

# Focus Groups

## a quick guide

### Q: What is a focus group?

#### A: Small group conversation guided by a facilitator

Participants share their experiences, opinions, and ideas about a program, service, or issue.

- Guided discussion with open-ended questions
- Participants build on each other's ideas
- Usually lasts 60-90 minutes



### Q: Why use a focus group?

#### A: To understand experiences behind the data

Focus groups understand the story behind the numbers. Focus groups help us learn:

- What participants think about programs or services
- What is working well and what can be improved
- New ideas from the community

### Q: Who participates in focus groups?

#### A: People with relevant lived experience

- Program participants
- Community members
- Service providers
- Family members



### Q: How are results used?

#### A: To improve programs and decision-making

Insights from key themes can be used to make recommendations.

- Highlight program strengths
- Identify participant barriers
- Suggest program improvements
- Inform planning and policy decisions



# Facilitating a Focus Group

## A Step-by-Step Guide

### 1 Recruit Participants

- Invite participants with shared lived experience.
- Incentives can help increase participation.

### 2 Create a Protocol

- Prepare a discussion guide to structure the conversation.
- Use open-ended questions that encourage detailed responses rather than “yes” or “no” answers.

### 3 Gather Materials

- **Moderator** – Guides the discussion and keeps the group focused.
- **Note Taker** – Documents key points and records the session (AI tools can assist).
- **Recording Device** – Captures the discussion for later review when writing up results.

#### Example Question:

“Thinking about your experience with the program, what has been most helpful, and what could be improved?”

### 4 Set Up the Room

- Arrange seating in a circle or around a table to encourage conversation.

### 5 Before You Start

- Set ground rules
- Obtain informed consent for recording the session

#### Ground Rules

1. **Respect and Confidentiality**  
Create a supportive space where participants feel comfortable sharing without fear of being judged.
2. **Everyone Gets to Speak**  
Minimize “dominant” voices (those who do most of the talking). Invite shy participants to offer their perspectives.

#### Start with an Icebreaker

Helps participants get comfortable, lowers tension, and encourages open dialogue.

#### Stay Focused on Goals

Minimize off-topic conversations to make the most of time.

#### Encourage Constructive Feedback

Invite participants to share both challenges and successes. Ask how challenges could be improved.

#### Ask Follow-up Questions

For brief responses, never be afraid to say “tell me more about that”

#### Summarize Key Takeaways

At the end, briefly summarize the main themes you heard and invite participants to clarify or add anything that may have been missed

#### Thank Them!

Remind them that their feedback helps to improve the program

Let's go!

#### Pro Tip

### Let them do all the talking!

A focus group is a **conversation** between participants. Ask questions neutrally and say as little as possible so participants don't feel you're looking for a specific answer. Let the conversation flow organically.