

# Ethical Issues in Journalism: Minimizing Harm when Reporting on Children

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## Reporting on Child Sexual Abuse and How Journalists Should Handle This

### Summary

Journalists often face ethical challenges the press faces when reporting on sexual abuse, especially when the victims are children. Many guidelines and recommendations have been made to ensure journalists can meet their obligation to report truth, while minimizing risks of any additional harm to the victims. The ultimate goal of a journalist in this situation is to inform the public of the important impact these crimes have on society, while also limiting any harm or discomfort this story may cause the child victim.

### Dealing with Sources

Journalists covering this topic are likely to encounter emotional or angry sources. Journalists may need to make sense of confusing mental disorders and justify cultural or religious beliefs. Reporters also must be aware that children may be suffering from emotional stress as a result to their abuse. Notwithstanding these challenges, journalists must ensure that the victims' perspectives are included in the stories.

### Guidelines for Journalists

According to SPJ Code of Ethics and The National Center for Victims of Crime, journalists should:

- Balance the public's need for information against potential harm or discomfort. Pursuit of the news is not a license for arrogance or undue intrusiveness.
- Remember the power imbalance between the adult abuser and child victim. The child is always the victim.
- Seek informed consent from a parent or guardian before interviewing or photographing a child.
- Use language about sexual abuse that is specific and accurate and doesn't convey unintended meaning.
- Expand the focus beyond individual victims and families. Report on the crime as a whole and how it impacts society.

### What is the Poynter Institute?

"The Poynter Institute is a global leader in journalism. It is the world's leading instructor, innovator, convener and resource for anyone who aspires to engage and inform citizens in 21st century democracies."

### What is the Society of Professional Journalists?

"The Society of Professional Journalists is the nation's most broad-based journalism organization, dedicated to encouraging the free practice of journalism and stimulating high standards of ethical behavior."



Example of Child Crime. See "Scenario" on the right for more information.



### Resources

Krueger, Vicki. "Language of the Image: Ethics for Visual Media." Poynter. March 02, 2017. Accessed April 10, 2018. <https://www.poynter.org/news/language-image-ethics-visual-media>.

"Children: Coverage, Images and Interviews." ONA Ethics. Accessed April 10, 2018. <https://ethics.journalists.org/topics/children-coverage-images-and-interviews/>.

"Reporting on Child Sexual Abuse." The National Center for Victims of Crime, 2012. <https://victimsofcrime.org/media/reporting-on-child-sexual-abuse>.

"SPJ Code of Ethics - Society of Professional Journalists." Society of Professional Journalists - Improving and protecting journalism since 1909. Accessed March 26, 2018. <https://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>.

## What Would You Do in Handling Crime Photojournalism of Children?

### Scenario

Daniel, an 8-year-old boy, is charged with first-degree murder of a 2-year-old boy. He has had no prior history of violence behavior, yet this chilling incident has shocked the community. As a photojournalist, you take a photo of the boy being handcuffed and escorted from his house to a cop car. You take the photo to your editor and together you have a decision to make. Do you publish the photo alongside the story of the crime?

### Questions to Think About

According to The Poynter Institute:

1. Is this invading the boys' privacy? If so, is it for an appropriate reason?
2. Is this a private moment of pain and suffering that needs to be seen by our readers?
3. Is the photo acting with compassion and sensitivity?

### Reasoning

- It's an invasion of privacy to the people in the photo, and it's hurtful, harmful to the people who view the photo. But it has a broader journalistic purpose. It's meant to reveal something to the audience so that the audience can uphold their Democratic duties.
- The photo of the boy will have an effect on the society and invoke emotion. Yet in the newsroom, the value of minimizing harm is secondary to the consideration of journalists' responsibility to the public. By adding the photo of the child, the public is able to comprehend the context of the crime.
- However, the photo should not be over used. Photojournalism has the power to traumatize families and communities. This power must be addressed and a system for maintaining it should be implemented in all newsrooms.