

Guidelines for the Conduct of Research with own children

General Statement and Submission Requirements:

The University of Manitoba recognizes the significant risks of conducting research with one's own children. When a Research Ethics Board (REB) receives an application for research with such a potentially vulnerable population, only proposals that fall into one of the following two categories will be accepted:

- a) A research project that poses "Minimal Risk" to the child or children. (TCPS 2 –Tri-council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans defines Minimal risk research as research in which the probability and magnitude of possible harms implied by participation in the research is no greater than those encountered by participants in the aspects of their everyday life that relate to the research.) Or;
- b) A clinical trial in which denial of access to participation would be unfair and deprives a child of a potentially lifesaving or life improving intervention.

Process and Appeal:

In either case, a detailed review of the proposal will be conducted on a case by case basis by the full REB with an emphasis on protecting the children involved. The review process will be guided by all applicable principles in the TCPS 2: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (e.g. risk and benefits, autonomy and voluntariness in consent, capacity to understand, participant vulnerability, conflicts of interest, and expertise of the investigative team, etc.)

The REB may approve a research proposal involving the researcher's own children only if the REB is satisfied with the Principal Investigator's responses outlined above regarding the safety and wellbeing of the children who would be involved in the project. (See below excerpt: Panel of Research Ethics statement on this issue 289A_HAA_2011).

The REB has the discretion to refuse approval of a research project where the REB decides that any of the ethical issues concerning the particular research or any other relevant factor to it, has not been assessed or cannot be appropriately managed. In case of discrepancy between the Principal Investigator and the resolution of the REB, a formal written request to review the REB resolution may be submitted to the Human Ethics Resource Committee (HERC). In case of discrepancy between the Principal Investigator and the HERC resolution the case will be forwarded for final decision to the Senate Committee on University Research.

HERC version: May 10, 2012

Panel of Research Ethics: 289A_HAA_2011

This is in response to your question in which you ask whether it is ethical for researchers to involve their own children as participants in their research study. Our response is in accordance with the guidance of the second edition of the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* (TCPS 2).

As detailed below, guidance in TCPS 2 places many restrictions on researchers who wish to involve their own children in research which if not addressed, prohibit researchers from involving their own children in research. Unless researchers justify to the REB the involvement of their children as participants in their own research, including consideration of the risk/benefit ratio, and demonstrate that the ethical issues relevant to consent and conflicts of interest (as outlined below) are addressed or managed, it would be unethical for researchers to involve their own children in research.

The REB should be satisfied with the researchers' responses to its questions, which should take into account the considerations mentioned below and any other relevant factors. Otherwise, "in exceptional cases, the REB has the discretion to refuse approval of a research project where the REB decides that the conflict of interest has not been avoided or cannot be appropriately managed." (Application of Article 7.4)

Voluntariness in Consent

As both researchers and parents of the participant children, the researchers are in a position of authority over their own children, which may result in undue influence. Undue influence (outlined in the application of Article 3.1) undermines the voluntariness of consent, as the children who are in a situation of ongoing dependency may feel constrained to follow the wishes of a parent who has control over them. This is why Article 3.9 states as one of the conditions for involving individuals who lack the capacity to decide for themselves whether to participate in research that "...the REB shall ensure that, as a minimum, the following conditions are met:...(c) the authorized third party is not the researcher or any other member of the research team...". This condition is a safeguard to protect those who lack the capacity to consent on their own behalf, thus managing possible vulnerability of participants and addressing situations where a third party is in a position of conflict of interest.

Key considerations: Is the authorized third party independent from the researcher and the research team? Is the researcher/parent in control of the consent process by proxy? If there is an authorized third party, is that person involved throughout the project or merely at the initial consent stage? What recourse do the children have if they do not wish to participate (dissent) or continue to participate in research?

Participants' Vulnerability

In light of the dual role of the researchers, and the power imbalance that exists with their children/participants, this situation is likely to result in or to exacerbate participant vulnerability. Article 4.7 addresses this issue, advising that the participants' involvement should be justified by the research question.

Key considerations: What is the researchers' justification for involving their own children in research? What is the risk-benefit of the research to participants?

Conflicts of Interest

The researchers' duty as parents is in real, potential or perceived conflict with their goals as researchers. The application of Article 7.4 also states that: "the REB, guided by established institutional policies, may require that the researcher withdraw from the research, or that others on the research team, who are not in conflict of interest, make research-related decisions."

Key consideration: What is the researchers' plan to manage their own conflicts of interest?

Capacity

Children must have capacity to understand relevant information and appreciate the potential consequences of his/her decision to participate or not to participate. The topic of capacity is addressed in Section C of Chapter 3.