Overview of Basic Principles

To be considered "ethical", social work research should:

- Cause no harm to participants. This may require careful weighing of potential risks vs. benefits of participating in a study.
- Respect participants’ rights and dignity.
- Do good, i.e., the research should provide information that will be useful and of service and value to social work.
- Be conducted with integrity, e.g., as accurate as possible and with minimal, acknowledged biases and limitations.

Ethical Treatment of People

When assigning participants to program groups, keep in mind that participation in the research should:

- Cause no harm
- Not result in a denial of services otherwise available

Also be aware of randomization issues, such as:

- Is it fair to deny services to a control group?
- Is it fair to impose untested services upon people?
- Is randomization a fair way to allocate service resources in a particular context?

Obtaining informed consent

To obtain informed consent, study participants must be provided with information about the study, such as:

- The purpose of study
- The auspices of the research
- Who they can contact
- What potential benefits or harm might result from participation
- Who will have access to the data, and in what form
- What confidentiality provisions, if any, have been made
- How they can obtain a copy of the results
- That they may refuse to participate at all
- That they may discontinue their participation at any time
• That they may refuse to answer specific questions

Collecting data

When collecting data:

• Have respect for respondents' privacy rights (i.e., anonymity/confidentiality protections). Only ask for identifying information when it is needed to link case level data from multiple sources or multiple times of data collection (e.g., pre-post tests).
• Administer and uphold informed consent, including the right of refusal and discontinuance.
• Be minimally reactive, and provide compensatory provisions if needed.
• Be sensitive to the demands on program staff.
• Act in a manner that is developmentally and culturally appropriate to respondents/subjects.

Potential Conflicts

Be aware of potential role conflicts, e.g.:

• Internal researchers are usually part of the management team, and are distinct from other parts of the organization.
  ○ They need to serve the interests of all stakeholders, but may only represent or be employed by one of the stakeholders.
  ○ Conflict among stakeholders should be anticipated and confronted, lest it render the research useless.
• External consultants need to acquire contracts vs. conducting quality research. Researchers may feel pressure to make stakeholders look good.
• Program managers are concerned with efficiency.
• Staff are concerned with improving their effectiveness.
• Clients want services that are accessible and meet their needs.
• The community and program funders or sponsors are also concerned with efficiency, although in a less detailed way than program managers.