



basic education

Department:
Basic Education
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

Guidance on Research in Early Childhood Development (ECD) Centres

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The Department of Basic Education (DBE) regularly receives requests for permission or advice regarding research conducted in Early Childhood Development (ECD) centres, including privately operated crèches and early learning programmes. This note provides clarity on the Department's role, as well as the legal and ethical obligations of researchers undertaking such work.

1. DBE's role and institutional authority

Unlike public schools, privately operated ECD centres are not public institutions under the direct authority of the Department of Basic Education. As such, the DBE **does not grant or deny institutional access** for research conducted in private ECD centres.

Responsibility for granting access to a private ECD centre rests with the **owner or operator of the centre**, subject to compliance with applicable laws and ethical requirements. Any engagement between a researcher and a private ECD centre is therefore a matter between those parties.

2. Ethical approval

The DBE does **not** have a research ethics committee and therefore **cannot grant ethical approval** for research.

Researchers are **strongly urged** to obtain ethical clearance from a recognised research ethics committee (for example, a university Human Research Ethics Committee or an equivalent body), regardless of whether the research is conducted in a public or private setting.

Ethical approval serves to:

- Protect research participants;
- Ensure compliance with national and international ethical standards; and
- Provide legal and professional protection to researchers and institutions.

Researchers should be aware that, in the absence of ethics approval, they may be **legally and professionally exposed** should any harm, complaint, or dispute arise during or after the research.

3. Research involving adults only

Where research in an ECD centre involves **only adults** (for example, interviews or surveys with practitioners, managers, or caregivers) and does **not involve interaction with children or the collection of identifiable child-level data**, researchers must still ensure:

- Informed consent from all adult participants;
- Written permission from the ECD centre operator; and
- Appropriate ethical oversight, which is strongly recommended.

4. Research involving children

Where research involves **direct or indirect interaction with children**, including observation, assessment, interviewing, recording, or any form of intervention, ethical and legal obligations are significantly heightened.

In such cases, researchers must ensure, at a minimum:

- Formal ethics approval from a recognised ethics committee;
- Written informed consent from parents or legal guardians;
- Child assent where developmentally appropriate;
- Adequate child safeguarding and supervision measures; and
- Compliance with applicable data protection requirements.

Research involving children without ethics approval exposes researchers to **serious legal risk** and is strongly discouraged.

5. Data protection and confidentiality

Researchers collecting personal or identifiable information must ensure compliance with applicable data protection requirements, including secure data handling, anonymisation where appropriate, and transparency regarding data use and storage.

6. Summary

In summary:

- The DBE does not grant or deny access to private ECD centres.
- Researchers are responsible for obtaining permission from ECD centre operators.
- Ethical approval from a recognised body is strongly advised and is essential where children are involved.
- The absence of ethical clearance may expose researchers to legal and professional consequences.

The DBE provides this guidance to promote ethical, lawful, and responsible research practices in the early childhood development sector.