

RESEARCH INVOLVING COMPETENT YOUTHS

Overview

“Competent youths” are aged 16 to 17. They technically hold the legal status of children but in certain research projects are considered to have sufficient understanding of the project and its implications for them that they can make up their own minds about taking part, and have that opinion honoured. However, the class of “competent youth” is not automatic and must be decided on a *per project* and (as appropriate) *per individual* basis. See also Ethics [FAQ C12a](#) and [C12 b](#).

If this class can be applied to all participants under 18 (see point 7 below for details), then the CUREC 1 form (Medical Sciences IDREC) or CUREC 1A checklist (Social Sciences and Humanities IDREC) is usually sufficient if the research study does not present any other major ethical issues. Any participants under 18 to whom neither the class of “competent youths” nor an [approved CUREC procedure](#) applies, would trigger the requirement to complete a full [CUREC 2 application](#).

If the class does **not** apply, or does not **wholly** apply to all participants under 18 in the project (please see point 8 below for details), a full [CUREC 2 application](#) may be required. Parental consent may be required depending on the project. Please also see our [Approved Procedures](#) for common research studies with children in institutional and non-institutional settings.

Further Details

1. Youths cannot usually be classed as “competent youths” if outside the UK and EU. This is because expectations of parental authority and young people’s autonomy, and the areas of life in which these apply, can vary considerably between cultures. Even if the project is located in the EU outside of the UK, researchers should be mindful of the different legislation and standards that might apply:
 - i. In considering whether the class applies to youths outside the UK and EU, e.g. in North America, researchers should be guided by cultural expectation plus any relevant legislation and (regulatory) standards.
 - ii. The class could also apply to youths outside the UK and EU who are enrolled at a university (where greater autonomy is likely).
2. If the research is “unproblematic” in ethical terms, then it is likely the class of “competent youth” applies. However, if in the context of the research project overall anything looks to be of significant ethical concern e.g. the project design, area of enquiry, research procedures, then the class may not apply.
3. If the research involves procedures which would require parent / legal guardian consent outside of a research setting, then the class would not apply.
4. Projects fitting under one of CUREC’s Approved Procedures concerning children (see [Approved Procedures](#)) would normally support the use of the class.
5. The language of information given to participants and consent forms (if used) should be appropriate to the 16-17 year old age group.
6. If planning research interviews of “competent youths” consider the following:
 - i. As with the topic of the research, interview questions asked should be unproblematic. This extends to the phrasing of interview questions. The researcher should provide a copy of the proposed questions for review when submitting the checklist to the relevant IDREC.
 - ii. The researcher should take into account practical or cultural considerations, such as whether it would be appropriate or necessary to have a third party attend face-to-face

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- interviews.
- iii. For research studies using online surveys it is important to add an age verification button before participants can proceed to the survey questions. Please see our [informed consent template for online research](#).
7. Examples of research where the class of “competent youths” would generally apply:
- i. Questionnaire/interviews on attitudes to science or mathematics
 - ii. Questionnaire/interviews on use of the internet to support study at school
 - iii. Questionnaire/interviews on use of public transport
 - iv. Questionnaire/interviews on food preference
 - v. Studies of memory, perceptual discrimination, response times, problem-solving or decision-making that do not involve potentially distressing stimuli
 - vi. Studies of social perception and interaction with peers that do not involve any risk of inducing distress or revealing sensitive information about the participant
 - vii. studies of musical preferences or judgments
 - viii. studies of language use, perception or production
 - ix. Study involving word association
 - x. Questionnaire/interviews on life choices/education after 18
8. Examples of research where the class of “competent youths” would generally **not** apply:
- i. Any research involving participants located outside of the UK and the EU (given the considerations in point 1 above)
 - ii. Studies targeted on cultural minority groups in which expectations of young people’s autonomy differs substantially from the norms of the wider society in the country in which the research is being conducted
 - iii. Questionnaire/interviews on truancy
 - iv. Questionnaire/interviews about self-image
 - v. Questionnaire/interviews about sexual behaviour or identity
 - vi. Adolescents with sub-clinical indications of depression or anxiety as participants
 - vii. Participants who have no person to give consent on their behalf but are potentially vulnerable (e.g. street/refugee children, children who are sole heads of their households)
 - viii. Participants who have been, or are currently within social care systems where the consent of their parent or legal guardian must be sought.
 - ix. Studies in which seeking parental consent might not be in the young person’s interest (for example, if it involved enquiries about abuse, or if it revealed information about sexual behaviour or orientation which the young person could properly expect to remain private). Such cases may well justify seeking consent from the young participants rather than their parents, but this question should be reviewed by the committee through a CUREC 2 submission
9. It is also important to appreciate that the ethical review process, as well as protecting the interests of participants, is intended to avoid any potential reputational risk to the University through public concern or objection that might arise in connection with a research project.