From Interest to Engagement: Recruiting and Retaining Parents of Children Within School Contexts

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Abstract

Internet parent-implemented interventions show promise as an ideal format for provision of stand-alone or supplemental services. However, the interventions are only useful if they are accessed. This case will help the reader understand issues and solutions related to recruitment and retention of parents in a digital intervention developed concurrently with school programming. The research method will be recruiting and retaining participants and evaluation of digital interventions.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this case, students should be able to:

- Describe challenges associated with recruitment and retention of participants in self-managed, internet interventions.
- Describe strategies for recruitment and retention of parents of children with disabilities into self-managed, internet interventions.
- Describe a model for recruitment and retention into self-managed, internet interventions within the context of school settings.

Project Overview and Context

This case study is based on the examination of a self-guided, internet intervention designed to increase the skilled interactions of parents during storybook reading with their children. Evidence-based internet interventions are needed because in-person evidence-based parent training interventions are not widely accessible. In-person interventions are most frequently conducted individually with families over many months, which limits accessibility
due to cost and a shortage of trained personnel. Additionally, limited access to services is linked to race, ethnicity, and poverty status. It may be that racial and income disparities are because families with limited resources or from minority backgrounds are less likely to be referred and enrolled than families who have more resources or are from the majority background. The recent pandemic and other natural disasters, which result in a greater negative effect on communities of color and children from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds, further underscore the need for accessible, portable interventions. Internet interventions can provide continuity of parent programs in spite of calamity.

In 2019, nearly 83% of U.S. adults owned a smartphone and nine out of 10 adults used the internet (Pew Research Center, 2021). As such, using digital methods to deliver parent training interventions eliminates many of the logistical and resource challenges common with in-person evidence-based parent training interventions. Digital methods address the challenges because the potential reach of internet interventions is large, internet interventions are cost effective, and internet interventions result in positive behavioral outcomes (Andersson, 2018).

Transferring a Direct Intervention to an Internet Intervention

The authors of this case study designed an internet intervention for parents of children at risk for language and learning disabilities based on evidence-based methods used in direct service provision. One research method that requires unique consideration when examining an internet intervention is the recruitment and retention of parents. Because this intervention was designed for parents of children at-risk for language and learning disabilities, the authors decided that the program would be best delivered concurrent with school programming. Additionally, because of accessibility issues identified in communities at-risk due to poverty and minority status, the authors decided their intended audience would be in such
communities. As such, they identified schools with a designated Head Start program as the implementation context. Head Start programs are federally funded programs with specific guidelines and outcome measures including the provision of parent and family engagement in child development and education. Given this, a school partnership with a designated Head Start program could result in mutually beneficial outcomes (i.e., access to recruit the intended audience and support of Head Start goals).

Section Summary

- Transfer of in-person, evidence-based parent programs to internet interventions is critical to address challenges in direct service delivery and the changing delivery landscape.
- One unique consideration is recruitment and retention of parents into internet intervention.
- A school partnership may be an excellent implementation climate for both optimal recruitment and retention for a clinical investigation and attainment of goals for the school.

Research Design

The development of a product designed for instructional purposes includes: (1) analysis and plan for development; (2) production and formative evaluation; and (3) usage and summative evaluation (Richey & Klein, 2014). Following usage and summative evaluation, impact of the product is evaluated, which consists of examining the effects of the product on the intended audience. The intervention in this case study has undergone Step 1 (i.e., analysis and planning) in which the authors developed a plan for development, including content development and outcome measures.
**Production and Formative Evaluation**

Step 2 (i.e., production and formative evaluation) was also completed. This step is designed to determine if the product can mitigate the potential negative impact of accessibility issues with an intended audience. Within this step, the content and delivery mode is refined through an iterative research process (Amiel & Reeves, 2008). Production followed a continuous improvement cycle to expose flaws and improve accordingly. Issues related to the content and delivery system were addressed as they emerged, and solutions were developed and implemented. Solutions were reviewed, which resulted in new issues. The cycle continued until solutions satisfied the greatest number of issues. This occurred through active discussions between eplatform developers and the authors.

The authors conducted a formative assessment to examine the degree to which the intended audience was satisfied with the content and delivery mode and perceived the content as valuable and useful (Morris & Bellon-Harn, 2021). Formative assessment is a critical step since limited uptake from the end user is often associated with digital health limitations (Eysenbach, 2005). This step is considered formative because the product is evaluated for flaws for further refinement. A relatively small number of users (i.e., 5–20 testers) can provide critical data on the usability and content that inform revisions to a program (Nielsen, 2012).

**Usage and Summative Evaluation**

Step 3, the usage and summative evaluation, involves pilot testing of the program with an intended audience. The authors examined the satisfaction of usability, content, presentation, suitability, and exercises given in the program, parental motivation and perceived competence during the program, and the outcomes of the program on parental beliefs with a group of 10 parents with preschool children identified with a language disorder.
or undergoing evaluation for a language disorder. Parents were recruited through convenience sampling. Four parents earned graduate degrees, three earned undergraduate degrees, and three completed some college. Qualitative and quantitative data indicated that parents were highly satisfied with the program delivery and content. Results also revealed that the program promoted independence, internal motivation, and perceived competence. Additionally, the program facilitated parental attitudes and beliefs about storybook reading with large effect sizes.

The authors’ work pointed toward the internet intervention’s promise to positively impact parental attitude and beliefs about storybook reading. As such, a second pilot study in a school context offered an extension of the intended population and new recruitment strategy. The population included at-risk families due to social and family risk factors (i.e., minority ethnic status, low SES). The recruitment and retention strategy included in-person activities on the campus.

**Section Summary**

- Research steps guide development and examination of internet interventions.
- Three main steps were conducted leading to a second larger pilot study within a school context.
- A school-based population was targeted, and a new recruitment strategy was employed.

**Research Practicalities**

Barriers exist in the recruitment of populations who are underserved due to low SES and/or minority ethnic status. Online advertisements or professional referrals may not successfully recruit diverse populations. If internet interventions rely on self-selected participants who learn about an intervention through online advertisements or because they
are regularly engaged with healthcare and educational professionals, the population is less likely to be representative of diverse populations (Zagorscak et al., 2021). As such, explicit efforts must be made to ensure diverse populations are recruited, engaged, and retained in online programs.

It is recommended that functions such as guided support, email, and chat functions are included in internet interventions to improve retention and completion (Yardley et al., 2016). The intervention in this case study included an automated messaging system, which had the facility to send automated messages (e.g., study invitation, push notifications requesting participants to complete study questionnaires and activities). A secured chat function was also included so that participants could send messages to researchers. Functions such as progress monitoring were included to ensure participants were consistently working through the learning modules and completing activities. This enabled researchers to monitor participant progress and to send encouragement and reminders to facilitate program completion.

**Recruitment Plan in School Contexts**

School administrators (i.e., principal, family service coordinator) were instrumental in assisting in the recruitment process. First, the authors scheduled a meeting with the administrative team of the campus to introduce the intervention and discuss ways in which the school’s parents could participate. During this initial meeting, it was evident that an optimal time to launch the program was during Literacy Week. The authors participated in two literacy showcases during Literacy Week at the school in an effort to recruit parents during school activities devoted to literacy activities. The information shared during literacy week included a brief description of the program and encouraged parents to participate if they wanted support with storybook reading. Parents were encouraged to sign up on site by
providing their email address, the name of their child’s teacher, and a phone number. Additionally, the authors, with the guidance of the principal, went live at the school on Facebook introducing the intervention and encouraging parents to participate. The video remained on the school’s website. Authors also were on site before and after school on four different occasions to answer questions and enroll parents who were interested in participating.

**Working Within a Wider Research Team**

In the initial meeting with the school administrators, it was imperative to make sure they understood the intervention goals and why the Head Start school campus was the ideal site. It was also important to make sure they were clear on their role in intervention delivery and to determine their needs and goals to which the authors could contribute. Following the joint recruitment efforts, 92 parents expressed immediate interest and the authors registered them on site or sent a registration email. The authors made phone calls and sent emails and text messages in an effort to register the parents, complete informed consent, and initiate the program. Additionally, the family service coordinator reached out to parents. Despite these efforts only 38 parents registered for the program, 16 completed informed consent and preprogram questionnaires, and seven parents completed the intervention.

**Data Collection Methods**

Once participants registered in the eplatform, they began the intervention. Parents were given 4 weeks to complete the program. The eplatform administered the intervention including: (a) program information (e.g., study description, informed consent); (b) program content via an interactive webpage or mobile application; (c) automated messaging system; (d) chat function; and (e) outcome measures. The eplatform was hosted in a Health
Information Trust Alliance (HITRUST) certified, HIPAA compliant environment that is 24x7x365 managed by ClearDATA on Amazon Web Server (AWS).

**Section Summary**

- Explicit efforts must be made to ensure diverse populations are recruited, engaged, and retained in online programs.
- Functions such as guided support, email, and chat functions are included in internet interventions to improve retention and completion.
- Research teams should include school administrators in order to manage intervention research activity.

**Method in Action**

Internet interventions to train parents show promise as an ideal format for provision of services. However, the interventions are only useful if they are accessed and completed. In the previous pilot study, attrition was identified as a potential concern. However, convenience sampling was used so results did not provide information regarding recruitment for an open trial. Issues of usability as it relates to the enrolment process are critical. However, thus far, usability had been rated as high. The authors expected procedures used in the initial pilot study would mitigate against attrition (i.e., progress monitoring, text messages).

Unfortunately, within each stage in the school-based pilot study, notable attrition occurred. The authors did not anticipate the low number of completers in light of planned methods of interacting with the school staff and parents through face-to-face interaction and text messages as well as engagement in the school community. It may be that accountability for enrolment and completion of an internet intervention for parents is linked to regular social presence.

**Benefits and Challenges**
There are several aspects of the case study that went well. The authors cemented a relationship with school administrators and developed a trusted partnership. Throughout the process, the authors learned which school personnel were responsible for different aspects of family engagement. This ongoing relationship also allowed the authors to understand the school culture and know when the best times are in the school year to implement specific programs.

The most challenging aspect of this work was ensuring follow through of parents from interest to engagement. The degree of attrition was disappointing. Initial interest occurred, but very little completion. Mechanisms in place (e.g., automated messages) were not successful in recruiting and retaining interested parents. Strategies were employed to meet these challenges; however, they did not achieve the needed outcome. Although the authors reached out to parents via phone calls and texts, the impact may have been limited because the authors were not part of the school community. Additionally, the authors were unsuccessful in contacting some parents even though contact information was obtained. Greater interaction with parents may have increased the likelihood that they would complete the program. Consequently, the authors decided to be on campus while parents were dropping and picking up children to facilitate the enrolment process. Ultimately, this did not improve enrolment or completion.

Section Summary

- Social presence may be critical for recruitment and retention of parents into internet intervention concurrent with Head Start school programs.
- Strategies that do not have the “human touch” may not mitigate against attrition.
- Developing relationships with administrators may not be sufficient to develop trusting partnerships across the school community.
Practical Lessons Learned

An evaluation of this case study’s research methods indicates a breakdown in the recruitment, enrolment, and completion process. The following identifies lessons learned and suggestions for recruitment into an internet intervention concurrent with school programming to achieve enrolment, retention, and completion of diverse populations.

Use Facilitators

School personnel serving as project facilitators may serve a critical role for program recruitment, retention, and completion. Facilitators may serve as enablers and motivators to support the program (Kotecha et al., 2015). Parent engagement may be linked to facilitator mechanisms that provide regular feedback and ensure accountability. Further, facilitators may support a coordinated effort between parents and researchers. This may further develop program delivery protocols and build capacity within the school (Taylor et al., 2013). Finding the right facilitator rests on the identification of key personnel to serve as facilitators throughout the research process. These may include the Head Start educational coordinator, instructional coaches, parent engagement coordinators, family service workers, classroom teachers, and/or paraprofessionals. Facilitators should be individuals who engage with families and would be instrumental in facilitating completion.

Provide Detailed Information to Parents

Morris and Bellon-Harn (2021) interviewed noncompleters to explore why they did not complete the program. They reported that their inability to complete learning modules was due to time management and other family obligations that arose in their lives during the time of the study. Such obstacles may have impacted the parents in this case study. It may be that more information regarding how to complete the program would be beneficial. For example, specific information about activities and time commitment may help parents plan
accordingly. Utilizing social media may be useful to encourage parents to complete the program. For example, a webpage or Facebook page with videos, quotes, or testimonials from other parents who have completed the program. Developing a blog for parents to engage in support via social groups may be helpful.

**Engage and Train Teachers and Paraprofessionals**

One thing to consider for partnering with a school is to allow time to train school personnel and allow time for them to complete the program prior to enrolling parents. This may be helpful in creating enthusiasm among the individuals who work closely with parents. Additionally, it may help school personnel feel better prepared to troubleshoot any technological issues or questions that may arise while using an online intervention. For example, a training workshop for school personnel involved with recruitment and retention could be completed. The training could include an overview of the intervention, the procedures that would be utilized for the work, and the primary role of school personnel. Survey or debriefing meetings could be held with school personnel to note any concerns going through the program or answer questions facilitators may have prior to enrolling parents. Critically, researchers must ensure that facilitators and others working with families understand how the intervention supports their work in the classroom and family outcomes, which are tied to the school’s goals and benchmarks.

**Fully Immerse in the School Community and Culture**

Researchers should immerse themselves in the school community and culture to ensure that school personnel and families understand the benefits of the intervention and come to view the research team as part of the school community. Active engagement in related school activities may be beneficial to establish trust with classroom teachers and families. Established relationships with school administrators (e.g., principals) are
instrumental, but the teachers, other educational staff, and parents must perceive the researchers as key contributors to their work in the classroom and the home.

**Section Summary**

- Training school personnel is integral to ensure decreased attrition of parents.
- It is imperative to elicit feedback from school personnel for future work or campus involvement.
- The integration of the researchers into the school culture is important in fostering relationships among parents and researchers.

**Conclusion**

Working with school administrators is critical and using digital activity to retain families is beneficial. However, recruitment in school context may require motivation by all stakeholders (i.e., parents, teachers, paraprofessionals), not only school administrators. Researchers should understand the school culture and the roles of different school personnel in order to engage individuals who have the most contact with families. Additionally, digital processes may not be sufficient, and an ongoing social presence by researchers and facilitators may be necessary. Researchers should engage in ongoing training and discussions with parents and school personnel on campus. Researchers should actively work within their own program as well as ongoing programs at the school to demonstrate to all stakeholders that researchers are committed to child and family outcomes.
Discussion Questions

1. Describe some of the challenges associated with recruitment and retention of participants in self-managed, internet interventions.

2. Explain some of the strategies a research team could use to recruit and retain parents of children with disabilities into self-managed internet interventions.

3. How might a research team utilize school personnel to enhance the likelihood that parents complete a self-managed, internet intervention?

4. Create a plan based on the case study, to recruit kindergarten parents into a self-managed internet intervention to target reading comprehension within the context of a school.

Multiple Choice Quiz Questions

1. Self-managed online interventions offered concurrent with school programs:
   - a. have the potential to be cost-effective and result in positive behavioral outcomes. [CORRECT]
   - b. require schools to spend more money because they are required to hire trained personnel to implement the program.
   - c. never show positive behavioral outcomes and parents do not find them useful.

2. Research steps guide development and examination of an internet intervention.
   Choose the answer with the steps presented in the correct order.
   - a. Production and formative evaluation, analysis and plan for development, and usage and summative evaluation
b. Usage and summative evaluation, analysis and plan for development, production and formative evaluation

c. Analysis and plan for development, production and formative evaluation, and usage and summative evaluation [CORRECT]

3. School personnel should be involved in recruitment and retention when using an online intervention.
   a. Always [CORRECT]
   b. Sometimes
   c. Never

4. What was the most challenging aspect of this case?
   A. The administration committing to allowing researchers to recruit in their school
   B. Ensuring parent follow through from interest to engagement [CORRECT]
   C. Parental interest

Further Reading


**Web Resources**

- Association of Internet Researchers: [https://aoir.org/](https://aoir.org/)
- National Association for the Education of Young Children: [https://www.naeyc.org](https://www.naeyc.org)
- National Association of Early Childhood Teacher Educators: [https://naecte.org](https://naecte.org)
- Institute of Education Sciences: [https://ies.ed.gov](https://ies.ed.gov)
- American Education Research Association: [https://www.aera.net/About-AERA/What-is-Education-Research](https://www.aera.net/About-AERA/What-is-Education-Research)
References


