

GUIDELINES FOR CONDUCTING RESEARCH AT SDN CHILDREN'S SERVICES INC. "SDN"

1. Introduction

SDN supports and encourages research being conducted within the organisation by our own staff and by staff within the organisation in cooperation with external agencies.

1.1 Scope

These guidelines have been developed to assist:

- **researchers** (internal and external) who would like to undertake research within SDN centres, programs or the organisation as a whole; and
- the **SDN Research Ethics Committee** in:
 - making decisions regarding the approval or otherwise of Applications to undertake research involving staff, families or children within the organisation;
 - overseeing the extent of compliance by those to whom approval has been granted to undertake research within SDN Children's Services (SDN);
 - dealing with complaints about research practices not deemed to be ethical.

The guidelines reflect SDN's values and the underlying values and basic principles of ethical conduct as provided for within the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans* (NHMRC, 2007a), the *National Health and Medical Research Council's Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research* (NHMRC 2007b) and the *Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies' Guidelines for Ethical Research in Indigenous Studies* (2002).

2. SDN Research Policy and Principles

2.1 Adoption of a Research Policy

The following policy was adopted by the SDN Board at its July 2008 meeting:

'No research involving the children who are or have been in SDN's care at any time, the families of those children, SDN staff, the information of those children, families or staff which is or has been in SDN's possession at any time or any one or more of those things be permitted by SDN without the approval of SDN's Research Ethics Committee or SDN's Board, whether the researcher or researchers be from outside or within the organisation.' (Statement approved by the SDN Board, 7 July, 2008.)

2.2 Involvement of SDN Children's Services in the research activity of other institutions

In principle, SDN Children's Services is open to involvement in the research activity of other institutions where the outcomes of such involvement are seen to enhance understanding. However, such involvement should not be to the detriment of children, staff and families in terms of the ethical issues outlined in these guidelines. These issues include attention to the commitment of both time and resources which should not detract from the normal function of the organisation or services it provides.

Where another institution wishes to conduct research within SDN Children's Services or in collaboration with SDN then that organisation needs to ensure that appropriate ethical clearance has been gained through their own organisation or institution.

2.2.1 Payment

Following practices identified in Macquarie University's Human Ethics Committee Survival Kit (September, 2001) SDN Children's Services considers that 'it is acceptable to provide payment or other inducement to encourage participation in research' (p.26). Where appropriate, it would be acceptable for such payment to be directed towards supporting release time for staff involved as research participants in such research. Approval for such arrangements must be sought from the CEO.

3. Information for researchers

3.1 Research definition

Research refers to:

any planned and systematic investigation that is undertaken in order to confirm existing or gain new knowledge, and/or review practices and where information is sought for the specific purpose of that investigation. Such investigation may include but is not limited to involving others in collaborative processes where the researcher and participants work together on collecting, reviewing and interpreting research data.

Research for the purpose of these guidelines does not include activity undertaken on a regular basis such as child observations for the purposes of documentation of children's learning, the collection of information associated with accreditation procedures or data collected for funding reporting purposes.

It may or may not include the collaborative efforts of professional peers for the purposes of informing or evaluating professional practice.

Numerical data that has been collected for funding and/or reporting purposes, or through an approved research project, can be used for other reporting purposes.

If an anecdotal illustration is required or warranted for reporting purpose, other than that required by a funding body, pseudonyms or other necessary devices must be used to maintain anonymity. Every reasonable effort must be made to seek permission from the family or individual concerned to use the illustration.

3.2 Research Ethics

Ethics is about what is considered to be right, fair, good and just. Ethical behaviour in research is concerned with adhering to those research practices that take account of the well-being and rights of others. The principles that underlie research ethics ensure that there is a high regard for:

- personal autonomy
 - the health and well-being of others including freedom from harm
 - truth and fairness
 - diversity across differing socio/cultural and political/economic contexts
 - the development of positive relationships through the establishment of trust
 - maintenance of confidentiality
 - the importance and benefits of the research and its contribution to existing knowledge.
- (Newman & Pollnitz 2002; Stonehouse 1998)

3.2.1 Principles underpinning ethical conduct

The National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007) identifies four basic principals that underpin ethical conduct in relation to research. These are research merit and integrity, respect, beneficence and justice.

- **Integrity** refers to a commitment by researchers to sound professional research standards. It encompasses the values or virtues of the researcher that are brought to bear in research practice.
- **Respect** for persons entails having a regard for the rights, beliefs and values of others and especially those from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, customs and circumstances. Research needs to be designed in such a way that the dignity of the individual is valued.
- **Beneficence** refers to a concern for the well-being of individuals and the avoidance of harm. It is aimed at ensuring the strategies employed in the research address the need to minimise harm and discomfort for participants. The dignity and welfare of individuals must take precedence over the pursuit of knowledge.
- **Justice** acknowledges the need to ensure that there is a balance of burdens and benefits for any research participant. This includes ensuring that any one group of participants is not overburdened with requests to participate in research and ensuring that selection and recruitment of participants is fair. Justice within research practice is also generally understood to involve the sharing the outcomes of research with the wider community.

Further to this, the national statement identifies six core values that have been identified as being important to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. These core values are:

- Reciprocity
- Respect
- Equality
- Responsibility
- Survival and protection
- Spirit and integrity

Respect for and the valuing of cultural and language diversity underpins ethical relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (NHMRC 2007a, pp 69-71)

3.2.2 Informed Consent

It is the responsibility of the Applicant (seeking SDN Research Ethics Committee approval for their project) to clearly explain to each research participant:

- the exact nature of the research study
- what the participant is required to do
- the voluntary nature of being a participant, and
- the right of the participant to withdraw from the study at any time.

A person may refuse to participate in research without having to provide a reason for such a decision.

If possible, consent to participate should be obtained in writing. Where young children are unable to provide consent in writing then the relevant 'authority' (parent or staff member) may speak on the child's behalf. See Appendix I for more information on conducting research with children.

Consent must be gained from participants for the use of audio-recording or video recording devices.

In situations where there is a mass distribution of questionnaires that are returned anonymously then the return of the questionnaire is regarded as consent to participate.

3.2.3 Justification for undertaking the research

The research effort needs to be justifiable in that, given what is already known, it will yield new knowledge or enhance understanding of existing knowledge. That is the research to be undertaken must have both value and validity or be based on sound findings. This requires that those undertaking the research (ie. the researchers) have the necessary expertise not only in effective data collection strategies but in analysing and interpreting the results. Such interpretation should avoid any bias or inappropriate explanation of results.

3.2.4 Ethical review and conduct of research

Research should not be commenced until ethical approval has been granted. However, once commenced, researchers need to be aware that they may need to modify or suspend their work if situations occur where the risks to the participants have the potential to outweigh the benefits. The concern should always be to avoid any harmful effects of the research.

Those responsible for conducting research should have or be able to access researchers who have appropriate experience, qualifications and competence in undertaking that research. This includes having available facilities to meet the physical, emotional or other needs that may be required by participants as a result of their participation in the research.

Another aspect of this principle is the need to ensure that research data is collected, stored, accessed and used in a manner that addresses issues surrounding privacy, confidentiality and cultural sensitivities.

4. Information about the Research Ethics Committee

4.1 The Committee membership and role

The establishment of a Research Ethics Committee was approved by the SDN Board at its Board meeting held on 28 May 2004. The Board determined that the membership of the committee be as follows:

- Dr Joy Goodfellow – SDN Board Member and SDN Senior Research Fellow (Chairperson of the Committee)
- Ms Ginie Udy – SDN CEO
- Mr Kerry Bennett – SDN Board Member

At its Board meeting on 5 March 2007, the SDN Board granted approval to allow for alternative Board members to sit on the committee, if the members listed above are unavailable.

If a research Applicant (external) wishes to conduct research in a particular area of the organisation (centres, programs, head office etc), the relevant senior manager will be invited to join the committee to review that particular Application.

An external advisor may be called upon to offer assistance if deemed necessary by the committee.

Committee Members should be familiar with relevant sections pertaining to responsible research and ethical conduct in human research outlined in the following three documents:

- National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) (2007a). *National statement on ethical conduct in human research*. Canberra: Australian Government.
- National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC). (2007b). *Australian code for the responsible conduct of research*. Canberra: Australian Government.
- The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (May, 2000). *Guidelines for ethical research in indigenous studies*, Canberra: Department of Education, Science & Training.

The Research Ethics Committee's role is to:

- make decisions regarding the approval or otherwise of Applications to undertake research involving staff, families or children within the organisation;
- oversee the extent of compliance by those to whom approval has been granted to undertake research within SDN Children's Services (SDN);
- deal with complaints about research practices not deemed to be ethical;
- report to the SDN Children's Services Board on research projects approved.

4.2 Frequency of meetings

The committee shall meet as required in order to consider Applications for ethics approval. The frequency of such meetings will be determined by the Application received in so far as any Application for ethics approval should not be unduly delayed. A turn-around-time of three weeks from time of receipt of formal Application is recommended providing that advance notice has been given by the Applicant that the application is forthcoming.

4.3 Decision making

Formal applications for ethics approval should be distributed to committee members at least one week before the formal meeting.

Formal minutes are to be kept of all meetings with a clear indication of the decisions made with respect to each application. Confidentiality is to be assured.

Decisions will be made according to the Criteria for Approval of Research Applications set out in these guidelines. The decision for approval will be made by consensus.

4.4 Documentation to be considered

The Committee shall consider all documentation submitted by the Applicant and this should include:

- a Letter of Application identifying who has overall responsibility for undertaking the research and the organisation that they are representing, if relevant;
- the *Application to Undertake Research form* (either internal or external form);
- attachments to the Application such as consent forms, interview schedules, questionnaires, surveys and recruitment information.

4.5 Review of Applications

The committee will take the following into account when considering Applications to conduct research within the organisation:

- the nature of the research project and clarity of procedures
- the worthiness of the project
- the appropriateness of the research methodology
- the extent of disruption to everyday activities of the centre or program and the researcher's capacity to take this into account/ make recompense
- the researchers' capacity to undertake the research and ensure that legal and ethical requirements are met
- the recruitment of participants ensuring that the participants' rights and privacy are adequately addressed
- expectations of participants ensuring that their involvement is not coercive or burdensome
- the general compatibility of the research with the values, vision, mission and strategic goals of SDN.

4.6 Criteria for approval of Applications

1. Does the research fit with SDN's values and strategic plan?
2. Are there benefits to SDN and/or the community through SDN's involvement in the research?
3. Will the research make a contribution to the field of early childhood education or family services?
4. Has provision been made to minimise the potential for there to be risk or harm to the participants involved?
5. Where the research involves vulnerable children/families, have measures been put in place to protect these people from any potential harm?
6. In the recruitment of participants, does the research provide adequate protection of the freedom of the participants to make informed choices?
7. Will written consent to participate in the research be sought from participants?
8. Will the participants be fully advised of the nature of the research and the distribution of the outcomes?
9. Has the welfare, rights, cultural heritage of all participants in the research been respected in the research design?
10. Will the research be conducted in a timely manner?
11. Does the research have the potential to impact significantly on staff time and responsibilities to the organisation?
12. If so, has provision been made to address this?
13. Has provision been made to communicate the outcomes of the research to SDN and the participants?
14. If an Application to conduct research has been made through another organisation or university, has ethics approval been gained through that organisation?

4.7 Decision outcomes

The committee may approve, require amendments or refuse an Application. However, a record must be kept of the reason for such decisions.

The Committee should endeavour to reach decisions through general agreement. Where there is

dissent, then the Applicant should be provided with feedback and encouraged to review their Application.

No member of the Committee will adjudicate on research where there is potential for there to be a conflict of interest because of their involvement in the research.

4.8 Recording of decisions

The Research Ethics Committee is charged with the responsibility of not only determining whether an Application may be granted approval but with recording in minutes of meetings, the nature of their decision and reasons for granting/not granting approval if this is the decision.

4.9 Monitoring

The Research Ethics Committee has a responsibility to monitor research activity and request interim and final reports of such activity.

4.10 Complaints

A key legal responsibility of the Committee is that of dealing with complaints about research activity. All ethics approvals should be given an approval number and this number must appear on documents that are distributed to participants as part of the research. An acceptable procedure is to request that the researcher(s) provide the following statement with respect to complaint procedures, at the end of letters of consent:

This project has been approved by SDN Children's Services Research Ethics Committee. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this research, you may contact the Research Ethics committee at SDN Children's Services (Tel. 02 9213 2400) quoting approval Number XXXX. Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully. You will be informed of the outcome.

5. Intellectual Property (IP) issues

IP issues often surface in the context of research projects and need careful consideration and management.

SDN has an Intellectual Property Policy that can be accessed by:

1. Logging on to SDN's intranet via the website (internal Applications only)
2. Phoning SDN's Head Office on (02) 9213 2400 to request a copy, which will be emailed or posted to the Applicant.

The policy contains a brief description of the various kinds of IP that SDN is likely to encounter and deals with the IP issues that often arise in the context of research projects. *Ownership* of the IP created is often the issue at stake.

Whether SDN is involved in research conducted by other institutions or involves other organisations in the research that it is conducting, a clear statement is made in a letter to the researcher(s) about reporting and ownership of intellectual property with respect to such involvement.

Finally, as stated in our IP policy, SDN discourages plagiarism and unauthorised copying in the strongest terms. Not only are such dishonest practices likely to damage the reputation of SDN and the staff concerned, they may also lead to legal liability. SDN accepts that most projects will make use of the ideas of others, but if:

- Ideas of a third party are to be used, proper citation/acknowledgement is required; and
- Work is to be copied, in all cases proper citation/acknowledgement is required *and* written permission of the copyright owner is required if the quantity is greater than that allowed by the *Copyright Act* as a “fair dealing for the purpose of research or study”. Useful guidelines on what constitutes fair dealing can be found at the website of the Copyright Council at: www.copyright.org.au/pdf/acc/infosheets_pdf/G053.pdf

6. Publications/acknowledgements

Subject to the provisions of agreements about intellectual property with third parties, any publication emanating from the research should acknowledge SDN’s participation in the research. A copy of publications that acknowledge SDN should be submitted to the CEO, SDN Children’s Services.

7. References

The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS), 2000. *Guidelines for ethical research in indigenous studies*. Canberra: Department of Education, Science & Training. [online] Available at http://aiatsis.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/2290/ethics/guidelines.pdf

Copyright Act, 2007. *Research or study*. [Information sheet from the Copyright Council] [online] Available at: http://www.copyright.org.au/pdf/acc/infosheets_pdf/G053.pdf

Macquarie University's Human Ethics Committee Survival Kit (September, 2001).

National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC), 2007a. *National statement on ethical conduct in human research*. Canberra: Australian Government. [online] Available at: <http://www.nhmrc.gov.au>.

National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC), 2007b. *Australian code for the responsible conduct of research*. Canberra: Australian Government. [online] Available at: <http://www.nhmrc.gov.au>.

Newman, L. & Pollnitz, L., 2002. *Ethics in action: introducing the Ethical Response Cycle*. Australian Early Childhood Association Research in Practice Series. Watson, ACT: Australian Early Childhood Association.

Stonehouse, A., 1998. *Code of ethics at work*. (Revised edition). Canberra: AECA.

APPENDIX 1

Research involving children

The following strategies that are outlined in the NSECRIH are relevant to research undertaken with the cooperation of young children:

'Research involving children and young people should only be conducted where:

- a) the research question posed is important to the health and well-being of children and young people;
- b) the participation of children and young people is indispensable because information available from research on other individuals cannot answer the question posed in relation to children or young people;
- c) the study method is appropriate for children or young people; and
- d) the circumstances in which the research is conducted provide for the physical, emotional and psychological safety of the child or young person.

Consent to a child's or young person's participation in research must be obtained from:

- a) the child or young person whenever he or she has sufficient competence to make this decision; and either
- b) the parents/guardian in all but exceptional circumstances; or
- c) any organisation or person required by law.

Research cannot be undertaken that is contrary to the child's best interests.

The child's refusal to participate in a research project must be respected.'
(NSECRIH, 1999, p.25)