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# **A cultural-historical exploration of relational ethics in research involving children**

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## **Abstract**

Participatory studies involving children are a growing topic of debate concerning research on early childhood education and care (ECEC). Developments in ethnographic methods and the use of video recordings to collect data have raised new challenges for researchers who study children regarding such issues as formal procedures for informed consent and obtaining children's assent to research encounters. A growing number of studies have explored children's and researchers' relationships, as well as the ethical aspects of research encounters. We contribute to this discussion by adopting a cultural-historical (wholeness) approach to research that involves children, partnering as researchers with a child participant. By using a cultural-historical approach, we analyzed a critical incident that involved a child's assent and dissent process through dynamic motive orientations. We focused on the importance of considering dynamic motive orientation as researchers navigate new ethical challenges. Our findings reveal that adopting a wholeness approach requires researchers to serve as activity partners, reflecting on and recalibrating their own motives and centering child participants in the research process.

*Keywords:* Early childhood education and care Relational ethics Critical incidents Motives Cultural-historical theory

## **1. Introduction**

As a group of researchers, we explored the meaning of undertaking ethical research with children in early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings. We contribute to the discussion on how to reach ethical decisions while navigating uncertainty during the research process. Such ethical decisions require researchers to interpret and understand children's non-verbal communication, which is embedded within multiple—and sometimes competing—contexts of interaction. These contexts include the research itself, ECEC, researchers' relationships with participating children, and child participants' ongoing activities. To understand these ethical decisions (i.e., critical incidents) during the research process, we adopted an approach based on cultural-historical wholeness which accounts for the child's and researcher's perspectives (Hedegaard, 2012, 2020). We contribute to the discussion of how the assent and dissent process occurs during research that involves children by developing a framework that extends understanding of situational assent and dissent by considering both child participants' and researchers' motive orientations as expressed intentions of what matters.

A vast body of literature has discussed children as research participants, including discussions of diverse ethical issues related to such research (Beazley et al., 2009; Einarsd'ottir, 2007; Hill, 2005; Huser et al., 2022; Kousholt & Juhl, 2023; Richards et al., 2015; involving children have been explored from multiple perspectives, in the social sciences and humanities, most of this work has focused on children who are older than infants and toddlers, discussing the role of verbal negotiation and situational agreements between researchers and participating children (e.g., Beazley et al., 2009; Dockett et al., 2013; Truscott et al., 2019). Given the challenging nature of ethical questions, critical reflection and the sharing of often-unpredictable dilemmas and ethical tensions that arise from research practices are continually needed. Particularly, more studies must examine events that unfold as part of the research-based social relationships and encounters between researchers and children.

The current paper seeks to extend a relational ethics approach to research by employing a cultural-historical perspective on studies that involve children as participants. This approach proposes that researchers play an active role in interpreting (child) participants' dynamic motive orientation when encountering ethical challenges. Little is known about the nature of the ethical encounters and concerns that arise between researchers and children. Reflecting on critical incidents allows researchers to approach ethical decision-making thoughtfully when interpreting the diverse aspects of ethical encounters with children, which are usually framed by uncertainty and unpredictability. Critical incidents are not reflected in data but are an ongoing process constructed by the researcher, who can identify incidents as critical and reflect upon them (Angelides, 2001; Halquist & Musanti, 2010). We directed a critical, reflexive, "transparent gaze" (Richards et al., 2015) to the research process and our individual research experiences. This reflective stance allows us to explore and go beyond single episodes towards a broader story (Richards et al., 2015). In this paper, we provide a single episode and construct a story to help us interpret 'what matters' for children as part of taking an ethical research practice.

### *1.1. Relational ethics and situational assent in research involving children*

Research processes involving human subjects are strictly guided by ethical principles that research communities have agreed upon across disciplines, countries, and contexts. These principles require researchers to respect human research participants' dignity and autonomy and avoid jeopardizing, damaging, or harming research participants, communities, or other research subjects (e.g., All European Academies [ALLEA], 2017; TENK Finnish Board on Research Integrity, 2019). Most formal ethical procedures, such as the ethical pre-review of research proposals, have been established to safeguard participants' rights and evaluate the possible risks that particular research frameworks and processes may include (see also Kousholt & Juhl, 2023). For research involving children, these procedures are especially significant because children's rights ought to be protected by their parents and guardians, who often remain distant from the research process in educational contexts.

As a result, in addition to discussions on research integrity regarding formal procedures and data protection in compliance with the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (Regulation [EU] 2016/679, 2016), discussions on *relational ethics* have gained traction in research (Ellis, 2007; Hilppo et al., 2019; Tutenel et al., 2019). Thus, to complement the formal procedures that must be followed before entering the research field, relational ethics—that is, the ethical situations encountered during fieldwork (Ellis, 2007) that demand ethical decision-making—are central to research. Accordingly, they must be understood and addressed as they emerge during the research process.

Complementing the discussion surrounding formal ethical procedures and pre-evaluation, the nature of research encounters and negotiating children's assent and dissent during the actual research process have attracted growing attention in the literature (Huser et al., 2022; Kousholt & Juhl, 2023; Olli, 2021; Richards et al., 2015). Diverse procedures and protocols for discussing the meaning of study participation with children and how to gain children's informed consent or assent to (or dissent with) research have been developed and reported (Huser et al., 2022). Many of these protocols have utilized written forms, similar to adult consent processes (see the review by Pyle & Danniels, 2015) or verbal informed consent signaled and recorded when children are presented with material or illustrations about the research process, such as cartoons (Dockett et al., 2013) or a picture book about research activities (Pyle & Danniels, 2015). In addition to the actual practices used to obtain informed consent or children's assent to participate in a study, the underlying assumptions related to these concepts have been critically discussed (e.g. Richards et al., 2015). Various authors have acknowledged children's ability to consent

to research, rather than viewing children as incapable of consenting. Although a full exploration of these tensions is beyond the scope of this paper, we note that many of these discussions on children’s ability and right to consent—as well as criticism about children’s implied vulnerability and lack of ownership—have focused on school-age children (Richards et al., 2015). To complement these debates, our study elucidates research practices and the negotiation of situational assent with children.

We use the *relational ethics* concept to refer to ethical situations encountered during fieldwork (Ellis, 2007). Based on the work of Tutenel et al. (2019, as cited by Rutanen, Raittila, Harju, Lucas Revilla & Hannikainen, 2021), “relational ethics include ideas on (a) the dynamics, unpredictability and messiness of ethical questions; (b) moral interdependency between researchers and research participants; and (c) understanding that ethical decisions are always socially and spatially situated in a context” (p. 387). Relational ethics builds on these assumptions, taking the interdependencies between persons seriously (e.g., Chimirri, 2019; Hilppö et al., 2019; O’Doherty & Burgess, 2019) and emphasizing research relationships, nurturance, and an “ethic of care” (Richards et al., 2015). In the literature, the concept of *situated ethics* bears many similarities to the concept of *relational ethics*. The term *situated* emphasizes that these relational, ethical challenges are concrete, variable, and often unpredictable, occurring in real situations throughout the research process’s various stages (Kousholt & Juhl, 2023). Kousholt & Juhl (2023) argued that the ethical dilemmas that arise often include contradictory concerns that should be addressed collectively, rather than fully by a single researcher.

Ethical questions cannot be separated from the mutually constituted relationships that are part of the context in which these questions emerge; thus, ethical questions are relationally, culturally, and contextually embedded (see also Kousholt & Juhl, 2023). The research process, research relationships, and related parties all interdependent and perpetually take part in the constitution process (Tutenel et al., 2019). In line with the unpredictable process of mutual constitution and relational becoming among research participants and researchers, new and even surprising ethical issues are likely to arise during research encounters. Thus, ethical questions emerge during research as a result of relationships that are both unique to that research and framed by its theoretical-methodological framework (Kousholt & Juhl, 2023). The current paper examines an ethical encounter (i.e., critical incident) with a child in an ECEC setting through a theoretical-methodological lens that focuses on dynamic motive orientations. Ethical encounters involve the researchers’ openness to negotiation and interpretation of a child participant’s and their own perspectives and motive orientations concerning both observed activities and the frame of the research space (Rutanen et al., 2021).

## 1.2. Cultural-historical theory

The cultural-historical theory of Vygotsky and contemporary scholars, such as Hedegaard and Edwards, has been used to discuss children’s learning and development. According to Hedegaard (2008a), the social situation of *development* is understood as the dynamic relationship between a child’s social reality and the social relations that surround them. A wholeness approach proposes that researchers must critically examine children’s perspectives, intentional orientations, projects, and motives embedded within institutional practice, such as in ECEC (Hedegaard, 2008a, 2008b).

Hedegaard’s (2012, 2020) wholeness approach provides a model with which to understand children’s learning and development and focus on dynamic perspectives—societal, institutional, and personal. A *societal perspective* focuses on the traditions situated in institutional practices and activity settings. Meanwhile, the *institutional perspective* relates to society’s creation of institutional conditions for activities (e.g., mealtimes, playtime, breakfast time, or homework time). From the institutional perspective, activity settings are part of practical traditions (Hedegaard, 2012, 2020). These two

perspectives are complemented by the *personal perspective*, which considers how these activity settings occur in different social situations.

Concerning research with children, the *child perspective* encompasses a child's position in a social situation and institutional practice. According to Hedegaard and Fler (2013), to understand a child's perspective, researchers can pay attention to the child's engagement—their motive orientation—since it constitutes their intention in a particular situation. Moreover, through their presence, researchers participate in institutions' everyday activity settings; thus, they partner with the person under study (Hedegaard, 2008a). As activity partners, researchers participate in shared activities with child participants, and both researchers and participating children contribute to each other's interactions during an institutional practice (Hedegaard, 2008b). To understand the centering of a child participant in the research process, a wholeness approach enables the researcher to account for the child's learning and development within institutional practices. In this way, to understand the child's role in the research process, a wholeness approach focuses on different perspectives and the interplay between the motive orientations of both the child and researchers.

### *1.3. Motive orientation*

When exploring ethical encounters, considering people's motivated actions within their everyday practices and activities is important (Edwards et al., 2019). When conducting studies, researchers enter a new institution, posing demands on the setting and children. Therefore, researchers must be ready to respond ethically to children's intentions, however it is not a simple task. Hedegaard (2019) notes that institutions have different traditions and activity settings (e.g., play and outdoor activities); thus, when researchers focus on a child's perspective, they must also consider the social situations in which the child is immersed. To interpret the child's motive orientation, understanding the demands that the child is meeting and how the child interacts with their surroundings is important (Hedegaard, 2019). According to Edwards et al. (2019), "motive orientations enable them [i.e., researchers] to work with the expectations or embedded motives in the practice they inhabit" (p. 6). In the context of child research, motive orientations are layered. They require attention not only to the child's motives and intentional actions but also to the social and material aspects of an activity setting and practice. A child's motive orientation might change because of the conditions of the institutional practice in which they participate (Edwards et al., 2019). For example, a child's motive orientation will differ when they are playing in a free-play setting from when they are playing in a preschool setting, where play is designed as a learning activity. Motives convey cultural intentions to people and are embedded in activities and practices (Edwards, 2012).

In the context of children's everyday lives, motive orientations have been explained as children's self-orientation as they engage with new demands. In turn, when researchers' motives and children's motives conflict, researchers must either align or adjust their motive orientations to the children's in order to foster mutually respectful practices. As Edwards et al. (2019, p. 204) explained, such adjustments involve "finding ways of navigating around the demands they [people] encounter". In this paper, we examine motive orientation as a key concept that supports ethical relations by encouraging researchers to consider children's motives and redirect their own. Moreover, we extended the motive orientation concept to dynamic motive orientations as researchers navigate new relational ethical situations with children, as well as alignments, affordances, and constraints during these research encounters.

### *1.4. A focus on critical incidents as ethical relational encounters*

In the current paper, we understand *critical incidents* as research encounters that demand researchers' deep attention (Angelides, 2001; Halquist & Musanti, 2010; Tripp, 1993). These incidents have been conceptualized as turning points in the research process that take the forms of episodes or situations that stand out and provoke reflection (Angelides, 2001; Halquist & Musanti, 2010; Tripp, 1993). Tripp (1993, p. 8, as cited by Halquist & Musanti, 2010; see also Rutanen et al., 2021) explained critical incidents in research as follows: "critical incidents are not 'things' that exist independently of an observer and are awaiting discovery like gold nuggets or desert islands, but like all data, critical incidents are created. Incidents happen, but critical incidents are produced by the way we look at a situation" (p. 450). We focused on an episode that "surprised the researcher" (Angelides, 2001, p. 434; Halquist & Musanti, 2010, p. 451), was unpredictable, and "held some degree of conflict" (Musanti, 2005, as cited in Halquist & Musanti, 2010, p. 451), thus causing ethical tension that led us—the researchers at the time and, later, the authors of the current paper—to reflect on relational ethics and ethical decision-making during this encounter, providing different perspectives on the episode. Researchers' interpretations of an episode's significance makes it critical (Angelides, 2001). This interpretation is based not only on the episode itself or a singular occurrence but also on the episode's links to other episodes and meaningful encounters during the joint histories of research participants and researchers during the study process.

## **2. Research methods, data and participants**

The data presented in the current study were drawn from a larger, nine-year study (2016–2025), the project, using a critical incident technique (Tripp, 1993). Author 2 led the project, while Author 3 participated in data production (denoted as *Y* in the episode that will be discussed in this paper). The project's data included qualitative and quantitative naturalistic observations and semi-structured interviews concerning children's transitions to and within ECEC. The data featured five children and their ECEC settings, including their peers and practitioners (ECEC teachers and childcare providers). The focus children were observed during their transitions from home care to ECEC at one year of age, during their years in ECEC (transitioning from group to group, to home breaks, or to a new center), and during the transition to pre-primary education at five or six years of age. Each child was observed for an extended period of five years, during which approximately 25 days of data collection took place. The data include structured, ethnographic, and video-recorded observations and interviews with children, parents, and practitioners. Originally, in 2016, the study's methodological design with naturalistic observations was based on an attempt to minimize disturbances to everyday life at the ECEC centers as much as possible (Given, 2008). To the centers' staff members, the study was presented as a project that "wouldn't cause any extra burden" or extra use of limited resources. Although the research team shared an understanding that the research process always changes some dynamics and participants' relations, the team attempted to study *children's transitions from home to ECEC* as they occurred within the setting without interrupting everyday activities. This approach and general characterization of the researchers' role was also framed by the study's international collaboration, which was supported by similar data collection procedures in six countries (for more detail, see Rutanen, Amorim, Marwick, & White, 2018). The research team attempted to observe and record children's transitional processes in different country contexts and to share their data and interpretations within and across teams for each country.

### *2.1. Video observations*

Video was used to record processes and practices in order to collect data that could be revisited at various times, from different perspectives, and by different teams. The researchers planned to use video recordings to help capture episodes and present particular snapshots of children's everyday lives in the

ECEC context in more detail than written field notes. For example, video recordings enabled the recording of the setting's floor plan, materials, and organization, in addition to detailed accounts of children's nonverbal gestures and positions (Quinones & Fleeer, 2011, Quinones, 2014, Ridgway, Quinones & Li, 2020). In the context of long-term research and data collection, video recordings were seen as important data, enabling multiple views and perspectives for interpretation (Rutanen et al., 2018). Nonetheless, it was also acknowledged that although videos immortalize some aspects of a lived moment, they do not simply "capture" reality. Various choices had been made that infused meaning into the data, such as what, when, or how to record (Peters et al., 2021; Robson, 2011). Moreover, the video camera was not understood as neutral but, rather, as agentic in the setting, drawing children's attention and interest and, thus, always participating in data production.

The research process always involves various emotions, contradictory expectations, and demands (Richards et al., 2015). In this project, collected data had to both be shareable across the team and follow the international project's specific procedure while providing flexibility and allowing for researchers' subjective, situational roles during encounters with participants. Therefore, the research team acknowledged that diverse researchers could, and would, form personal relationships while collecting data—regardless of the need to later share and explore data together as a team. Throughout the process, due to this study's long-term period, children's and researchers' relations also changed. During children's first days at the ECEC settings, in general, most children showed some interest in the researchers. They approached individual or multiple researchers and were curious to observe the recorded videos on cameras' screens. Soon, however, this curiosity faded away, and researchers were considered part of the group of present adults despite being more passive in coordinating activities, routines, and transitions than the ECEC teachers and other staff members. During the study's repeated encounters, the researchers conversed with the children—particularly if the children showed interest or approached the researchers. Intentionally, the researchers let the children lead situations without actively intervening or asking questions while recording. Due to the specific power structures embedded in ECEC settings, children also allowed researchers to withdraw and "do their job" as observers recording everyday life from a distance (see also Richards et al., 2015). However, this observer position and relationship emphasized an assent to participate in research that involved many ambiguities, which are discussed in Section 3. in more detail.

## *2.2. Children's assent to long-term research relationships*

The Trace in ECEC – Tracing children's socio-spatial relations and lived experiences in early childhood education transitions project's longitudinal design spanned many years and, thus, fostered necessarily evolving researcher-child relationships. Practitioners' (ECEC teachers' and childcarers') and guardians' informed consent to participate in the study was sought at the beginning of the research process. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Jyväskylä. The project emerged as a result of international collaboration in ISSEET - International study of social emotional early transitions. Participating children were 10.5–13 months old when informed consent was sought. Parents and guardians consented before the project took place. Through the data collection process, children's permission to participate involved a situational negotiation of assent, which is in this paper conceptualized as connected to researchers' own understandings of the children's motive orientation within the study context. Because the project included interviews with children, new informed consent for the interviews was sought from guardians when the children turned five years old. Additionally, children were informed about the interviews both through written leaflets and verbally. Before this process, the researchers had relied on face-to-face verbal and non-verbal negotiations of children's assent to participate (Rutanen et al., 2021). Although written descriptions and information leaflets were

provided, the research design had to be described broadly enough to flexibly accommodate changes or modifications in questions or methodologies that arose during the study (Rutanen et al., 2021).

The project's longitudinal nature allowed the researchers to observe changes in their relationships with the participants (see also Rutanen et al., 2021). Children's familiarity with the researcher grew in time. The researchers also gained new knowledge about the children and the research setting. The researcher-child relationship is an ethical association that involves particular roles and responsibilities for the researcher, as well as research expectations. Therefore, to "unpack what it means to be more than a participant in the research field" is important (Quinones, 2014). Additionally, the research setting's repeating nature and continuity (e.g., the presence of observing adults interested in observing and noting children's actions) implied some predictability that informed children about the researchers' positions and behavior in different situations.

### 3. Results: discussing the critical incident

In this paper, we discuss one focus child, Oliver (a pseudonym, like all the participants' names in this study). Oliver experienced various transitions during his years in ECEC; accordingly, we observed and video-recorded his everyday life in diverse ECEC settings and groups at various points over several years. Oliver began participating in our research when he was 10.5 months old. To date (2023), Oliver's transitions have been observed across 24 days (full, approximately eight-hour days in ECEC) over five years. On these days, five different researchers observed Oliver. Researcher Milla Tuikka observed Oliver eight times during his first seven months in ECEC (when he was 10.5 months to 1.5 years old). Later, researchers Yaiza Lucas Revilla and Kaisa Harju observed Oliver a total of five times, when he was 2.5, 3, and 4 years old, and research assistants Hanna Nieminen and Maija-Leena Tuomela in his transition to pre-primary education at the age of six.

Different ethical encounters with Oliver during the research, as drawn from the project's data, were observed and discussed for analysis in this paper. Since observation sessions were repeated, Oliver became more accustomed to being filmed and observed. Even during Oliver's first observation, he looked directly at the camera when he arrived at the center with his family. Oliver also showed familiarity by approaching a researcher and reaching for their camera bag. Moreover, Oliver's relationship with being observed and recorded evolved as he grew older. Once, Oliver and his friend stopped playing momentarily when a researcher, Yaiza, took their camera out. Looking at Yaiza, Oliver commented, "[It is] silly" (hassu in Finnish language). In another instance, after waking from nap time, he looked at Yaiza, who was taking notes, and pressed his face against a pillow, turning his back to Yaiza. Thus, Oliver and Yaiza shared somewhat ambiguous moments that could be interpreted as playful invitations between child and researcher but also included signs of withdrawal. Among the various encounters with Oliver, a particular critical incident prompted the research team to reflect on assent and dissent processes, oscillations in the child's willingness to participate, and relational ethics during observations that included filming children in an ECEC setting.

Our analysis of this ethical relational encounter focused on different steps of the research process:

- *During filming*: A researcher's deep attention and caring attitude involve a relational ethical approach. The researcher's role involves an awareness of tension as a critical incident, an openness to a child's communication of possible *dissent through interpreting dynamic motives* (e.g., children's use of gestures as non-verbal communication and actions involving withdrawal). These motives might demand an ethical response and participation from the researcher (e.g., reflection, deciding whether to stop recording, and eye contact with the child).



- *After filming*: A researcher's reflection and construction of the incident provide a critical, detailed interpretation of the dynamic motive orientations during the incident, helping the researcher to jointly reflect on children's assent during research.
- *Ongoing assent and dissent*: An examination of a researcher's and a child's dynamic motive orientations regarding "what matters" to children during moments of assent and dissent centers the child and their well-being in ethical relational encounters.

### 3.1. *The critical incident*

The critical incident comprised an episode that occurred when the researchers observed and video-recorded three-year-old Oliver during his transition to a new ECEC center. He had been observed by three researchers earlier during the previous years, and this was the 13th day of observations. The following excerpt was taken from field notes recalling the observation during Oliver's first week at the new ECEC center.

In the afternoon after nap time, we [two researchers] continued observing and video recording in the ECEC setting. One of us was taking notes, and the other was handling the camera. While we were observing and recording, Oliver started hiding from us. My colleague and I stopped the data collection and discussed what to do. We realized that the space was problematic because it was really tight (narrow and long with only one entrance/viewpoint). We needed to be very close to pursue the video recording; therefore, we and the camera were obvious and very present to the child. We considered whether we should stop the observation completely if Oliver wasn't comfortable. We decided to give him a bit of space and see how he reacted. We stopped the video recording and continued just taking notes, observing from farther away behind the doorframe to ensure he could not see us so much. After a while, we moved outdoors, where there was more space and recording from a distance was possible. During the transition from indoors to outdoors, Oliver held the door for us and was really nice to us, which made us think that maybe he did not want us to leave in the first place. However, it remained unclear. Once outdoors, we resumed the video recording, and Oliver did not hide from the camera

### 3.2. *During filming*

The critical incident presented in Section 3.1 involved interpreting and navigating Oliver's assent and dissent by paying deep attention to the child's dynamic motive orientations (gaze and non-verbal communication) at that moment. The critical incident demanded a close relational and ethical encounter between Yaiza and Oliver, who had experienced various encounters previously (discussed in more detail above). During these earlier encounters, Oliver had observed the researcher (sometimes directly referring to Yaiza's presence, e.g., by commenting upon it to a friend) without signaling discomfort or open resistance to observation. However, in some moments, particularly after waking up from naptime, Oliver had also shown dissent, exercising his intentions by turning back and hiding from the researchers.

The first important moment of this particular encounter, as described in the example with Yaiza, was when Oliver hid from the researchers. While filming, the researchers' personal perspectives involved sensitively interpreting the child's actions. For example, the child's gazing at a researcher and then hiding are motive orientations that portrayed intentional actions. The child's intentional actions were either an invitation to play, a withdrawal from the situation, or an attempt to exercise his agency by controlling the research situation. Thus, the researchers who were present could not rule out an interpretation of a child expressing dissent. The researchers navigated their own and the child's motive orientations through a sensitive and ethical response that involved posing and reflecting on the following questions: *Do I stop or continue video recording? Do I remain close or leave? At this moment,*

*is the child renegotiating his assent to filming?* Thus, this encounter involved the dynamics of motive orientations since the researchers and the child communicated their intentions non-verbally.

### *3.3. After filming*

The child's assent and dissent process was interpreted further and considered through the wider research team's reflection on critical incidents. Motive orientations are embedded in the practices that individuals perform. They involve intentional actions (Hedegaard, 2012) thus, recognizing expectations and demands in activity settings is important (Edwards, 2012). In practice, research involves data construction; however, in the context of research involving children, employing an ethical and relational response to data construction involves constantly renegotiating children's right to dissent as well as the research project's expectations. As Yaiza navigated this situation as an activity partner, she negotiated and recalibrated her own motives about participating in the physical space. The researcher and video camera imposed new demands on the observed child (e.g., being filmed and close to the researcher), influencing Oliver's motives and actions. Moreover, the compact physical space was problematic in filming the child; therefore, the researcher decided to stop filming. Thus, dissent was not only negotiated (Huser et al., 2022; Olli, 2021) but also caused a type of withdrawal for both the child and the researcher. The researchers interpreted the child's motive orientations (embodied actions, such as hiding and gazing at something) and created new motive orientations for the research situation by withdrawing both themselves and their video camera from the tight space.

### *3.4. Ongoing assent and dissent*

In the context of this encounter (Section 3.1.), the research process represented a new institutional practice that imposed a new demand on the observed child (see Rutanen et al., 2021). During the encounter, another institution and its methods (e.g., academic observational research) were inserted into existing institutions (Oliver's ECEC center). At this meeting point of diverse demands, contradictions emerged that not only the researchers but also the other people who were present at the studied institution (such as the children, parents, and teachers) needed to consider. When a researcher pays attention to a child's possible motives and intentional actions (e.g., hiding and gazing at something), these messages communicate "the why, or motives [...] what matters" for the child (Edwards, 2012, p. 186), obliging the researcher to make an ethical decision both while filming and after the episode (see Section 3.1.). The researcher's interpretation must be reassessed in relation to the entire institutional context, embracing the unpredictability of encounters with a child. As an activity partner, the researcher shares physical and social space in a balancing act that involves sensitivity to the child's perspective and centering the child in the research process while accounting for ongoing assent and dissent during filming. When the researcher embraces the child's perspective (and considers their motive orientations), they also listen to embodied and non-verbal signs of dissent and assent (e.g., withdrawing from the space or stopping the video camera). Ongoing assent and dissent involves the researchers re-aligning and re-adjusting data collection.

## **4. Conclusions**

The current research contributes to ongoing discussions about children's situational assent and dissent processes—particularly how researchers understand these processes through the lens of motive orientation. Dynamic motive orientation is a relational concept that allows researchers to understand what matters to a child at a specific moment and throughout the research process. Ethical research, through a lens that understands relational ethics' importance alongside formal procedures, involves constantly questioning possibilities for data collection - placing the child at the center. A wholeness approach provides a framework to understanding the child's and its dynamic yet uncerating motive

orientations. The role of the researcher requires sensitivity and deep attention to the institutional practices including physical space, and simultaneous interactions—a complex endeavor that merits consideration. The current literature on ethics and child research methodologies invites researchers to ethically consider the dilemmas of studying children, particularly, within the context unfolding research practices and changing relationships with children (Kousholt & Juhl, 2023; Richards et al., 2015).

Reflection on *critical incidents* points to an episode and encounters that demand researchers' deep attention in terms of relational ethics. Critical incidents are constructed and reflected through these episodes' importance to the research process (Angelides, 2001; Halquist & Musanti, 2010; Tripp, 1993). These challenging moments might include tensions as relationships with research subjects and participants develop and change. Additionally, researchers do not always clearly understand how or whether to take responsibility in guiding research (see also Kousholt & Juhl, 2023). However, openness to uncertainty is also part of conducting research with children in early childhood settings and other childhood institutions. As Hedegaard (2008b) suggested, researchers must strike their own balance between their interactions with children and responses to tensions, ambiguity, and uncertainty. Researchers work *with* children through encounters that constitute a collaborative process. The unpredictable critical incident discussed in Section 3.1. led us to reflect on the value of indeterminacy, which is deeply embedded in knowledge production during research (Chimirri, 2019).

Assent and dissent involve both the child and researchers, who engage in ethical and relational encounters, and it requires the centering of the child in the research process. When conducting research with children, an ethical stance requires researchers to constantly reflect, negotiate, and recalibrate their motives and the demands that their research imposes on children. A cultural-historical approach that considers researchers not single entities but activity partners, highlights the importance of ethical decisions that arise when participating as an activity partner with children. Ethical encounters are in this way joint processes that involve both children and researchers. Children's embodied actions and dynamic motives as research participants might explain how they orient themselves to a research topic, affirming the necessity of a collective and ethical effort from the research team.

While investigating our study's repeated encounters in detail is beyond the scope of the current paper, previous research has discussed repeated and diverse encounters that construct a research space (Rutanan et al., 2021). The role of researchers' and research participants' joint histories in renegotiations between researchers and children must be acknowledged. For example, the children who participated in our study began to call a researcher "Lapputiet"aj"ä" (in Finnish language). This term was the children's own invention, and its translation to English would be something along the lines of "the one who knows with notes." Since each relationship is unique, like each research process, further explorations are needed to explain the nature of research that includes repeated encounters with children, the characteristics of longitudinal research designs, and how these elements influence researchers' interpretation of withdrawal or dissent during research situations.

The research process and the negotiation of assent are central to complementing informed consent procedures for studies in which guardians safeguard children's rights. Importantly, guardians (often parents) remain distant from the actual research process and provide (or refuse) consent based on information that is provided in writing in advance without children's knowledge of the proposed research, and often, guardians do not know how children will live through and experience the research. Therefore, much more discussion on research practices, examples, and reflections related to the negotiation of children's assent throughout research practice is needed (see Huser et al., 2022; Kousholt & Juhl, 2023; Richards et al., 2015). Also, more research is needed to explain the diverse cultural views

of assent and dissent processes, which require an ongoing dialogue between researchers conducting observations (e.g., in video and written forms) of children.

### **Declaration of competing interest**

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

### **Data availability**

The data that has been used is confidential.

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### *Code availability (software application or custom code)*

Not applicable.

*Ethics approval* Approval was obtained from the ethics committee of University of Jyväskylä.

### *Consent to participate and to publish*

Written informed consent was obtained from the teachers and legal guardians of the children who participated in this study. Their informed consent included permission to publish research reports resulting from the case analyses. *Funding acknowledgement* Trace in ECEC - Tracing children's socio-spatial relations and lived experiences in early childhood education transitions -project (Research Council of Finland, project no 321374).

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