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RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Gaining access to the infant population

When asked about the most challenging aspect of recruiting infants, the majority of researchers described difficulties related to obtaining contact with new mothers. Hospital settings were frequently cited as being effective for accessing the infant population, but competition for time and attention with other researchers and hospital staff at maternity wards presented difficulties. Researchers were aware that parents approached in these hospital settings may be in emotional shock due to the recent experience of childbirth, and may thus find it difficult to actively listen to their project descriptions. Furthermore, there was significant variability in parental interest and scientific background during the consent process. As a result, researchers and coordinators often had to develop a basic explanation of their study, and tailor their explanations to the specific knowledge level of each individual. However, as coordinators often have a small window of opportunity to engage with parents, deciding how much detail to provide without knowledge of the person can be extremely challenging. Moreover, even after obtaining contact information from an interested parent, it can still be very difficult to bring infants into the laboratory to complete an experiment. Only a small proportion of parents who enroll their infants in research studies book a data collection session, and of those who do, less than half attend the session.

Other issues elucidated by researchers included the unreliability of contact information provided by parents, which often changed by the time infants were at an appropriate age for recruitment (generally 6 months to several years later). The process of connecting with parents who had previously given consent to be contacted over the phone was frequently compared to telemarketing. Many recruiters found it challenging to quickly but precisely explain their research and simultaneously retain prospective participants' engagement in the conversation. The ability to communicate information quickly and effectively was difficult to teach to new recruiters, but vital to establishing a good first impression with the parent. These concerns demonstrated that accessing participants was difficult at all stages of the recruitment process. Having the means to gather contact information did not always guarantee successful recruitment of the infant into the laboratory.

Strong relationships are essential

When asked about useful recruitment strategies, all researchers cited some aspect of forming positive interpersonal connections with the participating parent and general community. As previously mentioned, the most common method of obtaining access to infant participants was to work in collaboration with healthcare providers and recruit from hospital settings. The endorsement of healthcare professionals was often noted as an important factor contributing to recruitment success. In addition to clinical care settings, many researchers reported success approaching prospective participants in recreational or social contexts, such as at yoga sessions, birthing classes, and teddy bear picnics for new mothers, due to their interpersonal nature. This phenomenon was particularly true for rural areas. One researcher who was recruiting infants across multiple cities speculated that tight-knit community networks often found in less urbanized locations played a role in enhancing recruitment.

Many researchers noted that having a prepared pamphlet for prospective participants was useful in ensuring they were communicating the right amount of information and providing an opportunity for parents to privately consider the decision. However, one researcher mentioned that hiring a public relations company to create promotional materials was a comparably ineffective strategy. This finding is supported by previous research on infant recruitment for more invasive procedures, which demonstrated that parents responded better to face-to-face contact with researchers, rather than flyers and other print advertisements.¹¹

Beyond the initial recruitment process, the researchers also emphasized the importance of having flexible availabilities for parents with infants. Ensuring a positive experience for parents throughout the experimental sessions was frequently mentioned as being an effective way to recruit new participants, as it would influence word-of-mouth recruitment from previous participants. Furthermore, many researchers noticed that individuals who had completed a study previously were more likely to participate in another.

Finally, the researchers identified that a collaborative patient database, compiled by multiple laboratories at McMaster University to facilitate recruitment from regional hospital maternity wards, was especially useful for identifying potential participants. One researcher briefly mentioned the potential benefits of