

TIP SHEET

August 2016

FREDLA Tip Sheet: Focus Groups: An Effective Strategy for Gathering Input from Families

Many family-run organizations utilize focus groups as a means to gather information from families to assess needs, or to solicit input on programs or policies. Focus groups differ from support groups or training programs in the following ways:

- Focus groups are a form of research; they are structured around a set of questions that are designed to get information, ideas and opinions from participants.
- Focus groups are led by a trained facilitator who guides the participants through the questions. The facilitator is neutral throughout the discussion and does not share their personal opinions or react to comments made by participants.
- It takes more than one focus group to arrive at valid conclusions.
- Focus groups are recorded or a note taker is present to capture what participants have to say.

Planning for Focus Groups: A Type of Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is used to learn the opinions and experiences of research participants; and focus groups are one type of qualitative research. As such, it is important that family-run organizations are attentive to research guidelines.

When planning for focus groups, you must:

- Identify the issue you want to learn about. For example, what services are needed by families when their child is discharged from the hospital?
- Develop six to eight questions in advance, which will be asked by the facilitator. Questions should be open-ended asking participants for their opinions, or to describe their experiences.
- Develop a written protocol for conducting the focus group. A protocol describes the process and steps that will be followed during the focus group. It should include: How you inform participants about why you are conducting the group; and how the information will be used. The protocol must also identify any potential risks to participants and how those risks will be managed. For example, a question could trigger a memory of a traumatic event for a participant. The protocol must identify how that situation would be handled in the group, such as the note taker would accompany the participant to a quiet place and stay with the individual until the participant was able to safely return to the group or leave.

This resource was produced by the Family Run Executive Director Leadership Association (FREDLA) in its role as a core partner of the National Training and Technical Assistance Center for Child, Youth and Family Mental Health (NTTAC)



This document was prepared for the National Technical Assistance Network for Children's Behavioral Health under contract with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Contract #HHSS280201500007C. However, the contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government.

Participant Protections

While focus groups may not seem like a type of research, they are research and all research requires participant protection. It is important to develop participant protection guidelines and to review them with participants prior to beginning any focus group. Each participant should be given a copy of the participant protections and should be asked to sign acknowledgement of them to indicate their understanding of them, once they have been reviewed with the group by the facilitator.

Participant Protections should include:

- A statement that the research is voluntary: Participants are not being forced to participate and may leave the focus group at any time without being in jeopardy of losing any services.
- A description of why the focus group is being conducted and how the information gathered will be used.
- A statement that participants are not being forced to disclose any information they are not comfortable sharing with the group.
- A statement of how the confidentiality of participant information will be protected, including when results of the focus group are shared or published.
- A statement of the benefits and potential risks of participating in the research.

Data Collection

In addition to collecting participant opinions and experiences, it can also be helpful to collect demographic data that describes certain participant characteristics. Family run organizations can develop a one or two page information sheet with check boxes for participants to use in noting their responses.

The following are examples of demographic information that it may be useful to collect:

- Whether participant is part of the birth family, foster family, adoptive family, or a relative caregiver or guardian
- County, city or jurisdiction
- Child's gender
- Child's age
- Diagnosis
- Services the child currently receives

Recruiting Participants

Families that are served by your organization can be a good source of participants for focus groups. You may also want to recruit families from your broader community through flyers or emails. It is important to reach out to diverse communities to ensure that the voices of all families are included. Note: You may need to utilize interpreters for families whose primary language is not English and for individuals whose primary form of communication is sign language.

Recruitment incentives and tools include:

- **Stipends.** It is common practice in research to offer a stipend as an incentive for participation and it can be an effective tool for recruitment. Often, stipends in the form of money or gift cards are given to families who participate in focus groups as a way to demonstrate respect for their time, expertise and effort. Family organizations must be careful not to use stipends or gift cards as a way to coerce families to participate.

- **Requiring Pre-Registration.** Pre-registration can be helpful in screening out participants who may not be appropriate for a particular focus group. For example, a mother with a child in elementary school may not be an appropriate participant for a focus group to learn about the needs of adolescents or young adults.
- **Transportation/Child Care.** Child care and transportation are often barriers to participation for caregivers. If possible, providing transportation along with onsite childcare or stipends for child care may enable families to participate that would otherwise be unable to without these supports.

The ideal size for a focus group is 10-12 families. You should anticipate that a certain number of families may drop out and try to recruit more participants than you need so that you will have at least 8-10 families participate.

Selecting Your Facilitator

Selecting a skilled facilitator for a focus group is critical. Look for someone who:

- Has experience facilitating groups and can engage everyone in the discussion
- Is able to manage the group when one person tries to dominate the discussion
- Knows something about children's mental health
- Can remain neutral throughout the discussion
- Will relate well to group participants
- Can draw out the main points from the group's discussion

Conducting Your Focus Group

Be sure to select a location and setting where families feel comfortable. The room should be quiet and private, allowing for discussion. Family organizations often have coffee/water, food or snacks available when participants arrive.

The day and time of the group are also factors to consider. Focus groups with 10-12 participants usually require at least 90 minutes to allow enough time for everyone to be heard. You may want to allow up to 2 hours if food is being served beforehand so your participants have time to eat and get settled.

A sample format for your group might look like the following:

1. Opening

- Welcome, introduction of facilitator and note taker and explanation of the purpose of the focus group.
- Review of participant protections, and asking people to sign and hand in the forms.
- Participant introductions – So that people do not go on too long or ramble, you may want to suggest exactly how people should introduce themselves. For example, say "Tell us your first name and how old your child is."
- Review of guidelines for the group, including:
 - Turning off cell phones
 - Respecting the opinions of others
 - Respecting the confidentiality of all participants
 - Only sharing what you are comfortable sharing
- Explanation of the demographic questionnaire and stipends that will be distributed at the end of the group.

2. Discussion

- Facilitator asks questions and solicits responses from the group with the discussion either being recorded or a note taker writing notes (or both).

3. Conclusion

- Wrap-up and thank everyone for coming.
- Distribute demographic data collection questionnaires.
- Upon completion of questionnaires, distribute stipends. Note: For record keeping, participants should sign a form acknowledging receipt of a stipend or gift certificate.

Writing the Report

The purpose of a focus group is to gather information, so compiling that information and then disseminating it to the right audience is important. As you sort through the notes and/or recording of a focus group, the following questions should be asked:

- What patterns emerge?
- What are the common themes?
- What new questions arise?
- What conclusions might be drawn?
- What recommendations could be made as a result of the focus groups?

It is important to present the results of the focus group in an unbiased manner, ensuring that strengths of the system and positive experiences of families are noted, as well as any barriers, challenges or negative experiences of families. Readers and policy makers will consider a balanced report to be a more valid representation than one biased toward or focused solely on barriers or negative results.

Including quotes from families to illustrate some themes or patterns can be very effective. Be mindful of confidentiality in developing your report and avoid using any identifying information that could link something said as part of a focus group to an individual participant.

Using the Report

Focus group summaries or reports can be used to influence public policy, raise awareness about specific issues, plan programs and build partnerships. Some potential ways to draw attention to the report include:

- Releasing the report with publicity through email, Facebook or Twitter
- Hosting a webinar to review report findings and release the report with it
- Having a participant family member interviewed for a newspaper article
- Setting up meetings with policy makers to share the report with them
- Distributing the report to legislators
- Presenting report data at conferences

Family run organizations are considered good partners. If there is information in the report that could reflect negatively on a particular department or agency, it may be strategically important to share the information with these partners well in advance of releasing the report to the public. In this way, ensuring that partners are not taken by surprise or 'blind-sided,' and preserving the partnership.

Organizational Examples

Two examples of widely disseminated reports developed by family run organizations that have conducted focus groups are:

United Advocates for Children and Families in California: [2012 Stigma and Discrimination Reduction Focus Group Report](#)

Parent Professional Advocacy League (PPAL): [Pointing the Way to Leadership](#)

Resources

Community Toolbox

The University of Kansas,
Work Group for Community Health and Development
Community Toolbox Section 6. Conducting Focus Groups
<http://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/assessment/assessing-community-needs-and-resources/conduct-focus-groups/main>

Guidelines for Conducting a Focus Group

Elliott and Associates, 2005
https://assessment.trinity.duke.edu/documents/How_to_Conduct_a_Focus_Group.pdf

ABOUT THE NATIONAL TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE NETWORK FOR CHILDREN'S BEHAVIORAL HEALTH

The National Technical Assistance Network for Children's Behavioral Health (TA Network), funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Child, Adolescent and Family Branch, partners with states and communities to develop the most effective and sustainable systems of care possible for the benefit of children and youth with behavioral health needs and their families. We provide technical assistance and support across the nation to state and local agencies, including youth and family leadership and organizations.

ABOUT FREDLA

This resource was produced by the Family Run Executive Director Leadership Association (FREDLA) in its role as a core partner of the National Training and Technical Assistance Center for Child, Youth and Family Mental Health (NTTAC), operated by the National Technical Assistance Network for Children's Behavioral Health (TA Network), funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), Center for Mental Health Services, Child, Adolescent and Family Branch.