

Designing Focus Groups for Youth

This document will help Sexual Risk Avoidance Education (SRAE) grant recipients design focus groups through developing clear protocols and preparing for the focus group. These tips can also be helpful for refining existing focus groups plans.

Craft protocols that help youth feel comfortable and encourage descriptive responses

Think about flow and priorities

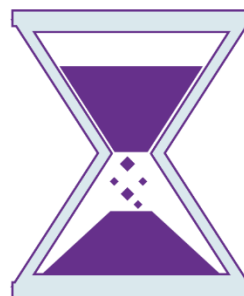
Focus groups allow you to hear directly from youth and for youth to interact with each other to build on each other's responses. Groups typically last 45 to 60 minutes. To make the most of the limited time and opportunity to interact directly with youth, keep your protocol short and focused on topics that directly relate to your research questions. Focus groups may be used to answer research questions directly or provide context or insights to other data sources.

Consider what information is best collected directly from youth in a focus group versus what information could be collected another way. For example, youth would be able to discuss their experiences in the classroom, including how often they attended class. However, you can get more accurate attendance data from administrative data sources, as youth may not remember how many times they missed a class. It might not be the most efficient use of focus group time to ask about attendance. Instead, use the focus group to discuss *why* they liked coming to class.

Allow plenty of time to ask each question. Account for interaction between youth, clarifying questions, and probes for further information. Typically, you might ask 10-12 questions in a 45-minute focus group.

To help build comfort with youth, order questions in the protocol like the shape of an hourglass: broad, narrow, broad (Figure 1). Start with broad, easy questions to warm the youth up to the topic. For example, *"How did you come to join the program?"* Then ask focused, topical questions relevant to research questions. Finish with broad, wrap-up questions, such as, *"Is there anything else you would like to tell us about the program that we haven't talked about so far?"*

Figure 1. Structure of a focus group



Start with broad, easy questions to warm up

Ask narrow, tailored questions to address research questions

Finish with broad questions to capture any missed information

Build plans for rapport-building into the protocol

At the beginning of a focus group, spending time establishing rapport and explaining the purpose and format of the group can reduce feelings of discomfort or intimidation the youth may be feeling. These can be built into the protocol. Some ways to establish rapport at the beginning of a focus group include:

- **Asking an ice breaker question.** For example, *“What’s a hobby you like doing outside of school?”* or *“If you could keep any animal as a pet, which would you choose and why?”*
- **Greeting youth as they arrive.** If the discussion is being conducted by someone from outside of the program, such as the evaluator, a program staff person may wish to join the first few minutes of the discussion to do introductions and offer a warm hand-off.
- **Setting up the space to be welcoming.** For instance, to encourage conversation, it may be best to arrange chairs in a circle and remove any desks or other items that might be blocking the open space. Consider setting out name tags for youth to write their first name if the moderator is not familiar with the youth.
- **Explaining the purpose and format of the group.** At the start of the protocol, the focus group moderator may use simple, accessible language to explain the structure to youth who haven’t participated in one before. For example, *“We understand that participating in a group like this might be new to some of you. A focus group is an opportunity for us all to discuss our opinions on this topic. We want to know your true opinions so we can help make the program better for people your age and with similar life experiences, all feedback is welcome!”*
- **Addressing privacy concerns.** Let youth know how you will protect their privacy and any other information required by your IRB. Tell youth their individual responses will not be shared with anyone outside of the study team, this includes their teachers and program staff. For example, *“Your responses in the discussion will not be shared with anyone outside of the study team. When we share what we learned during today’s discussion we will not use your name or any other information that could identify you.”* Additionally, hold the focus group somewhere that gives youth privacy to speak freely.
- **Establishing a group agreement.** Propose ground rules at the start of the group, such as not sharing personal information with others outside the group, being respectful of others’ opinions, and speaking one at a time. You can also let youth know that you may need to stop them at times to allow everyone a chance to participate. Ask youth if they want to add ground rules of their own. Group agreements are also a natural place to tell participants they can skip questions and that there are no right or wrong answers. For example, the moderator might say, *“There are no right or wrong answers, and we are not trying to get everyone to agree on something. It’s okay if everyone has different thoughts and ideas. It is possible you may not have strong opinions about a question, and that is okay too. Please do not share what we discuss today outside of this room. It is up to each of you to respect one another’s privacy and honor this request.”*

Craft open-ended questions and probes

Focus groups give you an opportunity to collect rich details you might miss in other modes. They also give an opportunity for youth to interact and build on one another’s responses. To get this detail, craft open-ended questions that elicit descriptive responses, rather than one-word or yes or no answers. Use probes to clarify responses, elicit more detail, or re-direct off-topic responses. This could be phrases like

"Tell me more about that," or "Has anyone had a different experience?" or "What do other kids at your school think about this topic? What do you discuss with your friends about the topic?"

Draft neutral questions that youth can easily understand

Write simple, easy-to-understand questions focused on youths' experience. Focus questions on one topic at a time. Be clear about things like recall periods, vocabulary you are using, and the topics you are discussing. For instance, when asking about social media use, you could say, *"How many days a week do you usually post on social media? For social media, we're including permanent or temporary posts on any sites you can message people or follow others."* This question specifies a time period, asks about youths' direct experience, and defines vocabulary.

Keeping vocabulary clear is important for words or subjects that might be described differently among youth. For instance, on social media, a direct message is often shortened to its acronym, DM. Providing clarity is a two-way street. If you are unclear as a moderator what an acronym or term means, you can ask youth to elaborate, *"I'm not familiar with that term/acronym, can you tell me what you mean by that?"* In these cases, it might be helpful to modify the protocol to further clarify the question.

Frame questions in a neutral way that does not suggest you are looking for a particular answer. Avoid leading questions or assigning value to particular answers. For example, if you want to know about youths' challenges with communicating with their parents or caregivers about mental health, you could ask *"What would it be like to talk to your parents or caregivers about your mental health?"* instead of asking about communication difficulties, which assumes youth have challenges with communication and leads them in a specific direction.

Plan for other logistics that promote youth comfort and participation

In addition to writing the protocol, there are other factors that may be helpful to consider when preparing for the focus group.

- Pretest the protocol with a small group of youth to ensure youth understand each question. You can also iterate throughout the study if changes should be made.
- Schedule your focus group at a time that works for youth. For example, this might be after the final lesson or the following week during the same timeslot. It will be more difficult to ensure a strong turnout if youth leave the site or need to remember a different timeslot at which to come. Similarly, it should be in a familiar location, rather than offsite, when possible.
- Consider who might be the best person to conduct the focus group. In order to collect honest feedback, the moderator should have a strong understanding of the program but should not be the person delivering the program to youth. Ideally, the moderator is independent of the program.
- Introduce the idea of a focus group ahead of the discussion. For example, a program staff member might prep youth by describing what is a focus group.
- Offer a token of appreciation for youth to participate, if possible. This could include lunch with the focus group, or it could be a small token of appreciation, such as a gift card to a nearby store.

Find more information

This tip sheet is a summary of how to collect high-quality data with interviews and focus groups:
https://acf.gov/sites/default/files/documents/opre/sraene_interview_and_focus_groups_nov2022.pdf

This video discusses collecting high-quality data in focus groups:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Clb8ZuBD7o4&list=PLypiJrod4DegeoMrjczwg-nawm1S4tJDp&index=35>

This tip sheet provides guidance on when and how to conduct a focus group as well as how to analyze and use focus group data: <https://rhntc.org/resources/focus-group-tip-sheet>

This document offers guidance for projects that include program evaluations that use qualitative methods:
https://acf.gov/sites/default/files/documents/acyf/qualitative_research_methods_in_program_evaluation.pdf