



Ethical Storytelling Guidelines

User guide

March 2026



**SOS CHILDREN'S
VILLAGES**

Executive Summary

These Ethical Storytelling Guidelines set out SOS Children's Villages' shared standards for how we gather, create and share stories, images and digital content about children, young people, families and communities. They support our collective purpose: to ensure each child and young person grows up with the bonds they need to become their strongest selves.

At their core, the guidelines are about protecting people's rights, dignity and safety. Ethical storytelling is not only a communications concern, it is a safeguarding responsibility. The way stories are told can either uphold dignity and agency or expose individuals to risk, stigma, or harm. These guidelines are aligned with SOS Children's Villages' safeguarding frameworks and uphold shared principles such as duty of care, "do no harm," confidentiality, child participation, inclusion and accountability.

The guidelines also reflect SOS Children's Villages' commitment to rights-based, decolonized, non-discriminatory and inclusive communication. This means working with people and communities as partners in storytelling, amplifying local voices, challenging stereotypes and avoiding narratives that portray individuals as passive victims or position external actors as "saviours." Stories should reflect lived realities while also recognizing strength, resilience and agency.

Ethical storytelling strengthens trust with our audiences — including children and families, local communities, partners, donors, policymakers and supporters. By presenting stories that are accurate, contextualized and respectful, SOS Children's Villages reinforces its credibility and contributes meaningfully to wider conversations on children's rights, care reform, social protection and other structural issues affecting children and young people.

The guidelines are organized around 12 core principles covering dignity, consent, accuracy, privacy, non-exploitation, agency, accountability, power dynamics, participation, digital ethics, trust-building and inclusive language. Each principle includes practical actions to guide day-to-day decision-making, supported by a checklist to use during planning, review and publication.

Together, these guidelines provide a federation-wide ethical framework to support responsible storytelling across diverse contexts, while allowing flexibility to align with national laws, safeguarding systems and operational realities. They are intended to guide reflection, strengthen practice and ensure that the voices of children, young people, families and communities are represented with integrity, respect and care.

Introduction

SOS Children's Villages is committed to telling stories that uphold the dignity, rights and best interests of the children, young people, families and communities we support. These guidelines provide a practical framework to support responsible communication that aligns with safeguarding and child rights principles. They promote storytelling that is locally informed, grounded in context and respectful of people's lived experiences.

The guidelines draw on established international standards from child-focused, development and humanitarian organizations. They are recommended for use across the SOS Children's Villages federation and should be applied in line with national laws, safeguarding frameworks and relevant internal policies and procedures.

Who These Guidelines Are For

These guidelines are intended for all SOS Children's Villages staff, partners and third-party collaborators involved in collecting, producing, or publishing stories, images, videos, or communications materials. They are designed to ensure that everyone representing or producing content for SOS Children's Villages upholds the highest ethical standards when gathering content and sharing the experiences of children, young people, families and communities. This responsibility is especially important in humanitarian settings, including situations of armed conflict and other acute emergencies, where urgency, trauma and power imbalances can increase risks and require even greater care in how stories are gathered and shared.



A Federation-wide Ethical Framework

Some elements of these guidelines reflect mandatory requirements linked to safeguarding, consent and protection, while others represent best practice and should be applied wherever feasible and appropriate to context. These guidelines provide a common ethical framework across the SOS Children's Villages federation. They are intended to guide practice, while taking into account the safeguarding systems, policies and operational realities of each member association.

How to Use These Guidelines

This document is organized around 12 core principles that define ethical storytelling at SOS Children's Villages. Each principle is accompanied by practical actions to guide implementation and is aligned with leading international frameworks and standards. To support everyday decision-making, the guidelines also include a practical **Ethical Storytelling Checklist** that helps ensure these principles are consistently applied across all stages of content creation - from planning and consent to review and publication. The guidelines conclude with a section on implementation and monitoring to support integration across our communications work.

About the Development of These Guidelines

These guidelines were developed through a review of leading ethical communication standards from child-focused organizations such as UNICEF, Save the Children, Plan International, Oxfam and World Vision, as well as sector-wide initiatives like the Bond guidance and the Pledge for Change 2030. They also build on existing SOS

Children's Villages communications resources, including our brand foundation, editorial style guide, visual and image guidelines, key messages and global content strategy. These guidelines were initiated by the communications team at SOS Children's Villages International and developed through consultation with colleagues in member associations and relevant internal functions, including safeguarding.

Where relevant, this document draws upon and adapts language and approaches from sector guidelines, with full credit to the original sources listed in the appendix.

Our 12 Core Principles of Ethical Storytelling

The following principles set out the key standards that guide ethical storytelling at SOS Children's Villages. Each principle includes practical actions to support day-to-day decision-making across different roles and contexts:

1. Uphold Dignity and Respect
2. Secure and Honour Informed Consent
3. Ensure Accuracy and Authenticity
4. Protect Privacy and Minimize Safeguarding Risk
5. Prevent Exploitation
6. Empower through Agency and Decolonized Storytelling
7. Review for Accountability and Learning
8. Recognize Power and Share Control
9. Engage through Participatory and Co-Created Storytelling
10. Use AI and Digital Tools Responsibly
11. Build Trust through Authentic and Ethical Storytelling
12. Use Language and Imagery to Drive Change



1. Uphold Dignity and Respect

Why this matters: Treating people with dignity in our communications reinforces their humanity, avoids harmful or stereotypical portrayals and builds trust with both the individuals featured and the audiences we reach. It reflects our safeguarding commitment to a “do no harm” approach in how people are represented. Our strategic audiences, including partners, donors, policymakers and young people, expect communication that reflects authenticity, respect and integrity. .

In principle, this means:

- Every child, young person and family must be portrayed with dignity, regardless of their circumstances.
- Avoid images or narratives that portray individuals as helpless victims.
- Respect for cultural and personal identity must be maintained at all times.
- Avoid imagery that stigmatizes children or reinforces stereotypical power dynamics between the Global North and South.

In practice, this means:

- Choose images and quotes that reflect people’s lived realities, including situations of hardship or need, while portraying them with dignity, context, strength and agency. Avoid depictions that isolate suffering or present individuals only as victims.
- Use a dignity check: ask, “Would this portrayal feel respectful if it were my own story?”

- Avoid exaggerating suffering or misrepresenting realities for emotional appeal.
- Collaborate with local colleagues to ensure cultural relevance and sensitivity.

2. Secure and Honour Informed Consent

Why this matters: Informed consent protects people’s right to privacy and ensures that all participants — children, young people, and adults — have meaningful control over how their stories are told. It is essential to preventing exploitation and misrepresentation throughout the storytelling process. These practices reflect SOS Children’s Villages’ commitment to informed consent. While legal requirements regarding consent may vary across countries, our approach is guided by the highest safeguarding and child rights standards and may go beyond minimum legal obligations.

In principle, this means:

- Consent must be obtained from children, their caregivers, or legal guardians before collecting and sharing their stories, photos, or videos.
- Children should be informed in a manner appropriate to their age and understanding about how their story will be used.
- They have the right to say no or withdraw their consent at any time.
- ***In practice, this means:***
- Explain, in age-appropriate and child-friendly ways, what consent is, how it can be given and that it can be changed or withdrawn at any time.

- Explain how, for how long, through which channels and for what purpose the content will be used.
- Ensure consent is a two-way dialogue: ask participants what they want to share, what concerns they may have and whether they want to participate.
- Involve trusted adults to support children during the consent process.
- Record consent appropriately (written, audio, or video) and securely store records.
- Reconfirm consent if significant time has passed or the story's use changes.
- Note that, in line with SOS Children's Villages practice, consent for content use generally expires five years after the production date unless otherwise specified. Continued use beyond this period should be reassessed and reconfirmed where feasible.
- Never pressure individuals to participate and remind them of their right to opt out at any stage.
- Handle images and stories with care throughout the content lifecycle, including proper classifications if stored in a database and noting any usage limitations.
- Ensure that consent records are stored, managed and deleted in line with SOS Children's Villages' data protection, safeguarding and retention policies.

⚠ Note: *SOS Children's Villages should consider developing a procedure to enable individuals to exercise their right to withdraw consent after publication, including how requests for content removal or amendment are assessed and handled across SOS Children's Villages channels, as well as partner and third-party platforms.*

3. Ensure Accuracy and Authenticity

Why this matters: Accurate and authentic storytelling protects credibility, prevents the spread of misinformation and ensures respectful and honest representation. Framing stories within broader social, economic and political contexts, such as inequality, discrimination, or systems of care, strengthens understanding and prevents oversimplified or "feel good" narratives.

In principle, this means:

- Stories must be truthful and based on facts.
- Narratives should reflect the child's full reality, including their strengths, aspirations and resilience.
- Avoid exaggeration or misrepresentation for emotional or fundraising appeal.
- Provide sufficient context to avoid misinterpretations or perpetuation of stereotypes.
- Allow children and young people to tell their stories in their own words, when appropriate.

In practice, this means:

- Fact-check background details, data and evidence shared in stories.
- Include children's and young people's goals, aspirations and achievements, not just their hardships.
- Provide geographical, historical and cultural context where needed so that audiences do not draw incorrect or simplistic conclusions about the individuals or communities featured.

- Resist simplifying stories into stereotypes of poverty or crisis.
- Connect individual stories to the larger societal issues SOS Children's Villages works to address (e.g. care reform, youth unemployment, or mental health), helping to contextualize personal experiences within lived realities.
- Where appropriate and feasible, follow up with contributors after publication to understand how their story was experienced and to identify any concerns or support needs that may arise.

4. Protect Privacy and Minimize Safeguarding Risk

Why this matters: Protecting identities and personal information reduces the risk of harm and upholds the safety and dignity of the individuals whose stories we tell. Ethical storytelling is a key extension of our safeguarding commitments. Content that compromises privacy, dignity, or safety including through lack of context can cause emotional or social harm, increase safeguarding risks and undermine trust in our child safeguarding systems. When in doubt, the default should always be to prioritize safety, dignity and privacy over completeness or storytelling impact.

In principle, this means:

- No identifying information should be disclosed unless it is clearly necessary for the purpose of the story, in the best interests of the individual and shared with informed consent.
- Images must not misrepresent reality through manipulation.
- Avoid using sensitive images that expose children to risk or harm.

- Stories should be assessed for potential risks to the child, young person, family, or community and concerns discussed with safeguarding or programme colleagues when needed.

In practice, this means:

- Change the names of children and young people who are minors to protect their identity and privacy.
- Change the names of adults to protect their identity and privacy unless they give their consent or are speaking at a public venue.
- Avoid revealing exact locations or identifiable places unless doing so poses no foreseeable risk to the safety, dignity, or privacy of the individual or their community and informed consent has been obtained.
- Engage with safeguarding and programme colleagues when planning stories involving abuse, trauma, abandonment or sensitive family situations, to assess risks and agree on appropriate safeguards before publishing.
- Review content for potential safeguarding, safety and privacy risks before publishing.
- Protect the storage, access and sharing of data related to children's stories and images

5. Prevent Exploitation

Why this matters: Ensuring that participation is fully voluntary protects children, young people, families and communities from coercion, reinforces their right to choose how they engage and helps safeguard their emotional well-being throughout the storytelling process, including by avoiding retraumatization.

In principle, this means:

- Children, young people and adults should never be forced or pressured by staff or external parties to share their stories.
- No one should be asked to reenact or be pressured to retell traumatic experiences.
- No incentives, financial or otherwise, should be offered in a way that influences or pressures participation.

In practice, this means:

- Let participants know that they do not have to answer any questions they do not want.
- Be mindful of questions that might trigger past trauma.
- Stop interviewing immediately if a participant appears uncomfortable or distressed.
- Allow participants to choose which parts of their story they wish to share.
- Focus on voluntary, informed participation without inducements.

6. Empower through agency and decolonized storytelling

Why this matters: Highlighting the agency and strength of children and families supports a more balanced and respectful narrative and avoids reinforcing stereotypes of them as victims.

For SOS Children's Villages, our commitment to decolonized storytelling means centering local voices and lived experience, recognizing children, young people, families and communities as agents of change and

avoiding narratives that position external actors, including our own organization, as "saviours." It reflects locally led solutions, equitable partnerships and the lived realities of people and their communities.

In principle, this means:

- Stories should empower children, young people and families and highlight their agency.
- Participants should be given an active role in shaping their narratives.
- Diverse voices should be included to provide broad perspectives.

In practice, this means:

- Ask contributors how they would like to be represented.
- Encourage children and young people to tell their own stories in their preferred way (written, drawn, spoken).
- Highlight positive changes made by individuals and communities themselves.
- Use language and framing that reflect our commitment to decolonizing content and shifting narratives, avoiding portrayals that position SOS Children's Villages as the "saviour" or reduce people to helpless victims.

7. Review for Accountability and Learning

Why this matters: Review and reflection help prevent ethical oversights, support safeguarding and promote consistent, responsible storytelling across the federation. They also create space for learning and improvement over time.

In principle, this means:

- All storytelling materials should be reviewed with an eye for potential ethical issues and language before publication.
- Ethical risks and dilemmas should be considered during the planning phase of any storytelling or communications project.
- Staff and partners involved in storytelling should receive these guidelines and ethical storytelling training where possible.
- Feedback mechanisms should be available for concerns and improvements

In practice, this means:

- Consider using a peer review system where another trained colleague reviews storytelling materials before publication.
- Use the ethical storytelling checklist to support the review of stories, images, or videos.
- Consider identifying an “Ethical Communications Focal Point” or appropriate colleague to provide advice on sensitive content when needed.
- Encourage training on ethical storytelling standards for staff and partners involved in storytelling, where possible.
- Enable simple feedback channels where contributors or audiences can report concerns about published content.
- Where appropriate, involve young people from SOS Children’s Villages programmes and others with lived experience of care in reflecting on and shaping ethical storytelling practices over time.

8. Recognize Power and Share Control

Why this matters: Acknowledging power imbalances helps to prevent saviour narratives and promotes equity, diverse voices and fairness in our storytelling.

In principle, this means:

- Recognize and reflect on one’s own role, background, and potential influence in the storytelling process, and be mindful of the inherent power imbalances that may exist when engaging with people in more vulnerable circumstances.
- Acknowledge and address power imbalances in storytelling by ensuring contributors have meaningful influence over how their stories are told.
- Avoid narratives that portray SOS Children’s Villages, its staff, or donors as “saviours.”
- Portray children, young people, families and communities as the primary agents of change in their own lives.
- Highlight resilience, leadership and the strengths of individuals and communities.

In practice, this means:

- Involve contributors meaningfully in shaping their own stories.
- Share drafts or final materials with contributors, where appropriate and feasible, but at least with SOS Children’s Villages programme staff before publication.
- Let participants approve images and quotes before publication where appropriate and feasible.

- Review all stories, captions, headlines and images to ensure they do not reinforce stereotypes, pity narratives, or power imbalances.
- Use language that highlights agency, achievements and the ability of individuals and communities to lead change.

9. Engage through Participatory and Co-Created Storytelling

Why this matters: Involving children and young people, as well as families and communities, in shaping their own narratives strengthens authenticity, ownership and representation.

In principle, this means:

- Whenever possible, involve contributors actively in the storytelling process, giving them opportunities to share their experiences in their own words and preferred formats.
- Support community-led contributions by enabling children, young people, families and communities to help shape narratives.

In practice, this means:

- Invite children and young people to suggest ideas, messages, or themes for stories.
- Offer options for participants to express themselves through interviews, drawings, writing, or recorded messages.
- When feasible, provide basic tools (e.g., disposable cameras, mobile phones, or supervised writing or drawing sessions) to encourage self-expression.
- Acknowledge the input or co-creation of contributors when appropriate (while maintaining privacy and safety).

10. Use AI and Digital Tools Responsibly

Why this matters: Responsible use of AI and digital tools helps prevent misinformation and protects the dignity and integrity of the people represented.

In principle, this means:

- Exercise caution in using AI-generated content.
- Be transparent and uphold ethical standards in digital storytelling.

In practice, this means:

- Clearly label any AI-generated images or videos and ensure transparency where AI-generated content is presented as final without substantial human authorship.
- Avoid using AI to alter faces, expressions, or realities.
- Vet AI content through the same ethical review processes as human-created content.
- Routine editorial or analytical uses of AI tools (such as grammar support, summarization, or data analysis) do not require disclosure, provided that staff remain responsible for reviewing, verifying and approving the final content.
- Do not upload or share sensitive, personal, or identifying information about children, families, or staff in AI tools unless this is explicitly permitted under SOS Children's Villages' data protection, safeguarding and IT security policies.

11. Build Trust through Authentic and Ethical Storytelling

Why this matters: This principle brings together the intent of the guidelines by showing how ethical storytelling supports trust, influence and long-term change in practice.

Ethical storytelling helps build trust with our strategic audiences, from policymakers to partners and donors. When framed within broader structural and societal contexts, our storytelling can challenge dominant narratives, shift power and position SOS Children's Villages as a thought leader advocating for long-term, systemic change.

In principle, this means:

- Represent stories truthfully and respectfully, avoiding portrayals that reinforce stereotypes or depict people as helpless victims.
- Situate individual experiences within their wider societal, historical, or structural contexts (e.g., poverty, gender inequality, discrimination, displacement).
- Ground storytelling in relevant data, evidence and research where appropriate, to strengthen credibility and avoid oversimplified narratives.
- Link storytelling to relevant societal trends such as the Sustainable Development Goals, mental health, care reform and social protection. Align storytelling with decolonizing communication by challenging dominant narratives and amplifying voices closest to the issue.

In practice, this means:

- Include background information that helps the audience understand why a person or family may be in a certain situation without oversimplifying or victimizing.
- Highlight structural drivers (e.g., conflict, inequality, policy gaps) alongside personal stories to make visible the systems that need to change.
- Use reliable data or programme evidence, where available, to contextualize individual stories and support key messages.
- Tailor storytelling to key international audiences (e.g., policymakers, partners, donors) in a way that informs, educates and fosters trust.
- Ensure content creators reflect on power dynamics and the potential impact of the stories they tell.
- Use stories to illustrate SOS Children's Villages' contributions to global debates and policy discussions on children's rights, care reform and social justice. .

12. Use Language and Imagery to Drive Change

Why this matters: The language and images we choose shape how children, young people, families and communities are seen. Grounded in respect and real-life context, storytelling can challenge stereotypes while affirming people's dignity, strengths and our core belief on the importance of bonds and nurturing relationships.

In principle, this means:

- Use language and imagery that reflect people with dignity and respect, promote inclusion and avoid reinforcing stereotypes or bias.

- Periodically, review storytelling materials to ensure they remain accurate, relevant and free from outdated or harmful representations.

In practice, this means:

- Apply SOS Children's Villages' brand principles in both language and imagery by portraying genuine bonds and nurturing relationships.
- Show children, young people and families as their strongest selves, capturing authentic moments and providing meaningful context so audiences understand lived realities with dignity and respect.
- Use empowering, rights-based language (e.g., "children with disabilities" vs. "disabled children").
- Partner with local creatives and experts for story creation.
- Periodically review published materials to identify and address harmful or outdated stereotypes. .

For respectful, clear, and rights-based **written communications**, refer to the **Editorial Style Guide** and Inclusive Language guidance (Part I).

For **visual storytelling** (photography and video), these principles should be applied in conjunction with **SOS Children's Villages' Brand Visual Guidelines** and **Image and Video Guide**, which provide practical guidance on ethical image creation, consent, context and dignified representation.



Implementation and Monitoring

To support the implementation of these principles across the federation, we recommend the following practices for member associations:

- Develop and apply ethical review practices such as peer review, use of the ethical storytelling checklist, or consultation with designated focal points before publishing stories, images and videos, adapted to local capacities and existing approval processes.
- Provide training and practical tools to support staff and partners in applying ethical storytelling standards, in line with available resources and operational priorities.
- Periodically review and update these guidelines to reflect best practice and evolving ethical considerations.
- Engage young people with lived experience in periodic reflection and feedback processes to inform how these guidelines are applied and improved over time, where appropriate and feasible.
- Conduct self-assessment and, where appropriate, external review to support alignment with Pledge for Change 2030 commitments.
- Encourage ongoing reflection on bias and narrative choices throughout the storytelling process including questions such as: Why am I choosing this story? Whose voice is being elevated and whose may be missing?
- Promote accessible and inclusive storytelling by using clear language, adding captions or subtitles to videos, providing image descriptions and, where feasible, considering formats that can be accessed by diverse audiences, including people with disabilities, taking into account technical capacity and resource constraints.

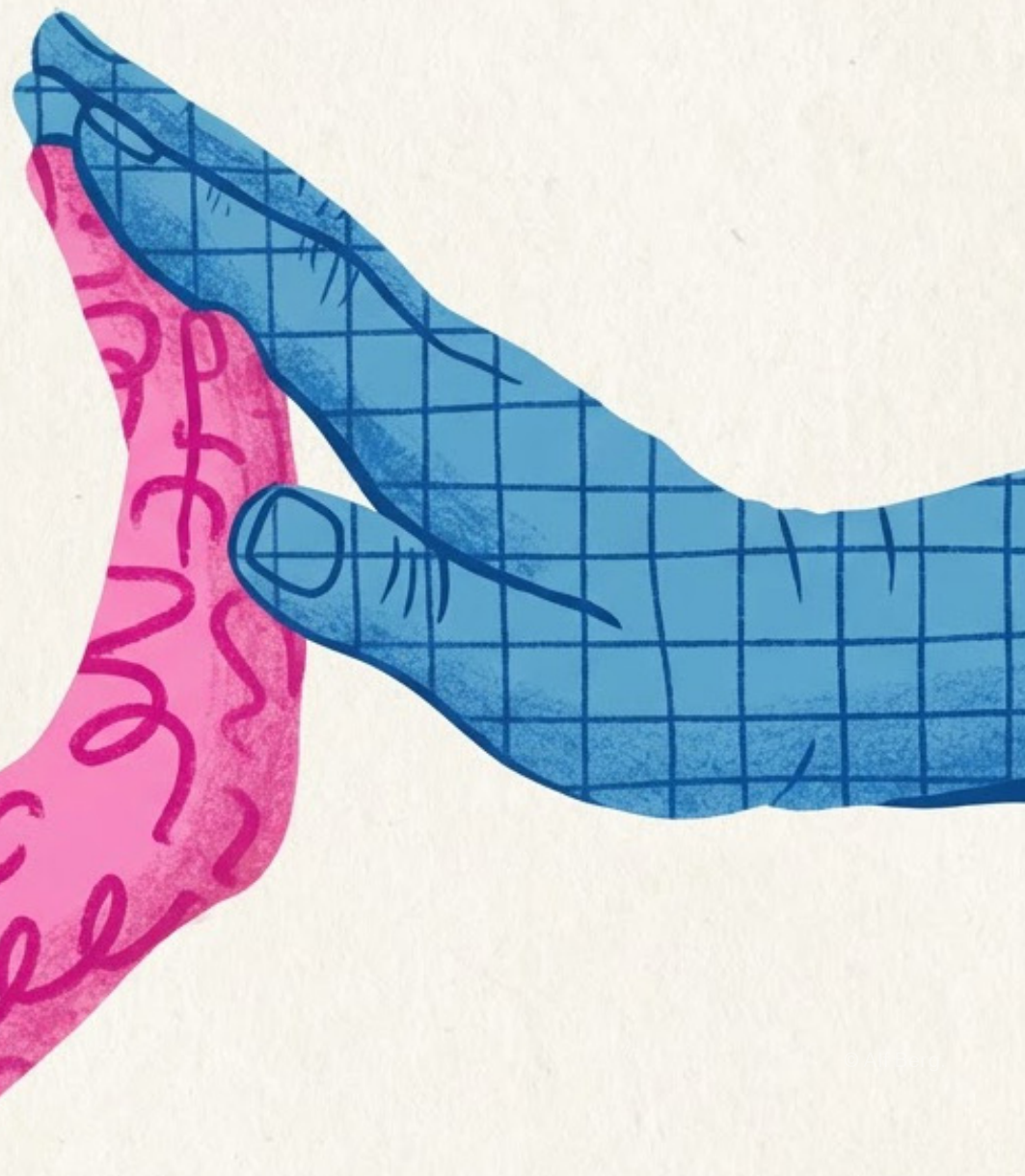
By adhering to these ethical storytelling guidelines, SOS Children's Villages ensures that the voices of children and families are represented with integrity, respect and care, while safeguarding their rights and well-being.



Ethical Storytelling Checklist

Use this checklist when creating or reviewing any SOS Children's Villages content, including stories, articles, videos, social media posts, and publications. It helps ensure our storytelling is ethical, respectful, inclusive, and aligned with our federation-wide principles.

This checklist is a reflective tool to support ethical decision-making, not a pass/fail test. Not every question will apply to every story or format. If a question cannot be answered confidently, it should prompt discussion, revision, or further review before publication. Use the checklist during planning and drafting, and again before publication or wider sharing. It complements and does not replace existing approval, safeguarding, or sign-off processes within SOS Children's Villages, including national or departmental procedures already in place.



Ethical Storytelling Checklist

1. Dignity and Respect

- Does the story or image show the subject with dignity and strength, even when showing difficult realities or situations of need?
- Have you avoided portraying them as helpless victims?
- Have you checked for cultural sensitivity?

2. Informed Consent

- Has informed consent been obtained from all individuals featured?
- Have participants understood how the content will be used and in which channels?
- Are real names, ages, locations and identifying features used with consent and in line with child safeguarding policies?

3. Accuracy and Authenticity

- Are facts verified and does the story provide meaningful and balanced context — including strengths, relationships and hopes?
- Have you avoided exaggeration or emotional manipulation?

4. Protection and Privacy

- Are identifying details omitted unless necessary and consented?
- Have you avoided harmful or sensitive imagery?
- Have risks (e.g., stigma, retraumatization, online harm) been assessed and mitigated, in consultation with safeguarding focal points if needed?

- Does the content follow child safeguarding and protection standards in both content and dissemination?

5. Non-Exploitation

- Was participation fully voluntary, without pressure or incentives?
- Were children free to stop participating at any time?

6. Empower Through Agency

- Were children or young people involved in shaping how their story is told?
- Does the story highlight their agency, dreams and achievements?

7. Accountability and Learning

- Has the story been reviewed by the participant or someone close to them, where appropriate?
- Has the story or image been reviewed for ethical issues?
- Are staff and partners aware of our ethical storytelling standards?

8. Power Dynamics and Shared Control

- Were contributors given as much control as possible over their narratives?
- Does the storytelling avoid reinforcing stereotypes or inequalities?

9. Participatory Approaches

- Have local voices been actively engaged in content creation?
- Were participatory methods (e.g., self-filmed stories, photo projects) considered or used?

10. Use of AI and Digital Content

- If AI tools were used, was it done transparently and ethically?
- Was AI-generated content reviewed with the same care as human-created content?

11. Build Trust through Authentic Storytelling

- Are the voices of the children, young people and communities clearly amplified?
- Have local initiatives and community-led actions been highlighted?
- Is the story framed within broader societal or structural contexts (e.g. child protection systems, poverty, mental health) and reflect our pledge to decolonize how we communicate?
- Does the content help position SOS Children's Villages as a principled, values-driven thought leader?

12. Language and Imagery to Drive Change

- Do the language and visuals reflect genuine relationships, authentic moments and meaningful context, showing people as more than just their circumstances?
- Is the language respectful, free of jargon and rights-based?

- Have all visuals been reviewed for outdated, biased, or stereotypical elements?

Final Questions Before Publishing:

- ✓ Would I feel proud if this were my own story or image?
- ✓ Does this storytelling empower the subject and protect their rights?
- ✓ Have I done everything to minimize risks and maximize dignity?



Appendix: Sources Consulted

These guidelines were informed by and draw upon principles and practices from the following sources and sector guidance:

- SOS Children's Villages Image and Video Guidelines
- SOS Children's Villages, [Brand Foundation](#), [Style Guide](#), [Key Messages](#) and [Content Strategy](#)
- UNICEF. "[Principles for Ethical Reporting on Children](#)," 2021.
- Pledge for Change 2030. "[Pledge for Change Statements](#)," 2022.
- Giva Sverige. Rätta bilden av mig: [Vägledning för bilder på barn](#), 2022.
- Bond. "[Putting the People in the Pictures First: Ethical Guidelines for the Collection and Use of Content](#)," 2024.
- World Vision. "[Child Protection Standards for Media and Communication](#)," 2019
- Plan International. [Ethical storytelling and child participation guidance](#) (various publications).

