



## Media, Ethics and Guidelines

There is no scope to see the ethics in an isolated way. While truthfulness/ objectivity (to the facts) and accountability (to the target audience/ child) are the ethical cornerstones in journalism, this must be considered alongside a sense of responsibility to the people involved in the news (the public, as well as the readers / viewers / audience). Thus, the idea of journalistic ethics is shaped in accordance with professional judgement, demands of taste and conscience, and humanity and accountability.

### **The basic guiding principles:**

- No alternative to factual accuracy – the complete truth
- Careful analysis of the issue – supported by evidence and examples
- Being accountable to the object of trust and the audience
- Substantiating subjective views with necessary objective data / facts / quotes of the persons involved
- Respecting readers' right to know – sharing source of information with the audience

It is important to be guided by **certain ethical standards**, even when reaching out to the child audience with **general news (where children are not present)**, as they learn from their surroundings and depend on adults to protect them and keep them safe from 'information abuse'. The issues which demand special attention and care include:

- **Accuracy and comprehensibility**
  - A) Keeping facts separate from opinions / comments
  - B) Avoiding false / half-checked information, rumours, distorted truth & biased information
- **Maintaining good taste and decency**
  - A) Avoiding vulgarity, atrocity, cruelty and violence – keeping away from display of gory visuals of murders / deaths / dead bodies /
  - B) Avoiding explicit sexuality
  - C) Avoiding sensationalizing crime and other anti-social behaviours
- **Dealing with different faiths, values and opinions with care**
  - A) Celebrating diversity
  - B) Identifying the unjust
- **Giving due importance to the psyche of the child-audience**
- **Maintaining a neutral and gender sensitive perspective**

Some specific considerations journalists should have **while dealing with news centred on children:**

- **Reporting appropriately and adequately** – Taking initiative to seek out important events that centre round children
- **Reflecting diversity** – News about children should consider the different kinds of children in a society and recognize their different needs and tastes
- **Understanding / monitoring child rights** – Issues and situations related to child rights (and violations of child rights) should be investigated with care and reported about. While doing so,



it's important to be sure to investigate the reasons of violations, who is responsible, what is the role of the concerned duty bearers / service providers, what is the systemic gaps involved (if any) etc.

- **Broadening the agenda** – it's important to look at incidents of violations of Child Rights keeping them in perspective. While reporting such incidents, often the journalists single them out and handle them as stand-alone cases. But it should be remembered that many of such incidents are mere manifestations of systemic disorders or perpetual adult-centric mindset.
- **Listening to children's voice** – When children are directly involved, it is a must to highlight their statements and views on the event or the issue. It is also important to listen to children, even when they are not directly involved. Often things that adults do and decisions they make may have a huge impact on children.
- **Perceiving & Presenting Child in a positive way, in the best interest of the Child** – The way that children are portrayed in the news is of utmost importance. Media portrayal of children has a profound impact on attitude towards children and childhood and has an important influence on adults' behaviour toward children. Media depictions may provide role-models for young citizens, in turn influencing their attitudes and expectations. The way in which media represent (or ignore) children can influence decisions taken on their behalf, and how the rest of the society regards them. The media often perceives children as mere passive / silent recipients or beneficiaries, while in an ideal condition they should be treated as right-holding entities and should be treated with due honour and dignity.
- **Protecting children** – No story is more important than that. Hence, there are aspects to be considered before reporting on child-protection issues.
  - A) **Risk analysis** – Are we doing something which in the long run may add to their vulnerability and expose them to further abuse?
  - B) **Dignity and Privacy** – While interviewing them (to authenticate the story) are we respecting their dignity and maintaining their right to privacy?
  - C) **Scandals and harassment** – Are we keeping a careful eye to protect them from social stigma, while reporting a story of child sexual abuse?
  - D) **Identifying the child** – Are we duly careful about protecting their identity, while exposing them in the news?



## Interviewing, photographing and filming children

Extracts from *Child Rights and the media: Putting Children in the Right*, International Federation of Journalists

<http://www.ifj.org/assets/docs/247/254/cf73bf7-c75e9fe.pdf>

The guidelines are not designed to, and will not, resolve ethical questions for journalists. As already emphasised, they provide a framework for media professionals to work through difficult issues. This section is designed to address some of the practical issues that journalists must consider.

### Each child is an individual human being

The Media sometimes contribute to myths that damage the public perception by showing children only as sinners or victims. In 1995, Dr Magda Michielsens of the University of Nijmegen in the Netherlands analysed the portrayal of victims in the news output of seven TV channels across Europe. She concluded that victims generally are given low status, and those from Africa are much less likely to be identified as individuals and offered the chance to speak, than those from Europe. In words and pictures children can often become cyphers, representing youth, hope, joy, misery or despair, but not properly existing as individual people with rights of their own.

Each child is of course an individual human being and, while the image of a girl or boy may be thought representative of a generation, the person does not in fact 'stand for' anything else but is a unique person with full human rights. The same principles should apply when interviewing children as when interviewing adults, even if the principles sometimes must be applied in different ways. The first requirement is that each child should be treated with respect and as an individual. This poses complex issues for reporters, and even more complex issues for photographers and those who are filming children.

### Gaining consent to photograph or interview

There are some principles that can be applied to interviewing children, and (albeit with less clarity) to photographing or filming children.

The first is that children have a right to privacy, and that this right should only be overridden where it is in a child's own interests or in the public interest, and when permission has been given. One might argue that a picture taken in the street of a group of children laughing on their way to school does not infringe their rights because it does not expose them to harm or ridicule and was taken in a public place. Others might question why it was necessary to take a picture in this way. Most would agree that it would be wrong to take a picture over a school wall of children in the playground, without the knowledge of children, parents or staff. This is not a public place, and children are entitled to privacy.

A journalist who interviews a child should be sure that the child understands that what he or she writes will be published or broadcast.

Clearly the child should consent to this process, and depending on the age of the child, so should a responsible adult. The interview should never normally take place without another adult being present. The adult would normally be a parent but might be someone else who was acting in the place of a parent, such as a teacher, or someone working for a children's agency. Older children can speak for themselves, but there is a danger that even young people in their teens may be misled or make a snap decision they later regret. Journalists should consider whether even older teenagers properly understand how material is to be used and whether they can give informed consent. Indeed, the older the child, the more necessary it is to explain the use of material fully and let them decide.



With younger children, permission must always be sought from a responsible adult, and even if the journalist believes that a relevant adult has made a poor decision or one designed to protect their own interests, the decision should be respected, except where there is a clear and strong public interest to do otherwise. The issue of seeking permission is often clearer cut for reporters than for photographers. It is therefore important for media professionals and media organisations to discuss these issues in advance and decide on guidelines and how issues will be resolved. The worst decisions are usually made when deadlines are tight, and a news editor or producer is under pressure to produce results. Ethics are then inconvenient and someone who has not been trained or prepared for these decisions will simply try to impose it as a 'management decision'. One not very scientific but useful guide for the photographer and camera operator is that if what they are doing feels shabby, it is almost certainly wrong.

### [Naming or not naming](#)

One of the most difficult ethical issues is whether to name children or show their faces in photographs or on film. The IFJ Guidelines say that media professionals should:

Guard against visually or otherwise identifying children unless it is demonstrably in the public interest; (Clause 5)

### **How are we to interpret this clause?**

Interestingly, the Convention on the Rights of the Child includes one right that has not yet been mentioned.

#### **Article 7 says:**

The child shall be registered immediately after birth and shall have the right from birth to a name, the right to acquire a nationality and, as far as possible, the right to know and be cared for by his or her parents.

#### **While Article 8 reiterates that the state must:**

undertake to respect the right of the child to preserve his or her identity, including nationality, name and family relations as recognized by law without unlawful interference.

Those who framed the convention may not have the media in mind, but it is significant that one of the fundamental rights of a child is the right to a name. Journalists should not lightly dispose of this right where there is no harm. If a child is featured in a story that reflects well on the child and where the child is not a victim, and where coverage has the agreement of the child and parents, and where it does not put the child at risk, there is a positive argument for respecting the identity of the child and using his or her name. Worries over identification are often associated with negative media coverage— which does not cover children's issues except when problem is involved. The IFJ clause is drafted to put the onus on the media to show that where they name a child, they can justify it in the public interest, rather than it being the responsibility of the family or of media critics to show that harm was done to the child.

There are many cases, where a child is involved in a legal case or is a ward of the local authority, where it is illegal to name the child in relation to proceedings or the issue that led to proceedings. Such laws vary between countries, but journalists in any event should never name a child who is the victim of a sexual assault or a rape. All journalists should be very familiar with the legislation protecting disclosure in the country where they are working.



When working on sexual abuse stories, the media must work within the spirit of two key parts of The Optional Protocol on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography. The first urges states to protect:

the privacy and identity of child victims ...to avoid the inappropriate dissemination of information that could lead to the identification of child victims.

The second key principle tells states to:

promote awareness in the public at large, including children, through information by all appropriate means, education and training, about the preventive measures and harmful effects of the offences,

which means that the media must do its job effectively.

Between the two extremes of a good news story and reporting on sexual abuse lies a variety of circumstances and stories which demand individual decisions about whether a child should be named.

The reason why media like to show people's faces and give their names is that what journalists do is about real life and real people, and that real people give news coverage humanity. There is a danger that, if names are routinely changed, then attachment to the individual and their reality is weakened.

Then the temptation arises to maybe change one or two other facts to 'improve' the story, since after all it is now about a fictitious person.

One advantage of using real names and faces, is that a journalist can be held accountable for what he or she produces. By giving information about a child, the media emphasises that the individual child is valued in the story and is not being used as a cypher.

The first duty of the media is to avoid inflicting further harm on a child, and in many cases further harm will be brought by publicity which identifies a child and brings him or her to public attention. However, in considering the public interest and the rights of the child to privacy, media professionals should consider the attachment that a child has to its own name.

If a child's name is automatically changed, regardless of the context, that also dehumanises a child, who is entitled to look at the final piece and wonder why that journalist who seemed so nice has got his or her name wrong. Often, it is enough just to use one name, and in an era of rising concern about paedophiles it would clearly be irresponsible of the media to identify the address of a child under any circumstances.

Clearly this approach needs to be balanced against the occasions where there will be harm to the child. The journalist should not need to be reminded of this. A media professional should point out to a young person, even an older teenager, that the pleasure of seeing themselves on television or their picture in the paper, needs to be balanced against what they may think a year later, if the publicity has damaged their prospects in some way.

### **Interviewing children**

We have already established that abuse is based on an imbalance of power, and in an interview the media professional has far more power than the child. How can an interview be carried out effectively while still respecting the rights of a child?



- 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.
- The interviewer should sit or stand at the same height as the child and not ‘talk down’, either literally or metaphorically.
- 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 must spend time around children until they stop focusing on the cameras and lights.
- 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.
- An interviewer should adopt a calm, friendly and neutral voice and not react with shock or amazement.
- 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 way) and then use closed questions to narrow down on facts that you have to check.
- Questions can be repeated in a different form to cross-check that the child has understood and has expressed himself or herself clearly.
- 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.
- Wherever possible corroboration should be sought (good practice for all kinds of interviews).
- If interviewing through a translator, care should be taken that the interpreter translates exactly what the child says and does not mediate or summarise answers.

### Conclusion

Those looking for a check list to work from may find this section annoyingly imprecise. The overall duty of a journalist or other media professional doing this kind of work is to act in the best interests of the child and of children and to try to deal with ethical issues with clarity and honesty. This will not guarantee that they make no mistakes but would dramatically improve the quality of media coverage of children’s issues.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child is based on the spirit of peace, dignity, tolerance, freedom, equality and solidarity. Journalists should extend those qualities to children. As the preamble to the IFJ guidelines says: “Informed, sensitive and professional journalism is a key element in any media strategy for improving the quality of reporting concerning human rights and society. The daily challenge to journalists and media organisations is particularly felt in coverage of children and their rights.”

The primary responsibility to ensure that young people are not harmed or exploited by media coverage lies with media organisations. They should put into place clear protocols for deciding when it is appropriate to film or interview young people, whether and how permission needs to be sought and how well this will be explained to the young people themselves. In addition, media organisations should have clear methods for discussing and resolving difficult cases. These procedures must go beyond naming a responsible person to take decisions. They must outline a method of holding a professional discussion, even (especially) when deadlines are tight.

There is not only a collective responsibility on an organisation. Each individual journalist and media professional also have an individual responsibility to act ethically, even if he or she are under pressure to bring back results. ‘Following orders’ cannot be used as excuse for inflicting harm on children. Journalists and media professionals have their own obligation to follow their own codes of conduct and to work according to their consciences, even if that means falling out with managers.



## Guidelines and Principles for Reporting on Issues Involving Children

The following guidelines for journalists have been drawn up by the International Federation of Journalists based on an extensive survey of codes of conduct and standards already in force across the world. The purpose is to raise media awareness of children's rights issues and to stimulate debate among media professionals about the value of a common approach which will reinforce journalistic standards and contribute to the protections and enhancement of children's rights.

### **Principles**

All journalists and media professionals have a duty to maintain the highest ethical and professional standards

Media organisations should regard violation of the rights of children and issues related to children's safety, privacy, security, their 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 which touches on the lives and welfare of children should always be carried out with appreciation of the vulnerable situation of children.

### **IFJ's Guidelines for Journalists on protecting children's rights**

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 straight forward 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.

