



Editorial Guidelines and Principles for Reporting on Children in the Media

Developed with children, journalists, editors, and media professionals for African media

About the project

These editorial guidelines form part of a project funded by the European Commission in partnership with Save the Children International, Media Monitoring Africa (South Africa), the Media Network on Child Rights and Development (Zambia) and the Swedish International Development Co-operation Agency. This project aims at empowering children to participate meaningfully in decisions affecting them in the media, and convincing adults that children can contribute to national debate and discussion.

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Editorial guidelines and principles for reporting on children in the media

The following guidelines and principles have been developed with the input of children and media professionals to assist journalists and media practitioners to produce better quality reporting on children, on the understanding that respecting children's rights today will mean respect for all people's rights in the future.

“Good stories don't depend on time and space but on the choice of words and sensitivity. You decide all day long until your story is published. The thing to ask as you make those decisions is, what is your yardstick, what is your measuring tool to assess if what you are doing is the right thing or the wrong thing? Is it fair or unfair? That's where ethics come in. We make decisions that have an impact in society, so our ethical foundation has to be solid. The Press Code is ‘Ethics in a Can.’”

Joe Thloloe, Director: Press Council, South Africa

General ethical principles for reporting on children

Section 28(2) of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa states,

“A child's best interests are of paramount importance in every matter concerning the child.”¹ A child is a person who is under the age of 18.²

Children constitute 39% of South Africa's population and not only deserve to have a “voice” in the media, and a right to participate in the media but are also powerful change agents and future media consumers. Children's issues are therefore of great importance and media professionals should always strive to bring attention to issues that affect children in society (outlined in the Millennium Development Goals), such as the eradication of child hunger, issues of education, lack of shelter, sustainability and more. Children's interests (such as trends, music and social media involvement) should also be explored and reported on by media professionals to encourage the involvement of children in the media, both as consumers and producers.

¹ The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa expands on the “best interest of the child” principle encompassed in both the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child

² Children's Act 38 of 2005, Section 17 defines the age of majority as 18

Journalists have a greater responsibility to report on children in an ethical manner, and specifically to³:

- **Seek the truth and report it accurately and as fully as possible**
- **Act independently** – do their best to avoid conflicts of interest and to remain free of influences that might interfere with publishing that is accurate, fair, transparent and professional
- **Act fairly** – do their best to act justly, to respect people, to respect privacy and to keep promises. Do their best to present different points of view in ways that adherents of various perspectives judge to be accurate
- **Minimise harm** – be compassionate to those affected by their actions. Treat sources, subjects, and colleagues as human beings deserving of respect, not merely as means to journalistic ends
- **Ensure balanced reporting that is in the best interests of the child⁴**
- **Consider the value of the information disclosed in the story**
- **Listen attentively to children** – ensure that they can actively participate in the reporting process

Furthermore, journalists must:

- Support the regional and international protections of children
- Guard against any practice that may exploit or violate the rights of any child
- Encourage reporting on a diversity of matters involving children
- Understand that children, taking into consideration their age, maturity and stage of development, are capable of participating in decisions that affect them and that views expressed by children must be given due consideration⁵
- Play a positive role in portraying children and their rights, and therefore support better attitudes and opinions about children and their rights



³ Ethical Guidelines, Poynter Institute,

<http://www.poynter.org/archived/about-poynter/20209/ethics-guidelines-for-poynter-publishing/>

⁴ The phrase “best interests of the child” refers to the well-being of any child in question. It is a **subjective test** that depends on a variety of individual circumstances, such as the age and the level of maturity of the child, the presence or absence of parents, the child’s environment, etc. All actions concerning the child should take full account of this

⁵ Children’s Act 38 of 2005, Section 10: Child participation

Editorial guidelines for reporting on children

In order to preserve the above principles, journalists should adhere to the following editorial guidelines in dealing with matters involving children⁶:

1. *Always respect the best interests of the individual child, even where you are trying to tell people about harm to children in general or another children's issue or promote children's rights.*

The best interests of each child are to be protected over any other consideration, including advocacy for children's issues in general and the promotion of children's rights as a class over the best interests of the individual child.

2. *Always respect children's dignity and well-being.* The dignity and rights of every child are to be respected in every circumstance.
3. *When interviewing and photographing children,*

respect their privacy and confidentiality, and make sure you protect them from harm and potential consequences.

In interviewing and reporting on children, special attention is to be paid to their right to privacy and confidentiality, to participate in decisions affecting them, and to be protected from harm and retribution, even potential harm and retribution. A child should always be interviewed in a safe, comfortable and non-threatening environment. If the child does not want to be a part of the interview, his/her wishes should be respected. A child should be afforded enough time to think about whether he/she wants a story to be published or not.

4. *Children have a right to have their views heard on matters that affect them, so try to include them⁷.* When trying to determine the best interests of children, their right to have their

⁶The following principles and information have been drawn from a variety of sources, including: the UNICEF guidelines on reporting on children; MMA's Editorial Guidelines for Reporting in the Media 2009; (*All Sides of the Story – Reporting on Children: A Journalist's Handbook*) (UNICEF and the Media Monitoring Project); Avusa (now Times Media Group) Editorial Policies; Independent Media Group of South Africa, MISA Guidelines on Reporting on Child Rights and Children Issues; Reporting on Children in the Context of HIV/AIDS (Media Monitoring Project, Children's Institute, Centre for Social Science Research and Wits University); the South Africa Press Code; as well as draft elements from the *Daily Voice* newspaper

⁷Children's Act 38 of 2005, Section 10: Child participation

views taken into account is to be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity.

5. *When writing a story on children, ask those who know or work with them, or are experts on the issue, about the potential consequences of telling their story.* Those closest to the child and/or those best able to assess a child's situation are to be consulted about the diverse ramifications, including possible secondary trauma as well as potential political, social and cultural ramifications of any reportage.
6. *Always hide a child's identity where the child might be at risk.* No stories or images should be published that might put the child, siblings or peers at risk. When it is editorially necessary to publish a picture of a child that is potentially harmful to that child, the identity of the child shall be obscured in such a manner that the child cannot be recognised⁸.
7. *Children involved in legal proceedings need even more protection, and are at greater risk, so make sure to always protect their identity.*

In all stories in which a child has been involved in a crime, either as a witness, victim or perpetrator, the identity of the child must be protected, unless exceptional circumstances prevail, criminal proceedings have been completed, and there is informed consent from the child involved and the child's caregiver⁹.

8. *If you want to name or show a child, make sure you are allowed to do so by law, that you have informed consent from both the child and caregiver and that you still protect them from potential harm.* Whenever the identity of a child is disclosed, whether pictorially or in print:
 - The statutory restrictions on the naming or identification of a child shall be observed and adhered to
 - The informed consent of the child and caregiver of any child shall be sought in all cases
 - Even if a child's caregiver consents to disclosure of the identity of a child, a journalist must exercise cautious discretion, as it may nevertheless be harmful to the child to publish his or her identity

⁸ In this regard, the face of the child shall be blurred or pixellated completely. However, pixellating the face alone is not enough; anything in the photo that may identify the child, such as a bracelet or picture, must be obscured

⁹ It should be noted that caregiver refers to a parent, guardian or an adult who has responsibility for the child, but that the degree of responsibility can vary depending on the circumstances

9. Make sure to protect a child's HIV status. If in doubt, leave it out. To prevent harm and possible stigmatisation, *the HIV/AIDS status of the child should not be disclosed without the consent of the child (taking into consideration the age, maturity and stage of development and evolving capacity of the child), together with the consent of their caregiver provided that such disclosure* is in the public interest and is in the best interest of the child. If in doubt, this information shall be left out.

10. Challenge negative stereotypes about children and conventional roles children occupy in the media (such as helpless victims¹⁰) whenever you can. Negative stereotypes about children based on race, gender, class, culture and/or sexual orientation are particularly harmful to children and must be challenged where possible. Children's achievements must also be given due recognition in the media.

11. Treat girls and boys the same in your stories, with equal care, dignity and respect. Girl and boy children have equal rights and

gender-based stereotypes must not be perpetuated when reporting on children.

12. When doing a story on a vulnerable child, make sure to be extra-careful. Where a child's circumstances make him/her especially vulnerable (e.g. due to poverty, homelessness, a parent or sibling's HIV status, being an orphan, child soldier or refugee¹¹), journalists must demonstrate extreme care to ensure their reporting does not cause further harm, secondary trauma, distress, humiliation, embarrassment or grief, or expose the child to danger. The child should only be identified after informed consent has been given by the child and caregiver, and it is demonstrably in the child's best interest to do so. Otherwise the child's identity should be protected. In all cases, reporting must be carried out in a manner consistent with the child's best interests.

13. Do not portray children in a sexual manner. Journalists must not use sexualised images of children.

¹⁰ Research conducted by Media Monitoring Africa shows that children are usually portrayed as victims in the media. For more information, visit: <http://www.mediamonitoringafrica.org>

¹¹ This list of examples is not exhaustive

14. Do not make promises you cannot keep, and don't bribe children for your story.

A journalist must never abuse his/her position of power, especially when it comes to accessing or reporting on children. Journalists must never

bribe a child with money, goods or promises of help or improved circumstances in order to obtain information or secure consent. To do so is a gross abuse of power, highly unethical and negates consent.





An ethics roadmap to assist journalists¹²

Journalists should use this roadmap to work through a particular ethical dilemma when reporting on children:

STEP 1: DEFINE THE ISSUE

- Have all the necessary facts of the matter and summarise the situation
- Formulate the ethical question: what needs to be resolved before reporting on the child/children?

STEP 2: THINK THROUGH THE ISSUE

- Look at this MMA Editorial Guideline and Principles for Reporting on Children in the Media, as well as other precedents and guidelines

- Weigh up the public interest against the subjective principle of the “best interests of the child”
- Who are the stakeholders? How will they be affected?
- Refer to MMA’s Editorial Guidelines and Principles for Reporting on Children in the Media, as well as other precedents and guidelines
- Identify options: imaginative solutions – utilise Green Light Ethics as opposed to Red Light Ethics¹³

STEP 3: DECIDE

- Commit to a course of action and then be ready to defend it

¹² Franz Kruger, *Black, White & Grey: Ethics in South African Journalism*, Juta and Company Ltd, 2004. Pg. 247-250

¹³ Roy Peter Clark, “Red Light, Green Light: A Plea for Balance in Media Ethics,”

<http://www.poynter.org/uncategorized/58912/red-light-green-light-a-plea-for-balance-in-media-ethics/>

Practical tips for reporting on children

Identifying children:

What does it mean to identify a child?

In terms of images, it means *to show an image of a child in such a manner that the child may be recognised by people who know the child*. In terms of text, it means *to provide the child's name or information about where the child lives, which school the child attends, or any other indirect means by which a child may be recognised by people who know the child*. In all stories where identifying the child may cause harm, be sure to avoid indirect identification of the child through showing family, a school, residence, friends or a combination thereof.

When deciding whether or not to identify a child, ask yourself the following questions before proceeding to report on the child, to ensure all possible consequences have been identified:

In general:

- **What is my journalistic purpose in identifying the child?** Who is served by identifying this child? Why does the public need to know the child's identity?
- **What is the level of public knowledge?** Is the child's identification widely known already? Beware, however, of identifying a child just because other media have done so.



- **How does the child's family feel about identifying the young person?** Has the family granted interviews or provided information to the media? Has the child talked publicly?
- **Once a child is identified, some damage is done to that child that can never be completely reversed.** The journalist should continuously evaluate the decision to name a child, always testing the value of the information against the harm caused to the child. Just because a child's name has already been reported is not an ironclad reason to continue reporting the name.

- **What would identifying the child allow the journalist to tell the audience that they would not have understood otherwise?**

How does naming the child allow the journalist to take the story into a deeper, more contextual level of reporting? For example, perhaps a deeper understanding of the child allows us to understand the circumstances of an incident.

- **What is the tone and degree of your coverage?** How often would the child be identified? How big is the coverage? How will the child be characterised in the coverage? What guidelines do you have about the use of the child's picture or name in follow-up stories or continuing coverage?



- **What are the legal implications of your decisions?** What laws apply regarding child identification?
- **How much does the child understand about the situation he/she faces?** How old is this child?
- **Who, besides the child, will be affected by your decision?** Other children? Parents? Families? Victims?
- **In the absence of a caregiver, can the journalist find someone who can act in an unofficial capacity?** This is to raise concerns on the child's behalf so the child's best interests are not lost in the journalist's quest to tell a story.

In criminal proceedings:

- **Have formal charges been filed against the child, or is the child just a suspect? If no formal charges, how likely are the charges to be instituted and the child prosecuted?** If it is likely that charges will be instituted – don't identify. If charges have been filed, it is against the law to identify¹⁴
- **What is this child's record?** What is his/her history? How will shielding that child's identity and history expose the public to potential harm? What may happen if you do not name the child? What harm may result if you do?

¹⁴ Criminal Procedure Act 51 of 1977, Section 154(3)

Imaging – showing children

Images of children can be extremely powerful and have a significant impact on people. However, dramatic images of children used without context and for gratuitous value not only lose much of their impact but can violate the rights of the children involved. Dramatic images of children should therefore be used with extreme care and be contextualised within a story. In addition, the following points should also be considered:

- Try to avoid images that stereotype children. Strive to find alternative angles and images
- Obtain permission from the child and his or her caregiver for all interviews and images. When possible and appropriate, this permission should be in writing. It is vital that the permission of children and their caregiver is not coerced in any way, and that they understand they are part of a story that might be disseminated locally and globally
- If there is a story on a child with a disability who needs treatment, and the aim of the story is to elicit sympathy and possibly help raise funds, or if the story is about disfigurement or tragedy, in all cases ensure that the child is represented with dignity. Where possible, reflect

the child's own wishes and hopes, as this will make the story more sympathetic and more powerful

- Ensure that, if the child's identity is to be protected, the editorial guidelines as set out above are followed

Hearing children's voices – children's participation in the news

Children have the right to participate in matters that affect them.¹⁵

At the same time, children are dependent, trusting and easily exploited or abused. By providing children with opportunities to speak for themselves – about their hopes, fears, and achievements, and the impact of adult behaviour on their lives – media professionals can remind the public of children's rights.



¹⁵ Section 10 of the Children's Act 38 of 2005 and Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child deal with children's rights to freedom of expression and participation in matters that affect them. South Africa and Zambia have signed and ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child

The way in which the media represents or even ignores children can influence decisions taken on their behalf, and how the rest of society regards children.

Why should journalists consult children?

- Children bring fresh perspective to stories
- Children reveal a range of different and unique stories that challenge many widely held stereotypes about children
- Children reflect and highlight varied experiences and views from different economic and cultural backgrounds
- Children can tell you how they would like to be referenced and identified in news stories (informed consent and ethical practice, however, is critical)



Tips and suggestions for interviewing children

Interviewing children requires extra care and preparation. Interviewing children is not the same as interviewing adults.

These are some points to consider:

- Take your time. You cannot rush children. Become aware of their silence and their discomfort
- To the child, you're just another adult. They might worry that they will look silly if they can't answer your questions, or they might close up if they see you as an authority figure
- You'll only get a few quotations in a formal interview. It is better to be around when they speak to their family, friends or teachers
- When necessary, you can fill in the blanks on details for your story from caregivers or teachers. From the child, you want to hear his or her feelings, thoughts and opinions about a situation
- Don't be patronising
- Don't assume it's okay to touch the child. Adults frequently touch children, even children they don't know. The child may not be

comfortable being touched by a stranger. This is particularly true for abused children

- Get down to their level, play with them and sit on their child-sized chairs. Let them show you their room. Talk about the things you see there, or ask to see their favourite toy
- If you have come to the interview with a camera or sound equipment, let the child see it, hold it, talk into it. Perhaps record something the child says and play it back to her/him, or let her/him hold the camera. This will make the child feel more comfortable around the equipment
- If you have the opportunity, meet children first without a notebook or camera. Get to know them a little and then go back for an interview
- Children who have experienced conflict situations have had to develop survival strategies, some of which involve telling reporters what they think they want to hear in the hope of getting some benefit in return. Don't judge them, but rather understand what they've been through. If you doubt some of the facts, check with the caregivers
- Never make promises you cannot or do not intend to keep to a child. It is highly unethical to promise children you will find their parents/take

them back to their home country/ provide shelter or food in return for an interview. If you wish to help out, be guided by your own ethical standards. You could, for instance, donate some money to a child's school or children's home where they live

- Be aware of the stigma surrounding HIV/AIDS. Identifying a child as an "AIDS orphan" stigmatises the child and could harm him or her. It also implies that the child is HIV-positive. Unless there is overwhelming public interest, and the child and caregiver have provided full informed consent (see informed consent forms on page 14), do not reveal a child's HIV status

Most importantly:

- Treat children with respect
- Speak to them just as you would an adult whose opinion really matters to you
- Don't laugh at anything that might offend the child, and listen carefully
- Remember, a child will have to live with your story long after it has been published



Gender



As with adults, gender stereotypes about children are common. Always try to avoid gender stereotypes about children; in particular, it is important to challenge the roles of girls and boys as children. MMA research has found that girls tend to be featured in stories about abuse, while boys tend to feature in stories about sports and achievements.

- Consider whether there are gender dimensions to the story you are reporting, and see if these can be highlighted in the story
- Consider also the role of men and boys in family-focused stories
- Consider the role of girls and women in sports and achievement-focused stories



Informed consent: print media

For caregivers of children to give permission for newspaper articles to be written and published.

Topic of newspaper article(s): _____

This consent form will be explained verbally. A copy will also be given to the caregiver to keep. This form will only be used for children who will feature in a newspaper article.

I am _____

I work as a journalist at _____ newspaper.

I am working on an article about _____

to be published on. _____ (date)

I live in _____

I would like to write a newspaper article that includes

_____ (name of child)'s

comments and/or story. I would also like to interview you and include your words in the story.

The newspaper article will go into a newspaper that many people will read, maybe even people who know you or your child, go to school with your child, or live near you. If you don't want the newspaper article to name you or your child, I will not use your or your child's name. If there is anything you say that you decide you

don't want to be published, I will take it out of the article. You can choose to be interviewed or not. You also have a choice to allow or disallow your child's story to be told in the newspaper article.

If your child is part of a support programme, it will not make any difference to your child's participation in the support programme if you choose not to allow your child's story to be told.

Just to make sure you understand and agree that it is acceptable for me to write a newspaper article about your child, and to interview you, I will ask you to sign a form. You can decide to withdraw your child at any point.

Remember, you can choose to allow or disallow your child's story to be told in the newspaper article. You can contact me at

if you have any questions about this form or about the newspaper article.



CAREGIVER'S STATED consent For newspaper article:

I agree to allow my child's story to be told in the newspaper article.

I agree to be interviewed for the article.

Date

Name of caregiver

Signature of caregiver

CHILD'S STATED consent For newspaper article:

I agree to allow my story to be told in the newspaper article.

I agree to be interviewed for the article.

Date

Name of child

Signature of child



