
Parent-guardian opt-out consent for research in schools and other childcare settings is a consent process in which parents and guardians are informed about research that will take place in those settings and are asked to actively state that they wish to remove their child from being involved in that research.

In 2021 a Task and Finish group with the brief of reviewing the research ethics policy and procedures at Royal Holloway undertook the specific task of developing a mitigation protocol that would establish when parent-guardian opt-out is appropriate for conducting research in schools and other childcare settings. The group debated the advantages, disadvantages and ethical considerations of the practice, the protocols of other higher education and research institutions, and guidance professional and funding bodies such as the British Psychological Society and Economic and Social Research Council. Academics were consulted from different departments across Royal Holloway and the group received an in depth case from the Department of Psychology, where most of Royal Holloway’s research in schools and other childcare settings takes place.

The proposed found that the advantages of the opt-out consent procedure are that it enables the recruitment of larger, more representative groups, involves considerably less burden on the school and the researcher, and that a considerable amount of research in schools and other childcare settings is at the lower end of risk. However, the group also proposed that there is a risk in which parents and guardians might fail to notice requests for opt-out consent and that they may therefore not be able in a position to consent to the involvement of their children in the research.

Subsequently, the group proposed a mitigation protocol (made up of a number of sub-protocols) that if implemented in entirety would determine that opt-out consent would be an appropriate approach to working with children in schools and other childcare settings. They are:

1. The child themselves consents/assents to take part in the study in an age-appropriate manner (written, verbal, or non-verbal), and researchers provide detailed information on how they will ensure the child understands the research and the tasks prior to participation, how this will be evidenced and stored, and how coercion will be avoided.

2. The research procedures should fall within the range of usual activities for the child at their institution. Once the institution has agreed to participate in the study a letter from the Head Teacher, childcare facility manager or other appropriate person legally responsible for the children indicating that the research activities are the same or sufficiently similar to normal educational activities. This letter must also contain a statement that the person legally responsible for the children has assessed the risk associated with the research and concluded that it is low, see 3. This letter must be sent to ethics@rhul.ac.uk before the start of the research activity in that institution or included in your application.
3. The study is 'low-risk' (The British Psychological Society Code of Research Ethics states that research at the lower end of risk involves 'innocuous, de-identified data gathering on non-sensitive topics'. 2021, p. 12).

4. Researchers should provide a convincing plan for ensuring that information about the research and the opt-out procedure reaches parents and guardians. Such information should be sent out prior to data collection and parents and guardians should be given ample time for it to be digested, for questions to be asked, and parents and guardians to have opportunities to opt-out (ideally more than two weeks, no less than one week). Researchers should consider the provision of the text in languages other than English in consultation with the school or childcare setting.

5. A full debrief sheet should be given to participants after they have participated (if of suitable age, or to a key organization contact who can disseminate to parents and guardians). It should also be considered whether this debrief sheet should be translated into languages other than English, in consultation with the school or childcare setting.

6. Safeguarding procedures of the host institution should be followed, and all researchers visiting should have a DBS check. This information should be clearly available in the ethics application.

7. Researchers must provide information on potential disclosure and breach of confidentiality and the reasons that this may occur, and on data storage.