



Focus groups

Focus groups are a group-based, verbal method for gathering in-depth information from several children or young people at once. They can create a dynamic, interactive atmosphere in which participants exchange ideas, respond to each other's insights and build a shared discussion.^{33,59,60}

The benefits of focus groups

- **Interactive sharing:** Children and young people can bounce ideas off one another, potentially uncovering richer insights than in one-to-one interviews.
- **Peer support:** Group settings may help participants feel more comfortable, validating each other's experiences or normalising certain views.
- **Efficient data collection:** Facilitators can gain perspectives from multiple individuals simultaneously, which may be beneficial when time or resources are limited.



Keep in mind

- **Limited confidentiality:** Because children are sharing in a group, you cannot guarantee privacy. Focus groups are generally not suitable for sensitive or highly personal topics.³³
- **Group power dynamics:** More vocal participants may dominate the conversation, while quieter children's insights risk going unheard if facilitation is weak.²⁵
- **Logistical complexity:** Coordinating schedules for several participants and ensuring child-friendly venues, snacks and breaks can be more involved than planning individual interviews.





Planning considerations



- **Group size**
 - For **school-aged children** (6–10 years), 4–6 participants is recommended.⁶¹
 - For **older children and young people** (10–18 years), a group of 6–8 is generally manageable.⁶⁰
 - **Children under 6 years** often do better in pairs or very small groups, and typically have shorter attention spans - requiring frequent breaks or varied activities.
- **Time.** Focus group duration should balance discussion scope and participants' attention span.
- Younger children may need shorter sessions or breaks; limit sessions to 45–50 minutes for those under 10. Older children and young people can typically engage for up to 60 minutes.⁶¹
- **Power balance.** Forming groups of children and young people of similar ages can assist to prevent power imbalances and influence.^{33,53,61} Depending on the topic, grouping by shared characteristics like gender or culture may be beneficial, and a facilitator with similar traits might be appropriate.⁶¹
- **Creating and maintaining engagement.** Incorporate task-oriented activities like drawing, games, role-play or props (e.g. photos, dolls, puppets) to keep children and young people engaged.³⁶ Integrating movement or play can help maintain focus and create a comfortable, enjoyable environment, reducing restlessness and distraction. Be flexible to accommodate the group's needs and interests.
- **Recording materials.** Recording devices (video and/or audio) can help reliably document the discussion to be analysed later and facilitate evaluation. Video recording may be preferable to just audio, as it can be difficult to assign voices to the individuals speaking when retrospectively reviewing.⁶¹
- **Catering.** Offering snacks and drinks can be a great way to keep everyone comfortable, especially for longer sessions or certain times of the day.⁶¹ See the [Snacks](#) section for further considerations.
- **Additional information.** Have helpful information, resources or referrals ready to support the child, young person, or parent or guardian as part of your risk management plan and or ethics protocol.⁴⁶

Tips for conducting your focus group



Starting the focus group

Building trust is key to open conversations. Start by introducing yourself and each other, and using [icebreakers](#) or a 'warm-up' activity to build rapport³³ and help the participants feel relaxed and ready to share their views (see additional resources).^{53,61} Warm-up conversational-style questions about age, school, interests, or feelings about their day can help children feel comfortable before the formal questions or discussion of sensitive topics.^{25,33}

Group agreement

Establishing a group agreement at the start of the focus group is an important first step. This can be co-created with the children and young people themselves.

Group agreements may include things such as:⁵³

- I can say 'pass' if I don't want to answer (you can ask the children or young people as a group to come up with a word or phrase they'd like to use).
- I tell you if I don't understand you, or if you don't understand me.
- There are no right or wrong answers.
- We'll take turns talking.
- We won't tease or make fun of each other.



Facilitator moderation

Once the discussion has started, the facilitator should hold back as much as possible, to allow the participants to talk freely.⁴⁸ Moderation may be required at times to ensure all participants enjoy equal opportunity to contribute and engage in the discussion.⁶¹

During the focus group

Open-ended questions – questions that cannot be answered with a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’ – are one of the best ways to elicit rich responses during a focus group.⁵³

- 'Can you tell me about a time when you felt proud of something you did?'
- 'What do you think is the best part of being involved in [activity or topic]?'
- 'How do you feel when you're at school (or another setting)?'
- 'If you could change one thing about [specific topic or environment], what would it be and why?'
- 'What do you enjoy doing the most, and why does it make you happy?'

A few tips

- Strategic use of follow-up questions prompts, and verbal cues can help keep the discussion flowing and encourage participants to provide more detail in their contributions. Examples of prompts include “Tell me more about ...” or “Describe ...”.⁵³
- Use reflective and summary statements to clarify meaning and understanding.⁵³ e.g. ‘It sounds like you feel happy/sad about!’ or ‘Did I understand right? You like drawing because it helps you tell stories?’
- Avoid leading responses by not over-assisting if a child struggles to express themselves. Instead, encourage them with phrases like ‘Try to find other words to tell me what you mean’ or offer a list of options to guide.⁵³
- Show encouragement (e.g. nodding, repeating responses, or giving positive feedback) to prompt further elaboration.⁵⁸
- Frame questions as requests (e.g. ‘Please tell me about the photograph you took’) for richer responses.⁵⁸
- Avoid bundling multiple questions together to prevent confusion.⁵⁸
- Allow sufficient pauses between questions, as silence may indicate thinking rather than refusal or uncertainty.
- Be patient—children may need time to process and respond.
- If the focus group is covering sensitive topics, it can be helpful to position these questions in the middle of the focus group to allow the children and young people time to ‘warm-up’ and importantly, ‘cool-down’ from the subject matter.⁴⁶

Concluding the focus group

- Check-in with the children or young people at the end of the focus group. Check how they are feeling - it gives them a chance to share if anything made them feel worried or upset and allows for timely referrals to appropriate support services if required.⁴⁶
- You may also like to leave the children or young people and/or their parent or guardian with a ‘thank you leaflet’ or ‘summary sheet’ containing further information about the project, links to additional resources or services and your contact details if they wish to follow-up with you or your team in the future.⁴⁶