1. Introduction

SDN is committed to delivering high-quality, inclusive and integrated services that support young children, their families, and the communities in which they live. We believe it is important to contribute to the evidence base that informs our work. For this reason we engage with, and critique contemporary best practice, our staff members use reflective practices and attend other professional development opportunities, we conduct research and evaluation within our services, and we share our learning with others.

SDN supports research and evaluation activities by staff members and by external agencies in collaboration with our staff members where those activities:

- are ethical and respectful of the people involved

- reflect SDN's values

- benefit SDN and/or the community through SDN's involvement in the research

- make a contribution to knowledge about the well-being of children, families and communities.

2. Scope

These guidelines have been developed to assist:

- applicants (internal and external) who would like to undertake research or evaluation projects involving SDN, its staff members and/or the children and families it serves

- the SDN Research Ethics Committee in:

  - making decisions regarding the approval or otherwise of applications to undertake research or evaluation projects

  - overseeing the extent to which those who have been granted approval to undertake research or evaluation projects comply with specified terms and conditions

  - dealing with complaints about research practices not deemed to be ethical.

The guidelines reflect SDN's values and the basic principles of ethical conduct of research as provided for within the *Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research* (NHMRC 2007a), the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* (NHMRC, 2007b), and the *Guidelines for Ethical Research in Australian Indigenous Studies* (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 2012).

Sections 1 to 4 of these guidelines provide general information; Sections 5, 7 and 8, and the *Applications for Research and Evaluation at SDN Procedure* assist Applicants applying for approval to conduct research

or evaluation projects; and Sections 6, 9 to 10 are relevant to those Applicants who have obtained approval.

Applicants will first be asked to submit an expression of interest to conduct research at SDN, and if this is approved then an application with full details will be requested before final approval is given.

Applicants should read SDN's *Research and Evaluation Application Procedure*, which can be downloaded from our website.

All inquiries should be directed initially to the Customer Experience and Outcomes Coordinator on 02 9213 2400, or research@sdn.org.au.

3. Key Terms

Assent to participate in research is an expression of agreement to participate from those who are not legally able to consent (Dockett et al, 2009; Ford et al, 2007). Assent may be verbal or non-verbal, depending on the child's development and capabilities. A child's refusal to participate in research (whether verbal or non-verbal) should be respected wherever possible.

Consent to participate in research is a deliberate and voluntary choice, based on the provision of sufficient information to the participant, and his/her adequate understanding of both the proposed research and the implications of his/her participation.

For definitions of other key terms used in this Guidelines, please refer to the *Research and Evaluation at SDN Policy*.

4. Ethical Conduct in Research

Ethical conduct in research is concerned with adhering to 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 and respect for the contribution made by participants

- the health and wellbeing 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)

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

- **Integrity** refers to a commitment by researchers to meet professional research standards.

- **Respect** for persons entails having a regard for the rights, beliefs and values of others (including children) 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. Ethical research minimises any 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 of research outcomes with the wider community.

The *National Statement* also recognises that research involving children raises particular ethical concerns, including their capacity to understand and consent to research; their possible coercion to participate in research by parents, peers, researchers or others; and conflicting values and interests of children and their parents (NHMRC, 2007b, pp 55-57). Before including a child in research, researchers must ensure there is no reason to believe that such participation is contrary to the child's best interests.

With respect to ethical research involving Indigenous Australians, the *National Statement* emphasises respect for, and valuing of, cultural and language diversity (NHMRC 2007b, pp 69-71). There are diverse Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and societies across Australia. As a minimum, researchers must attend the following six core values, identified as being important to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples:

- reciprocity

- respect

- equality

- responsibility

- survival and protection

- spirit and integrity.

5. Ethical considerations

Ethical practice in research involves careful consideration of the following:

Informed Consent/Assent

In general, SDN requires that Applicants seek to obtain written informed consent from persons participating in a research or evaluation project. It is recommended that participants and researchers each retain a signed copy of the consent form.

It is the responsibility of the Applicant to ensure that participants are provided with information about:

- the exact nature of the research or evaluation project

- what the participant is required to do, including expected time commitment

- the voluntary nature of being a participant

- any significant potential risks or harms to the participant

- the right of the participant to withdraw from the project at any time.

A person may refuse to participate in a research or evaluation project without having to provide a reason for such a decision, and should be able to withdraw at any time, without such actions impacting services provided to him/her by SDN.

Research involving children requires the consent of a parent or guardian. However, researchers must also respect the developing capacity of children to understand and be involved in decisions about participating in research. Whenever appropriate and possible, children's views on research participation should be sought. This may take the form of seeking children's *assent* to research, a term used for an expression of agreement to participate from those who are not legally able to consent (Dockett et al, 2009; Ford et al, 2007). Assent may be verbal or non-verbal, depending on the child's development and capabilities. A child's refusal to participate in research (whether verbal or non-verbal) should be respected wherever possible. Researchers should also consider the developmental level of children when engaging them in understanding the nature and likely outcomes of research, and when judging their capacity to assent or consent to research.

Research or evaluation projects involving the use of cameras, audio-recording or video recording devices also require the written consent of those whose images and/or voices are being recorded.

For projects where there is a wide distribution of questionnaires that are returned anonymously, then the return of the questionnaire is regarded as implied consent to participate. Where a research or evaluation project seeks to make use of documents or data produced during routine service delivery (for example, drawings produced by children in SDN's care or receiving special services), every reasonable effort must be made to seek permission from the family or individual concerned to use the material.

Payments to Participants

SDN considers it acceptable to provide modest payment or other inducement to encourage participation in research and evaluation projects, for example, to recompense participants for their time and travel costs, or to support release time for staff members participating in such projects. Approval for such arrangements must be sought from SDN's Research Ethics Committee as part of the application process.

Confidentiality

Every effort should be made to ensure the confidentiality and security of information collected as part of an approved research or evaluation project. Applicants must describe the strategies that will be used to ensure confidentiality and security of data records. Wherever possible, records that are maintained should be in a de-identified form; if this is not possible, Applicants should justify why identifying information is necessary, and what steps will be taken to protect such data. Data collected during the project, either on paper or in electronic form, should be stored securely and kept from misuse for a period of 5 years after the conclusion of the project, and then appropriately destroyed.

The reporting of research or evaluation results should generally preserve the anonymity of individual participants. Where reference is made to individual cases (children, families or staff members), procedures to de-identify the participants should be used to maintain anonymity, such as the use of pseudonyms or other necessary devices. However, it is recognised that there may be exceptions where participants consent and/or request to be identified because of the nature of their contributions.

6. Other considerations

Child Protection Obligations

It is SDN policy that all staff members, students, volunteers and contractors will be required to have a valid Working With Children Check (WWCC) (for NSW) or Working With Vulnerable People (WWVP) registration (for ACT). This includes external researchers working on a research or evaluation project that directly involves children. Applicants working directly with children will need to advise SDN of their WWCC or WWVP registration details before they begin working at an SDN location in order for a valid clearance to be confirmed.

Persons whose usual work role includes delivering services directly to children and families are classified as *mandatory reporters* for child protection purposes under the *NSW Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998*, and the *ACT Children and Young People Act 2008*. A mandatory reporter has an obligation to make a report to the Department of Family and Community Services (FACS) if in NSW, or Care and Protection Services if in the ACT, if s/he has a current concern about the safety, welfare, or wellbeing of a child.

A person who does not qualify as a mandatory reporter, based on his/her usual work role, remains so, even if participating in, or leading a research or evaluation project that directly involves children or families.

All persons who engage with children in SDN's care have a responsibility to behave appropriately and respectfully towards them. Applicants with approved applications are encouraged to report to SDN if they hear of, or observe any action towards a child that could be regarded as *reportable conduct*. Such conduct includes:

- any sexual offence, or sexual misconduct, committed against, with or in the presence of a child (including a child pornography offence)

- any assault, ill-treatment or neglect of a child

- any behaviour that causes psychological harm to a child.

Applicants with approved applications may also be reported if they have been heard, or observed to have engaged in the above behaviours.

Information or observations of potential reportable conduct must be brought to the attention of SDN's CEO, who is responsible for investigating a reportable conduct allegation.

Further details about mandatory reporting, working with children at SDN, and reportable conduct are described in SDN's *Child Protection and Wellbeing Policy*, and *Code of Conduct for Staff Members' Interactions with Children Policy*, which can be accessed by:

- logging on to SDN's intranet via the website (for internal staff Applicants)

- phoning SDN's Head Office on (02) 9213 2400 to request a copy (for external Applicants).

Intellectual Property

Intellectual Property (IP) issues often surface in the context of research and evaluation projects and need careful consideration and management. SDN has an *Intellectual Property* Policy that contains a brief description of the various kinds of IP that SDN is likely to encounter and the IP issues that often arise in the context of research and evaluation projects. This policy can be accessed by:

- logging on to SDN's intranet via the website (for internal staff Applicants)

- phoning SDN's Head Office on (02) 9213 2400 to request a copy (for external Applicants).

Ownership of the IP that is created is often the issue at stake. A clear statement is made by the Research Ethics Committee on a case by case basis in the letter of approval to Applicants about reporting and ownership of IP. As stated in SDN's 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 individuals concerned; they may also lead to legal liability.

SDN accepts that most projects will refer to and/or make use of the ideas of others, and in all cases proper citation/acknowledgement is required. Where work is to be copied, written permission of the copyright owner is also 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 Copyright Council website at: www.copyright.org.au

Publications and acknowledgements

Subject to the provisions regarding intellectual property with third parties, any public presentation or publication emanating from an approved research or evaluation project should acknowledge SDN's participation. A copy of such presentations or publications should be forwarded to SDN's EA to the Head of Communications.

7. Role of SDN's Research Ethics Committee

The role of SDN's Research Ethics Committee is to:

- make decisions regarding the approval or otherwise of *Applications for Research or Evaluation at SDN*

- monitor compliance by those granted approval to undertake research and evaluation activities at SDN in accordance with the principles and terms identified in Sections 5, 6 and 10 of these guidelines

- deal with complaints about research and evaluation practices deemed to be unethical

- report approved research and evaluation projects to SDN's Board

- provide advice on policies and procedures pertaining to research and evaluation at SDN.

The committee meets quarterly to consider applications for ethics approval. Extraordinary meetings may be scheduled for urgent or time-sensitive applications. Further details about the operations of the

committee are described in the document, *SDN's Research Ethics Committee – Terms of Reference*, which can be accessed by:

- contacting the EA to the Head of Communications (for internal staff Applicants)

- phoning SDN's Head Office on (02) 9213 2400 to request a copy (for external Applicants).

The committee strives to respond to applications with a turn-around-time of three weeks from time of receipt of formal application to response from the committee, provided that advance notice has been given by the Applicant that the application is forthcoming.

Projects should not commence until ethics approval has been granted. However, once commenced, Applicants 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. An Applicant's priority should always be to avoid any harmful effects of the research or evaluation project.

Applicants conducting research and evaluation projects should have the appropriate experience, qualifications and competence to undertake the proposed project, or demonstrate access to others with the necessary expertise. This includes having available facilities that meet the physical, emotional or other needs of participants engaged in the project. Applicants must also ensure that data are collected, stored, accessed and used in a manner consistent with issues of privacy, confidentiality and cultural appropriateness.

8. Criteria for Approval of Applications

The proposed research or evaluation project 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 project must have both value and validity or be based on sound findings. This requires that those undertaking the project (i.e., the Applicants) have the necessary expertise in research design, data collection strategies, data analysis and interpreting the results.

The Research Ethics Committee will take the following into account when considering *Applications for Research or Evaluation at SDN*:

- Does the project fit with SDN's values and strategic priorities?

- Are there benefits to SDN and/or the community through SDN's involvement in the project?

- Will the research or evaluation make a contribution to the field of early childhood care and education or family services?

- Has provision been made to minimise the potential for risk or harm to the participants involved?

- Where the project involves vulnerable children/families, have measures been put in place to protect these people from any potential harm or minimise such harm?

- In the recruitment of participants, does the project provide adequate protection of the freedom of the participants to agree or decline to participate?

- Where written consent from adult participants is being sought, will sufficient and appropriate information be provided to the participants?

- Where verbal assent from children is being sought, will sufficient and appropriate information be provided to the children?

- Where written consent is not being sought, will participants be fully advised of the nature of the project and the dissemination of outcomes/results?

- Have the welfare, rights, and cultural heritage of all participants been respected in the design of the project?

- Have issues of participant and data confidentiality been appropriately addressed?

- Will the project be conducted in a timely manner, and is it feasible in the timeframe proposed?

- Does the project have the potential to impact significantly on SDN staff members' time and work responsibilities? If so, has provision been made to address this?

- Has provision been made to communicate the outcomes of the project to SDN, the participants and any other audiences?

- Has ethics approval been requested or gained through another organisation (for example, university)? If so, has a copy of the approval been provided?

9. Monitoring

The Research Ethics Committee has a responsibility to monitor research and evaluation activity and request interim and final reports of such activity. Applicants with approved applications will be advised of such reporting responsibilities in the committee's letter of approval. SDN will request periodic updates from the Applicant regarding progress.

Applicants with approved applications must notify SDN (through the EA to the Head of Communications), as soon as practicable, of any substantive changes affecting the approved project. Such changes may include, but are not limited to, changes to the Applicant(s) named in the application, significant changes to the proposed methods, major delays in progress, or unanticipated adverse effects associated with the project.

10. Complaints

The Research Ethics Committee deals with complaints about research activity. Applicant(s) should include the following statement, either as part of the written information provided to participants or at the end of the participant consent form, with respect to complaint procedures:

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 project, you may contact SDN Children's Services (Tel. 02 9213 2400) for the contact details of the REC secretariat. Please quote application approval number XXXX. Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully. You will be informed of the outcome.

Related SDN Documents

Policies

- GI-HLP-1-09: Privacy

- GI-OP-1.13: Complaints Management

- GI-HLP-1.18: Research and Evaluation at SDN

- SD-HLP-2.02: Child Protection and Wellbeing

- HR-HLP-3.03: Code of Conduct for Interactions with Children

- LGL-HLP-8.01: Intellectual Property

Procedures

- GI-PRO-1.18-01: Applications for Research and Evaluation at SDN

- HR-PRO-2.02-03: Working with Children and Vulnerable People and Police Checks

Forms/Templates

- GI-FRM-1.18-01-01: Expression of Interest to Conduct Research or Evaluation at SDN (External) Form

- GI-FRM-1.18-01-02: Expression of Interest to Conduct Research or Evaluation at SDN (Internal) Form

- GI-FRM-1.18-01-03: Application for Research or Evaluation at SDN (External) Form

- GI-FRM-1.18-01-04: Application for Research or Evaluation at SDN (Internal) Form

Other SDN Document

- SDN's Research Ethics Committee, Terms of Reference

Other References/Related Documents

- Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies. (2012). *Guidelines for Ethical Research in Australian Indigenous Studies*, 2nd edition. Canberra: Canberra Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies. http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/research/ethics/GERAIS.html

- Copyright Act. (2012). *Research or Study*. [Information sheet from the Copyright Council] http://www.copyright.org.au/admin/cms-acc1/_images/40289474052392587a82ec.pdf

- Dockett, S., Perry, B., Kearney, E. (2009). *Promoting children's informed assent in research participation*. Paper presented at the Australian Social Policy Conference, Sydney.

- Early Childhood Australia. (2006). *Code of Ethics*. http://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/our-publications/eca-code-ethics/

- Ford, K., Sankey, J., Crisp, J. (2007). Development of children's assent documents using a child-centred approach. *Journal of Child Health Care* 11: 19-28.

- National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC). (2007a). *Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research*. http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/_files_nhmrc/file/publications/synopses/r39.pdf

- National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC). (2007b*). National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research 2007*. http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/guidelines/publications/e72

- 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.