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Waiata / Song

Hutia Te Rito

Hutia te rito

Hutia te rito o te harakeke

Kei hea te kōmako e kō

Kī mai ki ahau

He aha te mea nui

He aha te mea nui o te ao

Māku e kī atu

He Tangata, He Tangata

He Tangata Hi

Pluck the Baby (of a flax bush)

Pluck the baby

Pluck the baby of the flaxbush

Where will the bellbird sing

You ask me

What is the greatest thing

What is the greatest thing in the world
I will tell you

Tis People! Tis People

Tis People

Adapted by Rose Pere





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Relational ethics-in-action: Learning from naturalistic video observations of infants, toddlers, and their teachers

BY ALICE CHEN JIA, DR MARIA COOPER, AND DR KIRI GOULD

(peer reviewed)



In the context of researching the real lives of infants, toddlers, and their teachers in early childhood education, the role of ethics goes beyond being an institutional requirement to being the key to ensuring integrity of the research, the researcher, and respect and care for the research participants. Written from the perspective of the lead author, this article explores some of the relational ethics-in-action that were identified when she was filming infants, toddlers, and their teachers, as part of a University of Auckland research project on the implementation of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017). Exploring these ethics-in-action highlights the possibilities and complexities of naturalistic video observations with very young children in early childhood settings.

Introduction

With a heightened focus internationally on impactful early childhood education (ECE) (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2023), and the common phenomenon of children aged birth-to-3-years attending ECE, there is a growing interest in how infants and toddlers fare in group-care settings. This rising interest emphasises the crucial role of ethics in research involving very young children, including the need to address inherent assumptions, explore possibilities, and navigate complexities. This article examines some of the ethical aspects of research involving infants, toddlers, and their teachers, from literature and first-hand experiences. In creating this piece, we engaged in collaborative dialogue to reflect on the relational ethics involved in ensuring no harm came to the infants, toddlers, and their teachers involved in our project. This article follows Powell and Gooch's (2017) emphasis on interrogating the growing focus on infants and toddlers in the context of "our personal, social, moral and political lives as researchers" (p. 34).

The Research Project

The purpose of our qualitative collaborative project was to explore the ways teachers promote the revised learning outcomes of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) with children in ECE in Aotearoa New Zealand. There is little guidance yet for what these outcomes might look like in everyday practice, so real-world examples are helpful for teachers to consider the professional and theoretical knowledge underpinning the outcomes. Therefore, alongside our goal to disseminate knowledge useful to researchers and teachers, we aimed to create research-informed audio-visual and textual teaching resources for our early childhood-focused programmes at the university. Supported by our faculty's Nurturing Research Collaborations grant, our research team comprised five academic researchers, three research assistants who were mentored by the academic researchers, and consenting teachers and infants, toddlers, and young children (with parental consent) from three ECE settings: two education and care centres, and one kindergarten in Auckland. This article foregrounds the lead author's learning in relation to her ethical conduct with infants, toddlers, and their teachers in one of the centres.

The Matter of Ethics

Research involving infants, toddlers, and their teachers in real-world settings demands a strong focus on ethics. Researchers often face moral dilemmas about ways to gather data while keeping those they are interested in physically, emotionally, and psychologically safe. Importantly, they must remember to view all participants, including infants and toddlers, as real people

deserving of respect and care, reflecting a “a reciprocal contract to care” (Powell & Gooch, 2017, p. 36). Observing teaching practices guided by curriculum frameworks, especially within the fluid, complex environment of ECE, can be a challenge. Researchers’ presence can influence actual practices and sway subsequent understandings of effective teaching and learning. This complexity necessitates a reflexive approach to ethics in situ, recognising our own subjectivity, and staying open to what can be learned beyond what is already known about “good” research in ECE.

The project received ethical approval from the University of Auckland’s Human Participants Ethics Committee (UAHPEC). Engagement with this process required the research team to consider how agreed upon ethical principles would be applied to the research design. These matters were ensuring that all managers, teachers, and parents had clear and accessible information to make an informed decision about participation in the project (informed consent, voluntary participation, and parental permission), respecting the privacy of each participant (confidentiality and careful use/storage of the data), and prioritising the well-being and safety of the participants such as through non-intrusive observations (minimising harm and ensuring well-being). It also triggered important conversations about how to approach the project and relationships with the teachers, children, and families involved in the filming.

Beyond the anticipatory process of formal ethics approval, there were also micro-ethical moments (Graham et al., 2015) that required in situ responses from the research team. Spiel et al. (2020) describe micro-ethics as mundane and everyday moments, including everyday interactions between individuals that are, nevertheless, ethically significant. Attending to micro-ethics involves ethics-in-action, nuanced responses required by researchers as ethically charged moments arise during the research process. Ethics-in-action engage with the messiness and unpredictability of actual ethical situations encountered during fieldwork (Rutanan et al., 2023) and highlight the need for ongoing, situated reflexive approaches to ethical decision-making.

Reflexivity, a fundamental principle of ethical decision-making, is described by Graham et al. (2015) as the capacity of the researcher “to be conscious and give account of their actions” (p. 334). Reflexivity throughout the research process fosters an ethical mindfulness that assists researchers in gaining insights into dynamics that are unfolding, including a self-awareness of their previous experiences and values. We posit that illuminating the micro-ethical moments that occurred in the context of an unfolding research project including infant and toddler participants has the potential to feed forward into broader understandings of what ethical conduct means for anyone working with infants and toddlers.

The micro-ethical moments reported in this article occurred in the developing relationship between two researchers and their infant and toddler (and their teacher) participants. Rutanan et al. (2023) point out that infants and toddlers continue to be marginalised in discussions about children as research participants because their non-verbal participation is challenging to conceptualise and theorise. From their work with children with disabilities,

Spiel et al. (2020) argue that research with children from marginalised groups requires careful attention to issues of power and responsibility. Infants and toddlers, as a group, have specific characteristics and needs that require consideration throughout the research process and are especially relevant in situ. Infants’ and toddlers’ ways of participating, and of giving or withdrawing consent, require continuous interpretation by adults who are still developing trust.

Ethics-in-action are first and foremost relational ethics because ethical decision-making is grounded in the relationship between the researcher and participant and acknowledges their interdependency in the research process (Rutanan et al., 2023). Researchers need to be aware of the power differences inherent in these relationships, and how these differences actively shape what occurs during the research process. In our project, we found that researching with infant and toddler participants required us to think beyond standard ethical principles and assumptions, recognising the fundamentally different ways that infants and toddlers are “heard”, “seen”, and respected as research participants.

Spiel et al. (2020) note that ethical decision-making at this level often remains “tacit and implicit” (p. 46) in the reporting of research. They suggest that including these considerations in the reporting process can offer diverse perspectives and insights to the field. Reflecting on and illuminating moments of ethics-in-action from our project reveal the fluid and complex nature of research with early childhood communities, the unique considerations of naturalistic research with infants and toddlers, and how the subjectivity of each researcher comes to bear on in situ ethical decision-making. We hope these discussions will be useful more widely, particularly for teachers and those working with infants and toddlers in a range of ways and contexts that inevitably involve everyday ethics-in-action.

The Approach to Ethics

A central voice in this article, Alice (research assistant), worked closely with Justine (academic researcher) to complete the filming in one centre. Alice shares her experience of filming infants and toddlers in this setting, and the ethical possibilities and complexities this experience raised for her. Alice’s experiences highlight the importance of a relational approach to ethics-in-action, including an awareness of the reciprocal ways in which the relationships between children, families, teachers, and researchers influence each other. Alice’s reflexivity as an emerging researcher is also evident as she gives account of her actions in order to foster an ethical attitude during the research process (Graham et al., 2015). To do this, Alice reflects on her previous assumptions about infants and toddlers and draws on her identities as a researcher and an infant-toddler teacher to help her engage in an ethically mindful way in relation to each scenario.

Alice applies the idea of ethical symmetry in research with infants and toddlers. Ethical symmetry refers to the attitude of forming the same ethical relationships with children as if they were adult participants while simultaneously respecting and being responsive to children’s unique developmental stages and surroundings (Salamon, 2015). This attitude corroborates the idea that infants and toddlers are “smaller, younger and easily misinterpreted by



others” (White, 2011, p. 191). However, they are “powerful and agentic” (p. 191) at the same time and can make an authentic contribution to the research. Importantly, the notion of ethical symmetry encourages a shift from seeing infants and toddlers as research objects to people who are co-generating knowledge with adult researchers.

We may never fully understand what a child thinks. However, Alice made efforts to gain the perspectives of infants and toddlers in the research. As suggested by White (2011), infants’ and toddlers’ voices can be viewed “as plural, corporeal, dialogic, visual and aural; and as an intersubjective research quest with our youngest that is in constant flux” (p. 185). Alice carefully observed and tuned in to infants’ and toddlers’ various ways of non-verbal communication through their cues, gestures, vocalisations, and language of the body (Cooper et al., 2012). Co-authors and research project leaders, Maria and Kiri, engaged in collaborative dialogue with Alice about these experiences to consider the ethical possibilities, complexities, and learning involved.

Alice’s Story

I was involved in the Te Whāriki project as a research assistant. One responsibility of mine was to generate data by taking videos in an infant and toddler centre, supported by an academic researcher. When I was an infant-toddler teacher, I favoured taking videos to record valuable moments of children learning, playing, and growing. In particular, I enjoyed watching these videos with the toddlers, which seemed to strengthen our relationships and help them revisit their experiences. Sharing the videos with their parents, whānau, including their families overseas involved them in their children’s learning experiences and deepened my connections with them. Also, I preferred using an iPhone to film, rather than a camera or iPad, since an iPhone is small and handy, and produces high-quality images and sound.

From a researcher’s perspective, the use of video allows me to replay footage back as many times as I need to, for a better understanding and to interpret data. Additionally, videos provide opportunities to document and analyse children’s learning and development, including infants’ and toddlers’ non-verbal communication and language, facial expressions, and body movements (Cooper et al., 2012).

Although I kept institutional ethics in mind when I entered the centre, I did not have a deep understanding of why “applying ethics principles in practice is a complex and dynamic process that requires critical reflection throughout all stages of research” (Flewitt & Ang, 2020, p. 31). This filming experience has since influenced my understanding of ethics-in-action when undertaking naturalistic video observations of infants and toddlers in an ECE setting. I present two situations I encountered. For each one, I engaged in further collaborative discussion with the project leaders to make sense of these experiences in relation to my learning about research ethics.

Scenario 1: The Value of Building Trusting Relationships

Spending time thinking about different ways to establish trusting relationships can benefit researchers and participants and contribute to minimising the disruptions that the research may bring to participants (Flewitt & Ang, 2020). To build trusting relationships with teachers Justine and I were invited to attend one of the centre’s regular staff meetings to answer teachers’ questions about the project. At this meeting, we also asked teachers to introduce the project to parents and children and then organised an online session (using ZOOM) for parents to ask their own questions and have them answered.

Once we had consent from participants, Justine and I scheduled a half-day visit to the centre for familiarisation. In negotiation with the centre leader, we decided to arrive at the centre as soon as it opened in the morning. We thought that meeting children and their families in person during the drop-off time would be beneficial to building trusting relationships.

Although we had consent to proceed, we planned to be flexible in relation to videoing the infants and toddlers during the familiarisation visit. An hour or so into our visit, we realised the children were settled with our presence in the centre and with me using my iPhone to film the physical environment. Would it be possible to start filming children now? Or maybe I could begin with filming child Jake (pseudonym), who showed an interest in me, and actively invited me into several pre-verbal, gestural conversations. So, we asked the centre manager and teachers whether it would be appropriate for us to begin videoing children in this situation. After getting their agreement, I started filming the infants and toddlers that teachers pointed out we had consent for.

Before going to the centre, I had assumed that filming infants and toddlers would be difficult. However, the unexpectedly short period of familiarisation challenged my assumption. As a former infant-toddler teacher, I still remember how some infants or toddlers would burst into tears when they saw new parents visiting, making it difficult for them to ease into their sleep or mealtime routine, let alone deal with strangers taking videos of them. Hence, I thought I would see a similar situation. Also, I was unsure how long infants and toddlers would need to feel secure in my presence and let me film them. However, the infants and toddlers in the centre appeared confident, highly adaptable, and quickly and smoothly resumed their routines after seeing and meeting us, two strangers, in their environment.

I have since learned that personal assumptions are one of the influencing factors in ethical planning and decision-making (Flewitt & Ang, 2020). Hence, researchers need to be aware of them. It is also common for personal beliefs or values to be challenged or maintained during research. Indeed, “Methods that treat children as knowledgeable, capable, and agentic are now *de rigueur*, but suffused with challenges that researchers may not always perhaps consider or report” (Hedges, 2022, p. 60). With these ideas in mind, I understand now that rather than view my prior assumptions and subjectivity as a failure, my previous teaching experience supported me to be more sensitive and responsive to the infants and toddlers in the centre. Nonetheless, Hedges (2022) would suggest that in the role of research assistant, not a teacher who has a different way of interacting with children, I need to stay open

and reflective about “my role, intentions and methods” (p. 62) in the setting and how my assumptions can affect data generation.

In addition to thinking about the assumptions I brought to my filming of infants and toddlers, I contemplated why the infants and toddlers had responded to us in the way they did despite us being strangers. Based on the centre’s high teacher-child ratio of 1 adult to 3 children, and my observations of the patient and peaceful interactions between teachers and children, I realised that the effort in establishing trusting relationships with teachers and children’s parents helped in some way to differentiate us from strangers.

As previously mentioned, for the familiarisation period, we made the deliberate decision to spend time in the centre during their morning drop-off time to introduce ourselves to parents and children. The trust-building activities with teachers and parents helped introduce us to “the setting” before we met the children. Then, as we interacted more with the teaching team in their room, children witnessing our friendly communication and interactions with their teachers and parents likely helped children to feel at ease with us in their space.

Scenario 2: The Importance of Seeking Ongoing Assent From Infants and Toddlers

Baby Ollie (pseudonym) was around 11 months old. When I stood nearby to begin filming, he was lying on his tummy on the mat, his eyes looking down, and stretching and kicking his legs. I started videoing him, thinking this would be a valuable clip for the research. Immediately, Ollie turned his head to me and found me. He smiled at first, with his mouth making a “si-si” sound. I smiled at him, waving my hand to greet him. However, he suddenly stopped smiling, making sounds, kicking his legs, and just stared at me. Mindful of his demeanour, I continued filming but was ready to pause if needed, making the same “si-si” sound to connect with him in a friendly manner. Ollie still stared at me without any response. Was this Ollie’s way of telling me he was unsure of my presence? Had I interrupted his flow of thought? Or had I just become a focus of interest for him? Did he want me to stay or go? I then decided to stop filming and come back later.

I believe infants are “competent and confident learners and communicators” (MOE, 2017, p. 5) and respect their diverse forms of communication, such as their non-verbal language, gestures, and cues. Although Ollie did not cry, I realised my presence and the action of filming may have interrupted his exploration of body and sound. The belief in putting children and their agenda first, no matter their age, and being unsure of what Ollie was thinking or feeling, influenced my decision to stop videoing Ollie and to leave more time for him to choose his own ways to participate in the filming.

Adjusting the filming according to Ollie’s non-verbal responses exemplifies the ethical consideration of seeking infants’ and toddlers’ ongoing consent (assent) and voluntary participation during the research, once parents have given proxy consent for their children’s participation (Hedges, 2022). Importantly, ongoing consent means children’s assent or dissent is not fixed but constantly changing (Hedges, 2022). Ollie’s ambivalent response to me at this time did not mean he would not participate in the

research. When I returned to Ollie later in the day, he smiled at me and continued his exploration of the environment. I took this affirmative, non-verbal cue to be his way of telling me he was comfortable with my presence and for me to film at this time.

Putting children and their emotions first, and believing they can give consent/assent, upholds ethical research with children. Children are capable participants in research. Researchers generate data with children rather than “extracting knowledge from them” (Flewitt & Ang, 2020, p. 82). However, children are different from adults, especially infants and toddlers who are still developing their verbal language and coherent understandings of their experiences. Such ideas are consistent with Salamon’s (2015) notion of going into naturalistic research with infants with an attitude of ethical symmetry. This idea acknowledges infants and toddlers as capable participants and respects their unique needs as people.

Concluding Thoughts

Reflecting on these experiences, including through collaborative dialogue with more established researchers, I have learned that qualitative research with infants and toddlers requires a thoughtful approach before, during, and after the familiarisation period (Hedges, 2022). Reflexivity is key to recognising and responding to the micro-ethics of situations with infants and toddlers that may appear as mundane and everyday moments to some but are, nonetheless, ethically significant (Graham et al., 2015; Spiel et al., 2020). I understand now that relational ethics-in-action brings both possibilities and complexities when filming in an infant-toddler setting. The trusting relationships between researchers, teachers, children, and their families can affect the progress and integrity of the research and the researcher. In particular, respectful and responsive relationships between researchers and very young children can empower both parties’ active co-generation of knowledge. However, researchers must constantly reflect on how their assumptions impact data generation and seek infants’ and toddlers’ ongoing assent by being attentive to their verbal and non-verbal cues in every research situation. It is also important for teachers and researchers to reflect on how their assumptions about the capabilities of infants and toddlers affect their teaching or research in the infant-toddler setting.

Finally, teachers and researchers need to be encouraged to engage in collaborative dialogue about ethics-in-action concerning all children and a reflexive approach to the ongoing storage and dissemination of their video data. For example, where and how do they store the videos? Who does and will have access to the video data? If teachers use their own phones to film, what will happen to those phone videos if they leave the job? If teachers or researchers include children’s videos in an online seminar or workshop, how can children’s videos be protected from being recorded by third parties? These questions remind us that videoing children’s experiences in ECE requires ethical conduct and a thoughtful awareness of the possibilities and complexities. Above all, it is essential for researchers to remember that participants are not just the subjects of research; rather, they are real people who are deserving of respect and care, no matter their age.

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