the protection of the child from information and material injurious to his or her well-being bearing in mind the provisions of articles 13 (see page 37) and 18 (parental responsibility).

Unofficial summary

Access to appropriate information

This outlines the role of the media in disseminating information to children that is consistent with moral well-being and knowledge and understanding among peoples, and respects the child's cultural background. The State is to take measures to encourage this and to protect children from harmful materials.

International Federation of Journalists' Guidelines and Principles for Reporting on Issues Involving Children

These guidelines were adopted by journalists' organisations from 70 countries at the world's first international consultative conference on journalism and child rights Brazil in 1998.

All journalists and media professionals have a duty to maintain the highest ethical and professional standards, and should promote within the industry the widest possible dissemination of information about the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and its implications for the exercise of independent journalism.

Media organisations should regard violation of the rights of children and issues related to children's safety, privacy, security, education, health and social welfare, and all forms of exploitation as important questions for investigations and public debate. Children have an absolute right to privacy, the only exceptions being those explicitly set out in these guidelines. Journalistic activity that touches on the lives and welfare of children should always

be carried out with appreciation of the vulnerable situation of children.

Journalists and media organisations shall strive to maintain the highest standards of ethical conduct in reporting children's affairs and, in particular, they shall:

1. strive for standards of excellence in terms of accuracy and sensitivity when reporting on issues involving children
2. avoid programming and publication of images which intrude upon the media space of children with information which is damaging to them
3. avoid the use of stereotypes and sensational presentation to promote journalistic material involving children
4. consider carefully the consequences of publication of any material concerning children, and shall minimise harm to children
5. guard against visually or otherwise identifying children unless it is demonstrably in the public interest

6. give children, where possible, the right of access to media to express their own opinions without inducement of any kind

7. ensure independent verification of information provided by children and take special care to ensure that verification takes place without putting child informants at risk

8. avoid the use of sexualised images of children

9. use fair, open and straightforward methods for obtaining pictures and, where possible, obtain them with the knowledge and consent of children or a responsible adult, guardian or carer

10. verify the credentials of any organisation purporting to speak for, or to represent, the interests of children

11. not make payment to children for material involving the welfare of children, or to parents or guardians of children, unless it is demonstrably in the interest of the child.

Journalists should put to critical examination the reports submitted, and the claims made, by governments on implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in their respective countries

Media should not consider and report the conditions of children only as events but should continuously report the process likely to lead or leading to the occurrence of these events.

Press Complaints Commission Code of Practice

This code sets the benchmarks for professional standards in the UK press. The relevant section is:

6. Children

- (i) Young people should be free to complete their time at school without unnecessary intrusion.
- (ii) Journalists must not interview or photograph children under the age of 16 on subjects involving the welfare of the child or of any other child, in the absence of or without the consent of a parent or other adult who is responsible for the children.
- (iii) Pupils must not be approached or photographed while at school without the permission of the school authorities.

(iv) There must be no payment to minors for material involving the welfare of children nor payment to parents or guardians for material about their children or wards unless it is demonstrably in the child's interest.

(v) Where material about the private life of a child is published, there must be justification for publication other than the fame, notoriety or position of his or her parents or guardian.