

6 Principle Six: Do no harm

Our work and the work we support may have unintended and unexpected results. These can be positive or negative. The design, monitoring and evaluation should be explicitly designed to take account of both, and support the revision or reorientation of interventions if indicated.

Understanding the principle

‘Do no harm’ is a fundamental principle deriving from Hippocrates who articulated the maxim *‘As to diseases, make a habit of two things— to help, or at least do no harm,’* and it forms the basis of the Hippocratic oath which all doctors are required to swear. Basically, it means that where there is an existing problem, it may be better not to do something, or even to do nothing, than to risk causing more harm than good. It requires that doctors and other health care providers must always consider the possibility that an intervention, however well-intentioned, may cause harm. The principle needs to be applied when deciding on the use of an intervention that carries an obvious risk of harm, but a less certain chance of benefit.

The principle has equal relevance for programming in the development field, and needs to inform the thinking underpinning all interventions. It is implicitly acknowledged in the CRC, not only through the obligation to promote the best interests of children, but also in the right of children to survival and optimum development.

Why we emphasise ‘do no harm’

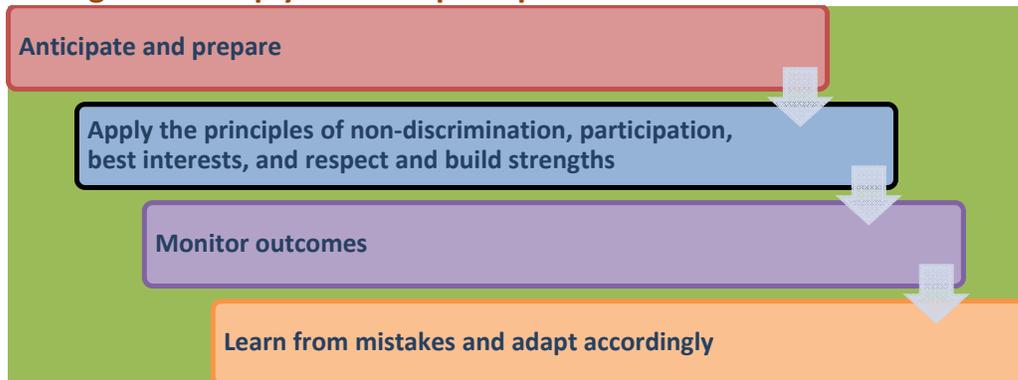
- As outlined throughout this paper, Oak Foundation seeks to use its resources to promote the rights and well being of children and promote their protection.
- However, it is fully aware that **interventions or decisions** made by donors, as well as policy makers and development agencies, about how they invest in programmes, **can have unintended or negative consequences**. In other words, their actions can potentially serve to harm rather than enhance children’s situation. There are examples throughout the world of well-intentioned initiatives that have had the opposite results than those intended: placing vulnerable children in institutions where they are then subjected to physical and sexual abuse; programmes teaching children that they have rights, exposing them to a backlash from their parents and local communities; research into children’s lives raising expectations for change, but then offering no feedback or action, resulting in disillusionment as to the benefits of both research and participation.
- We acknowledge these risks and seek to ensure that programmes we fund are **alert to the importance of taking every possible measure to ‘do no harm’**. At the same time we are committed to transparency and integrity in our work, and wish to promote the maximum possible learning from the experience of programmes. We therefore encourage **a willingness to be open about outcomes that do not result in benefit to children**, in order that lessons can be learned and applied, and repeated failures avoided.

Implications of ‘do no harm’ for programmes

Every project and programme funded by the Foundation believes that its actions will lead to greater protection for children: that is their very *raison d’être*. It can be difficult therefore to acknowledge that the desired outcomes have not been achieved, or, worse, that they have actually led to deterioration in the lives of the children concerned. However, the reality is that any intervention can have different outcomes to those that were intended. Programmes need to be alert to that risk and

take all possible action to anticipate and avoid it. They need to introduce measures to monitor that risk throughout the life cycle of a programme, and adjust or adapt the work accordingly.

Strategies to comply with the principle 'Do No Harm'



Anticipate and prepare

From the outset of any programme, when determining the aims and objectives, it is important to **reflect on all possible consequences that might arise, including negative outcomes**. For example, the introduction of a reporting and complaints mechanism for children, who have been physically or sexually abused in institutions, may expose those children to negative retribution from staff concerned. Once these possibilities have been identified, not only can staff be sensitised to be alert to them and seek to build in measures to address them, but they can also be built into the monitoring and evaluation process. This enhances the potential for measuring and assessing any evidence of negative change or harm as one of the outcomes of the programme. It is also important to **promote a culture of willingness to accept the possibility that interventions may cause harm** as well as good, and of confidence in recognising and acknowledging any such harmful outcomes.

The Six Lessons from a Do No Harm Project¹⁰

- 1 **Whenever an intervention of any sort enters a context, it becomes part of the context.** No intervention is seen as neutral by people in the context.
- 2 **All contexts are characterized by factors that divide and those that connect**
 - A divider is a factor that causes difficulties, creates conflict, divides people
 - A connectors is a factor that serves to unite, overcome challenges, bind communities,These factors need to be analysed to help identify how to anticipate challenges and to utilise strengths that can be brought to bear to overcome them
- 3 **All interventions interact with both dividers and connectors.** They can either make them worse or make them better.
- 4 **Actions and behaviours have consequences.** All interventions consist of both actions and behaviours
 - Actions reflect effects of resources being brought by an organization into a context.
 - Behaviour reflects the conduct of the people bringing the resources.
- 5 **The details of interventions matter.** The details are where the impacts come from, not the whole. By analyzing the details of an intervention, we can determine how actions and behaviours are having an impact on the context.
- 6 **There are always options.** Options grow out of understanding our actions and behaviours.

Apply the core principles

Adherence to the four core principles will facilitate an approach that, at a minimum, commits to doing no harm, but hopefully extends beyond that, to positively doing good:

¹⁰ Collaborative Learning Project,
http://www.cdainc.com/cdawww/project_profile.php?pid=DNH&pname=Do%20No%20Harm

- **Child participation:** Listening to children will help programmes have a better understanding of the nature of those children’s lives, their behaviours, environments and the risks to which they are exposed. This will help the design and implementation of initiatives which take account of those risks and include measures to mitigate against them.

Illustrative examples

Concern during the 1990s over child workers in carpet factories in Bangladesh led to the introduction of legislation in the US prohibiting import of carpets from factories employing young children. Intended as a measure to afford children greater protection from exploitation, the outcome for the children, who were thrown out of their jobs by the factory owners, was a resort to more dangerous and risky forms of employment on the streets. The impassioned response of the children concerned was the policy makers should have talked and listened to them first.

Many efforts have been made to 'rescue' child soldiers; some girls involved in those processes have argued that, in fact, their lives, once recruited, had improved, as they were offered greater autonomy, opportunities for education, and a sense of responsibility and self worth, all of which had been denied them within their own communities. For these girls, imposed actions to reintegrate them with their families and villages, without taking on board their perspectives and experiences, and exploring measures to address them, may well cause them greater harm than leaving them where they are.

- **Non-discrimination:** Clearly any action which explicitly discriminates against a child or group of children is inconsistent with the maxim 'do no harm'. Furthermore, initiatives designed to address discrimination also need to be carefully planned to ensure that they do not exacerbate the very problem they are seeking to tackle.

Illustrative examples

If a legal system requires that a witness in a court is able to visibly identify a defendant in order to be able to give evidence against them, this will discriminate indirectly against blind or partially sighted children, who are unable to meet the requirement. This could result in offenders against blind children being immune from prosecution and free to abuse them with relative impunity. Such a restriction could therefore be argued to breach the principle of 'do no harm'. Explicit and deliberate efforts within programmes are needed to ensure a commitment to both direct and indirect discrimination.

During the period of Romania's accession to the European Union, the Government was required to bring an end to the discriminatory practice of placing children with disabilities in residential institutions and to promote inclusive education. Hundreds of children were suddenly transferred into mainstream schools with no support, no training for teachers, no dialogue with parents, and no resources. The outcome was that most of the children ended up at home with no schooling at all - an infinitely worse outcome than if they had been left in the residential schools.

- **Best interests:** The commitment to promoting the best interests of the child needs to be a continual mediating principle applied to determine whether the actions of programmes are likely to breach the commitment to 'do no harm'.

Illustrative examples

An initiative promoting sexual and reproductive health rights for young people is likely to be committed to ensuring that both girls and boys have equal access to counselling, advice and services. Such an approach would be seen as consistent with the commitment to children's rights, to non-discrimination, and to the best interests of the young people concerned in terms of their health, development and protection. However, where such a programme is being developed in a deeply conservative community, a service offered on an equitable basis may be seen as offensive and threatening, and indeed, young girls may be subjected to punishment, potentially extending to extreme violence, as a consequence of participating. The 'do no harm' principle would require that these risks are fully taken on board. The best interests of the girls concerned need to be understood in respect of all their rights, including the right to protection from all forms of violence, and the right to life as well as those rights being promoted by the programme. This does not mean that efforts to provide sexual and reproductive health services should be abandoned for girls, but that when designing the programme, the cultural context is taken on board and efforts made to understand and address parental concerns.

- **Respecting and building on strengths:** Over the years, many development programmes have entered communities from outside with proposals to improve, for example, health care, education, or levels of violence. Too many have not only failed but have actually damaged those individuals or communities they were intended to help. The issues can be complex, as in the examples described above. However, in all cases, working with the assets within communities, and building on the strengths both of children and their families, will play a crucial part in both alerting programmes to potential risks and to mitigating or mediating potential harm.

Monitor outcomes

Throughout the course of a programme, it is essential not only to monitor whether the work being undertaken is on track to achieve the overall aims and objectives, but to monitor any unintended or negative outcomes emerging. It is important therefore to include negative benchmarks or indicators alongside the positive aspirations of the programme. This will involve efforts to collect data on those potentially harmful outcomes.

Illustrative example

An initiative might be established to support a child protection system which involved mandatory reporting for all professionals, together with the creation of an integrated child protection register. Possible downsides might be that children felt there was no-one to talk to confidentially, that the idea of their stories being shared among other professionals felt like further abuse, that they would no longer talk to professionals about abuse in case the information was reported to other officials, thus reducing the level of support available to them. Investment would need to be made in collecting information on these potential outcomes as well as charting progress in establishing the policy and the child protection register. Data might, for example be collected on numbers of children reporting abuse, focus groups or surveys on children's experiences of the new systems, and actual outcomes for children who are registered.

Learn from mistakes

Ultimately, there has to be a preparedness to recognise if the programme is actually resulting in more harm to children than good. Depending on the nature of the problems arising, this might involve investment of additional resources, more time spent with local communities, recognising that a longer time frame is needed to achieve the programme goals, or it may involve a complete re-think of the initiative itself. This in itself can have positive implications. The consequent lessons can be shared with other programmes in order to provide broader learning from the process and ensure that others can build on that experience and minimise the risks of repeating the same problems.

Sources of information on 'do no harm'

- American Association of Paediatrics Policy Statement on Health Equity and Child Rights, 2010
- Development assistance and humanitarian aid in conflict,
http://www.cdainc.com/cdawww/project_profile.php?pid=DNH&pname=Do%20No%20Harm
- Anderson M B (1999) Do no harm: how aid can support peace--or war, Lynne Rienner Publishers