

Recruiting Participants Through SPARK Research Match A Guide for Investigators Interested in Applying

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1. Introduction to SPARK

SPARK, which stands for Simons Foundation Powering Autism Research, is a landmark autism research project with the mission of speeding up research and advancing our understanding of autism to help improve lives. Funded by the Simons Foundation and Simons Foundation International, SPARK is the result of a collaboration between the Simons Foundation Autism Research Initiative (SFARI*) and more than 31 university-affiliated clinics and community partners.

For more information on SPARK and resources available from the cohort, please visit the SFARI website for the [SPARK cohort](#). For the participant-facing website, please see the [SPARK website](#).

*In 2024, many of the SPARK team members transitioned from SFARI to Boston Children's Hospital (BCH), where SPARK's PI, Wendy Chung, serves as Chief of Pediatrics. The Research Match staff are now employed by BCH yet still work closely with SFARI staff on aspects of the Research Match process, including application review, approval, and data sharing.

2. Research Opportunities within SPARK

SPARK provides multiple ways for investigators to access resources and perform research with the SPARK cohort.

2.1 Access to SPARK Data

Principal Investigators may request access to SPARK phenotypic and genetic datasets by placing a SPARK dataset resource request in [SFARI Base](#), the Simons Foundation's centralized repository for autism and autism-related research data and biospecimens, along with an online portal facilitating research recruitment requests. The review and approval process typically takes up to three weeks for **SPARK dataset resource requests**.^{*} These data include a wide range of behavioral, developmental, and clinical measures completed by SPARK participants. The [Researcher Welcome Packet](#) describes these resources in more detail.

Because SPARK is an online study, participants complete assessments at different times and may choose which measures to complete. As a result, the availability of specific phenotypic measures and genetic data can vary across participants.

^{*} See Section 4.2 for more information on the review process for Research Match resource requests.

2.2 Recruiting Participants through Research Match

In addition to accessing existing datasets, investigators can apply to recruit participants from the SPARK cohort to their own studies through SPARK Research Match.

Research Match allows approved investigators to invite eligible SPARK families to participate in new research studies. Invitations are distributed electronically by the SPARK Team and their IT partner, Tempus Dynamics. Invited participants can choose whether they would like to learn more about a study, and those interested can further authorize the sharing of their contact information with the external research team or choose to complete surveys online.

2.3 Linking Study Data with SPARK Data

Investigators who recruit SPARK participants for new studies via Research Match may also be able to link their study data with the SPARK phenotypic and genetic data described above. This linkage is made possible through a unique participant identifier (SPID) and requires appropriate consent and data-sharing agreements. All Research Match studies linking SPARK data with their Research Match project data must also obtain a [Certificate of Confidentiality](#) from the National Institutes of Health.

The ability to link new study data with existing SPARK data can enhance research by providing richer datasets and enabling longitudinal or multi-modal analyses.

3. More on SPARK Research Match

As summarized above in section 2.2, SPARK Research Match is a recruitment service that connects approved investigators with eligible SPARK participants. Research Match is designed to:

- Facilitate recruitment for autism-related research
- Minimize participant burden
- Ensure privacy and responsible data sharing
- Maintain transparency with SPARK families about research opportunities
- Keep families engaged in and informed about the state of the field

Investigators who utilize SPARK Research Match work closely with the SPARK Research Match Team to design recruitment workflows that are appropriate for their study protocols. The Research Match service can support a variety of research study designs. While the exact recruitment workflow may vary, most studies fall into one of two general categories:

3.1 In-Clinic and Hand-off Studies

In these studies, SPARK invites eligible participants to express interest and authorize the sharing of their contact information with the research team. Investigators then contact participants directly to provide additional details about the study and obtain consent.

This approach is commonly used for studies that involve:

- in-person visits
- clinical assessments
- phone interviews

- focus groups
- online tasks hosted outside of SPARK's platform

3.2 Online Survey Studies

For studies that consist primarily of surveys, SPARK may be able to host the study within its own online system via its IT partner, Tempus Dynamics. In these cases, participants may proceed directly from consent to survey completion within the SPARK workflow. Upon completion of the online survey study, Tempus Dynamics can seamlessly distribute incentives to participants' emails. Taken together, hosting surveys within the SPARK system can streamline the participant experience and simplify data integration with SPARK resources. Please note that hosting online surveys within the SPARK system is most effective for studies with a large sample size and where investigators do not need participant identifying information. Certain studies with extremely complicated workflows or custom build needs (e.g. integration of custom tasks, external API hookups) should discuss their needs with the Research Match team by contacting sdbr@simonsfoundation.org. In rare cases, custom workflow needs may incur charges to the investigator in order to support the build.

SFARI and the SPARK Research Match team will work with investigators to determine the most appropriate recruitment workflow for each project.

4. Applying to Recruit SPARK Participants

Investigators interested in recruiting participants from the SPARK cohort must submit a **Research Match resource request** through [SFARI Base](#). Resource requests are evaluated by the SPARK team and the SPARK Participant Access Committee (PAC), a group of external and internal scientific experts and community advisors (CA). This process allows evaluation of proposed studies to ensure they meet scientific quality standards, are a good use of resources, and align with SPARK's mission while minimizing burden on participating families.

4.1 Submitting a Research Match Resource Request Through SFARI Base

To submit a resource request, investigators must first create an account on SFARI Base and affiliate with their institution. During this process, investigators will also sign the [Joinder Agreement to the Researcher Distribution Agreement \(RDA\)](#), which outlines responsibilities related to data use and sharing.**

After creating an account, investigators can complete the **Research Match resource request**, which includes information such as:

- study objectives
- eligibility criteria for participants
- recruitment targets and estimated sample size
- study procedures and participant time commitment
- incentives or compensation offered to participants
- plans for data sharing with SPARK

Investigators must also upload relevant study materials, including:

- Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval documentation
- Consent forms
- Recruitment materials (optional)*
- Surveys, interview guides, or other study instruments (if applicable)
- [Certificate of Confidentiality](#) (if applicable)

*If you decide to draft recruitment materials prior to SPARK Research Match approval, please know that you may need to resubmit them to your IRB after details of your project are finalized with the Research Match team.

Additional details about submitting a resource request can be found on the [SFARI Base website](#) or by reaching out to sdbr@simonsfoundation.org.

**If no RDA is in place, the RDA execution process will be kicked off upon approval of your first Resource Request in SFARI Base.

4.2 Application Deadlines and Review Cycles

Recruitment requests for the SPARK cohort are reviewed on a quarterly basis. Application deadlines occur at the end of each calendar quarter:

- 11:59 pm ET on March 31
- 11:59 pm ET on June 30
- 11:59 pm ET on September 30
- 11:59 pm ET on December 31

Applications submitted during a given quarter are typically reviewed by the PAC during the following quarter. Investigators are encouraged to carefully plan their submission timing and to submit **no more than one** application per review cycle. If multiple applications are submitted by the same research group within a single cycle, SFARI and the SPARK Team may request that the investigator prioritize one application for review and defer the others to a later cycle.

4.3 Evaluation Criteria

Research Match resource requests undergo an initial review by the SFARI science and SPARK teams before forwarding for review by the SPARK Participant Access Committee (PAC), a group of external and internal scientific experts, as well as a board of community advisors (PAC-CA). Applications are evaluated based on several criteria, including:

- scientific merit and potential impact
- feasibility of recruitment from the SPARK cohort
- participant burden and study complexity

- appropriateness of participant incentives
- appropriateness for use of SPARK resources (e.g. staff time, participant burden)
- alignment with SPARK's mission to advance autism research
- potential value of data contributed back to the SPARK resource

Studies that provide minimal incentive, place high burden on participants, or contribute limited scientific value to the SPARK dataset and/or broader autism science may be rated less favorably during the review process. In some cases, after initial review, revisions or additional information may be needed before a request can proceed to committee review. Additionally, a request may be declined at the initial review stage and not proceed to the full PAC. The PAC may also require revisions or additional information from requests before making a final decision. Finally, select applications may undergo specific review from a bioethicist (e.g. to evaluate risk to participants, data privacy concerns, etc).

4.4 Notification of Decision

After the review process is complete, investigators will be notified of the outcome of their resource request. Possible outcomes include:

Approval

The resource request is approved as submitted and may proceed to the planning and implementation phase.

Conditional approval

The resource request is approved pending specific revisions or additional information. Investigators must address the outlined questions or conditions before receiving a final decision.

Defer

The resource request requires substantial revisions or clarification before it can be reconsidered by the PAC. Investigators may revise and resubmit the resource request for review in a future cycle.

Reject

The resource request is not approved for recruitment through SPARK Research Match. Investigator may not reapply for the same resource request.

Investigators will receive communication from SFARI outlining the decision and, when applicable, providing feedback and next steps with the SPARK Research Match team.

For approved resource requests, the next phase involves working with the SPARK Research Match team to plan and prepare the recruitment workflow. **Please note:** In most cases, recruitment launches approximately **3–6 months** after approval of the associated resource request, though timelines may be shorter or longer. Prompt engagement and response to the SPARK Team's communications are important to minimize delays.

5. Letters of Support for Grant Applications

Investigators may request a letter of support from SFARI for use in grant applications or other funding proposals from the SFARI Data and Biorepository (SDBR) Team. These letters indicate that a proposed study may be a good fit for recruitment through SPARK Research Match, pending formal review and approval.

To request a letter of support, [please complete this form](#). For questions about letters of support, please reach out to sdbr@simonsfoundation.org. Investigators should allow at least 2-3 weeks for letter preparation.

Please note: A letter of support **does not guarantee approval** to use SPARK Research Match. All studies must still undergo the standard application and review process as outlined above. Provided letters will include language noting this.

6. Frequently Asked Questions

How do I apply to recruit SPARK participants?

Investigators must submit a Research Match resource request through [SFARI Base](#), the Simons Foundation's secure research portal. The application requires study details, IRB documentation, and supporting materials. See Section 4 for more information.

How long does the application review process take?

Research Match resource requests are reviewed on a quarterly basis by the SPARK Participant Access Committee (PAC). Some applications are also reviewed by a board of community advisors. Most are reviewed in the quarter following submission. Investigators should plan accordingly, as expedited review is generally not available.

What types of studies are a good fit for SPARK Research Match?

SFARI supports a wide range of autism-related research studies, including:

- in-person or clinic-based studies
- remote or online studies
- survey-based research
- behavioral or observational studies

Studies are evaluated based on scientific merit, feasibility, participant burden, and alignment with SPARK's mission.

Are there any limitations on the types of studies that can be approved?

Studies may be less competitive if they:

- place high burden on participants without sufficient justification
- offer minimal or no participant incentive
- have very small sample sizes/limited potential participants eligible in SPARK or limited scientific contribution

- do not plan to contribute data back to the SPARK resource (when appropriate)

The SFARI/SPARK team may also recommend modifications to improve feasibility or participant experience.

How long does it take to launch a study after approval?

While timelines vary, most studies take approximately 3–6 months to launch after approval. This depends on factors such as study complexity, IRB timelines, and preparation of recruitment materials.

Is there a cost to use SPARK Research Match?

At this time, SFARI provides in-kind support for Research Match, which means most investigators are not charged a fee for recruitment services. However, investigators are responsible for:

- any licensing fees for standardized measures
- costs associated with in-person study implementation
- participant incentives
- any custom development needs for complex study components (will be communicated directly with investigators)

Can I link my study data with SPARK data?

Yes. Investigators may be able to link their study data with SPARK phenotypic and genetic data using a unique participant identifier (SPID). This requires appropriate consent language and adherence to SPARK data-sharing policies. All Research Match studies linking SPARK data with their Research Match project data must also obtain a [Certificate of Confidentiality](#) from the National Institutes of Health.

Who should I contact with additional questions?

For questions about applications, feasibility, or SPARK resources, please contact:

sdbr@simonsfoundation.org