

Focus groups

Focus groups are generally one-off discussions with a small group of around 6–12 children. Focus groups are mainly suitable for gathering information that is not sensitive. They are ideal for when you want to engage children to get their ideas or test options.

Focus groups are appropriate for children and young people aged from 10-17 years. It is important that children are of similar ages for the group to run smoothly.

Strengths

- Children can share their experiences and build on conversations which can provide richer information.
- If focus group members know each other they can feel more relaxed and willing to share information.
- You can get quotes, group agreement on priorities and preferences, and use a range of workshop techniques with the children.

Things to think about

- Focus groups may not be a suitable method to use if the information you require is sensitive and inappropriate to share in a group.
- If focus group members do not know each other, you will need to factor in time (e.g. for icebreakers) so children can feel comfortable to talk.

Tips and tricks

Conducting focus groups with children

- **Think about the physical environment** – the space can help the children feel relaxed if it is a familiar location (e.g. their school library or community centre) and child friendly (spacious, with comfortable furnishing or bean bags and colourful interiors).
- **Don't mix ages** – keep groups of similar age and abilities together.
- **Prepare a range of key questions you want answered but be flexible** – be prepared that some of your questions or techniques might not work. Have some back-up questions, or allow the group to lead the discussion.
- **Avoid ambiguity!** Questions should be very literal – children have a low threshold for ambiguity and interpret language very literally. Avoid de-personalised, indirect or abstract questions.
- **Use vocabulary children will understand** – this means both age-appropriate (depending on the range of ages you are including) and avoiding technical terms (instead use terms that are relevant to children's everyday life).

Think about attention spans – younger children will only be able to focus for about 30-45 minutes, but older children can remain engaged for up to 2 hours if the activity is well designed.

It can put children at ease if you introduce a question with "Some children agree with this, and others do not. What do you think?"

- **Make it fun** – make the focus group session as interactive as possible and be prepared to be flexible to meet the needs of children. Icebreakers are a great way to start sessions and you can use interactive activities or games throughout the session.
- **Establish some ground rules** – have the group agree on some ground rules for the session. This will be a good ‘warm up’ before you get to the topic of your enquiry. This is particularly important if the children do not know each other
- **Select facilitators carefully** – facilitators should be trained to facilitate groups of children and be able to ‘connect’ with the group. The facilitator will also need to consider children’s cultural diversity, their ages, learning abilities, and whether they have disabilities.
- **If in doubt seek ethical advice** – consider if there is any possibility that your questions may be sensitive and upset a child, or lead to them share information about themselves or others being at risk.

Focus groups can use different activities: brainstorming ideas, discussion, drawing and games to rank option preferences. Be creative or ask an experienced facilitator for advice.

Starting with an icebreaker helps children relax when introducing themselves. For example you could have blank name badges with images of different animals. Ask the children to select an animal that means something to them and fill in their names. You can then go around the group have them say their name and why they picked the animal they did.

Examples

- *At the Office of the Children’s Commissioner, we used focus groups to get children’s views on living in poverty as part of the work of the Expert Advisory Group on Solutions to Poverty. We asked what they thought would make a difference for them. Meetings were in church halls and community centres and co-facilitated by someone from the local community.*

We found an unexpected topic during the consultation: children identified the importance of access to good parks and recreation facilities to allow them to play and just be kids. This new idea was added to the Expert Advisory Group’s recommendations.

- *A local government used focus groups to get children’s views on recreation facilities planned for the community. They ranked ideas based on their preference, talked about the times they might use the facilities and how children would get to them.*