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Ethical considerations of text messaging-based interventions with a vulnerable population: gay, bisexual, and queer teen men

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* Thank you for your interest in this presentation. Please note that analyses included herein are preliminary. More recent, finalized analyses may be available by contacting CIPHR.

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Introduction

As technology-based health behavior change programs for youth become ever more common, it is imperative that we consider the associated ethical challenges. Including:

- How do you ensure the safety of your vulnerable population while still obtaining informed consent
- When recruiting online, how do you know people are who they say they are
- How do you ensure safe usage of program features (i.e., the Text Buddy)



How do you ensure the safety of your vulnerable population while still obtaining informed consent

An IRB waiver of parental permission

Verbally talking through the consent (as opposed to having the person read it online)

Using a 'capacity to consent' screener

A self-safety assessment for the youth to think through different scenarios and determine the potential outcomes

Example self-safety assessment question

Initial Safety Question

What do you think? If your parents saw a text message about anal sex, or guys having sex with other guys on your phone, what would happen?

What would happen if your friends, boyfriend, or brothers or sisters saw these kinds of messages on your phone?

→ **If it seems unsafe:** Based upon what we're talking about here, it seems like taking part in Guy2Guy right now might not be a safe decision for you. We can talk you through how to make your cell phone more private by putting a password on it. Even then, though, someone might demand the password from you. I'm concerned about your safety. What do you think?

When recruiting online, how do you know people are who they say they are

- You can obscure the incentive and keep the amount nominal
- You can talk to them to:
 - Confirm that the information they provided on the screener matches up with the information they are telling you over the phone
 - Confirm that they sound of the appropriate age (although imperfect)



How do you ensure safe usage of program features (i.e., the Text Buddy)

Project G2G Control Panel

Home | Participants | Messages | Follow-up | Survey Events | Text Buddy | Text APP | G2G Home Page | Account | Logout

Welcome, michele

Recent Text Buddy Messages			
Date/Time	From	To	Message
20 Jan 9:23pm			My number is: [redacted] if you want to talk buddy
20 Jan 4:12pm			
21 Jan 7:17am			Good luck
20 Jan 12:04pm			HELLO - the number is [redacted]

Warnings

Mark all as read

- Text Buddy Code of Conduct
- Constant monitoring of Buddy conversations
- Reaching out to Buddies about conversations if warranted

Conclusion

A thorough and thoughtful ethical protocol, developed in conjunction with the target population and one's IRB, can ensure safe implementation of a sensitive intervention with a vulnerable population.

Key components for programs targeting LGB youth under 18 include:

- A waiver of parental permission
- A direct conversation with the youth
- A self-safety assessment
- Constant monitoring of participant interaction during field



Quantification of the process

- **Confirming the person:** 13 reported a characteristic that made them ineligible for participation (e.g., did not identify their current gender as male)
- **Self-safety:** 2 declined participation during the self-safety assessment:
 - 1 was not out to his parents and worried how they would react if they saw program messages on his phone
 - 1 was concerned about how his boyfriend would react if he saw messages about sex on his phone.
 - Several other youth decided to continue with the enrollment procedure even after identifying potential risks. 1 asked to not receive an incentive; 2 used initials instead of their full name

Quantification of the process

- **Safe usage of program components:**
 - All youth in the intervention arm agreed to the Code of Conduct
 - Nonetheless, several attempted to get around the rules:
 - 28 pairs tried to share personal information; 12 were successful
 - 4 pairs tried to share photos of themselves
 - At the same time
 - Positive conversations took over half (54%) talked about G2G content 27% talked about their process of coming out, etc.
 - We are not aware of any Buddies meeting up during the intervention