

**“Want Chips?” Challenges and Lessons Learned With
Recruiting Adolescent Boys and Securing
Parent/Guardian Consent for a Study on Masculinity**

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Abstract

Recruiting participants for research can be a daunting task, even more so when the participants are adolescents. Recruiting young people through schools poses a number of ethical and practical challenges and is subject to stringent oversight and regulation. This case study will give readers an example of the challenges and successes in recruiting adolescent boys in high school and securing parental/guardian consent for a doctoral research project. The research uses a mixed-methods evaluative approach to compare boys who did, and boys who did not, participate in a local sexual health promotion/healthy relationship program, focusing particularly on differences in scoring and understandings of masculinity ideologies. The planned recruitment strategies as well as the multiple modifications made throughout the recruitment process will be described. The case study will conclude with several lessons learned in the process of trying to recruit adolescent boys and obtain parent/guardian consent.

Learning Outcomes

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

- Identify and plan for ways in which to develop relationships with a variety of gatekeepers who can support their research with adolescents
- Predict modifications they may need to make to their recruitment strategies to engage adolescents in academic research
- Predict ethical requirements for recruiting and obtaining consent from adolescents in educational settings

Many novice researchers looking to conduct field-based research do so with some degree of excitement and, to a greater extent, some anxiety. Will people agree to participate? The process may be even more harrowing when the population in question are adolescents. Many researchers will avoid including younger adolescents in research who are under the age of legal consent, primarily because of the difficulties with securing ethical approvals. Many studies on “youth” are based on samples from populations of university students, where issues of recruitment and consent are less fraught with difficulties. When researchers do decide to conduct field-based research with younger adolescent participants, they have a number of institutional and practical hurdles to get through. One of the most significant hurdles is recruitment of adolescents and obtaining parental consent (Lamb, Puskar, & Tusaie-Mumford, 2001; Logsdon & Gohmann, 2008). McCormick et al. (1999) have called for researchers to report their recruitment experiences to provide a base of information upon which others can build. The purpose of this case study is to discuss some of the issues involved in recruiting

adolescents in high school, securing parent/guardian consent, managing relationships with gatekeepers as supporters of the recruitment process, and the importance of being flexible with a recruitment plan.

Project Overview

This case study is drawn from experiences conducting a doctoral research study titled “The Effectiveness of WiseGuyz: Understanding the Long-Term Effects of a Male-Only Sexual Health and Healthy Relationship Program on Adolescent Masculinity.” WiseGuyz is a school-based sexual health and healthy relationship promotion program offered by Calgary Sexual Health Centre (CSHC) that targets Grade 9 boys (ages 13-15) attending selected Calgary Board of Education (CBE) schools in Calgary, Alberta, Canada. Through sexual health education, WiseGuyz seeks to change the beliefs and expectations about what adolescent boys are like and should do in regard to relationships. Preliminary research on the WiseGuyz program examined how the program is creating positive change for the boys who participate, specifically in regard to change in traditional and limiting adolescent male norms (Claussen, 2016). My doctoral study examines the long-term impacts of having participated in WiseGuyz by comparing boys who did, and boys who did not, participate in WiseGuyz. The study focuses particularly on differences in scoring and understandings of masculinity ideologies.

Building Relationships With Gatekeepers

Fundamental to this research project are principles of community-based research (CBR), a term which encompasses forms of participatory, action-oriented, and/or collaborative research approaches (Kingsley & Chapman, 2013). Collaboration, relationship-building, and ongoing dialogue are key attributes of the CBR process (Kingsley & Chapman, 2013). Building and supporting collaboration and ongoing dialogue with CSHC and the WiseGuyz Facilitators is a key feature of my study. The male facilitators of WiseGuyz are an important resource for gaining access to the alumni of WiseGuyz for several reasons. First is because there is a high school version of the WiseGuyz program attended by alumni offered at the high school chosen as the site for recruitment. Facilitators work with the small group of alumni at the school, using topic-based conversations to support further exploration around healthy relationship and masculinity issues. This continued presence in the school allows past participants the opportunity to maintain contact with facilitators. Second, facilitators have a lot of tacit knowledge around working with adolescent boys. Developing an authentic relationship with these facilitators, or gatekeepers, supported me in being able to recruit boys for my study (Berg & Lune, 2012). I attend monthly program meetings, listen to facilitators’ concerns, and offer information on pertinent research regarding masculinity and sexuality. Through this process, I

have built a trusting relationship with the facilitators, and as a result, they are committed and involved in the execution of my research study.

To examine the long-term impacts of having participated, I needed to recruit boys who had completed the WiseGuyz program and had moved on from junior high into high school, as well as boys who had never taken the program. The WiseGuyz facilitator providing programming at the high school invited me to a meeting with the primary guidance counselor responsible for the delivery of the program in the school. We spent time discussing the need for a program like WiseGuyz and I listened to some of the issues the counselor was facing in the school (i.e., mental health needs of students). I described my research, identifying my specific research questions, and explored how the resultant information could be useful for the guidance team and the school. This meeting, which took place in the spring of 2016, approximately 9 months prior to commencement of data collection, was the beginning of the relationship-building process with the school and important gatekeepers. As noted by Agbebiyi (2013), schools are bounded and gated spaces. For this reason, spending time answering questions and reassuring school gatekeepers were an important part of accessing the research site.

Together with the WiseGuyz facilitators, we went back to the school early in the fall of 2016 to attend a full staff meeting at the high school. The facilitators discussed the WiseGuyz program, what it was, who it was for, and how teachers could support boys who they believed would benefit from attending. I discussed my research study, letting the teachers know that they could expect me to be a presence in the school and to come to me with any questions they may have about the research. I let the teachers know that although I could not offer financial incentives to the boys for participation in my study (as per the ethical regulations from the local school system), I was offering a pizza lunch as a token of appreciation (deemed acceptable by the school authority). Teachers felt that food was the best way to entice the boys into the study and thought that if I were to offer free pizza, I would have more boys than I could handle wanting to participate.

Through discussions with the guidance counselor in the fall, it was decided that recruitment would be best suited to begin *after* the end of the first semester, once students had transitioned to the second semester. There were two reasons for this decision. First, the guidance counselor felt that late fall recruitment would be too difficult, given that Grade 10 students are generally overwhelmed with the transition to high school. As a group, they generally need some time to acclimate to the demands and schedules of a high school setting. Second, the school itself has its own rhythm, with professional development days, winter break, and preparation for exams. Therefore, certain blocks of time and months were not appropriate for recruitment and data collection.

Description of Initial Procedures for Participant Recruitment

Through conversation, the guidance counselor suggested recruiting in classrooms the first week of the new semester (February 2017) as several community-based programs would be providing information to students on the services and programs offered in the school (WiseGuyz being one of them). The guidance counselor would schedule time in classrooms over the course of the first week, take the service providers and myself to each classroom, and introduce the various individuals, including me, to the students. On paper, this seemed the ideal recruitment scenario. Both of my gatekeepers to prospective participants would be in the room, visibly “vouching” for me and my research. The guidance counselor offered to place an envelope in the guidance office to collect signed parent/guardian consent forms on my behalf. Guys could bring the consent forms back at their convenience and place them in the envelope. I envisioned having so many guys asking for parent/guardian consent forms that I would easily have the desired number of guys sign up for my study (i.e., 40 past program participants and 40 who never participated in the program in junior high, for a total of 80 guys).

On the first day of recruitment, I showed up at the designated meeting space outside of the guidance office. Together with the WiseGuyz facilitator, guidance counselor, and a couple of other staff from local programs, we went into our first class. There were a total of eight guys in the class (from 19 possible students), and the WiseGuyz facilitator recognized a couple of boys from the previous year who had taken the junior high program. Perfect! I presented details on my research project, what I was interested in, and why I was looking for guys to participate. At the end of the presentation, I asked who might be interested in participating. I had two guys put their hands up. As I passed them parent/guardian consent forms, I thought surely the next few classes would yield greater numbers of participants.

We went to the next class, where I gave my same talk on the research. When I asked who might be interested in participating and looked into the room, I saw the guys staring down at their shoes, studiously avoiding eye contact with me. After an awkward moment of silence, I let them know I would leave some blank parent/guardian consent forms in the guidance office that they could pick up if they decided to participate. The next several classes yielded the same shoe-staring, awkward silences in response to the question “who might be interested in participating and taking a parent/guardian consent form home?” The guidance counselor assured me that there were many more classrooms on her list and that the following days should be more successful.

The high school version of the WiseGuyz program was set to begin the first day of recruitment,

given that it was the start of the new semester. They were having a pizza party to welcome any new guys into the group. I presented my research to the six guys in the group, and all of them said they would be interested in participating and took parent/guardian consent forms to take home. Of the approximate 35 guys I presented to that day, I had eight declare interest and take home consent forms. This is far cry from the 80 participants I needed to recruit.

First Modification Made to Recruitment: “Want Chips?”

The facilitators and I discussed how the process could be modified. Based on their experience recruiting boys into the WiseGuyz program, they felt a less structured process might be more successful. They suggested being centrally located in the school, offering free food to entice guys to come over (like potato chips or donuts), have them listen to the description of my research, and then offer the parent/guardian consent form if they expressed interest. They suggested having a WiseGuyz facilitator be present for recruitment, as they may recognize many of the guys and could talk to them a little bit about the importance of the research. I thought this was a great back-up plan, should the classroom visits prove unsuccessful.

The opportunity to move to the back-up plan quickly presented itself, as the school needed to cancel the classroom visits for the next 2 days due to a variety of scheduling and technical issues. Rather than let those 2 days go by without any recruitment activity, I decided to implement the alternative strategy. I spoke with the guidance counselor, who was happy to let me set up a table in the main foyer of the school during the lunch hour. A WiseGuyz facilitator was able to meet me at the school just prior to lunch, and I brought a box of individually packaged potato chips with me. As the lunch bell rang and students started entering the foyer, I watched the WiseGuyz facilitator casually ask the first group of guys he saw coming around the corner “hey guys, want chips?” The guys came over to the table for the chips and asked why we were handing out free chips. I proceeded to explain who I was, what I was researching, and why I was looking for guys to participate. Overwhelmingly, guys were happy to take the parent/guardian consent forms. Quickly, both the facilitator and I were inundated with groups of students, wanting to know about the chips and listening to my research description. When girls came by the table, we also offered them chips, but asked that if they knew any guys, they should send them over to the table as we were looking for guys to participate in a research study (which they almost always followed through with). At the end of the 30-min lunch period, I had gone through all 45 bags of chips and handed out 31 parent/guardian consent forms. Feeling incredibly excited and hopeful, I let the guidance counselor know that I was going to pursue more lunchtime recruitment as it was certainly more fruitful and allowed me to engage in conversation with students about the research.

The following day, I was on my own for recruitment as none of the WiseGuyz facilitators were available. Summoning my courage and using the previous day as a guide, I spotted the first mixed group of students coming around the corner as the bell rang and said, “hey guys, want chips?” Handling the recruitment alone was definitely a more daunting task, as the number of students coming by for chips greatly exceeded my ability to speak to all of them about the research. By the end of the lunch period, however, I had passed out another 26 parent/guardian consent forms for a total of 65 recruited participants. I left the school that day feeling much more hopeful about the possibility of recruiting 80 participants.

Second Modification Made: The Black Hole of Parent/Guardian Consent Forms

While giving out the parent/guardian consent forms to guys, I let them know that they were to bring the forms back to the envelope in the guidance office by the following week. I would be back at the school to conduct the surveys and have the pizza lunch the week after that. Guys seemed to understand the instructions, and the school included reminders about the consent forms in their daily bulletin.

At the end of the following week, I went into the school to see how many forms had been returned, as I needed to plan on the amount of food to order for the pizza lunch. I checked the envelope, only to find that not a single form had been returned! I checked with the guidance office staff, thinking that surely could not be the case, but they confirmed my worst fears. No guys had returned the parent/guardian consent forms. The staff was sympathetic, but not surprised. They too struggle getting parent/guardian consent forms back for field trips and special programs. They suggested that I try again, but this time see whether I could get the names of the boys taking consent forms, and the guidance office could then personalize the reminders to the guys. They also recommended keeping the timeframe between taking a form and requiring it back as short as possible. Although I thought having a week between handing out the forms and getting them back was appropriate, the staff suggested it be a 24-hr turn-around. In their experience, this was the best way to get parent/guardian consent forms back.

Armed with several boxes of chips, fresh consent forms, and large, colorful posters that I put up in the cafeteria, foyer, and outside the guidance office (see [Figure 1](#)), I assumed my regular position in the main foyer and proceeded to use my standard line “hey, want chips?” A good number of the boys I had given parent/guardian consent forms 2 weeks before stopped by to get chips and to take a second consent form. “I lost it” and “I forgot it” were the two most common reasons boys gave me when I recognized them. I let them know I would be at the school the following day, at lunch, with pizza to do the survey collection. They promised to bring the forms back. When I returned the following day, I did have 12 boys show up to

participate in the survey with signed parent/guardian consent forms. Having the school give a reminder and quick turn-around did seem to encourage consent form completion and return. This was a process I was to use throughout recruitment as it proved to be the most successful.

Figure 1. Recruitment poster.



Third Modification Made: Increasing the Reach of Recruitment

Two weeks in a row, I repeated the process outlined above. I would hand out chips and consent forms at lunchtime on the first day and then return to the school the following day at lunchtime with pizza and conduct the survey administration. I was beginning to realize, however, that I was seeing the same faces walk by my table of chips. I was not reaching any new potential participants. During a survey administration session, I spoke with a couple of my “regulars” (guys who showed up for free pizza or to hang out with friends who were completing the survey). I described how I was reaching the same groups of guys, but needed to increase my reach. They suggested a variety of additional places and times for recruitment, specifically the cafeteria and the library, and suggested I modify my time from lunch to perhaps the first or second period in the morning. I decided to try this method and let the school know I would be coming during the morning periods to recruit new groups of guys.

Food had been an invaluable recruitment tool, and thus, I brought donuts with me to my morning recruitment periods. I began by walking through the cafeteria, where groups of mixed and single-gender groups of students were sitting talking or working on homework. I approached these groups, usually starting with “hey, want a donut?” As students took the donuts, I would explain that I was a student researcher conducting a study on guys in high school and was looking for research participants. I would give a simple explanation of my study and then let them know I would be at the school the following day at lunchtime with pizza. I would ask whether they were interested and would pass them a parent/guardian consent form. I would then ask them to provide their name and email information so that the guidance office would be able to personalize reminders.

In addition to the cafeteria, I found that simply wandering up and down the halls with food in various spaces in the school proved to be a successful process for recruitment. It allowed me to speak to smaller groups of students, and soon students began to recognize me as “the pizza lady” and would readily take a parent/guardian consent form. This freedom to wander the school during class-time was only possible because of my relationship with my gatekeeper (the guidance counselor) and my continual presence in the school. This presence allowed me to develop unofficial peer recruiters for my study, an unanticipated outcome of being in the school a significant period of time in an unstructured way. Often, this peer recruitment was incredibly helpful, as guys could vouch for me and the research. There were, however, also challenges with peer recruitment, primarily in relation to ethical constraints.

Bump in the Road: Ethical Constraints on Adolescent Research

Over time, there were several guys who, having already filled out the surveys, would still come during data collection periods. With the exception of one guy, they would all bring at least one new participant to potentially fill out the survey. In cases where the guy was 18 years of age or older, this worked out very well. The unofficial peer recruiter would explain the process to the new guy, and I would explain the research to him and have him fill out and sign the consent form.

What proved to be incredibly frustrating was when my unofficial peer recruiters would invite a guy under the age of consent. Here I was, faced with a willing and eager participant, only to turn them away with a parent/guardian consent form and asking them to come back. In many cases, I did not see those particular guys again. This frustration with turning away potential participants prompted me to engage in a conversation with my institutional review board. Through email exchanges facilitated by my doctoral supervisor, we asked about the possibility of mature minors (i.e., 16- and 17-year-olds) providing consent without parent/guardian consent. They informed us that according to local public school board policy, all students recruited through schools, under the age of 18, needed parent/guardian consent, no exceptions. We also asked about asking for parent/guardian email addresses from the boys to email parents/guardians about the consent forms. The Ethics Board advised that even though boys might provide their parents' contact information, people generally view their email information as private and thus might not appreciate this possible violation of parent/guardian privacy. In discussing these issues, Ethics Board reviewers shared insights about possible gender differences in the research context, specifically that females are possibly more compliant. They felt that girls might be more likely to say yes when asked to participate, actually show up, and take what is asked of them seriously. The reviewers felt that incentivizing guys with food certainly seemed to make sense. They also offered some suggestions in terms of reaching parents, such as attending parent–student conference nights.

Taking this information back to the WiseGuyz facilitators, we made the decision to make several adjustments to our recruitment strategy. First, we settled on a more realistic number of participants for the study (minimum 20 past participants and 20 who never took the program for a total minimum of 40 guys). Second, we decided to utilize the recruitment processes available through CSHC. The program has guys sign a consent form prior to participating in the WiseGuyz program. This consent form indicates that emails will be used for follow-up purposes. The WiseGuyz facilitators suggested pulling the emails for guys who are 16 years of age or older and sending them a recruitment notice for my study. This allowed us to have mature minors sign consent forms without parent/guardian consent, as recruitment was not occurring through schools or on school grounds. Furthermore, the organization has a

Facebook page set up for alumni, and they suggested posting information about the study with the consent form on the Facebook page. The organization also offered to allocate some time at their annual alumni event so that I could conduct a focus group with guys who wanted to participate and were 16 years of age or older.

What I Learned

This process has taught me a lot about recruiting adolescents to participate in research studies, particularly in regard to the importance of being flexible with the recruitment processes. The reality is recruitment happens in “real time” and, as such, requires “real-time” decisions and flexibility. When opportunities present themselves, you need to be able to capitalize on those opportunities (as much as ethical guidelines allow). I had planned on recruiting guys through presentations made in classrooms but very quickly learned that that particular strategy might not yield the results I wanted. I needed to adjust my recruitment strategies several times during the process, usually with little lead time or structured thought. Being nimble in the social setting allowed me to engage with guys where they were at, in a way that proved to be more productive. Further recommendations are below:

1. *Develop strong relationships with your gatekeepers.* This study has depended on relationships with multiple gatekeepers. The success with these relationships could only occur because they were based on trust, collaboration, and transparency. With the WiseGuyz Facilitators, I tried to “give” to the meetings I was a part of, as opposed to just taking away. I would forward relevant research articles, bring forward thoughts and suggestions regarding other research projects, help plan alumni events, and promote the program to colleagues and peers. The facilitators, as a result, have been very invested in recruiting the numbers needed for the study because they see the value in the research and because of the strong relationship built between us. Sitting around the table as part of the “team” creates a feeling that we are all in this together and encourages us to problem-solve together. WiseGuyz facilitators were enormously helpful in suggesting recruitment strategies that they themselves had found effective in recruiting boys to the program.

Relationships with the school, particularly staff in the guidance department, were invaluable in allowing the freedom to be in the school environment in an unstructured way. Generally, having adults not associated with the school wandering around and speaking with students might be viewed suspiciously; however, the guidance counselor ensured this could happen without interference. In addition to facilitating freedom and access in the school environment, the school gatekeeper also followed up with boys to remind them about bringing back consent forms, reminded them of survey and focus group sessions, and provided students with late slips when required (if participation in the research made them

late for class). This kind of effort, on top of the tasks regularly associated with the job of guidance counselor, could only be possible with strong relationships based on trust and transparency.

2. Developing strong relationships takes time. Recruitment for participants occurred in the winter of 2017, but I really began to build processes for recruitment 2 years earlier by joining the WiseGuyz facilitator team meetings as an observer and participant. It takes time to build trust, and I knew that if facilitators were going to be invested in the work, then they needed to see more than the importance of the research. They needed to feel a personal connection, based on trust and transparency, that would allow them to walk with me on the recruitment journey (as opposed to simply opening a door and then leaving me to journey on my own).

Developing relationships with schools also takes time. I first met with the school guidance staff 9 months before entering the school to collect data. The guidance counselor and I had many email conversations and meetings during those 9 months to touch base on the project and make a plan that would work with the school's timelines.

3. Be cognizant and respectful of your gatekeeper's schedules. Part of working successfully in collaboration with your gatekeepers is being constantly aware and mindful of their schedules, responsibilities, and workloads. This means giving lots of prep time and advance notification about scheduling and what might be required of school staff to support recruitment. This can only happen when you have a relationship that allows you to work back and forth with lots of give and take, specifically surrounding timing, schedules, and required resources (e.g., room bookings at the school, late slips).

In addition to relationships with gatekeepers in regard to recruitment, this experience has provided a number of lessons to consider when working with younger adolescent populations (i.e., high school). Having conducted many studies focused on adult populations (e.g., provincial policymakers, social work practitioners), this was my first time working with adolescents. As such, a number of recommendations are offered:

4. Be prepared to meet adolescents where they are at. This is meant both metaphorically and physically. In retrospect, I think I began recruitment for my adolescent population in much the same way as I would have with the adult populations I have worked with. Adults require a lot of advance notice before participation, given that scheduling is often difficult. I found the opposite to be true with my adolescent population. Longer lead times led to fewer boys returning parent/guardian consent forms and fewer boys showing up to complete surveys. Recruitment occurred best when the timing was rapid. I would recruit and hand out consent forms the day before I was conducting a survey completion session. This way, when I was

talking with guys, I could say, “tomorrow at lunch I will be bringing pizza to the survey session. Get this parent/guardian consent form signed, and bring it back tomorrow to room 239.”

Meeting guys where they are at also means being in the physical spaces where adolescents are congregating. Although I was able to do a lot of recruitment through being located in a central space during the lunch hour, I found that was not enough to have the reach I wanted. Walking through the cafeteria, library, and main hallways was an essential component of my recruitment strategy.

5. Utilize the rhythms and schedules of the school to increase access with parents/guardians.

In hindsight, I would have begun my relationship-building with the school earlier so that when the start of the school year came, I could send my research forms out with the rest of the forms the school sends home. This way parents/guardians would know about the study, have the parent/guardian consent forms to sign, and could send them back with the rest of the forms they regularly fill out every year. This was a missed opportunity. Second, I would have capitalized on the “meet-the-teacher” nights and parent/guardian/teacher interviews that occur after report cards. This would have provided me the opportunity to reach a large number of parents and students simultaneously, thereby getting both consent/assent forms completed.

Conclusion

Recruiting adolescents in the school system for research often takes an enormous amount of prep work, specifically when developing relationships with critical gatekeepers who can greatly influence your study success. As this case study shows, however, there are many additional hurdles that emerge when recruiting adolescents as participants in research studies. This study highlights the time and energy it takes to recruit adolescents, not only because you need to meet them where they are at but also because there is an extra layer of complication with parent/guardian consent form return. I have attempted to provide practical ideas for processes and procedures for how you can recruit adolescents for your own school-based study.

Exercises and Discussion Questions

1. In this study, I made many “real-time” modifications to recruitment procedures with adolescent guys, most of which were not planned ahead of time. What kinds of modifications might be needed to recruitment procedures for your study with adolescents?
2. Identify who your gatekeepers could be and how you will develop relationships with them.
3. If you are planning on doing school-based research, review the local school board calendar

to identify holidays and events happening at schools of interest. Develop a recruitment work plan that takes into considerations these holidays and events.

4. What does it mean to you “meet adolescents where they are at?” How will you work to “meet adolescents where they are at” in your own study?

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