

Nuffield Family Justice Observatory: Evidence Standards

The Nuffield FJO want those working in the family justice system have access to high quality data and research evidence. We believe this is a critical step in achieving positive outcomes for children and families.

We are committed to producing high quality research that meets a set of evidence standards to promote confidence and trust in our work whilst ensuring it is both accessible and inclusive.

Why it matters

There is a wide variety of data and research evidence that is relevant to the family justice system, from small-scale surveys and focus groups to large-scale randomised-controlled trials. We recognise the value of having a broad range of research methodologies from which to draw learning, including insights from children, families and practitioners, as well as findings from a spread of academic disciplines. What matters is that data and evidence is high quality. Poor-quality evidence could lead to ineffective (and even harmful) decision making by professionals in the family justice system with a direct impact on children and families.

Our audience covers many professions, and we recognise not everyone will be familiar with evaluating the quality of research. We have a role to play in helping our audiences trust the research we publish. We do this by providing clarity on what can be inferred from our research outputs and its limitations. This applies to the research we do ourselves and projects we commission through external organisations.

Our evidence standards

Our evidence standards build upon the five 'core areas' of Research Integrity developed by UK Research Integrity Office (UKRIO), the UK's national advisory body for research integrity.¹

These five 'core areas' apply throughout the lifetime of a research project – from design, data collection and cleaning, analysis and reporting. They can be applied to various research methods, undertaken in a range of contexts – such as small-sample qualitative interviews and large quantitative evaluations of innovative practice. More details about applying these aspects in research can be found in the [UK Concordat to support research integrity](#) (Universities UK 2019).

Honesty

Honesty is paramount in all aspects of research from planning, data gathering, reporting, acknowledging the work of others, stating interpretations and making justifiable claims. We approach our research with this mindset and expect the same from others we work with.

¹ [What is Research Integrity? - UK Research Integrity Office \(ukrio.org\)](#)

Transparency

We require all research we are involved in to be transparent about its methods, including the decisions and processes used. This means setting out what was done, (and why), throughout the whole process, including constructing research questions, research design and methods, and decisions relating to analysis and reporting – sharing data and code where possible.

Transparency also involves ensuring there are no conflicts of interest

Accountability

We are responsible for creating research environments where people, either within the Nuffield FJO or outside, are empowered and able to ‘own’ the research process. We are also responsible for holding researchers to account if they do not meet our evidence standards.

Respect

We will ensure that care and respect is given to all research participants, as well as for those who conduct the research.

When we engage children and families with lived experience of the family justice system, we will provide a safe environment for them to share their experiences.

If we, or an organisation we have commissioned, do not feel we have the skills or experience to undertake any kind of engagement, or other type of research, we will seek out an organisation who specialises in this work, to learn from and apply best practice.

Rigour

All research studies funded by the Nuffield FJO are expected to be conducted with rigour, which relates to the thoroughness and carefulness with which it is undertaken and the attention that is paid to nuance and complexity.

In quantitative research, rigour is normally understood in relation to reliability and validity, whether the findings would be reproduced if the study was repeated in exactly the same way, avoiding subjectivity and bias, and whether the methods used are appropriate.

In qualitative research rigour involves recognising that the information generated within a research study is situated in context—in time and place, and in the relationship between the researcher and the researched.

We are testing an approach for how we ensure our evidence standards are met in our own research, and in research we commission. Our proposals for embedding our evidence standards are set out below.

How we ensure these evidence standards are met

Commissioning process

1. We evaluate responses to our invitations to tender for the delivery of contracted research services against a set of evaluation criteria:

- Expertise in relation to the subject matter
- Quality and robustness of the proposed approach and methodology
- Proven experience of working in this field (NB, this may be adapted to include ethical engagement with professionals and/or children and/or families with lived experience of the family justice system, as required)
- Potential and ability to deliver high quality work on time and to budget
- Value for money

All organisations and/or individuals we commission to undertake research are provided with these evidence standards.

We ensure due consideration is paid to the research method(s), ethical considerations, data collection, management and retention, quality assurance and project management, including close management of risks and issues through the contracting period.

Staff at the Nuffield FJO work closely with external researchers throughout the research process to ensure evidence standards are upheld. We assess progress towards the research project milestones through a formal process that includes regular meetings and milestone reviews.

Ethics

In addition, all research studies should pay attention to ethics, ensuring a self-critical, imaginative and responsible ethical reflection about issues that may arise during the course of the research,² as well as appropriate adherence to legal and governance processes in order to protect the dignity, rights, and welfare of research participants and researched populations. We follow the ethical principles set out by the Economics and Social Research Council (ESRC):

- research should aim to maximise benefit for individuals and society and minimise risk and harm
- the rights and dignity of individuals and groups should be respected
- wherever possible, participation should be voluntary and appropriately informed
- research should be conducted with integrity and transparency
- lines of responsibility and accountability should be clearly defined
- independence of research should be maintained and where conflicts of interest cannot be avoided they should be made explicit.

Most projects we commission involve academics so research will go through universities' ethics procedures. For our own research, and research done by non-academic institutions, we will ensure an appropriate ethical process at the start of the project. This can range from internal checks that ethics principles are being met, to creating research ethics committees.

Research quality frameworks

It may be appropriate to consider specific frameworks for appraising the quality of certain kinds of research evidence.

² Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Framework for Research Ethics.

There are a number of established tools for assessing the quality of specific types of research evidence e.g. the Maryland Scientific Method Scale for assessing the quality of evaluations or the Grading of Recommendations Assessment, Development and Evaluation (GRADE) approach for assessing the strength of evidence from a systematic review.

Advisory group oversight

All substantive research projects including those conducted internally and those commissioned externally, require advisory group oversight. Advisory groups are bespoke for each project and will ideally include a mix of academic methodology experts, as well as those knowledgeable about policy and practice. The frequency of their meetings and communication method will be determined by Nuffield FJO for internal research projects and in partnership with the project lead for commissioned projects. We expect the advisory group have the opportunity to feedback at two stages, i) research design and ii) to review the results and conclusions.

There may be other less formal mechanisms to consult with experts in the field of research we are focussing on, to ensure we utilise existing knowledge and build a network of professionals who can guide and steer our approach.

Critical reflection

We ensure all our research demonstrates evidence of critical reflection, recognising and reflecting on things that might influence the construction of knowledge.

Peer review

All substantive research reports will be independently peer reviewed. We select peer reviewers to ensure a mix of relevant academic, policy, and practice expertise. In addition, feedback is sought from individuals with first-hand experience of the family justice system (or organisations representing them).

The peer review process means that a draft report is shared with peer reviewers so that comments can be taken on board before a final draft is completed. Sufficient time is allocated for peer review and a record is kept of all peer review material. We keep a record of peer reviewer comments and actions taken to address the comments.

Continued improvement

We welcome feedback on any aspect of this approach to promoting high quality data and research and commit to reviewing this approach on a regular basis.

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