

# Editorial Guidelines and Principles For Reporting on Children in the Media

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



# About the Editorial Guidelines

These editorial guidelines form part of a project funded by the European Union in partnership with Save the Children, Media Monitoring Africa (South Africa), the Media Network on Child Rights and Development (Zambia) and the Swedish International Development Cooperation 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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## Disclaimer For European Union

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## Acknowledgements

**Media Monitoring Africa (MMA) would like to acknowledge the following contributors, funders and partners:**

- European Union (EU);

- Media monitors from Park Senior Primary and members of Media Monitoring Africa's Children's News Agency (CNA);
- Media Network on Child Rights Development (MNCRD) in Zambia;
- Save the Children (SC);
- Swedish International Development Agency (Sida);
- The African Editors Forum, which was approached by MMA for input and
- All other individual children, journalists and experts for their contribution to these guidelines.

## Editorial Guidelines and Principles For Reporting on Children in the Media

The following guidelines 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.

## Principles

Children's issues are important. Media professionals should always strive to bring attention to issues that affect children in society, eg social conditions, as outlined in the Millennium Development Goals, such as the eradication of child hunger and other general issues of education, lack of shelter, sustainability and more. Children's interests (ie trends, music, and social media etc) should also be explored and reported on by



media professionals to encourage the involvement of children in the media.

**Journalists should report on children in an ethical manner, and specifically:**

- Seek the truth and report it accurately and as fully as possible;
- Act independently;
- Minimise harm<sup>1</sup>;
- Ensure balanced reporting that is in the best interests of the child<sup>2</sup>;
- Listen attentively to children.

**Furthermore, journalists should:**

- Support the regional and international protections of children;
- Guard against any practice that may exploit or violate the rights of any child under the age of 18<sup>3</sup>;
- Encourage reporting on a diversity of matters involving children;
- Play a positive role in portraying children and their rights, and therefore support better attitudes



and opinions about children and their rights.

In order to preserve the above principles, journalists should adhere to the following editorial guidelines in dealing with matters involving children<sup>4</sup>:

- 1. Even where you are trying to tell people about harm to children or another children's issue or promote children's rights, you always need to respect the best interests of the individual child.* The best interests of each child are to be protected over any other consideration, including over advocacy for children's issues and the promotion of children's rights.
- 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 children, respect their privacy and confidentiality*

1 From Bob Steele, Poynter Institute.

2 The phrase "best interests of the child" refers to the well-being of any child in question. All actions concerning the child should take full account of this.

3 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) Article 1: ...a child means every human being below the age of 18 years, unless, under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier.

4 The 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 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); as well as draft elements from the Daily Voice Newspaper.

*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 and include them.** When trying to determine the best interests of children, the children's right to have their 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 best able to assess a child's situation are to be consulted about the diverse ramifications, including 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 will be published that might put the child, siblings or peers at risk even when identities are changed, obscured or not used. 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 recognised<sup>5</sup>.

**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, unless exceptional circumstances prevail and then only if there is

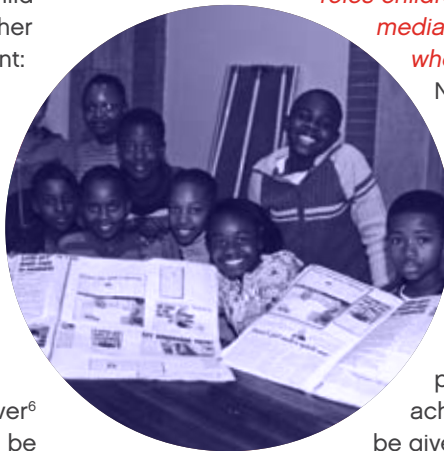
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<sup>5</sup> In this regard, the face of the child shall be blurred or pixelated completely. However, pixelating the face alone is not enough; anything in the photo that may identify the child, like a bracelet or picture, must be obscured.

informed consent from the child involved and the child's caregiver, the child's identity will not be revealed either directly or indirectly.

- 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<sup>6</sup> 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 a cautious discretion, as it may nevertheless be harmful to the child to publish the identity of the child.



- 9. *Make sure to protect a child's HIV status.*** If in doubt leave it out. To prevent harm and possible

stigmatisation, a child's HIV status will not be revealed directly or indirectly, unless there are exceptional circumstances, and informed consent (from both the child and caregiver) has been attained. If in doubt, this information shall be left out.

- 10. *Challenge negative stereotypes about children and conventional roles children occupy in the media (eg helpless victims) whenever you can.***

Negative stereotypes about children based on race, gender, class, culture, and/or sexual orientation are particularly harmful for children and will be challenged where possible. Children's achievements will 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 will not be perpetuated when reporting on children.

- 12. *When doing a story on a vulnerable child make sure to be extra careful.***

<sup>6</sup> 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.

<sup>7</sup> Research conducted by Media Monitoring Africa shows that children are usually portrayed as victims in the media. For more information visit: <http://www.mediamonitoringafrika.org>

<sup>8</sup> This list of examples is not exhaustive.

Where a child's circumstances makes him/her especially vulnerable (eg due to poverty, homelessness, parent or sibling's HIV status, being an orphan, child soldier or refugee<sup>8</sup>) journalists must demonstrate extreme care to ensure their reporting does not cause further harm, trauma, distress, humiliation, embarrassment, grief or expose them to danger. The child should only be identified when 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.

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



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

**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



# 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, what 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 to identify a child, ask yourself the following questions before proceeding to report on a child, to ensure all the consequences have been thought through:**

- Who is served by identifying this child? Why does the public need to know the child's identity? **What is**

### my journalistic purpose in identifying the child?

- If the child is charged with a crime, what is the strength of the evidence? **Have formal charges been filed, or is the child just a suspect? How likely** are the charges to be proven and the child prosecuted?
- If you do not name the child, who else could be implicated by rumour, or confusion about who is charged?

- **What is this child's record?** What is his/her history? How will

shielding that child's identification 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?**

- **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 person that can never be completely reversed.** Even if charges against the child are dropped or proven untrue, do not discount the value of stopping further damage by not



identifying the child. **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.

- How does naming the child allow the journalist to take the story into a deeper, more contextual level of reporting? **What would identifying the child allow the journalist to tell the audience that they could not understand otherwise?** For example, perhaps a deeper understanding of the child allows us to understand the circumstances of a crime or 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 pictures or name in follow-up stories or continuing coverage?
- **What are the legal implications of your decisions?** What laws apply

regarding child identification?

- How old is this child? **How much does the child understand about the situation he/she faces?**
- **Who, besides the child, will be affected by your decision?** Other children? Parents? Families? Victims?
- In the absence of a parent or guardian, can the journalist find someone who can act in an unofficial capacity 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?



### **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.

9 Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child deals with children's right 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.

- Get permission from the child and his or her guardian/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 guardians 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 illicit 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.



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.

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).

### **Hearing Children's Voices – Children's Participation in the News**

Children have the right to participate in matters that affect them<sup>9</sup>. At the same time, children are dependent, trusting and easily exploited or abused. By providing children with opportunities to speak 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 talk 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 promise 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 and 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 an overwhelming public interest, and the child and parent/caregiver have provided full informed consent (see

informed consent forms on page 10), do not reveal a child's HIV status.

**Most importantly:**

- Treat children with respect.
- Talk 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 for 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.

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Date

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Name of Caregiver

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Signature of Caregiver





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