



What Teens Really Hear:

Rethinking Survey Design Through Cognitive Interviews

Authors:

Jania Marshall, Kristen Conrad, Melissa Silesky, Darby Steiger



81ST ANNUAL CONFERENCE | MAY 2026

The Value of Cognitive Interviews with Teens

“Cognitive interviewing focuses on identifying and fixing problems in survey questions by exploring how respondents understand, retrieve, and use information to answer those questions.” (Tourangeau, et al, 2000)

Tourangeau, R. (2000). *The psychology of survey response*. University of Cambridge.

Why do cognitive interviews with teens?

- ✓ Strengthen Question Clarity
- ✓ Validate Response Options and Instructions
- ✓ Ensure Questions Work for Teens
- ✓ Improve Sensitivity and Participant Comfort



Improve Data Quality!

Better questions lead to more meaningful, and actionable results.

Approach – 4 Studies Reviewed

50 Cognitive Interviews with Tweens and Teens 11-18 Years of Age Across 4 Studies

Study A: 11-17
Social media

Study B: 13-17
Teen pressures



Study C: 14-18
Civic engagement

Study D: 13-17
Civic education & politics



Teen Cognitive Interview Considerations

- Recruit through parent vs directly with teen (unless teen is 18)
- Obtaining parental consent/Youth assent
- Zoom screen sharing
- Setting incentive levels



Setting the Stage with Teens



- Build rapport with teen participants
 - Consent process before interview itself
- Teach teens how to engage in a cognitive interview
 - Encourage feedback
 - Provide a space to speak freely



Modifications to Cognitive Probing Approach to Accommodate Teens

ADULT PROBE	TEEN PROBE
What does the term “ ” mean to you?	Have you ever heard of the term “ ”?
How easy or hard was it to answer this question?	Was there anything confusing about the question?
How did you decide on your answer?	What were you thinking about when you read this question?

Importance of Being Aware of Non-verbal Cues that Merit Spontaneous Probing



Hesitation / Lengthy Pauses



Cursor Movements



Confused Expressions



Loss of Attention



From Confusion to Clarity

Use Terminology Familiar to Tweens/Teens

Have you ever used **generative Artificial Intelligence** (AI) technologies like ChatGPT?

- **Example:** The term “generative Artificial Intelligence” caused confusion for teens because that’s not how they refer to AI
- **Solution:** Simplify to “AI” and “ChatGPT”

Some people feel bad because there’s too much pressure to look their best or present themselves in a certain way. Examples include **looking trendy**, having a certain body type or look, etc.
How much does this pressure affect you personally?

- **Example:** The term “looking trendy” while understood by teens, was not a term they used
- **Solution:** Used more commonly used phrases “following fashion trends” or “wearing certain brands” to align with terminology teens use

Define Unfamiliar Terms

What is the first thing that comes to mind when you hear the word **democracy**?

- **Example:** Across the tweens/teens, understanding of the term “democracy” varies greatly
- **Solution:** To ensure all teens were answering questions from the same understanding of the term, a definition was added prior to the questions

Offer Tangible Examples to Clarify a General Concept

The next questions refer to social and political issues, by which we mean the sort of issues you would hear about in the news.

How often do you talk about social and political issues? *With other people online (social media)*

Never | Rarely | Sometimes | Often | Don't know

Add tangible examples to help clarify a more general concept

- **Example:** Teens interpret “social media” in different ways
- **Solution:** Necessary to clarify what apps and behaviors they need to consider when answering the question

Define Activities to Help Ground Question

During an average weekday (i.e., Monday-Friday), how much time do you spend on your smartphone?

- **Example:** When asking about time spent on their smart phones – with so many possible activities (texting, playing games, social media, schoolwork, etc.), many question what activities they should include
- **Solution:** Offer examples to clarify what teens should include when considering their usage

Recommendations for Conducting Cognitive Interviews with Teens

Cognitive interviews are a critical part of the questionnaire design process – especially for teens



Conduct interviews with a range of teens within the design of the study



Make sure you take the additional time to teach teens how to participate in an interview – ground them in the understanding that it's okay to not understand something



Every voice matters – even if only one teen is challenged by something in a survey, it deserves attention. If one struggles, surely others will struggle as well



Acknowledgements

Special thank you to Ken Winneg and Lance Holbert (University of Pennsylvania/Annenberg Public Policy Center),
Michael Robb (Common Sense Media) and David Campbell (University of Notre Dame)
for allowing us the use of their study data for this presentation.



Thank You, AAPOR 

Jania Marshall

Research Director

jmarshall@ssrs.com