

Recommendations for Achieving High Response Rates in School-Based Program Evaluations with Adolescents

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Introduction

Program evaluation studies require sufficiently large samples of participants to detect impacts. However, studies tend to lose potential participants in the recruitment and consent phases, as well as during follow-up data collection. Evaluators of school-based programs also face challenges such as managing compressed timelines, gathering parental consent (particularly if the school district requires that families have the opportunity to opt out of programs), and working in school systems with high rates of student turnover.

This research brief presents recommendations for achieving high response rates in evaluations of school-based programs for adolescents, learned through the recent evaluation of Re:MIX, a teen pregnancy prevention program implemented in charter schools with primarily Latinx students in grades 8 through 10.

Background

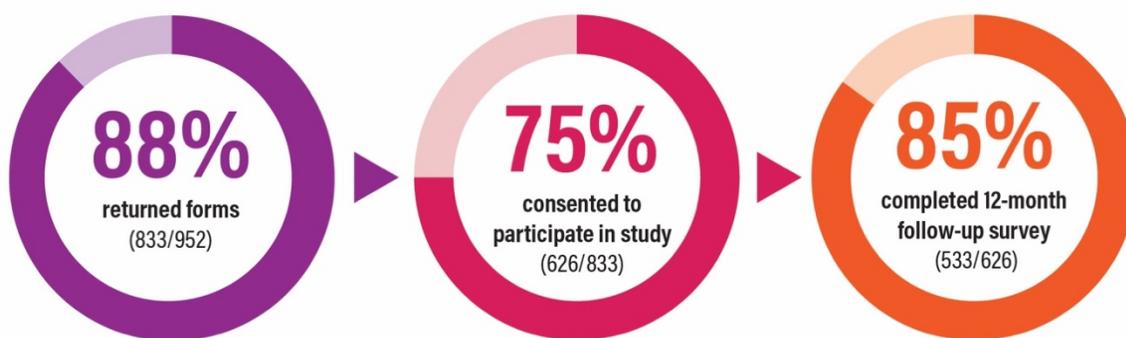
Re:MIX, developed by EngenderHealth, is a comprehensive sexual health education program that aims to reduce rates of unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) among adolescents in Texas.^{1,2} Child Trends is evaluating the impact of Re:MIX through a cluster-level randomized controlled trial. Child Trends and EngenderHealth worked collaboratively to recruit students in grades 8 through 10 in three public charter schools in Austin across five semesters (Fall 2016 through Fall 2018). Eligible students and their parents/guardians were required to sign and return assent and consent forms in order to participate in the evaluation study. In total, 57 classes and 626 students were enrolled in the study and randomized to receive Re:MIX or the control condition. Data collection included a baseline survey, an immediate post-test survey, and a 12-month follow-up survey. The study team administered the surveys on-site at the three schools through an online platform. The team also provided an online link to the survey to students who were no longer enrolled in the participating schools (or absent during in-school data collection).



Re:MIX is an evidence-informed, medically accurate, comprehensive sexual health education program that aims to educate and empower adolescents (ages 13-17). Re:MIX pairs professional health educators with young parents (ages 18-24) to co-facilitate topics related to human development, healthy and gender equitable relationships, decision making, consent, contraception and STI prevention. Taught over the course of ten 55-minute sessions, the program emphasizes the stories of young parents, who serve as peer educators, to encourage them and their students to explore personal values.

The study team achieved a high return rate for consent forms and a high response rate for the follow-up survey. Among eligible students, 88 percent returned consent forms, 75 percent of students that returned the consent forms enrolled in the study, and 85 percent of students enrolled in the study completed the 12-month follow-up survey. The 12-month follow-up response rate was higher than^{3,4} or comparable to^{5,6} those of other high-quality evaluations.

Figure 1. Percentage of students who returned forms, consented to participate in the study, and completed the 12-month follow-up survey.



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Based on lessons learned in the Re:MIX study, we offer researchers strategies for recruiting students, obtaining parent and student consent forms, and retaining study participants.

Recommendations for successful student recruitment

Before starting student recruitment, build relationships with schools, teachers, and staff. Positive relationships between school and program staff can foster and sustain school support. To build relationships, EngenderHealth led program orientations and meet-and-greets with school staff to develop rapport and to ensure that school staff had a thorough understanding of the program, its value, and their role within the program and study.

Develop a standardized recruitment script. A script that provides clear information about the program during the recruitment phase can help ensure that students fully understand what they will be participating in. This is particularly important for sexual health programs, as these curricula contain sensitive and potentially triggering information. During the first recruitment session for Re:MIX, program staff visited the classrooms where the study would be implemented and read a recruitment script that introduced the program and study and explained what students would need to do if they chose to participate.

Provide parents/guardians with in-depth information about the program. Flyers that provide detailed program information and frequently asked questions about the program can help garner parent support. Flyers can include a program summary and session overviews, and can explain why the program is important. Sexual health programs in Texas (and many other states) are required to provide parents/guardians with the opportunity to opt their child out of the program. In the first semester of the Re:MIX evaluation, opt-out rates were higher than anticipated. During this first semester, the only documents given to the students and parents were the opt out form, introduction to study letters, and the assent and consent forms. To address high opt-out rates, starting in the second semester, the study team provided parents/guardians with detailed program information in conjunction with the required opt-out

form. Opt-out rates decreased when the required opt-out form was sent home with extensive information about the program.

Develop materials for students and families whose primary language is not English. Providing materials in the preferred language of both students and parents/guardians will ensure that they can understand the program and study information. Re:MIX students were primarily Latinx; thus, the study team provided introduction letters, program information, student assent forms, and parent consent forms in both English and Spanish. Additionally, we provided the email addresses of bilingual coordinators whom students and parents/guardians could contact if they wanted additional information. Finally, throughout the study, bilingual team members were available to contact parents and students in their preferred language to provide reminders about returning the forms and upcoming study activities.

Ask students to complete individual sign-up sheets. Sign-up sheets are a useful tool to gather important contact information and create a classroom roster (often not provided by participating schools), allowing researchers to follow up with students and parents/guardians about completing assent and consent forms. To start the student recruitment process for the Re:MIX evaluation, study staff asked students to complete individual sign-up sheets, which gathered names and multiple forms of contact information for both students and parents/guardians. To ensure accurate contact information, some teachers allowed students to access their phones while they completed the sign-up sheet. Completion of the sign-up sheet was optional, and the sheet was not used to determine whether the student agreed to participate in the program or in the evaluation.

Recommendations for increasing consent form return rates

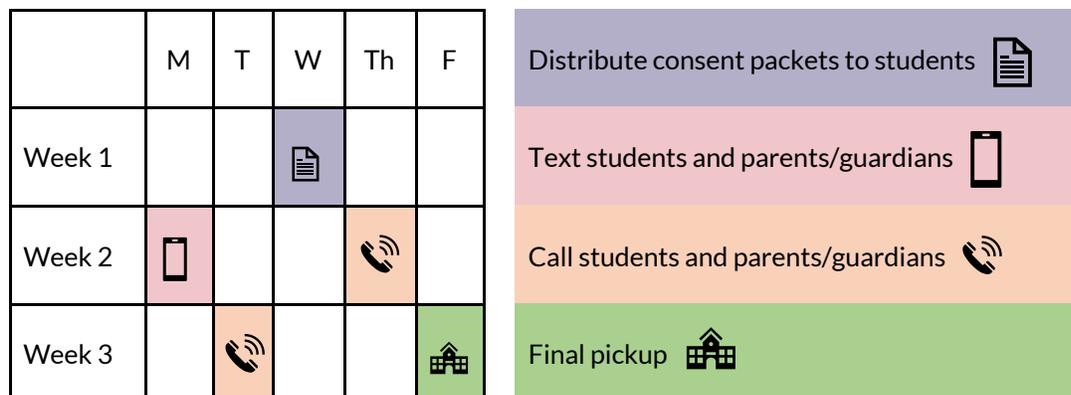
Color code assent and consent forms to reduce confusion. Providing assent and consent forms on different colored paper can help ensure that students and parents complete the correct paperwork. The Re:MIX study staff distributed consent packets to eligible students with an introduction letter, a parent consent form, and a student assent form. Parent consent forms were printed on pink paper, and students were asked to remember “pink parent.” Student assent forms were printed on either green or blue paper, and students were asked to remember “green teen” or “blue you.” The study team also gave the teachers extra packets in case students were absent or lost their packet.

Allow at least two weeks for the consent process. Although tight school schedules may limit the time available for the consent process, allowing at least two weeks is ideal to ensure that students and parents/guardians have enough time to fill out the forms, and that the team has enough time to remind participants to turn in the forms. During the first semester of the Re:MIX project, the team struggled to receive consent forms from all students. When we allowed for more time in subsequent semesters, our consent rates improved. Additionally, we worked closely with classroom teachers, providing them with ongoing updates on which students still had not returned the forms, so they could help us remind students to complete them.

Develop a protocol and schedule to remind students to return forms. Sending reminder text messages and emails can help improve the percentage of teens who return completed forms. Also, researchers can call students and parents/guardians to ask whether they have any questions about the program and to remind them to return the forms. The Re:MIX study team spread these communication efforts out across the consent period. The team also picked up forms at least two times a week, which ensured that we followed up only with students who had not yet returned forms. If school schedules do not allow two weeks for the consent process, the study team should contact students, communicate with teachers, and return to the schools to pick up forms more often, possibly every day. The Re:MIX study team enforced a final pick-up

date to ensure that we had time to create a final roster and correctly sort students before starting study activities. See Figure 2 for a sample calendar for contacting students and parents/guardians during the consent process.

Figure 2. Sample calendar for contacting students and parents/guardians during consent process



Offer incentives for students to return forms. Offering food and other incentives for returning consent forms can motivate students. The Re:MIX study team hosted pizza parties for classes in which at least 90 percent of students returned the consent forms. We also asked schools to consider providing other incentives for students to return the forms. One school agreed and offered students “Tiger Bucks,” which they could use at their school store. Additionally, one teacher gave students a grade for returning forms and another teacher gave students part of a free period.

Recommendations for increasing retention for follow-up data collection

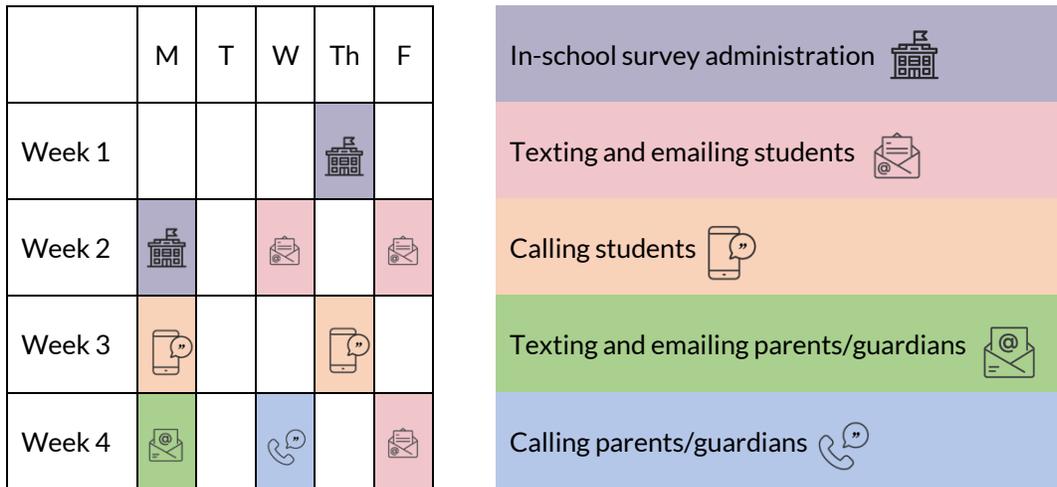
Keep students engaged by sending reminders about the study. During the period between the end of program implementation and the follow-up data collection, remind students that the study is not over yet to ensure that they are aware of next steps. After the administration of the immediate post-test survey, the Re:MIX study team sent monthly text messages reminding students that they would be asked to take one more survey on a future date. We also sent an email reminder approximately one month before the 12-month follow-up survey administration.

Schedule multiple in-person survey administration dates. In-person survey administration can yield higher response rates than remote survey administration, in part because students are all at the school at the same time and have fewer barriers to completing surveys. Scheduling an alternative date for the in-person survey, as a back-up to reach students who are absent or unable to take the survey on the first scheduled date, can also help increase response rates. The Re:MIX study team scheduled at least two in-person 12-month follow-up survey administration dates with each school. We were able to survey the vast majority (95 percent) of students who were still attending the school where the program was implemented.

Develop a protocol to survey students remotely. Developing a protocol to survey students who have left the school or cannot be reached in school is helpful to ensure high response rates (Figure 3 shows a sample calendar for contacting students and parents/guardians remotely for the long-term follow-up). During the Re:MIX study, in the period between program implementation and the 12-month follow-up survey, 28

percent of students either left the schools or were unable to be reached during in-school administration. We asked school liaisons to provide these students' updated contact information, when possible. We texted and emailed the survey link to each student at least three times, and we called each student twice. We also texted, emailed, and called each student's parent/guardian so they could remind their student to take the survey.

Figure 3. Sample calendar for contacting students and parents/guardians remotely for the long-term follow-up survey



Offer incentives for students to take the follow-up survey. Cash or gift card incentives are effective tools to motivate students to participate in the follow-up survey. Students expressed a preference for cash over gift cards, so the study team chose to give students who took the Re:MIX survey in person \$10 in cash as a “thank you” for their participation. Students who completed the survey remotely were emailed a link to claim a \$10 Amazon gift card.

Recommendations for effectively gathering and maintaining good contact information

For an evaluation study to succeed, the study team must have the ability to stay in contact with students and their parents/guardians. Here are three strategies for gathering good contact information.

Gather multiple types of contact information from various sources. As mentioned previously in the recommendation about individual sign-up sheets, collecting multiple types of contact information allows study teams to remind participants to return forms, to keep them engaged, and to remind them to complete surveys remotely. The Re:MIX evaluation study collected two student phone numbers (cell phone and home), two student email addresses, and the phone number and email address of their parent/guardian. Collecting two email addresses is useful since school email addresses (the most common email address provided by students) can expire or change between school years. To keep contact information up to date, the study team asked for contact information on all forms and surveys.

Request rosters from partner schools. Student rosters (a general list of the students who are enrolled in the course) can be helpful for building a complete list of potential student participants and for identifying

missing student contact information. For the Re:MIX evaluation, two of the three schools in the study ultimately provided rosters to the study team.

Keep contact information up to date. Working with schools, students, and parents/guardians to get updated contact information is helpful for increasing participation rates. During the Re:MIX evaluation, for texts and emails that were undeliverable, the study team contacted students or their parent/guardians via other modes of communication, or coordinated with the school liaisons to ensure we had updated contact information. Additionally, all Re:MIX participants were asked to update their contact information one to two months before follow-up survey administration.

Conclusion

Program evaluators and program implementers can use the lessons from our evaluation of the Re:MIX program to improve recruitment and retention of participants in future evaluations of school-based programs implemented with adolescents. To maximize recruitment and retention of study participants, the Re:MIX study team established relationships with partner schools, provided detailed information about the program up front to potential student participants and their parents/guardians, and remained in contact with participants and their parents/guardians throughout the evaluation. The strategies of gathering and updating multiple forms of participant contact information, scheduling multiple dates for data collection, planning for a 12-month follow up, and allowing adequate time for consent and data collection were additional keys to success.

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Endnotes

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