

WORKBOOK D:

**CONDUCTING
FOCUS GROUPS**

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OVERVIEW OF FOCUS GROUPS

A focus group is a small group of about eight to ten people participating in an in-depth discussion about a particular topic, led by a moderator. Focus groups are a type of **qualitative research**—that is, research that focuses on people’s attitudes, opinions, beliefs and values. The answers derived by qualitative research tend to be narrative-oriented, rather than numeric. While quantitative research (such as a telephone survey) can tell you, for example, what *percentage* of parents are sending their children to structured after-school programs, **qualitative research can reveal a detailed story about the underlying reasons** parents have for sending their children to structured after-school programs.

Steps Involved in Conducting Focus Groups

1. Developing a recruiting strategy

(Whose attitudes and beliefs matter to your research, and how will you find these people?)



2. Selecting a time and place

(When and where will you hold your focus group?)



3. Preparing screeners for recruitment

(The screener enables you to exclude people whose characteristics do not match what you are looking for.)



4. Recruiting participants

(Inviting participants to the focus group.)



5. Writing the moderator guide

(A moderator guide contains the questions that will be asked during the group.)



6. Holding the focus groups

(Includes preparing the room, hosting, recording comments, and other details.)



7. Moderating the focus groups

(Facilitating the focus group discussion and ensuring that you collect high-quality data.)



8. Analyzing the data

(Making sense of the findings.)

Focus groups are an ideal method to **combine with quantitative research**, such as a telephone or self-administered survey. You can use focus groups as an initial step (for example, to understand the concerns that are preventing parents from enrolling their children in OST activities, prior to conducting a survey to measure the extent to which specific services and solutions will help parents overcome these barriers), or as a means of exploring in greater depth issues you have identified through a telephone survey.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Focus Groups

Advantages

- ▶ **Depth:** The principal advantage of focus groups is that they enable you to understand the real feelings and beliefs of the people who will be affected by your research—a layer that is difficult to reach through other methods.
- ▶ **Quality of data:** Moderators are able to respond to questions and probe for greater detail. Questions can be added or altered in real-time if needed.
- ▶ **Short timelines:** Data can be collected faster than other research methods—a few weeks to a few months, depending on the number of groups you are conducting.
- ▶ **Can recruit through communities:** Focus groups can be used to hear from participants who are unable to read and write, who do not have telephones, or who speak a language other than English, and would therefore be less likely to participate in other common survey methods.

Disadvantages

- ▶ **Analysis can be challenging and time-consuming:** The information obtained from focus groups is more ambiguous than that obtained from a telephone survey. Analysis can be difficult, particularly for less experienced analysts.
- ▶ **Moderating requires a high level of training and skill:** The best professional moderators make it look easy, but there is much more to moderating than simply asking people questions.
- ▶ **Recruiting can be challenging and time-consuming:** It can be difficult to get people to attend the focus group, and time-consuming to find enough people who will participate.
- ▶ **Expense:** Costs will vary depending on how many focus groups you conduct, how difficult it is to find participants, how far vendors have to travel, where you hold the groups, how much you give participants as an honorarium, how you are recording comments, and other factors.

Deciding Whether or Not to Outsource Focus Group Research

Most of the steps involved in conducting focus groups require special skills and training, and many of the steps are time-consuming. **Focus groups are very complex; there are many details that must be effectively managed to be successful.** People without experience may not be able to recognize problems when they occur.

- ▶ **When to outsource focus groups:** Consider outsourcing the entire focus group project if you have a project with difficult logistics (e.g., hard-to-reach populations, a large number of groups, groups in multiple languages, etc.). If you cannot outsource the entire research project, outsource specific components. Recruiting (which will consume a lot of staff resources) and moderating (which requires skill and training) are good choices for outsourcing. Most moderators will also provide a summary analysis for an additional fee. You can observe the groups and determine whether to outsource analysis, depending on the complexity of the findings.
- ▶ **When to conduct focus groups using internal resources:** Conduct focus groups internally if you have enough staff resources to handle recruiting, or staff with training and experience in conducting or analyzing focus groups. Conducting focus groups internally is also a good choice if your target population is easy to reach, especially in cases when you have **access to existing groups**, such as parents who meet regularly at a PTO or PTA group. If you can conduct a focus group when these groups are meeting, you will minimize recruiting logistics considerably.

Including Area Schools in Your Research Planning Process

No matter what research method you plan to use to inform your community's OST planning research, if you plan to use students as research subjects, it is a good idea to **include area schools in your research planning process**. One strategy we have found to be successful for getting students to participate in focus groups is to go to area schools, talk to students in the lunchroom, and have interested students fill out cards to be contacted about the group (we will explain this process in more detail in this workbook). In order to use this method, however, it is imperative that researchers obtain appropriate permission and approval to enter the school.

It is helpful if someone on the project planning team has connections with the school department and can contact superintendents to get their buy-in and approval to use the school in the research. Ideally, the superintendent can assist you in contacting school principals to get their buy-in. It is critical to **obtain the approval of school principals**, as they generally have complete decision-making power regarding what occurs in their schools. Principals are also highly likely to want to notify parents before any research is conducted. **Remember to build time into your research schedule for schools to send notices to parents**. In addition, school systems have formal systems for reviewing research materials; there could either be a review board or an individual who will review and approve your research materials. Talk to the school superintendent to identify what the reviewing process is and who you should contact. **Build this review process into your research timeline as well**.

Two good strategies for obtaining buy-in are to **emphasize the value of the research**, and **make it easy for schools to participate**. For example, make sure school superintendents and principals understand the importance of your research project and the direct benefit this research will have on your community's children. Try to arrange your research project so that it uses as few school resources as possible. For example, do not request that school staff be involved in distributing or collecting any information relating to the research project; arrange for your own staff to handle all details.

What Communities Have Learned

Enhance the value of participation. “The challenge is convincing the principal to administer the survey in his or her school, and helping them find a way to get it done. Schools always have special projects, and fitting in a survey is often not the principal's first priority. What we tried to do after the first year was to feed back the principal's own school information, so that they got a direct benefit from participating. They were the only ones that received their own school's information—everything else we did was by the entire region. Principals had control over their own school's specific information.”

You must get buy-in from principals even if you have conducted research at the school previously. “This third year [that we've done the research], we didn't market to principals well enough. We thought maybe that they would have been more on board the third year. I think the big lesson is that every year you do research, you've got to treat it like it's the first year, and really sell it to the people who control whether or not your research is going to be successful. For example, just because you gave incentives the first year, you shouldn't think that incentives won't be necessary the second year. You can't let up on the marketing aspect of your research. You've got to constantly assume that people aren't necessarily on board.”

--Bob Goerge, Chapin Hall Center for Children. Conducted a multi-phase research project, including self-administered surveys of high school students in Chicago, in-depth interviews with students, and an inventory of OST programs in Chicago. The objective of this research was to better understand participation in OST programs and other activities among Chicago youth, as well as the effects of established programs.

In the next sections, we will present more detailed information regarding outsourcing focus groups and conducting focus groups using internal resources. For communities conducting focus groups using internal resources, we will present information about each step in the process.

Passive Consent

What is Passive Consent? *Passive consent* is the process whereby consent is given by not returning an “opt-out” or “withdrawal” form. In other words, parents are given the opportunity to withdraw their child from the research. If they do not withdraw their child, then the researchers can include the child in the research. This differs from *active consent*, which requires that parents confirm in writing their permission for their child to participate in research. Many CBOs and school districts now use passive consent rather than active consent in order to secure the participation of students in important research. A sample withdrawal form is included on the CD of prototype materials included with this guide.

Why Use Passive Consent?

- ▶ Active consent has been criticized as an overly rigid process that severely limits access to students for survey research. Proponents of passive consent note that survey research such as that proposed herein already has minimal risks, is anonymous or confidential, and is voluntary.
- ▶ Research suggests that passive consent results in a more representative sample. Students who would have been excluded by active consent because they or their parents simply forgot to sign and return an active consent form can now be included in the research.
- ▶ Passive consent generally involves less cost and labor for researchers.

Passive Consent Recommendations

- ▶ Most importantly, specific schools, districts, or organizations may have their own consent policies. Always check with the schools or organizations you are working with to be sure that passive consent is permitted.
- ▶ Allow more than one way for parents to refuse their child’s participation. For example, they could return the form, call a telephone number on the form, or reply by email.
- ▶ Make sure all materials are language-appropriate. For example, if you anticipate a population with limited English-reading ability, be sure to provide forms in the appropriate primary language.
- ▶ Parents should be given sufficient time to refuse their child’s participation. We recommend that you hand out forms about one week prior to research. This provides adequate time for refusal, but is not so far in advance that the form is forgotten or deemed irrelevant.
- ▶ Be sure to include the following information on the withdrawal form:
 - Topic of research.
 - Participation is voluntary and refusal to participate will not negatively affect the student.
 - No identifying information is recorded (the survey is anonymous) or if recorded, every effort is made to keep the information confidential.
 - The dates of the research, and how long the research will take (e.g., “the survey will take approximately ten minutes to complete”).
 - Any potential risks (for this type of survey research, risks are minimal. Be sure the student knows that if at any time they feel uncomfortable participating in the survey, they can stop).
 - Any direct benefit to the student for participating (for example, better after-school programs).
 - All relevant contact information (e.g., the school or organization conducting the research).

OUTSOURCING FOCUS GROUP RESEARCH: A Guide to Hiring Vendors

There are two strategies you can use to outsource focus groups: (1) outsourcing the entire project to a full-service vendor; and (2) outsourcing components of the project. Outsourcing component parts might involve: (1) hiring a professional focus group facility for all or some combination of recruiting, room preparation, hosting, audio-taping, and video-taping; (2) hiring a professional focus group moderator for all or some combination of moderation and brief analysis; (3) hiring translators or transcribers; and (4) more rarely, hiring an analyst to prepare a report of the findings (it is less common to hire a vendor exclusively for analysis). The charts on the following pages will provide information about outsourcing to each type of vendor.

Outsourcing To A Full-Service Vendor

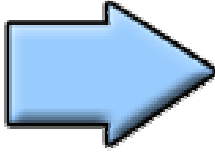
Who to hire:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Full-service marketing research firm ▶ Professional moderator (some may handle all components)
What to look for:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Request references: are former clients satisfied? ▶ Focus group experience ▶ Knowledge of the OST industry a plus ▶ Experience working with target population (e.g., school-age kids) a plus
Where to find vendors:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Ask trusted associates for recommendations ▶ Quirk's Marketing Research Review, Researcher SourceBook™ (www.quirks.com). Look for vendors offering <i>qualitative research</i> ▶ The Blue Book Research Services Directory (www.bluebook.org) ▶ Internet searches for <i>focus group research, qualitative research, etc.</i>
What they will do:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Discuss your research objectives with you in detail ▶ Prepare screeners and moderator guides ▶ Recruit and confirm participants ▶ Make arrangements for physical facilities, hosting, food, audio- and/or videotaping, honorariums ▶ Moderate the groups ▶ Have groups transcribed and/or translated (if applicable) ▶ Analyze and present the findings (you should be able to request your choice of a detailed written report, a summary, a PowerPoint presentation, etc.) ▶ May be able to offer recommendations and strategies for next steps, depending on vendor
What you will do:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Provide vendor with a clear understanding of your research objectives ▶ Review and approve screener and moderator guide prior to groups ▶ You should be given the option of observing the focus groups and debriefing with the moderator afterward
What you should expect to pay:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Will vary widely, depending on the number of groups, the location, the characteristics of participants, the type of report prepared, and other factors ▶ From \$6,000 to \$8,000 <i>per group</i>; plan to conduct at least two groups

Outsourcing Components of Focus Group Research

Hiring Focus Group Facilities	
What to look for:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Location ▶ References
Where to find vendors:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Ask trusted associates for recommendations ▶ Quirk’s Marketing Research Review (www.quirks.com), Focus Group Facilities Directory Search ▶ The Blue Book Research Services Directory (www.bluebook.org)
What they will do:	<p>Specific services offered may vary, but are likely to include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Participant recruitment, using either the facility’s own database or a sample list provided to them ▶ Video- and audio-taping of the groups ▶ Provide a host or hostess for the groups, who will greet participants as they arrive, review their information, be available for questions, and provide payments to participants when the focus group is over ▶ Provide food and beverages for participants and observers ▶ Provide a meeting room appropriate for conducting the focus group, and an observer room. Observers (e.g., other researchers on the team) can observe the focus groups through a two-way mirror
What you will do:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Provide vendor with an outline of the requirements (see Sample Bid Form) ▶ Set a timeline for the groups ▶ Obtain list of telephone numbers to be used for recruitment (unless the facility is recruiting from their own lists) ▶ You will be responsible for any components of the research not provided by the focus group facility (e.g., translation, transcription, analysis, etc.)
What you should expect to pay:	<p>Total will vary depending on services being provided. Services may include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Recruitment: \$75 to \$150 per participant (depending on whether you are conducting focus groups with the general population and have few screening requirements, or if you are targeting hard-to-reach populations or have a lot of screening requirements), or between \$900 and \$1,800 per focus group, not including any monetary incentive you offer people to encourage participation ▶ Use of meeting room: \$400 to \$650 per group ▶ Food and beverages: \$10 to \$20 per participant; \$25 to \$50 per person for others (e.g., colleague or stakeholder observing the group, the moderator, etc.) <p>Focus group facilities often offer videography services as well (please refer to “Hiring a Videographer”).</p>

For details about what will be required of you if you are outsourcing a component of the focus group research to a facility but handling related or additional tasks yourself, please see the information about conducting focus groups using internal resources.

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In general, we recommend that you **hire a professional moderator** if you can afford it. The best value a professional can offer you is his or her ability to get the most out of a challenging group. If something should go wrong, a professional moderator will have the experience and background to know the best method for handling the problem.

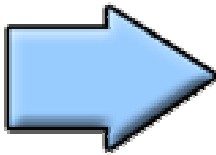
Hiring A Professional Moderator	
What to look for:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Experience▶ Communication and listening skills▶ Ease and adeptness with group processes▶ Curiosity and openness to other ways of thinking▶ Friendliness and a sense of humor▶ Ask yourself, “Would I feel comfortable opening up to this person?” If so, chances are that focus group participants will as well▶ Experience working with target population (e.g., school-age children) a plus▶ Knowledge of OST industry a plus
Where to find vendors:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Ask trusted associates for recommendations▶ Quirk’s Marketing Research Review (www.quirks.com), Moderator Directory Index▶ The Blue Book Research Services Directory (www.bluebook.org)
What they will do:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Moderate the focus groups▶ Some moderators may provide other services for an additional fee, such as writing the moderator guide, participant recruitment, and/or analysis
What you will do:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Provide moderator with a clear understanding of your research objectives▶ Review the moderator guide with the moderator▶ Provide input and approval for any other services the moderator may be handling (e.g., moderator guide)▶ You should be given the option of observing the focus groups▶ You will be responsible for any components of the research not provided by the moderator (e.g., arranging a meeting room, recording the groups, translation, transcription, analysis, etc.)
What you should expect to pay:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Will vary widely▶ From \$400 to \$2,500 per group

A professional moderator’s experience in this regard is particularly valuable if you are planning to conduct focus groups with students. **Students present special challenges for focus group moderators.** To a greater extent than adults, students may be reluctant to speak openly or at all, or may be disruptive, inattentive, or unfocused. The professional’s skill will pay off in

these situations; he or she should be able to remain calm, get students interested in the topic, and keep unruly students in check while encouraging shy students to share their views.

For details about what will be required of you if you are outsourcing a component of the focus group research to a moderator but handling related or additional tasks yourself, please see the information about conducting focus groups using internal resources.

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For audio-recording, if you have the resources and plan to conduct a lot of focus group research, you may want to consider investing in a **digital recorder**. While such equipment can be expensive (about \$500 in 2006), you can expect excellent sound quality, an absence of background noise, and you do not need to think about changing tapes midway through a group.

Hiring Transcriptionists	
What to look for:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Accuracy ▶ Typing speed ▶ Knowledge of English language and rules of grammar ▶ Accessibility for questions ▶ Transcription training and/or specialized transcription equipment (e.g., pedal transcriber headset)
Where to find vendors:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Quirk’s Marketing Research Review (www.quirks.com) ▶ The Blue Book Research Services Directory (www.bluebook.org)
What they will do:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Prepare a written transcript of a focus group from an audio recording
What you will do:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Make arrangements for transcription in advance, letting the transcriptionist know when to expect the recording of the group and when you will need to have the transcripts back (average turnaround time for a transcript is about one to three days) ▶ Provide transcriptionist with clear audio recording of the focus group
What you should expect to pay:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Between \$200 to \$300 per group

Hiring Translators

What to look for:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Fluency in the source and target languages
Where to find vendors:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ The language department at an area college or university ▶ Quirk's Marketing Research Review (www.quirks.com) ▶ The Blue Book Research Services Directory (www.bluebook.org)
What they will do:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Prepare a written translation of a focus group from an audio recording
What you will do:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Make arrangements for translation in advance, letting the translator know when to expect the recording of the group and when you will need to have the translation back (average turnaround time for a translation is about two to four days) ▶ Provide translator with clear audio recording of the focus group
What you should expect to pay:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Between \$900 to \$1,200 per group, depending on the language and length of the group

Hiring A Videographer

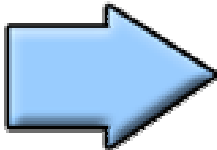
What to look for:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Location ▶ Availability
Where to find vendors:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Quirk's Marketing Research Review (www.quirks.com) ▶ The Blue Book Research Services Directory (www.bluebook.org) ▶ Directory of videographers by state (www.videographer.com)
What they will do:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Videotape the focus group(s)
What you will do:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Let them know whether you want stationary video (camera training on entire meeting table and left unattended) or an operator (videographer pans room and focuses on individual participants as they are speaking; more expensive option)
What you should expect to pay:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ May vary widely depending on the area and other considerations ▶ For groups conducted at a focus group facility: Between \$250 (stationary video) and \$600 (with a video operator) for a single focus group an hour and a half in length ▶ For groups not conducted at a focus group facility: Between \$600 and \$850, depending on how far they have to travel, for a single focus group an hour and a half in length

Hiring A Focus Group Analyst

What to look for:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Experience ▶ References ▶ Communication skills (ask to see a sample written report) ▶ Knowledge of OST industry a plus ▶ Experience analyzing focus groups with target population (e.g., school-age children) a plus
Where to find vendors:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Ask trusted associates for recommendations ▶ Quirk’s Marketing Research Review (www.quirks.com) ▶ The Blue Book Research Services Directory (www.bluebook.org)
What they will do:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Observe the focus groups and/or review a record of the groups (e.g., audiotape, videotape and/or a transcript) ▶ Prepare a written report of the findings
What you will do:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Provide vendor with a clear understanding of your research objectives ▶ Provide vendor with a record of the groups (ideally, a videotape and written transcript of each group), and all materials generated in the course of organizing the groups (i.e., screeners, moderator guides, sign-in sheets, any visual aides used during the group, etc.)
What you should expect to pay:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Between \$250 and \$600 for a moderator’s summary of two focus groups ▶ Between \$1,500 (for a topline summary) and \$3,500 (for a detailed written report) from an outside vendor, assuming an average focus group research project including two focus groups

It is less common to hire a vendor exclusively for analysis, the final stage in the research process. Most commonly, the outside vendor who would analyze your qualitative research would be the moderator or a full-service research company that has been involved in the project before the analysis stage. This vendor might have been involved in recruiting and moderating the focus groups, and would prepare a written report or presentation for you after the data has been collected, using any audiotapes, videotapes, or field notes that were generated during the groups. You might choose to hire a vendor exclusively for this stage if you have in-house staff with the time, experience and ability to recruit and moderate focus groups, but who lack analysis experience.

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As with focus group moderation, we recommend hiring a professional analyst if you can afford it. Qualitative data is inherently complex, and it lacks many of the clear “rights and wrongs” of quantitative analysis. In many cases, this can prove overwhelming for the inexperienced analyst. If you are **working with a small budget** and can hire a vendor for only one aspect of focus groups, however, hire a professional moderator rather than hiring someone to analyze the findings. Having a professional moderator will help ensure that you obtain the best possible information from your focus groups—if you do not get high-quality information to begin with, then the quality of your analysis doesn’t matter.

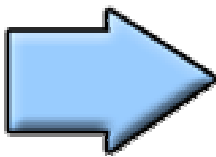
In this case, have in-house staff (ideally, about three to four people who are knowledgeable about the project) observe the groups and discuss the findings with the moderator afterward. Most moderators will prepare a short written summary of the findings from the group for you afterward (they may include this in their fee for moderating or may charge an additional fee for this service).

In some cases, **the findings of the focus groups may be straightforward, and you may not require a time-intensive analysis process.** For example, your community could need answers to only a few specific research questions, and your study could have a narrow scope; or participants could be clear, articulate, and have highly consistent perceptions. You may find that observing the groups, discussing them, and reviewing the moderator’s summary provides you a good foundation of information with which to move forward.

Do allow some time for in-house staff to reflect on the findings and return to the record of the groups, as it’s always a good idea to confirm your recollection of events, and you may have a new perspective or insight into the discussion after some time has passed. Also, allow for the fact that **focus groups can often appear to be more straightforward than they actually are.** A professional moderator should use his or her skills to reduce hidden complexities (e.g., asking probing questions to ensure that participants are revealing their true feelings, rather than masking them with polite or superficial responses), and will debrief with you after the session to clarify any issues or address any questions or concerns about the findings that are emerging.

Analysis costs are likely to vary widely depending on the vendor you use, the nature of the qualitative research to be analyzed (i.e., the number of focus groups or in-depth interviews), the method used to capture comments (e.g., videotapes, transcripts, etc.), and the level of detail to be provided in the analysis. For example, a short written summary provided by the moderator at the end of two focus groups based on field notes will cost less than a full report and presentation of six focus groups, prepared from videotapes and verbatim transcripts, provided by a market research company. The chart on the previous page provides a range of cost estimates based on a typical focus group research project of two focus groups.

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If you plan to have a professional moderator provide you with a written summary (usually a bulleted list of findings between two and three pages long) following the groups, ask whether or not this is **included in the fee** for moderating.

What Communities Have Learned

Outsourcing lends credibility. “They have a credibility—it’s what they do for their business. It’s their trade, so the results and findings are seen as highly credible because you had the focus groups and survey process done by a competent firm. It is really important to hire a firm that also has the capacity to produce a final report and summary that is easily understandable by a wide audience. We appreciated having the funds and resources to actually be able to hire somebody to do the market research and present the results.”

-- Catherine B. Walsh, Rhode Island KIDS COUNT. Conducted a multi-phase research project, including focus groups and a telephone survey of middle-school students and parents in Providence, Rhode Island. The purpose of the research was to understand middle-school students’ and parents’ perspectives relating to OST activities with the goal of developing OST activities that most effectively meet their needs.

CONDUCTING FOCUS GROUP RESEARCH USING INTERNAL RESOURCES: 1. Developing A Recruiting Strategy

The seven steps involved in conducting focus groups are: (1) developing a recruiting strategy; (2) selecting a time and place for the focus groups; (3) preparing the screeners for recruitment; (4) recruiting participants; (5) writing the moderator guide; (6) holding the focus groups, which includes preparing the room, hosting, moderating, recording comments, and other details; and (7) analyzing the data. We will discuss each of these steps in turn.

The first step in conducting a focus group is developing a recruiting strategy: determining **who you should be inviting** to the focus groups, and figuring out **how to find these people**. Whose beliefs, feelings, and attitudes matter to your OST planning? You need to have the right people participating in order to have a good focus group and get valuable information. Use your research goals to help you determine who you should be recruiting.

<p>WHO should you invite?</p>	<p>Begin with a clear understanding of the types of people you plan to contact for your research. This will be determined by your research objectives. Here are some questions to ask yourself:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Why are you conducting this study? ▶ What do you want to learn from this research? ▶ What decisions will you need to make once the research is completed? ▶ Whose feelings, beliefs, attitudes and preferences will help your community make the decisions it needs to make for your OST planning? ▶ Who will be most affected by the decisions you will make?
<p>HOW will you find them?</p>	<p>Once you have determined the types of people you want to invite to your focus groups, the next step is to figure out how you will find these types of people. Here are some questions to ask yourself:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ How large is this population? How common are the characteristics you are looking for? For example, “parents of school-age children” will probably be easier to find than “parents of deaf school-age children with incomes of \$100,000 or more.” ▶ What population are you able to access? ▶ Are these people likely to have telephones? (About 93% of American households have telephones.) ▶ Do you have a way of reaching a large number of these types of people at once? For example, would you find large numbers of these people at schools, clubs, parks, recreational centers, area businesses, etc.?

Effective Recruitment Strategies

Multi-phase method for recruiting students and parents

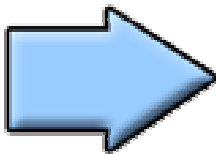
The following method is very effective for recruiting students and parents to focus groups.

- ▶ Researchers **request permission from area schools** to enter the school to inform students about the focus group.
- ▶ Researchers go to area schools during school hours and are posted in the lunchroom. They inform students about the focus group, and **interested students are asked to fill out a card** that includes information about their pertinent characteristics as well as their parents' contact information (a sample card is included on the CD of prototype materials included with this guide).
- ▶ Researchers **contact parents by telephone** using the information provided by students. They inform parents about the focus group, and invite either the student or both the parent and the student, depending on the project.
- ▶ Researchers **mail permission slips** to all parents whose child has agreed to participate in a focus group (a sample permission slip is included on the CD of prototype materials included with this guide).
- ▶ Parents complete and sign the permission slip, and **students bring the signed permission slips with them** on the night of the focus group.

Invite potential participants by telephone

You can purchase databases of telephone numbers and addresses from research sample vendors, such as Survey Sampling International (SSI) (www.surveysampling.com), and ASDE Survey Sampler (www.surveysampler.com).¹ Such vendors can supply lists for targeted samples (e.g., residents with specific characteristics, such as age, income, ethnicity, children under age 18 living in the household, etc.).

POINTER



When calculating how many telephone numbers to purchase, estimate that you will need 25 telephone numbers to recruit one person.

¹ *In market research, a “sample” is a portion or subset of a larger group, called a “population,” which is the universe to be sampled. In this context, “sample” refers to the list of telephone numbers or addresses for potential participants.*

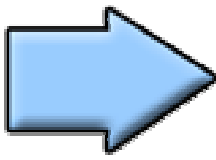
Intercept Recruiting

Invite potential participants in person at shopping malls, local community centers, health clinics, schools, or after-school programs or other public locations.

Posters or advertisements in the community

Place an ad in a local newspaper asking people with specific characteristics to contact you about participation, or post flyers with contact information in a neighborhood populated by the types of people you want to recruit. If you are posting ads or flyers, provide the date and time of the group and a telephone number for interested parties to call for more information.

POINTER



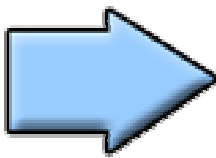
DO provide an incentive to call—for example, give information about the value of the research, the honorarium, the fact that refreshments or a light meal will be served to participants, etc.

DON'T include the location of the group—this is likely to result in people arriving for the focus group who may not have the characteristics you are looking for.

Community-based recruiting for special populations

Some populations have characteristics that make them difficult to reach using traditional recruiting strategies; for example, low-income residents without phones, residents who speak languages other than English, and small subsets of the population (e.g., students who participate in OST activities through religious organizations). To reach these individuals, consider a **community-based recruiting strategy**. Contact community groups, workplaces, churches, or schools that can put you in touch with the types of people you are recruiting, or who can encourage these people to contact you about participating. For non-English speaking groups, work with an individual who speaks the language and, ideally, who is known and trusted by the community you are trying to recruit.

POINTER



The key with community-based strategies is to identify **where you can find large numbers of the people who are trying to recruit**. What are the common gathering places? For example, Asian residents are likely to spend time in different places in the community, compared with African-American residents and Caucasian residents. Within immigrant communities, people who are more acculturated are likely to spend time in different places in the community than do people who are less acculturated. Your goal is to identify the places where you are able to find the largest numbers of your potential participants, and the best cross-section of this population.

Once you find the places where this population is likely to be, **obtain permission from someone with authority** (e.g., the store owner if it's a neighborhood store, the executive director if it is a community organization, etc.) to recruit participants at the site. Station a staff person at the location to speak to people who have the desired characteristics, tell them about the focus groups, and recruit them if they are eligible and interested.

Typically, **you will need to go to several different locations in order to recruit enough participants** for a focus group. Individuals who are known and trusted by the community you are trying to recruit will be a good source of information about the places where you are most likely to find your target population.

Homogeneity

The most successful focus groups are homogenous: participants share certain similar characteristics, backgrounds, or experiences. While it can be important to hear from a range of people (e.g., using quotas to ensure a mix of ethnic groups, or age ranges among parents), there are certain characteristics participants should share. For example, if you are researching educators, do not combine teachers and principals into one focus group—the power relationship between these two groups is very likely to adversely affect the group dynamic.

If you are researching students, you are likely to find that a group of students close in age will be more successful than a group with a wider range of ages. Even two years can make a big difference with school-age children. Consider grouping students together by grade level and, within a grade level, by gender if possible.

A word of caution: while homogenous focus groups are likely to yield successful results, do not recruit a focus group of participants who all know each other, are friends or family, and have the same opinions about everything. The goal is not to have a group in which the participants all have exactly the same feelings on a topic (this will yield much less useful data), but to have a group in which the participants all have *characteristics* in common, so that you can understand more about the various feelings of people with these characteristics.

2. Selecting a Time and Place

The next step is to determine **when and where you will hold your focus groups**. We will discuss each of these separately.

Deciding When to Hold the Group

In order to set a date for your focus group, you must think about the broader timeline for the focus group project. The timeline you are working with will be affected by several factors, including:

- ▶ How soon you can **develop screeners** and, if you are inviting participants by telephone, generate a **list of telephone numbers** for recruiting the groups
- ▶ The availability of your **focus group moderator**
- ▶ How many groups you are holding and how quickly you can **recruit participants**
- ▶ Dates when **colleagues or key stakeholders** are available for observing the focus groups
- ▶ Dates when you are able to use the **meeting room or focus group facility** (if you are holding the groups at a facility)

If you are using a meeting room at a focus group facility, **you may need to put several dates on hold** before settling on final dates in order to coordinate the schedules of all people involved.

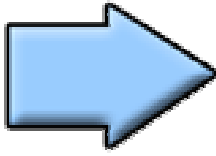
Scheduling Focus Groups

Depending on the population you are recruiting, it is generally advisable to hold focus groups **Monday through Thursday** in the evening.

It is also more efficient to conduct **two focus groups on a given night**, for example, one at 5:30 p.m. and one at 7:30 p.m. Holding two or more focus groups on a day helps to shorten the overall timeline of the project and increases efficiency by reducing travel time for the moderator and any colleagues who are viewing the groups.

Use whatever information you have about the targeted population to schedule the groups in such a way that will **reduce barriers to participation**. For example, you might find that it makes sense to recruit students to focus groups in the late afternoon or early evening, and to recruit parents to a later group.

POINTER



Find out **what's happening in your community** on the evening you intend to hold your focus group. You don't want to schedule your focus group on the night of parent-teacher conferences, the big football play-off, or some other major area event that many people may be attending or involved in.

Deciding Where to Hold the Group

If your community is located in or near a major city, you may be able to hold the focus groups in a **professional focus group facility** (even if you are conducting other stages of this research in-house). See the section on "Hiring a Focus Group Facility" in this workbook for information about the costs associated with this option. If there is no focus group facility in your immediate area, a common alternative is to hold the focus group at a **hotel meeting room**. There are several advantages to holding a focus group in a professional focus group facility or hotel:

- ▶ They will provide food and beverage services.
- ▶ They are likely to have all of the furniture needed for holding the discussion group.
- ▶ They will set up the room according to your instructions.
- ▶ They may be able to provide you with videography services.

The costs associated with hotel meeting rooms will vary widely, depending on where the hotel is located and the specifications of the meeting room. For example, you will pay more to use two adjoining meeting rooms with a closed-circuit television enabling you to observe the focus groups from the second room. Costs can run from \$500 to \$1,500 per focus group, including food service. You will need to provide the hotel with detailed instructions regarding room set-up and when food should be served.

You do not need to hold the focus group in a professional facility or a hotel meeting room, however, and there are low-cost alternatives. For example, you could hold the focus groups in a conference room at your organization, at your local community center, in a classroom, or at another location that will be familiar and convenient to the targeted population.

Guidelines for Selecting a Good Meeting Room

- ▶ Ideally, select a location that your participants are likely to be familiar with (e.g., a local community center or school).
- ▶ Select a location that is **easily accessible**. For example, the location should be near major routes; have adequate parking; and should be wheelchair-accessible. It should be accessible during the hours the group will be held (for example, it will be a problem if the groups are held at 6 p.m. in a building where the doors are locked at 5:30 p.m.).
- ▶ It should be **easy to find**, with convenient places to post signs directing participants to the room where the discussion group(s) will take place.
- ▶ The location should be in an area where participants will **feel safe and free to express their opinions** openly.
- ▶ Select a location that is **quiet and private**. The meeting room should have doors that can be shut. Avoid locations near noisy venues, such as a bar (in a hotel) or gymnasium (in a school, if the group is held at an hour when the gymnasium would be in use).
- ▶ Select an **appropriate-sized room** for the discussion group. The ideal room is approximately 10' by 20' and has one conference table that comfortably seats 9 to 10 people. If possible, avoid very large rooms, as this affects the quality of the recording and the overall feel of the group. If the group will be videotaped, be sure there is enough room behind the head of the conference table for a tripod and camera.
- ▶ If possible, select a location with space outside the room for a **host table** and a **refreshment table**. If the refreshment table must be located in the room, make sure the room is large enough so that people can move between the conference table and the refreshment table comfortably.

Guidelines for Selecting a Good Observation Room For Viewing Via Closed-circuit Television

- ▶ Select a location with two rooms that are **adjacent, with an adjoining door**, or a location with two rooms that are nearby and where it is feasible to run cable between the rooms.
- ▶ The observation room should be large enough to accommodate **six to seven people**, with a main table facing a TV monitor and space to set up a refreshment table.
- ▶ Ideally, the room will have a **separate entrance** that allows the observers to come and go without being seen by group participants.
- ▶ Both rooms should have several **electrical outlets** for plugging in equipment.
- ▶ Both rooms should be **comfortable and appropriately furnished**. They should be appropriately heated or air-conditioned and have blinds that can be drawn if there are windows. They should not be overly noisy (e.g., from an air conditioner or piped-in music), and should be well lit. Avoid rooms with distracting clutter, scuffed or broken furniture, or dirty or torn upholstery.
- ▶ Both rooms should be relatively close to **restrooms**, and an area where smoking is permitted.

3. Preparing Screeners for Recruitment

What is a screener?

A screener is a list of questions designed to **eliminate, or “screen out,” people who are ineligible** to participate in a focus group.

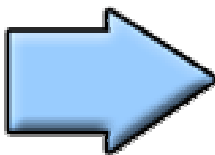
You will need to prepare a screener before you begin recruiting participants, whether you are recruiting them yourself or outsourcing recruitment to a vendor. For example, if you are conducting a focus group of area parents with children in seventh grade, your screener might ask if the person you are speaking with has a child (which will screen out people without children), and if so, if that child is enrolled in the seventh grade at an area school (which will screen out people with older or younger children and those not enrolled in school).

In addition to eliminating ineligible participants, screeners can also be used to obtain information about **potential participants’ characteristics**. For example, you might want to conduct a focus group of parents with a range of ethnicities, including Caucasian, African-American, and Hispanic parents. You can ask about parents’ ethnicity in the screener, and recruit a minimum of two parents belonging to each ethnic group. The chart below presents a variety of types of characteristics you can determine about your potential focus group participants through the use of screening questions.

Types of Information You May Want to Determine

- ▶ Whether or not they have kids
- ▶ Ages or grade level of kids
- ▶ Age range of parents
- ▶ Race or ethnicity
- ▶ Primary language (you should screen out people who are not fluent in the language the group will be conducted in)
- ▶ Industry of employment (you may want to screen out people who work in the industry you’ll be talking about; for example, you may want to screen out someone who runs an after-school program)
- ▶ Gender
- ▶ Level of income

POINTER



Avoid “professional focus group participants.”

Consider screening out people who have participated in a focus group in the past six months, in order to exclude people who participate in focus groups regularly in order to generate income.

There are **six component parts of a focus group screener**: (1) a list of requirements; (2) an introduction; (3) screener questions; (4) information about quotas; (5) the invitation to and information about the focus group; and (6) confirmation and record of contact information. We will discuss each of these component parts on the following pages. A sample screener is included on the CD of prototype materials included with this guide.

Requirements

Begin the screener with a brief, bulleted **list of requirements for group participants**; this will provide an “at a glance” overview of who to recruit for the focus group. An example of a list of requirements is provided in the box below.

2 Groups with parents of students in grades 6 through 8:

- Must be fluent in English (judge this during interview – there is no screening question for it)
- Cannot work in advertising, market research or for an organization that provides recreational or educational activities for children or teens
- Cannot have participated in a focus group (on any topic) in the past 6 months
- Speak with parent most involved in coordinating child’s after-school activities
- No more than half of recruits should have children who regularly participate in formal after-school activities. Regular participation is two or more times per week (including weekends)
- No more than half of recruits should have household income over \$30,000
- Mix of grade of child
- Mix of ethnicity/country of origin
- Recruit 12 for each group

Introduction

The screener is essentially a short questionnaire. Include an introduction that will provide potential participants with pertinent information, grab their attention, and keep them on the phone. Keep the language simple, and the tone of the writing conversational and natural. **Important things to include in an introduction:**

- The **name of the person who is recruiting** and the **organization they are calling from**.
- The name of the **organization sponsoring the study** (if it is different from the organization they are calling from). This will reassure respondents that the study is legitimate and increase the likelihood that they will cooperate.
- The **purpose for the call**, or the general topic of what the study is about.
- A natural transition for **getting the person in the household you are interested in recruiting on the phone** (for example, the person who makes decisions about OST activities).

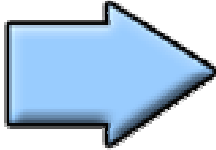
[INTRODUCTION]

Hello, my name is _____ and I am with _____. I am not trying to sell you anything. We are conducting a study on after-school activity preferences on behalf of _____, with the assistance of the local school system. Participation in this study is voluntary. We are inviting parents or guardians of students in grades 6, 7, or 8 to participate in a paid discussion group we are holding. Is there a student in the home in grade 6, 7, or 8? May I speak with his or her parent or guardian?

Screener Questions

The introduction is followed by the screener questions themselves. The order in which screener questions are asked is important. There should be a **logical flow** to the questions, bearing in mind that **you want to determine as early as possible if a person is ineligible to participate** in a focus group. Recruiters should be able to determine quickly if there is someone in the household eligible to participate, and if not, move on to the next person on their list.

POINTER



Ask questions about **sensitive information** such as race or ethnicity and income toward the end of your screener.

For each screener question you ask, you must also provide **logical responses**. For each response, provide the recruiter with information regarding what they should do next based on that response. In the example below, we want to recruit parents with children in 6th, 7th, or 8th grade.

What grade is your child in?

- 6th grade → CONTINUE
- 7th grade → CONTINUE
- 8th grade → CONTINUE
- Other → THANK AND END CALL

Each grade level is given a separate response so that we can recruit a mix of parents with children in the different grades, and parents who do not have children in one of the grades listed can be categorized as “other.” If the respondent does have a child in 6th, 7th, or 8th grade, the recruiter is instructed to “continue,” meaning continue on to the next screener question. If the respondent does not have a child in 6th, 7th, or 8th grade, the respondent is not eligible for the study, and the recruiter is instructed to thank the respondent and end the call. Additional examples of screener questions appear in the box below.

- 4. Do you or does an immediate family member work in market research, in advertising, or for an organization that provides recreational or educational activities for children or teens?
Yes ➔ **THANK AND END INTERVIEW**
No ➔ **CONTINUE**

- 5. Have you personally participated in a focus group on any topic in the past 6 months?
Yes ➔ **THANK AND END INTERVIEW**
No ➔ **CONTINUE**

The screener should focus on finding people who have the characteristics you want included in the focus group. Asking questions that are **outside the purpose of the research** is considered unethical and is an inefficient use of time. Also, try to prioritize and minimize your eligibility requirements. It is important to keep in mind that **the more eligibility requirements you have, the more difficult, time-consuming, and potentially expensive it will be to recruit people** for the group.

Setting Quotas

What is a quota?

A quota is a goal to achieve in terms of the **numbers of people with specific characteristics** you will invite to the focus group.

Whether or not you will need to set quotas for your focus group depends on the decisions you need to make after the focus group and who you will need to hear from to help you make these decisions. In thinking about quotas, **think about the types of people you want to have in your focus group**. Here are some sample questions to ask yourself:

- ▶ **Gender:** Do you need to hear from both women and men? For example, does it matter whether you talk only to boys, only to girls, or both? Does it matter whether you talk only to moms, only to dads, or do you need to talk to both moms and dads for the decisions you want to make?
- ▶ **Students' grade level:** Are you going to be making decisions for a specific grade level? For example, if you are conducting research about OST activities for middle school children, will you be able to make the decisions you need to make if you hear only from sixth graders? Do you need to hear from a mix of students in the sixth, seventh and eighth grades to make good decisions?
- ▶ **OST participation:** Does it matter to you whether the people who attend your focus group are participating in OST activities or not? Will your decision-making be affected if everyone in the group participates in OST activities? Perhaps this will make it more difficult to know about the issues that may be preventing some members of your community from participation. Will your decision-making be affected if no one in the group is participating in OST activities? This could make it difficult to assess satisfaction with available offerings.
- ▶ **Residence.** What geographic area will be affected by the decisions you are making? Think about where your focus group participants might live. Do you want to hear from a mix of people living in different towns within a certain geographic radius? Perhaps you want to exclude certain towns—for example, if you are designing programs for low-income students, you may not want to recruit people who live in a very affluent town nearby.

There are many other types of characteristics you may want to consider setting quotas for, depending on the community you are in and the decisions you need to make—for example, you may want to set quotas for household income, race or ethnicity, the schools students attend, parents' marital status or family composition, religious affiliation, etc.

Words of Caution About Setting Quotas

There are trade-offs between compatibility and variety.

Remember that the people who participate in your focus group will be very aware of who else is in the room with them; **the composition of the group will have an impact on the group dynamic**. If people look around the table and see other people they identify as being “like themselves,” they may feel more free to share their feelings and experiences. If they look around and see people they identify as being different from themselves, it may take time to establish trust within the group, or participants may spend more time explaining themselves.

There is no single correct way to determine the composition of your focus group. Strive for a group that will give you **enough variety that it will help you make the decisions** you need to make, without ending up with a group of people so different from each other that it will be **difficult for them to find any common ground**. For example, a focus group of boys and girls in the seventh and eighth grades will probably yield good information. A focus group that combines very affluent, white students attending a private school and participating in OST activities with lower-income Hispanic students attending public school and not participating in OST activities will probably be less useful. If you want to hear from groups that are this different, you are better off holding a larger number of focus groups and recruiting compatible participants to each group than you are assigning quotas.

Set reasonable quotas.

Used wisely, quotas can yield a much higher quality of information from your focus groups. If not used wisely, quotas can quickly turn your focus group recruitment into a nightmare. Avoid these two common quota pitfalls:

- ▶ **Do not set too many quotas.** The more quotas you assign, the more difficult it will be to recruit a group with the exact characteristics you have decided upon. Think about quotas using this shopping metaphor: if you needed to purchase a dozen pencils, you could probably do so fairly quickly and easily. If you needed to purchase a dozen pencils, but two of them needed to be manufactured in China, two of them had to be made from recycled fibers, two of them had to have a hardness rating of HH, two of them had to have red wood casing, two of them had to have a blue-pigmented graphite core, and two of them needed to be mechanical pencils, it would probably be more time-consuming and difficult to track each type down. When thinking about quotas, think about the characteristics that will *truly* impact your decisions and are most critical to the success of your group. If you are having to think too hard to come up with ideas for quotas to assign, that’s a good indication that you do not need additional quotas.
- ▶ **Do not make your quotas so restrictive that it will be difficult to recruit the groups.** It’s difficult enough to recruit focus groups without placing a lot of restrictions on who you’re able to invite. “Low minimums” or “high maximums” are the key to quotas that still allow flexibility. For example, if you want a mix of male and female participants, you can establish a minimum number of people from either gender to recruit. Assuming that you are recruiting a total of 12 people, rather than setting the minimum at six, try setting the minimum at four, to provide some flexibility and facilitate recruiting. Similarly, if you want a mix of parents of 6th, 7th, or 8th graders, consider setting a maximum for each category at six, rather than four.

Invitation and Information

After the screener questions, provide an invitation to the focus groups for recruiters to read to eligible respondents. The invitation should include a brief, general description of what the group is about, and the location, date, and time of the group. Also let respondents know how long the group will last, that refreshments will be provided, and the amount of the monetary incentive for attending, as in the example below.

1. We are conducting a group discussion on after-school activity preferences at the Springfield Middle School at 6:00 PM on October 5. The group will last about an hour and a half to two hours. We will be serving you some light food and drinks, and for your time and effort, we'd like to offer you \$65. Will you be able to take part in this group?

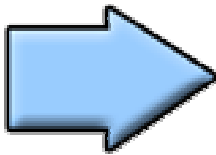
Yes ➔ CONTINUE

No/not interested ➔ THANK AND END INTERVIEW

Incentives

When recruiting, it is a good idea to **offer incentives to increase participation**. Assistance with childcare and transportation, a small meal at the time of the group, cash rewards (between \$20 and \$75, depending on your resources), gift certificates, movie passes, telephone cards, or grocery store gift cards will help you achieve a good turnout. Another method for encouraging participation is to **emphasize the social value of the research**—how their participation will benefit their community, and perhaps even benefit them directly.

POINTER



Obtaining Permission to Invite Student Participants: Record the Information!

If you are conducting focus groups with students, you will need to speak to the child's parent and obtain permission to invite the student to the focus group. Be sure to **record the name of the parent you spoke with** who gave you permission to invite the student. When you confirm that the student will be attending the group, if another adult in the household has any questions about the initial contact, you will be able to tell them who you spoke with in the household earlier.

Confirmation and Record of Attendee Contact Information

At the end of the screener, thank the person you are speaking to for agreeing to participate. Confirm that they will attend the discussion group at the specified location, date and time. Provide them with any relevant additional information, such as:

- ▶ **Arrival time.** It's a good idea to ask participants to arrive 15 minutes early. This gives participants time to get settled and have refreshments, and the group can get started on time. Consider offering an additional incentive for showing up at least 10 minutes early, such as a lottery drawing for a cash amount equal to the honorarium they will receive for participating.
- ▶ **Instructions for canceling.** If the person has a change of plans, it's best to find that out as early as possible, so that you can recruit someone else to replace that person. Also, participants should be instructed not to find someone else to participate in their place, as this person may not have the characteristics required for participation.
- ▶ **Instructions not to bring friends and family.**
- ▶ Let them know they will be receiving a **letter confirming the date and time** of the group, which will include directions.

Finally, include a space to record the participants' name, telephone number, address. You will need this information to mail them the confirmation letter with directions. Optionally, include a space to record the name of the person who recruited the participant, for the purposes of supervision and feedback if you have multiple people involved in recruitment, as shown in the example below.

1. To confirm, you will attend the discussion group at the Springfield Middle School at 6:00 PM on October 5. Thank you for agreeing to participate. Please plan to arrive at least 15 minutes prior to the group to get settled and have some refreshments. You will be paid \$65 for your participation. In addition, anyone who arrives at least 10 minutes prior to the scheduled group time will have their name entered into a drawing to win an additional \$50, also paid out the night of the group. Your chances of winning this additional money are 1 in 12 or better, so please plan to arrive early.
2. We are holding a spot for you at the discussion group. If for any reason you need to cancel, please call _____ and ask for _____. If you can't come to the group we ask that you do NOT find someone to come in your place because we need to speak to all participants in advance. Please note we only have a limited amount of seating for those specifically invited to participate in the discussion group. Please do not bring friends because we do not have room to accommodate them. We will send you a letter confirming the date and time and including directions to the group. Also, we'll call a day or two before the group to remind you about it.

RECORD INFORMATION BELOW:

ATTENDEE'S NAME: _____

PHONE: _____

ADDRESS: _____

INTERVIEWER INITIALS: _____

4. Recruiting Participants

Recruiting is an investment of time and resources

It takes a **high level of personal attention and a lot of time** to make a successful focus group happen: you will need to prepare and distribute the necessary materials, recruit participants, confirm participation, monitor cancellations prior to the group, and re-recruit as needed to ensure that you will have enough people in the group.

You will need enough time to contact and recruit potential respondents until you have about twelve people agree to participate. Always recruit more participants than you will need, because inevitably some recruits will fail to show. **Recruit twelve people in hopes of seating seven to ten.** For example, if you are recruiting by phone, factor in the number of people who will not answer the phone, will not want to participate in a focus group, or will not be able to participate, and you will have to make a lot of phone calls to get twelve people to agree to participate! In general, expect that it will take between one to two hours to recruit a single participant.

It should take one staff person between **one and two hours of active calling** to recruit one participant.

It should take one staff person between **12 and 24 hours of active calling** to recruit enough participants for one focus group.

Steps Involved in Focus Group Recruitment

- ▶ **Selecting, scheduling, and training recruiters.** Recruiters are the people who will be contacting potential participants. You will need to have enough recruiters to recruit your focus group within the necessary time frame.
- ▶ **Contact people to invite them to the focus group.** Begin contacting potential participants no more than two weeks before the focus group will occur. Ideally, you will complete recruitment about four to five days before the day of the focus group (but if needed, you can recruit participants right up until the focus group happens).
- ▶ **Supervising and motivating recruiters.** If you have multiple recruiters, it's a good idea to have someone in charge of supervising recruiters and keeping them motivated to ensure that you will successfully recruit your focus group within your timeline goal.
- ▶ **Send confirmation letters and information.** You will want to send confirmation letters about four to five days before the group happens, in time for participants to receive them a couple of days before the day of the group.
- ▶ **Confirm recruited attendees' participation by telephone.** Begin making confirmation calls two days before the scheduled focus group, in order to have adequate time to recruit a replacement if someone cancels.

Selecting, Scheduling and Training Recruiters

Selecting and Scheduling Recruiters: First, you will need to evaluate your budget to determine whether you are going to recruit **paid recruiters** or **volunteers**. Using paid recruiters is preferable, as this option is more likely to result in successful focus group recruitment. If you decide to use volunteers, you will have less discretion as to the quality of your recruiting staff. Regardless of whether you decide to use paid or volunteer recruiters, potential recruiters should be informed that this style of interviewing is highly controlled and does not allow for flexibility or chatting with respondents casually while conducting the survey. Providing potential recruiters with this type of information should help them to determine on their own if they are suitable for this type of work. For example, you could inform potential recruiters that:

- ▶ The screeners and recruiting guide should be read exactly as written for every interview.
- ▶ Recruiters will need to do concentrated dialing and contact a certain number of people every hour in order to recruit enough participants within the specified recruitment time frame.
- ▶ Recruiters have no choice in the people that they call, apart from not calling people they know, and terminating calls with respondents who they believe are not giving genuine answers, or who are abusive to the recruiter.

Paid Recruiters: Cost Expectations

If you decide to use paid recruiters, offer a **competitive hourly wage**. Between \$10 and \$11 per hour (in 2006) should enable you to attract high-quality recruiters at what would still be a significant cost savings from outsourcing recruitment to a vendor. If possible, hire recruiters with surveying or recruiting experience, as these recruiters will require less extensive training. Bear in mind that you are hiring people for a temporary position that may only last a few nights or weeks, depending on the scope of your project. Recruiters will not have a chance to develop their skills over a long period of time; use recruiters who have a high level of competence from the beginning. You may also want to avoid hiring recruiters with telemarketing experience, as the phone demeanor used is quite different than what is desirable for focus group recruitment.

To generate interest in the position, your approach will probably depend on whether you decide to recruit paid recruiters or volunteers. Volunteers for interviewing are more likely to be recruited through networking. For paid recruiters, use ads in local newspapers and possibly flyers to advertise the position. Apart from a basic job description, include in advertisements for the position:

- ▶ That it is a temporary, part-time evening job
- ▶ That the position requires punctuality, and the ability to remain focused on task and think on your feet
- ▶ A phone number for applicants to call, as this will give you the opportunity to assess their phone demeanor
- ▶ Recruiters should be able to read aloud in a natural manner, write clearly, and have a pleasant, yet professional phone demeanor. This manual assumes that you will be conducting the interviews on printed hardcopies of the questionnaire, but if recruiters will be entering responses into a computer, be sure to test for typing skills.

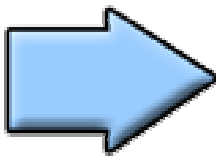
When determining the number of recruiters to hire, you will need to consider several factors, including:

- ▶ The total number of participants you plan to recruit.
- ▶ Your overall timeline for the project. Plan to recruit participants within two weeks prior to the date of the focus group. If you begin recruitment much earlier than this, recruited participants are less likely to remember the commitment and attend; if you begin much later, you may not have enough time to recruit the number of people you need.
- ▶ The number of shifts per week you will be able to hold, and the length of those shifts.
- ▶ The number of recruiters you want to schedule per shift.

Example of Calculating the Number of Recruiters to Schedule

- ▶ You plan to conduct two focus groups: one with parents of eighth-graders in School X and one with parents of eighth-graders in School Y.
- ▶ You will recruit 12 parents for each focus group in order to seat 7 to 10 participants.
- ▶ You have access to the school system's database, which has up-to-date contact information for students. Therefore, you will easily be able to identify names and phone numbers of parents with children in the eighth grade in the targeted schools.
- ▶ There is sufficient sample to recruit 12 participants for each focus group. Assume you will need to contact at least 20 people in order to recruit one participant.
- ▶ You are revealing the name of your organization to parents and that you have the cooperation of the school system.
- ▶ You are offering an incentive to participate. An honorarium of \$65 is fairly standard.
- ▶ Given these factors, and that this is a subject in which parents are likely to be invested, estimate how long it will take to recruit one participant. It is better to have more resources than you need than less, so estimate conservatively. Given the assumptions listed here, estimate it will take **1.5 hours** to recruit one participant.
- ▶ Multiply this number by the total number of participants needed, for a total of **36 hours**.
- ▶ Although recruitment should begin two weeks before the groups are held, aim to finish recruitment within 7 to 10 days of beginning.
- ▶ Bearing in mind the estimated number of recruiting hours needed, allocate the hours across available resources.
 - ▶ For example, one person working on the project full time should be able to finish recruiting in one week.
 - ▶ Alternatively, two recruiters each working a three-hour shift per day would recruit 4 participants per day. At this rate, recruitment can be completed in six days, which is well within the timeline for this project.

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If your project is larger in scope, and you need to recruit participants for several focus groups, but you have a limited number of recruiters and hours per week in which to do the recruiting, **schedule the dates of the focus groups accordingly**. You can schedule two focus groups for one week, and two the next, and so on, in order to complete the project using a smaller number of recruiters.

Training Recruiters: Before they begin calling, all recruiters should receive: (1) general training on how to conduct focus group recruitment phone calls, including information regarding **techniques for high-quality recruitment** and **tips for refusal conversion**, and (2) specific training on the focus group screeners being used for the study. The training on the screeners to be used for the study should include an overview of what the major objectives of the study are, a question-by-question review of the screener, and a review of the Answers to Potential Questions (APQ) sheet.

If possible, **train all recruiters on the screener at the same time.** The supervisor should read through the screener with the recruiters, providing them with any information they might need for particular questions, going over any skip patterns in the screener, and answering questions as needed. The supervisor should pronounce any unusual words and define industry-specific terms as needed (for example, if “OST” is used in the screener, the supervisor should explain that this means “out-of-school time,” and can include the hours before or after school, weekends, and the summer months). The supervisor should also review the APQ, which will provide basic information about the project and suggestions for converting refusals. Recruiters should always have a copy of the APQ with them for their reference while calling.

It may not be possible for all interviewers to train on the screener at the same time. If this is the case, the supervisor should make a training tape for interviewers to listen to while following along with a copy of the screener and the APQ. During the training tape, just as he or she would during an in-person training, the supervisor should read the entire screener, point out any skips in the screening questions, and provide any relevant background information about the study.

After recruiters train on the screener, they should **run through one or two practice screeners** to make sure they are familiar with the questions and can pronounce all of the words easily. Recruiters can pair up and ask the screening questions of each other so they have experience reading the questions aloud and recording responses before they start calling potential recruits.

Note: recruiters should be instructed to **speak in a quiet tone of voice** and **avoid profanity and other inappropriate comments** while in the calling room, as potential recruits will be able to hear background noise while they are answering screening questions.

Techniques for High-Quality Recruitment

The following are some specific techniques you can use to ensure that the quality of information you are collecting is high:

- ▶ Use a clear and professional tone, but don't be too stiff.
- ▶ Be friendly with potential recruits, but not overly casual. Avoid laughing.
- ▶ Beware of over-empathizing, and avoid biasing comments (for example, agreeing that the survey is tedious or that school security is terrible).
- ▶ Read all questions and responses in the screening questions exactly as written.
- ▶ Read all the details of the invitation clearly. Make sure the participant knows when the group is being held, what will be required of them, and the nature of the commitment they are making.

Refusal Conversion Strategies

The first step in recruiting a potential participant to a focus group is to get someone to agree to go through the screening questions and hear the invitation in the first place. Ideally, the introduction to the screening questions should be persuasive enough that your potential respondents will be highly interested in answering your questions. Unfortunately, this is not always the case, no matter how compelling or important the topic, and no matter how well the introduction has been written. Recruiters will sometimes need to practice what we call “refusal conversion.” Here are some refusal conversion strategies:

- ▶ **Ask the screener questions.** It may be that the respondent is not even eligible to attend the focus group; for example, if you are trying to recruit parents with children in elementary school, perhaps the person you are speaking to does not have children. If it turns out that they are eligible, give conversion another shot. You got them to stay on the phone for three questions, see if you can keep them for more.
- ▶ **Don’t talk too fast.** Talking fast is a sales tactic. You will appear more confident and legitimate if you are able to clearly explain the purpose of your call.
- ▶ **Emphasize the duration.** Stress that your questions will only take a few minutes of their time and that you will go as quickly as possible.
- ▶ **Work on the introduction.** Recruiters should work with supervisors to make the introduction sound more interesting, and include extra pieces of information that could be important to the respondent. For example, it may be helpful to include in the introduction that this is not a sales call of any kind.
- ▶ **Stress that the topic is important.** Use strong language. “This is a very important study designed to have a direct impact on the services and programs available to your children. My questions should only take a few minutes. Is now a good time for you?”
- ▶ **Be sure your conversion tactic answers their concern.** For example, if the respondent tells you they don’t want to buy anything and you tell them it will only take a few minutes of their time, you haven’t addressed the fact that it isn’t a sales call. Convey to the respondent that you’re listening to what they have to say by using the refusal conversion tactic that best answers their question. It’s a great way to develop rapport!
- ▶ **Offer to call back.** It may very well happen that you’ve just reached this person at a bad time. Make it clear that it is so important that you get their opinions that you’d be happy to call back whenever is best for them.
- ▶ **Call back hang-ups.** If you call back, the worst case scenario is you’ll get a refusal—and you’ve already got that. It’s quite possible that you’ll be able to give them more information about the reason for your call that they might not have understood and they will complete an interview.
- ▶ **Don’t let a refusal (or two!) get you down.** It happens to the best recruiters. Some people just don’t answer questions over the phone, and it may be beyond your control. Recruiters should talk with supervisors about how they could have handled a situation differently. The most important thing is that recruiters are putting their best effort into converting refusals.

Phrases for Refusal Conversion

There are many specific phrases one can use when converting refusals into successful recruitments. The following is a sample of common concerns or questions from potential participants, and specific language you can use to help these people understand the importance and value of answering your screening questions.

Hangs up before hearing reason for your call. Call back!

1. “I want to make sure you understand that I’m not selling or promoting anything. I’m calling in regard to a very important study we’re doing that will have a direct impact on the types of activities and programs that are available for children in our community. I was wondering if this would be a good time to go through my questions with you. It only takes about [NUMBER OF] minutes.”

2. “I’m sorry, I realize I’ve called at a bad time, but we are conducting a very important study that will have a direct impact on the types of activities and programs that are available for children in our community and I’d like to have a chance to get your opinions. When would be the best time to call you back?” (Be sure to use assertive language such as, “When can I call you back?” instead of “Can I call you back?”)

Hangs up after hearing reason for the call. Call back!

1. (Assume it was accidental) “I think we got disconnected. I was in the middle of explaining this very important study we’re conducting about the activities and programs that are available for children in our community. We’re not selling or promoting anything and we’d like a chance to get your opinions. My questions will only take about [NUMBER OF] minutes—is now a good time?”

2. “I want to make sure you understand that this is a very important study that will have a direct impact on the types of activities and programs that are available for children in our community. It’s very important that we get your opinions, and if now is not a good time, I’d be happy to call you back whenever is most convenient for you.”

3. “I realize I may have called at a bad time, but I was hoping to speak to the person in your household who is responsible for making decisions about what your child does after school. When might be the best time to call back for him or her?”

I’m not interested.

“The results of this study will have a direct impact on the types of programs and activities your children have available to them. This is your best chance to make sure your opinions are taken into consideration. It only takes about [NUMBER OF] minutes and if this is a bad time I’d be happy to call back whenever is most convenient for you.”

I don’t have time for this.

“My questions only take about [NUMBER OF] minutes and I can assure you that your responses will have a direct impact on the programs and activities that are available to your children. If now is not a good time, when would be the best time to call you back?”

I don't like answering questions over the phone.

“I understand your concern, but we're actually just looking for general opinions. Why don't I try reading you a few questions and we'll see how it goes? Of course, if there are any questions you don't want to answer, just let me know.”

The person who makes those decisions won't be interested—don't bother calling back.

“Thank you for that information, but I will need to speak with him/her for a moment just to make sure he/she understands the importance of the study. When would be the best time for me to reach him/her?”

I'm satisfied with things the way they are / I don't have any complaints.

“We're very interested in speaking to people who are satisfied as well as dissatisfied, so that we can identify what types of programs and services should be continued or expanded as well as those that should be discontinued or changed.”

I wouldn't know anything about that / I don't use those services.

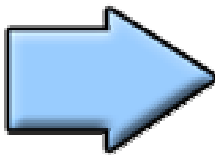
“It's still very important that we get your opinions. We are interested in knowing what people should be informed of as well as what they already know.”

Contacting People to Invite Them to the Focus Group

The best times to call may vary depending on the region of the country, time of year, and special events. In general, however, evening hours between 5:00 PM and 9:00 PM on Monday through Thursday are considered the most productive times to call members of the general population (see chart below). Friday and Saturday evenings are generally considered the least productive times to call, although weekend afternoons can be productive. It is also worth considering scheduling some daytime shifts. This can be a good time to reach parents who do not work outside the home while they are less likely to be distracted by family demands. The schedule may also be influenced by the availability of a supervisor.

WHEN TO CALL POTENTIAL RESPONDENTS?	
Area Residents	Area Professionals
<p>Monday – Friday 5:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m.</p> <p>Saturday and Sunday 12:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m.</p>	<p>Monday – Friday 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.</p>
<p>These times are when residents are most likely to be home, and least likely to object to the call.</p>	<p>When trying to reach area professionals, such as educators, use their likely office hours as a guideline.</p>

POINTER



Leaving Messages

Please note that you can **leave messages for people on answering machines or voice mail and ask them to call back** if they are interested. If you decide to use this strategy, however, you will need a procedure for handling these calls when they come in. Specifically, you need to make sure that you can link the person who calls in with the sample information you have in your database—this will prevent a recruiter from calling someone who has already called in and agreed to participate. Each telephone number in your sample should have a **unique case ID number**. When you leave a message on an answering machine, give them the case ID number and tell them to ask for this extension. When they return the call, the recruiter will use this number to look them up in the database and record them as a completed recruit.

To recruit participants, you will contact potential participants using the recruiting strategy you decided upon and the screener you developed in the previous steps. For example, if you have generated a list of parents' telephone numbers from permission slips sent home with area school children, you will recruit participants by calling each of the parents who returned a permission slip with a telephone number, asking them the screener questions, and inviting them to the group if they meet the requirements for the group. You will continue calling parents until twelve people have agreed to attend the focus group. You will need a **method for keeping track of each individual telephone number** and the disposition, or outcome, of each call, and to keep track of **quota information**.

We provide instructions for one effective method on the following pages. This method is similar to that which we recommend for keeping track of telephone numbers in a telephone survey. You will need to create a **call sheet** for each telephone number you have collected, and one **quota tracking sheet** for the entire project. We have included samples of both documents on the CD of prototype materials included with this guide.

WHAT IS A CALL SHEET?	WHY DO WE NEED ONE?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ A means of recording information about the status of each telephone number ▶ A means of passing along any helpful information (e.g., a contact name to ask for, best times to call) to the next recruiter to call the number ▶ A means of linking the recruiter to the recruited participant, for feedback and supervision if needed ▶ A means of marking the outcome of each telephone number (including completed interviews, refusals, etc.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Too many telephone numbers to remember what happened on previous tries ▶ Allows supervisors to decide the next action to take for each number (e.g., call back, or remove from the sample pool?) ▶ Helps ensure that each number is called back an adequate number of times, maximizing validity
WHAT IS A QUOTA TRACKING SHEET?	WHY DO WE NEED ONE?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ A record of the characteristics of each person who has been recruited to a focus groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Enables supervisors to determine when recruiters should stop recruiting people who have certain characteristics for which the quota has already been filled

When you are recruiting participants to a focus group, be sure that all participants are fluent in the language in which the groups will be conducted. Recruiters can assess a potential participants' fluency during their call; you may want to include a specific screening question for this issue if you have reason to believe you may contact a lot of people who do not speak the language in which the groups will be conducted. **It is important that focus groups are conducted in a single language:** for example, if the group is conducted in English, all participants must be fluent in English. Do not invite a participant who speaks another language and then attempt to have the group translated for that individual; this will have a strongly negative impact on the group's length, complexity, usefulness, and on the group dynamic. If you wish to hear from participants who speak different languages, hold a group in each language.

A process for managing call sheets and quota tracking sheets, and an example of the call management process, are provided on the following pages.

Process for Using Call Sheets and Quota Tracking Sheets to Manage Focus Group Recruitment

- ▶ The supervisor **distributes a stack of callback sheets** to each recruiter, and recruiters **call the number** on the first callback sheet.
- ▶ Recruiter **records the disposition, or outcome, of the call**: the date and time the number was tried, the disposition of the call (e.g., no answer, call back, successful recruitment, etc. See the chart on the next page for a complete list of possible dispositions), their recruiter number or name, and any notes that might be helpful for the next caller.
- ▶ If a telephone number must be **withdrawn from the sampling pool**, the recruiter removes this callback sheet from the stack of active numbers.

Reasons a telephone number may need to be withdrawn:

- ▶ **Recruit**: Respondent agrees to attend the focus group
 - ▶ **Refusal**: Respondent is unwilling or unable to attend the focus group
 - ▶ **Ineligible**: Respondent is not eligible to attend the focus group
 - ▶ **Non-working number**: Disconnected, wrong number, business number, etc.
- ▶ When someone has been successfully recruited to the focus group, the recruiter gives the screener for that person to the supervisor. The supervisor then records their information on the **quota tracking sheet** for that group. The supervisor regularly updates recruiters as to which quotas are still open so they can recruit accordingly.
 - ▶ The supervisor **collects callback sheets for active numbers** from recruiters as they call on active lines, and **distributes callback sheets for active numbers to recruiters**, so that numbers are called back at the appropriate time.

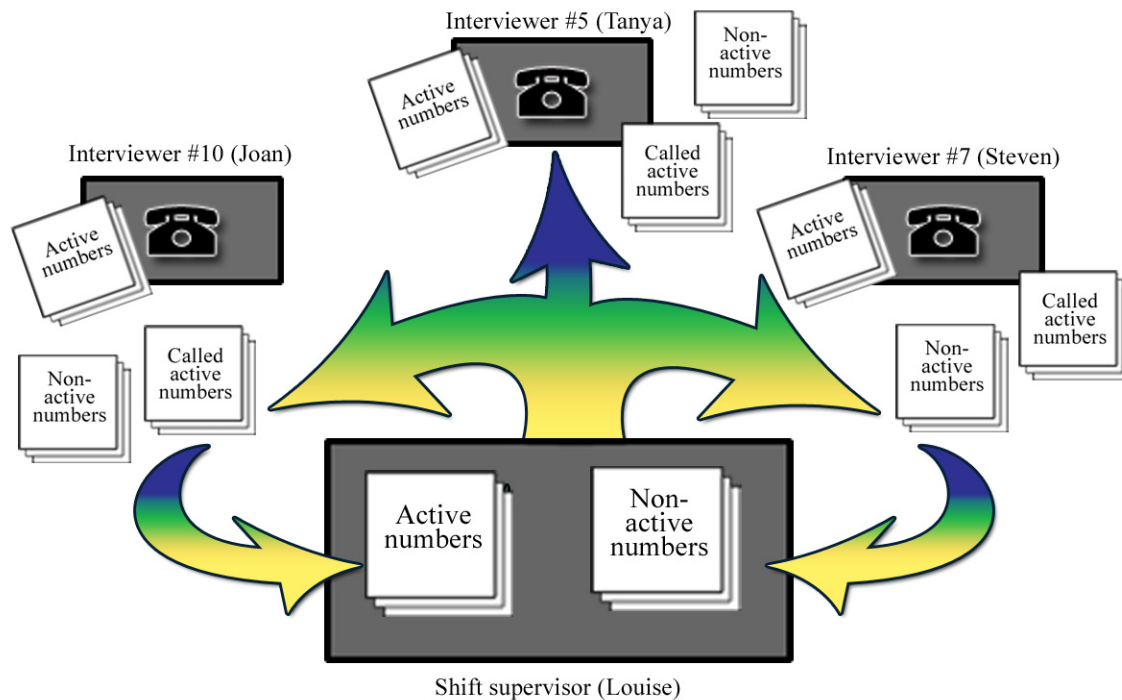
Order of priority for callbacks:

- ▶ **Callbacks to complete**: Resident has expressed intent to speak to a recruiter, and has given the recruiter a specific time to call them back.
 - ▶ **Scheduled callback**: Resident has given a better time to call back, but without expressing intent to go through the screener questions.
 - ▶ **Callback**: Active numbers will be re-tried after a pre-determined period of time. For example, if a number is tried and there is no answer or the line is busy, an interviewer should try the number in two hours, or (if there are less than two hours remaining in the shift) at the beginning of the next shift.
- ▶ At the end of the shift, the supervisor **collects all remaining active and inactive numbers** and sorts them for the next recruiting shift.

Example of Call Dispositions

CALL DISPOSITIONS		
LIVE SAMPLE (telephone numbers to keep and try again)		Abbreviation
1	No answer	NA
2	Answering machine or voice mail	VM
3	Busy signal	B
4	Callback, or call back to complete (CBC)—this is when the respondent or someone else at the number schedules a specific time for you to call back	CB, CBC
OTHER NON-ACTIVE DISPOSITIONS (telephone numbers you will not try again)		
5	Refusal	R
6	Unreachable (unusable numbers, such as fax machines, etc.)	U
7	Ineligible – screener questions rule out respondent for eligibility	IN
8	Agreed to attend focus group	COMP

Example of Call Sheet Management During A Recruitment Shift



Louise, the shift supervisor, distributes a stack of **50 active telephone numbers** to each recruiter. Joan calls the first telephone number on her stack of active numbers. There is no answer. She marks the disposition of the call “no answer” and puts the call sheet on a stack of **called active numbers** at her side. She calls the next active number, speaks to someone, and successfully recruits an attendee. She marks the disposition of the call on the call sheet and moves the call sheet to a stack of **non-active numbers**.

Periodically, Louise walks through the room, **collecting the non-active numbers** and sorting them by disposition (e.g., ineligible, recruited, etc.), and **collecting the active numbers** for redistribution. Louise sorts the active numbers by priority, placing the numbers that need to be called back soonest and are highest priority. Louise ensures that “no answer” call backs are redistributed among recruiters so that the telephone numbers are tried again in two hours. If a telephone number has been tried six times without resulting in a successful recruit or a scheduled callback, Louise gives this telephone number a disposition of “never available” and moves it to the stack of non-active numbers.

An active number has a scheduled callback for 7:30. Joan scheduled the callback earlier that evening, but when the time comes for the callback, she is on the phone with another potential participant. Louise gives the callback sheet to Steven, who has just hung up the phone after getting an answering machine, and so is free to make the call. Steven calls the person back and successfully recruits them. Louise **keeps track of the characteristics of participants and quotas** as recruiters successfully invite participants.

At the end of the shift, Louise collects all active and non-active telephone numbers from interviewers and **sorts them into categories** so that they are ready for the next shift. Callbacks are **organized in descending order of priority** by the time they are scheduled to be called back; e.g., telephone numbers that should be called back at 5:30 are on top of those that should be called back at 7:30, and a scheduled callback at 5:30 (i.e., the respondent has specifically requested to be called back at this time) is on top of a routine callback for 5:30.

Supervising and Motivating Recruiters

Assuming you have multiple recruiters, each shift will require a **supervisor** to manage it. For the purposes of this manual, we are assuming that the supervisor will be a staff member of the organization that is sponsoring the research who is heavily involved in the project. If this is a full-time (40 hours per week) staff person, expect that recruiting interviewers and then managing the actual interviewing process will consume at least one-half of his or her working hours for about four weeks or more. A supervisor's **primary responsibilities** during a shift include:

- ▶ Providing recruiters with the **materials they will need** for their shift, including several copies of the screener, a copy of the APQ, a writing implement, and call sheets.
- ▶ **Reviewing completed screeners.** The supervisor should review completed screeners immediately after a successful recruitment. Check to make sure that all questions are answered and that the recruit's name, address, and any other information is recorded clearly and legibly. If there is a problem, such as a response that is unclear or skipped, check with the recruiter to see if they can provide additional information. In some cases, it may be necessary for the recruiter to call the recruit back to ask a question that was accidentally skipped. This should be done as soon as possible, to increase the chances that the recruiter will be able to reach that individual again.
- ▶ **Managing sample.** The supervisor needs to keep track of the "live" telephone numbers (i.e., those that have not yielded a terminating disposition, including completions, refusals, ineligible respondents, and unusable phone numbers), and make sure the right call backs get to the right interviewer at the right time. Numbers that are "no answers" should be tried twice in one night, if possible. The supervisor also needs to keep track of the "dead" sample: that is, any telephone number that has ended in a terminating disposition. For more information regarding managing sample, refer to the information on using call sheets later in this section.
- ▶ Providing **training and feedback** for recruiters as needed. Feedback should be provided privately, and in a constructive manner.
- ▶ **Being available for questions.**
- ▶ **Motivating recruiters**, which will be discussed in detail in the next section.
- ▶ Creating and maintaining a **pleasant and professional atmosphere** in the calling room.

How to Calculate a Cooperation Rate for Individual Recruiters

- ▶ Add together their total number of successful recruits and refusals.
- ▶ Divide their total recruits by the combined total of recruits and refusals.
- ▶ For example, if Jenny got 6 recruits and 2 refusals, divide 6 by 8 to determine her cooperation rate for the night: 75%.

Cooperation rates can be calculated for individual recruiters as well as for all recruiters combined. They can be calculated on a per-evening basis as well as for the entire course of the project.

Motivating recruiters

Two of the best ways to motivate recruiters to perform their best are through (1) friendly competition; and (2) providing rewards for performing well. The following are some suggestions that can be effective in motivating recruiters.

- ▶ Be sure to provide plenty of encouragement and positive feedback.
- ▶ Make sure recruiters know what the expected cooperation rate and number of completions per hour (CPH) is for the project.
- ▶ Keep track of each recruiter's completions during the shift on a blackboard or dry erase board.
- ▶ Provide bonuses every shift to the recruiters who performs best in some respect. The bonus could go to the recruiters who gets the highest number of recruits during the shift, for example. The bonus could be a \$10 bonus or gift certificate.
- ▶ Recruiters can also work toward winning a bonus for the best performance on some measure of quality and/or productivity for the project as a whole. Keep track of recruiters' cumulative performance over the course of the project, and keep interviewers informed as to where they are in the standings.
- ▶ Try to keep the atmosphere pleasant and supportive, yet professional.

Sending Confirmation and Information to Recruited Attendees

After you have recruited enough participants to fill your focus groups, you will send them each a confirmation letter with information and directions to the place where the focus groups will be held. A sample confirmation letter is included on the CD of prototype materials included with this guide.

Confirming by Telephone

A few nights before the groups, call each of the recruited participants to confirm that they will be attending. This step ensures that participants' commitment to attend the group is fresh in their minds, and also gives you an opportunity to recruit a replacement if they cancel.

5. Writing the Moderator Guide

What is a moderator guide?

A moderator guide is a tool for **structuring a discussion** and ensuring that important questions will not be forgotten during a focus group.

While moderator guides are similar to questionnaires used in telephone surveys in some respects, there are important differences between the two instruments. While questionnaires are good for achieving consistency in responses (using closed-ended questions with specific predetermined response options and scales), consistency is less important in a focus group, where **the emphasis is on exploration and the depth of information you can learn**. Focus groups are the ideal research method for getting “the real story” and uncovering the attitudes and emotions that drive behavior.

Unlike questionnaires and quantitative interviews, a moderator in a focus group does not have to stick to the script. A moderator guide is just that: a guide. Moderators have the freedom in a focus group to follow a train of thought and reorder the questions if it better suits the flow of the discussion. Questions in a moderator guide may include suggested probes—follow-up questions designed to explore specific aspects of an issue. When you hold a focus group, **you may wind up getting answers to questions that you didn’t know you needed to ask** when you were developing the guide. Moderators can ask additional probes or questions to find out more about relevant issues that are not covered specifically in the guide. Samples of moderator guides for focus groups with parents and students are included on the CD of prototype materials included with this guide.

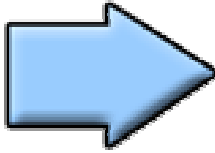
You need to **have specific objectives in mind** when you are figuring out what to ask in your moderator guide; your research objectives will determine its content. In developing questions, your aim is to write questions that, when participants answer them, will answer your organization’s questions and meet your research objectives.

Before you begin writing a moderator guide, ask yourself the following questions:

- ▶ What is the specific purpose of the focus group?
- ▶ What information am I interested in exploring?
- ▶ Who needs this information, and what are they going to do with it?

The guide should be kept fairly brief, and should stay focused on your research objectives, so that you are able to get as much in-depth input from all of your participants as possible. You should ask questions in **natural, conversational language**—avoid jargon or technical terms your participants may not know. A moderator guide should only include questions directly related to your research objectives. Do not ask personal questions that are not related to the topic.

POINTER



Allow a certain number of minutes to discuss each topic area.

If you ask too many questions, you will not have enough time to explore these topics fully, and you will not get the full benefit of holding a focus group. When you add up the allotted time periods after writing the guide, they should total about 90 minutes.

COMPONENTS OF A MODERATOR GUIDE

PURPOSE AND INTRODUCTION

In the introduction, the moderator should introduce him- or herself, welcome participants and thank them for coming, and briefly introduce the topic of the conversation. The introduction of the topic should be very general (e.g., “We are here to discuss some issues related to after-school programs in your area”) and not give away too many details about exactly what you’ll be asking.

GROUND RULES

The moderator goes over the ground rules that will help the discussion go more smoothly. The sample moderator guide on the CD of prototype materials included with this guide will include a complete description of ground rules you may want to use for your focus group. Certain ground rules are applicable only if the groups are being viewed by others through a one-way mirror, or if they are being audiotaped or videotaped.

PARTICIPANT INTRODUCTIONS

A good exercise for achieving a positive group dynamic is to spend a couple of minutes at the beginning of the group going around the room and having participants introduce themselves and share something about themselves (for example, the moderator could ask everyone to say where they live, how many children they have, what their ages are, and what fun thing they most enjoy doing with their children). Alternatively, participants can interview each other briefly, and then introduce their neighbor to the rest of the group.

QUESTIONS

There are several types of questions you can use in a focus group, including:

- ▶ Opening questions
- ▶ Introductory questions
- ▶ Transitional questions
- ▶ Key questions
- ▶ Closing questions

We will discuss each of these in more detail on the next page.

CONCLUSION

The moderator ends the discussion by asking if participants have any last suggestions or comments about the topic. If there are stakeholders observing the group behind a one-way mirror, the moderator should check with them to find out if they have any additional questions for participants.

TYPES OF QUESTIONS

Opening questions:

- Get participants acquainted and feeling connected.
- Establish a high-energy, comfortable environment: get participants interested in the topic and enable them to feel safe enough to share their opinions and feelings.
- Let participants know what to expect during the group.
- Not intended to obtain useful information for your research, and not analyzed.
- Example for a focus group with parents: “Tell us your first name, and one thing that your child does that makes you smile.”
- Example for a focus group with children: “Tell us your first name, and something fun you did this summer.”

Introductory questions:

- Introduce the overall topic of discussion.
- Open-ended questions that ask for participants’ thoughts, feelings, or experiences relating to the topic at hand.
- Example for a focus group with parents: “My first questions are about how your middle school children spend their time after school. What kinds of things do they usually do?”

Transitional questions:

- Move the conversation toward the key questions, the reason the focus groups are being held.
- May ask participants to go into more detail about an issue raised during the introductory questions.
- Example for a focus group with children: “What’s important to you in deciding how to spend your after-school time?”

Key questions:





- The most important issues in the moderator guide; the questions that relate to the core reason for the focus group.
- Enable participants to elaborate and discuss things in detail.
- It is important for the moderator to know which questions are the key questions for the group. Allow for enough time to discuss these questions completely.
- Example for a focus group with parents: “How satisfied are you with the things middle school children are doing?” “What could make it better for you or are there other things you would rather they were doing?” “What would you rather they were doing?”

Closing questions:

- Bring closure to the discussion.
- Give participants a chance to think about what they’ve talked about.
- Moderator can ask participants to identify the most important component from the discussion (e.g., “If you had one minute to tell me how to improve the after-school programs in your community, what would you tell me?”), or ask for final thoughts (e.g., “Is there anything else you would like to add about after-school programs in your community?”).

Ordering Your Questions

It is not only important what questions you ask and how you ask them—you must also consider the order in which you ask specific questions, as this can make a difference in how they're answered.

<p>General</p>  <p>Specific</p>	<p>Asking broader, more general questions first (e.g., “What types of things do you enjoy doing after school?”) will provide a context and prepare participants to give more considered responses to the more focused, specific questions that will follow (e.g., “How interested would you be in going to a place with adult supervision where you can hang out with kids your age after school?”).</p>
<p>Positive</p>  <p>Negative</p>	<p>Ask participants to talk about both the good and bad parts of an experience, but ask them to talk about the good parts first—this usually makes people feel more comfortable talking about the bad parts. For example, “What do you like most about the after-school program you attend? What do you like least?”</p>
<p>Unaided</p>  <p>Aided</p>	<p>Get participants to respond to a question in their own words before following up with specific probing questions. For example, begin by asking participants, “What is important to you, in terms of how your children spend their after-school time?” Allow them to respond before going on to ask, “How important are things like cost? Transportation? Your child wanting to be with his or her friends?”</p>
<p>Participant categories</p>  <p>Guide categories</p>	<p>Similar to the concept of “unaided before aided” described above, in situations where you are asking participants to rank order, rate or comment on a set of categories, it is a good idea to have them come up with their own categories and comment on these before moving on to a list of specific categories developed before the focus group. For example, the moderator asks, “Let’s go around the table and name some activities you’d like to participate in after school.” The moderator keeps track of the activities that children are mentioning on a blackboard or large pad of paper at the front of the room, where everyone can see it. When the students have finished completing the list, the moderator might ask people to vote for certain activities with a show of hands. If there are certain activities that you want to learn about that were not raised during this exercise, the moderator will write them on the board at this point, asking, for example, “What about music lessons? How many of you would be interested in something like this?”</p>

6. Holding the Focus Groups

In this section, we will discuss four key components of holding a focus group: (1) hosting the group; (2) preparing the meeting room and equipment; (3) moderating the group; and (4) recording comments.

Hosting the Focus Group

What is a focus group host?

A focus group host prepares the focus group room and greets participants. He or she acts as an assistant to the moderator and helps ensure a successful focus group.

It will be very helpful to have someone acting as a host or hostess at the focus groups. Responsibilities of a host at a focus group include:

- ▶ Arriving about an hour early to check on room set-up, help **prepare the meeting room and equipment**, and deal with any potential problems.
- ▶ Coordinating and bringing **name cards for participants** and other miscellaneous materials that may be needed.
- ▶ **Greeting participants** as they arrive, re-screening them, and directing them to the room.
- ▶ Turning away any **late arrivals**.
- ▶ Being available to **bring notes from the people observing** to the moderator during the focus group.
- ▶ Having participants **sign out** after the group has been held and giving participants their honorarium.

The host or hostess should have a **professional demeanor** and be dressed in **appropriate business clothes**. This person should also be able to **manage a lot of details**. On the next page, we present a summary of the host's duties before and after the focus group.

Duties of a Focus Group Host or Hostess

Duties upon arrival:

- ▶ Make sure facility staff know where to direct **lost respondents**
- ▶ Make sure there is a **posted sign** directing participants to the discussion, which includes the name or number of the meeting room
- ▶ Set out **name cards** (no particular order)
- ▶ Have **attendance sheet** ready to check off
- ▶ Have **list of screener questions** handy

After the discussion group:

- ▶ After the group is over, the moderator will instruct the participants to see you. This is the time that you should get their **payment envelopes** ready.
- ▶ Have the **sign-out sheet** ready for them to sign with a ball point pen. A sample sign-out sheet is included on the CD of prototype materials included with this guide.
- ▶ After they have signed out, you can **give them the envelopes** containing their honoraria.
- ▶ After participants leave, you can check in with the **audio or video crew** (if you are using one) to see how recording went.
- ▶ If there are no more groups scheduled for that night, this is when you will probably **sign their bill** and **take the tapes and cassettes**. If you are not taking the tapes for some reason, it is still your responsibility to make sure that the moderator has them before he or she leaves.

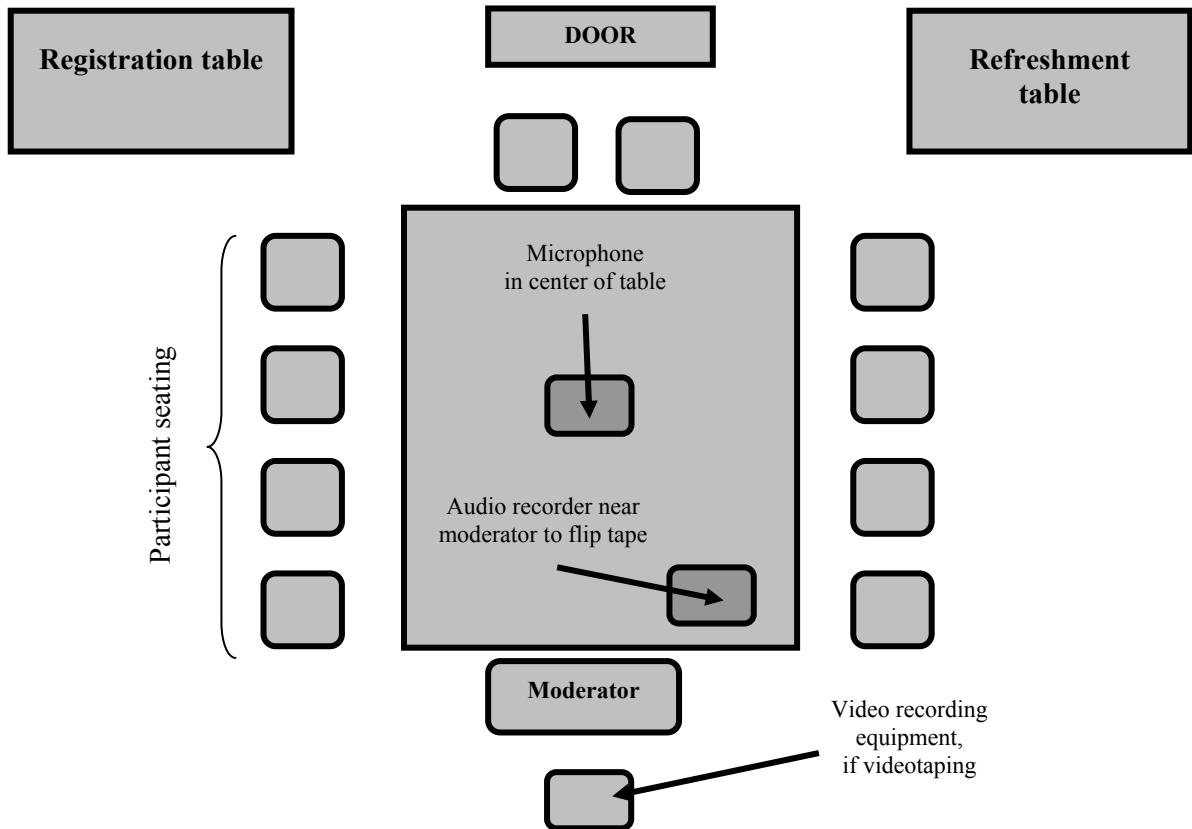
If participants are lingering after the discussion:

- ▶ Make sure anyone observing the groups knows this, in case it is important that observers and participants not meet.
- ▶ If that is the case, either **have the observers leave through a different door** or have them wait to leave until **after the participants have left** the building.

Preparing the Meeting Room and Equipment

Once at the facility, the host or hostess should conduct a room check. Make sure the meeting room(s) are set up correctly. If they are not set up correctly, get management (if you are using a hotel, focus group facility, or other facility) to help you put it together the right way as soon as possible, although it may be easier to just do it yourself. In rare cases, you may need to request a replacement room. The chart below illustrates a suggested layout for a focus group meeting room.

Suggested Layout for Focus Group Room



There are a number of important issues to consider when setting up your focus group meeting room. You want to make sure that **the characteristics of the meeting room itself will help ensure a successful focus group**, rather than working against you. In addition to having adequate space to seat participants comfortably, you will want to consider the light, temperature, and possible distractions in the room. For example, open windows might mean that you will hear traffic noises or other sounds from outside throughout the group—this can be a distraction during the group, and can make it difficult to hear all participants' remarks when the audiotape is played back. Air conditioners and heating systems may also pose a sound problem. Can these be shut off during the discussion? Are they quiet enough to keep on? If you can, draw blinds or close curtains to eliminate distracting views.

On the next pages, we present checklists for hosts to use to ensure that the focus group room and needed equipment are ready.

Checklist for Focus Group Hosts: The Meeting Room

General things to consider:

- Is the **lighting** adequate?
- Is the **temperature** comfortable?
- Are there any **visual or auditory distractions** that can be minimized or eliminated?
- Is the room located near a bar, or any other **potential distraction**?
- Are there adequate **electrical outlets**? Where are they located?
- Are there **enough chairs** for the moderator and the number of participants you expect to seat?
- Is the **refreshment and beverage table** supposed to be inside the meeting room or outside?
- Is there **piped-in music**? If it is loud enough to be picked up by the microphones, can it be shut off?
- Is the room **easy to get to**? If needed, make signs to post near the facility's entry directing participants to the meeting room.
- Where are the **restrooms**? Are they close by?
- Will the participants be able **see the observers** at any time?
- Has the facility supplied **pens and paper**?
- Can observers easily give you a **message** to pass to the moderator?

Observation room:

- Will observers be watching a **monitor**? If so, can they all see it?
- Do they have **food** in the room, or will they be ordering from a menu?
- Are there enough **chairs**?

Food set-up should include:

- All **utensils** (plates, silverware, napkins, etc.)
- Vegetarian** menu options
- Water** (hot and cold)

Upon arrival, make sure that the reception area includes:

- A **desk**
- A **chair**
- A **garbage can**
- A **clock** or watch (it is good to have an extra timepiece; the moderator will need a clock or watch to keep track of time during the group as well)
- Extra chairs**, so that participants can sit while waiting for the group to start

Checklist for Focus Group Hosts: Equipment and Materials

Focus groups require a certain amount of **equipment**. Invest in a large, sturdy bag to transport these items. What you bring to the group may vary depending on how you are planning to record what occurs during the group (e.g., field notes, audiotape, videotape), and whether you are hiring a vendor (e.g., a professional videographer). Below is a list of common items you may need to bring.

- A copy of **this guide**
- Name cards** for participants (index cards; see below)
- List of **recruits**, with contact information, plus any cancellations
- Telephone number and name of **contact person** at the focus group facility
- Directions** to the group and name of location for groups
- Sign-out sheets** for each group
- Copies of screeners** (actual screeners if possible, as well as some blank ones for re-screening)
- Incentives**. Count out money and put it in envelopes. Seal them but do not label them. Make sure to put the envelopes in a place that is easy to get to, but also well hidden.
- Marking pens** (thick, dark ink)
- Writings tablets and pens, pencils**
- Cassette tape recorder**
- Remote microphone**
- Extension cords**
- Extra batteries** for all equipment
- Blank cassette tapes**
- Several copies of the **moderator guide**
- Duct tape or masking tape**
- Box of tissues**
- Flip chart**
- Any **handouts or materials** for participants

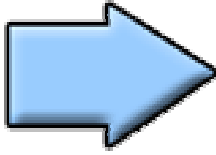
Materials for moderator:

- Pencils and/or pens**
- Notepads** (8 to 12)
- Paper clips**
- Markers** (blue, black, red)
- Thumb tacks**
- Materials specific to the group**, like questionnaires, handouts, etc.
- Easel** (if needed)
- Flipchart** (pad of paper for easel, if needed)
- Clock or watch**

Materials for observers:

- List of **recruits** (first names only)
- Copy of **moderator's guide**
- Seating charts**

POINTER



Participant Name Cards

For participant name cards, consider using **folded index cards** with the participant's first name printed neatly in black ink on both sides. It is easy to move these tags for optimal viewing (as opposed to name tags worn on clothing, which may be obscured from your view depending on how participants are seated) and generally easy to read them from across the table. If there is more than one respondent with the same first name, give the last initial of both respondents. The moderator also gets a name card.

If you are audiotaping the focus groups yourself, **always test your recording equipment prior to the group**. To test the equipment, set up the recorder beside the moderator (so that the moderator can easily flip the tape if needed) and the microphone in the center of the table (you may need additional microphones for larger tables to capture everyone's comments). Push the record button and walk around the table, speaking at a normal, conversational volume. Rewind the tape and play it back: did it record successfully? Can you hear yourself at every point around the table? If not, you may need to adjust the position or number of microphones.

If you are doing the audiotaping, be sure to bring:

- Tape recorders**
- Cassettes** (one 120-minute cassette for each group plus back-ups) and labels
- Extension cords and adapters**
- Two **microphones** (main plus back-up)
- Back-up **batteries** for microphone

How to set up audio equipment (if you do not have professional AV staff):

- The microphone sits in the **middle of the table** with the wire running to the nearest edge. The microphone wire is taped (with masking tape) under the table.
- The microphone is plugged into the **tape recorder**, which sits near the moderator (either on the table or on the floor by the moderator's chair).
- The **adapter** is plugged into the outlet nearest the moderator's chair and plugged into the tape recorder. The wire from the wall to the tape recorder is taped down with masking tape.
- The microphone is **turned on** when the moderator is ready to start: the play and record buttons on the tape recorder are pushed.

Things to remember when recording:

- Always **test the microphone for sound**. Test from all seats around the table.
- See if the **air conditioner or heat** can be heard.
- Talk **softly and loudly** to test the noise level.
- Tape any wires** you see.
- Remind the moderator to **start the tape** before she begins.
- After an hour (assuming a 120-minute tape), come in, **flip the tape over**, and then leave.
- Label the tapes** at the beginning of the group.
- All equipment must be stored in the **original boxes** as neatly as possible.

RECORDING COMMENTS: BASIC METHODS

In order for a focus group to be successful, you must have a way of capturing the information. Your memory of what occurred during a group is likely to be unreliable. Use as many of the methods below and on the next page as you can afford; use combined methods when possible. Regardless of whatever additional methods you may use, we recommend that you **always audiotape focus groups**. It is a relatively easy and inexpensive way of capturing information. Audiotapes can help flesh out observations made during field notes, and are necessary for later transcription or translation.

FIELD NOTES

- ▶ A researcher observes the focus group and takes detailed notes on participants' responses. This researcher should be **someone other than the moderator** (so that the moderator can focus on moderating the group), and ideally should be **observing the group from another room**, behind a one-way mirror or through closed-circuit television. Having an observer present in the room and taking notes has the potential to make participants self-conscious and may inhibit free discussion.
- ▶ If there is no other room available, the researcher can be in the room, but should not be seated at the table with the focus group participants. He or she should be seated on the side of the room opposite the moderator. **It is very important that the researcher not say anything during the focus groups**, and should not have any nonverbal reactions (e.g., nodding, frowning, etc.) to anything said during the group. At the beginning of the discussion, the moderator should be sure to introduce this researcher and explain that he or she will be taking notes during the discussion.

AUDIOTAPE

- ▶ The entire focus group is captured on audiotape using an audio-recorder. Care must be taken to **ensure that all remarks are audible** when played back later.
- ▶ **Multiple microphones** may be necessary to adequately capture all participants' comments, depending on the size of the room (remarks from participants seated farthest from the microphone may be muffled, particularly if they speak in a soft voice).
- ▶ The moderator should **remind participants to speak up and not to talk over each other** as needed.
- ▶ If you are serving snacks or a light meal during the focus group, **avoid crunchy foods** (e.g., potato chips): these noises will be very loud on the audiotape and it may be difficult to hear participants' remarks over them.
- ▶ Keep in mind that, depending on the equipment you are using and the length of your focus group, you may need to **flip the cassette tape over or insert a new cassette** to capture the entire group.
- ▶ Audiotapes should be **labeled with the time and date of the group** (and any additional relevant information) before each group for the purposes of easy identification and analysis later.

VIDEOTAPE

- ▶ The entire focus group is captured on videotape using a video-recorder. Many of the same principles described above apply for audio-taping as well. You may use **stationary video** (in which the camera is positioned so that it captures all participants in the frame and does not move), or you may enlist a video operator, who can **pan and zoom** so that the video will show individual participants as they are speaking.
- ▶ Videotapes should be **labeled with the time and date of the group** (and any additional relevant information) immediately before the group for the purposes of easy identification and analysis later.

RECORDING COMMENTS: SPECIALIZED METHODS

The methods below typically require more **specialized skills**. If you have the resources, consider hiring a professional for these methods. Please see the section on outsourcing in this workbook for more information on how to hire these vendors.

TRANSCRIPTION

- ▶ A focus group that has been recorded, either on audio- or videotape, is transcribed verbatim. The transcript is typically a word-processed document that can be used either on the computer, or printed as a hardcopy reference.
- ▶ Transcription is **very time-consuming**; we recommend that you hire a professional transcriptionist.

TRANSLATION

- ▶ Your community may choose to conduct focus groups with a population that speaks a language other than your own. If this is the case, you will need to have the tape of the group translated.
- ▶ Translation is **very time-consuming and requires specialized knowledge**; we recommend that you hire a professional translator.

7. Moderating the Focus Group

The following section is intended for communities who plan to conduct focus groups and use internal staff to moderate them rather than hiring a professional moderator. We will describe the steps you should take to prepare for the group; what will be expected of you during the group; and common problems you may encounter, along with suggestions for how to handle them.

We assume for the purposes of this workbook that you will also have a host or hostess for the focus groups. We strongly recommend having a host or hostess, although moderators can perform hosting tasks if there is no other option. For a complete description of these tasks, please see the previous section on hosting focus groups.

What to Do Before the Group Begins

Mental preparation: Completely familiarize yourself with the moderator guide. You will have a copy of the guide with you, but use it only as a reminder—not as a script. Know the rationale for each question so that you can ask follow-up questions effectively. The night before the focus group, get adequate rest. You want to be calm, mentally alert, and able to concentrate during a focus group. Minimize the chance that you will be distracted during the group by feeling tired, hungry, or by thinking about other things you need to do. Do not drink alcohol, and be cautious using medications that may make you feel drowsy or might make it difficult for you to concentrate.

Prepare a checklist of everything you need to remember to bring with you, and everything you need to do before the groups begin. Leave adequate time for travel and finding the facility if the group is being held in a place you have never been before. Plan to arrive an hour before the group begins. Take a few minutes to collect your thoughts before the group begins—find a quiet space and spend five or ten minutes reflecting or meditating. Leave adequate time between groups to debrief with fellow researchers or an assistant, record your observations of the group, and refresh yourself before the next group.

Put participants at ease: Make sure that participants feel comfortable entering the group. Treat them as guests; invite them to help themselves to beverages or refreshments, and let them know where to hang their coats, umbrellas, etc. Small talk is extremely valuable for putting participants at ease. Ask them about the weather, the traffic, sports. Don't bring up any topics that will be discussed during the group, and avoid sensitive topics (e.g., politics, religion).

This is also a **valuable time for you to observe participants and think ahead about the likely group dynamic.** Is there someone in the group who might prove to be disruptive in some way—someone who is dominating the group, or acting rudely or inappropriately? Is there someone in the group who seems particularly withdrawn or ill at ease? Is there a participant who might be difficult to understand (e.g., a heavy accent, or speech impediment)? If possible, use the seating arrangement to your advantage: position dominant talkers next to you, and shy participants across from you. This will best enable you to use eye contact and nonverbal communication to discourage the dominant talker from speaking (e.g., turning away, limiting eye contact) and encourage the quiet participant.

Guidelines for a Successful Discussion

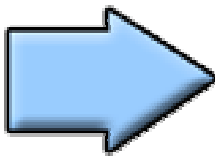
DO LISTEN	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Listen actively and attentively. Participants are more likely to open up if they feel you are really listening to them, and you will be better-equipped to ask insightful follow-up questions.
DO PROBE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Probing is a key element of successful moderating. These phrases will help you achieve the clearest understanding of participants' responses: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ "Can you give me an example?" ○ "Would you say more about that?" ○ "I don't understand; could you explain that to me?" ○ "How does that work?" ○ "Is there anything else?"
DO PAUSE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ After someone finishes speaking, wait a few seconds before moving on to the next question. This will often prompt someone else to offer their views, or prompt the original speaker to elaborate on their previous comment.
DO CONTROL YOUR REACTIONS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Try to avoid giving verbal (e.g., "That's great") or nonverbal signals (e.g., nodding or frowning) that could be interpreted as agreement or disagreement. Participants may wish to please you, in which case their comments might not reflect their actual beliefs. ▶ You may not like everything participants have to say. If you make it clear that you object or disagree with a participants' beliefs or feelings, you risk alienating the participant and negatively affecting the group dynamic.
DO USE EFFECTIVE NON-VERBAL CUES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Using hand signals and other body language can assist the flow of a conversation. For example, pointing to a participant or looking at them are clear signals that it is their turn to speak; turning away from a participant is a signal that they should stop speaking. Leaning toward participants is a signal that you are interested in the conversation and listening actively.
DON'T TREAT THE GUIDE LIKE A SCRIPT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Ask questions in a natural, unrehearsed way. Reading questions directly off the moderator guide will sound stilted and inhibit the discussion. Familiarity with the moderator guide will help you ask questions in a natural-sounding manner. ▶ Anticipate and adjust the flow of the conversation. Remember, you do not need to follow the exact order that the questions are presented in the moderator guide. For example, if the topic is sensitive and participants are beginning to get emotional, shift the conversation back to more neutral territory by introducing a less emotionally charged line of questioning.
DON'T PROBE CARELESSLY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Use probing questions deliberately and consciously to add clarity and insight into complex issues, or when responses are vague. Too much probing risks wasting time without contributing new information.
DON'T GET SIDE-TRACKED	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Time is limited in a focus group, and it is fairly easy for the conversation to wander away from the topic—participants may begin to share personal anecdotes that are only slightly related to the topic, inspiring others to share even less related anecdotes, and before you know it the conversation has nothing to do with what you are there to learn about. ▶ You should refocus the discussion by repeating the question, or tactfully interrupting participants if needed: "I'm going to have to stop us here. This is interesting stuff, and we could have a whole other focus group about that situation, but we don't have much time today and I really need to hear about..."

Handling Problems and Special Situations

There are a variety of things that can go wrong during a focus group. As the moderator, one of your jobs is to anticipate possible problems and resolve them should they occur. On the next pages, we provide guidelines and tips about how to handle a number of common problems that can occur.

PROBLEMS WITH FACILITIES AND MEDICAL EMERGENCIES	
PROBLEMS WITH THE EQUIPMENT OR MEETING ROOM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Earlier in this workbook, we provided recommendations for how to set up equipment and the meeting room. Double-check these before beginning the group. Try to be as prepared as possible for equipment malfunctions; for example, pack spare batteries and power cords. In the event of an emergency, the host or hostess may be enlisted to purchase supplies from an area store, or to take detailed field notes to capture information. ▶ To prevent problems with the room, try to arrange a viewing of the room prior to the focus group. If you are using a room at a professional focus group facility, you may be able to arrange for a replacement room if the room you are using is unsuitable. Make sure the facility redirects participants to the new room. If you do not have the option of a replacement room, try to minimize circumstances that may be causing problems; for example, minimizing or eliminating visual and auditory distractions, adjusting the light or temperature, etc.
MEDICAL EMERGENCIES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ In the unlikely event of a medical emergency during a focus group, remain calm. Ask the participant closest to the door to have the host or hostess call 911. ▶ In the meantime, turn off the tape, have participants collect their belongings and adjourn to the waiting room. ▶ While paramedics are assisting the participant in the focus group room, pay participants and send them home. ▶ After the paramedics have left, return the room to its original condition, checking for any areas that may need professional cleaning or sterilization.

POINTER



Cell phones and pagers

Ask all participants to turn these devices off at the beginning of the group. In the event participants must be reachable for emergencies, ask them to set their devices to vibrate, and excuse themselves from the room to take calls if absolutely necessary.

PROBLEMS WITH THE NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS WHO SHOW UP

TOO FEW PARTICIPANTS

If only a few people have arrived by the time the focus group is scheduled to begin, **wait a few more minutes** (up to ten minutes after the original starting time) to see if additional people show. Then begin the group. The host or hostess can greet and register newcomers and send them into the group. Participants who arrive very late—more than ten minutes after the group has begun—should be **thanked and sent home**.

You may want to consider **arranging another focus group** if very few individuals show and you are unable to get answers to your research questions. To help prevent this from occurring in the future, try to find out what might have caused the low show rate. For example, was there some unusual circumstance that prevented people from attending, such as heavy snow or rain, a traffic jam, etc.? Was there a problem with the recruitment process that could be corrected for future groups? For example, were enough people recruited for the group to have a reasonable expectation of seating of seven to ten? Did recruits receive information and directions in the mail in a timely manner? Were recruits confirmed before the group? Did recruits receive personalized reminders? Was the offered incentive appropriate?

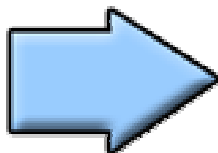
TOO MANY PARTICIPANTS

Focus groups with more than ten participants can be difficult to control and with so many people, you are less likely to achieve the depth of responses you are aiming for in a focus group. **After you have seated ten people, turn extras away**. Be careful not to recruit so many people to a focus group that you will have to turn a lot of people away—the people you turn away should still be given an honorarium for attending the focus groups, and so turning away a lot of people can quickly become expensive. You can either seat people on a first-come, first-served basis, or you can turn away those participants who may prove disruptive (for example, a recruit who acts rude or disorderly in the waiting room). You can also turn away people based on their characteristics—for example, if you have more female participants than you need and not enough male participants, you could decide to send over-recruited female participants home.

ADDITIONAL UNRECRUITED GUESTS

Recruited participants may show up with their spouse or partner, another family member, or a friend. Invite these individuals to return when the focus group is over, or to take a seat in the waiting room. Parents may also arrive with young children. **Having young children or babies in the focus group room will be a significant distraction**. Try to discourage this from the outset by informing parents at the recruiting stage that child care will not be provided. If necessary, consider offering parents of young children reimbursement for the cost of child care for the hours the focus group will be held. If parents arrive with children anyway, **send them home**.

POINTER



If you must turn people away, be tactful, yet firm. **Do not worry about people getting upset at being sent home**; it is very rare that people will object to being turned away at the door. You are still giving them the honorarium they were promised, and they do not even have to attend the group to receive it.

PROBLEMS WITH PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS AND BEHAVIORS

Participant characteristics that may jeopardize your research

- ▶ Certain types of people may, by their presence or participation, **influence the group in a biasing way**. For example, if you hold a focus group of parents and one of your parents also happens to be the leader of an area OST program, this individual may take the position of “the group expert,” and other parents may defer to his or her opinion. Parents may also be reluctant to offer any criticism of area OST programs for fear of offending this individual. Be very cautious about keeping these people in the group.
- ▶ The types of people who might jeopardize your research will vary depending on the nature of the research you are conducting; use your judgment. In general, be cautious about people who might be considered **authorities**, people in positions of **power** or who are responsible for making decisions about the topics being discussed in the group; members of the **press**, and members of **special interest groups**. If necessary, have these individuals removed from the group (see the chart at the end of this section for tips on how to do this tactfully).

Dominant participants

- ▶ On occasion, a participant may try to “dominate” the group. They may **talk a lot**, consider themselves to be an **expert** on the topic, and may try to position themselves as the **group leaders**.
- ▶ As described earlier, try to **position these participants near you** so that you can use body language and eye contact to discourage them.
- ▶ **Suggested verbal redirection:**
 - “Thank you. Does anyone have a different opinion?”
 - “Does anyone else want to comment on this topic?”
 - “That’s one point of view; let me hear from some other people.”
 - “Thank you. I want to be sure that I hear from everyone tonight, so I’m going to ask you to hold that thought while I find out how Mary feels about this.”
- ▶ **Flattery** can also be a useful tactic; for example, “Since you are especially well-informed about this topic, I’d like you to hold back so that I can hear from others before you share your experience.”

Shy or withdrawn participants

- ▶ Some participants may not speak unless they are called on, and even then they may speak very softly, decline comment, or tell you that they don’t know how they feel. They probably have a lot to share, but **need special encouragement to draw them out**.
- ▶ If you’re observing someone before the group begins and suspect they may wind up being particularly quiet, try to **position these individuals across the table from you**. They will be directly in your line of sight and you can encourage them with eye contact.
- ▶ Use **gentle, reaffirming questions** to draw these people out.
- ▶ **Suggested verbal redirection:**
 - “I would like to hear your feelings about this. What do you think about this?”
 - “I haven’t had a chance to hear anything from you in a little while. Would you like to add something?”

PROBLEMS WITH PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS AND BEHAVIORS (cont.)

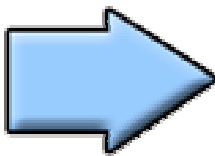
Inattentive or unfocused participants

- ▶ You may get someone in your focus group who appears distracted, has difficulty staying focused or on topic, or who may tell long, rambling stories that do not seem to have a point.
- ▶ Try to focus these participants by **calling on them personally** if their attention is wandering.
- ▶ If you suspect a participant’s inattentiveness is caused by **drugs or alcohol**, have him or her removed from the group (see the chart at the end of this section for tips on how to do this tactfully).
- ▶ **Suggested verbal redirection:**
 - If a participant launches into a long story that isn’t related to the topic of the discussion group, interject with, “I’m interested in what you have to say about that, but if you could hold that thought for a moment, what I’m most interested in finding out about right now is...”

Rude or disrespectful participants

- ▶ While this occurs more rarely, some individuals may **criticize or insult other people** in the group. This is particularly likely to happen in a focus group on an **emotionally-charged topic**. Focus groups about OST activities may venture into sensitive areas about issues surrounding parenting—for example, if one parent strongly disagrees with how another parent handles their child’s after-school time, or if a parent feels their parenting decisions are being criticized.
- ▶ In this situation, try to remind participants of the ground rules about **respecting each other opinions**:
- ▶ **Suggested verbal redirection:**
 - “We might all have different opinions about this. You will probably hear opinions that you don’t agree with, and other people may not agree with your opinions. It’s important that we hear all of these opinions, so please listen respectfully to others and share your views.”
- ▶ If you suspect a participant’s rudeness is caused by **drugs or alcohol**, have him or her removed from the group (see the chart at the end of this section for tips on how to do this tactfully).

POINTER



Always handle problem participants with **tact, respect and courtesy**; rude or insensitive treatment of these individuals is likely to have a negative effect on the group dynamic.

How to remove participants from the focus group

There are a number of situations in which you may need to remove a participant from a focus group. You may have recruited them, but realize after the fact that they do not have the characteristics you were recruiting for or that their characteristics may jeopardize your research. Perhaps you have a participant who is especially disruptive, or is clearly impaired by alcohol or drug use.

It is imperative that you are **tactful, clear and firm** with individuals you are removing from the group. If you need to remove them from the group before the group is seated, explain the reasons you are unable to seat them. If you recruited them, thank them, give them the promised honorarium, and send them home. If they were not recruited (but showed up with a recruited participant) give them the option of returning in two hours or taking a seat in the waiting area until the group is over.

Removing a participant after a group has already begun should be considered a **last resort**, but if you find yourself in this situation, finish the topic you are discussing and tell the group that you are going to take a five-minute break before beginning the next topic. Ask the participant if he or she would join you outside the room for a moment. Tell them that not all participants will be remaining for the second part of the discussion and that they are free to leave. Thank them for coming, tell them their views have been very helpful, and provide them with the promised honorarium. You do not need to mention the individual's absence upon reconvening the group. If, however, someone inquires about the individual's absence, simply say that they will not be participating in the next part of the discussion; you have appreciated hearing their views, but now you want to move forward and hear from those seated.

How to handle questions from observers

You may have people, such as your fellow researchers, observing the focus group from another room (e.g., through a one-way mirror). **These individuals should have the ability to send you information or questions during the focus group.** They may want to know more about a topic that had been raised earlier, or perhaps it is the end of the group and you have forgotten to ask a key question.

During the focus group, observers can write their question down and have it delivered to the moderator. Questions should be in large print, **clearly legible**, and should not be overly wordy. A neutral person such as the host or hostess should enter the room (quietly, so as not to overly disrupt the group), hand the question to the moderator, and leave.

It is a good idea to warn participants that this might occur when you are beginning the group. Such interruptions should be **kept to a minimum**. At the end of the group, the moderator should also take a break to check in with the observers in the other room to see if they have any additional questions at this time.

Examples of Focus Group Moderation

In this section, we provide examples of aspects of focus group moderation from transcripts of actual focus groups that were conducted in Providence, Rhode Island, to guide the city's OST planning.² We will provide examples of the purpose, introduction and ground rules; participant introductions; asking questions (including open- and closed-ended questions, alternatives to "why," building participant categories, and orienting participants in the concrete and specific); probing and asking follow-up questions; managing participants (including disruptive, quiet or shy participants); and concluding the group.

Purpose, introduction and ground rules

In this example, the moderator briefly explains to a group of parents the purpose of the focus group, introduces the topic, and goes over the ground rules to keep the group running smoothly. She uses a conversational tone to put participants at ease.

Moderator: I don't know if you talked to the kids about it, but we're going to be talking about after-school programs. The whole idea is . . . there is this grant of money that has been allotted to create programs for kids in Providence for after school, and they are really reaching out to parents and kids to talk about what would be good. What kinds of programs, not only would kids actually go to, but, you know, would be beneficial, and you would feel comfortable, that you would like the kids to go to, all that kind of stuff. And I can tell you, your input is really taken very seriously, and so it's kind of like you speaking out for everyone. . . . There's not wrong answers, and you all may have very different opinions, but you are sort of representing all of the parents in Providence. So, even though you might be the only one in here that feels one way about something, you can be pretty sure that someone else out there feels that way, so it's kind of your responsibility to step up and represent that opinion. Again, there's no right, and there's no wrong answers. If you guys could turn your name tags towards me, that would be wonderful. If you have cell phones or beepers, I ask that you turn them off, only because I would love your undivided attention for the next 90-odd minutes. What other things do I have to tell you... Okay, this is a funky mirror behind me. There are people actually on the other side, and they are... "Hiiiiii!" [*chuckling*]... the people I work with, and people who are helping to create these programs. They are here for a number of reasons, largely to hear what you have to say for themselves, and also it's very likely that I'll forget something and this mysterious little note will come and say, "Remind her to ask dah, dah, dah." I'm also audio-taping and videotaping, and that is so that when I forget, which I will, everything that you've said, and when I go back to write a report, I can go back and listen to the tapes and actually remember what you said. At no point are you ever identified. Your kids are not back there, they do not know what you say. That was the kids' question, "Is my mom back there?"

Female participant: I know they will say, "They going to be there looking at you, but I was afraid it was going to be you."

Moderator: I know, they did. It was very cute. I had to swear that it wasn't you guys. What else can I tell you? I guess that's pretty much it. Why don't we do this? If we could take one of these and pass it down, take one of these and pass it down. Oh, I guess I should tell you what my role is and who I am. My name is Jen, and this is basically what I do. I travel around and I talk to all different people about all different kinds of stuff. Some days I talk to old people, some days I talk to the kids, some days I talk to people like you, just to find out what they think about different things. One day it's paper towels, the next day it's dog food. I tell you this because I don't work for any of the companies whose stuff I talk about. So if you were to tell me, "The City of Providence is terrible and no matter what they do it doesn't matter," you know, I don't care. . . . I'm really here to find out the truth, and that's why they hire me.

² *Names have been deleted or changed to protect participants' privacy.*

Participant introductions

In this opening exercise, the moderator asks a group of middle school students to pair off, interview each other, and introduce their partner to the group. This gets the students comfortable with each other and with speaking in the group setting. This transcript also shows how the moderator encourages participation and creates a more energetic dynamic. Four of eight students are introduced in this excerpt.

Moderator: What I'm going to ask you to do is partner up. *[Moderator distributes pads of paper]* If you can take one of these and pass it down, and if you could take one of these and pass it down. Turn your name tags so I can see them. Okay, you guys partner up. . . . Derek and Annabelle team up, Jane and Ellen team up, Eddie and Ryan team up, and Heidi and Tom team up. You are going to interview your partner. You guys ready? You are going to interview your partner. You're going to ask them things like, do they have any brothers and sisters. I actually wrote the questions up there: do you have any brothers and sisters, how old are your brothers and sisters, and what are you doing for the holidays. They're really easy questions. And then you are going to come back and report what you learned. Have at it; get to know your partner. Oh, you need pencils, oh yeah. Pass them down. *[Moderator distributes pencils]* My goodness, for people interviewing, it's very quiet in here! Okay, get with your partner, ask your partner questions. Alexandra and Jose, ask each other questions.

[Students interview each other]

Moderator: Make sure you switch sides [and interview the other person] because we're going to be done soon.

[Students interview each other]

Moderator: Ding ding! Okay, I'm going to start over here with Jane and Ellen. Ellen, tell me what you learned about our friend Jane.

Female participant: Jane has one brother and one sister, and her brother's name is John and her sister's name is Jennifer. Her brother is 18 and her sister is 16, and for the holidays, she's going to be eating dinner at home and having a party.

Moderator: Sounds good. Very, very good. Jane, tell us about Ellen.

Female participant: She has one sister. She's one month and one week [old].

Moderator: One month and one week? A little baby! Oh, that's so cute. . . . Annabelle, tell us about Derek.

Female participant: Derek has two brothers, one is 22 and one is 20. He has three sisters, one is 22, one is 18 and one is 7. . . . For the holidays he has dinner with his family and he plays soccer. And he is Bolivian.

Moderator: Very good interview, very thorough. Thank you very much. Derek, tell us about Annabelle.

Male participant: She is 13. She has one brother, her brother is 11. She goes to [a local school]. For the holidays she goes to Massachusetts, goes to the movies.

Moderator: Very good, very well done. Thank you very much.

Asking questions

1. Open-ended questions.

In this example, the moderator asks parents a broad, open-ended question about perceptions of safety in after-school programs in this example.

Moderator: If there was an after-school program—because we have the opportunity here to create the after-school program however you want it to be—and one of the concerns you guys expressed was safety, so what are some of the things that they could do to make you feel that this was a safe place?

Female participant: Monitoring the children more.

Female participant: Caring.

Female participant: Yes, you do have to care, because if you really care about the children, you care about the whole person. You know, you can't just say, "Oh they are here, they are just a bunch of kids, and we just look at them and keep going, just check in every once in a while," but really be involved with them.

Female participant: Get to know them.

Female participant: Exactly.

The moderator in the example below is asking students to describe OST activities they have participated in that have helped them in their lives.

Moderator: Let me ask you this—this is a very adult question, so think about this. . . . Think about some of the things that you did in the past. Maybe it was at the Boy's and Girl's Club, or maybe it was—I don't know, I can't think of anything else—some of the activities you may have done in your past that you think have helped you in your life today.

Male participant: I think non-violence.

Moderator: What's that?

Male participant: Non-violence is like a program that teaches you how to avoid—how to be more respectful and avoid violence.

Moderator: Avoid conflicts?

Male participant: Yeah.

Moderator: Anybody else do anything like that that they think has helped them in their life? . . . Tell me more. What other things have you done in your past that you learned a lot from or you think that would be helpful in your life?

Male participant: You mean—well, this isn't in my past, but I'm in a youth group now and we just had this program, it's called the Yellow Ribbon Program. It's teens against suicide. It [taught us that if] someone says they're thinking about killing themselves, even though it's like they say it in a joking manner, you should take it seriously.

In this example, from a focus group conducted in Spanish and translated into English, the moderator asks participants to describe what they are looking for in the OST activities their children participate in.

Moderator: What do you all want from the activities?

Female participant: More interest.

Female participant: For example, I would like to see that if my child is in a program, that he tells me about new experiences. That every day he brings me something different.

Moderator: . . . What else?

Female participant: That they are interested in the children.

Female participant: They made [crafts] out of leather. They made other things out of leather.

Female participant: . . . My children know how to cook because they were in a cooking program. They made pizza yesterday. Yesterday we made an empanada. The day before yesterday, we made something else. Every day they would bring a new one. They have a cookbook. Because I put cooking as an activity, now they know how to cook.

Asking questions

2. Closed-ended questions.

In this example, from a focus group conducted in Spanish and translated into English, the moderator asks for a show of hands to find out the extent to which these parents would like for their children to be involved in structured OST programs.

Moderator: How many of us here, you can show me your hands, how many of you would be interested that your children did participate in organized activities? [*Participants raise their hands*]

Female participant: Everyone.

Moderator: Everyone.

Female participant: With capable people.

Female participant: With people... exactly.

In this example, the moderator uses “yes or no” questions to bring clarification to the larger, open-ended question of how involved these students’ parents are in determining what they do after school.

Moderator: So tell me what... do your parents sit down with you and say, ‘What are you going to be doing today?’

Male participant: I would say that to my mom.

Female participant: Only if I get in trouble at school.

Moderator: Ah, okay.

Female participant: They ask me like, ‘What are you going to do today? Are you going to be good?’ I say, ‘Yeah.’ So I have to bring up my grades.

Male participant: My mom asks me that. The day after I come back from suspension, beating up a kid . . .

Moderator: Oh, so it’s only when you get in trouble that they get involved?

Male participant: Yeah. ‘Cause I hate it when kids hit me first.

Moderator: Yeah, I do, too.

Female participant: My parents always get involved.

Moderator: What about you, Tommy? Do your parents...

Male participant: They hardly get involved, because I don’t get in trouble that much.

Moderator: What about if you’re not in trouble? Let’s just say you’re all perfect angels...

Female participant: They still ask me sometimes.

Moderator: They still ask you sometimes.

Female participant: They’re like, ‘Is there anything you’re going to do after school?’ And I say no, because I hardly have a lot of things to do.

Moderator: What about you Adriane? Are your parents wondering what you’re doing?

Female participant: No.

Moderator: Do they ever say to you things like, why don’t you do this, or why don’t you do that?

Male participant: Yeah. [*General agreement*]

Female participant: Oh yeah.

Asking questions 3. Alternatives to “why?”

In this example, these parents are home when their children come home from school out of concern for their children’s safety. The moderator phrases her question about why parents are concerned for their children’s safety by asking them to describe specific safety concerns.

Moderator: Are the rest of you home? Are you guys home?
Several: Yes.
Moderator: ...When the kids get home?
Male participant: My wife is.
Moderator: Your wife is, okay. A couple of you talked about safety. Tell me a little bit more about that. What is it that you are worried about?
Female participant: I’m worried about drugs. I’m worried about being on the street. . . .
Female participant: First of all, you want to say, you know, keep all these dangerous things we have in this world [away].

In the example below, rather than asking parents why their children are not participating in OST activities, she offers some possible reasons that had been provided by parents in earlier groups as a starting point. She defuses a potentially accusatory question with a conversational tone.

Moderator: Now your kids are starting to play some sports, organized sports—what about the rest of you? I know obviously these programs exist, because your kids are in them. How come—did your kids not want to? Did you not know about it? I mean, would you consider putting your kids in some kind of more organized program that are then not there? I guess I’m just curious.

In the example below, the moderator employs a strategy of verbalizing or repeating middle school students reactions to encourage elaboration.

Moderator: What about the parents? Do you want your parents involved at all?
Many: No.
Moderator: No? I’m seeing a lot of head shaking now.
Male participant: They can embarrass you.
Moderator: They can embarrass you? I know that feeling.
Male participant: And they are boring, and they are old.

Asking questions

4. Building participant categories

The moderator begins this set of questions by asking students to describe an ideal OST program. She approaches it as a project that they are going to work on, and encourages the students to think about the program creatively. These questions will be followed by specific questions about students' preferences: the types of activities they would like to be offered, hours of operation, location, and other factors. This initial discussion highlights the issues that are most important to students.

Moderator: All right. So here is our project: the Mayor's office has given us this boat load of money—not a ridiculous amount of money, but a fair amount of money that we can pretty much do what we want. So we're going to devise these programs, these after-school programs. So I want to know from you guys—and really, I want you to be creative and free-flowing and do this whole brainstorming thing—what would you really want to do? What would be good for you? It can be good for your lives, it can be good for you academically. It could be good for you socially, or . . . it's just fun. Something that you're actually going to go to, and that you'd tell your friends, 'This is pretty cool, I think you should look at it.' Go ahead, Sam.

Male participant: . . . There's this movie that I think a lot of people saw, it's called *School of Rock*, and it's when this guy comes and teaches these kids how to play music and sing and whatever. And then in the end he opens up this school where kids can learn how to play music and stuff. And so I think that we should have a place where from kids to teens can go and, you know, learn how to play music, learn how to rap or whatever, join a group or sing.

Female participant: Or dance.

Female participant: Dance music.

Male participant: A lot of people want to like sing and stuff and rap, but they know that they're not going to get there, you know what I'm saying?

Male participant: Even just learn how.

Male participant: Yeah, just for fun.

Male participant: I have something to speak on that.

Moderator: Go ahead.

Male participant: That was a good one, Sam. That was a good one. Because if you look at it, I mean most kids, most people, you look up to rappers. You look up to singers. Those are more like, what would you say, as a young kid, he looks up to a Superman or something. Those are more of our heroes. So you look up to Fifty Cent or a Linkin Park or . . . I'm just saying, like groups that normal people would look up to, and that helps you out because they inspire you. You listen to their music and it inspires you in more stuff. So music, that's pretty good of a ticket for a program.

Moderator: That's a good one?

Female participant: Not only music . . . but some people like to draw. Some people like . .

Female participant: Yeah.

Male participant: Like an arts...

Moderator: Like an artsy thing?

Female participant: Yeah.

Male participant: So arts, music. Basically just the arts in general.

Moderator: Arts in general. Todd, what do you think of that? Is that something you'd be interested in?

Male participant: Yeah.

Moderator: Okay, because you can say no. You can say, 'have absolutely no interest in that whatsoever,' and that's perfectly fine.

Male participant: But we should have—like, if we did do that, we should have people that would come in and be enthusiastic about teaching. Not just being, 'Blah, blah, blah.' Like there's things where you have to—but actually get you into it.

As shown below, the moderator goes on to ask about the activities that had been determined before the focus group.

Moderator: What about things like sports? Do you want to have sports stuff there? No?

Male participant: Well, sports is kind of common.

Male participant: Yeah.

Male participant: Yeah.

Female participant: Yeah.

Male participant: And you can get that from the school.

Moderator: You can get that from the school. Can't you get the arts from the school, or no?

Male participant: Uh, no. Not really.

Male participant: Yeah, not really.

Moderator: I have some other questions here. What about computer stuff and technology? Would that be good?

Male participant: Yeah. That [costs] money, too.

Moderator: Well, don't worry about the money.

Male participant: Yeah. I say yes.

Female participant: I say yes, too.

Asking questions

5. "Think back..." Orienting participants in the concrete and specific.

In asking middle school students about the types of things they do after school, she asks them to tell her what they did after school the day before.

Moderator: To get started, I want to learn about the kinds of things you guys do after school. Let's take yesterday, for example. You got off the school bus—you guys all take the school bus home? You take the city bus. You get off a bus, school is over—what do you do? What did you do yesterday?

Female participant: Watch TV.

Moderator: Anybody else watch TV yesterday?

Male participant: I'm on the computer.

Moderator: You went on the computer. What else? Give me more.

Male participant: Call my friends.

Male participant: Played video games.

Moderator: Played video games. What else? What did you do yesterday, Josh?

Male participant: Played soccer.

Moderator: Do you play soccer every day?

Male participant: I go to practice.

Moderator: Is it every day?

Male participant: No, I go on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and then Friday.

Probing and asking follow-up questions

In this example, the moderator uses probing questions to determine whether the activities students are participating in are informal (i.e., hanging out with friends) or structured. She calls on people individually as needed to draw out shy or quiet students.

Moderator: What are the kinds of things that you like to do after school? *[Silence.]* Okay, don't overwhelm me with a speech. What?

Male participant: I play basketball.

Moderator: . . . Like what, do you play for a team?

Male participant: Kiwanis. . . I'm a member of the club.

Moderator: Okay. Does anybody else do anything like that?

Male participant: No.

Male participant: No.

Female participant: I like to watch TV and play on my computer on the internet.

Moderator: Okay. Mark?

Male participant: Sometimes I play my game. Sometimes I play football and sometimes I play basketball.

Moderator: Okay. Now is it like you're playing football and basketball with your friends, or do you play...

Male participant: With my friends.

Moderator: With your friends, okay. Sarah?

Female participant: I play basketball, soccer and I dance in school with a program.

Moderator: Okay. Basketball and soccer—is that like for a team, or just whenever with friends?

Female participant: Team.

Moderator: For a team. Is that for school or through...

Female participant: School.

Moderator: Through school. What about you guys? Andy, Bob? Did I see your hand up?

Male participant: I like to talk on the phone. I think I got that from my sister. I like to go on the internet. I like to buy sneakers. I have a whole sneaker collection at home.

Moderator: Oh, that's a lot of things. And Angie, what are you doing?

Female participant: After school? Playing soccer, basketball, football with my friends and at school. And video games and go on the computer.

Moderator: Now are you doing things like hanging out with your friends?

Female participant: Yeah.

Moderator: Is everybody saying yes?

Male participant: Uh huh.

Female participant: Yeah.

Moderator: Yeah? . . . Is it like—tell me what it's like. You come home from school, and do you have a place that you're supposed to go?

Female participant: I live in a two family house, and inside my house there's like a little playground, and we go there.

Moderator: And you go there, okay.

Male participant: I know.

Moderator: What do you do?

Male participant: Go to bed.

Moderator: Well, other than your bed, the times that you're awake, tell me the other things you like to do.

Male participant: I don't know.

Male participant: Play basketball and sometimes baseball with my friends.

Moderator: With your friends. Now is that with school or like on a team? Just with your friends, okay.

The students in this group are not participating in the structured OST activities that are available in their community. In this example, the moderator uses probing questions to understand the reasons students are not participating. She also uses strategies such as sentence completion (“Because it’s...”) and repeating or verbalizing students’ reactions (“I’m seeing heads nod yes”) to encourage elaboration.

Moderator: How come you’re not enrolling in this stuff?

Male participant: I’m not interested.

Moderator: You’re not interested. That’s what I’m wondering. Is it that you’re not into what they have?

Male participant: I don’t know, but these young people nowadays, they’re kind of like...

Moderator: Now you’re saying, ‘these young people nowadays’—is that you?

Male participant: Sometimes.

Moderator: Sometimes, okay. . . . Let me ask you a couple of things. So, now, you’re not into the stuff that they’re offering now. Correct? Am I right in saying that?

Female participant: Yeah.

Female participant: Uh huh.

Moderator: I’m seeing heads nod yes. How come? Because it’s... what?

Female participant: It’s [school.]

Female participant: . . . You’re going to be in a club right, and the clubs that are in [school], they’re like the teachers are doing them and we don’t want to deal with them no more.

Moderator: Ahhh. . . . What about the rest of you? Is it because the teachers are involved in the school?

Female participant: Yeah.

Male participant: Uh huh.

Moderator: Oh yeah, lots of heads.

Female participant: . . . You’re going to go to an after-school program and it turns out to be a teacher and you’re like, ‘Oh my God.’

Male participant: Your least favorite teacher.

Moderator: Okay.

Male participant: Yeah, you need some, like, independence.

Moderator: Independence.

Male participant: When we’re with teachers all day, we want to do stuff with our friends.

Moderator: Oh, with your friends. That’s interesting.

Male participant: Or meet new people, instead of being taught.

Managing participants

Managing disruptive participants

Focus group participants can be disruptive in a variety of ways. For example, a common form of disruption is for participants to hold side conversations with each other, or to talk over each other. A participant may dominate the conversation (limiting your ability to hear from other people in the room). Participants may be passionately opinionated or highly emotional. More rarely, they may act rudely or antagonistically toward the moderator or other participants.

In this example from a focus group conducted in Spanish and translated into English, the moderator reminds parents to talk one at a time so that their comments will be distinguishable later on the audiotape.

Moderator: Well, speaking about that, which sports would you want them to offer? We mentioned baseball...

Male participant: Baseball. Basketball.

Moderator: What else?

Female participant: Softball for the girls.

Female participant: Football.

Moderator: You said soccer.

Female participant: Also volleyball.

Female participant: Football is very important.

Female participant: I want tennis. Lots of kids like to play.

Moderator: I can't get every one you are saying; the tape won't be able to decipher all of that. One at a time. Carlos, which sports?

Male participant: Basketball.

Moderator: Yeah. Would anything else interest you?

Male participant: And football.

Moderator: And football? American?

Male participant: Mhmm.

Moderator: One at a time, excuse me. Please. Elena, and then Maria.

Female participant: That sport...

Moderator: Track and field?

Female participant: Yes, exactly.

Managing quiet or shy participants

The ninth-graders in this focus group were very quiet and reluctant to offer responses. The moderator began walking around the table giving the students M&Ms, while joking with them that the sugar would energize them. The real purpose of this activity is to introduce a new element to the room, and get the moderator moving. The students paid more attention to the moderator when she was in motion—they had to turn their heads or move in their seats to follow her. Her joke also served the dual purpose of putting students at ease with humor, and reminding them that their active participation was needed. Following this, students began talking more spontaneously and openly, and she was able to get to the bottom of why a student had stopped participating in a certain after-school activity.

Moderator: Are you not doing that now because... why?

Female participant: [It isn't at] school anymore.

Male participant: Season ended.

Male participant: It's far.

Moderator: Season ended, [and] it's what?

Male participant: Far.

Moderator: What do you mean? Like, too far away?

Male participant: No, I mean it's far.

Moderator: I'm feeling an energy lull. I'm trying to sugar you guys up. . . . If I have to, like, sugar you guys, I have no problem with artificially exciting you. You're not doing it now because it's far. Like the activities used to be closer, or you moved?

Male participant: Far.

Moderator: Bobby, help me out. [Why aren't you doing this] anymore?

Male participant: I don't know. I just grew out of it.

Moderator: That's what I'm wondering.

Male participant: More like my—like once me and my brother got out of it, and my friend got out of it, we just don't get into it no more.

Moderator: Uh huh. Is it too—I don't want to use this word—like too babyish, or just like too young?

Male participant: I just didn't like the league, because it wasn't like organized right. It wasn't like a real league. . . . It's like it's not a good league. It's just something to keep you busy, but they're not into it. I mean, the jerseys they look—they're like made out of plastic, basically. You either got to put duct tape to make it... it's just not happening.

Moderator: You're just not into it.

Male participant: Not into it. And when you have a game, it's just no fun. Nobody comes. So it's like an empty gym, and there's a couple of kids playing.

Moderator: What about the rest of you? How come you're not going to anything like that any more?

Female participant: Because they do the same things like over and over and I get tired of it.

Male participant: Uh huh.

Female participant: It's the same thing.

Male participant: Yeah, there's this basketball program and all we do is drill, like running back and forth. That's it, the whole time. That's why I quit.

Female participant: They don't make it exciting, like, more fun to do. It's, like, boring. That's why I don't go to [that program] anymore.

Concluding the group

At the end of the group, the moderator asks students if they have any final thoughts to add before going home.

Moderator: All right, I think we are all wrapped up. Do you guys have anything else that you want to tell the people who are going to create these programs before you go? This is your one and only chance.

Male participant: [Have activities] for boys who want to be DJs.

Moderator: For boys who want to be DJs.

Female participant: DJs and rappers.

Male participant: . . . Like if they make a place where we can work.

Moderator: You want to work there. . . . Okay. Great. Okay guys, thank you so much for your time. Pass up the pencils. Everyone have a very merry Christmas, okay?

8. Analyzing the Data

To put it in the most basic terms, analyzing qualitative research involves **reviewing a record of the group and taking notes to keep track of the findings that are emerging**. Ideally, you will have the focus group transcribed and will read along with this document while viewing a videotape—this is the best method for capturing the nuances of facial expression, body language, and other nonverbal information. You may also be reading a transcript while listening to an audiotape. If the group has not been transcribed, plan to take particularly extensive notes, and return to the tape as needed to refresh your memory of what occurred. The methods you may use for taking notes can vary widely, from the low-tech to high-tech, depending on what works best for you. We will talk about methods for note keeping in more detail shortly.

Start your analysis process by collecting all the materials generated during the focus groups, and the materials you will need to assist you with your analysis. This includes:

- The **screeners used for recruiting** (this will ensure that you know exactly what type of participants were targeted for this research)
- The **moderator guide** (so you will know what questions were asked)
- Sign-in sheets** (so you will know who showed up to the groups and what their characteristics were; for example, if John Smith signed in for the focus group, you can look up John Smith's characteristics in the screener that was filled out for him at the time he was recruited)
- The **moderator's summary of the findings**, if applicable (so you will have another perspective on what occurred during the groups)
- All records of the groups**, including any field notes, audiotapes, videotapes, and transcripts (this is the key to your analysis)
- Any additional materials you may need to help with **organization**, such as index cards, highlighter pens, word processing software, etc.

You can think of focus group analysis as consisting of three stages:

Description	What occurred in the group
Interpretation	What it means that these things occurred in the group
Recommendations	What you need to do based on what occurred in the group

Description: Your first step is to determine **what occurred in the group**. You will be dealing with a large volume of data, and in order to make sense of it, **you must have a good note-keeping system** to organize and record the findings. There is no one correct way to keep notes; this decision will be based in part on the ways you deal with information best, and in part on the resources available to you.

Your note keeping can be low-tech or high-tech. Perhaps you have always worked well putting thoughts onto index cards or color coding with highlighter pens. Perhaps you are most comfortable organizing information in a word processing or spreadsheet program. Some analysts cut and tape pieces of transcripts together and group them into categories on a large table; others use qualitative research software packages to assign codes to participant comments.

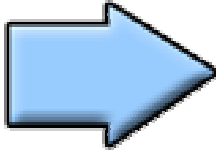
Most Common Strategies for Organizing Focus Group Notes

- ▶ **Organizing by question.** In this strategy, you record your notes as “answers to questions.” For example, for the question, *What’s important to you in terms of how your children spend their after-school time*, you would record respondents’ remarks, and your observations about what was occurring in the group when the moderator asked this question. Keep in mind that focus groups follow the flow of a conversation more than they follow a script, and so questions may be answered or returned to at different points in the group. With this strategy, you would record any additional remarks or observations relating to this question in the same place, even if the question is brought up later on in the group.
- ▶ **Organizing by theme.** In this strategy, you group comments that speak to specific themes (predetermined and/or that emerge in the course of a group) together, regardless of the question they relate to. For example, under the theme *Safety*, you might include comments about safety in response to questions about the factors parents consider when selecting an OST program, the barriers that prevent them from allowing their children to participate in activities, reasons their children have stopped attending programs they used to go to, etc.

You may also use both of the above strategies concurrently. For example, you could begin by organizing your analysis by question, but switch to a thematic strategy as themes emerge over the course of the focus group.

A Caution About Basing Your Analysis Solely On Transcripts

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Unless there are special circumstances, never base your analysis solely on field notes or a transcript of a focus group. Try to observe the group yourself, view a video, or listen to an audiotape.

There are some occasions when you have no option but to base your analysis solely on a transcript, such as when you are conducting focus groups with a populations whose language you do not speak, and the only way to know what occurred in the group is to read a translation of participants' comments.

Transcripts are invaluable tools that speed the process of analysis and provide a permanent, easily searchable record of the group. Transcripts are also an excellent method for recalling details for analysis after having observed a focus group. If you do not have the opportunity to observe the focus groups yourself, however, either as they are occurring (such as through a one-way mirror or closed-circuit television) or on videotape, or to listen to an audiotape, important elements can be lost. For example:

- ▶ **It is difficult to determine the extent to which a feeling or belief is shared among participants.** Transcripts are rarely able to identify the participant who is speaking, and it is therefore difficult to know whether a particular feeling has been expressed by all participants over the course of a focus group, or whether it has only been expressed by one participant who keeps bringing it up again and again.
- ▶ **It can be difficult to determine intensity.** Transcripts cannot capture the tone of a person's voice, the volume at which they are speaking, or any nonverbal communication, such as hand gestures. In some cases, anger, frustration, and passivity can wind up sounding similar on the page.
- ▶ **It can be difficult to interpret participants' meaning.** The words we use to communicate when we are speaking are usually not the words we would use to communicate the same thought in writing. Participants' verbal communication can read as peculiar or unintelligible on the page. This can be exacerbated when participants use a lot of "filler noises" such as *like*, *um*, and *y'know*, or when remarks have been translated from another language. For example, in a focus group of Spanish-speaking parents, one woman said, "*And another thing is that... I live in a part of [the city]. If my daughter is... I live in that area, that they put here, in that area, because that area is my zone. It's not that they send me to [missing word] where she has to catch the bus, the bus, no?*" Without benefit of tone of voice and facial expressions, and with the added ambiguity of inaudible words and sentences that trail off in mid-thought, it can be difficult to understand exactly what point a participant is making.

Qualitative Analysis Software: To Use, or Not To Use?

Another option for qualitative analysis is the use of specialized qualitative analysis software packages, such as NUD*IST (<http://www.qsrinternational.com/products/productoverview/N6.htm>) or Atlas/ti (<http://www.atlasti.com/index.php>). These software packages are designed to assist in the analysis of qualitative data by assigning codes to participant comments; the analyst can then analyze focus group data as they would analyze coded open-ended questions in a telephone survey.

The advantage of this approach is that it is **systematic and consistent**. This is beneficial for researchers who are particularly concerned about scientific rigor, who must document their analysis strategies carefully, or who will have their analysis reviewed by others. For this reason, qualitative software is most likely to be used in academia—particularly by graduate students working on dissertations.

Qualitative software is less likely to be used in market research and among researchers specializing in focus groups. There are **expenses and time** associated with purchasing and learning how to use these software packages, and the coding system will result in a longer period of time spent in analysis as well. More important than these drawbacks, however, is the concern that qualitative software packages may yield **incomplete or misleading analyses**. For example, an analyst may not have time to thoroughly review and code the transcripts before the data must be used. The simple method of counting responses can skew the findings when contextual factors are de-emphasized. For example, consider a focus group in which one student is repeatedly expressing a desire for an after-school cooking class, while every other student is giving clear nonverbal signals that they are not interested in this activity.

GUIDELINES FOR FOCUS GROUP ANALYSIS

<p>What words are being used?</p>	<p>Words matter! Pay attention to the connotations of the words participants use; for example, there’s probably a difference between the activity described as “<i>fun</i>” and one described as “<i>a blast</i>.” Look out for ambiguous words that can have multiple meanings. “<i>Quality</i>” is an overused and ambiguous word—what a “quality” OST program means to one participant (credentialed staff, proven educational outcomes) may be very different from what “quality” means to another participant (children have a lot of fun and make a lot of new friends).</p>
<p>What’s the context?</p>	<p>No focus group occurs in a vacuum. Everything participants say takes place within a context, and sometimes the context can have a big impact on the findings. For example, comments may be influenced by such factors as a participant sharing an extremely emotional personal experience, widespread media attention about a related issue, local news about education cuts, etc.</p>
<p>To what extent is this belief, feeling, or thought shared?</p>	<p>One of the greatest challenges in qualitative research is knowing how much attention to place on various comments. What are major findings, what are minor findings, and what isn’t a finding at all? Here are some simple guidelines to help you make these distinctions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ How often did this perception come up? Comments that come up frequently become major findings, whereas a comment that comes up only once may not (unless it’s an excellent idea or insight). ▶ How many people hold this perception? If a perception is held by many, most, or all of the participants in a focus group, that’s a good sign that it’s a major finding. ▶ How strongly do people feel about this perception? Are participants passionate about a particular point of view, or are they neutral and blasé? ▶ Are participants’ feelings and beliefs based on specific personal experiences and feelings, or are they talking generally about “what most people say?” A specific anecdote about a getting injured at a particular OST program because of inadequate supervision, for example, should carry more weight than a participant who says, “Everyone says that place isn’t any good.”
<p>What’s not being said?</p>	<p>Sometimes, participants may avoid answering a question, and an entire group may go silent. This can happen when a topic is particularly anxiety-provoking or threatening, as it did in a focus group with children when the moderator asked them how safe they feel at a particular OST program. In most cases, a good moderator should be able to get people to open up; in this group, children were fearful of some aggressive older children. Listen for moments like these—sometimes, an uncomfortable silence can tell you as much about participants’ reality as their words. Also, look at the ways participants are communicating nonverbally. Are they nodding their heads in agreement? Shaking their heads in disapproval?</p>
<p>What’s the “big idea?”</p>	<p>It is very easy to get mired in the details when conducting qualitative analysis. If you begin feeling lost, take a step back from the data. Put it aside for a day and return to it with a fresh eye. Time is an important component of the analysis process, enabling you to live with the findings that are emerging, digest their meanings, make connections between issues that may not appear connected at first glance, and achieve new insights.</p>

Example of Focus Group Notes

Major headings are provided for key topic areas.

IMPORTANT CRITERIA FOR DETERMINING OST ACTIVITIES

“What’s important to you in terms of how you / your middle school children spend their after-school time?”

Responses are organized by question in this example.

	Cost	Transportation	Wanting to be with friends	Adult running program	Fun, interesting activities	Location	Safety	Be paid	Other
Grp 1			X		X				
	Good quote on neighborhood violence: kids are crazy-fractured now. This is part of the reason why it’s important to have friends there (“If friends are there, I have to go”). desire to be comfortable, not around “stupid people” where there is a risk of violence. Transportation: generally not a problem; several take the bus, one says Mom will drive “if it’s important” to her, quote about h								
Grp 2	X				X				
	Cost is an issue, with good quote : “Cheaper it is, more people will co issue; they all ride the city bus and say this is better. RELEVANCY is a big theme: they want things that are inspiring to programs suited to their taste; see also the fact that word of mouth from Quote about how adults may not know what kids want. RE: EMPLOYMENT. One person is employed in this group. They the program (even if they were employed, they would still want to go interested in a program that would help them find jobs in the commun								
Grp 5			X		X				
	Safety is a key concern: “Can’t trust nobody.” Others say there are a “lot of haters,” “too much stuff going on”, don’t want to “take any junk.”								
Grp 3	X	X							
	Transport and cost - overwhelmingly the most important considerations for parents. Parents speak very emphatically about the burdens of money, transportation and of researching or learning of quality organized activities for their children. The quality of the adult supervision and staffing is also of prime importance. of “quality” staff - included that the staff be qualified to work with children and t activities, i.e., that they not simply “chaperone” children and that the children not Exchange about the importance of having good program leaders & instructors hearts are in, their child is clearly benefiting. Good quote about supervision, sho and kids are just running around. Mom determines whether or not an OST activity is good or not by whether kids come home relaxed, eager to go to the activity again.								
Grp 4		X		X			X		
	Very important that children are supervised in a caring and responsible manner. Also, these parents want an environment that will supplement or enrich the education they say their children are not getting at school. “If you were to ask me what would influence me to have my child go to it, education, ‘cause they are not getting enough.” One parent says that safe transportation could help get around the safety barrier—kids are picked up and taken to the program. Another says that having numerous, caring, responsible program leaders would help get around the safety barrier.								
Grp 6							X		
	Safety is key concern for this group as well. Like other parent group, these parents talk about the loss of community , and how kids don’t have community controls in place. These parents are highly dissatisfied with the school system.								

This approach uses a system of coding for predetermined comments as well as those emerging from the group. The checkbox in the column indicates whether the factor (e.g., cost, transportation, etc.) was mentioned on an unaided basis during the group, and the text below describes elements of frequency and intensity, along with illustrative remarks from participants.

Responses are organized by group, and color-coded by participant characteristics (blue for children, yellow for parents).

Note how observations are often framed in terms of whether it is a perception shared by one, a few, some, many, most, or all participants; the extent to which participants agreed with a remark; and whether similar perceptions existed in other groups or were mentioned for earlier questions.

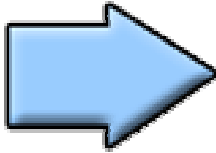
BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION

“What might be some reasons your middle school children might not be able to participate in organized activities that you are interested in them being a part of?”

	Not aware of them	Don't like the adults, kids	Family duties	Needs pt-time work	Transportation	Cost	Feeling uncomftb, unwelcme	Language, cultural reasons	Safety
Grp 1						X			X
	General agreement that the program should be free; one says can't go unless it's free. One says parents will need to know they can trust the place. One alludes to violence , saying he'd need to hire bodyguards.								
Grp 2		X			X	X			X
	<p>COST is a big barrier for a few.</p> <p>Safety: “Some people that are our age that are not too pleasant to be around.”</p> <p>Transportation is a barrier. Not fond of “cheese buses” (school buses), most say parents would bring them, which means parents will have to be available to bring them. Although earlier this group says they ride the buses and it's no problem & better than other options, at end of group they raise concerns about riding buses at night. Quote about race-inspired shootings. Only one says he'd ride the bus. Suggests that the program have its own bus.</p>								
Grp 5		X			X	X			X
	<p>Wouldn't go because of “the haters.” Huge concern: expressing desire for security, camera, two-way mirrors, interview process to weed out problem children (although one objects, asking what if a friend was identified as a problem child?), and a “one strike and you're out” policy of suspending children from participation. One says they would stop going if bad kids were there, or want them removed from the program.</p> <p>Transportation could be a problem, esp when it's cold (don't want to wait for city bus). All agree program should be free.</p>								
Grp 3	X				X	X			X
	<p>TRANSPORTATION, COST, LACK OF PROGRAMS or CONCERNS ABOUT QUALITY OF EXISTING PROGRAMS are the major barriers.</p> <p>Money is the principal obstacle to participating in their ideal program; then transportation. Related to issues of money are issues of culture and race. The majority of parents feel they and their children would not be welcomed in many activities where most whites attend. One parent shares how her daughter was told by another child at an after-school ballet program that ballet is for white people. The child lost interest in going after that incident.</p> <p>Quote in this group similar to other parent's group, where mom invested in computer to keep her son home.</p> <p>Parents see their own lack of time as a barrier as well; they work; they don't have time to investigate programs thoroughly and don't want to send children off to just any program.</p> <p>Exposure to negative influences, safety; quote similar to that of other parents about not trusting other kids in program.</p> <p>Another quote about kids getting intimidated off basketball courts at community centers by bigger kids.</p>								
Grp 4						X			X
	<p>SAFETY is the key barrier for these parents. Excellent long quote from one mom about how her son's life is too heavy a price to pay for activities. Many are very concerned about the influence of children raised with morals and values different from their own, and effect on their own child's behavior. Many are very concerned about the loss of community (baseball anecdote)—once, an entire neighborhood helped raised your child, and now they're alone on dangerous streets; fear fueled by what they hear and read in the paper. Parents are so concerned about these outside influences that they don't trust the programs; good quote about “If I'm not letting my child into our home, I'm not going to let my child into the after-school program.” Wants to know the kids, the kids' parents, before they can feel trusting. “I want my daughter to learn to dance, but at what price?” and another parent agrees, voicing concern that OST will tear down everything they've worked so hard to build up.</p> <p>One says her children weren't interested in activities. COST BARRIER; one mom says “I have eight kids; I'd love to, but can't.”</p>								
Grp 6		X				X			X
	Quotes about lax supervision at after-school programs.								

Interpretation and Recommendations: After you have reviewed the record of the focus groups and taken notes to record your observations on what occurred, you should have a pretty good idea what your major findings are. If the findings seem murky to you, take a break from the data and return to it later. Don't think about the many details, but try to focus on the big picture.

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If you find yourself getting lost in the details, ask yourself this question: if you had to tell someone in fifty words or less what you discovered from the focus groups, what would you tell them?

Your next steps are to think about what these findings mean and how your community can move forward with this information. These steps, of course, depend completely on the findings that emerge from your particular focus groups. Recommendations follow from findings, as may be expected, and **solutions can be straightforward or creative**. Below are some examples of findings and their recommendations:

- ▶ Your focus groups find that there is an abundance of programs for the hours after school, but that no good programs exist for the summer months. As a result, you implement a program of summer activities for children.
- ▶ Your focus groups find that transportation after OST activities is the biggest problem for students in your rural community. As a result, you raise funds for a bus service that brings participating students home after activities.
- ▶ Your focus groups find that OST programs have a negative reputation in your community due to some widespread media attention about misused funds. This incident occurred many years ago and the program is no longer operating, but the bad image remains, despite the fact that your neighborhood has some excellent and under-used programs. As a result of this information, you launch a media campaign to improve the image of OST programs and show parents what current programs have to offer them.

You will probably share your findings with important stakeholders, such as other people in your organization, local educators or OST program leaders, or policymakers. It is a good idea to **put the findings from your focus group in writing**: this will help you organize your thoughts as well as providing a permanent record of your analysis. On the CD of prototype materials included with this guide, you will find a sample organizational structure for preparing a written report of focus group findings, based on the sample moderator guide also on the CD.

On the next pages, we will present a **sample summary analysis** of the same two questions for which we provided sample focus group notes earlier. This is a good example of how you can take a great quantity of data—lengthy discussions of two questions from approximately 50 participants across six focus groups—and condense it down to a few key findings and bullet points, making the “big picture” clear to others.

Example of Focus Group Analysis: Summary of Findings

Important criteria in selecting after-school activities: In general, there are two main criteria that are highly important for both parents and children in determining which after-school activities children will participate in: the activities must be **interesting and enriching**, and they must be **led by knowledgeable, enthusiastic instructors**. Children expressed a strong desire to learn new skills and engage in fun activities, an enthusiasm that was confirmed by parents. Parents placed importance on individual attention and mentorship in a structured context. Children described the ideal program leader as being young, caring, from the neighborhood, and knowledgeable about the activities they are leading.

Children also talked about the **need to feel safe** in after-school programs. Younger children (i.e., grades 6 and 7) also placed importance on having friends involved in the program.

Parents also placed considerable importance on their confidence that their children are exposed to **morals and values** that are consistent with those they are being taught at home. They want to know the other parents that are involved, and expressed interest in activities that facilitate interactions among parents and community-building, and enhance their ability to trust their children's peer group.

Key barriers to participation: Parents and children identified several major barriers to children's participation in after-school activities during the focus groups, including:

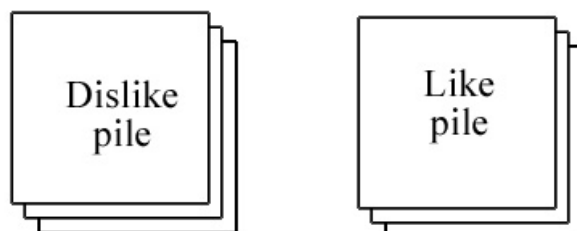
- **Safety.** Safety is a predominant concern among English-speaking parents especially; safety is also described as a barrier to participation among Spanish-speaking parents. Children in grades 7 and 8 also view their personal safety as a barrier to participation. Participants discussed recent incidents of neighborhood violence and the fear of encounters with "bad kids." Several English-speaking parents said, for example, that they have invested in computers and Playstations with the goal of keeping their children at home, where they feel their children are safe, rather than allowing them to participate in after-school activities.
- **Lack of quality programs.** Participants expressed the strong sentiment that there are not enough programs available that meet their needs. Participants feel that children no longer have access to some types of activities (such as arts programs) because these programs have been removed from the curriculum at local schools as a result of budget cuts. The programs that are available are not perceived as being especially high-quality, with participants saying that the activities are not interesting or engaging, or that they are not led by enthusiastic, knowledgeable instructors who are invested in the program. Children do not feel that there are many interesting programs available to them; one program that was spoken of positively was perceived as being for older children, despite the fact that the program is available to children their age. Spanish-speaking parents, specifically, talked about the disparity between their children's schools and the schools in more affluent, white sectors of the community. Spanish-speaking parents feel their children do not have the opportunities for organized team sports, music, and arts programs that exist elsewhere in the city.
- **Cost.** While cost is an issue for most parents in this research, Spanish-speaking parents were particularly likely to identify cost as a major barrier to after-school program participation, with several saying their children have had to discontinue participation in programs for this reason.
- **Transportation.** The extent to which transportation is a barrier varied among participants. Some children are comfortable using public transportation and are allowed to do so by their parents; transportation is no great concern for these participants. Some parents have concerns about their children's safety using public transportation; transportation is a much greater concern for these participants.

In addition, Spanish-speaking parents also identified **issues of culture and race** as a barrier to participation. Most of these parents feel that their children would not be welcomed in many activities attended by white children.

Guidelines for Analyzing the “Preferred Activities” Exercise

In the sample moderator guide included on the CD of prototype materials, you will find an exercise in which focus group participants review cards with activities printed on them, sort them into two separate piles, and discuss the activities they are most interested in. In this section, we provide some guidelines for analyzing this type of exercise. To begin, we will review the exercise itself.

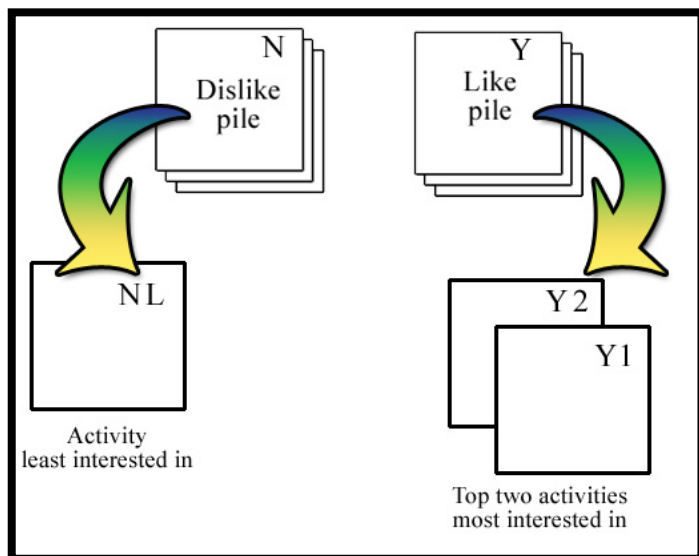
“What I want you to do is to put each card into one of two piles. The pile on your right should be those activities you are interested in having your child participate in, and the pile on your left should be the activities you are not interested in having your child participate in. This is important: you must have two piles—you can’t put all of them in the like or the dislike pile—at least one has to be in each pile.”



“Next, I’d like you to look at the activities on your right—the ones you are interested in for your child. I’d like you to put a Y in the upper right hand corner of each one, and then pick out the one you are most interested in for your middle school child and put a number 1 on it, and take your second favorite and put the number 2 on it.

“Now, I’d like you to do the same thing with the activities on your left. Put an N in the upper right hand corner of each one, and then pick out the one you are least interested in for your middle school child, and put an L for least interested on it.

“How many of you rated [ACTIVITY 1] as your number one? [ASK ABOUT EACH ACTIVITY AND PICK OUT THE TWO WITH THE HIGHEST NUMBER OF VOTES] Now I’d like to talk about the two types of activities that got the highest number of first place votes. What about this activity do you like? What makes that type of activity better than the others? What do you dislike about it?”



At the end of the focus groups, you can expect to receive a stack of cards for every person who participated in a group (i.e., if you conducted two focus groups with eight participants in each, you should have sixteen stacks of cards returned to you).

Each card will be lettered with an N (for “no,” or a card that wound up in the dislike pile) or a Y (for “yes,” or a card that wound up in the like pile). There will be three special cards in each stack: (1) one marked NL (the activity they are least interested in); (2) one marked Y1 (the activity they are most interested in); and (3) one marked Y2 (the activity they are second-most interested in).

This exercise is a good one for communities who want to get preliminary information about parents' and students' interest in a wide variety of activities they could offer. This information can be used to make early decisions or narrow activities down prior to collecting quantitative information. This exercise is also a great way of narrowing a discussion about activities down to a select few activities which will be discussed in greater depth. After conducting this exercise, you will be able to tell the extent to which each activity was considered interesting or not interesting by respondents. You will also have detailed reactions to the two activities respondents considered most interesting.

A good strategy for beginning an analysis of this exercise is to **tally the results** for each activity. Keep in mind that all cards should be marked with a Y or an N (for each activity, the number of cards marked N added to the number marked Y should equal the total number of respondents in your focus groups; see the chart below). Three cards from every respondent should be marked with a 1, 2, and L (if you count the cards marked with a 1, that total should equal the number of respondents in your focus groups; see the chart below). Be sure that every respondent's notations are accounted for. A second tally groups together the top two favorite activities.

TOTAL NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS IN GROUPS: 20	N Not interesting	Y Interesting	TOTAL	1 Favorite	2 Second favorite	L Least favorite
Leadership development	8	12	20	1	2	4
Career exploration	5	15	20	5	4	0
Sports activities	6	14	20	5	3	1
Performing arts	6	14	20	3	2	2
Arts and culture	8	12	20	3	4	1
Experiential learning	18	2	20	0	2	9
Homework help or tutoring	7	13	20	2	1	0
Safe, supervised places to hang out	3	17	20	1	2	3
			TOTAL	20	20	20

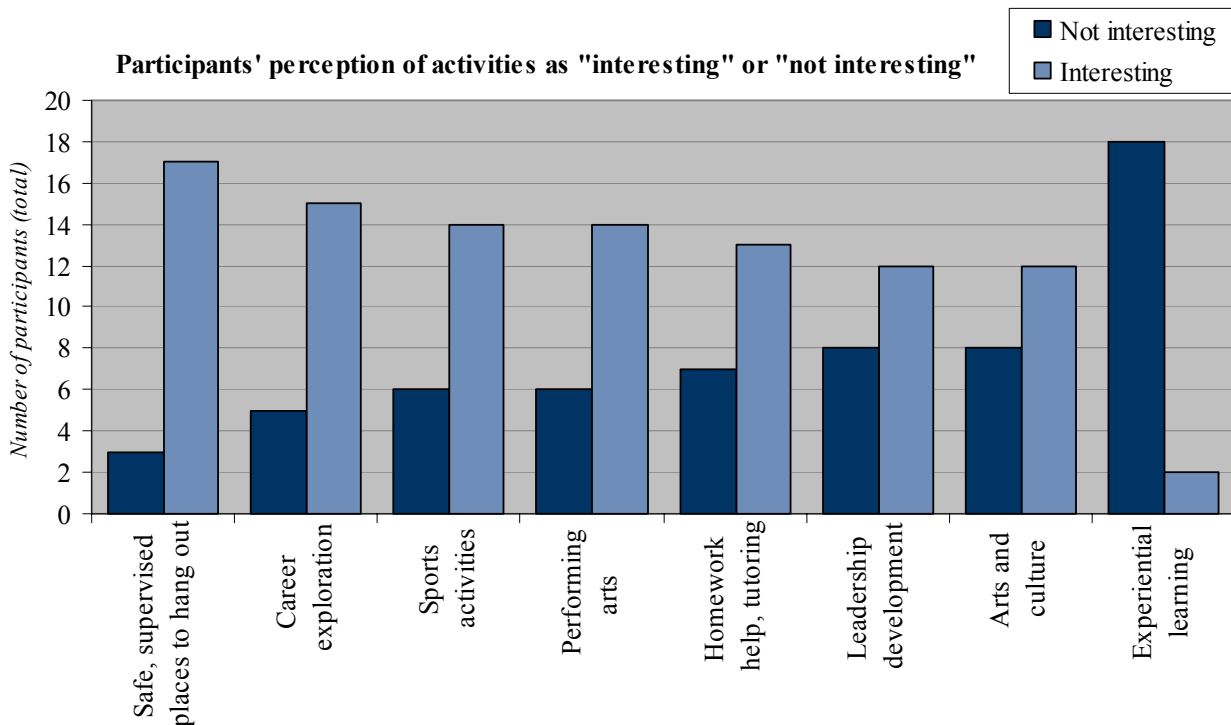
TOTAL NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS IN GROUPS: 20	N Not interesting	Y Interesting	1 or 2 Top two favorites	L Least favorite	
Leadership development	8	12	3	4	Moderately interesting
Career exploration	5	15	9	0	Highly interesting
Sports activities	6	14	8	1	Highly interesting
Performing arts	6	14	5	2	Highly interesting
Arts and culture	8	12	7	1	Highly interesting
Experiential learning	18	2	2	9	Low level of interest
Homework help or tutoring	7	13	3	0	Moderately interesting
Safe, supervised places to hang out	3	17	3	3	Moderately interesting

The tally now provides a clearer picture of the extent to which these activities are of interest to respondents. Activities that are *highly interesting* were not only likely to be marked as interesting (Y) by a large number of respondents, but were likely to be identified among the top one or two favorite activities as well. *Moderately interesting* activities may have been identified as interesting by many respondents, but ultimately were not among the top one or two favorites—or were equally likely to wind up among the least favorite activities. Activities with a *low level of*

interest were identified as not interesting (N) by a large number of respondents, and were identified as among the least favorite activities by a large number of respondents.

Your analysis can provide information about which types of activities were considered highly, moderately, and less interesting among respondents. This is qualitative research and as such does not deal in strict percentages, but you can use numeric information if this helps you make the findings clearer.³ How you communicate the findings to others will depend largely on the complexity of your data. When the picture painted by the data is very easy to interpret, it can be enough to explain, for example, that *an overwhelming majority of focus group participants are interested in [a type of activity]*. When you have no clear majority perceptions, it may be useful to include numeric information in percentages to give a sense of the extent to which a perception is shared (e.g., *nine of 20 participants identified [a type of activity] as among their top two favorite activities*).

You can also use charts to illustrate the findings if this makes them clearer. For example, the chart below illustrates the activities identified as “interesting” or “not interesting” among all focus group participants, with the findings sorted in descending order of those identified as interesting.



After providing a sense of the extent to which activities are of interest to participants, you can go on to analyze the findings for the two activities most frequently voted as favorites—in this example, sports activities (with a total of 5 votes) and career exploration (4 votes).

³ *If you have held enough focus groups, the total number of participants included in your research may be large enough that it is appropriate to handle this type of data as you would data from a quantitative study (e.g., if you held a total of 12 focus groups with eight participants in each, you would have a total of nearly 100 participants included in your research. It is important to keep in mind, however, that focus groups do not involve random samples and therefore the results are not representative of the larger population.*