

Obtaining parental consent for minors in social media-based research projects: is this the 'gold standard'?

The issue of obtaining parental consent for young people is often logistically complex and, for those young people falling within the National Statement's:

- Category C (*'young people of developing maturity, who are able to understand the relevant information but whose relative immaturity means that they remain vulnerable. The consent of these young people is required, but is not sufficient to authorise research'*) and
- Category D (*'young people who are mature enough to understand and consent, and are not vulnerable through immaturity in ways that warrant additional consent from a parent or guardian'*) (National Statement, Ch. 4.2, p.65)

this is further complicated by the difficulty of identifying the young participant's level of maturity [NS 4.2.2 (a); 4.2.4 & 4.2.6].

As researchers begin to seek participants online and in social media networks where consent is usually provided by clicking a link or, at most, responding to a text or email, the problem becomes more difficult still. How can researchers ensure that the person providing consent is truly the participant's parent or guardian and not, for example, a participant or a friend of the participant? [NS 4.2.2 (c)]

Potential 'gold standard' approach:

Ethical investigators have been grappling with this issue for some time and a potential 'gold standard' approach could include the following sequence of activities:

1. Initial contact is made by the participant accessing a link to [an advertisement] about [an online survey] through social media avenues
 - a. The advertisement outlines the Participant Information Statement and requests that the participant enter one of: their parent's/legal guardian's name; phone number; and/or email address
 - b. The participant would also enter their own name and email address to enable linking
2. Once completed, the researchers contact the parent/guardian via email, providing an online link containing the Participant Information Statement and Consent Form + a pdf copy of the online survey
3. Consent is obtained by the parent/guardian completing the online consent form for their child to participate in the study
4. At the completion of the consent form, the parent/guardian will select an option for how the online survey will reach their child:
 - a. If the parent/guardian selects "Yes", the researchers will email the online survey link directly to the child's email address to complete
 - b. If the parent/guardian selects "No", the online survey link will instead be sent to the parent/guardian's email address for the parent/guardian to give to the child to complete
5. Participants will only be able to participate in the research study once the parent/guardian has completed the online consent form

Potential 'silver standard' approach:

1. Investigators ask for a phone number, rather than/in addition to an email address (as in 1 (a) above)
2. Investigators then call the 'parent/guardian' to ensure an adult is answering the phone
3. Points 3 & 4 above would then be replaced by a verbal exchange with the parent/guardian over the phone

While considerably more time-consuming than the more common approach of sending an email, this would also enable researchers to ask identity questions designed to flush out fraudulent 'parents'.