

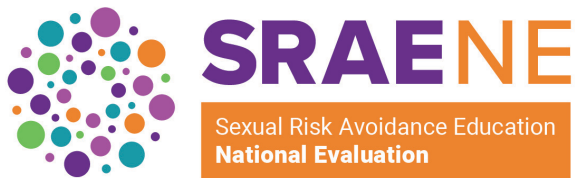
DEVELOPING QUESTIONS FOR FOCUS GROUPS AND INTERVIEWS

As part of an implementation evaluation, Sexual Risk Avoidance Education (SRAE) grant recipients may conduct focus groups or interviews with youth and program and partner staff. The detailed qualitative information collected during focus groups and interviews can help you better understand program implementation. Before scheduling a focus group or interview, it is important to develop a list of questions to guide the discussion with respondents. The list of questions is sometimes called a “discussion guide,” “question protocol,” or “semi-structured protocol.” This document will refer to the questions as a discussion guide. A discussion guide ensures that you collect data that are relevant to your research questions while also ensuring that you remember to ask multiple respondents the same questions. This document outlines key considerations for developing discussion guides for focus groups and interviews.

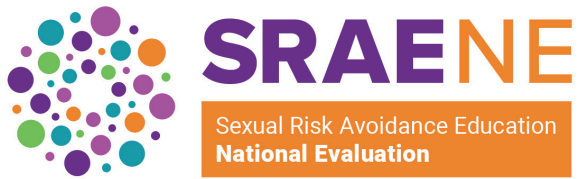
Respondents refers to the people participating in the focus group or interview.

As you write your questions, keep these tips in mind:

- **Start with your research questions.** Before collecting data, refer to your implementation evaluation research questions and note which ones can be answered with data from interviews or focus groups. (See Data Sources for Common Implementation Evaluation Research Questions: Frequently Asked Questions in [Toolkit 1](#) for more information on this process.) While it can be tempting to ask respondents about many topics, the topics in the discussion guide should map closely to the research questions.
- **Keep it simple.** Questions should be easy to understand. Long phrases can be confusing, so state each question clearly and concisely. If you are conducting a focus group or interview with youth, try to use words they already know and define any words that may be less familiar to them.
- **Consider your respondents’ background and lived experiences.** School staff and program staff may have different levels of understanding of and familiarity with the SRAE program, so the level of detail you ask these respondents may vary. For example, in focus groups or interviews with program staff, you might ask detailed questions about specific curriculum activities and the sequence of lessons, while in focus groups or interviews with program partners, you might ask about their general impressions of the program and whether it is a good fit for the youth they serve.
- **Ask open-ended questions.** Write open-ended questions that allow respondents to give more detailed responses, rather than asking simple yes or no questions. For example, you can ask, “In your opinion, how did the role-playing activity go?” instead of “Did you like the role-playing activity?” If you do include questions that have a yes or no answer, prepare follow-up questions to ask for more details.



- **Avoid leading questions.** Consider whether the phrasing of your questions could lead to biased results. Sometimes the question phrasing can lead respondents to feel compelled to answer in a certain way. For example, suppose you ask, “Do you agree that this is a great program?” Respondents might feel you are expecting them to agree with the statement—even if they disagree. You could instead ask, “What are your overall impressions of the program?” to encourage the respondents to reply candidly.
- **Consider the time allotted for the interview or focus group.** Typically, interviews and focus groups have a set amount of time—such as a 45-minute focus group with youth during their lunch period or a 60-minute interview with program staff. The intended length of the interview or focus group will help you decide how many questions you can ask. Overall, you may find you can ask 15–25 questions in a 60-minute interview, depending on the expected complexity of the responses, and 10–12 questions in a 45-minute focus group. Keep in mind that the amount of time it takes to ask all the questions in a discussion guide may depend on the length of the respondents’ answers. For example, focus group respondents can react to and build on others’ answers, so there may be further discussion after each question. This means you likely will be able to ask fewer questions in a focus group than in an interview. Before you conduct the interviews or focus groups for the evaluation, you may want to pilot test the questions. This will help you get a better sense of how long the discussion guide takes to complete. You may be able to ask others on your team to role play an interview or focus group to find out roughly how long an actual interview or focus group would take.
- **Consider the order of the questions.** For focus groups and interviews, the flow of the questions in the discussion guide can be similar to the shape of an hourglass.
 - **Start broad.** Begin with simple, introductory questions, such as “What grade are you in?” or “What is your role at your organization and how long have you been in that role?” These questions should be easy for the respondents to answer, so they can help respondents warm up and feel more comfortable. They can also allow the person conducting the interview or focus group to build rapport.
 - **Next, narrow the discussion to ask more targeted, specific questions.** The middle of the discussion guide is the “meaty” or most dense portion of the discussion when you ask respondents about the topics relevant to your research questions. Depending on how many questions you have, you may want to divide them into sections with questions on similar topics together. For instance, suppose you are conducting focus groups with youth and asking about three topics: (1) their impressions of program activities, (2) their relationships with the facilitator, and (3) similar services they may have received. Keeping the questions on each topic together can make the flow of questions more logical for the respondents. Within a topic, questions may have a logical sequence. For instance, if you are interviewing program staff about their impressions of specific activities in the curriculum, you could follow the sequence in the curriculum: first ask about activities in lesson 1, then ask about activities in lesson 2, and so on.
 - **Finish with broad questions.** To close the interview or focus group, you can return to broader questions that allow respondents to wrap up their thoughts. For example, you



could end with questions like: “Do you have any recommendations for implementing this program in the future?” or “Outside of what we’ve already discussed, is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences with the program?”