



## **MEASURES FOR THE PROTECTION OF CHILDREN WITHIN SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH PROJECTS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF MODENA AND REGGIO EMILIA**

### **Child Protection Policy**

#### **Introduction**

This Policy has the purpose of ensuring that respect, attention, care and concern towards children are always primary objectives when carrying out research activities involving the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia (UNIMORE). Pursuant to this Policy, wellbeing and dignity of children shall also be intended as the responsibility of each researcher. Any possible action shall be taken in order to protect the respect of children's rights and safeguard their personality.

The University of Modena and Reggio Emilia endorses the principle of the child's interest as a guideline and priority value in research activities in which it is involved. To that purpose, it commits not only to adopt measures aimed at preventing any risk of causing harm to children, but also to promote research to the benefit of their peacefulness, balanced growth, acquisition of competences and participation to the life of the community.

This document endorses the guidelines provided in the *Child Protection Policy and Code of Conduct* for the protection of children in scientific research, drawn up by the CNR Commission for the Ethics of Research and Bioethics, and may be subject to periodic review.

Where necessary, UNIMORE undertakes to contact the ethical Committees directly relating to the research in question.

#### **1. General principles**

Children have the right to be treated with the same respect owed to adults. Children's specific needs and vulnerability shall make researchers to adopt a more careful behaviour compared to the one reserved to adults.

Every single interaction and activity addressed to children shall be inspired to the principles of dignity, responsibility, and respect of their rights, with methodological rigour and concern.

Especially important for the research activities involving a direct or indirect interaction with the children is the ethics of relations, which requires consideration, listening, and dialogue. This document includes the acknowledgment of the child's availability, or the acceptance of his/her unavailability to the relation with the people differently involved in the research.

The ability to recognise and value the competences, considered as the set of sensorial, perceptive, motor, linguistic, and intellectual abilities, diversified based on the evolution stages and contextualised based on the personal history and social and cultural environment of each child, should be promoted. The cultural identity shall also be recognised and duly considered.

In the event of children with disabilities and/or limited abilities and personal skills, the parameters shall be flexible and adaptable, also taking into consideration the awareness they have of their own condition.



UNIMORE Policy, endorsing the principle of the “priority of the child’s interest”:

- a) complies with the principles and values inspiring the international Charters, and in particular the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), the Convention of the fundamental rights of the European Union (2000, art.24) and the Constitutional Charter of the Italian Republic (arts.3, 9, and 33), the European Charter on the Rights of the Child (Strasbourg 25/01/1996), ratified by law 20/03/2003
- b) adopts the principle of recognition of the child’s subjectivity as holder of his/her own rights
- c) fulfils its obligations towards childhood, those set out in the European good practices for children protection.

## **2. Objectives**

This Policy is aimed at preventing the conditions that may lead to performing judicially relevant acts towards children or that may harm them.

The Policy focuses on ensuring that the dignity, freedom, rights and interest of the children involved in the research are respected, by defining ethical criteria and warranty procedures. It also has the purpose of promoting a culture that is concerned about children’s rights.

Extensively, the objectives of the Policy are:

- define the standards and ethical criteria aimed at protecting the children involved in the research
- for each research stage, indicate the potential risks of causing harm to children and provide suitable protection measures
- lastly, promote researchers’ awareness regarding the protection of children within research activities.

## **3. Scope**

The Policy shall be intended as referring to all research activities involving UNIMORE and its personnel, involved in any way and regardless of the financing resources; it shall be deemed integral part of the project documentation.

Consistently with the provisions of financing agencies, the adherence to its prescriptions shall be made explicit in a written form by the project manager, and is a preliminary condition for carrying out the activities. In accordance with this document, the word “child” is used in its legal meaning, which includes in this category all individuals under 18 years of age.

In any case, due account should be always given to the differences and maturity levels that are typical of the various stages of the children’s growth process, in line with their cognitive abilities and the level of independency reached, also referred to the evaluation that children make of the quality of their life, of their existential conditions and of the decisions concerning them.



## 4. Code of conduct

The essential principles of this code of conduct are the maximum protection of children within the research, as well as their interest as priority condition for the lawfulness of the scientific research, in accordance with what provided for in the main international Charters and good practices of the field. The Code recognises and values the need and the importance for children to participate in scientific research as essential conditions to broaden the knowledge aimed at promoting their wellbeing and that of the society as a whole.

In this context, the researcher plays an essential role in positively involving children's parents or tutors, through transparent and comprehensive information on the methodology and objectives of the research. The communication with the children and their parents will be aimed at not undervaluing or hiding the possible risks resulting from the participation in research; at the same time, however, it should highlight its expected benefits, both of specific and general nature.

The purpose of this approach will be to build confidence and therefore promote research. The notification given to the participants may be an opportunity to describe, through dialogue with the adults and children involved, the ethical value of participation in research as an essential tool for scientific progress, as well as the enriching and solidarity meaning that research assumes for other people.

### 4.1 General rules for research activities

Researchers, scientific and legal managers of UNIMORE research structures undertake the following:

- in project planning, as well as in all stages of research activities, the dignity, freedom, interests, needs, and psychophysical wellbeing of the children involved are respected
- in interactions with children, these are considered and respected, also when expressing their desires and emotions
- in the activities carried out for research purposes, prevention measures are adopted to protect the children against any damage, manipulation or exploitation
- any cases of suspected harm to children shall be disclosed
- any notice of harm caused to children is taken care of with due urgency
- any unfair conduct in research, as to infringe the children's dignity and wellbeing, is immediately notified to the Rector and the Ethical Board of the University
- the privacy of the children and researchers involved is safeguarded; the obligation to inform the competent authorities of any suspected criminal offence has the priority over the protection of the privacy
- stigmatisation, discrimination, or retaliation towards the subjects involved in the notification are actively prevented
- when carrying out the research activities, a contact person for children's protection is appointed; unless otherwise stated, s/he will be the scientific manager responsible
- the tools for accessing the relevant rules are made available to research staff
- where appropriate and/or necessary, they will contact the Ethical Committee of the Area Vasta Emilia Nord (AVEN).



## 4.2 Ethical aspects of the research activities

Risk prevention and the attention paid to children affect all research stages, such as

- a) *ideation, planning, and design* of the activities
- b) *selection and training* of researchers and collaborators
- c) *methods for involving children* in the study
- d) *process for obtaining consent*
- e) *research conduct*
- f) *results obtained, their publication, and dissemination* of the results.

More specifically,

- A. during the ***ideation, planning and design stage***:
  - (i) the issue of balancing the potential direct and indirect benefits and obligations for the children participating in research shall be dealt with
  - (ii) a suitable monitoring process shall be provided, as well as risk assessment and management effective procedures, by using the most appropriate indicators.
- B. during the ***selection and training of researchers and collaborators***:<sup>1</sup>
  - (i) skill-based and transparent procedures shall be identified
  - (ii) profiles consistent with the principles expressed in this Policy shall be identified
  - (iii) it shall be ensured that the professionals involved are properly trained based on the observance of the principles expressed herein and the characteristics of the specific research.
- C. during the ***selection of the participating children and the research conduct***
  - (i) the risk of stigmatisation and discrimination of the people involved shall be prevented;
  - (ii) an adequate ability to listen to children and relate with them shall be ensured.
- D. during the ***process for obtaining consent***
  - (i) the children involved and their parents or guardians are offered exhaustive and transparent information on the research project, in order to allow for a fully aware participation
  - (ii) the information shall specify: any potential risk and discomfort resulting from research; whether there are direct benefits expected, which are the expected benefits in terms of advancement of knowledge, who are the people in charge of the project with whom one should interact, which are the financing sources and if there is any conflict of interest, who is the data controller for the personal and sensitive data collected, what measures have been adopted to protect the data privacy and which are the rights that participating children may exercise through their parents or tutors, in which manner the research results will be disseminated and on which occasions, and, lastly, if there are direct commercial purposes

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<sup>1</sup> Also pursuant to the European Charter of researchers and a conduct code for the recruitment of researchers, Recommendation 005/251/CE.



- (iii) when dealing with children, an effective and linear communication shall be ensured, which shall also be suitable to their ability to understand; the same care shall be reserved for the adults involved in different ways
- (iv) both the competence and the maturity showed by individual children, and their age, shall be taken into account, in particular in case of disabilities and/or limitations to their personal skills and abilities, with the aim to understand the level of independency reached and their preferences. To this aim, suitable communication modes and strategies may be proposed that differ from the information notice by means of written text
- (v) any children's will not to participate in the research shall be respected.

**E. in conducting the research**

- (i) measures aimed at minimising the risks to harm children are adopted
- (ii) as far as possible, the child is actively involved in the research and its development
- (iii) any kind of exercise of power, psychologic pressures and constraints that may make children feel inadequate, emotionally uncomfortable or forced to participate in research shall be avoided
- (iv) a suitable ability to listen to children and relate with them shall be ensured, based on the different periods of adaptation and their ability to understand
- (v) maximum respect for private life shall be paid to the children involved and their parents or guardians
- (vi) it shall be ensured that the collection of personal data is limited to what is necessary for conducting the research and exclusively for those purposes
- (vii) the privacy of the data collected shall be ensured
- (viii) in the event that forms of prejudice are detected towards one or multiple children participating in the research, as a precautionary measure this is suspended and will be subject to an overall methodological review.

**F. when obtaining, publishing, and disseminating the results**

- (i) the research conclusions shall be appropriately returned, for the participants' best interest
- (ii) in publications resulting from research, researcher/s shall provide information that not only prove the knowledge advancement, but may also be used to promote the children's wellbeing
- (iii) the results shall be disclosed in a usable format, with special care to the stakeholders and to all people who may use them to the benefit of children
- (iv) in any case, it must be ensured that children are not identifiable, including the elements that may lead to their identification indirectly.

**5. Preventive strategies**

The scientific manager or project coordinator shall carry out a preliminary assessment of the potential risks of harm towards children and adopt suitable protection measures, by ordering periodic monitoring activities. All UNIMORE researchers shall commit to ensure that the dignity, freedom, interests, needs, and psychophysical wellbeing of the children involved are respected, by adopting relevant behaviours and methodological and linguistic tools.

In any case, the following actions shall be implemented:

- i. prepare an experimental design aimed at minimising the risk to cause harm
- ii. ensure that researchers listen to children and they are fully considered



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- iii. in the event of suspicious abuse or harm to children, immediately inform the scientific manager and the legal manager of the relevant research facility, as well as the competent authority where applicable
- iv. in the event that forms of prejudice are detected towards one or multiple children participating in the research, as a precautionary measure this shall be suspended and will be subject to an overall methodological review.
- iv. always provide an information notice and a consent to the participation in research activities, to be sent to children and their parents or guardians
- v. always expect that the consent may be revoked at any time, also with no reasons, and ensure that this will not cause direct or indirect consequences for the child
- vi. ensure availability to respond to any children or parents/guardians' requests relating to research, during the entire duration of the research activity
- vii. where needed, provide for the consultancy of an expert of developmental age to improve the experimental design and/or help researchers in their relationship with the child
- viii. provide for suitable measures to ensure that the children involved in the research cannot be identified.

## References

- Ethical Code of the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia (<https://www.unimore.it/ateneo/RegolamentoDett.html?R=602>)
- CNR Commission for the Ethics of Research and Bioethics, Child Protection Policy and Code of Conduct - Measures and strategies for the protection of children in scientific research and code of conduct (<https://www.cnr.it/it/ethics>)
- Ethical Board of the Area Vasta Emilia Nord (AVEN), <http://www.aou.mo.it/ComitatoEticoAVEN>
- Eurochild's Child Protection Policy (<https://www.eurochild.org/terms/child-protection-policy/>)
- Graham, A., Powell, M., Taylor, N., Anderson, D. & Fitzgerald, R. (2013). Ethical Research Involving Children. Florence: UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti.