

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE
GUIDELINES FOR CHILD ASSENT

These suggestions are designed to assist researchers in drafting appropriate child assent forms allowing for their participation in research studies. The informed consent process will include both child assent and parental permission/consent. Researchers whose procedures pose greater than minimal risk for their subjects can request additional assistance from the IRB.

What follows includes the definition of assent and guidelines for obtaining the assent of children of different ages. Because the ability of children to understand the elements of assent generally increases with age, researchers will likely provide less detailed explanations to younger children and more detailed explanations to older children. In addition, because there are individual differences in the development of a child's ability to understand the researcher's requests, there is a necessary age overlap in the categories listed below. Please note that if the children are at the top of one grouping and the bottom of the other - you should usually use the format for the **older age** grouping. The age ranges listed below provide general guidelines and the reading levels may not be appropriate for all populations. You must always consider the child's ability to understand the information.

Sometimes you will need several consent documents when a study involves many age groups. All child assents must be documented and include the signature of a witness to the consent process.

REMEMBER: A PARENT PERMISSION/CONSENT must be signed by a parent or guardian prior to obtaining child assent. Parent consent forms must contain all of the required elements for a standard informed consent form (refer to example of **Informed Consent Form for Adults**) and a modified signature section. The Parent Signature Template is included below.

Ages 2-7*: The request for assent should be kept simple and direct. For example, the researcher might ask the child if he or she would join the researcher in the next room to: look at pictures, read a story, play a game, etc. If the child were to say "yes", that would imply assent for this age group. If the child were to say "no", the researcher should respect the child's wishes. It should be possible, however, to ask the child once again several minutes later. Sometimes children may not communicate verbally their refusal to participate. For example, a child may begin working on another task unrelated to the research activity. The researcher should be aware of such a cue and end the activity.

*The oral assent process may be appropriate for children with **diminished capacity**. Please consider level of functionality in drafting your assent.

Requirements: Child assent can be written consent form or written script for oral consent. A witness signature is required.

Ages 8-14: The request for assent should include: (1) a general description of the purpose of the child's participation; (2) a brief description of the experimental tasks; (3) an assurance that the child's participation is voluntary and that he/she may withdraw from the study at any point; and (4) an offer to answer questions.

A researcher studying reading comprehension might say the following: "I am studying how fourth grade students read. I am going to ask you to read a few stories for me and answer questions about the stories when you are finished. You don't have to read if you don't want to do so. If at any point you want to stop, that is fine; you may stop and go back to class."

Requirements: Child and witness to the consent process must sign the statement. If you are concerned that the child cannot understand the process of assenting, please contact the IRB for additional information regarding assent modifications or waiver requirements.

Ages 15-17: For high school students, please refer to Informed Consent for Adults template. The template should be modified if necessary and presented in language appropriate to the child's level of comprehension.

Requirements: Child and witness to the consent process must sign the statement. If you are concerned that the child cannot understand the process of assenting, please contact the IRB for additional information regarding assent modifications or waiver requirements.

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE
WRITTEN CHILD ASSENT SAMPLES

Please use the model that corresponds to your study population and adjust the language based on the age of the child. These examples are intended as guidance and should **not** be used verbatim. The language used should be age appropriate for the study and sections highlighted in yellow should be modified to fit your study.

Example 1:

STUDY NAME

I have been told that my parents (mom or dad) have given permission (said it's okay) for me to take part in a project about *[insert a simple statement about your study here]*.

I will be asked to *[briefly describe the task(s) involved and how long participation will take]*.

I am doing this because I want to. I know that I can stop at any time if I want to. It is okay if I want to stop.

SIGNATURES

CHILD *(IF APPLICABLE)*:

Child's Signature *[if applicable]*

Child's Printed Name *[if applicable]*

Date

WITNESS:

In my judgment, the subject understands the information in this consent form and agrees to be in the study.

Witness Signature

Date

Example 2

STUDY NAME

I have been informed that my parent(s) have given permission for me to participate in a study concerning *[insert a statement about your study here]*.

I will be asked to *[briefly describe the task(s) involved and how long participation will take]*.

My participation in this project is voluntary and I have been told that I may stop my participation in this study at any time. If I choose not to participate, it will not affect my *[grade, treatment/care- whichever applies, select only one]* in any way. I have been told that I can ask questions at any time.

SIGNATURES

CHILD:

Child's Signature

Child's Printed Name

Date

WITNESS:

In my judgment, the subject understands the information in this consent form and agrees to be in the study.

Witness Signature

Date

