

# Designing Survey Items for Youth

This document will help Sexual Risk Avoidance Education (SRAE) grant recipients build survey items to answer research questions and collect data from youth. It also describes best practices for putting survey items together into a survey instrument.

## Look for existing survey items appropriate for your study

First, consider existing resources within already established items that have been used in similar studies and with similar populations. These items can save you the time and effort of developing your own content from scratch. Ask the following questions when assessing these resources.

### Is the item appropriate for your study?

Check whether the item was used with a similar population, including dimensions such as age, race or ethnicity, and location. Consider how the data were collected, such as the survey mode used, and how that aligns with your data collection plans. If there are key differences, you might want to make some adjustments. Check whether the survey item's developer discussed how the item performed, such as whether it measured accurately what it was intended to measure. If the item performed well in similar circumstances, it may be a great item to use in your study. Finally, also consider how the researchers defined the constructs at hand, like youth engagement or facilitator quality, and ensure it is aligned with your definitions.

### Is the item part of a larger assessment?

Survey items might be part of larger assessments, or scales. These larger assessments might cover topics that don't align with your research questions, or would add too much length to your survey. Evaluate whether you need the full assessment; a smaller, more specific set of items (sometimes called a subscale); or an individual item. Assessment developers may publish statistics about how the whole assessment performed—not how individual items performed. Therefore, published measurement statistics might not apply as you break up the assessment.

### Do you need permission to use the survey item?

It is generally permissible to use items accessed in the public domain in other studies. Be aware that some authors of surveys require that you ask permission to use their items. Some items might be copyrighted and require permission or a fee to use. If you are unsure whether you are permitted to use a survey item, you can contact the original item developer.

## Resources for existing items

The following resources might have relevant survey items for SRAE studies:

- [The Repository of Survey Items for Teen Pregnancy Prevention \(TPP\) Evaluations](#) includes survey items for use in evaluations of TPP programs in domains such as healthy relationships, sexual behavior, caregiver relationships, maternal and child health, and attitudes and beliefs. Many items from this repository are pulled from recently published evaluations of TPP programs.
- [The Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education Recommended Outcome Measures for Adolescents](#) is a set of resources with survey items related to adolescent relationships.

- [The TPP Evidence Review](#) website offers a database of reviewed studies, where users can search for recently published SRAE, TPP, and Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention studies, including for specific programs. After identifying an appropriate study, users can review study pages that include information about the evaluated program, setting, focus population, and outcome measures, as well as a study quality rating. Users who find a study has items relevant for their program can then access the publication for more information or reach out to the study's authors.
- [Instruments That Measure Youth Engagement and Facilitator Quality](#) is a toolkit developed by the SRAE National Evaluation that includes items about youth engagement and facilitator quality.
- [The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Q-Bank](#) includes health-related surveys and survey items on topics such as health behaviors, mental health, school and education, and social activities and relationships.

## Writing your own survey items

If you need to create your own survey items, the following tips can help you write clear, easy-to-understand questions for youth. These tips can also be helpful for refining survey items from existing resources or that you previously developed yourself.

### Avoid leading questions

Leading questions prompt respondents to answer one way or another. They might make assumptions about respondents' answers or push respondents toward a particular opinion, resulting in biased data. When developing questions, avoid phrases that might lead to particular answers—for example, "How wonderful is...?" or "What difficulties did you have with...?" Instead, you might ask respondents to rate their experience on a scale.

### Ask questions one at a time

It is important to ask one question at a time to ensure clarity and collect the best data possible. Surveys should avoid posing questions that ask about more than one topic, but allow only one answer. For example, "Is the classroom environment welcoming and accessible?" could be difficult to answer. A better option would be to separate the two questions: (1) "Is the classroom environment welcoming?" and (2) "Is the classroom environment accessible?"

### Write questions that are specific

Ambiguous language, unclear instructions, and double negatives can make questions challenging to answer. For example, rather than asking "Do you usually talk to your parents about school?" consider asking "How many times have you talked to your parents about school in the last month?"

To make questions as clear as possible, keep them short and straightforward. In addition, check for consistent wording throughout the survey, consistency in response options, and consistency in recall periods. If relevant for the question, be clear on the time period you want respondents to think about.

### Ensure the response format aligns with the question and response options are mutually exclusive

The response format must reflect the question format. For example, if the survey asks about events and behaviors, the response options should include frequency-based responses, not agree or disagree statements. Conversely, questions about attitudes and opinions *should* use agree or disagree statements.

The responses should be mutually exclusive and not have overlapping options. For example, the responses in the following scale are not mutually exclusive: 1–2 times, 2–3 times, 3–4 times, 4 or more times. Instead, the responses should be written as 1–2 times, 3–4 times, 5 or more times.

### **Label your response options completely**

Be clear on scales by labeling all response options completely. For example, for a scaled frequency-based question, responses might be labeled 1=never, 2=rarely, 3=sometimes, 4= often, 5=very often.

### **Provide all instructions *before* asking questions**

Guiding respondents with instructions will help them provide more accurate answers to questions. Instructions should precede the question text. For example, instead of “How many days did you smoke cigarettes or use electronic vapor products in the past 30 days, this includes e-cigarettes, vapes, vape pens, e-cigars, e-hookahs, hookah pens, and mods?” try this: “We want to know how many times you smoked cigarettes or used electronic vapor products in the past 30 days. Electronic vapor products include e-cigarettes, vapes, vape pens, e-cigars, e-hookahs, hookah pens, and mods. On how many of the last 30 days did you smoke cigarettes or use electronic vapor products?”

If future questions require a different recall period, be sure to reorient respondents with similar instructions.

### **Make sure questions don't convey judgment**

Questions might convey judgement if they include words that indicate particular values. For example, in the question “How much do you agree that it is good to wait until marriage to have sex?” the word *good* conveys a value judgement. Instead, you might ask, “What is your opinion on waiting until marriage to have sex?”

### **Consider that trauma or past experiences might affect respondents' ability to answer questions**

Allow respondents to skip items they are uncomfortable answering. Also, be thoughtful about what resources or supports might be helpful to respondents. For example, if asking questions about depression, think about having mental health resources available to youth taking the survey.

### **Ensure questions are culturally and developmentally appropriate**

When drafting the items, keep the specific population in mind. Consider whether any words or phrases might be more or less relevant to the groups you're seeking to engage.

Questions should also be easy to read. The Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level test, built into Microsoft Word, measures readability and is a helpful tool to use when drafting survey questions.

### **Additional resources**

This report includes general tips on writing survey items:

<https://www.annualreviews.org/content/journals/10.1146/annurev-soc-121919-054544>

This report includes specifics related to surveying youth:

[https://www.aka.fi/globalassets/tietysti1.fi/awanhat/documents/tiedostot/lapset/presentations-of-the-annual-seminar-10-12-may-2011/surveying-children-and-adolescents\\_de-leeuw.pdf](https://www.aka.fi/globalassets/tietysti1.fi/awanhat/documents/tiedostot/lapset/presentations-of-the-annual-seminar-10-12-may-2011/surveying-children-and-adolescents_de-leeuw.pdf)

This video discusses how to prepare for survey data collection, including collecting consent from parents or guardians, preparing to obtain assent from youth, and pre-testing survey instruments:

<https://sraene.com/resource/Video%20%3A%20Consent%2C%20Assent%2C%20and%20Pre-Testing%20to%20Prepare%20for%20Collecting%20Survey%20Data>