

# Editorial Guidelines and Principles for Reporting on Children in the Media 2008



## A Snapshot of Children in Zambian News

**media**  
monitoring project

 **Save the Children**  
Sweden



## Editorial Guidelines and Principles for Reporting on Children in the Media 2008

### Preamble

South Africa is signatory to a range of international treaties which deal with children's rights, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The South African Constitution, one of the world's most progressive, gives even more protection to children as a special category than the Convention does. We have an Office on the Rights of the Child in the Presidency, a National Plan of Action for children, and laws and regulations that are aimed at children's protection.

Unfortunately, as so frequently reported, children are still at risk. They are exposed to some of the most inhuman cruelties and endure the worst forms of abuse. Because children are afforded special protection under the law, and because of the notions of innocence and, purity that we attach to them, the violation of children is often very newsworthy.

**The media plays a very important role in protecting and promoting children's rights and in many instances, in exposing their abuse and their triumphs.**

The South African Constitution guarantees freedom of expression, including freedom of the press and other media, and access to information. However, these rights do not stand alone. The rights to privacy and dignity, and the specific rights protecting children are also constitutionally guaranteed.



Satisfying the public's right to hear stories about and affecting children, while at the same time respecting children's rights to privacy and dignity, is a delicate and difficult balancing act.

Thus, journalists reporting on children are confronted with ethical dilemmas of an extraordinarily complex and diverse nature.

In order to assist the process of reporting on children the Media Monitoring Project has adopted the following code and guidelines:



## Principles of reporting on children

Given the challenges in reporting on children, the media agency commits itself to reporting on children in an ethical manner, and specifically:

- To seek the truth and report it as fully as possible;
- To act independently, and;
- To minimise harm<sup>1</sup>.

Further, the media agency:

- Supports the constitutional protections of children;
- Believes that the community and the newspaper it represents should guard against any practice that may exploit or violate the rights of any child under the age of 18<sup>2</sup>;
  - Will encourage reporting on all matters involving children only if the matter is relevant;
  - Will play a positive role in representing children and their rights,

<sup>1</sup> From Bob Steele, Poynter Institute.

<sup>2</sup> In line with the South African Constitution, children are defined as being people under the age of 18 years.



and therefore support better attitudes and opinions about children and their rights in our readers;

- Believes that respecting children’s rights today will mean respect for all people’s rights in the future.

In order to preserve the above principles, the Media Monitoring Project hereby adopt the following editorial code in dealing with matters involving children<sup>1</sup>.

1. The dignity and rights of every child are to be respected in every circumstance.
2. In interviewing and reporting on children, special attention is to be paid to each child’s right to privacy and confidentiality, to have their opinions heard, to participate in decisions affecting them and to be protected from harm and retribution, even potential harm and retribution.
3. 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.
4. When trying to determine the best interest of a child, the child’s right to have their views taken into account is to be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity.
5. Those closest to the child’s situation and best able to assess it are to be consulted about the diverse ramifications, including potential political, social and cultural ramifications of any reportage.
6. 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 such child, the identity of the child shall be obscured in such a manner that the child cannot be recognised. In this regard, the face of the child shall be blurred or “pixelated” completely. Pixelating the face alone is not good enough, such pixilation should include anything in the photo that may identify the child, like a bracelet or picture.



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

8. Whenever the identity of a child is disclosed, whether pictorially or in print:

A. The statutory restrictions on the naming or identification of children shall be observed and adhered to. These include, but are not limited to, the General Laws Amendment Act dealing with the publication of matters around civil court proceedings and the Criminal Procedure Act;

B. The informed consent of the child and parent or guardian of any child shall be sought in all cases where the identity of the child is to be disclosed;

C. Even if the parent or guardian consents to disclosure of the identity of a child, Media Monitoring Project shall exercise a cautious discretion, if it may be harmful to the child to publish the identity of the child.

9. To prevent harm and possible stigmatisation, a child's HIV status will not be revealed, unless there are exceptional circumstances and informed consent from both the child and caregiver/parent has been attained. If in doubt, this information shall be left out.

10. 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.

11. Girl and boy children have equal rights and gender based stereotypes will not be perpetuated when reporting on children.

**“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.”**

<sup>1</sup> The following principles and information have been drawn from a variety of sources including: the Unicef Guidelines on reporting on children; All Sides of the Story, Reporting on Children: a journalist's handbook (Unicef and the Media Monitoring Project); 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.



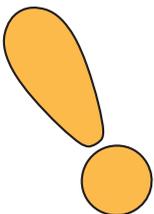
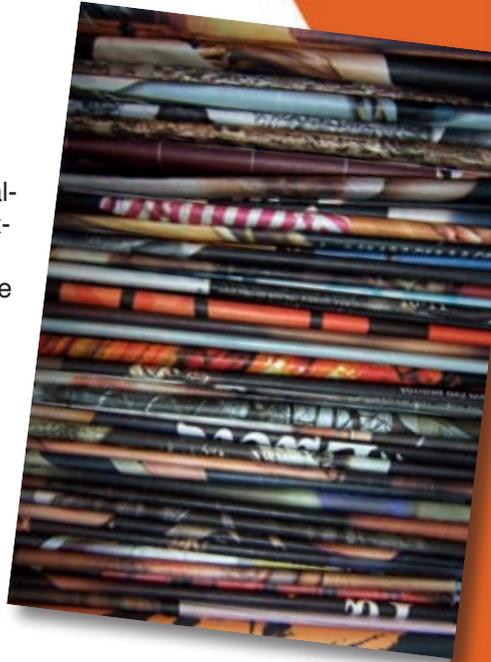
suspect? How likely are the charges to be proven and the child prosecuted?

- If you do not name the child, who else could be implicated by rumour or confusion about who is charged?
- If the child is charged with a crime, will the child be tried as an adult?
- What is this child's record? What is his/her history? How would shielding that child's identification and history expose the public to potential harm? What could happen if you do not name the child? What harm could 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 another media organisation has 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. The fact that 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 knowledge 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 with regard to child identification?
- How old is this child? How much does the child understand about the situation she/he 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 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. Some, like the image of Hector Pieterse taken during the 1976 Soweto uprisings, continue to have great impact. However, dramatic images of children used without context and for gratuitous value not only lose much of their impact, but can also 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.
- 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 that 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 elicit 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.

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

Children have the right to participate in matters that affect them.

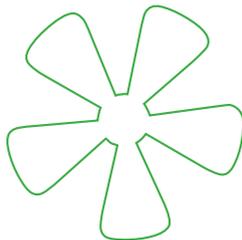
At the same time, children are dependent, trusting and easily exploited or abused. By providing children with opportunities to speak for themselves – about their hopes, fears, and achievements, and the impact of adult behaviour on their lives – media professionals can remind the public of children's 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 perspectives to stories;
- Children reveal a range of different and unique stories, which contest many of the 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).





## Interviewing Children

Interviewing children requires extra care and preparation. Interviewing children is not the same as interviewing adults. As two US reporters who won awards for their articles on children said: “You can’t just show up and interview them and expect good material.”

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 stupid if they can’t answer your questions, or they might close up if they see you as an authority figure.
- You’ll only get some quotations in a formal interview. It is better to be around when they talk to their family, friends, or teachers.
- You can fill in the blanks on details for your story from caretakers or teachers. From the child, you want to hear his or her feelings, thoughts, and opinions about a situation.
- Don’t be patronising. As one US journalist said: “Get over the cute thing.”
- Don’t assume it’s okay to touch the child. Adults frequently touch children, even children whom 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 and 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 still camera. This will make the child feel more comfortable around the equipment.
- If you have the opportunity, meet the child 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 ever make promises you cannot or do not intend to keep. 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 in this resource kit), do not reveal a child's HIV-positive status.

Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child deal with children's right to freedom of expression and participation in matters that affect them. South Africa has signed and ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

## Most importantly:

- Treat children with respect
- Talk to them just as you would to an adult whose opinion really matters to you
- Don't laugh at anything and really listen
- 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.

MMP 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 roles of men and boys in family focused stories;
- Consider the roles of girls and women in sports and achiever focused stories.

