



Tips for Human Subjects Research

March 2004

Increasing Parental Consent Response Rates

A low response rate for parental consent forms has long plagued investigators who target certain populations of school-aged children for research. This problem was recently tackled by researchers who found a number of strategies to address this issue (Fletcher and Hunter, 2003). Investigators at Cornell University are coming up with their own tactics as well. Although this is not a widespread problem in our immediate area, investigators seeking subjects in very rural or inner-city areas may need to put extra time into the design and dissemination of their parental consent forms. Below is a list of strategies you may wish to incorporate into your own protocol if you have found parental consent to be an elusive commodity.

- To involve teachers in the process:
 - Offer a reward (i.e., gift certificate for teachers to use for their classes) to the class that receives the most consent forms back (in which case be sure to allow a space for parents to indicate they do NOT wish their child to participate)
 - Offer an incentive to all classes that receive $X\%$ of the consent forms back (again, be sure to allow a space for parents to indicate they do NOT wish their child to participate)
 - Offer a small incentive to the class for each form received
- If teachers are not enthusiastic about your project, it will be reflected in a lower parental response rate. Take the time to explain your project to these teachers, sharing your excitement about it, and try to make extra visits to these classrooms to help with the collection and tracking of your consent forms.
- Arrange to have lunch at school with the students to describe the project and encourage the return of the forms. If they think it will be an exciting or fun project in which to participate, they are more likely to get their parents to sign the form and return it to their teachers.
- Make your consent form easy to read (in language and set-up).
 - Keep words and sentences short
 - Do not use technical jargon. If you think an 8th-grader could not understand your form, you need to simplify it further.
 - Use section headings (as in the UCHS sample letter, which can be found at <http://www.osp.cornell.edu/Compliance/UCHS/sample.htm>)
 - DON'T USE ALL CAPS BECAUSE THEY ARE HARDER TO READ

- Fonts with serifs, like Times New Roman, are easier to read than sans serif fonts (like Arial)

- *Limit the use of italics*

- Print the form on a neon or other brightly-colored paper. It is less likely to get lost in the shuffle of the students' other school papers, and will catch the eye of the parents.
- Consider attaching a cover sheet with a short message in big letters to the parents such as: "Important! Please complete and return to school tomorrow. Your child's class receives a donation for each form returned—whether you check yes or no!"
- Because most parental consent forms are returned within two days of being sent home (Fletcher and Hunter, 2003), you may wish to wait one week and then send a second set of forms home *only with those children who did not bring the form back to school*. Possibly personalize it with a new cover message and hand write the child's name at the top. You may even need to do this a third time to capture enough student participants. It is therefore important in your protocol to allow for plenty of time to establish your subject pool (where obstacles might be expected).

Fletcher, A. C., and Hunter, A. G. 2003. "Strategies for Obtaining Parental Consent to Participate in Research." *Family Relations*, 52, 216-221.*

Ideas for making a study "exempt from further review"

1. If you are administering questionnaires or surveys to individuals 18 or older and you won't need to follow up with your subjects, consider making the entire process anonymous by NOT collecting names on consent forms. Instead, make the first page of your questionnaire a tear-off sheet with information similar to (but much shorter than) a consent form for your subjects to read and keep. This way, the questionnaires you collect will truly be anonymous. (Do not state in your protocol that your subjects' identities and the data will be "confidential," as that implies that you *have* a record of their names. When you don't collect identifiers along with data, your subjects' identities vis-à-vis your data are "anonymous.")
2. If you want to make a mailed questionnaire anonymous, yet be able to follow up with non-respondents to increase your response rate, consider the following. Along with the questionnaire and stamped, return envelope, request that your respondents mail back SEPARATELY a pre-printed, stamped post card on which they give their name only. This



permits the investigator to cross off the names of those who have responded and allows for subsequent follow-up post card reminders to non-respondents, urging them to complete and submit their surveys. A second follow-up reminder could be strategically timed (perhaps a month or two later) to capture the largest sample possible from your prospective subject pool.*

Hidden Videotaping

On June 11, 2003, “Stephanie’s Law” was passed in New York State to protect individuals from hidden videotaping. Individuals convicted of photographing or video taping another person in private circumstances without that person’s knowledge or consent would be charged with a felony and face tough prison sentences. (See http://www.state.ny.us/governor/press/year03/june11_1_03.htm for the full text of this document. Stephanie’s Law can be found at http://criminaljustice.state.ny.us/legalservices/ch69_2003_stephanie_vidvoy.htm)

UCHS recommends that, if you design your research such that you wish to videotape your subjects without making them overly conscious of it (this constitutes “deception”), you do the following:

Conspicuously post signs (perhaps on the doorway through which your subjects will be entering as well as inside the room) stating “Interactions in this laboratory are monitored for security reasons.”*

How to Construct a Good Consent Form

Contrary to popular belief, a good consent form is not a work of creative writing. In fact, probably the less “creative” it is, the better it is. Therefore, UCHS highly recommends that you cut and paste our “Sample Consent Form” (found at <http://www.osp.cornell.edu/Compliance/UCHS/sample.htm>), and revise it to fit your particular circumstances (clearly labeled sections, as in our sample, make the consent form easy to follow). Here are some other tips to help you construct a good consent form:

- Use language and terminology that will be easy for your subjects to understand—they are not likely to understand the specialized terminology with which you are so familiar. Count the number of three syllable words on one page. If you have more than 10, you have written a consent form that, on average, requires a high school degree to read. (Note: the federal and UCHS standard is 8th grade reading level for consent forms to be read by the general public.)
- Be sure your description of their participation is clearly explained, and include an estimate of how much time the procedure/interaction will take.
- Consider asking a friend or family member to read your consent form for ease of understanding the descriptions and terminology.
- If you wish to tape or video record your subjects, you must include a separate signature line for the subject to consent to being recorded (unless you only want subjects who agree to be recorded, in which case this must be made explicit). State on the consent form how the recordings will be securely stored and when they will be destroyed (if ever).
- If you want to use the recordings in academic presentations or classes, include that information on the consent form. Give subjects the opportunity to “opt out” of having the information used in that. Video and audio recordings are potentially identifiable.
- If recordings will be archived for future research, include that information on the consent form. Give subject the opportunity to opt out of having their recordings archived.*

Recruiting Cornell Faculty and Staff as Research Participants

If your subjects will be Cornell faculty and/or staff, in addition to UCHS approval, you may need approval from the Dean of Faculty (Charles Walcott) and/or the Vice President for Human Resources (Mary Opperman) before you can begin your research. Additionally, Cornell researchers who intend to use large numbers of Cornell students as subjects may also need approval from the Vice President for Student and Academic Services (Susan Murphy). Please contact UCHS for further details.*