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This is the published version of a paper published in *Journal of Academic Ethics*.

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Isakovic, B., Hellfeldt, K., Johansson, B., Thunberg, S., Källström, Å. et al. (2026)
Ethical Issues Involved in Conducting Research with Victimized Children – A Literature Review of Existing Literature
Journal of Academic Ethics, 24(4): 98
https://doi.org/10.1007/s10805-026-09773-w

Access to the published version may require subscription.

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

Permanent link to this version:
http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:oru:diva-132008

Journal of Academic Ethics (2026) 24:98
https://doi.org/10.1007/s10805-026-09773-w

REVIEW ARTICLE

Ethical Issues Involved in Conducting Research with Victimized Children – A Literature Review of Existing Literature

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Received: 2 December 2025 / Accepted: 29 September 2026
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Abstract
Research involving victimized children presents several distinct ethical challenges due to their dual vulnerability as minors and victims of violence. This review of 32 studies synthesized current knowledge on ethical issues in such research and identified three themes: (1) The children – passive or active agents, emphasizing both competence and vulnerability; (2) The researcher and the research process, highlighting responsibility for safety, ethical integrity, and sensitivity; and (3) General guidelines and standards, emphasizing the role of ethical guidelines, review boards, and methodological frameworks. While children are often considered vulnerable, studies stress the importance of recognizing them as competent agents, with participation sometimes offering empowering and positive experiences. Researchers hold primary responsibility for minimizing risks, ensuring competence, and maintaining ongoing consent processes. Ethical review boards play a central role in protection while enabling ethically complex studies to proceed. Policies must also adapt to avoid excluding children with experiences of violence from research. Ultimately, ethical research requires balancing protection and agency while safeguarding children's voices.

Keywords Children · Victimization · Research · Ethics · Methodology

Introduction

The interest in methodological and ethical challenges and dilemmas concerning research with children has gained attention during the last decades. Conducting research with children presents a range of ethical challenges related to informed consent, power dynamics, and the need to ensure children's safety and well-being throughout the research process (Crane & Broome, 2017). These challenges can become even more complex when the participants are children who have experienced victimization in the form of abuse, neglect, or other forms of interpersonal violence (Houghton, 2015; Knight et al., 2000). This subgroup of children often holds a double marginalized position, both as minors and individuals exposed

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Published online: 22 October 2026

to violence. This dual vulnerability amplifies the ethical dilemmas involved in studying their experiences. At the same time, it is crucial to include their voices in research, as their perspectives are essential for developing knowledge, policy, and practices that can better protect and support them. There is therefore a need to deepen our understanding of the ethical dilemmas involved in conducting research with victimized children and to build on the experiences and reflections reported in previous studies. Existing knowledge remains fragmented across fields and studies, highlighting the need to systematically synthesize existing insights into the ethical issues that arise when researching this specific group of children. As such, the overall aim of this review is to examine and synthesize current knowledge on ethical issues involved in conducting research with victimized children.

When children have experienced victimization, ethical decisions that might otherwise be considered inappropriate may become necessary to ensure participants' safety and well-being. For example, obtaining parental consent may not be appropriate if a caregiver is suspected of being involved in abuse (Mathews et al., 2022). Researchers may also face situations in which promises of confidentiality must be balanced against legal obligations to report suspected maltreatment to child protection authorities (Knight et al., 2000). For example, Sadzaglishvili et al. (2021) describe cases in which researchers working with vulnerable children faced ethical dilemmas when parental consent could not safely be obtained because parents were implicated in abuse or neglect. The authors argue that, in such cases, excluding children from research may reinforce their marginalization and limit opportunities to document harmful experiences. Similarly, Kiili and Moilanen (2019) in their analysis of child protection research, highlight the difficulty of ensuring meaningful participation when children's involvement is mediated by adult gatekeepers such as parents, professionals, or institutional authorities. Although children's participation is often pre-determined by adults, especially when children are considered too young or when adult gatekeepers perceive participation as potentially harmful, critical reflection on how to include children suffering from, e.g., traumatic experiences or having negative attitudes towards adult professionals remains limited. Traumatic experiences that may lead to stigma or fear, including child abuse, bullying, and family violence, are typically viewed as sensitive topics (Powell et al., 2018). Hence, Sadzaglishvili et al. (2021), Kiili and Moilanen (2019) and Powell et al. (2018) imply a set of ethical issues and dilemmas that could become particularly important when research focuses not only on vulnerable children in general, but specifically on children who have been victimized. In such cases, important questions arise: How does victimization affect children's ability to exert their research rights? How should researchers navigate relationships with parents when those parents may be the perpetrators of the violence that is the objective of the research?

While researchers have acknowledged a range of specific ethical challenges in research involving adult victims of violence (e.g. Bender, 2017; Bredal et al., 2024; Goossens et al., 2016; Silverio, 2021), considerably less attention has been given to the ethical dilemmas relating to researching child victims and children's experiences of victimization. Existing studies indicate that only a small proportion of youths typically report experiencing distress or harm when asked about victimization to violence, abuse, assault or maltreatment (Finkelhor et al., 2014; McClinton Appollis et al., 2015). However, when researchers address sensitive and complex topics, for example children's experiences and conceptualization of safety in relation to sexual abuse, researchers need to ensure that children understand what is expected of them throughout the research process. Moreover, researchers need to renego-

tiate consent at multiple stages throughout the research process, recognizing that children´s willingness and capacity to participate may change over time. This is especially important when participants have some choice in the topics being discussed or when immediate ethical concern arises, such as discomfort (Moore et al., 2018). These ethical considerations may also vary depending on the characteristics and circumstances of the children involved. Victimized children differ widely in age, gender, lived experiences, additional needs, and the contexts in which research takes place. Although young children are increasingly being listened to and included in research, further attention is needed to promote children's agency within relational contexts involving adults. This includes viewing assent as an ongoing process rather than a one-time decision, which may be particularly important when conducting research with children with additional needs (Sun et al., 2023).

A previous review by Crane and Broome (2017) examined ethical issues in research participation from the perspective of children and adolescents more broadly. Their review provided important insights into how children perceive research participation and ethical safeguards. The review did not focus specifically on research involving children who have experienced victimization, nor did it synthesize methodological reflections from studies dealing with such sensitive topics. Since the publication of that review, research addressing children's experiences of violence, abuse, and maltreatment has expanded considerably. An updated synthesis focusing specifically on ethical issues in research with victimized children is therefore warranted.

Aim

The aim of this research review is to examine and synthesize current knowledge on ethical issues in research involving victimized children. Victimization is conceptualized as exposure to abuse, neglect, or other forms of interpersonal violence. The following research questions are addressed:

- What ethical challenges and considerations have been identified in previous research regarding conducting studies with victimized children?
- What practical strategies and guidelines have been proposed by previous research to address these ethical challenges?

The target population of the review includes children and adolescents under 18 years of age. To capture the full range of ethical dilemmas and issues related to research with victimized children, a scoping review approach was applied. This approach allowed the inclusion of studies using qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods designs, as well as theoretical and discussion papers.

Method

This study used a scoping review methodology. A scoping review is designed to map and provide an overview of the research that exists within a specific field (Pollock et al., 2024). This approach is useful when a research area is broad and includes studies with different

designs, methods, and study populations. Instead of focusing on evaluating the quality of individual studies, scoping reviews aim to identify and describe the available evidence, including key concepts, definitions, and common themes found in the literature.

The current review was conducted following the framework described by Pollock et al., (2024). The process began with defining the aim of the study and formulating research questions. Based on these aims, inclusion criteria were developed to guide the selection of relevant literature. A structured plan was created for searching the literature, screening studies, extracting data, analyzing the findings, and presenting the results. After conducting systematic searches and selecting relevant literature, data were extracted and analyzed to identify patterns and themes related to ethical challenges and considerations in research involving victimized children as well as proposed practical strategies and guidelines that address the ethical challenges. The findings were then summarized and presented in relation to the overall purpose of the review. The process is described in detail in the next coming sections.

Search Strategy

The main searches were conducted in September 2024. Electronic literature databases EBSCOhost (including all databases), Web of Science, PubMed, Scopus and Sociology Collection were used to detect relevant studies. To identify eligible studies, the following combination of keywords were entered in the search field of the databases: *"child research" OR "research on child*" OR "research in child*" OR "research with child*" OR "research involving child*" AND ethic* OR "research ethic*" AND victim**. These terms were chosen as broad umbrella concepts intended to capture studies explicitly addressing ethical issues in research involving victimized children. These outlined search strings were used in all databases. Due to the high volume of articles retrieved in Web of Science ($n = 3{,}720$), the outlined search strings were search within "Topic" instead of anywhere in text. Filters were used to limit search results to peer review articles available in full text, published in English during the past ten years (2014–2023). The search was conducted in 2024, however, publications from 2024 were not included because the year was still ongoing at the time of the search. Restricting the timeframe to 2014–2023 ensured that the review covered the most recent complete decade of published research while avoiding potential inconsistencies due to incomplete indexing of studies published during 2024. No restrictions on the location of studies or type of studies were applied. Using the explained process, the searches led up to a combined total of 4,136 potentially relevant articles. After removing duplicates ($n = 1{,}156$), 2,980 articles were included for screening. The search strategy was intentionally made broad to minimize the risk of missing out on relevant articles as the topic is broad and can be applied in several ways.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To ensure the relevance of the studies included in this review, specific inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied. Studies were considered eligible if they (1) included samples of children that were younger than 18 and who had been subjected to any type of victimization, (2) included a discussion of ethical issues when doing research on victimized children, (3) included an abstract that included an explicit reference to research ethics, methods or

participation with children who had been exposed or subjected to any form of victimization. Further, (4) studies with any type of method (incl. non-empirical papers) and (5) any type of context were included as well. Studies were excluded if the sample only consisted of individuals that were 18 years or older; if the study population did not include children who had been victimized; if ethics were not a part of the study; or if the language was not English. Some studies had samples that included participants slightly older than 18 years. These studies were included if the sample also consisted of participants under the age of 18. In these cases, data were extracted for only the population of interest. Therefore, the focus in the study remained on children. If any conflict of assessment was detected, it was resolved by discussions. Further exclusion criteria included publications in languages other than English, and studies published before 2014. Studies were also automatically excluded if there was no full text available or if it was previously undetected duplicate. The current review did not conduct a formal quality assessment. Instead, the analysis focused on the reasoning and discussion of research ethics within the included studies.

Screening

The screening process was managed by using Covidence (Covidence, 2024). All authors were involved in the screening process where each author screened a section of the collected titles and abstracts.

Every title and abstract was screened by at least two of the authors to determine whether they were eligible for selection for full-text reading. If any conflict of assessment was detected, meaning two authors did not agree in the screening processes, two other researchers also screened the studies. In cases where consensus still could not be reached, the study was included for full-text assessment. The process resulted in 2,856 excluded articles, and 96 included to full-text screening. Full texts were retrieved online and studied to decide if they were eligible for inclusion in the study. The 96 articles were read in full-text by at least two authors. A senior and a junior researcher oversaw the whole screening process and ensured consistency by rechecking the data and supporting consensus through regular team meetings. From the original search 96 articles were assessed to determine if they were eligible. An additional 28 studies were also identified through the other 96 studies references, which were then also assessed to confirm eligibility. Out of the total of 124 studies, 92 were excluded. The process was documented in detail in a PRISMA flow chart, see Fig. 1.

Data Extraction and Synthesis

The data extracted from the included articles encompassed several key elements, including the author and year of publication, title, country of study, methods, study design, sample size, population age, type of victimization, as well as ethical considerations and implications. Particular emphasis was placed on ethical considerations and implications, which were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2013). To ensure rigor and reliability, the thematic analysis process involved four researchers. In the first stage, each researcher individually reviewed the ethical considerations and implications outlined in the studies, inductively coding relevant information in relation to the research objectives. Coding inductively is characterized by the codes and themes being developed from the data instead of being determined from the analysis (Terry et al., 2017).

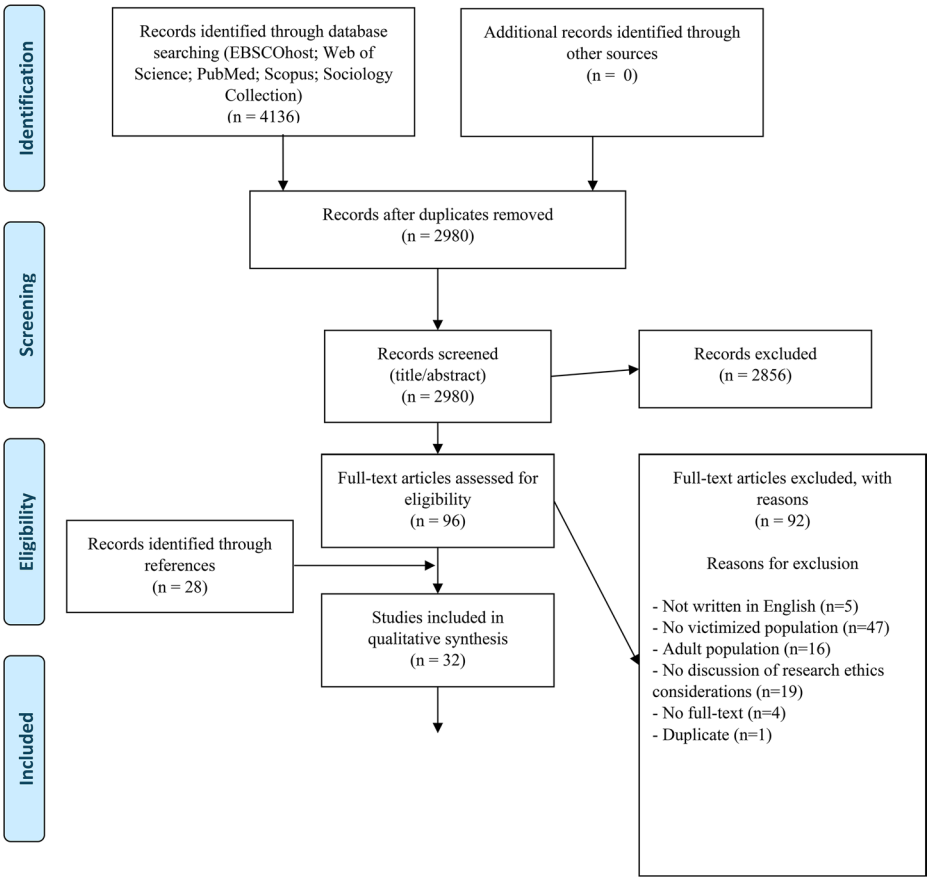

Fig. 1 The screening process described step by step in a PRISMA flow chart

Thus, themes emerged during the coding process and were developed through continuous engagement with the data. In the second stage, each researcher proposed preliminary themes and sub-themes that emerged from their analysis. This resulted in themes such as children as vulnerable, children as agents, protection, sensibility, researchers' competence etcetera. After completing this initial phase, the researchers convened to collaboratively review and discuss the identified themes and sub-themes and resolve any disagreements. This collaborative process involved critically evaluating and refining the proposed themes to ensure they accurately represented the ethical considerations and implications identified in the studies. The aim was to achieve consensus on the most effective and coherent way to synthesize the data, facilitating a comprehensive understanding of the ethical dimensions addressed across the reviewed articles. It is through this discussion it became clear that some aspects were closely related to the child as a research participant, the researcher's role when researching children's experiences, and the relation between both as a bridge more focused on general guidelines.

Results

Description of Included Studies

The review comprised a diverse range of studies ($n=32$) focusing on or discussing ethical considerations or implications in research. Most studies were non-empirical ($n=21$) and consisted of reflective papers ($n=6$), methodological papers ($n=3$), and theoretical papers ($n=8$). This suggests that much of the ethical inquiry in the reviewed literature is conceptual or normative, aiming to theorize or critique ethical principles rather than directly applying them in empirical settings. Among the non-empirical studies there were also a few systematic and literature reviews ($n=4$). Empirical studies included those employing qualitative methods, such as various types of interviews ($n=5$), case studies ($n=1$), and multimethod designs ($n=1$). A few studies utilized quantitative approaches, including cross-sectional ($n=1$) and longitudinal designs ($n=1$). Mixed-methods approaches were used in two studies ($n=2$).

The geographical scope of the studies was diverse, with explicit mention of countries in some cases. In other cases, the geographical context was either not specified or not applicable (i.e., in non-empirical papers). Most of the studies focused on children under the age of 18 ($n=18$), although the specific age ranges varied within this group. A smaller subset targeted older populations ($n=6$), such as mothers or young adults slightly over 18 years old. Importantly, these studies nonetheless maintained a focus on children's perspectives, illustrating an ethical commitment to understanding issues from the viewpoint of victimized children. The studies included in the review addressed a wide spectrum of victimization experiences, including domestic violence, family violence, sexual violence, physical violence, emotional violence, maltreatment, neglect, interpersonal violence, exposure to intimate partner violence, rape, poly-victimization, school violence and school bullying. For detailed information about the characteristics of the included studies, see Table 1.

Qualitative synthesis

The ethical challenges and considerations identified in previous research on victimized children can be grouped into three main themes (i) The children – passive or active agents?, (ii) The researcher and the research process, and (iii) General guidelines or standards. The first theme primarily relates to children´s roles as active actors or co-creators in the research process. The second theme highlights issues connected to the role of the researcher and the research process in general, with an emphasis on responsibility, professional experience, competence and sensitivity as well as requirements related to the role of researcher that are in focus. The third theme centers on the broader ethical framework and context including questions of ethical guidelines and standards, legal or ethical obligations, the availability of support systems for children, the importance of sharing knowledge and experience among researchers, as well as methodological considerations of relevance to this field. The ethical challenges identified can also be considered in terms of power imbalances between the researcher and the child, as well as the individual's autonomy over their own lives. To provide an indication of the prevalence of each theme across the included studies, we report the number of studies contributing to each theme (se also Supplementary Table 1). As studies could contribute to more than one theme, totals exceed the number of included stud-

ies. Since the frequencies reported refer to the overarching themes, references within each theme are provided as illustrative examples of the arguments represented in the literature.

Theme I: The Children - Passive or Active Agents?

Theme I identified ethical issues related to the child. This first theme was identified in 13 of the 32 included studies (se Supplementary Table 1). The theme highlighted two central ethical considerations and implications in research involving children who have experienced victimization: (a) children as agents and (b) positive feelings regarding participation in research.

Children as Agents The literature contributing to this theme described children as occupying a dual position. One the one hand, children were portrayed as vulnerable participants requiring protection though appropriate ethical safeguarding. On the other hand, they were increasingly recognized as competent actors capable of contributing meaningfully to research. Traditionally, children are often viewed as vulnerable agents, necessitating strict ethical research guidelines to ensure their protection. However, this view underscores the importance of safeguarding their well-being while recognizing their inherent right to be heard and included in research processes (e.g. Evang & Øverlien, 2015)

Within this body of literature, children were understood as active agents who both influence and are influenced by their environments. For example, Radford et al. (2017), highlighted how children's agency is shaped through ongoing power dynamics between children and adults. As so, children should be actively involved as informants, particularly in research addressing sensitive topics that directly affect them (Beetham et al., 2019). However, current ethical approaches often prioritize adult-led protection of children, reflecting a paternalistic view that positions adults as sole protectors. In contrast, these researchers advocate for repositioning children as active participants in their own protection (e.g. Beetham et al., 2019; Houghton, 2015; Radford et al., 2017). Across the included studies, children's agency was reflected in several aspects of the research process. Children were described as capable of regulating their participation, limiting or directing interviews, making informed decisions about participation when appropriate support was provided, and contributing to the design and dissemination of research (e.g., Evang & Øverlien, 2015; Kyegombe et al., 2019; Lamb et al., 2021; Nikupeteri & Laitinen, 2023). Their narratives were regarded as valuable sources of knowledge despite often differing from adult accounts in structure and expression. Thus, children perspectives were argued to provide valuable insights that may otherwise be overlooked, and therefore contribute to a better understanding of their experiences of being victimized.

Failing to acknowledge children as capable agents is argued as being potentially harmful. When children are labeled as too vulnerable to contribute, they risk being marginalized or excluded from decisions that directly impact their lives. For example, one study argued that exclusion of children's perspective in research may reinforce their disempowerment, perpetuating harm rather than mitigating it (Martins & Sani, 2020). Such an approach was described as risking children's exclusion from research and decision-making processes concerning issues that directly affect their lives, thereby limiting opportunities to understand their experiences and perspectives (e.g., Beetham et al., 2019; Martins & Sani, 2020). This

Table 1 Descriptive overview of included studies

Author, year	Title	Country	Methods	Design
Beetham et al. (2019)	Young children's narrations of relational recovery: A school-based group for children who have experienced domestic violence	United Kingdom	Qualitative	Interviews
Cater, Å. & Øverlien, C. (2013)	Children exposed to domestic violence: a discussion about research ethics and researchers' responsibilities	N/A	Non-empirical	Reflective
Dayal et al. (2018)	Ethical and definitional considerations in research on child sexual violence in India	India	Non-empirical	Systematic review
Devries et al. (2016)	Collecting data on violence against children and young people: need for a universal standard	N/A	Non-empirical	Reflective
Dubow et al. (2017)	Conducting longitudinal, process-oriented research with conflict-affected youth: Solving the inevitable challenges	N/A	Non-empirical	Reflective
Evang, A. & Øverlien, C. (2014)	'If you look, you have to leave': Young children regulating research interviews about experiences of domestic violence	Norway	Qualitative	Interviews
Fagerlund and Ellonen (2016)	Children's experiences of completing a computer- based violence survey: Finnish child victim survey revisited	Finland	Quantitative	Cross-sectional
Gabriel et al. (2017)	Reflexive research with mothers and children victims of domestic violence	United Kingdom	Non-empirical	Methodological
Hardesty et al. (2019)	Qualitative research on interpersonal violence: Guidance for early career scholars	N/A	Non-empirical	Methodological
Houghton (2015)	Young people's perspectives on participatory ethics: Agency, power and impact in domestic abuse research and policy-making	United Kingdom	Qualitative	Dialogue between a young expert group and politicians
Hoytema van Konijnenburg et al., (2015)	Data research on child abuse and neglect without informed consent? Balancing interests under Dutch law	Netherlands	Non-empirical	Reflective/Theoretical
Kyegombe et al. (2019)	How to conduct good quality research on violence against children with disabilities: key ethical, measurement, and research principles	N/A	Non-empirical	Theoretical
Lamb et al., (2020)	Research ethics in practice: challenges of using digital technology to embed the voices of children and young people within programs for fathers who use domestic violence	Australia	Qualitative	Interviews/ Workshops

Table 1 (continued)

Author, year	Title	Country	Methods	Design
Laurin et al. (2018)	Youth self-report of child maltreatment in representative surveys: a systematic review	Canada	Non-empirical	Systematic review
Lund et al. (2016)	Empirically based analysis of methodological and ethical challenges in research with children as participants: the case of bullying in kindergarten	Norway	Qualitative	Interviews
Manion et al. (2023)	Creative and participatory methods for bolstering violence prevention in schools in South East Europe through shifting social and gender norms	Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo, Moldova, Romania, Serbia	Mixed methods	Mixed-method with a qualitative driven approach.
Martins, P. & Sani, A. I. (2020)	Consent for research on violence against children: dilemmas and contradictions	N/A	Non-empirical	Theoretical
Mathews et al. (2022)	The ethics of child maltreatment surveys in relation to participant distress: Implications of social science evidence, ethical guidelines, and law	N/A	Non-empirical	Theoretical
McGhee et al. (2015)	Taking a long view in child welfare: How can we evaluate intervention and child wellbeing over time?	N/A	Non-empirical	Theoretical
Nikupeteri and Laitinen (2023)	Addressing post-separation parental stalking: A multimethod qualitative approach to producing knowledge of stalking in children's lives	Finland	Qualitative	Multi-methodological
Pickles, J. (2019)	Including and involving young people (under 18's) in hate research without the consent of parents	United Kingdom	Non-empirical	Reflective
Pihkala and Huuki (2023)	Safe and enabling: composing ethically sustainable crafty-activist research on gender and power in young peer cultures	Finland	Non-empirical	Reflective
Radford et al. (2017)	Researching violence with children: Experiences and lessons from the UK and South Africa	United Kingdom, South Africa	Non-empirical	Theoretical
Randall et al. (2016)	Protecting children in research: Safer ways to research with children who may be experiencing violence or abuse	United Kingdom	Non-empirical	Literature review
Randall et al. (2015)	An analysis of child protection 'standard operating procedures for research' in higher education institutions in the United Kingdom	United Kingdom	Non-empirical	Inductive review
Resnik, D. B. & Randall, D. C. (2018)	Reporting suspected abuse or neglect in research involving children	USA	Non-empirical	Theoretical

Table 1 (continued)

Author, year	Title	Country	Methods	Design
Rizo et al. (2017)	Research with children exposed to partner violence: Perspectives of service-mandated, CPS- and court-involved survivors on research with their children	USA	Qualitative	Focus groups
Robinson et al. (2023)	Prioritising children and young people with disability in research about domestic and family violence: Methodological, ethical and pragmatic reflections	Australia	Mixed methods	Case-file analyses, interviews, focus groups
Tiyyagura et al. (2020)	Seeing the forest in family violence research: Moving to a family-centered approach	USA	Non-empirical	Methodological
Vearey et al. (2017)	Research ethics in practice: lessons from studies exploring interpersonal violence in different contexts	N/A	Non-empirical	Theoretical
Waechter et al., (2019)	Maltreatment history, trauma symptoms and research reactivity among adolescents in child protection services.	Canada	Quantitative	Longitudinal
Wall et al. (2018)	Conducting evaluation research with children exposed to violence: How technological innovations in methodologies and data collection may enhance the process	Canada	Non-empiciral	Literature review

Author, year	Participants (*n*)	Age group, target population	Type of victimization	Ethical considerations	Implications
Beetham et al. (2019)	4	7–10 years old	Domestic violence	Highlights the importance of including children as informants in sensitive research to ensure their voices are heard, noting that excluding them to mitigate risk may lead to greater consequences	Acknowledge children's experiences with violence, support their expression, and offer choices in how they share. Value their identities and recognize them as reliable informants, even if their narratives differ from adults'
Cater, Å. & Øverlien, C. (2013)	N/A	Children < 18	Domestic violence	Children can be interviewed on any topic, but with careful attention to circumstances and purpose. Researchers must ensure both the protection and meaningful participation of children.	Each child's situation requires individual consideration. Researchers should reflect on their ethical stance, and further research is needed on the benefits and risks of children's participation in studies.

Table 1 (continued)

Author, year	Participants (*n*)	Age group, target population	Type of victimization	Ethical considerations	Implications
Dayal et al. (2018)	N/A	Children < 18	Child sexual violence	Six major themes: Informed consent Confidentiality Selection, training, and protection of study team members Validity of CSV measurement methods Measures to minimize participant harm Participant compensation	The review lay a foundation for a development of culturally tailored recommendations for the conduct and reporting of CSV research in India.
Devries et al. (2016)	N/A	Children < 18	Physical, sexual and emotional violence	Collect data to address knowledge gaps and improve services, select and train interviewers carefully, and uphold confidentiality, except to protect the child.	A universal standard for collecting data from children, both in and outside research, is essential to prevent harm. Ongoing reflection and discussion on best practices are needed.
Dubow et al. (2017)	N/A	Children < 18	Violence across different contexts (e.g. family, media, neighborhood). Armed conflict areas/ civil war	Incentives can encourage participation, and referral to mental health services may be necessary. Community adults should not interfere with participation, and networking is crucial to ensure children's safety.	To avoid exploiting vulnerable participants, research should focus on benefiting them, not just studying them. Making research actionable is key to serving participants. Additionally, the terms used in research can have different cultural meanings, influencing project outcomes.
Evang, A. & Øverlien, C. (2014)	7	4–7 years old	Domestic violence	Researchers must protect vulnerable participants, considering that children's ability to regulate involvement varies. It's crucial to balance their vulnerability with their competence and agency.	Children can be included in research as they are competent and can regulate, limit, and take the lead during interviews.

Table 1 (continued)

Author, year	Participants (*n*)	Age group, target population	Type of victimization	Ethical considerations	Implications
Fagerlund and Ellonen (2016)	11,364	11–12 years old and 15–16 years old	Sexual victimization	Special attention was given to questionnaire design, voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, and post-survey guidance. Parents were informed about the survey's nature after the study was completed.	Future research should prioritize free-text comments to capture a wider range of emotions, rather than focusing solely on predefined reactions. Surveys on sexual victimization should be designed with sensitivity, recognizing that asking about such experiences alongside other types of victimization may cause discomfort.
Gabriel et al. (2017)	N/A	Children < 18	Domestic violence	Both participants and researchers should have access to peer supervision and supportive conversations to manage traumatizing information. Anonymity is especially important in smaller groups, and researchers should be well-connected with child and adult protection services.	Ensure transparency at all stages of the research process and maintain critical reflexivity. Encourage peer support and supervision among researchers, and establish a steering group for the project.
Hardesty et al. (2019)	N/A	Young adult children	Intimate partner violence, marital violence	Drawing on their own experiences and existing literature, they aim to help early career scholars anticipate and address safety and ethical issues throughout the research process.	Participant and research team safety and ethics are central to all decisions in interpersonal violence research. There is a need for more interdisciplinary training in diverse methodologies to support early career qualitative researchers in developing rigorous research programs on interpersonal violence.

Table 1 (continued)

Author, year	Participants (*n*)	Age group, target population	Type of victimization	Ethical considerations	Implications
Houghton (2015)	8	Children < 18	Domestic violence	Three Cs - consent, confidentiality, and child protection. Three Ds - danger, distress, and disclosure Three Es - enjoyment, empowerment, and emancipation.	Children should be re-positioned as agents, with information directed toward them. A child-centric approach to research ethics shifts the focus to children's agency, power, and impact.
Hoytema van Konijnenburg et al., (2015)	N/A	Children < 18	Child abuse and neglect	The use of informed consent in research using data from records and health or social service protocols is complex. While informed consent is a guiding principle in Dutch and European law, its application in such research is challenging due to low participation rates and significant non-response bias.	Research on child abuse should generally require consent from those involved. However, under certain circumstances and with appropriate safeguards, the law should permit research without consent to enable studies on child abuse and neglect.
Kyegombe et al. (2019)	N/A	Children < 18	Violent victimization	Researchers must ensure participation doesn't harm children, especially if disclosure increases risk. "Do no harm" must extend beyond the study. Informed consent and assent should be tailored to the child's disability, with supported decision-making. If needed, a representative should be chosen by the child. Collaboration with child protective services is essential for post-study support. Interviewer selection and training must be adjusted accordingly.	More research is needed to identify high-quality, ethical, and inclusive approaches to studying violence against children. Such research should be encouraged to safely collect evidence in this critical area.

Table 1 (continued)

Author, year	Participants (*n*)	Age group, target population	Type of victimization	Ethical considerations	Implications
Lamb et al., (2020)	16	9–18 years old	Domestic violence	Informed consent should be considered in relation to age, with individuals able to consent for themselves from 16 years old. Digital storytelling can be discussed with children/young people before starting, allowing them to review their stories and provide feedback. Safety risks related to visual methods and ensuring anonymity must be addressed. The dissemination process should be planned from the outset.	The use of digital research methods requires more investigation. It is essential for researchers to share their experiences and decision-making processes in addressing emerging issues, helping to build a stronger foundation for this type of research.
Laurin et al. (2018)	N/A	Children < 18	Child maltreatment	Wording of questions and language need to be considered. Name of survey can be triggering.	Sensitivity for potentially adverse reactions is important. Generally, youth are comfortable answering survey questions.
Lund et al. (2016)	31	5 years old	Bullying	Key considerations include how to obtain consent from child participants, ensure privacy and confidentiality (especially when concerns about a child's welfare arise), and manage researcher-child power dynamics. Interview techniques should be flexible, using informal language appropriate for children. Group dynamics in focus groups and the sensitive nature of the issues discussed must also be carefully handled.	Methodological and ethical dilemmas should not prevent research from including children. Instead, more documentation and discussion on these issues and their solutions are needed.

Table 1 (continued)

Author, year	Participants (*n*)	Age group, target population	Type of victimization	Ethical considerations	Implications
Manion et al. (2023)	263	13–18 years old	School violence	Explaining the limits of the confidentiality (e.g. reporting young people at risk). Research integrity with clarity regarding how the data will be used.	It is crucial to clearly explain the limits of confidentiality to participants, ensuring they understand. From the start, participants should be informed about the research project, their rights, and how their data will be used beyond the project.
Martins, P. & Sani, A. I. (2020)	N/A	Children < 18	Violence (as victims or witness)	Parental consent reflects a parent's responsibility to act in the child's best interest. However, it can also be used to silence the child and prevent their participation in research.	A flexible, joint-participatory model is proposed instead of traditional parental consent and child assent, involving children early in the research process and allowing their participation at a level suited to their maturity. Parents would guide rather than control the child's involvement. In cases where obtaining parental consent is challenging or unsafe, minimal disclosure to parents may be appropriate to uphold ethical principles, such as the child's right to participate in research.

Table 1 (continued)

Author, year	Participants (*n*)	Age group, target population	Type of victimization	Ethical considerations	Implications
Mathews et al. (2022)	N/A	Children < 18	Child maltreatment (physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional or psychological abuse, neglect, exposure to intimate partner violence	Research on child maltreatment does not appear to significantly increase participant distress. Researchers have an ethical duty to minimize any potential distress and should assess children's ability to consent based on their capacity	To minimize discomfort and distress in research, suggestions include: adhering to ethical guidelines, using valid and reliable instruments with mechanisms to skip questions or withdraw, carefully sequencing and wording questions, employing trained professionals to administer surveys, providing information about support services, establishing protocols to address distress, and offering follow-up contact with participants.
McGhee et al. (2015)	N/A	Children < 18	Child maltreatment (neglect and abuse)	The authors emphasize the need for ethical rigor in longitudinal research with children, focusing on continuous consent, data privacy, and accurate measurement and reporting of interventions and outcomes.	Improved data linkage and comprehensive longitudinal studies can strengthen child welfare policies and interventions. Standardizing service measurements enhances analysis and system comparisons. Leveraging administrative and survey data deepens insights into child welfare dynamics, while high ethical standards in consent, data handling, and participant engagement protect children's rights and research integrity.

Table 1 (continued)

Author, year	Participants (*n*)	Age group, target population	Type of victimization	Ethical considerations	Implications
Nikupeteri and Laitinen (2023)	Multiinformant, including 38 children	2–21 years old	Parental stalking as domestic violence	The study's ethical foundation rests on four key choices: a child-centered approach with continuous risk assessment, respect for inter-generational dialogue, building trust between professionals and participants, and a multi-voice approach that includes children, mothers, and professionals for broader insights. Ethical dissemination of findings aims to enhance school, health, and social policies supporting children exposed to parental stalking.	Incorporating practical wisdom and diverse knowledge sources can uncover the complexities of parental stalking, highlight children's positions and rights, and deepen understanding. A multimethod qualitative approach is ideal for such studies.
Pickles, J. (2019)	23	14–18 years old	LGBT+ hate experiences	To avoid potential harm from seeking parental consent, parents were not informed or involved. Instead, following flexible ethical guidelines, the ethics committee recommended involving another trusted adult to act as a legal guardian for signing consent and supporting the young person.	To safeguard young participants, youth or community workers can replace parents for consent if parental involvement risks harm. Young people should be shown the interview schedule beforehand, with the option to opt out of certain questions. After the interview, they should have the opportunity to discuss the experience with the appropriate adult without the researcher present, allowing them to raise any concerns.

Table 1 (continued)

Author, year	Participants (*n*)	Age group, target population	Type of victimization	Ethical considerations	Implications
Pihkala and Huuki (2023)	150 in one project, 40 in another project	10–12 years old	Sexual abuse, violence	The study prioritizes children's well-being and privacy, ensuring confidentiality and informed consent. Sensitive topics like gendered power dynamics and sexual harassment require careful handling to prevent harm. Continuous ethical reflection is essential to maintain standards and protect participants throughout the research.	The study highlights the importance of addressing gendered power dynamics and sexual harassment among children. It emphasizes using creative methods to empower children to share their experiences and challenge oppressive peer cultures. The findings stress the need for ongoing support and intervention to foster healthy relationships and create safe spaces for children to express themselves.
Radford et al. (2017)	N/A	Children < 18	Violence, childhood victimization, domestic abuse, men's violence against women, polyvictimization, rape	Establish support to the participants. Referral of at risk children and young people. Make the projects child-friendly, for example, by involving children and young people in the design of the project. Highlight children's agency.	Normalize talking about violence with children, as it can be empowering to talk about these experiences. Research should be with children. Researchers need to ask children and young people more about their experiences of participating in research.

Table 1 (continued)

Author, year	Participants (*n*)	Age group, target population	Type of victimization	Ethical considerations	Implications
Randall et al. (2016)	N/A	Children < 18	Violence or abuse	The two main themes identified in the synthesis of 23 studies are: Social justice, focusing on transparency about confidentiality, ethical obligations, and the impact of research on child welfare. Research safety for children, emphasizing researcher training, safety protocols, ethical care, and collaboration with services and communities to ensure a safe environment for participants.	Researchers should not avoid detecting or reporting child maltreatment. Future studies should focus on practical child protection issues, ensuring child safety without enabling those responsible for maltreatment.
Randall et al. (2015)	N/A	Children < 18	Maltreatment (abuse and neglect)	Researchers must be trained to recognize signs of child maltreatment and understand their responsibility to report it. This requires continuous supervision and clear ethical guidelines to balance participant confidentiality with the duty to protect children. Ongoing support and access to child protection experts are essential for effective safeguarding in research.	Guidelines for involving children affected by maltreatment in research should be clear, concise, and focused on child protection. They must provide guidance on ethical and legal obligations, addressing the dilemmas researchers face. University guidelines should be supplemented with institutional-specific policies to ensure effective child protection.

Table 1 (continued)

Author, year	Participants (*n*)	Age group, target population	Type of victimization	Ethical considerations	Implications
Resnik, D. B. & Randall, D. C. (2018)	N/A	Children < 18	Abuse and neglect	When conducting research with children, the decision to report suspected maltreatment is complex. Study protocols can guide researchers in protecting participants, but improper handling of reporting can cause harm. Arguments against reporting include concerns about violating confidentiality, potential retaliation from parents, the stress caused by unfounded reports, and the ineffectiveness of child protective services. Regarding consent, information should be communicated in a way that is understandable to children. While researchers may have an ethical obligation to report suspected maltreatment, they should not actively seek it out.	Additional studies on reporting evidence of abuse or neglect discov- ered in research involving children may help investigators and oversight committees decide how to handle reporting dilemmas and address parents' and children's concerns.

Table 1 (continued)

Author, year	Participants (*n*)	Age group, target population	Type of victimization	Ethical considerations	Implications
Rizo et al. (2017)	21	Mothers talking about children < 18	Exposure to intimate partner violence	In the study examining mothers' views on children's participation in research about intimate partner violence (IPV), several ethical considerations emerged. Mothers acknowledged the importance of research on IPV exposure and its potential benefits for their children and other families. However, reluctance to consent for their children's participation was influenced by concerns about the researcher's motives, fears regarding confidentiality, potential repercussions, feelings of shame or guilt, denial of IPV's impact, lack of understanding of the study's benefits, and worries about the research negatively affecting their child. These factors must be addressed in the design and implementation of ethical research practices.	Mothers suggested that to encourage consent for children's participation in IPV research, researchers should be knowledgeable, trustworthy, warm, and respectful. They preferred all-female research teams and consistent contact with the same researcher throughout the project. Having a respected institution backing the research and providing information from multiple sources were also key factors in gaining trust and facilitating participation.

Table 1 (continued)

Author, year	Participants (*n*)	Age group, target population	Type of victimization	Ethical considerations	Implications
Robinson et al. (2023)	36	8–24 years old	Family violence	The study stresses balancing risks and benefits, engaging families as partners, and using clear communication with children. It recommends both written and oral consent, offering support services, and providing gift vouchers. A mixed-methods approach helps explore sensitive topics without direct questioning.	The research method and design should reflect children's real-life contexts. It's important to continuously check with participants about safe and ethical participation, emerging results, and how findings should be used. Investing in research frameworks like supported decision-making and child ethics can enhance methods for engaging children who are less involved in traditional interview-based research.
Tiyyagura et al. (2020)	N/A	Children < 18	Family violence	In sensitive research, informed consent may require neutral advocates instead of parents. Researchers must ensure studies benefit participants, and IRBs should carefully review consent waivers. Uncovering maltreatment may lead to mandatory CPS reporting, impacting family dynamics and participation. Researchers must ensure confidentiality, handle disclosures appropriately, and collaborate with community partners and CPS to uphold ethical standards.	By creating a unified research paradigm and applying it to integrated care systems, we aim to reframe research communities and refocus efforts to improve the lives of families affected by violence.

Table 1 (continued)

Author, year	Participants (*n*)	Age group, target population	Type of victimization	Ethical considerations	Implications
Vearey et al. (2017)	N/A	14–17 years old	Interpersonal violence and abuse	Ethical concerns in research involve minimizing harm, obtaining informed consent, and ensuring data protection and confidentiality. These must be balanced with the benefits to participants, both survivors and perpetrators. Key aspects for managing risks include the skills of the research team, effective participant recruitment, and proper use of data.	Other researchers are encouraged to disclose and share reflections and dilemmas concerning methodological and ethical questions in their studies on violent victimization, and particularly share how they managed to overcome risks in their research (e.g., related to agency, vulnerability and power in processes of recruitment and obtaining consent).
Waechter et al., (2019)	382	14–17 years old	Maltreatment (physical, emotional, sexual abuse, physical and emotional neglect)	Participants with more serious experience of maltreatment reported more distress, but also more benefits with their participation	To reduce risk of harm a well-written and clear consent form, explaining the potential of data removal on the participant's request, robust system of support for the participant if they were to need it, well-trained personnel.
Wall et al. (2018)	N/A	4–12 years old	Family violence	Technical applications in research with children exposed to family violence offer advantages like increased engagement, reduced non-response bias, safer data storage, and minimized researcher bias. They are accessible to children, adaptable to cognitive levels, and include built-in safety features like reminders, the option to skip questions, text-to-voice alternatives, and immediate feedback options.	Researchers and program evaluators must stay updated on how technology can enhance data collection and support trauma-informed research methodologies

challenges traditional assumptions that position children as passive subjects in need of protection in research.

In addition, literature within this subtheme also argued that agency and autonomy of children should be central considerations in research on sensitive topics such as different types of victimization. Rather than excluding children due to concerns about vulnerability, research should empower them by allowing them to make informed choices about their participation, including how and when they share their experiences (Beetham et al., 2019; Radford et al., 2017). Research shows that supported decision-making is particularly important in this context, ensuring that children, including those with disabilities, can engage in research on their own terms rather than having decisions made on their behalf (e.g. Kyegombe et al., 2019). This approach respects children's evolving capacities and acknowledges that they can make informed choices when provided with appropriate support. Research also shows that involving children in the design and dissemination of research further reinforces their agency by giving them control over how their narratives are presented (Lamb et al., 2021). Another way of highlighting the autonomy and agency of children in research is by using a child-centered approach (Nikupeteri & Laitinen, 2023).

Positive Feelings Regarding Participation in Research The literature contributing to this theme suggested that participation in research on sensitive topics was generally perceived as a positive or meaningful experience by children, despite concerns that discussing victimization might cause distress. While it is often presumed that participation in such studies might evoke negative emotions, studies included in this theme suggest otherwise. Several research studies indicate that children mostly perceive their involvement in research as a positive experience (e.g. Laurin et al., 2018; Mathews et al., 2022; Vearey et al., 2017). For example, in one study, children reported that the research experience was beneficial and provided a "safe zone" where they could express their feelings in a supportive environment (Rizo et al., 2017). Additionally in another study, when asked whether they would participate in future studies or if they would have agreed to participate knowing the nature of the questions in advance, children generally provide positive responses (Mathews et al., 2022)

Notably, there were also examples of studies that show that participants with more severe experiences of victimization (i.e. maltreatment) report higher levels of distress but also greater perceived benefits from their participation (Waechter et al., 2019). In this study, those who experience the most distress tend to be more emotionally engaged in the study, fostering a deeper connection to the research. Despite the increased risk of negative emotions, these participants often view their involvement as a meaningful and empowering experience. Importantly, research on child maltreatment did not appear to cause significant distress among participants, although researchers must remain attentive to the potential for adverse reactions (Laurin et al., 2018). Overall, the literature suggested that research participation did not result in substantial or lasting distress for most children, if studies were conducted with appropriate ethical safeguards (e.g., Houghton, 2015; Laurin et al., 2018; Mathews et al., 2022; Waechter et al., 2019). At the same time, the included studies emphasized the importance of remaining attentive to individual reactions and ensuring that appropriate support is available when needed.

Theme II: The Researcher and the Research Process

Theme II identified ethical issues related to the researcher and the research process. This theme was identified in 30 of the 32 included studies (see Supplementary Table 1). The literature contributing to this theme focused on the role of the researcher in conducting ethically sound research with children who have experienced victimization. Across the included studies, discussions centered on four interconnected areas: (a) protection, (b) responsibility, and (c) researcher competence and (d) designing the research process.

Protection The literature contributing to this theme emphasized the protection of children as a central responsibility throughout the research process, particularly when studying sensitive topics such as victimization. Protection was described as requiring a balance between safeguarding children from harm while ensuring that they can participate and express their views (e.g., Evang & Øverlien, 2015; Houghton, 2015; Robinson et al., 2023). The level of protection required was argued to depend on children's individual circumstances, including their vulnerability, competence, and capacity to regulate their participation (e.g. Evang & Øverlien, 2015). Safety concerns were particularly pronounced in cases where participation may place children at increased risk, such as when perpetrators of violence remain a potential threat. Houghton (2015), for example, described how young participants reported ongoing coercive control and fear even after leaving abusive environments, illustrating the need for careful safety planning and management of distress

Confidentiality and privacy emerged as key components of participant protection. The included studies highlighted the importance of informing children about the limits of confidentiality, particularly in situations where disclosure may be necessary to prevent harm (e.g., Dayal et al., 2018; Mathews et al., 2022). At the same time, researchers must navigate child protection laws and reporting requirements, which may create ethical dilemmas when information disclosed confidentially during the research indicates that a child may be at risk of harm. In such situations, researchers may be required to disclose information outside the research context despite their general obligation to protect participants' confidentiality. The complexities surrounding the reporting of suspected abuse or neglect therefore highlight the importance of researchers being familiar with relevant confidentiality laws and the legal exceptions that permit disclosure in specific circumstances (Evang & Øverlien, 2015; Resnik & Randall, 2018). The included studies further highlighted collaboration with child protection services and other support systems as an important safeguard when conducting research with victimized children (Gabriel et al., 2017).

Beyond legal obligations, the literature contributing to this theme emphasized the importance of creating research environments that minimize distress and support participants' well-being. This includes providing accessible mental health support, ensuring safe and private research settings, and allowing participants to quit at any stage if they feel uncomfortable (e.g. Houghton, 2015; Wall et al., 2018). Studies also argued for the importance of collaboration between researchers, caregivers, and professionals across sectors as part of safeguarding children participating in research, nothing that no single actor possesses all the expertise and resources needed to ensure children´s well-being (e.g. Lund et al., 2016; Pihkala & Huuki, 2023). At the same time, the included studies cautioned against protective practices that inadvertently excluded children from research participation. Robins et al., (2023), for example,

argued that excluding children from research on issues that directly affect them may silence their perspectives and limit the development of knowledge to inform policy and practice.

Responsibility The literature contributing to this theme described researchers as having a fundamental responsibility to ensure the safety and well-being of participants throughout the research process, particularly when they are children with experience of victimization. This responsibility goes beyond simply obtaining ethical approval and was portrayed as requiring continuous attention to children's safety, emotional well-being, and changing needs during data collection (e.g. Cater & Øverlien, 2014; Evang & Øverlien, 2015; Randall et al., 2015). It was argued that researchers must be attentive to both verbal and non-verbal cues during interviews and take immediate action if a child shows signs of distress (Evang & Øverlien, 2015). The literature also highlighted the need to assess whether participation could place children at additional risk and to ensure that appropriate support systems, such as social worker or other professionals, were available when needed

The included studies further described the importance of designing research in a way that minimizes potential harm while ensuring that the study has meaningful benefits for participants (e.g. Mathews et al., 2022). Transparency about the purpose of the study was emphasized as importance to avoid creating unrealistic expectations about the potential impact and outcomes of participation (e.g. Cater & Øverlien, 2014). Thus, researchers must ensure children clearly understand the research purpose, so they do not mistakenly believe their participation will lead to service improvements if that is not the case. Several studies also discussed researchers' responsibilities regarding confidentiality, mandatory reporting, and collaboration with child protection agencies when disclosures of maltreatment occurred (e.g. Evang & Øverlien, 2015; Tiyyagura et al., 2020). As an example, this was argued to include preparing mandatory reporting obligations and collaborating with child protection agencies to navigate ethical challenges responsibly (Tiyyagura et al., 2020). If reporting is necessary, researchers must prioritize the child's well-being while carefully balancing legal and ethical requirements (Evang & Øverlien, 2015; Tiyyagura et al., 2020). Across the literature, researchers were therefore portrayed as having responsibilities that extended beyond data collection to include safeguarding children's well-being throughout the research process (Cater & Øverlien, 2014).

Competence The literature contributing to this theme emphasized researchers' competence as a key prerequisite for conducting ethical research with children who have experienced victimization. Competence was described as encompassing necessary and appropriate experience, skills, and training, and interpersonal skills, including active listening, empathy, and sensitivity when interacting with children (e.g. Devries et al., 2016; Hardesty et al., 2019; Mathews et al., 2022; Randall et al., 2016; Rizo et al., 2017; Vearey et al., 2017). It was also argued that previous experience in child protection or clinical practice can help researchers in navigating complex situations, such as managing distress or respond appropriately to disclosures of abuse (Randall et al., 2015; Vearey et al., 2017). Appropriate training was described as including strategies for handling personal topics, recognizing levels of distress, and implementing child protection protocols if necessary (Devries et al., 2016)

Additionally, maintaining a consistent researcher-participant relationship and ensuring non-judgmental, respectful interactions was also argued to encourage participation and improve research quality (Rizo et al., 2017). Some studies further described supervision from child protection professionals, and collaboration as valuable for researchers working with victimized children, although these practices were reported as not yet being routinely implemented (Randall et al., 2016).

Designing the Research Process The literature contributing to this theme highlighted the importance of carefully designing the research process to support both ethical conduct and meaningful participation. Accordingly, methodological decisions, such as the wording of questions, study information, and data collection procedures, were described as important to protecting children while facilitating their participation (Robinson et al., 2023). As an example, included studies emphasized that the wording of questions and even the title of a study may influence participation rates and children's emotional responses. For example, references to a sensitive topic like *child maltreatment* may deter engagement compared to broader terms like *child health* (Laurin et al., 2018). Simliar, the structure, number, and order of questions were described as important considerations for obtaining reliable data while minimizing the risk of overburdening participants (Devries et al., 2016). Some studies also argued for the value of including free-text responses, allowing children to described their experiences in their own words and thereby capturing a wider range of perspectives than may not emerge thought predefined response options (Fagerlund & Ellonen, 2016)

Theme III: General Guidelines and Standards

This theme was identified in 31 of the 32 included studies (see Supplementary Table 1). Several ethical considerations and implications emerged that relate to overarching aspects that relate more legislation and policy. Across the included studies three primary areas categorized as (a) ethical review boards, (b) sharing knowledge and experiences and (c) the consent process was identified.

Ethical Review Boards The literature contributing to this theme described ethical review boards (ERBs) as playing a central role in research involving children who have experienced victimization. ERBs were portrayed as balancing the protection of vulnerable participants with enabling ethically sound research to be conducted (Resnik & Randall, 2018). This role was describe as including the review of research procedures to ensure compliance with ethical guidelines and established standards (Pihkala & Huuki, 2023; Tiyyagura et al., 2020)

Studies contributing to this subtheme argued that researchers should actively engage with ERBs, not only to follow the rules but also to seek guidance on ethical challenges that may arise. At the same time, some studies highlighted limitations in current review processes, noting that ERBs may lack sufficient expertise in research involving childhood violence and victimization (e.g. Devries et al., 2016). Therefore, researchers and organizations working with children must maintain high ethical standards, actively engage with ethical principles, and share best practices (Devries et al., 2016; Dubow et al., 2017). This may involve collaboration with relevant actors such as schools, social services, child protection agencies, healthcare providers, and non-governmental organizations that support children exposed to

violence. Such collaborations can help ensure appropriate safeguarding procedures, referral pathways, and ethical support for participating children.

Sharing Knowledge and Experiences The literature contributing to this theme emphasized the importance of sharing methodological experiences and ethical reflections from research involving children who have experienced violence. Several studies highlighted transparent reporting of ethical procedures and methodological decisions as a way of strengthening knowledge about how ethically complex research with victimized children can be conducted (Beetham et al., 2019; Tiyyagura et al., 2020). The included studies described detailed reporting of ethical procedures, including recruitment strategies, consent processes, safeguarding measures, and the management of disclosures, as valuable resources for other researchers (Gabriel et al., 2017). Such reporting was portrayed as contributing to the development of methodological knowledge and supporting future ethical guidance for research involving children exposed to violence

Studies contributing to this subtheme also discussed the limitations of existing ethical guidelines. On the one hand ethical guidelines should be the same for all people that participate in research (Mathews et al., 2022), on the other hand, the literature suggested that standard procedures may not always accommodate the circumstances of children who have experienced violence. Challenges were described in situations involving parental consent when legal guardians were suspected perpetrators of abuse. Consequently, several studies called for the continued development of ethical guidance that addresses the specific challenges of research involving victimized children (Pickles, 2020; Radford et al., 2017; Randall et al., 2015; Hoytema van Konijnenburg et al., 2015). This also highlights the need for greater expertise on children exposed to violence within ethical review boards, as well as the development of ethical guidelines at multiple levels (Randall et al., 2015).

The Consent Process The literature contributing to this theme described informed consent as an ongoing process rather than a single event. Several studies emphasized the importance of revisiting consent throughout the data collection and providing children with opportunities to reconsider their participation as the study progressed (e.g. Devries et al., 2016; Fagerlund & Ellonen, 2016; Robinson et al., 2023). Providing children with accessible study information, such as child-friendly explanations of the study and its purpose, was described as facilitating informed decision-making (Robinson et al., 2023). Some studies also highlighted supported decision-making for children with disabilities rather than having decisions made on their behalf (Kyegombe et al., 2019), opportunities to review interview topics in advance to decide if they wish to not answer specific questions (Pickles, 2020), and consideration of how parents, caregivers, and professionals may influence children's participation in the consent process (Nikupeteri & Laitinen, 2023)

The included studies further highlighted confidentiality as an integral component of informed consent. Several authors described the importance of clearly communicating the limits of confidentiality, including situations in which disclosure may be required to protect a child from harm (Devries et al., 2016; Manion et al., 2023; Resnik & Randall, 2018). In addition, it was argued that in some cases, research involving child abuse and neglect may need an exception to traditional consent procedures to allow for the study of large, unselected samples, as these

findings have significant implications for child welfare policies (van Konijnenburg et al., 2015). Longitudinal research adds another layer of complexity, requiring standardized methods for linking data while ensuring participants' privacy over time (McGhee et al., 2015).

Several studies additionally described consent as a process of ongoing engagement between researchers and participants. For example, one study argued that iterative engagement with participants, where researchers check in throughout the study and adapt methods based on feedback, can enhance ethical participation (Robinson et al., 2023). Another highlighted multiple forms of expression, such as oral storytelling or artistic methods, to ensure that children who struggle with verbal communication still have opportunities to share their experiences (Nikupeteri & Laitinen, 2023). Additionally, others argued that researchers should provide children and their caregivers with opportunities to discuss the study privately after data collection to raise any concerns outside the presence of the researcher (Pickles, 2020).

Discussion

The aim of this review was to examine and synthesize current knowledge of ethical issues in research involving children who have experienced victimization. Specifically, the aim was to examine (1) what ethical challenges and considerations had been identified in previous research regarding conducting studies with victimized children, and (2) what practical strategies and guidelines had been proposed to address these ethical challenges. Findings related to the first research question are considered first. These findings concern the ethical challenges and considerations identified in previous research. Further, we turn to the practical strategies and guidelines identified in relation to the second research question.

Regarding the first research question, part of our synthesis showed that ethical considerations operate on three interconnected levels, i.e. the child, the research, and the broader ethical and organizational framework. Across these levels, one overarching finding emerged. Ethical research involving victimized children is not about choosing between protecting children and enabling their participation, rather it requires continuously balancing children´s vulnerability with their agency thought the research process.

Our findings can also be understood considering international children's rights frameworks, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The Convention emphasizes children's right to express their views and to have those views given due weight in matters affecting them (Article 12), protection from harm (article 19), and the consideration of the child's best interests (Article 3). In research contexts, these principles imply that children should be given opportunities to express their views on matters that affect their lives, while researchers remain responsible for ensuring that participation does not expose them to harm. Our synthesis indicates that these principles need to be considered simultaneously in research involving children who have experienced victimization. Across the included studies, ethical challenges primarily arose not from deciding whether participation or protection should be prioritized, but from determining how both could be achieved in practice. This supports recent scholarship arguing that ethical research with children requires balancing children's participation, protection, and provision rights throughout the research process (Robinson, 2025). However, although the UNCRC provides an important norma-

tive framework, the present review illustrates how translating these principles into research practice remains challenging.

Further, findings from this review suggest that vulnerability and agency should not be understood as opposing concepts. Instead, the included studies consistently portrayed children as simultaneously vulnerable and competent participants (e.g. Houghton, 2015; Radford et al., 2017). Childhood itself often motivates additional ethical safeguards because of children's developmental stage and legal status, while being victimized introduce further layers of vulnerability that require careful consideration. However, our results show that this additional layer of vulnerabilities should not disregard victimized children from participating in research. Based on the research presented in the previous section, this additional layer does not disqualify children from participating in research, they can and should be able to participate if they want to. Several studies stress the importance that children are seen as active agents and that they have a right to be heard even in research settings (e.g. Beetham et al., 2019; Evang & Øverlien, 2015; Radford et al., 2017). Disqualifying them from participating can instead have opposite effects, where the children feel disempowered and not listened to by adults about their experiences (Martins & Sani, 2020). Moreover, research even shows that participation in research can be a positive experience for children (Laurin et al., 2018; Mathews et al., 2022; Rizo et al., 2017). Thus, children's narratives may differ from those of adults in structure and expression, but this does not diminish their reliability as informants. Excluding children from research to mitigate potential risks may have greater ethical consequences by silencing their voices and limiting knowledge that could inform policies and interventions designed to support them. Thus, our findings support a research agenda, where protection and participation are viewed as complementary rather than competing ethical principles, especially since these children's voices are essential to inform research and improve responses to issues impacting their lives.

In addition to identifying these broader ethical challenges and considerations, the second research question concerned the practical strategies and guidelines proposed in the included studies for addressing them. Several strategies emerged across the review, particularly regarding researcher competence, individualized and child-centred approaches, ongoing consent, and organizational and ethical procedures.

One important strategy identified in relation to the second research question concerns researcher competence and preparedness. Our findings highlight the importance of the role of the researcher who works with victimized children. Throughout the included studies, researchers were portrayed not only as data collectors but as an active role whose decisions shape children's opportunity to participate safely and meaningfully. This responsibility extends beyond obtaining ethical approval or following established protocols. Instead, researcher skills and the abilities to recognize and respond to children's changing needs emerged as central components of ethically sound research practice. For example, the research needs to be able to balance the protection of the children and to make sure that children can participate (Robinson et al., 2023). In addition, researchers studying children should have the training to recognize signs of distress and allow participants to pause or discontinue if needed (Houghton, 2015; Wall et al., 2018). These findings from the review therefore suggest that ethical competence should be viewed not only as knowledge of ethical guidelines but also as the practical ability to exercise ethical judgement in complex situations.

Another practical consideration identified across the included studies was the need to adapt research procedures to the individual child. Children's responses to participation vary, and

ethical considerations should be considered as individual needs rather than treating children as a homogeneous group. Such sensitivity can support children's empowerment and enable their participation in research, even on sensitive topics such as victimization. For example, age should not be viewed only as a marker of vulnerability but as a factor that shapes how children exercise agency and participate in research. For example, younger children might require more tailored support and appropriate methods related to their level of development while older children might be able to take a more active role in their participation. This also goes in line with Crane and Broome (2017), who distinguished between children and adolescents and highlighted that agency and participation may differ across different developmental stages. Thus, although the studies included in this review generally discussed children as a broad group, agency and participation may be expressed differently depending on children's age and developmental stage. Careful methodological design is therefore required to support child-centred approaches that balance both vulnerability and agency.

Another aspect to keep in mind is the meaning of consent, for example, when is a consent valid and for how long? Each participant has a right to information so they can make an informed decision about their participation. Children who want to participate in research can rarely consent on their own, instead it is their legal guardian that will make the formal decision. Older children might, depending on national legislation, to consent for their own. After that the legal guardian has consented, the child can be asked whether or not they want to participate. This means that all information also needs to be adapted in relation to the individual child to make sure that they understand what participation entails. Based on the review, consent also need to be understood as something that is ongoing and should be repeated during several stages of the research process (Devries et al., 2016; Robinson et al., 2023). By continuous consent, we mean that consent is checked repeatedly during data collection. This understanding expands traditional interpretations of informed consent by recognizing that children's willingness to participate may change during a study. For example, during an interview, the child is asked at several points whether they wish to continue participating. This can also be an opportunity to see if the children have any questions regarding their participation and to look into the emotional state of the children. Continuous consent therefore represents more than repeated confirmation of participation it reflects an ongoing dialogue between researcher and participant in which responsibility increasingly rests with the researcher to ensure that participation remains informed and voluntary. Such an approach may be particularly important when conducting research with children who have experienced violence, as participation may evoke changing emotions or memories that cannot always be anticipated at the outset of the study.

An additional observation from this review is that the terminology surrounding children's agreement to participate can vary across studies (e.g. consent vs. assent) (see e.g. Crane & Broom, 2017; Devries et al., 2016). While we have used the term consent consistently to emphasize children's active role in decision-making, differences in the use of terms such as consent and assent might reflect differences in national legislation and ethical frameworks rather than just linguistic preferences. Future research could explore how these legislative and ethical differences influence both terminology and research practice when involving children in research.

Finally, this review shows that ethical research involving victimized children cannot be understood solely as the responsibility of individual researchers. Ethical review boards and legislation all shape researchers' opportunities to include children safely in research. Several

included studies highlighted limitations within existing ethical frameworks, suggesting that general research ethics procedures do not always accommodate the circumstances surrounding research involving children who have been victimized (e.g. Pickles, 2020; Hoytema van Konijnenburg et al., 2015). Our findings therefore point towards the need for ethical guidance that recognizes both children's right to protection and their right to participate in research. Such guidance should support researchers and ethical review boards in navigating situations where standard procedures, for example regarding parental consent or mandatory reporting, may require careful contextual interpretation.

Implications for Ethical Research with Victimized Children

Based on the findings of this review, several key considerations should be considered when designing, conducting, and reviewing research involving victimized children. The following implications represent a synthesis of strategies and recommendations identified in the synthesis as well as across the included literature:

For Researchers

- Recognize children as both vulnerable and capable agents and avoid excluding them from research solely based on perceived vulnerability.
- Ensure ongoing consent throughout the research process, recognizing that children's willingness and capacity to participate may change over time.
- Design child-centered studies that allow children to express their experiences on their own terms.
- Plan procedures for handling distress or disclosures.
- Provide referral pathways to appropriate support services.
- Ensure adequate training and competence to conduct research with children who have experienced violence.

For Ethics Review Boards (ERBs)

- Consider situations where parental consent may not be appropriate and evaluate alternative consent procedures.
- Assess safety planning, particularly when participation may increase risk for the child.
- Evaluate researcher competence and preparedness for working with victimized children.
- Ensure that protocols include clear procedures for managing confidentiality, disclosures, and potential mandatory reporting obligations.
- Ensure that ethical guidelines and review processes are adapted to research involving children exposed to violence, rather than relying solely on general research ethics frameworks.

Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

All studies have limitations, this one included. One of these limitations concerns victimization as an inclusion criterion for the study, where type of victimization needed to be mentioned already in the abstract. There is a possibility that there are articles that were excluded in the abstract phase due to not mentioning type of victimization in the abstract, but if full text had been read, they might have had a focus on victimization. Of course, this limitation might have affected the results, but at the same time it is also a strength with the review that criteria for inclusion and exclusion were followed as intended. In line with this, another limitation relates to the search terminology used in database searches. The search strategy relied primarily on combinations of terms referring to child, research, ethic, and victimization, using these as rather broad umbrella terms. The terms were deliberately selected to identify studies that explicitly discuss ethical challenges related to conducting research with victimized children. However, research within this field often uses a wide range of related terminology. For example, studies addressing victimization could refer to abuse among other terms, while ethical considerations may be discussed in terms such as consent or safeguarding among other terms. As a result, some relevant studies using alternative terminology may have been missed using the current search strategy. At the same time, the search was intentionally designed to be broad withing the selected concepts and was conducted across several major multidisciplinary databases to maximize the likelihood of identifying relevant literature. In addition, the screening process involved reviewing a large number of records which could be considered reducing the risk of excluding potentially relevant studies. However, future review studies could benefit from expanding the range of search terms to include additional victimization and ethics related terminology to further strengthen the comprehensiveness of the search.

A further limitation is that studies were required to reference ethical issues in the abstract during the screening process. This may have resulted in the exclusion of studies where ethical considerations were discussed primarily within the methods section rather than highlighted in the abstract. As abstracts typically provide only a summary of the study, some potentially relevant articles may not have explicitly mentioned ethical challenges despite addressing them in greater detail in the full text. Therefore, this criterion may have introduced a degree of selection bias and potentially limited the inclusion of studies in which ethical issues were discussed but not foregrounded in the abstract. However, this approach was applied to ensure that ethical issues constituted a central focus of the included studies rather than being mentioned only briefly as part of standard methodological reporting. In this way, the criterion helped ensure that the review captured literature that engaged more substantively with the ethical challenges of conducting research with victimized children. Moving away from the children, another limitation is that this review did not address the potential impact on researchers working with children who have experienced some form of victimization, as the focus was on ethical challenges related to child participants. However, this is also an important issue that could be explored in future research.

Another limitation concerns the countries represented in the review, which are skewed towards global north countries, with only a very limited sample from the global south. This raises questions about the representation of the results, as countries typically associated with the global south might have other ethical concerns regarding victimized children in research. Furthermore, this review did not systematically extract data regarding the specific ethical guidelines, legal frameworks, or international conventions referred to in the included studies.

Consequently, differences between national ethical frameworks or the extent to which international conventions such as the UNCRC informed research practice could not be examined. Still, the present review contributes to a general discussion regarding victimized children's participation in research, and how it could be handled in the research setting, which can help guide both researchers and ethical review boards. With the limitations in mind, more research in the form of, for example, reflections, reasonings, and debates in regard to victimized children's participation in research is still needed as important pieces are missing in the joint knowledge base. For example, there are types of victimizations, different research settings, and specific countries that are not represented in this review. The number of studies included from each country is also quite low, with the exception of the UK. This means that single studies can have a bigger influence on the results, which means that more studies in general within this field are needed.

Supplementary Information The online version contains supplementary material available at https://doi.org/10.1007/s10805-026-09773-w.

Author Contributions Conceptualization of study design: BI, KH, BJ, ST, ÅK, FB, GAK, LS. Literature search: BI, KH, BJ. Screening and validation: BI, KH, BJ, ST, ÅK, FB, GAK, LS.Writing – original draft: BI, KH, BJ, ST. Writing - review & editing: BI, KH, BJ, ST, ÅK, FB, GAK, LS.

Funding This project was funded by Örebro University and the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences (Örebro University grant ID ORU 2022/05145). The funders had no role in study design, data collection and analysis, decision to publish, or preparation of the manuscript.

Data Availability Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Declarations

Ethical Approval The authors did not collect any data directly from human participants, therefore, informed consent was not required.

Conflict of Interest The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial competing interests to report.

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