EWA
EDUCATION WRITERS ASSOCIATION

REPORTER GUIDES

Interviewing Children

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Interviewing children is a critical element of the education reporter's daily work. However, practices for gaining access and avoiding harm and embarrassment vary widely depending on the news organization and individual reporter in question. This document aims to provide journalists with broad guidelines, but it stops short of advocating for the kinds of uniform policies to which academic researchers must adhere. These recommendations should be viewed as suggestions based on expert consensus and years of firsthand experience interviewing children — not as immutable rules. The guidelines can best be summarized by the maxim that Columbia Journalism School professor LynNell Hancock presents at the start of her education reporting classes: When covering children, first do no harm.

Before the Interview

Journalists should use their judgment in determining whether an interview with a child requires advance permission from a parent or proxy (such as a teacher or school official). Some interviews benefit from spontaneity. Generally, journalists should almost always seek parental permission to interview an elementary school student; the sole exception occurs if the parent might have caused the child trauma, in which case reporters should work through another authority figure responsible for the child's well-being. Reporters should often seek permission for pre-teens. And they should sometimes reach out to the parents of teenagers before or after an interview.

For older children, the need for parent involvement increases if the story is sensitive in nature, and the teenager's comments could make them vulnerable or expose them to criticism. For instance, journalists should feel comfortable interviewing most teenagers about changes in school start times or school lunch menus without parent authorization. But they should usually seek permission (or at the very least notify a parent) before quoting minors about their personal experiences with drug use, bullying or academic failure.

School policies concerning media interviews vary widely: Some require parents to sign media releases at the start of the school year; others have no system in place. Journalists should learn a district's policies or protocols before attempting to interview students. This includes determining if parents have been asked to sign media release forms. Such forms can be time-savers for reporters, particularly if they plan to spend a significant amount of time at a single school. (Sample media release attached.)

Journalists should also familiarize themselves with their states' laws regarding access to schools and interviewing students. In some cases, a district's policy can be out of compliance with the state law. Similarly, an individual school's practices might not be in line with its district's policies. If your access is being limited, don't hesitate to set up a meeting with district officials to discuss what the actual law does, and does not, allow.

Reporters should never pressure a minor into giving an interview. They should make an extra effort to be explicit when explaining the reporting process: clearly introducing themselves and their news organization, describing the story in as much detail as possible, and providing the child with a sense of who the audience or readers will be (in most cases a mixture of strangers and people the child knows well). Reporters should tell the child that it's fine to decline an interview before asking for permission to proceed.

> "When covering children, first do no harm."

During the Interview

Generally, let children above the age of 10 decide where and when an interview should occur (within reason). For younger children, defer to the advice of a parent or teacher. If the students prefer to have another adult or friend present, heed that request. If they prefer to be interviewed alone, find a location that is not too isolated to avoid making them feel uncomfortable or intimidated.

Be sure students understand that they do not have to answer every question. With older children, it might be useful to give a quick lesson in "on- and off-the-record" comments. But with elementary and middle school age children, simply tell them they can skip questions or decide later on that they do not want specific comments included. Allow children of all ages to stop an interview at any time.

After the Interview

Before leaving or getting off the phone with a child, journalists should make sure they know how to reach a parent or guardian. They should also give the child their business card or professional contact information and make it clear that the child's family is welcome to reach out with questions or concerns.

Journalists should be more lenient with children than adults when deciding whether to allow them to retract statements or review stories, manuscripts, and videos prior to publication. Most journalists would not allow a public official to alter or delete a controversial quote. But that practice is more acceptable with children, who are less media-savvy and may not immediately realize what's at stake when they agree to speak to the press.

Many journalists have valid reasons to avoid sharing unpublished copies of stories with their sources. While reporters should not feel compelled to show children stories in advance, they should go to extra lengths to ensure children have a complete understanding of how they will be portrayed and what details about them will be included.

Journalists should also be more flexible when deciding whether to include a minor's full name in stories that are sensitive or controversial, leaving open the possibility of including only a first name or shielding a child's identity completely. If both the child and a parent agree to be identified, then it is usually fine for the journalist to proceed with publication.

However, reporters should also weigh independently whether publishing certain details or full names might endanger children or subject them to intense ridicule. In such instances, reporters should at a minimum double-check their understanding of the situation with the family, and should strongly consider editing out certain information.

TIPS:

Be aware of age-appropriate language, but don't talk down to a child.

Don't overgeneralize. There's no one right way to interview kids. For instance, some open up more in groups, while others feel more comfortable talking one-on-one.

Don't worry if a parent wants to sit in on an interview. If you are respectful and open, you will usually gain the family's trust.

If you are struggling to get a child talking, start by asking about their hobbies and interests even if they aren't germane to the story.

Specific follow-up questions like, "Give me an example of a time you felt that way..." are often more effective than a simple, "Why?"

Social Media and Children

Facebook, Twitter, and other forms of social media can be useful ways for journalists to generate story ideas, contact students, and learn more about their personal lives. But they should avoid conducting interviews with minors via social media. And they should always remain cognizant of the fact that online information can easily be faked or manipulated, and that many minors (and even many adults) do not fully understand the public nature of online posting.

Only in rare circumstances should reporters use direct quotes children post on social media sites. If a student or teacher dies, for instance, it might be appropriate to include some quotations from an online memoriam. Reporters should only attribute quotes to children by name if they have verified their authenticity and received permission, however.

Reporters who write regularly about youth issues should determine whether their news organizations have policies or protocols for commenting on stories about children and families. If not, journalists should strongly consider requesting that online comments on such stories be monitored aggressively and deleted if they are hurtful in substance or tone.

If a news organization is unwilling to monitor comments about minors, reporters should explain to families and children that stories will be posted online and made available for anyone to post feedback. Regardless, reporters should ensure children understand that stories about them could live indefinitely on the web.

Interviewing Children in Crisis

Journalists should take extreme care when interviewing children who have recently witnessed violence, suffered the unexpected death of a loved one, or experienced another form of trauma. In general, reporters should avoid interviewing children — particularly young ones — immediately after a tragedy. Instead, they should wait until the child is in a safe space with a parent or other trusted adult figure and has had time to process the event. They should realize that a child may still be in shock even if they do not outwardly exhibit signs of stress. However, if a reporter decides it's necessary and appropriate to interview a child immediately after a crisis or other traumatic event, they should consider the following guidelines:

1. Seek the permission and presence of a parent or trusted adult, but also independently assess whether an interview might cause the child harm. Although journalists should generally defer to parents in times of crisis, even caring adults may be so overwhelmed that they are temporarily unable to act in their child's best interest. If so, journalists should use their best judgment in determining whether to proceed, but should err on the side of caution and strongly consider delaying the interview.

2. Find a safe and quiet spot for the interview; be patient. Reporters should make sure the child and parent understand where and when the interview will be broadcast or published. They should stop the interview immediately if the child becomes nervous, agitated, or frightened. Journalists who give families time and space to process and reflect on a traumatic event will generally end up with a much stronger, more complete story.

3. Take extra care to ask open-ended questions. Asking leading questions in the wake of a traumatic event can inadvertently add to a child's confusion, pain, or stress. For instance, instead of prompting a child, "Were you scared when the man pulled out his gun?" consider asking, "How did what happened make you feel?" That way the child will not assume she is supposed to feel scared.

4. Corroborate details or information provided by children. Interview subjects of all ages are prone to misremember details when they are under a great deal of stress, and children can be particularly vulnerable to the power of suggestion. Reporters should be careful not to contradict or challenge a child's account during the interview. But they should check the facts with official and other sources afterward.

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