



Ontario Centre of Excellence
for Child and Youth
Mental Health

Bringing People and Knowledge Together to Strengthen Care.

Method Mini-Toolkit

Learning

Collaboration

Leadership



Focus group interviews: >>

An overview



Introduction

What is a focus group interview?

➤ A focus group interview...

- involves bringing together a small group of people to share their thoughts, ideas and experiences related to a particular subject.
- is a type of interview that involves a number of participants and a facilitator who asks questions and guides the conversation. The participants are typically a homogenous group of people who share some common experience or characteristic (e.g., parents of teenaged children, people who work in a particular type of job). A total of five to eight people works best (more than this can become challenging to manage).
- typically lasts from 1 - 2.5 hours.

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About the Centre

As a leader for child and youth mental health in Ontario, we build connections, share knowledge and draw upon our expertise to enhance the skills of front-line service providers. We passionately promote and share the benefits of both organizational learning and evidence-informed practices. Together with our partners, we are working to strengthen Ontario's mental health programs and services for all children, youth, families and caregivers.



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When would I use this method?

- To collect in-depth, qualitative information on a particular topic.
- To explore an area about which little is known, or limited prior research has been done.
- To identify variables, outcomes and/or processes that may be of interest in a broader, quantitative study.
- To complement or corroborate findings obtained through other methods (e.g., surveys, case studies).
- To facilitate the free flow of ideas.

Where do I start?

- Begin by reviewing the literature on a particular topic to help you to narrow your focus and identify key questions you'd like to explore.
- Brainstorm (with a team) a number of issues/questions you'd like to pose to potential participants.
- Select about six to eight questions you think would be most useful in helping you meet the overall goals of your project.
- Recruit participants by using an advertisement or poster inviting them to take part in your project, or by word of mouth.

Developing an interview guide to collect data

- Focus group interview discussions are directed by a facilitator who uses an interview guide or script. This helps to keep the conversation on track and ensures the topics under study are addressed.
- You should aim to have six to eight questions. More than this might broaden the focus of the session too much, and may be too many for the allotted time.
- More general questions should be addressed first and specific issues should come later.
- The interview guide does not need to include all of the questions that will be asked, nor should the facilitator feel that s/he must only cover what is in the guide. The discussion can be modified based on responses from participants.
- Questions should be open-ended in order to generate as much discussion as possible. It's most useful when questions start with phrases like: "How do you feel about...", "What is your opinion of..." or "Please describe..."
- Questions that require a "yes/no" response should be avoided, since this limits the amount of discussion that might take place.

How do I conduct a focus group interview?

BEFORE the focus group interview

- Think about how participants will feel in certain contexts. For example, when discussing particular topics, young women may respond differently in a group consisting only of other young women than they would in a group with both young men and women, and employees may not be as open in groups that include employers. Think also about the person who is facilitating the group and the location at which you are holding the session, and whether these factors might make participants more or less comfortable.
- Be aware of participants' needs in relation to transportation, child care, scheduling and wheelchair accessibility. This helps to ensure optimum participation.
- Consider offering an honorarium (or incentive) to cover people's time and travel-related costs. It's also a good idea to have light refreshments available for the focus group interview meeting. These may help to entice people to take part.
- If possible, it's a good idea to send the focus group interview questions to participants before the day of the session. This can give people some time to think about how they might respond to various issues.
- The setting in which the focus group interview takes place is important. Make sure that the room is easy to get to, comfortable (not too hot, not too cool) and free from distractions. Try to arrange the room so that participants are sitting around a table or in a circle, so that they can all see each other.

DURING the focus group interview

- Welcome people and thank them for attending.
- Explain the purpose and process of the focus group interview, and ask if people have any questions.
- Establish a set of ground rules that will be effective throughout the session. These ground rules can include guidelines around participation, respect and confidentiality (e.g., assuring participants that their answers are all equally valid and reiterating the importance of maintaining confidentiality outside of the group).



- Communicate to participants that the goal of the focus group interview is to hear everyone's opinions. It's okay if there are divergent views, as focus group interviews are not meant to achieve consensus.
- Invite participants to introduce themselves.
- If you think it's appropriate, you may want to start the session with an ice-breaker. This can help to make people feel comfortable speaking in the focus group interview context. See websites such as www.group-games.com or www.ezinearticles.com for some suggestions.
- Try to audio-tape your session. This will ensure that there is an accurate record of what was shared during the conversation. If the session is being recorded, make this clear to participants at the time you invite them to participate, and also at the beginning of the group, in order to allow them to withdraw if they wish to do so. If the session isn't being recorded because of time or budget constraints, make sure a second facilitator is there to take clear, concise notes.
- Using the interview guide, the facilitator should moderate the discussion so that all group members' views are expressed. At times, one or more participants may dominate the discussion or steer the conversation off track. Some suggestions regarding the management of such situations can be found in the section called '[Some helpful tips for facilitating focus group interviews](#)'.
- If possible, have a co-facilitator present. This person can take notes and help keep the conversation on track.

AFTER the focus group interview

- Make sure to ask if people have any final thoughts to share.
- Explain what will happen next (e.g., data will be analyzed, findings will be presented).
- Thank people for coming.
- Immediately record any observations or reflections after the participants have left the session. For example, were there any surprises during the session? Were there some questions participants were hesitant to answer?
- Store notes, consent forms, audio-tapes, etc. in a secure location. Make sure everything is labelled with the date and time of the focus group interview meeting, and be certain that notes/transcripts do not contain any identifying information.

Some helpful tips for facilitating focus group interviews

Do:

- **Make sure that the interview guide contains no more than six to eight questions.** Begin with more general questions to get people talking. For example, “Tell us about how you first became involved with the program”.
- **Respond to the group’s needs.** Get a sense of whether participants need direction or if they might respond best to a less structured process.
- **Consider unique ways of approaching focus group interviews with different populations.**
- **Rephrase a question if it is met with silence.**
- **Use prompts to elicit more detailed responses** (for example, “Is there anything else you’d like to add?” or “Can you elaborate on that point a bit further?”).
- **Periodically reflect back a summary of what you are hearing to ensure that you are understanding participants correctly.**
- **Try to stay impartial.** Although it’s impossible to be completely unbiased, it’s important to appear neutral in order to avoid influencing the discussion in a particular direction.
- **Make sure that you are adhering to ethical guidelines in your work.** Visit the [National Council on Ethics in Human Research](#) for more information.
- **Try to ensure that each participant has a voice.** You can do this by asking “Do others in the group agree?” or “Does anyone have any further thoughts on this?” For more suggestions on how to engage participants, see the resources in the section called ‘[Where can I go for more information?](#)’.
- **Dress the part.** Business casual is a good guide in terms of what to wear when facilitating a focus group interview. This way, you are dressed in a way that is respectful, but not so formal that it alienates members of the group.

Don't:

- **Ask more than one question at a time.** These are called “double-barreled questions”, and require that participants answer two questions at the same time. For example: “What did you like most about this program and what did you like least?”
- **Expect group consensus.** Participants don't have to agree on all items discussed. In fact, disagreement may reflect some interesting themes to explore further.
- **Single out specific individuals to answer questions unless they appear interested in sharing their views.**

How do I analyze the data that is produced in a focus group interview?

- Focus group interviews provide **qualitative** data. While quantitative data are typically numbers, qualitative data take the form of words. Qualitative data include people's experiences, opinions, feelings and knowledge about a particular topic.
- Once the focus group interview session is complete, the audio-recording is transcribed either entirely, or in part. This written material is then transcribed.
- The most common approach to analysis is **content analysis**. This involves looking through the data for common themes or patterns.
- Analysis can be **inductive** (where the person doing the analysis discovers themes or patterns in the data) or **deductive** (where data are analyzed according to a pre-determined framework, like the program's logic model).
- Qualitative analysis provides “thick description”—this means that the reader gets a full, in-depth sense of the situation being described.
- There are software programs that can help to analyze qualitative data, like [QSR NVivo](#). These tools are typically used only with large samples.

Some strengths of focus group interviews include:

- Relatively easy to assemble.
- Flexible in terms of format and types of questions.
- Useful when working with groups with lower literacy levels (e.g., young children, people for whom English is a second language).
- Helpful in providing a lot of rich, in-depth data.
- Dynamic (participants are able to build on one another's responses).
- Able to provide non-verbal data (e.g., facial expressions or body language).
- Can explore processes in depth, not just outcomes.
- Can support findings obtained from other methods.
- Useful when exploring sensitive issues, and can sometimes even be a setting in which people can give and receive support.

Some limitations of focus group interviews include:

- Findings cannot be generalized to larger segments of the population.
- The success of a focus group interview is determined by the skill and experience of the facilitator.
- Group discussions can sometimes be difficult to moderate and keep on track.
- A few dominant personalities can shape the direction of the conversation.
- Participants' views might be influenced by one another.
- Qualitative analysis can be time consuming.



Where can I go for more information?

Bickman, L. & Rog, D.J. (1998). Handbook of applied social research methods. Sage Publications. pp. 505-526.

Morgan, D.L. (1996). Focus groups as qualitative research. Sage Publications.

Patton, M.Q. (2002). Qualitative research & evaluation methods. Sage Publications.

Stewart, D. W., Shamdasani, P. N., and Rook, D. W. (2006). Focus groups: theory and practice, (2nd Ed.). Sage Publications.

[International Electronic Journal for Leadership in Learning](#)

(although the focus is on education, the principles are common to child and youth mental health)