

Focus Groups

A focus group brings a group of 6-10 people together in person to have an organized discussion on a particular topic for 1-2 hours. It is slightly different from a group interview because the participants can interact with each other as well as the facilitator. The main purpose is to elicit participants' attitudes, beliefs, reactions, experiences, and knowledge in a social context—qualitative information, not data. Group members can be recruited from certain population groups, e.g., young Latina mothers, or from a diverse group so that different genders and ethnicities are represented, e.g., grandparents. They are selected based on criteria that makes them have something in common, but it is best to select people who don't know each other. Focus groups can also be for “key informants” from a community—people who have a broad perspective and extensive experience with an issue or are a long-standing member of the community.

Focus groups require a great deal of planning and time to contact, screen and recruit people to participate; plan and field-test the questions; locate a meeting site; arrange for incentives; conduct and audiotape the session; and compile the responses. However, they do yield valuable information that often can't be elicited in other ways. They are useful for identifying potential barriers to dental care access, getting opinions on a proposed program, field-testing new educational materials, and generating new ideas for solutions to problems.

The role and skills of the facilitator are important. These include establishing a trusting environment for discussion, keeping people focused on the topic, making sure everyone participates, clarifying responses, probing for details, avoiding interjection of their own opinions, and being non-judgmental. Five to 10 questions should be carefully prepared to acquire the desired information, but can be supplemented with additional ones during the session. The facilitator needs to be flexible and determine how best to promote meaningful discussion. Because of the large amount of information generated during these discussions, they usually are audiotaped; videotaping is too intimidating. Someone other than the facilitator needs to take observational and summary notes. The audiotapes later should be transposed with the other notes into a written summary. This can be difficult if the audiotape quality is poor.

Tips for Success

- Hold the meeting in an easily accessible facility with good parking or close to public transportation.
- Cover confidentiality issues and have participants sign confidentiality forms.
- Provide nametags and have people introduce themselves; the facilitator should learn to pronounce everyone's name correctly.
- Provide incentives, e.g., food, coupons for local services, group day care onsite, cash payments.
- Make sure the tape recorder volume will pick up everyone's voice, and have enough blank tapes for two hours.
- Try to make the session fun rather than too formal and serious.
- Use “neutral” questions and probes that won't bias responses.
- You may want to schedule a series of focus groups on the same topic with different groups to determine if and how the groups differ in opinions.

Sample Focus Group Questions about Oral Health for a Group of Parents of Children with Special Health Care Needs

1. Has anyone from an agency or program ever helped you find or pay for dental care for your child? How did they help you? (e.g., give you a list of dentists or a specific referral, make an appointment)

2. Has any dental office ever denied you services because of:
 - a. your child's special needs? (e.g., say they don't treat children with that condition)
 - b. financial reasons? (e.g., don't take Denti-Cal, have to pay at time of appointment)

What did they say to you?

3. If you were informed by a dental office that they do not treat children with special needs and they did not give you a referral to someone who does, what would you do?

4. If you felt you needed help in finding appropriate dental care for your child, whom would you contact?

5. If you wanted to locate information on dental health for children with special needs, where would you go or call to find the information?

6. In what ways do you think you could help dental professionals to better understand your child or provide appropriate services?

From California Connections Project. Oral Health Needs Assessment Report. Los Angeles: USC University Affiliated Program, Childrens Hospital Los Angeles. 1995.

Resources

Resource for Basics on Conducting Focus Groups
<http://www.mapnp.org/library/evaluatn/focusgrp.htm>

Client Guide to the Focus Group
<http://www.mnav.com/cligd.htm>

ASTDD Seven-Step Model, Step 4, pgs. 70-72, <http://www.astdd.org>.

SRI Institute. *We Did it Ourselves. An Evaluation Guide Book*, Sacramento, Sierra Health Foundation, 2000, pg. 71-74.