



REPORTING ON CHILDREN: AN ETHICAL GUIDELINE FOR JOURNALISTS

Introduction

Journalists have the potential to be champions of human rights. Their reporting, writing, photographs, and videos can act as the eyes, ears and voices of the public, encourage governments, civil society organizations and communities to bring about change that will improve the lives of children and their families.

The way in which the media represents children can influence how a society regards its youth. Children and young people have the right to be respected as individual human beings. Ensuring that they can speak for themselves and share their hopes, fears and achievements, and the impacts of adult behaviour on their lives, remind the public of their important voices.

When a story does not consider and prioritize the rights and best interests of the child, particularly when reporting on vulnerable situations such as violence, abuse, exploitation, children in conflict with the law and situations around which stigma still exists, the child could face serious consequences such as discrimination or retribution.

With this in mind, journalists should approach children with care and sensitivity. This guide aims to provide tips and recommendations for reporters and media outlets on how to do so.

About this Document

This guide has been prepared for journalists who write about various social issues and matters affecting children, and those who work with children, as well as students of journalism.

Coverage of stories affecting children could range from children's ability to access to their rights and various social services, children in residential care, violence against children, children facing abuse, neglect, exploitation or trafficking, children affected by HIV and AIDS, children with disabilities, just to name a few.

This guide¹ aims to strengthen journalists' understanding of children's rights, particularly as they relate to media coverage, and to establish best practices for interviewing children, as well as ways to gather stories to the public in a manner that ensures children's best interests without exposing them to additional harms or risks.

This publication is organized into three main focus areas:

- 1) Portraying children and safeguarding their rights**
- 2) Principles and guidelines for interviewing and photographing children**
- 3) "Do no harm": Covering sensitive topics**

This guideline is based on an adaptation of content taken from the following publications:

- 1) UNICEF. 2005. "The Media and Children's Rights" available at: https://www.unicef.org/ceecis/The_Media_and_Children_Rights_2005.pdf
- 2) UNICEF. 2007. "Children's Rights and Journalism Practice: A rights-based perspective" available at: http://elearning-events.dit.ie/unicef/html/index_1_1.htm
- 3) UNICEF. "Children and the media" available at: <https://www.unicef.org/magic/briefing/childmedia.pdf>
- 4) International Federation of Journalists. 2002. "Guidelines for Journalists and Media Professionals" available at: https://www.unicef.org/philippines/intl_journalists_guidelines.pdf

The Convention on the Rights of the Child

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) sets out what governments and individuals should do to promote and protect the indivisible human rights of all children. Cambodia is a signatory to this Convention, which was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 20 November 1989.

A few examples of the rights stipulated in the CRC as they relate to the media are:

- Article 12: The child's right to express views freely in all matters affecting them.
- Article 13: Children have the right to obtain and make known information and to express their views, unless this would violate the rights of others.
- Article 16: Protection against interference or attack on privacy, family, home or correspondence, honour or reputation.
- Article 17: Recognition of the importance of the media by encouraging the dissemination of information of benefit to the child.

These articles clearly establish rights for children that should be safeguarded by journalists in their daily work. The media has an important role to play by reporting on injustices against children, raising awareness of the issues that affect them, and encouraging serious efforts to achieve real positive change in children's lives.



1 Portraying children in the media and safeguarding their rights



Media professionals have an extremely important role to play in portraying children as individuals with rights and opinions and making sure that society fulfills its obligations to its young population.

To properly tell a story, journalists must respect children's views and carefully consider their decisions that could potentially affect children. The journalist's utmost priority should be to ensure that children are not subjected to harm through reporting (more on the topic of 'Do no harm' under section 3 of this document).

The media should treat children as equal members of society, not powerless sub-groups. Just like adults, children and adolescents have rights, struggles, hopes and dreams, and a story to tell. Portraying children simply as victims or as 'cute' appendages of adults creates the misconception that their views and experiences are of lesser value. The media has an obligation to report fairly, honestly, and accurately on the experience of childhood.

The potential harm to children by having exposure and access to certain materials via the media must also be considered, especially with the increased penetration of internet and social media across Cambodia. For example, the media must closely evaluate its depiction of violence and the use of graphic or disturbing images. Producers should ensure that children are not desensitized or put at risk by easy access to such materials, including imagery that appears to encourage violence or inappropriate sexual activity.

To ensure that coverage of children's issues receives the attention and care it deserves, journalists and their managers are encouraged to work together to protect the rights of children through training, information materials, and cooperation within media. Having clear internal guidelines within a media organization, fully committed to by both the managers and journalists, helps ensure that reporting on children is done in a manner safeguarding their rights and needs.

An example of such guidelines are those established by the International Federation of Journalists, an organization that encourages governments to promote social justice and rights for journalists. It includes child rights in its professional code of ethics.

BBC has also established a full section in its guidelines focusing on children and young people as contributors, fleshing out the principles, guidance on safeguarding the welfare of children, informed consent and parental consent, and the impact of the involvement of children, such as considerations when interviewing a child in conflict with the law.

In Cambodia, the Cambodian Center for Independent Media (CCIM), an NGO that promotes freedom of expression and independent media, developed the Code of Ethics for Cambodian Journalists that includes a code of ethics on reporting children, women, and people with disability.

UNICEF strongly recommends that media outlets and associations in Cambodia establish and adopt guidelines related to reporting on children to ensure that journalists are guided by them in their work.



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Interviewing and photographing children



Balancing the journalistic obligation to tell the truth with the need to protect children is fraught with difficulties and ethical questions. Should reporters intervene in the lives of children at risk? Should journalists interview children after they have been involved in a traumatic event? Under what circumstances is it appropriate to reveal or conceal a child's identity?

When media coverage involves children, the best interests of the child should be an overriding consideration. Journalists must ensure that no harm is inflicted on the child, both in the circumstances of the interview and with regard to the likely consequences of what is published. Some basic questions journalists can ask themselves before starting an interview:

- Are children being interviewed with their informed consent and the consent of their parent or carer?
- Has the interview been conducted in a manner considerate to the child, including allowing sufficient time and a comfortable environment?
- Have the potential consequences of the child's comments, both short term and long term, been considered and explained to the interviewee?
- Have arrangements been made to ensure that children are protected after publication, and that support systems are in place should other children contact the publisher?
- Are children told what will be done with what they say and are they permitted to see the finished product?

While the most authentic information is usually obtained when children are in an environment with their peers, it is important to obtain the consent of an appropriate adult (parent or carer) and to ensure that adults known to the children are nearby when interviewing them.

When photographing children, it is important to remember that identifying children in photos even without mentioning their name can be extremely harmful in certain circumstances. For example, a child who is a survivor of violence and abuse may be harmed by the aggressor who does not want witnesses to their action. In such circumstance, the use of a child's image in the media could result in further harm. When conducting interviews, taking videos or photographs, and writing and publishing a story, the journalist must always bear in mind potential outcomes for the child. Asking one's self, "What if he/she was my child?" is a good place to start.

UNICEF principles and guidelines for interviewing children

UNICEF has developed the following principles to assist journalists as they report on issues affecting children. They are offered as guidelines to help media cover children in an age-appropriate and sensitive manner and support the best intentions of ethical reporters: serving the public interest without compromising the rights of children.

Principles

1. The dignity and rights of every child are to be respected in every circumstance.
2. In interviewing and reporting on children, special attention is to be paid to each child's right to privacy and confidentiality, to have their opinions heard, to participate in decisions affecting them and to be protected from harm and retribution, including the potential of them.
3. The best interests of each child are to be protected over any other consideration, including over advocacy for children's issues and the promotion of child rights.
4. When trying to determine the best interests of a child, the child's right to have their views taken into account are to be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity.
5. Those closest to the child's situation and best able to assess it are to be consulted about the political, social and cultural ramifications of any reportage.
6. Do not publish a story or an image which might put the child, siblings or peers at risk even when identities are changed, obscured or not used.





Guidelines for interviewing children

1. Do no harm to any child; avoid questions, attitudes or comments that are judgmental, insensitive to cultural values, that place a child in danger or expose a child to humiliation, or that reactivate a child's pain and grief from traumatic events.
2. Do not discriminate when choosing children to interview because of sex, race, age, religion, status, educational background or physical abilities.
3. No staging: Do not ask children to tell a story or take an action that is not part of their own history.
4. Ensure that the child or guardian knows they are talking with a reporter. Explain the purpose of the interview and its intended use.
5. Obtain written permission from the child and his or her guardian for all interviews, videography and photographs. Permission must be obtained in circumstances that ensure that the child and guardian are not coerced in any way and that they understand that they are part of a story that might be disseminated locally and globally. This is usually only ensured if the permission is obtained in the child's language and if the decision is made in consultation with an adult the child trusts.
6. Pay attention to where and how the child is interviewed. Limit the number of interviewers and photographers. Try to make certain that children are comfortable and able to tell their story without outside pressure, including from the interviewer. In film, video and radio interviews, consider what the choice of visual or audio background might imply about the child and her or his life and story. Ensure that the child would not be endangered or adversely affected by showing their home, community or general whereabouts.
7. After interviewing the child, make sure to ask them if they have any questions for you. Remind them what the article will be used for, and arrange to send it to them. Ask them if they want to leave anything out, or change their names or any other details.

Practical tips for interviewing children

International Federation of Journalists with the support of the European Commission has offered practical advice on how to carry out an interview effectively while respecting the rights of children:

1. Interviews with children should, except in exceptional circumstances, always take place with someone acting in the best interests of the child on hand, to protect the child and to call a halt if necessary.
2. The interviewer should sit or stand at the same height as the child and not 'talk down,' either literally or metaphorically.
3. In the case of radio or television interviews, it is essential that the child is relaxed and not distracted or overawed by the camera or technology. This may mean that camera crews have to spend time around children until they stop focusing on the cameras and lights.
4. Questions should be directed to the child, not to the adult, and the adult should observe and not intervene—otherwise you get the adult's story, rather than that of the child.
5. An interviewer should adopt a calm, friendly and neutral voice and not react with shock or amazement.
6. Questions should be clear and straightforward, and should not lead the child. At first, ask open questions (so the child is not pressured to respond in any particular way) and then use closed questions to narrow down on facts that you have to check.
7. Questions can be repeated in a different form to cross-check that the child has understood and has expressed himself or herself clearly.
8. It is better to ask factual questions about what someone said and did, than to ask about how they felt. A child will often reveal, when he or she is comfortable with the interview, how he or she felt, but may be pressured by direct questioning about feelings.
9. Wherever possible corroboration should be sought (good practice for all kinds of interviews).
10. If interviewing through a translator, care should be taken that the interpreter translates exactly what the child says and does not mediate or summarize answers.

3

“Do No Harm”: Covering sensitive topics



Children have the right to protection from interference with their privacy, family, home and correspondence and from slander (article 16 of the CRC).

Children also have the right to be protected from all forms of exploitation that is detrimental to any aspect of their welfare (article 36).

Journalists must ensure that interviewing the child or publishing a story is not done at the cost of the child’s safety and well-being, both short and long term. Special considerations must be given particularly when the child is in a vulnerable situation, so as not to victimize the child and put them at even greater risk and danger. For the child, life continues after the journalist leaves, and so media professionals need to think about the impact of their visit and coverage, making sure that no negative consequences are inflicted on the child.

For example, a child survivor of sexual abuse or exploitation could suffer from life-long stigma and isolation from society following publication of a story that identifies his/her name or face. The experience of the interview itself could be traumatic. Special care must be given to such children by obtaining the full informed consent of the child and their guardian for the interview, ensuring the child and their family members have access to necessary services such as counselling, and not revealing details in the story that would identify the child and label them as victim of abuse/exploitation for life. Another example would be the printing of the name or photo of a child arrested for an alleged offense. In such a case, a child could be labeled a criminal by his or her peers, family and community.

UNICEF has developed a set of principles to indicate when journalists should exercise caution and pay extra attention when covering sensitive child-related stories.



Examples of photographs in which the identities of at-risk children are hidden to protect them from further harm and stigmatization. In both situations, the children were interviewed in the presence of a trusted guardian or care-taker, with full informed consent and written permission).

Credit: UNICEF Cambodia/2015/Antoine Raab

Caption: [Left: A 13-year-old girl and survivor of human trafficking sits with the social worker who works for the NGO providing her with care and support. Right: A boy who was rescued from traffickers sits with his foster mother at their home.]

UNICEF guidelines for reporting on sensitive child-related cases

1. Do not further stigmatize any child; avoid categorizations or descriptions that expose a child to negative reprisals, including additional physical or psychological harm, or to life-long abuse, discrimination or rejection by their local communities.
2. Always change the name and obscure the visual identity of any child who is identified as:
 - a. A victim of sexual abuse or exploitation,
 - b. A perpetrator of physical or sexual abuse,
 - c. Living with HIV or has died from AIDS unless the child, a parent or a guardian gives fully informed consent,
 - d. Charged or convicted of a crime.
3. In certain circumstances of vulnerability or potential risk of harm or retribution, change the name and obscure the visual identity of any child who is identified as:
 - a. An asylum seeker, a refugee or an internally displaced person,
 - b. Survivor of violence,
 - c. A child living in residential care,
 - d. A child living on the streets.
4. In certain cases, using a child’s identity – their name and/or recognizable image – is in the child’s best interests. However, when the child’s identity is used, they must still be protected against harm and supported through any stigmatization or reprisals.

Examples of special cases include:

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

The media has an enormous potential to influence people's opinions and perceptions. Their stories can bring to light matters that otherwise could have remained hidden and buried. That is why it is crucial that reporters and other professionals working with media outlets, as well as journalism students, have a strong understanding of ethical reporting and children's rights, including to have their voices heard and to be protected from all forms of harm and negative repercussions of media coverage. We hope that this short document will contribute to generating active discussions among media professionals in Cambodia so that more journalists are aware of their role in safeguarding children's rights, and media organizations set a positive example by adopting and practicing codes of conduct in relation to ethical reporting on children.

For more information go to: <https://www.unicef.org/cambodia/>

Further reading:

- BBC, Editorial Guidelines, Children and Young People as Contributors, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/editorialguidelines/guidelines/children-young-people>
- International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), Guidelines on Children Reporting, <http://admin.ifj.org/en/contents/ifj-guidelines-on-children-reporting>
- Save the Children, Interviewing Children: A Guide for Journalists and Others, <http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/resources/online-library/interviewing-children-guide-journalists-and-others>
- The Cambodian Center for Independent Media (CCIM). Code of Ethics for Cambodian Journalists, <http://www.ccimcambodia.org/resources/code-of-ethics>
- The Convention on the Rights of the Child in English, <http://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>



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