NOTE TAKING GUIDELINES FOR FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Note taking

We suggest that you have one note taker and one flip chart recorder (who is also an assistant moderator. Also, use a tape recorder—but get signed permission from your participants. (See Family Voices’ Audio Tape Consent Form included in this Toolkit.)

Regardless of whether you record the focus group, note taking is critical to capturing the important points made by your participants. And, remember that recorders can fail and without good notes, you’ll have no information to show!

The moderator should not be expected to take written notes during the discussion. Facilitating the discussion is a full-time job! Note taking is a primary responsibility of the assistant moderator(s).

Clarity and consistency of note taking

The notes you take will likely be used by others in the future—and without a good set of clear and consistent notes, you may even find it challenging to make sense of your notes days or weeks following the focus group! A good set of notes will reflect value for the information the families share with you.

Notes contain different types of information

It is essential that the information you gather is easily identified and organized. Your notes will contain:

Quotes

Capturing family wisdom includes recording not only what is said, but how it is said. Listen for those well-spoken statements that illustrate an important view. Try to record sentences or phrases are that are especially enlightening or eloquently express a point of view.

Use initials of the speaker before or after the quotation (remembering to protect confidentiality when writing reports).

It is difficult to capture the entire quote, so aim to get as much as you can, recording especially the key phrases. Use three periods (…) to indicate missing words.

Key points and themes for each question

Key points and themes typically become apparent as a question is discussed. Sometimes they’ll be said by one person, and often they will be echoed by others as the discussion progresses.

Plan on sharing these themes with the participants at the end of the focus group. The assistant moderator (who is taking flip chart notes) can share these and ask for clarification.

Follow-up questions that could be asked

The assistant moderator should make note of follow-up questions that didn’t get asked, but would help clarify an important thought. Take a few minutes at the end of the focus group before dismissing everyone to ask any additional questions that would make a vague point clear in the notes.

Family Voices built this tip sheet on a report by Richard A. Krueger of the University of Minnesota, Designing and Conducting Focus Group Interviews, October 2002.

Family Voices aims to achieve family-centered care for all children and youth with special health care needs and/or disabilities. Throughout our national grassroots network, we provide families resources and support to make informed decisions, advocate for improved public and private policies, build partnerships among families and professionals, and serve as a trusted resource on health care.

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Big ideas, hunches, or thoughts of the recorder

Sometimes, in the process of listening and taking notes, the assistant moderator may have an “aha” moment—a new concept or understanding of a previously “fuzzy” idea. Be sure to note these on the flip charts and/or in the notes for future reference.

Other notes to capture

Part of the value of getting families together for focus groups comes in the non-verbal information. Note takers should be aware of—and record—passionate comments, body language, or other non-verbal activity such as nodding heads, eye contact between specific participants, physical excitement, and even tears that can indicate an important level of agreement, support, or interest.

Analyzing the data

1. Start while still in the group to note what is said and what needs more clarity
   - This is your last opportunity to ask additional questions, while the participants are still together.
   - Make a note of inconsistent, vague, or cryptic comments and probe for understanding.
2. Immediately after the focus group
   - Draw a diagram of seating arrangement. This can help you visualize the discussion later on.
   - Spot check tape recording to ensure proper operation.
   - Conduct moderator and assistant moderator(s) debriefing using the Plus Delta exercise included in this Toolkit.
   - Note themes, hunches, interpretations, and ideas; look for emerging themes by question and then overall
   - Label and file notes, tapes, and other materials; share with Family Voices
3. Soon after the focus group—within hours—analyze focus group
   - Review notes and flip charts in detail
   - Write draft report of the focus group in a question-by-question format with amplifying quotes, using field notes and flip charts. Family Voices has a template for recording the notes for each focus group topic to help you organize your notes.
   - Describe findings and use quotes to illustrate
4. Write report
   - Consider narrative style versus bulleted style; what works best for your group?
   - Use a few quotes to illustrate
   - Sequence could be question by question or by theme
   - Share draft report for verification with assistant moderator(s)
   - Finalize report, and send to Family Voices

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