

CONDUCTING FOCUS GROUPS

Focus groups are small, structured group discussions that examine the perceptions of a particular group. The format encourages group members to interact and to reflect on one another's statements. A moderator leads the discussion, using a list of open-ended questions and probes. Ideally, the moderator/facilitator will be someone with experience in facilitating focus groups. The discussion typically focuses on one or two specific topics. Transcripts are later reviewed to identify recurring themes.

Each focus group typically includes 8 to 10 persons who are similar in regard to the issue of interest (e.g., young adults currently misusing alcohol, parents, law enforcement personnel) and/or to represent the larger group of people about whom you want information—your target audience. Three to five focus groups are typically used per demographic.

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Developing Questions—Focus Group Protocol

Develop a protocol. A focus group needs a plan. Give some thought to what you want to learn from the group and the questions that will best elicit this information. Develop a written protocol that includes primary questions, potential follow-up questions (or probes), the order in which these questions should be asked, and introductory and closing statements.

Rely on a small number of core questions. Your protocol should include between 10 and 12 questions. When developing a protocol, imagine that each participant will respond to every question. Focus groups should not last more than 90 minutes.

Use broad, open-ended questions. Don't ask questions that call for a "yes" or "no" response, as they tend to end discussion and make it harder to learn why people believe what they do.

Ask participants to speak from their own experience. In general, it is more useful to have participants speak from their own experience than to ask them what other people do or think or to predict what they might do or think in the future.

Start easy. Start with a question that everyone should be able to answer and that doesn't require much disclosure. This will help get everyone talking and provide you with an indication of people's styles so you can better manage the group.

End by asking if participants have anything to add to the discussion. This may result in some incredibly useful information that you did not anticipate.

Group Characteristics and Composition

Focus groups are typically composed of 8–10 participants. If the group gets much smaller, it can be difficult to sustain a lively and interesting discussion. If it gets much larger, people have less opportunity to participate, which often leads to disruptive side conversations among small clusters of two or three participants.

The environment should be conducive to open discussion. It is the job of the facilitator to create an environment that nurtures differences in points of view, protects participants, and does not pressure participants to reach consensus or vote on issues discussed.

Typical focus group discussions last 60–90 minutes. In addition, you should allocate another 30 minutes: 15 minutes at the beginning to check people in, orient them to the group, have them introduce themselves, and lay out the ground rules for the discussion, and 15 minutes at the end to debrief the discussion and allow participants to ask any questions they might have about the study and or how the information will be used.

Participants should share characteristics that relate to the topic being investigated. For example, you may convene a group of parents of middle school students, parents of high school students, teachers, 8th grade girls, 10th grade boys, or members of specific cultures that are highly prevalent in your community. You should not recruit participants who know little or nothing about the issues being discussed.

Participants should be similar to one another (though not in their opinions about the topics being investigated). The rule for selecting focus group participants is commonality, not diversity. You don't want to combine dissimilar people in focus groups—for example, don't put together people with high levels of education and people with low levels of education. People are more likely to reveal their opinions and beliefs and to talk about sensitive issues when they are with people they perceive to be like themselves, rather than those whom they perceive to be more knowledgeable than they are, wealthier than they are, or more influential than they are.

Participants should be selected so that they are likely to represent the views and opinions of a defined population. For example, focus group members might be chosen to represent all police officers or all school nurses in a community.

Participants should be unfamiliar with one another. This helps to ensure the validity of the data by encouraging participants to state their real opinions and views. When participants know one another, they (1) are often less likely to reveal highly personal or sensitive information, (2) are more likely to express views that conform to those of others in the group (especially others whom they perceive as having some power or influence outside the group), and (3) may respond to questions based on their past experiences with one another, which can confound the data.

Locating and Recruiting Participants

When recruiting participants, try to define the group as precisely as possible. It usually makes sense to consider gender, age, occupation, geographic location, ethnicity, and language. Think about what you want, then think about how you might identify potential members who match your needs, and then think about whether they are so diverse that you need to eliminate some or put some in a separate group.

Try different strategies to find participants. One way to reach potential focus group participants is to go where they are. For example, to recruit law enforcement officers, you might work with their unions. You might also put announcements in local newspapers and on public access cable stations or post notices in public places such as libraries, supermarkets, or public health clinics. Once you find potential participants, simple screening questions can help you decide whom to include.

Convince people to participate. Make an upbeat pitch. People may be more likely to participate if they believe that the project will benefit their community. Remind them that participating in the group gives them a chance to offer their opinions and experience to the project.

Also, make it easy. Schedule groups at a convenient time (one that will not interfere with, for example, the participants' jobs) and in a convenient place (one that is easy to reach by public transportation and has adequate parking). Consider offering food or childcare if that is feasible within your budget.

Here are some other things you might mention:

- The name of the agency or organization sponsoring the research or conducting the focus group
- The reason the focus group is being conducted
- How they were selected
- What they will do in the group (for example, "If you agree to participate in the group, you will be asked to take part in a one-hour discussion about misuse and abuse of alcohol among youth. The discussion will include 8–10 other community members and 2 discussion leaders")
- Who is eligible to participate in the group
- How their confidentiality will be protected and how they will be expected to respect the confidentiality of the other participants
- When and where the focus group will take place, and how much time it will take
- (Optional) That a reminder letter will be sent to participants
- Your name and telephone number so they can call you if they have additional questions or discover they are unable to attend the group

Do your best to ensure that participants attend. Send a follow-up letter to each participant, and telephone them the day before the meeting. Recruit more subjects than you need (e.g., recruit 12 people with the hope that 10 show up). Sometimes offering a monetary incentive, such as a \$25 gift card per participant, is effective.

Setting and Other Conditions

Provide refreshments. When possible, it is a good idea to serve light refreshments. Sometimes participants are served a meal and given a chance to socialize under the supervision of the group leaders before the focus group. The theory is that this increases their willingness to converse once the group convenes. If you do this, make sure that participants don't discuss the topic before the focus group

officially begins—this pre-discussion tends to solidify their positions and to make the group discussion something of an anticlimax.

Use a comfortable and private meeting space. Don't hold focus groups in high-traffic areas. The surroundings should be comfortable and private so participants feel free to speak openly. For example, use a private conference room.

Typical Opening Procedures

Keep an attendance list, and collect demographic information if needed. Keep a checklist of those expected to attend the group. If age, gender, or other demographic attributes are important for correlation with focus group findings, collect this information from participants. Design a short half-page form that requires no more than two or three minutes to complete, and administer it before the focus group begins. Questions to consider include age, gender, occupation, grade in school, school attended, and town of residence.

Determine how to deal with late arrivals. Generally it's best to dismiss people who arrive late because it is difficult to integrate them successfully into a group discussion that has already started.

Obtain informed consent, if needed. Generally, informed consent is not necessary, provided that the group comprises adults, the topic is not sensitive, and the questions do not focus on members' illegal or potentially embarrassing behavior. With minors, informed consent from a parent or guardian is always needed.

Distribute name tags/cards (with first names only). Another option is to have participants fill out their own name cards/tags (again, with their first name only).

Conducting the Focus Group

Use two facilitators—a primary and a secondary leader. There is a lot to manage in a focus group, and while it is possible to have just one leader, two are better. One person (who is experienced with group process) should be primarily responsible for putting questions to the group and managing the group process. The second leader can assist in the discussion but should mostly be responsible for taking detailed notes. Both leaders should take notes, but the assistant will have more time to keep careful notes. He or she should also be responsible for managing latecomers, housekeeping issues, etc.

Read the opening remarks statement. Begin the group by reading the opening remarks to all group members and having group members introduce themselves to one another. Consider articulating ground rules to the group, for example:

- We want you to do the talking.
- We would like everyone to participate. I may call on you if I have not heard from you in a while.
- There are no right or wrong answers. Every person's experiences and opinions are important. Speak up whether you agree or disagree. We want to hear a wide range of opinions.
- What is said in this room stays here. We want folks to feel comfortable sharing when sensitive issues come up.
- We will record the group because we want to capture everything you have to say, but we won't identify anyone by name in our report. You will remain anonymous.

Follow your focus group protocol. Ask the questions in the order specified in your protocol. Not following your plan can get confusing, both to you and to the participants.

Invite and promote participation by all members. At times it is necessary to ask participants who have not spoken to contribute. Use prompts, such as, “John, we haven’t heard your opinions about this issue yet. What do you think?” But don’t put people on the spot if they simply don’t have anything to say.

Wait for responses. Give people time to think. Don’t bias their answers by suggesting possible responses.

Clarify responses using neutral probes. For example: Can you explain further? Can you give us an example of what you mean? Is there anything you would like to add? Can you say more about that? I’m not sure I understand, can you help me out?

Elicit and protect minority opinion. Focus groups should help you understand the perspectives and experiences present in your target population, not just the perspectives and beliefs of the majority of that population.

Do not state or show your opinion. Avoid body language that reflects how you feel—especially nodding or shaking your head. Avoid approving or disapproving comments after people speak, such as saying “Good” or “Correct” or “Really?”

Maintain order. It is the leader’s job to cope with our “favorite” group members—the expert, the endless Rambler, the shy participant, and the dominant talker. It is better to intervene with them a bit early than to let things go.

Note Taking

Consider using a “Focus Group Notes” form to assist you in taking notes. Here are some other tips:

- Indicate individual responses or different points of view held by several members by beginning notes for each on a new line.
- Try to identify speakers so you can keep track of individual themes.
- Try to record the number of people holding various views.
- Try to record important comments verbatim.
- Review and summarize your notes immediately after the group ends.

Consider recording the group. If the adults present consent to recording, it may facilitate easier note taking. Please note that use of a tape recorder with youth may not be permitted. In any case, it is good to also take notes by hand in case there is a malfunction with recording technology.

Debriefing

Record your observations of the group process. The two leaders should meet immediately after the group ends to share and record their views about the group. Consider the following issues:

- Were there any major departures from the protocol?
- Were there any unusual events? If so, how were they handled?

- Was there sufficient time to complete the protocol comfortably? If not, why not? What issues were cut short?
- Was the group fairly unified in its views, or was there diversity of opinion? If there was diversity, did it seem associated with particular types of participants, such as males vs. females?
- Were there any major disagreements in the group? If so, what were they?
- What was the group process like—were people bored, restless, excited, angry, silent, confused?
- What, if anything, should be changed for the next group?

Focus Group Analysis and Reporting

Note: This section was adapted from Rhode Island State Epidemiology and Outcomes Workgroup, Buka, and Rosenthal.⁴²

Transcribe the recording. After each focus group, transcribe the tape and insert notes as needed. Clean up transcripts by stripping off nonessential words. Assign each participant comment a separate line on the page. Label each line with a participant ID number (e.g., 1, 2, 3 . . .).

Compile your results. Use different-colored highlighters (ideally, five or six different colors) to identify recurrent themes, which will make compilation and analysis easier. Create a database in Excel, or use a table format (if no one is proficient in Excel). Here are some guidelines:

- Use a separate spreadsheet or table for each focus group
- Within each spreadsheet, use one sheet per question
- Make three columns and label them Coding, Participant ID, and Responses
- Fill in Participant ID and Responses for each question (coding will be done in analysis)

Analyze your results. Once all the comments have been entered, look for common categories or themes across responses for each question. One thing you’ll want to determine is whether specific groups of people or other factors stand out. Healthy People 2020 defines a *health disparity* as “a particular type of health difference that is closely linked with social, economic, and/or environmental disadvantage. Health disparities adversely affect groups of people who have systematically experienced greater obstacles to health based on their racial or ethnic group; religion; socioeconomic status; gender; age; mental health; cognitive, sensory, or physical disability; sexual orientation or gender identity; geographic location; or other characteristics historically linked to discrimination or exclusion” (p. 28).²⁸ Is there a particular impact on a group or subpopulation who may be vulnerable to health disparities?

It is ideal to have several people participate in this process. Once consensus has been achieved regarding the best categories for organizing the data, assign a number or letter to each category. (See the example in the table below.) Repeat this process for each question in each focus group.

Sample Analysis Table

Focus Group 1: Youth		
Question 3: What are the main reasons, do you think, that kids drink alcohol?		
Category Code*	Participant ID	Responses
B	4	“Some kids are just bored”
A	3	“Usually they are just trying to be cool”
C	1	“They might feel sad or depressed”

A	4	"Everyone does it"
B	2	"It's fun"
C	6	"They want to escape their problems"
A	5	"They want to fit in"
D	4	"Their parents are okay with it"
B	2	"It feels good"

* A – Peer influence, B – Enhancement, C – Coping, D – Parental influence

Note: The "sort" function in Excel can be used to group entries by category. If some entries seem inconsistent for their category, consider re-categorizing them or adding another category. It may also become apparent that one or more categories can be collapsed.

Synthesize your results. Identify category heading titles. Write a short paragraph summarizing findings for each category, possibly noting similarities and differences across groups. Add powerful quotes to each section.

SAMPLE QUESTIONS FOR YOUTH FOCUS GROUPS ON ALCOHOL

Note: The questions in this section were adapted from Rhode Island State Epidemiology and Outcomes Workgroup, Buka, & Rosenthal.⁴²

Social norms:

- Is underage drinking a serious problem in (name of the community)?
Probe: [If yes] Why? [If no] Why not?
- Do all youth engage in underage drinking, or is it just a few?
Probe: What percentage of students at your school do you think drink alcohol?
- How old are most kids when they started drinking alcohol?
- In your opinion, how often do kids drink alcohol?
- In your opinion, what are the main reasons that kids drink alcohol?
- Are there certain subpopulations of kids who are more likely to drink alcohol in this community?

Perceptions of harm:

- What are the potential consequences of underage drinking?
- Do you think underage drinking is harmful?
Probe: [If yes] How or why? [If no] Why not?
- What do you think should happen to a kid who is caught drinking alcohol?

Drinking and driving:

Note: Some questions in this section were adapted from the Wyoming Department of Health.⁴³

- Do you know kids who've ridden in a car or other vehicle driven by someone who had been drinking alcohol?
- Do you know someone who's driven a car or other vehicle when he or she had been drinking alcohol?
- Do you know someone who was killed or injured in a drunk driving crash?
- Do you know someone who has been arrested for drunk or impaired driving?
- What do you think should be the penalty for underage drinking and driving?

Parental monitoring:

- How do parents in this community feel about their kids drinking alcohol?
- If kids in your community drink alcohol, how likely are other people to find out?
Probe: Parents? Family members? Police? Teachers?
- Do you know of parents or adults who permit youth under the age of 21 to consume alcohol in their homes?

Access and availability:

- How do most kids get alcohol?
- How easy would it be for people your age to get alcohol from those sources?
- Where do kids go when they want to drink alcohol?

Outreach/programs:

- Does your school have an alcohol policy?
- Does your school offer any education about alcohol?
- What programs or services are available in your community to help students avoid drinking alcohol?
- Are you aware of local resources that can help students with alcohol-related problems?
- How effective do you think our community is at enforcing laws against underage drinking?
- In your opinion, would any of the following solutions be effective at stopping underage drinking in your community: tagging beer kegs with the ID of the purchaser, offering an 800 number for citizens to report stores that sell to minors, providing server/seller training programs for places that sell alcohol, conducting a public awareness campaign?
- What other ideas or strategies could [name of your group] try to keep students from drinking alcohol?

SAMPLE QUESTIONS FOR PARENT FOCUS GROUPS ON ALCOHOL**Social norms:**

- Is underage drinking a serious problem in (name of the community)?
Probe: [If yes] Why? [If no] Why not?
- Do all youth engage in underage drinking, or is it just a few?
Probe: What percentage of students at your child's school do you think drink alcohol?
- Do you know any youth under the age of 21 who use alcohol?
- How old are most kids when they started drinking alcohol?
- In your opinion, how often do kids drink alcohol?
- In your opinion, what are the main reasons that kids drink alcohol?
- Are there certain subpopulations of kids who are more likely to drink alcohol in this community?

Perceptions of harm:

- What are the potential consequences of underage drinking?
- Do you think underage drinking is harmful? If so, how or why?

- What do you think should happen to a kid who is caught drinking alcohol?

Parental monitoring:

- Do parents in your community talk to children about alcohol?
- How do parents feel about their kids drinking alcohol?
- Under what circumstances is it acceptable for an adult to provide alcohol to minors under age 21—holidays, special occasions, at meals, never, other?
Probe: If you picked “other,” please specify.
- If kids in your community drink alcohol, how likely are other people to find out?
Probe: Parents? Family members? Police? Teachers?
- Do you know of parents or adults who permit youth under 21 to consume alcohol in their homes?

Access and availability:

- How do most kids in your community get alcohol?
- How easy is it for kids to get alcohol from those sources?
- Where do kids go when they want to drink alcohol?

Outreach/programs:

- Are you aware of local resources that can help students with alcohol-related problems?
- What’s happening in the community to educate parents about underage drinking?
- How effective do you think our community is at enforcing laws against underage drinking?
- What ideas or strategies could [name of your group] try in order to keep students from drinking alcohol?