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## Improving Survey Questions

Evaluating parent education programs is an essential part of the educational process. Typically, we seek to understand whether a particular program or activity had an impact on participant attitudes, behavior or knowledge. To do this, we need good measures of participant attitudes, behaviors or knowledge. In other words, we need a survey.

Developing a survey is easy; developing a good survey is not. A good survey provides clear, useful information about the attitudes, behavior or knowledge of people taking part in a program. Survey questions should be both **reliable** (that is, the question is consistent, or understood the same way by different people or in different contexts) and **valid** (the question measures what you want it to measure). The following guidelines are intended to help educators develop survey questions which produce reliable and valid answers from respondents.

### 1. List your objectives

When developing a survey, think carefully about which specific attitudes, behavior or knowledge are likely to result from taking part in your program. Then, think about which questions you can ask that would get at these attitudes, behaviors and knowledge.

To do this, start by creating a list of **objectives** of your parenting class. Next, take these objectives and link them to questions you could ask to measure them. Your objectives should be as specific as possible. Additionally, more than one question could be used to measure a given objective.

- Example objective: Reduce feelings of parental stress.

*Stress levels can be interpreted in many ways, ranging from how the stress is caused, how to minimize stress, to having the resources to deal with stress. The questions you want to ask depend on the specific goals of your program.*

#### Possible questions:

- Q1: How often do you feel stress due to parenting? (all the time, often, sometimes, never)

- Q2: How many times in the past week have you spoken to someone about stress related to your child?
- Q3: Do you feel that you have someone to talk to when you are feeling stressed? (all the time, often, sometimes, never)

## **2. Questions should be clearly understood and unambiguous**

Questions need to be consistently understood by those taking the survey. Questions should be specific and terms should be unambiguous and understood in the same way by all participants. Thinking about the objectives of your program, and what specific information you seek, can help you to develop clear and concise objectives and survey questions.

- Example objective: Increase knowledge about age-appropriate toys for young children.

Ambiguous Question: I can identify age appropriate toys and activities for my child (yes, no, maybe).

*The problem with this question is that each parent may have a different idea of what an age appropriate toy is, making the responses to the question difficult to compare across parents.*

Better Question: From the following list, please identify the age appropriate toys and activities for a 5-year old.

## **3. Think about the time frame of your question**

The time frame of each question should be clearly stated in order to eliminate ambiguity in answers.

- Example objective: Increase the frequency that parents and children read together.

Ambiguous question: How often do you read to your child? (Rarely, sometimes, often)

*Because the timeframe is not specified, “rarely” could mean different things to different people. For some people “rarely” is less than once a day, while for others “rarely” would mean less than once a week. A better question clarifies the time frame so that the question is interpreted in the same way by all people taking the survey.*

Better Question: How many days per week do you read to, or with, your child?  
(Range: 1-7 days per week)

#### **4. Focus on Firsthand Knowledge**

Ask people questions about firsthand knowledge (what they have done, feelings/perceptions, current situation). People know answers to questions about their own experiences and emotions. In fact, their own experiences are likely to affect how they view their community or society as a whole. Therefore, broad, secondhand, questions are typically not a very reliable source of information. For example, if a person was robbed, they are more likely to think that robbery is an issue in their community. That person can provide you with more accurate information about the robbery they experienced (firsthand knowledge), than the prevalence of robbery in their society.

- Example objective: Increase knowledge about obesity and its risks.

Secondhand Knowledge Question: Does your community have a problem with obesity?

*This question is problematic because it is difficult for one person to knowledgeably report on the problem faced by an entire community. Additionally, that person's perception of the problem is likely to be colored by their own experiences.*

Better Firsthand Knowledge Question: Is your child obese or overweight? (May have to define by providing a Body Mass Index calculator).

#### **5. Ask one question at a time**

If there is a sequence of questions you would like to ask, each one should be posed individually. Asking double-barreled questions (more than one question at a time) makes interpreting the results very difficult.

- Example objective: Improve healthy eating and sleeping behaviors among children.

Double-barreled question: Does your child get at least 9 hours of sleep per night and exercise for at least 20 minutes per day?

*Someone whose child does not get 9 hours of sleep, but does exercise each day, would not be captured by this question.*

Better questions: Does your child get at least 9 hours of sleep each night?  
Does your child exercise for at least 20 minute per day?

## 6. Diminish blame among respondents

When answering a survey, people seek answers that are socially desirable and will put them in a good light. To reduce answer bias, the interviewer can assure confidentiality, as well as minimize their role in the data collection process. For example, the surveyor could step out of the room while the participants take the survey and have the survey collected in an envelope before they return. Additionally, the way questions are worded can help to diminish blame and make the respondent more likely to answer questions truthfully.

- Example objective: Increase family meals.

Leading Question: How often in the past week did your child enjoy the benefits of eating meals together as a family? (Range: 1-7 days in a week).

*Here, by the use of the word “benefit” it is obvious that the “correct” answer is to say that the family does eat together as often as possible. People may stretch the truth in order to provide the more socially acceptable answer.*

Better Question: How often in the past week did your family eat dinner together (Range: 1-7 days in a week).

## 7. Think about response options

The answer choices provided to the respondent are particularly important when collecting survey data. Posing clear and meaningful response options increases the chances that your question will produce results that can be compared between respondents. Some questions lend themselves to simple numerical answers, while others require that respondents choose from among several categories of responses. Regardless, the response options should be clearly defined and appropriate for the question being asked.

- Example Objective: Increase healthy sleeping behaviors

Ambiguous Question: Does your child get adequate sleep?

*The definition of “adequate” will vary across parents, making it impossible to compare answers.*

Better Questions: How many hours of sleep does your child get on a typical school night?

OR

What time does your child usually go to bed on a typical school night?

What time does your child usually wake up on a typical school day?

When rating items on a continuum, the category order should be unambiguous. Generally, the more answer categories there are, the more accurate your results will be.

- Unclear rating scale: A rating scale of: somewhat satisfied, satisfied, somewhat dissatisfied, and dissatisfied.

*Here, it is not clear which category is “more” satisfied or “more” dissatisfied.*

Better rating scale: very satisfied, generally satisfied, generally dissatisfied, very dissatisfied

The order of responses can be further improved by adding numbers to the scale; for example, using the scale above, but adding in numbers, makes the ordering even more clear:

1	2	3	4	5
very	generally	neutral	generally	very
dissatisfied	dissatisfied		satisfied	satisfied

Other possible rating scales seek to put responses into clear categories. Here, it is important that the categories be mutually exclusive and that they capture all possible responses:

- Non-mutually exclusive responses: Several times a day, 1-2 times a day, a few times a week, less than once a week

*Here, someone who did an activity two times per day would not know whether to answer “several times a day” or “1-2 times a day”*

- Mutually-exclusive responses: More than once a day, once a day, 4-6 times per week, 2-3 times per week, once a week, 2 or 3 times a month

## Summary

A good survey is needed in order to determine the effectiveness of a program. The quality of a survey depends on the quality of the questions asked. Specifically, survey questions should be designed to produce data that is reliable and valid. Following the steps above will help to ensure that your survey produces clear, meaningful results that are useful to you.

## References

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