

Tip Sheet

Obtaining Parental Consent for Online Data Collection Involving Youth

Parental¹ consent may be required by schools, other partner organizations, or Institutional Review Boards (IRBs)² for data collection that involves youth under the age of 18. Obtaining parental consent can be challenging. The purpose of this tip sheet is to provide guidance to grantees on how to obtain parental consent for online data collection involving youth. This guidance includes options and strategies related to distributing consent forms and obtaining a response from parents.

These options are based on best practices, published guidance, and information shared by grantees during Sexual Risk Avoidance Education (SRAE) Performance Analysis Study (PAS) webinars, cluster calls, and individual technical assistance communications. The options can be adapted and/or combined to fit grantees' specific needs and circumstances. Grantees should ensure the options they select are acceptable to schools, other partner organizations, and IRBs (if IRB approval is required). In particular, grantees should ensure the options they select protect parent and youth confidentiality. Grantees should review required data privacy and security protocols at <https://www.sraepas.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/SRAE-Performance-Measures-Data-Privacy-and-Security-Requirements.pdf> to ensure compliance for SRAE performance measures data collection.

Options for Distributing Consent Forms to Parents

Options for distributing consent forms to parents include:

- Distributing them with paperwork that schools and other partner organizations

¹ Though the term “parental consent” will be used throughout, consent may come from a parent or legal guardian.

² Guidance related to IRBs is included in January 2020 and January 2021 webinars about human subjects protections, which are available at www.sraepas.com/webinars.

- require parents to review and sign at the beginning of the school year
- Using online learning platforms³ that schools and other partners employ to communicate with youth and parents
 - Emailing consent forms to parents
 - Using Google Forms
 - Using a survey platform to email consent forms to parents
 - Mailing hard copy consent forms to parents

For all options, grantees should ensure that parents receive a copy of the consent form for their records and are assured that the platform is secure for confidentiality of personal information.

Distribute with other paperwork that schools and other partners require

Because parents are used to completing paperwork for schools and other partner organizations (including community locations outside of the school system) at the beginning of the school year, grantees may consider including consent forms with this paperwork. Many of the letters and forms previously sent home on the first day of school are now available online for parents and students to review and submit electronically, such as through a parent portal. Grantees can coordinate with schools and other partners to include a parental consent form with these documents.

Use existing partner online learning platforms

Teachers at school-based and community-based sites may post lessons, assignments, and communications to families via online learning platforms such as Canvas, Clever, Seesaw, or Google Classroom. Grantees can ask sites and teachers to post the SRAE parental consent forms on the online communication platforms that families and schools already use.

Email consent forms to parents

Grantees may ask whether schools or other partners can share a parent email list that can be used for sending consent forms. Grantees also could consider using an email marketing service, such as Mailchimp or Constant Contact, to manage email lists and provide data on recipient activity, which could be useful to assess whether this strategy should be combined with another option.

Alternatively, schools or other partners may be willing to email consent forms to parents

³ Although examples of survey platforms, email marketing services, and application software are provided, the Government does not endorse any product or vendor.

using the school/partner parent email list. Parents will be more likely to receive the email (instead of it going to their spam or junk folders) and to read it if it comes from a recognizable email address.

Use a survey platform to email the consent form to parents

REDCap, Qualtrics, SurveyMonkey, and Google Forms are examples of survey platforms that allow grantees to email e-consent forms. E-consent forms can be completed via computer, mobile phone, or tablet. Parents can then provide consent electronically by selecting, “I certify that all the information in the document above is correct, and I understand that signing this form electronically is the equivalent of signing a physical document.” The survey platform saves the consent responses directly to the system and sends parents an email that includes a copy of their signed consent form as a pdf attachment.

After creating a consent form in Google Forms, there is an added feature that will allow grantees to select an option to “invite people” and add the email addresses of parents who will receive the form. The link to the Google Form will appear in an email message to parents. Google Forms allows consent form response information to be connected to a spreadsheet on Google Sheets, which automatically records the answers. The spreadsheet then populates the consent form responses in real time. Google users can password-protect their consent forms to restrict access from unauthorized users.

Some IRBs have approved this method of obtaining consent, but they may require staff who obtain consent this way to receive training about how to use the survey platform consent feature.

Mail hard copy consent forms to parents

It is important to remember that some families/parents/caregivers are not tech savvy and may have limited access to Wi-Fi. In this case, grantees can mail hard copy consent forms to parents. Grantees should use envelopes and letterhead from an organization familiar to and trusted by parents, such as the school. This approach maximizes the likelihood that parents will open and read the letter. This may be a good option for parents who do not respond to electronic communications.

As with distributing consent forms, there are many options for parents to provide a response about consent. After sending a hard copy consent form or emailing a consent form to parents, grantees must decide how they will collect consent documentation. To obtain parents’ responses about their consent decision, grantees can ask parents to respond by email or to use a digital signature or e-signature. Grantees should ensure

that the options and strategies they select for parent response are acceptable to schools, other partner organizations, and IRBs (if required).

Ask parents to respond by email

Grantees could include instructions on the consent form asking parents to send a response message by email indicating that they have read the consent form and give permission for their youth to participate in data collection (remembering that some families/parents/caregivers may not be tech savvy). Parents could be asked to simply email a sentence such as, “I approve.” Alternatively, grantees could ask parents to photograph the signed consent form with their smartphones and return the digital image by text, email, or uploading it to the learning platform that schools or other partners use. Parents also could scan the signed consent form and email it as an attachment. To ensure privacy, grantees should consider using encryption procedures for email attachments to protect personally identifiable information (PII). There are several procedures for protecting PII sent electronically. Individual Word, Excel, or pdf files may be password-protected before attaching them to the email. When sending password-protected documents, grantees must share the password(s) with recipients in a **separate** email. Grantees also may opt to encrypt the email, encrypting both the message and the attachments. Since email encryption is only available with specific services and platforms, grantees should consult with their IT team to determine their options for encryption procedures.

Ask parents to sign using a digital signature or e-signature

After sending a digital copy of the consent form to parents, grantees could allow parents to sign with a digital, or electronic, signature. This option is best for receiving an immediate response while also protecting PII. An electronic signature can be obtained by parents through application software such as Adobe Acrobat, DocuSign, and Microsoft Word. If grantees use this option, they should include clear instructions for parents and some information about how much time parents will need to complete the consent process. Keep in mind that not all families/parents/caregivers are tech savvy.

Additional Options

In addition to obtaining consent through online learning platforms, email, survey platforms, or mail, grantees should consider options that may be available for telephone or in-person communication with parents. When considering this option, be sure to utilize staff with diverse backgrounds to meet any cultural or language barriers that may arise. At the beginning of the call, be sure to go over the confidentiality policies, what the information will be used for, and how it will be stored.

Call parents and allow them to provide verbal consent over the telephone

Calling parents can be time-consuming and labor-intensive but may be a good option for those who do not respond to other methods. Grantees may call parents, read a consent script, sign the consent form (indicating whether the parent consented), and then mail a copy to the parent. Grantees should consider calling parents from the school or another number recognizable to parents.

Distribute consent forms in person at the site

Grantees can check with schools and other partner organizations to learn about possible opportunities to meet with parents (such as when returning technology or during Meet the Teacher nights). Grantees can meet parents at schools (or at the community location of the SRAE class and data collection) that offer regular times for students to access the internet or turn in hard copies of their assignments. Some schools also set up Wi-Fi networks or hot spots to allow youth to complete assignments online outside of the building. This method may be a good option for reaching parents whose youth do not have access to technology or Wi-Fi. This approach also allows parents to ask questions in person.

References and Resources

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Additional information about the Sexual Risk Avoidance Education (SRAE) performance measures is available at www.sraepas.com. For further support, contact the Public Strategies SRAE Performance Measures Help Desk at www.sraepas.com/contact or call toll-free (833) 797-0166.