

# A guide to developing effective focus groups

## About this resource

This guide offers current best practices for planning and conducting focus groups, including practical tips on how to:

- Embed equity, diversity, inclusion, and anti-racism (EDIA-R) considerations.
- Co-design focus groups with young people and family members.

This resource is developed for service providers and agency leaders in the child and youth mental health and addictions sector (the sector).

## What is a focus group?

A focus group is a way to collect qualitative data. A small group of individuals, typically sharing a common experience or characteristic, gather to discuss and share their thoughts, ideas, and experiences on a specific topic. A focus group usually consists of 5 to 8 participants and a facilitator who guides the conversation. Focus groups have a timeframe of 60 minutes to 2 hours and can be conducted in person or virtually (Rodriguez et al., 2011; Sim & Waterfield, 2019; Vogl et al., 2023).



## When should I use a focus group?



### **A focus group works best when you want to:**

- Collect rich, in-depth, qualitative data on a particular topic by asking questions that can't be easily asked or answered on a written survey (Lloyd-Evans, 2017; Parker & Tritter, 2006). For example, you could gather a group of young adults who have recently immigrated to Canada to openly discuss their experiences with navigating mental health services. Open conversations can identify what's working well and help you to understand participants' specific challenges in accessing the support they need.
- Complement or supplement findings obtained through other methods like surveys and interviews (Parker & Tritter, 2006). For example, focus groups can be used alongside surveys to gain a richer understanding of how social pressures and cultural influences impact the body image and self-esteem of young people from the 2SLGBTQI+ community. By employing both methods, we can delve deeper into participants' experiences and perspectives, enhancing our insights beyond what each method alone can provide.



### **Focus groups offer several strengths (Vogl et al., 2023):**

- Relatively easy to assemble.
- Flexible in terms of format and types of questions.
- Useful when working with diverse participants unique backgrounds, demographics, perspectives, and lived or living expertise.
- Useful for exploring sensitive issues and providing a comfortable environment to share perspectives and experiences, fostering open dialogue and deeper exploration of personal topics.



### **However, they also come with limitations (Vogl et al., 2023):**

- Findings cannot be generalized to other groups.
- Success relies on the facilitator's skill and experience.
- Some individuals can dominate the group discussion.
- Other participants' input and opinions can influence the views of individuals.
- Qualitative data analysis can be time-consuming.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed (Sim & Waterfield, 2019).

Combining focus groups with other data collection methods gives you a fuller picture of your topic and strengthens your research. This approach helps make sure your findings are solid and comprehensive.

As with surveys, it's important to think about when to do focus groups, who takes part, and how to conduct them. Matching these factors with your research goals and the people you're studying helps make your study more effective.

## How do I develop a focus group?

First, conduct a thorough literature review and environmental scan. Doing this upfront can help you understand what is already known about your topic, identify gaps in knowledge, and formulate relevant questions to address those gaps. Our [resource hub](#) and [measures database](#) can be a useful resource for this purpose. Check if others in the sector have done similar work or have relevant data that could help you. This could save you time and resources. If a ready-made tool that suits your needs is unavailable, you can create your own focus group materials. The following sections will guide you through this process.

### Define your objectives

After deciding that a focus group is the right choice for your research, you can begin to create your objectives. To ensure the effectiveness of your focus group, it is crucial to establish clear objectives from the beginning.

- Why are you conducting this focus group?
- What specific information do you want to gather from the participants?
- Who will participate in your focus group? (Consider the types of participants needed to answer your research questions.)
- How will the focus group results help you improve your programs and services?

#### Tip



If the participants are young people and their family members, it's important to consider them as key partners in your study. Ensuring their active involvement in the process is essential for gathering relevant insights and improving your programs and services (Agency for Clinical Innovation [ACI], 2016; Gibson, 2007).

## Begin with an EDIA-R lens

Your research will be enhanced by integrating EDIA-R considerations throughout your study, from planning to sharing findings. Here are some tips on applying EDIA-R in your focus group (Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada [NSERC], n.d.):

- Recruit participants from diverse backgrounds to ensure representation from various contexts (NSERC, n.d.; Turuba et al., 2022).
- Prioritize building relationships and trust with the community or group you are studying (Alamgir et al., 2020, Turuba et al., 2022).
- Tailor your focus group guide to reflect diverse cultural contexts, language preferences, and experiences. Ensure inclusivity, diversity, and respect for various norms, values, and strengths of different communities and individuals (Justice for Families, 2013). To achieve this, you can pilot the guide with diverse respondents for relevance and appropriateness.
- Offer training programs for facilitators on cultural responsiveness, diversity, equity, and inclusion to create a welcoming and inclusive environment where all voices are heard (Turuba et al., 2022).
- To encourage a safer environment and open sharing, give your participants the option to skip questions, leave the room at any time, and return as needed.

## Gather your team

Collaboration and engagement are crucial elements in conducting an inclusive focus group. You can ensure a more comprehensive approach by bringing in diverse voices and fostering a sense of shared purpose. When planning who will participate in your focus group, remember to include key partners from community organizations, youth-serving agencies, and family support networks, as well as young people themselves, to ensure all perspectives are incorporated throughout the process.

It's important to select the right facilitator, as they play a crucial role. In the first few moments of a focus group, the facilitator needs to introduce themselves, make everyone feel comfortable, provide guidelines for the session, and move the conversation in a productive direction. It's also essential for the facilitator to ask if the group has any questions, concerns, or needs for clarification before beginning. How well the group interacts often depends on how well this relaxed setting is established (Krueger, 2002).



To ensure meaningful participation and collaboration, consider the following questions as you identify and engage your key partners:

- Who are your key partners in this process (project team, clients, leaders, young people, and family members)? What are their roles and expectations?
- Why should they be engaged in the study? How will they benefit from it?
- How and to what extent are they engaged?

Value and respect the voices, experiences, opinions, and insights of young people and families at each stage of your focus group: planning, formation, and facilitation. Actively listen to all voices and avoid dismissing or minimizing any perspectives (Alamgir et al., 2020; Turuba et al., 2022).

## Tip



When young adults are participating in focus groups, there may be perceived power imbalances and generational gaps between the facilitator and the participants. The facilitator should be well-trained in empathy, flexibility, and active listening. There might also be a need to include another facilitator or moderator, such as an agency representative, a family member, or a young person. Facilitating focus groups with young children can be more challenging and require a specialized skillset, so it can be helpful to include a facilitator with experience in working and conducting focus groups with young children (Vogl et al., 2023).



Check out our [engagement planning tool](#) for more information on gathering an efficient team for your focus group.



## Adhere to ethical guidelines

Research Ethics Board (REB) members must review and approve all research involving humans, regarding ethical and scientific considerations. Depending on the nature of your project and the research requirements of your organization, you may need to obtain REB approval to set up and conduct your focus group (Agency for Clinical Innovation [ACI], 2016).

Before conducting any focus group, all participants should provide informed consent indicating their understanding and willingness to participate in the research. Informed consent is an ongoing process that ensures all participants are fully briefed on the format, purpose, and potential risks and benefits of the study, and that they are continually given opportunities to check in, ask questions, and clarify concerns (Turuba et al., 2022).

- Document consent through written forms or verbal agreements, based on the participants' preferences and literacy levels (Turuba et al., 2022).
- Include specific statements and signatures in the consent form, confirming participants' agreement to be audio- or video-recorded. While verbal agreement may be sufficient, signed consent is preferable (Halej, 2017).
- Inform participants that their participation in the focus group is voluntary and they can withdraw at any point, whether before the session begins, during the discussion, or at the conclusion (Turuba et al., 2022).
- Establish ground rules to safeguard confidentiality and protect participants' privacy (Halej, 2017).

## Develop your interview guide

An interview guide is a memory aid used by the facilitator to ensure every topic is covered and the necessary details are obtained (Magnusson & Marecek, 2015). Interview guides also ensure consistency between multiple focus groups. For a structured and effective session, the interview guide should have an agenda that includes introductions, background information, icebreakers, main discussion topics, next steps, and closing statements. The interview guide should also include clear, straightforward, and impartial questions tailored to your focus group.

To ensure your guide engages your participants and works well, try these tips (Adler et al., 2019):

- Use plain language to make sure things are clear and easily understood.
- Keep the questions concise to help participants better understand them.
- Pilot-test the interview guide with a diverse group of respondents and ask for their input.
- Incorporate feedback from the pilot into the final version of the interview guide.
- Finalize the interview guide to ensure it aligns with your focus group objectives and goals.

### Develop your focus group questions

Crafting the right questions for your focus group plays a crucial role in your analysis. The process of developing your questions should be collaborative, involving any core team members, and key partners, including young people and family members, where appropriate (Adler et al., 2019). While it is suggested that a focus group session include fewer than 10 questions (Marczak & Sewell, n.d.), there is room for flexibility based on your study's specific needs and context. Aim to develop user-friendly, culturally sensitive, relevant questions that resonate with your participants and inspire conversation. Keep your questions clear and concise.

Your focus group questions should (Adler et al., 2019):

- Be open-ended and adaptable.
- Be clear and straightforward.
- Be impartial.
- Be relevant to the subject and meaningful to the focus group participants.
- Encourage depth of thought and conversation between participants.

#### Tip



Let your participants know that there are no right or wrong answers to the questions; their opinions are valued, and all viewpoints are appreciated.

## Recruit your participants

The next step is to identify your potential participants. Who could take part in your focus group? There are many ways to recruit for your focus group. To begin, you can reach out to 15–20 individuals representing diverse experiences with the subject, program, or service you are investigating. Make sure to include representation from diverse contexts.

Ideally, focus groups will have 6–8 participants, to encourage discussion and equal sharing (Krueger, 2002; Lloyd-Evan, 2017). However, it is likely that through your recruitment efforts, more or less people will be interested. In these cases, you can offer to conduct individual interviews, hold more than one focus group, select participants based on their expertise and the insights needed, or simply select participants based on who volunteers first. Consider offering multiple sessions to accommodate participants' schedules. When you offer different time slots, more people can join in at times that work for them.

To encourage the inclusion of participants with diverse experiences and from various contexts related to the subject area, program, or service you're studying:

- Identify community partners with ties to the target population, such as community organizations, schools, social media, and those hosting local events (Alamgir et al., 2020; Turuba et al., 2022).
- Develop clear, visually engaging, and accessible recruitment materials that highlight the purpose of the research, the benefits of participation, and contact information for inquiries.
- Use culturally relevant language and imagery to resonate with your target population and enhance the accessibility of recruitment materials (NSERC, n.d.; Turuba et al., 2022).
- Provide honoraria for participants' time and expertise to recognize their contributions and participation (Turuba et al., 2022).

## How do we overcome barriers to participation?

To improve the participation rate for your focus group, try to recognize barriers and address them proactively.

- Conduct a thorough assessment to identify potential barriers to participating, including logistical, cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic factors (Alamgir et al., 2020).
- Engage with community members, partners, and target participants to understand their concerns and challenges related to taking part in the focus group (Alamgir et al., 2020).
- Tailor your recruitment strategies, communication methods, and interview formats to accommodate the diverse needs and preferences of your potential participants (ACI, 2016).
- Build trust and rapport with potential participants by emphasizing transparency, confidentiality, and respect for their perspectives and experiences (Krueger, 2002).
- Address structural barriers like transportation, childcare, and language by offering solutions such as help with transportation, flexible participation hours, and interpretation services. You can also provide snacks and refreshments to make the atmosphere comfortable and informal (Turuba et al., 2022).

### Tip



Some individuals may experience insecurity, embarrassment, or shyness when discussing sensitive subjects during a focus group. Examples of sensitive topics include trauma and abuse, substance use health, and gender identity. While some individuals may prefer not to participate in a focus group on a sensitive topic, others may prefer the interactive environment of a focus group where they can share whenever a point resonates with them, and some might feel more comfortable in a one-on-one setting. To address this barrier effectively, consider providing the option of participating in either a focus group or a one-on-one interview.

## Decide on your delivery approach

Now that you've developed your interview guide and identified your participants, it's time to decide how your focus group will be delivered. Do you want to conduct the focus group in-person or virtually? Which method best suits your study and your participants? To help choose the right setting and location for your focus group, consider factors like comfort and accessibility, and how these might help ensure an effective session. Ask participants if any accommodations are required prior to the focus group.



### **For in-person focus groups (Krueger, 2002):**

- Choose a venue that is accessible, conveniently located, and served by various forms of transit.
- Create a comfortable environment with appropriate seating arrangements to make it easy for participants to interact.
- Select a quiet location free from distractions to maintain participants' focus and engagement.
- Prioritize privacy and confidentiality by selecting a venue where discussions cannot be overheard or interrupted.

### **For virtual focus groups (Alamgir et al., 2020; Brown, 2022; Griffith et al., 2020):**

- Select a reliable and user-friendly platform that supports effective group meetings and interaction among several participants. Look for features such as audio and video quality, closed captioning, screen sharing, and breakout rooms.
- To minimize technical issues and disruptions, ensure participants have access to the necessary technology (internet connection, webcam, microphone) and guide them through using the chosen platform before beginning the focus group. If participants are in rural or remote areas with unreliable internet connections, consider conducting the focus group in-person to ensure smooth communication and participation.
- Establish ground rules such as muting microphones when not speaking, raising hands to indicate a desire to speak, and respecting others' speaking turns. These tactics will help keep the focus group on track and make it easier to have a meaningful discussion.
- Create a variety of engagement opportunities, such as polls and chat features, to promote active participation outside of speaking in turn.
- Make virtual sessions accessible through the use of closed captioning, sign language interpretation, and accessible presentation materials.

No matter which delivery method you choose, it's important to prioritize safer and more inclusive meeting spaces where participants can express themselves and exchange experiences and perspectives without worrying about judgment, discrimination, or negative consequences.

## Wrapping up

To conclude your focus group (ACI, 2016):

- Thank everyone for attending and taking the time to participate. Send a thank-you note afterward.
- Inform participants about the honoraria process, if applicable.
- Share the project coordinator's contact information for any further inquiries.
- Provide opportunities for feedback.
- Follow up with participants by sharing session summaries and results.
- Clarify what will happen with the results.

### Tip



To give participants a take-away from the session, you may consider ending your focus group with the question: What have you learned from today's conversation? Or, do you have any takeaways from today's conversation?

## Conclusion

Developing and conducting effective focus groups within the child and youth mental health and addictions sector is an effective method for gathering rich qualitative insights. Whether conducted in-person or virtually, a well-facilitated focus group can offer invaluable insights that stand alone or complement other research methods, ultimately contributing to improved programs and services.

Emphasizing EDIA-R principles throughout the process fosters a welcoming environment where diverse perspectives are heard and valued.

By following the best practices outlined in this guide— from planning and participant recruitment to developing interview guides and choosing delivery methods – you can ensure your focus groups are effective, well-organized, and culturally relevant.



## Additional resources

- The [evaluation toolkit](#) at the Knowledge Institute can be a helpful tool to refer to when planning your focus group.
- Learn more about [designing and conducting focus group interviews](#).
- This [toolkit](#) provides additional tips on planning and research design for focus groups.
- Check out [What is a focus group | Step-by-step guide & examples](#) to learn more about focus group steps.
- If you are developing a questionnaire for young people, here are some [tips on writing surveys for youth](#) and tailoring your questions for youth.
- [Stanford University's website](#) offers resources on practical methods for sex, gender, and intersectional analysis in science and engineering research, including case studies demonstrating how these analyses drive innovation.
- [Ecology and Society: A review of Indigenous knowledge and participation in environmental monitoring](#) addresses EDIA-R-related research questions, defines diversity-related terminology, and examines the impact of power dynamics on Indigenous participation in environmental monitoring.
- [Tri-Council policy statement: Ethical conduct for research involving humans](#) includes a chapter on [Research involving the First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples of Canada](#).

## References

- Adler, K., Salanterä, S., & Zumstein-Shaha, M. (2019). [Focus group interviews in child, youth, and parent research: An integrative literature review](#). *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 18, 1–15.
- Agency for Clinical Innovation. (2016). [Participant experience focus groups: Facilitation guide](#).
- Alamgir, A. K. M., Nudel, S., Badrunnesha, M., & Daou, S. M. (2020). [Home to home: A purposeful journey. Toolkit for working with refugee youth](#). Research and Evaluation Department, Access Alliance.
- Brown, R. (2022). [Best practices for conducting virtual focus groups](#). Sheridan College.
- Gibson, F. (2007). [Conducting focus groups with children and young people: Strategies for success](#). *Journal of Research in Nursing*, 12(5), 473–483.
- Griffith I., Parekh, J., & Charles, C. (2020). [Conducting successful virtual focus groups](#). Child Trends.
- Halej, J. (2017). [Ethics in primary research \(focus groups, interviews and surveys\)](#). Equality Challenge Unit.
- Justice for Families. (2013). [Focus on youth and families: A guide for conducting focus groups with youth and families impacted by the juvenile justice system](#).
- Krueger, R. (2002). [Designing and conducting focus group interviews](#). University of Minnesota.
- Lloyd-Evans, S. (2017). [Focus groups, community engagement, and researching with young people](#). In R. Evans, L. Holt & T. Skelton (Eds.), *Methodological approaches (Geographies of children and young people)*. (pp. 375-379). Springer.
- Magnusson, E., & Marecek, J. (2015). [Doing interview-based qualitative research: A learner's guide](#). Cambridge University Press.
- Marczak, M., & Sewell, M. (n. d.). [Using focus groups for evaluation](#). The University of Arizona.
- Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada. (n. d.). [NSERC guide on integrating equity, diversity and inclusion considerations in research](#). Government of Canada.
- Parker, A., & Tritter, J. (2006). [Focus group method and methodology: Current practice and recent debate](#). *International Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 29(1), 23–37.
- Rodriguez, K. L., Schwartz, J. L., Lahman, M. K. E., & Geist, M. R. (2011). [Culturally responsive focus groups: Reframing the research experience to focus on participants](#). *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 10(4), 400–417.
- Sim, J., & Waterfield, J. (2019). [Focus group methodology: Some ethical challenges](#). *Quality & Quantity*, 53, 3003–3022.
- Turuba, R., Irving, S., Turnbull, H., Amarasekera, A., Howard, A. M., Brockmann, V., Tallon, C., Mathias, S., Henderson, J., & Barbic, S. (2022). [Practical considerations for engaging youth with lived and/or living experience of substance use as youth advisors and co-researchers](#). *Journal of Participatory Research Methods*, 3(3).
- Vogl, S., Schmidt, M., & Kapella, O. (2023). [Focus groups with children: Practicalities and methodological insights](#). *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 24(2), 21.