

## Maximizing the Return of Parent Consent Forms

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### Introduction

Garrett Lee Smith Memorial Act (PL 108-355) grantees are required to obtain active parent consent prior to allowing children to participate in grant-related programming. This requirement has been extended to Linking Adolescents at Risk to Mental Health Services (RFA No. SM-05-019) grantees. Active parent consent is commonly obtained by sending permission forms home with students. The parent or legal guardian must indicate whether they do or do not give permission for their child to participate in the program, sign the form, then return the form to the school prior to their child's participation in program activities.

Unfortunately, the return rate for consent forms often falls below 50%, regardless of whether parents give consent or not (Tigges, 2003). A low return rate results in students not receiving services and lessens the credibility of evaluation results. The former is particularly troubling because non-respondents are often those who need services the most (Anderman et al., 1995; Noll et al. 1997; Unger et al., 2004). However, with awareness of the problem and careful planning consent rates can be significantly increased.

This paper provides practical and research-based recommendations to improving the return rates of parental consent forms. It does not address the content of consent forms. Programs should comply with any relevant federal or state regulations that govern obtaining consent from parents. (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services policy guidance on informed consent can be found at this webpage: <http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/policy/index.html>.) It is also important that programs exert no undue influence or coercion upon parents to return only affirmative consent forms; the methods outlined here are meant to increase the return rate of consent forms regardless of whether consent is provided or not. In addition, programs may want to actively collaborate with parents and families so that the process of seeking consent is acceptable to the community in which the programs operate.

### Recommendations

The following recommendations were culled from the literature. Each recommendation is followed by examples from specific studies.

1. Engage parents and school personnel. High consent rates cannot be obtained without the support of parents, school administrators, and teachers. Support can be increased by engaging parents, parent groups (e.g. community and school advisory boards, and parent-teacher organizations), and school personnel from the beginning of program planning and keeping them fully informed."

- While the process of obtaining active parent consent is required, it should also be seen as an opportunity for constructive interactions among parents, school staff, and researchers. Such interactions are credited, in part, for achieving an 89% response rate from middle school parents (O'Donnell et al., 1997). Culturally appropriate communications should be used with families and should detail all aspects of the program and data collection (Ross, Sundberg, & Flint, 1999)
- When middle and high schools used their own resources and staff to collect consent forms, they had a significantly higher return rate (80% v. 59%) compared to schools that requested or required that researchers collect forms (Ji et al., 2004).
- Administrator and teacher support was credited as being the difference between low and high response schools in a middle school population in one study: "The schools that had high completion rates...typically had administrators who were personally invested in the study and worked closely with teachers to monitor the consent process...teachers were provided support and encouragement to obtain high return rates" (Pokorny et al., 2001; p. 574).
- Including a cover letter from the school's principal has also been recommended by researchers (Esbensen et al., 1996, Ji, et al., 2004; Knowlton et al., 1999). Such letters should include a description of the program and research, stress the importance of participation in the research, describe confidentiality assurances, and examples of the types of questions asked (Knowlton et al., 1999).

2. "Piggyback" with existing form collection. Many schools require parents to complete and return a variety of forms at the beginning of the school year. Consent forms can be included with these other forms. (Unfortunately, this may not fit all intervention/research timelines). If report cards are required to be signed and returned by parents, this may provide a more frequent opportunity to obtain consent.

- Higher return rates were found for middle school students when consent forms were attached to student report cards as compared to forms that were mailed and asked parents to return the form to the school with their child (Pokorny et al., 2001).
- In addition to piggybacking, having parents complete consent forms while attending school functions may also be effective. Ji et al., (2004) examined a variety of methods to increase return rates for middle and high-school students and found that "The highest return rate occurred when a consent form was attached to an existing school form that parents had to sign and return to the school" and that "The second highest return rate was obtained by using procedures where parents attended a school-based function and project or school staff was stationed at a location that parents had to stop to complete school-related forms" (p. 588).

3. Provide incentives. Return rates are increased by providing incentives to students, parents, teachers, and schools. Student rewards can be individual (candy, pencils, t-shirts) or class-based (pizza parties). Parent incentives have included gift certificates for local grocery stores or entry into drawings for other prizes. Teachers can be given incentives based on the number of individual returns (e.g., \$5 gift certificate for each return) or based on a percentage of returns (e.g., \$25 gift certificate for a 90% return rate). School incentives can be supplies or gift certificates. Note that incentives should be provided for returning a completed consent form *regardless* of whether consent is granted or denied by the parent.

- Fletcher and Hunter (2003) obtained a 95% return rate from elementary school parents; they credited the high return rate to three factors: rewarding teachers with \$5 gift certificates for every consent form returned, developing a strong relationship with school-level administrators and teachers, and “attention-grabbing” forms.
- Classroom pizza parties contributed to a 90% return rate for middle school students (Leakey et al., 2004).

4. Use simple “eye-catching” forms. Consent forms should be easy to read, simple to complete, and catch parents’ attention. Parents should not be required to fill in any unnecessary information or information that can be filled in by the school. Forms should “catch” parent’s attention through a combination of color and text. Cover sheets should be printed on color paper.

- Fletcher and Hunter (2003) used a cover sheet that exclaimed: "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!" They also found a more rapid response when bright orange neon paper was used for the cover sheet.

5. Be prepared to follow-up. Sending additional forms to non-respondents will increase return rates. Follow-ups should be spaced one to two weeks apart. Follow-ups can also be conducted by phone with direct requests to return the consent form.

- Using a single follow-up coupled with a “Tootsie Pop” incentive, (Leakey et al., 2004) increased return rates by 18% for middle school students.
- Fletcher and Hunter (2003) recommend the following schedule of follow-ups: (1) initial consent request and form sent home with the student, (2) one week later a second request and consent form is sent home, (3) one week after the second request a third request is sent, this time with a sticker placed on the child’s shirt notifying parents that they should look for an important form in their child’s book bag (for elementary students); and, (4) if a consent form has still not been returned, parents should be called at home to see if they’ve received the form and, if so, could they return it to school the next day.

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