



Conducting Focus Groups with Youth and Teens

This document outlines some best practices for conducting successful focus groups with your members.

WHY?

In your ongoing effort to continuously improve the Club for your members, you may occasionally want to solicit feedback in a group setting. After all, Club members are the experts when it comes to understanding what makes the Club a great place to belong.

Asking kids what they think in a small group setting can provide you with rich insight to deepen your understanding of data obtained through a survey like National Youth Outcomes Initiative survey. For example, you may want to better understand how you can improve your Club's score on emotional safety or fun. A small group of youth may be able to add context to the data and provide suggestions for improvement.

WHO?

Staff:

- Two staff should be present during the group discussion – one who is focused on really listening to the feedback and facilitating the discussion, and another who can focus on taking good notes.
- Staff who have good relationships or a good rapport with members are ideal; they are best able to draw out honest feedback from participants.

Participants:

- Volunteers! Participation should not be mandatory; provide an opportunity to opt-out
- 4-10 participants per session is ideal, and group size may vary depending on the age of the youth participating:
 - For younger members (10 and younger), consider a smaller group of 4-6
 - For older members (ages 12+), group size can be slightly larger (6-8 is ideal, max of 10)
 - Youth under 6 should not be solicited for participation
- Homogeneity:
 - Groups should not contain wide age ranges; focus each session to a 2-3 year age span.
 - Conduct same-gender sessions when possible
- Relevance: Ensure that only members for whom the content of the focus group is relevant are invited to participate (e.g., if the focus group is about a specific program, invite only those who are part of (or could be part of) that program)

WHERE?

- Choose a quiet room with limited distractions
- Set up ahead of time
- Provide refreshments
- Provide “table toys”, such as pipe cleaners, plastic slinkys or legos – something for members to manipulate while participating in the conversation

HOW?

- Duration: 30-45 minutes; for younger youth, no more than 30 minutes
- Determine your priorities for the session beforehand, and focus your discussion on the 2-3 key questions you’d find the most value in being able to answer
- Create a safe, trusting atmosphere; this is essential to obtaining honest feedback
- Respect the participants
- Recommended Agenda (and tips!):
 - Welcome
 - State the purpose of the session; explain the value of their participation and feedback:
 - “When we reviewed the results of the survey that our Club completed back in ____, we noticed that some youth feel _____ about _____. As Club members, you are the experts, and we’d like your thoughts about how we can improve _____ and make the Club a better place for everyone.”
 - Provide ground rules:
 - Assure the group that there are no right or wrong answers to questions. We’re asking for their opinions, and all opinions are welcome.
 - State that group members need not all agree, but that all opinions will be heard and respected.
 - Ask questions:
 - Plan your questions ahead of time, and order them from more general to more specific
 - Try to engage all participants so that you’re not just getting the opinions of the vocal minority.
 - Begin with a general question, and ask all participants for their thoughts. This gets them all talking toward the beginning of the session.
 - If one or a couple of youth are dominating the air space, use questions like “What does everyone else think?” to draw out more reserved participants. Activities that ask participants to think on their own first, and provide a moment for reflection or writing down their own thoughts before taking feedback aloud from the group may also help even out the air space in such circumstances.
 - Use “we” instead of “you”. This prevents individual participants from feeling called out for expressing their opinions. For example, “It sounds like we feel _____ about _____.”

- Instead of asking “Why?,” which can feel accusatory and put youth on the spot, dig deeper on issues of interest using questions like “Can anyone tell me more about that?,” which can be asked of the whole group
- Re-state what youth are telling you to be sure you’ve understood. This also gives the note-taker more time to record the feedback.
- Wrap up:
 - Remind participants of the goal for the session
 - Summarize the ideas that have been shared
 - Ask each participant to tell you which idea they think will be most helpful to achieving your goal. Go around the circle and give everyone a chance to answer this question. This will ensure that everyone has an opportunity to share at least one thought before the session is over.
 - Consider handing out index cards at the very end of the session and inviting participants to write down any thoughts or ideas they didn’t want to share out loud, and giving them to the facilitator or putting them in a drop box.
 - Thank participants for their time and for offering their opinions. Tell them what will be done with their feedback, but be careful not to commit to making changes you aren’t sure can be made.

WHAT’S NEXT?

- Now that your members have taken time to provide you with great information, create a plan to put it to use.
- First, transcribe your note-taker’s notes and anything fresh in your memory that wasn’t captured during the session into a coherent, single document.
- If the focus group was conducted at multiple sites within your organization, dedicate someone to look at the feedback across sites. What themes were the same across sites? What was different?
- Dedicate a meeting, or part of a meeting, to reviewing the results of the focus group with other staff. In your meeting, begin the action planning process. Brainstorm solutions to problems brought to light by the participants, and discuss feasibility of any ideas for improvement or solutions raised in the focus group.
- Develop action plan for making improvements.
- Once changes have been implemented, allow time for change to take place.