

## BEST PRACTICES FOR CONDUCTING VIRTUAL INTERVIEWS AND FOCUS GROUPS

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many Sexual Risk Avoidance Education (SRAE) grant recipients pivoted to implement their programs and conduct data collection virtually, rather than in person. Virtual data collection can be easier than in-person data collection, as it does not require a physical space and does not require people to travel to attend. However, virtual data collection may bring technological issues or limit personal connections between respondents and those collecting the data, which could make respondents less comfortable sharing their experiences during focus groups or interviews. Being intentional and proactive about conducting virtual data collection can minimize the challenges it brings. This document provides tips and best practices for SRAE grant recipients when conducting virtual interviews and focus groups.

**Respondents** refers to the people participating in the focus group or interview.

Before conducting interviews or focus groups virtually, keep these tips in mind:

- **Be intentional in choosing a virtual platform.** Typically, it is useful to use video calls for interviews and focus groups so you can gauge people's body language and facial expressions. Although there are many video platforms available for conducting interviews and focus groups, some are likely more familiar or easier for your respondents to use. Consider the type of respondent and the platforms they may have access to. For example, if you know that all staff at your partner site are accustomed to using a specific platform, try to use that platform.
- **Recruit a smaller number of respondents for a virtual focus group than you would for an in-person focus group.** In-person focus groups can have as many as 10 respondents. By comparison, a virtual focus group should have four to six respondents to help ensure that there will be enough energy in the virtual space for conversational flow and enough time for everyone to contribute (Carter et al. 2021). Having fewer people involved decreases the chance of technological challenges that can disrupt the focus group.
- **Plan for how you will obtain consent.** Before collecting data in interviews or focus groups, you should make plans for obtaining consent from respondents in a virtual setting. First, work with your Institutional Review Board (IRB) to determine if the respondents (or in the case of youth respondents, their parents) will complete consent forms electronically, verbally, or on paper. For more information on IRBs, see this SRAENE [resource](#) or the resources on the performance measure portal's T&TA resources page. Partner site staff may be able to help manage the logistics of securing consent. If you are obtaining consent electronically, keep in mind that many consent forms contain Personally Identifiable Information (PII), including names, birth dates, email addresses, or phone numbers. Therefore, you should set up a system to securely transmit the forms electronically. (See Best Practices for Managing and Storing Data—Frequently Asked Questions in [Toolkit 1](#) for more information on securely managing PII.) Before beginning an interview or focus group, have a list of all respondents



with consent and be sure to cross-check that all those who log in to the virtual platform have provided consent to participate. If any youth without parental consent join the platform, you should politely let them know that they cannot participate as their parents did not provide permission.

- **Identify how you will deliver incentives.** If your study includes offering incentives to respondents, develop a plan for mailing or electronically sending them. For example, you may need to collect each respondent's mailing address or email address before the focus group or interview. Having this information ahead of time will allow you to distribute the incentives immediately after the interview or focus group. Be sure you plan how to securely manage the PII included in the contact information. You may be able to ask partner site staff for help collecting the necessary contact information. Partner site staff may also be able to help distribute incentives. For instance, you could drop off physical gift cards at your partner school the day after a focus group and ask teachers to distribute them to the youth respondents.
- **Send instructions for accessing the virtual platform.** When you invite respondents to the focus group or interview, send tips or instructions for logging into the platform and for contacting you if they have trouble accessing the platform or the call. This is especially important if respondents may be unfamiliar with the platform.
- **Ask respondents to be in a quiet, private space.** Although you cannot control where respondents will be when they log in to the virtual focus group or interview, you should set the expectation that they try to be in a private, quiet location where they will be able to hear and be heard by others. Particularly for focus groups, this practice is important to protect the privacy of other respondents. Be willing to offer different times of day for the interviews or focus groups, so respondents can choose a time they are most likely to be in a suitable space to participate.
- **Have a backup plan for technology challenges.** Respondents and facilitators may have technological issues with accessing the Internet, logging into the platform, or adjusting audio or video quality. Encourage everyone to log into the platform 5 to 10 minutes early, in order to start on time and minimize technology issues during the focus group or interview. To help manage possible issues, have a way to contact respondents directly, outside the platform. For interviews, if needed you could call them to hold the interview by phone alone. Most platforms also have a call-in number so respondents can join via phone, which can help address technological or Internet connectivity issues. If possible, plan to have two people to support the interview or focus group: one to facilitate the conversation, and another to take notes and help troubleshoot technology issues.
- **Encourage everyone to turn on video.** Being able to see each other's faces and body language can help build rapport and allow respondents to read non-verbal communication. However, some people may not be comfortable appearing on video, so do not pressure them to do so.

- **Be mindful of time and set the pace.** As with in-person interviews or focus groups, time can pass quickly. Time constraints can be even more pressing if the call is challenged by technology barriers that delay conversation. Ensure that all respondents have time to answer questions. Interviewers may want to state the question slowly, so respondents can hear properly and respond thoughtfully.
- **Recognize the mental strain of video calls.** Virtual focus groups and interviews that involve looking at a screen for extended periods can be mentally taxing. You can address this challenge by updating respondents on the number of topics or the time remaining. You can also allow respondents to take breaks when necessary.
- **Use virtual platform features to encourage participation.** As with in-person data collection, some respondents may be very talkative and others may be quieter. If some people are less comfortable responding verbally, you can invite them to use tools within the virtual platform to respond instead. For example, you could ask them to contribute via the chat function or use features like polls or word cloud generators. You could also ask them to raise their hands or use emoji or reaction options in the platform to indicate their agreement or disagreement with certain statements.
- **Ask respondents to mute themselves when they are not talking.** This is a good practice for both interviews and focus groups, as background noise can be a challenge. At the start of the interview or focus group, ensure that all respondents know how to use the mute feature, and remind them to mute themselves when they are not speaking.

## References

Carter, S.M., P. Shih,, J. Williams, C. Degeling, and J. Mooney-Somers. “Conducting Qualitative Research Online: Challenges and Solutions.” *The Patient–Patient-Centered Outcomes Research*, vol. 14, no. 6, 2021, pp. 711–718. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40271-021-00528-w>