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# All About Focus Groups: What, Why, and How

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This document can be used to prepare youth or adults to conduct focus groups. It may be used in conjunction with “Planning Focus Groups: The Details” (SA-6).

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## Why Do Focus Groups?

Focus groups are one way to get feedback from other people. They can be a valuable tool for making sure youth projects (or any projects) are on the right track. Being able to cite the results of focus groups, surveys, or other needs assessments, can also build youths’ credibility. For example:

- One California Center group working on teen pregnancy prevention held focus groups in their communities to learn what their peers thought should or should not be taught in sex ed. The results were used as part of a statewide youth advocacy effort.
- Another group held community focus groups to determine what people thought were the greatest needs in their community. The results were used to select youth-led community service projects.
- Youth in your project could choose to hold a focus group of local elected officials to gauge how supportive they would be of more youth participation in planning decisions.

## What Exactly Are Focus Groups?

Focus groups are small meetings, led by moderators, in which people discuss a topic. From meetings like these, people learn what others think about all kinds of subjects – from teen pregnancy to dish soap. Focus groups are forums for **discussion and conversation**. Their purpose is not just to learn *what* people think about a certain issue, but *why* they think that way.

Focus groups are lead by one or two moderators that ask questions and direct the discussion in an **unbiased** way. Most focus groups can cover 10-15 questions in one to two hours.

Focus groups are used by youth, teachers, community organizations, or the government to get people's opinions on programs, policies, or important issues.

## Who Participates?

Unlike surveys, which collect information from a wide cross-section of people, focus groups gather opinions from a smaller, pre-selected group. Often focus groups are made up of people

who do not know each other. However, it is not essential that participants be strangers; often youth-led focus groups are more informal and the participants do in fact know each other.

The **ideal size** for a focus group is generally between six and twelve people. This size group is small enough that discussion is manageable, but big enough to provide a range of ideas.

## **Conducting the Focus Group**

### **Pre-session**

Encourage small talk as participants arrive. The moderators should greet each participant. The group can talk while waiting for everyone to arrive, but try not to chat about the focus group topics. (Doing so can accidentally result in valuable information getting shared before the whole group arrives.) The moderators should use this time to watch the way participants interact — noticing who is quiet, who seems to talk a lot.

### **Welcome**

The moderators should introduce themselves, thank everyone for coming, and go over any logistical issues (location of the bathroom, the refreshments, etc.).

### **Overview**

Explain the purpose of the focus group, the importance of the topic, and how the information will be used. Explain that you will ask questions and that you want as many people as possible to answer – not at the same time though! Ask people to be respectful of each other.

### **Begin the Questioning**

The questions should be determined beforehand, but questioning should appear casual and informal. Moderators should let the discussion move as freely as possible and step in only when discussion is getting off track or it is time to move on to the next question. Be sure to watch the clock so you do not spend too much time on any one question.

### **Take Notes**

There are a few ways to record the information. You can use a tape recorder, but doing so requires parental consent if minors are in the focus group. The California Center uses a simpler approach: We ask youth to lead the focus group and ask a fast-writing adult to sit in the back and take notes. (The tips on the next page will help you train youth facilitators. Or call in the California Center!)

### **Concluding**

When all the questions have been covered, conclude the focus group. Thank everyone for coming and let them know that their input is valued highly. If you offered an incentive (prizes, raffle) for participation, give it out at the end.

## **Being a Good Focus Group Moderator**

### **Tip #1: Lead the discussion in an unbiased way.**

Sometimes if you believe something strongly, it is hard to hide it. But good moderators keep their own opinions to themselves so the group can talk freely.

*Moderator:* What do you think is the greatest challenge facing our community?

*Participant:* There is nothing to do. There are no movie theaters or skateboard parks!

**Bad Moderator Response:** You are wrong. There are so many more serious problems!

**Good Moderator Response:** Thanks for sharing that opinion, Helen. What about the rest of you, what do you think our community most needs?

**Tip #2: Do not correct participants who say something incorrect:**

Part of focus groups is learning what people *know* and *don't know*. That means we can actually learn just as much from comments that are *wrong* as from those that are *right*. So don't shut down the conversation just because the participants are incorrect about something. *After* the meeting is over you can casually set the record straight, but not during the focus group.

*Moderator:* What are major issues facing our schools?

*Participant:* I know one! All the high schools are going to be closed down because the county doesn't have enough money.

**Bad Moderator Response:** No George. Everyone knows the schools won't be shut down!

**Good Moderator Response:** Hmm. I haven't heard that. What about the rest of you? Has anyone else heard that the schools are closing? No? OK, what are other issues facing our schools?

**Tip #3: Make sure everyone is participating and no one is talking too much.**

A good moderator gently involves quiet people and steers away from people who talk too much.

*Moderator:* Does your family talk with you about what goes on in school?

*Participant:* No way! I would not talk to my parents about school if they were last people on earth. I mean the very last. I mean like everyone else was dead and gone and never coming back. ... My parents probably wouldn't understand if I did try to talk with them. ... I don't think they even...

**Bad Moderator Response:** [A bad moderator would let this participant keep talking. She isn't really saying anything new and she is preventing other people from talking.]

**Good Moderator Response:** [Said with a smile] Hold on there, Susan! We get your point. What about the rest of you? How about you Michael? We haven't heard from you in a while. Do you recall talking to your family about school?

**Tip #4: Keep the discussion on the topic.**

It helps to steer to the conversation away from unrelated topics.

*Moderator:* Do you think every community should offer affordable housing for low-income people?

*Participant:* Not really! My mom was telling me about this guy who lived in the projects who killed three people outside the 7-11. She saw it on the news. Our city is getting so unsafe.

**Bad Moderator Response:** Now wait a minute! Are you suggesting that all poor people are criminals? We know that's not right. Don't the rest of you agree with me?

**Good Moderator Response:** That's one view. What do the rest of you think? Remember: We are talking about whether to include housing for people of different incomes in every community.

## Other Quick Tips

- **Practice.** In advance, know your pre-set questions well. Know who is asking what. Practice. Practice. Practice.
- **Know answers.** Think of potential answers to all the questions, so you can provide an example if your focus group members get stuck. *However, **don't** provide the examples until your group is stuck – otherwise you might accidentally be putting ideas in people's heads. You want **their** ideas, not yours.*
- **Follow-up.** It's OK to ask follow-up questions that are not on script. Use them to clarify what people say or to expand on an idea.
- **Tune in.** Be sensitive to the mood of the focus group. If they seem worried, tell a joke. If rowdy, ask people to pay attention.
- **Respect.** Always be respectful of your participants and remind them respect each other.

## Discussion Questions

- What are focus groups? What are they for?
- Describe the format of a focus group (who does what, what happens first, etc.)
- As a moderator, what do you do if one person is talking too much? What about the person who isn't talking at all?
- What do you do if everyone gets so excited about a topic they all talk at the same time?
- What do you do if someone says something with which you TOTALLY disagree?