

# Tips for Running Focus Groups with Youth

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## **Part I: The Three Most Common Barriers to Youth Focus Groups and Suggestions for Overcoming Them**

### **1. Perceived violations of youth's privacy**

Requiring a completed parent/guardian consent form as a prerequisite to participating in the focus group can be a barrier. Some youth do not want their parents knowing their activities and they will self-select out. This is also true for youth who have a less than ideal relationship with either their parent or guardian.

Location can have a large impact on youths' willingness to participate in a focus group. If youth are seen going into a building that they do not normally visit (public health offices) or that has specific associations (STI/STDs, birth control), they may hesitate to participate. The fear of having other people knowing and talking about their actions can be a hindrance to youth participation.

### **2. Capacity for commitment**

The choice of setting and the ability for youth to travel to the focus group location are intimately connected and strongly affect youth's ability to commit to attending.

Pick a setting that has staff and/or volunteers who can help select focus group participants, remind them about it, and support the facilitators of the group; this can have a large impact on the success.

Don't underestimate the need for reminding focus group participants.

When participants for the focus group are recruited can have an impact on the youth sub-groups who participate. For example, recruiting for participants near religious holidays or school exams will affect participation.

### **3. Disconnect in interest in topic between project and youth**

Recruitment of participants can be greatly affected by their degree of interest in the focus group topic.

Youth interest in the topic can affect their willingness to accommodate any focus group structure needs, e.g., speaking one at a time for recording sound quality.

## **Part II: The Top Ten Focus Group Elements for Youth**

The following ten elements are important to the successful planning and implementation of youth focus groups.

### **1. Providing compensation and incentives to youth participants**

Compensation and incentives are a recruitment aid, facilitate youth attendance, acknowledge the importance of their contribution, and convey respect. Incentives can include food and transportation aids.

### **2. Choosing the right focus group setting**

The setting for the focus group can affect the range of youth sub-groups who can be recruited for the discussion. There is also the potential for the project to become linked with the venue in the youth's minds. The youth's opinions and feelings about the venue could be extended to the project. The fewer special arrangements that need to be made, the more likely that youth will attend the session. Try and hold the focus group as close to where youth already congregate as possible.

### **3. Facilitation sets the tone in the focus group**

Facilitation is an element that is completely within the control of the project staff. It is also one of the biggest elements that affects the tone of a focus group. Style, attitude, and type of facilitation are very important. Always keep in mind that youth are people and that they can tell when the facilitator is being authentic.

It is important to be clear and consistent in the values and philosophy of the focus groups. Do youth possess the solution to a problem? Are they being consulted on a *fait accompli*? Is this meant to be an information-sharing process or is it an exploration of an issue?

### **4. Letting youth know that they are contributing to something more than a two-hour focus group**

Youth have responded well to offers to remain connected to a project after the focus-group data-collection portion is completed. They liked participating in building something that other youth will use. If the project decides to go this route, it is important that any promises made are kept and that the youth's involvement is not make work.

## **5. Schedule for maximum attendance and appropriate diversity**

Consulting with the agency where the participants are being recruited is an important step in scheduling the group to achieve maximum attendance. The organization that is the source of the participants will have insights into the best time and day of week for a focus group. Keep in mind that youth can have difficulty making a commitment and/or remembering that commitment more than a week to two weeks in advance.

## **6. Group composition**

A good group, especially if the session is going to be taped, needs to have enough people to have a good dynamic but not so many that it leaves people out. You do not want people feeling pressured to speak but there should be opportunities for everyone to have a voice. Six to eight youth makes a good group.

## **7. Demonstrating that the focus group topic is relevant to the youth participants**

Youth are more likely to be engaged and interested in a topic that they feel is relevant to them. Framing a focus group topic so that it becomes relevant is important.

## **8. Language of questions and discussion**

You want as few barriers as possible between the youth, the questions, and their answers. For example, do not make any assumptions about youth's familiarity with your terminology. Either give examples for such terms or avoid specialized language.

## **9. Privacy and security are important to everyone but especially to youth living in a small town**

Every action and form that youth complete for the project should reinforce the belief that their privacy and security is of utmost importance to everyone involved.

## **10. Developing and fostering trust throughout the process**

A focus group only works if there is trust. Trust is built in increments and can be lost very quickly. Serious second thought should be used before bringing in a second, unfamiliar adult unless the group knows that person or they are fulfilling a vital role and it is worth the possible suppression of discussion.